Chapter 1
Centering Learners in Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Traditional assessment tends to be a one-size-fits-all approach to student learning that does not consider individual students nor the underlying systems of power and oppression in higher education. This chapter argues for equity-centered assessment as learner-centered assessment which eschews Western ways of knowing and not only focuses on individual learners but is also a tool for advancing equity. The authors compare and contrast traditional assessment with learner-centered assessment and describe benefits, characteristics, and strategies for implementing equity-centered assessment.

INTRODUCTION

There is ample evidence that placing students at the center of their own learning results in a more effective learning environment and improved learning outcomes (Wright, 2011). In order for learner-centered learning to take place, learners need a voice in *why*, *what*, and *how* learning experiences take shape (McCarthy, 2015). This is also true for the assessment of that learning. This chapter will discuss the tenets of learning-centered teaching, briefly trace the history and evolution of assessment in higher education, explicate the paradigms and ways of knowing that undergird teaching and learning and explore the key elements of learner-centered assessment. In this chapter the authors will also advocate for pushing the boundaries of learner-centered assessment to adopt equity-centered assessment, recognizing that students do not enter the college environment with a level playing field and that there are dramatic disparities for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students as well as those from lower socioeconomic status, among other historically marginalized groups. Even while recognizing these disparities in their own data, many institutions still adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching, learning, and assessment.

In order to ensure that all students have the ability to meet their learning goals, an equity-centered approach to the assessment of student learning must be adopted.

LEARNING-CENTERED TEACHING

Any discussion of learner-centered assessment must be rooted in learning-centered teaching. Many college graduates can recall a class in which an instructor was at the front of a large lecture hall talking, often with detailed slides, to students in their seats—some attentively taking notes, some slouching in their uncomfortable theater-style seats uninterested, and some blissfully napping. This is what Barr and Tagg (1995) termed the instruction paradigm of college learning that centered on all-knowing faculty dispensing knowledge to passive student learners.

In 1987, Chickering and Gamson argued for learning-centered teaching in a piece titled *Seven Principles in Undergraduate Education*. The national conversation regarding learning-centered teaching was jumpstarted in 1995 with Barr and Tagg's "A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education" in which they argued that a learner-centered teaching approach could ensure institutional success during a time of uncertainty. They stated, "Today it is virtually impossible for them (colleges and universities) to respond effectively to the challenge of stable or declining budgets while meeting the increasing demand for post-secondary education from increasingly diverse students" (p. 13). Sound familiar? That quotation is as true today as it was over 25 years ago. For Barr and Tagg, both institutional success and improved student learning would result from a shift to a learning paradigm.

Rooted in the cognitive science of learning, researchers argued that students learn better when they are actively involved in their own learning (Bar & Tagg, 1995; Doyle, 2011; Piksaldo, 2016; Suskie, 2015; Weimer, 2013). In addition, active, collaborative, and engaged learning facilitate student learning outcomes (Barkley et al., 2005; Bransford, 2000). These active and engaging teaching strategies are effective because they are constructivist in nature, empowering students to create their own knowledge through interpreting information, solving problems, and making connections (Piksaldo, 2016; Smart, et al., 2012).

In learning-centered teaching, learning is holistic (Barr & Tagg, 1995) as it involves social, emotional, and intellectual components (Ambrose et al., 2010) and focused on personal and professional growth (Vander Ark, 2016), not simply cognitive development. A defining characteristic of a learning-centered approach to teaching is the roles that teachers and students play. Rather than traditional roles of teacher as knowledge holder and students as knowledge receiver, teachers serve as facilitators of learning, not dispensers of knowledge (Felder & Bent, 2017; Vander Ark, 2016) who support students in the struggles with and challenges of learning (Darsih, 2019; Martin, n.d.; Weimer, 2012). As active participants in the learning process, students become teachers themselves creating their own knowledge (Ambrose et al., 2010; Barr & Tagg, 2015; Darsih, 2019; Felder & Bent, 2017; Smart et al., 2012; Weimer, 2013) and taking responsibility for their own education (Blumberg, 2016; Blumberg 2019; Darsih, 2019). As facilitators, teachers create environments empowering student agency in learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Blumberg, 2019; Darish, 2019) by leveraging constructivists approaches to knowledge creation such as active, collaborative, and engaged learning (Barkley et al., 2005; Bransford, 2000; Felder & Bent, 2017; Martin, n.d.; Weimer, 2012). Teachers guide students in their learning through reflection, feedback, and practice (Ambrose et al., 2010; Martin, n.d.; Darsih, 2019; Weimer, 2012). While a learning-centered approach can foster learning, it can also be a powerful means to advance equity.

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