Learning from the Commensurability Hypothesis

We did not achieve what we set out to do in our Quality Collaborative Project. We were not able to answer the question we posed: “To what degree are transfer students from J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (JSRCC) and the native students at Virginia Commonwealth University’s (VCU) commensurably prepared regarding general education proficiencies?” Our question addresses the “commensurability hypothesis” that is implied in transfer agreements such as the Virginia Guarantee Admission Agreement (GAA).¹ This hypothesis is the assumption that commensurable materials between paired transfer courses would yield commensurate results in terms of student learning. Our collaborative project would probe this assumption. The raw data we needed was straightforward: collect student work products from university general education and community college general studies courses (e.g., English/English, biology/biology, math/math, etc.) that are paired as part of the GAA. Additionally, we would collect student work in capstone courses from degrees that attract high numbers of transfer students (social work, biology, liberal studies for elementary education, and psychology).

This case study presents two brief points. The first is a consideration about why we were not adequately successful recruiting and retaining faculty for the project. And the second considers what we learned about working with the faculty in our two Quality Collaborative (QC) cohorts. Both of the points are commonplace, but, nevertheless, they do offer an opportunity for consideration for those venturing in initiatives or projects similar to the Quality Collaboratives. Before proceeding though, a bit of context about our motive for participating in the Quality Collaboratives to illuminate the element of the VCU/JSRCC QC that is the center of this case: the Summer Institute for Faculty Partners.

The QC project provided an opportunity for our separate campuses to advance fledgling work on projects that sought to bring together faculty development, assessment, and curricular alignment. At VCU, I was attempting to move forward pilot projects for course-embedded assessment in our general education program; at JSRCC, the assessment coordinator was engaging faculty and administrators

¹ The GAA, as part of Virginia State Policy on Transfer, guarantees that Virginia Community College System (VCCS) students completing a general education certificate or a transfer oriented associate degree and with a minimum 2.5 GPA, are guaranteed admission into Virginia Commonwealth University. The GAA does not, however, guarantee admission into a degree program. Transfer students must meet additional eligibility requirements.
about a project institute focusing on course, assignment, and pedagogical alignment. The grant resources from QC would help move these projects along. In addition, the QC project was timely given that VCU’s provost had charged academic deans to “grow” the transfer student pipelines. Similarly, the community colleges under the aegis of the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) were expected to improve evidence of the success rates of students who transferred to baccalaureate degree programs.

Given these confluences of interests and agenda, the VCU/JSRCC collaborative wanted to do more than simply answer to the “commensurability hypothesis.” Indeed, we could have simply collected student work from appropriate courses, coded the work in terms of transfer or native (and other relevant demographics), and then submitted them to be scored by trained readers using rubrics. This approach, though, would not satisfy the opportunity most compelling to us: bringing faculty together to work on course alignment, assignment design, and assessment for improvement. That we would be utilizing the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP: http://degreeprofile.org/), a framework of emerging consensus about student learning at the degree level, lent additional gravitas to the project.

Toward all of this, the centerpiece of the VCU/JSRCC QC was a week-long Faculty Partners Quality Collaborative Summer Institute during which paired faculty would refine (align) courses and assignments to target learning outcomes as well as use the DQP as the framework for improving articulation between the courses in terms of expectations for student learning (more about this below). At the end of the institute, each faculty partner would leave with an “action-research” plan to deploy the revised course and the assessments.

Alas, though, as the proverb reminds us, “there are many slips ‘twixt the cup and the lip.” As noted above, the efforts to recruit and retain faculty at each campus for the summer institute were only partially successful. At VCU, knowing that we needed “leverage” to recruit, the calls for faculty participation went through deans’ offices, formalized with the imprimatur of an academic affairs enterprise. VCU’s tenured and tenure-track faculty told us that though the work looked interesting, it would not amount to “credit” towards tenure and promotion. They had, in other words, priorities driven by tenure and promotion criteria. (Additionally, we were told that the modest stipend of $750 for participation was insufficient.) Thus, at VCU, only a handful of adjunct faculty teaching general education courses, applied. And at JSRCC, given that faculty work assignments were so tightly governed by union contracts, faculty were recruited directly from the academic affairs office. For them, QC work could not conflict or overlap with their primary contract. Thus, given contract stipulations it was a kind of game of “Twister” to secure JSRCC faculty members. Hence, our first cohort (and also our second
cohort) was half the size we needed; and the faculty we were able to recruit were “the usual suspects,” that is, those teachers who frequently sought to participate in faculty development.

On the surface, at both campuses, the difficulties with recruiting participants can be attributed to the structures for maintaining employment. At VCU, the currency of the realm is what counts toward promotion and tenure. At JSRCC, the contract stipulations for full-time teaching dominated. And, in both instances, the stipend was insufficient to engage faculty other than those who loyally responded to opportunities to become more involved in the life of the college or university. But if we accept legalities of contracts and stipend sizes as the exclusive problem, it will be a long, long time before projects such as this have an opportunity to grow some legs at our campuses. For many of us, these are the conditions in which we will continue to work: meager financial reward for projects beyond the contract, and contracts with demanding stipulations. There must be a more fruitful way to consider such obstacles.

In hindsight, we think that we did not seek adequate public endorsement from executive level leadership on our campuses. Granted, our executives had generously delegated the QC project to us (assistant vice provosts and directors of faculty development offices and assessment offices), but in this case, none of us individually nor collectively had the leverage or gravitas to bring the status to QC work that could mitigate the pressures of tenure and promotion, low compensation, and byzantine contracting processes. In simpler words, we needed a robust public, executive message campaign about our QC project. This is a point underscored in the recent publication from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education. In the chapter covering the role of university and college leadership regarding assessment, the authors emphasize that faculty engagement and buy-in are “crucial determinants” to the success of initiatives such as a QC; however, this is “rarely attained in the absence of visible, sincere, demonstrated support by the institution’s leaders” (Ewell and Ikenberry 2015, 117). But, to be fair to our executives, they were (and still are) consumed with priorities driven by the Virginia Assembly, the State Council for Higher Education, the VCCS board, and the Board of Visitors for VCU. These priorities, crucial to the management of higher education including enrollment management, retention, time to degree, online education, and, ironically, increasing the number of transfer students in baccalaureate programs. Though the aims of our Quality Collaborative—to contribute to articulation agreements based on evidence of commensurability—ostensibly complements our executives’ priorities, the reality was one of initiative overload: our executives have only so much gravitas and capital to lend.
The second point of this case study is not particularly unique either. In fact, the perspective we found was familiar from previous years as classroom teachers: don't lead with “Big Ideas.”

The summer Institute was our QC’s engine. Preparation of the faculty partners would yield the student work products necessary for querying the commensurability hypothesis; we would have ample to report to AAC&U and Lumina Foundation regarding the DQP as a set of reference points for student learning and assessment; and we would be growing the legs for ongoing faculty development that intentionally situated course, assignment, and assessment designs and practices in larger frameworks of expectations for student learning. As we proceeded to select materials and design activities for the institute, we embraced a core assumption: our QC faculty partners would be rich in content knowledge but would most likely lack much formal preparation in the design and delivery of course assignments and assessments. This assumption was accurate, and our ensuing plan to include fundamental elements of course and assignment design was well received by our faculty partners. We made, additionally, a second assumption, which gave rise to how and when we presented the DQP to our QC faculty partners. This assumption, though, was not accurate and the ensuring choices we made were not so well received. But, more about that in a moment.

The summer institute asked faculty to focus on internal and external alignment in their individual and paired courses. For internal alignment, we provided tools for analyzing and mapping the integrity and coherence of their courses as well as tools for aligning assignment, course and program outcomes, and assessments. Additionally, we provided information about how people learn, directing the participants to incorporate this into the mix, so to speak, as they were exploring and planning for ways to increase the transparency and intentionality of their individual courses. For external alignment work, we provided ample time for faculty partners to compare and contrast their courses, identify alignments to be strengthened, gaps to be closed, and redundancies to be eliminated. We took pains to emphasize that the aim was not for paired courses to mirror one another, but rather that students taking biology at VCU or at JSRCC would be so similarly prepared that their learning downstream would be likewise similar. Below is an abridged outline of the objectives and desired outcomes for the week-long summer institute.
Construct a complete course plan with learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessments that are all aligned and learning-centered, specifically focusing on the following:

- Align course content and skills outcomes with program learning outcomes.
- Align course and pedagogy with how people learn.
- Prepare an “elevator talk” for faculty peers explaining how the theory of how people learn has informed the course re-design.
- Select key assignments to improve in terms of alignment and intentionality.
- Select appropriate assessments to target learning outcomes as related to the DQP and reconcile with faculty partner.
- Intentionally link assessments to teaching, assignments, types of learning as related to the DQP and reconcile those with faculty partners.
- Collaboratively reflect on the DQP project and think of ways in which policy, assessment, and faculty practices can be improved.

The faculty partners’ reception of the internal and external alignment activities fulfilled our expectations, until we asked them to work specifically with the DQP. Specifically, to introduce the DQP to the faculty partners, we provided a cross-walk tool and directed them to identify elements in their courses that were or potentially were in alignment with the DQP. (The completed cross-walk tool was a deliverable for which they were responsible at the end of the institute.) As the assessment and faculty development leads, our expectation was that the faculty partners would use DQP as an additional and powerful lens for refining internal and external alignments. But here is where the second assumption manifested itself. We assumed, without much examination, that introducing the DQP at the “get-go” was appropriate, indeed, even necessary. We were wrong.
In our end of the day de-briefing with the faculty partners, they candidly shared that they found the DQP cross-walk exercise to be irrelevant and an interruption of what they were most interested in: cleaning up the internal alignment of their courses, learning about their faculty partner’s course, and identifying existing alignments and gaps that needed to be reconciled. Moreover, the partners responded with some cynicism to our attempt to elicit a discussion about the DQP and we found ourselves suddenly whirling in a familiar maelstrom that ranged from conversations about who gets to make these claims about student learning and why these specific claims to how this undermines academic freedom to, most troubling, blaming students: “Send us better students if you want to see better outcomes.”

We heard them; we backed off for the next few days about the DQP and continued to work with internal and external alignments, assignment development, and assessment. Though pleased with faculty collaborating across campuses, we really did not know what to do to restart engagement with the DQP.

On the final day of the summer institute, our participants shared their internal and external alignment revisions and their plans for assignments and assessments. Again, the tools we provided for internal and external alignment were well received and put to good use; there was no hangover from the “DQP hiccup” from earlier in the week. For the second half of the final day, we re-introduced the DQP with language such as “You have been working all week long at establishing shared understandings about student learning at our two institutions, about what it should look like, about what quality is, and about the kind of learning and assessment that are best suited for the desired outcomes. Now, consider the DQP again as a similar project (sans the emphasis on details of learning theory) that represents an emerging consensus from faculty and faculty leaders throughout higher education.” Though the specifics of the ensuing discussion were not recorded, the faculty, with the drafts of the courses provisionally wrapped up, were suddenly receptive to discussion about the potential for the DQP to be a useful framework for building and clarifying common reference points for what degree-level learning means. Much to our relief, our participants leaned into the DQP elements with the curiosity, energy, and insight that we had hoped for earlier.

In retrospect, the watershed moment on the second half of the last day was something we recognized from our own teaching histories: don’t lead with the big idea. Unfortunately, our breakthrough with the DQP came during the last hours of the institute. We knew immediately that for the following year, we would position the introduction of the DQP somewhere in the middle of the
institute. Some participants in our second cohort goaded us with “Why didn’t you give this to us right away?” And at that point, we shared what had happened the previous year and it instigated reflection and discussion about timing in regards to presenting a new concept or skill—especially something of the magnitude of the DQP—when teaching and learning are embedded in years of professional, habitual thinking about pedagogy, student learning outcomes, and the curriculum.

References