

“It is not enough to demonstrate differences and inequality – we have plenty of studies that show disparities ... But many of these studies fail to engender changes in society or higher education. Despite reports of how detrimental such disparities are to the larger social good, we can only conclude that the normative culture is invested in these inequalities in ways that complicate change” (Hurtado, 2015, p. 290).



Critical Assessment

Sonia DeLuca Fernández, Ph.D.
sdf4@nyu.edu
9 December 2015

Pressing issues in higher education

- Accountability and assessment in higher education (e.g., MSCHE, the White House's framework);
- Changing student demographics;
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion (NASPA, 2014).

Developing skills for the 21st Century: outcomes

- Ability to work in teams; problem solving; ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work; verbal communication; ability to obtain and process information (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2013, 2014; National Research Council, 2011)

Assessing student learning: high impact practices

- First-year seminars; learning communities; diversity outcomes and global learning; learning applications and synthesis (internships, service learning, capstone projects; AAC&U, 2008).

Equity and race on campus

How are you engaging? How are you engaged?

12/9/2015



What makes the assessment “critical”?

- Expose and address power, privilege, and structures
- Consider thoughtfully histories and contexts
- Make explicit assumptions and intentions
- Eschew colorblind and ideological neutral claims

Core motivations of assessment:

- Student experiences, learning
- Institutional improvement

*What kind? Why? Who decides?
Who benefits?*

Assessment is a social and political act, regardless of whether or not an agenda is made explicit.

A critical assessment practice starts with mindfulness.



Session questions

What is critical assessment, and why should I care?

How does a critical assessment approach differ from a traditional assessment approach?

How can I adopt a critical assessment approach?

Traditional approaches to professional assessment practice: Emphasis on methods (see

- Reflections of power, privilege; largely unexamined
- Political considerations
- For example:
 - ASK Standards (2006) – “awareness that different subpopulations may have different patterns of development,” “determine political risks that may apply to assessment results and the audiences likely to be adversely affected by findings.”
- Narrative: value-free, apolitical, neutral

Critical assessment approach: Emphasis on foundational influences, assumptions

- Aligning assumptions with methods
- Intentionally consider impact

For example, methods missteps...

**Reported salary upon
graduation**

**National average:
\$47000**

**Your institution:
\$52000**

Studying leadership

**Operationalizing
squishy a
constellation**

**Hallmarks of
individuals**

Interrogating methods

- Context and application
- Definitions
- Culture

Analyses

- Integrity of dimensions measured
- Is it a numbers game? Regressing to the mean
- Factor analyses
- Problems with/of “representation.” Do we respond exclusively to averages and statistically significant results?

What ideals are we privileging and how? How are the most vulnerable on our campuses being served by our assessment practice?

Methodology

What choices of technique do we privilege?

What do we systematize?

To what extent are we promoting unconsidered inquiry:

- Contextual and historical factors
- Forms of oppression
- Multiple v. singular (theories, ways of knowing, evidence)
- Assumptions of homogeneity
- Structures, conditional effects ignored
- Individuals

**An uncritical examination of our work (place, space, face)
and
A disconscious adoption of conventionally acceptable approaches
results in:**

- Rejection of underrepresented voices, experiences
- Limited and partial truths
- Over-valuation of existing systems, particular knowledge
- Reproduction of inequality and reification of white supremacy

(Explicit) purpose

Critical assessment as

- ... Critical postmodernist project
- ... Transformative paradigm
- ... Challenge to reproduction of inequality

“... [as] active engagement in change and reform issues that seek[s] to sever inequalities and other forms of social and cultural injustices” (Kampol, 1999, p. 33).

Clarify your worldview, and the assumptions required of that worldview

What is real? How do social, political, cultural, and economic lenses influence what we consider real and legitimate? (ontology)

What (cultural) norms do we privilege? To what extent do we know and make explicit biases and values? (axiology)

What constitutes knowledge, evidence? In assessment, which ways of knowing, and what kinds of evidence do we privilege? (epistemology)

Critical race theory: ontology, axiology, epistemology, methodology

Racism is real and pervasive. (ontology)

Recognize the falsehood of dominant ideologies and “master narratives” (e.g., neutrality, colorblindness, meritocracy). (ontology)

Interdisciplinarity is required. (epistemology)

Privilege counternarratives and lived experiences. (epistemology and methodology)

Make explicit transformation and liberation (a social justice project). (axiology)

Assessment is a process where, by using explicit goals, we measure student learning and capture their experiences in a systematic way, to support continuous improvement efforts.

“Assessment ... should be conceived as a practice that attends more fully to the social and political position that it occupies within institutions” (Wall, Hursh, & Rodgers, 2014)

Practical considerations

- Explore and engage your worldview.
- Investigate and discuss who decides, who benefits.
- Confront emphases on procedure and methods.
- Consider effects and justifications of “market” and economic drivers.
- Discuss and critique how meaning is attached to data, results. (Data does not own meaning.)
- Consider how value is attached to what is measured.
- Recognize and address the extent to which assessment work prevents social justice and structural transformations.

- Cabrera, N. L. (2012). Working through Whiteness: White male college students challenging racism. *The Review of Higher Education*, 35(3), 375-401.
- Gillborn, D. (2007). Education policy as an act of white supremacy: whiteness, critical race theory and education reform. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(4), 485-505.
- Harper, S. (2012). Race without racism: How higher education researchers minimize racist institutional norms. *The Review of Higher Education*, (36) 1, 9-29.
- Martinez-Aleman, A. M., Pusser, B., & Bensimon, E. M., Eds. (2015). *Critical approaches to the study of higher education: A practical introduction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McArthur, J. (2015). Assessment for social justice: The role of assessment in achieving social justice. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1-15.
- Stephens, N. M., et al. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: How American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102 (6), 1178- 1197.
- Wall, A. F., Hursh, D., & Rodgers, J. W. (2014). Assessment for Whom: Repositioning Higher Education Assessment as an Ethical and Value-Focused Social Practice. *Research and Practice in Assessment*, 9 (Summer 2014), 5-17.