

Questioning General Education: What Difference Does it Make?

The former head of the graduate music education program at the University of Illinois, and my first doctoral advisor, was a colorful and sometime contrary old gentleman named Charles Leonhard. A graduate of Teachers College – Columbia (capital T, capital C as he always said) and grounded in the education philosophy of John Dewey, Leonhard often shared with us his “maxims,” sayings that he used repeatedly to make points, both educational and political. His favorite, and particularly meaningful to a musician, was “you learn what you do and damn little else!” The Dewey influence was clear. For doctoral students with somewhat inflated egos, he offered “sic transit gloria mundi” , a phrase used historically during Papal coronations suggesting to the Pope, as Leonhard suggested to his students, that *all fame is fleeting and we should not get all puffed up*. While both of these maxims could actually provide insight and guidance for those pursuing general education reform, it was Leonhard’s frequent reminder to us to “ask the pragmatic question” – What difference does it make?” that I propose for us to consider as we think about levels of assessment in general education.

When you publicly ask the question “What difference does it make,” you may have to explain that it is asked not cynically – *What difference does it make you ignorant twit?*– but with a problem-solving mindset – will this effort really produce the results intended? is there a better way? And so, with the pragmatic question fresh in our minds, I’d like to spend a short time examining some issues and questions related to general education and higher education in general, believing that one has to answer these questions and look at certain issues as part of planning for learning and assessment. You know, there is plenty you can do before or between assessments to improve learning! I have planned for three conversation breaks during my comments so that you can briefly discuss some of the issues with people at your table. I hope these brief conversations will send

you off to the workshops with these “prerequisite” issues reviewed so you can dive right into a particular level of assessment.

First question to deal with: What is the purpose of your general education program? What is general education at your school supposed to achieve? Is the purpose publicly stated or is it assumed that “everyone knows” what gen ed is for. Too often, the PURPOSE of a general education program is missing, unclear, or purposely left vague. Andrea Leskes, director of the Greater Expectations project at AAC&U, cites several basic purposes that general education programs can have – and the purpose does indeed *make a difference* in what goes on in a student’s education. Here’s a couple of examples:

General education can be “foundational,” intended to build a beginning knowledge base and competence, often in a few selected disciplines, but potentially it could include a variety of intellectual skills and personal responsibilities. Such a program may occur primarily during the first two years of college attendance. What difference does it make to have a “foundational” purpose? That depends.... The strength of the foundation will, of course, be enhanced if the goals for knowledge, skills, and responsibilities are clear and multiple experiences and assessments are aligned to achieve those intended outcomes. An important question to ask: is the learning achieved by a foundational program sufficient for a graduate or is more learning, in the same outcome areas, expected to take place in the non-general education parts of the curriculum? If learning in the selected outcomes is expected go beyond that achieved when the “foundational” program ends, then responsibility for subsequent development will have to be assumed by the majors or be achieved through electives and co-curricular experiences.

A general education program could have an “interdisciplinary or integrative purpose.” Such a program would seek to foster connections among knowledge areas and other kinds of learning, and help students build understandings and

skills as they learn to employ multiple perspectives to address issues and solve problems both in and out of the classroom. Such a program could be “foundational,” intended to introduce interdisciplinary or integrative thinking to students as they begin college. But a general education planned as a sequence across the full four years of a baccalaureate program, could develop an interdisciplinary or integrative mindset throughout a student’s time on campus. Program goals could be set at graduation levels with the pathways for achieving the outcomes residing mostly or wholly within the program. What difference could it make? If implemented with good intentionality, such a program could build a culture of integrative learning that would influence the way students think in many or most situations, teaching them to find and apply useful information from multiple sources and disciplines to their work.

Other purposes for general education programs, might include:

- providing an integrated investigation of a series of topics. Some “core” programs feature “university studies courses” required of all students across four years. The difference?—common learning experiences that create opportunities for out-of-class discussions and debates across the institution.
- to integrate general education outcomes and disciplinary knowledge (sort of a gen ed goals across the curriculum approach). The difference? Intentional development of vital intellectual skills and capacities over the entire degree program, outcomes like communication, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement, developed initially in general education and brought to graduation levels through majors or professional programs.

Some historical purposes, often stated very generally, can be found in Boyer and Levine’s book “A Quest for Common Learning.” The examples include: “train citizens for public responsibility,” (from 1945) “to provide a global or worldwide

perspective” (from 1918), or “to reduce overspecialization” from 1920, and 1949, and 1977.

One advantage of having a clear purpose for general education is that a campus can actually reveal to students, faculty and public alike about what general education is supposed to do – don’t underestimate the effect that can have on program outcomes. The purpose should be public, familiar, and have high visibility for students as they are recruited, as they begin college, and throughout their time on campus.

(take 6 minutes to discuss the purposes of your gen ed programs with the person next to you.) Is the purpose of your program stated and clear? public knowledge? How might or how does having a clear purpose for gen ed make a difference on your campus?

Once purpose has been established, then a second hard question arises: “how do we achieve that purpose”, challenging us to create intentional pathways to achieve outcomes. Such pathways are likely to include many elements but they will need at least three major parts: goals, learning experiences, and assessments.

Certainly, the pragmatic question should be used as goal areas are being discussed: what difference will it make if we select critical thinking as a goal for gen ed? how about civic engagement or ethical reasoning, etc? Is this goal important enough to take up faculty and student time and institutional resources? If people agree that there are compelling reasons for selecting specific goal areas, it then makes sense to plan carefully to achieve those goals starting by being clear about “what it looks like” to think critically, be civically engaged or act through ethical reasoning.

As a music education student in the 1970s, I learned to write behavioral goals – descriptions of expected student learning using active, observable verbs that describe what students will be able to do after a specified period of instruction and learning. The verbs that describe student behavior are key to a quality behavioral goal. While behavioral goals have been criticized by some as oversimplifying complex learning, they have the advantage of making the trajectory of instruction and assessment fairly clear by mentioning the behaviors expected, the instruction that will be used, the time period involved, and the expected level of student achievement. Careful work on choosing and describing meaningful behaviors that represent the learning in authentic ways remains a challenge but one that experts in a field, i.e., college faculty, can do with sufficient thought.

When a goal includes a non-observable verb such as “appreciate” or “understand,” one may be able to “translate” that verb into proxy behaviors, the presence of which imply that the student has achieved the desired non-observable outcome. For example: what if a music course has as a goal that students will *appreciate* a certain kind of music? Suppose that we define appreciation as “liking with reasons.” So to figure out whether students *appreciate* a certain kind of music, one might observe that students spend a certain amount of time listening to the music, including during leisure time, and they could also cite reasons for that liking, using genuine musical vocabulary to describe features of melody, harmony, rhythm, instrumentation or other musical elements. Simply saying that the music is “awesome” is not sufficient. So even less-observable outcomes can be described and defined if one persists.

Just as goal verbs are critical, students’ knowledgeable use of special language is critical. Because much of what we expect from learning in higher education tends toward the ineffable, we actually need to teach students, and perhaps

ourselves, to talk about the ineffable – to develop a vocabulary that students and faculty can use to describe and critique the quality of work in the domain.

Musicians often use metaphors for performance concepts – e.g., a trumpet teacher may urge a student to “blow forward, not up” or ask them to “darken their sound”, or work with them to “open their throat,” instructions that are loaded with cognitive, psychomotor, and affective layers of meaning. Young musicians must become part of a learning and performing culture to grasp the subtleties of such terms, just as all students need to be acculturated to multiple areas of learning. Ideally, students should learn to use the same vocabulary that experts use in discussions with other experts as they analyze, create, and evaluate work in a domain. Don’t forget that we all had to learn the language of higher education: I first thought that an “articulation agreement” was when some brass players decided to double-tongue some music they were playing!

What difference does it make to develop clear goals and a rich vocabulary that both teachers and students understand? Clear goals help everyone – students, faculty, and administration – to focus on the learning that is important, a real advantage in our contexts of limited instructional time and lives filled with multiple responsibilities. Clear goals also help tremendously with planning assessments. A rich understanding of the sophisticated language of a domain brings students to a level where they can use the language as they judge the quality of work in the domain, effectively communicating their analytical, creative, and critical insights. The same vocabulary may be useful in creating assessment rubrics and scoring guides.

Activity: discuss one general education goal that is not so easy to define (say critical thinking, teamwork, or civic responsibility) and talk about the vocabulary that both faculty and students may need to learn to use to talk meaningfully about the quality of work completed in that area. What will students know and be able to do when the goal has been achieved? What distinguishes quality work from

poor work? What common vocabulary does a campus need to understand to talk meaningfully to one another about learning in this area?

In completing the review of the literature for my dissertation, I ran across a number of very interesting studies about how to improve music reading using a variety of tactics. Somewhat discouraging however, were the large number of studies that had selected a very promising factor to investigate but found No Significant Difference at the end of the experiment. While one has to be careful about making judgments with such research, it seemed fairly clear that, in a number of cases, the reason for the NSD result was that the experimental TREATMENT was not powerful enough, often due to the treatment's short duration. Given sufficient chance for the experimental treatments to have an effect, I judged that many of the studies I read could have had different, and positive, results.

It does make a difference how we teach, how long students have to learn, and whether we are monitoring their achievement over the course of instruction.

Lion Gardiner, in a substantial review of research on teaching and learning noted:

Research on student development, coupled with modern educational methods and quality improvement principles, *can enable us for the first time in human history to educate all of the people to a high level.* We will, however, have to use, rather than ignore, research. (Gardiner 1994, vii, italics in text) (*Redesigning Higher Education: Producing dramatic gains in student learning.*)

Both Gardiner and others suggest that careful alignment of goals with instructional methods and assessments is a very powerful curricular practice with

an effect size of up to two standard deviations. Alignment is one strategy that can move us toward the Greater Expectations ideal of bringing all students up to high levels of achievement, regardless of initial uneven preparation.

During the Greater Expectations project, we noted that innovative campuses were actually using a relatively small number of instructional practices and contexts *on beyond lectures*, to foster learning, including learning in general education. These practices and arrangements have been shown to be effective ways for students to learn. The names of the practices may vary from place to place but the concepts will be familiar:

- learning communities,
- first-year experiences,
- capstones,
- service learning,
- experiential learning,
- authentic tasks (like research and collaborative projects),
- problem-based learning, and
- interdisciplinary instruction.

These practices have good potential to serve as powerful treatments, given sufficient time and opportunity for students to learn. After making our best professional judgment about how to teach, how many repetitions, and over what period of time, we can monitor student achievement with formative assessments to see whether our plans need to be revised. Of course, formative assessment need not be only a classroom tool: one can also employ formative assessment over the years of a gen ed program, monitoring the sequential improvement of selected goals as major “opportunities to learn” within the program are completed, making changes as warranted by the data collected.

One more important practice that can make a difference is metacognition – sometimes described as thinking about thinking. The book *How People Learn* from the National Research Council states:

“metacognition refers to people’s abilities to predict their performances on various tasks, and to monitor their current levels of mastery and understanding. Teaching practices congruent with a metacognitive approach to learning include those that focus on sense making, self-assessment, and reflection on what worked and what needs improving. These practices have been shown to increase the degree to which students transfer their learning to new settings and events.

Transfer makes many general education outcomes more useful, dramatically boosting the difference that general education can make. Course or program activities that elicit metacognitive behavior make good sense. I’d like to suggest that an institutional metacognitive approach is what the four levels of assessment are all about -- sense making, self-assessment, and reflection on what worked and what needs improving.

Activity: take a few minutes to discuss the “opportunities to learn” for one important general education outcome on your campus. Are the treatments powerful and of sufficient duration or numbers of repetitions to achieve program goals? Are goals, instruction and assessment aligned well? To what extent does metacognition, student self-assessment, or structured reflection support student learning in general education?

This brings us now to the discussions on four levels of assessment? What difference will that make? Well...to be intentional we need to know: 1) what students learn over the short term – in courses, 2) what students learning over

the long term – across courses, 3) how small chunks of gen ed are functioning (course assessment), and 4) how the chunks fit together to contribute to overall program outcomes, including whether the sum is more than the parts.

We leave out a level at the risk of not being able to diagnose and prescribe when things go wrong.

Strangely, even in discussions within my own office at AAC&U (with only two people!), or in planning for sessions at our annual Institute on General Education, we would often discover that we had talked for a while with each of us thinking about a different level of assessment – usually with one of us focusing on program assessment and the other on the individual student level. In campus group discussions, we believe it is very important to clarify the level of assessment being discussed to avoid misunderstandings.

In AAC&Us recent publication *Levels of Assessment: From the student to the Institution*, we note that different questions are asked at different levels of assessment. The questions of interest will, naturally, determine how assessment is conducted. The blue handout on your tables lists the questions from the *Levels* publication and thus, suggests the differences among levels that will be discussed in the workshops that begin in a few minutes.

From choosing purposes to goals to practices to assessments for general education, asking **and answering** the pragmatic question can help you analyze the intertwined elements in general education upon which assessment decisions depend. By defining purpose, writing goals, developing language, and choosing powerful treatments you increase the chances that some learning worth assessing has actually occurred.

Given the pragmatic concerns of limited resources and time, accreditation demands, growing accountability pressures, and our own professional commitments to students, we need to work to ensure that we do indeed make a tremendous difference, improving student's lives through our general education programs.

We have four workshop leaders, one for each level to lead sessions over the next hour or so and I would like to introduce them to you now:

- **Assessment of Individual Student Learning Outcomes in Courses:**
Michael Strait, Director of Assessment, University of San Diego
- **Assessment of Individual Student Learning Across Courses:** *Betty McEady, Director of the Center for Teaching, Learning and Assessment, California State University-Monterey Bay*
- **Using Student Learning to Assess General Education Courses:**
Cynthia Conn, Associate Director for the Office of Assessment, Northern Arizona University
- **Using Student Learning to Assess General Education Programs:**
Stephen Bowen, Dean, Oxford College, Emory University