Exploration of Conceptions of Assessment within High-Stakes U.S. Culture

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Abstract. Past quantitative research about students' and faculty members' conceptions of assessment indicates that faculty believe that one of the primary purposes of assessment is for improvement of both teaching and learning. Students, however, associate a primary reason for assessment in higher education for accountability of both students and the institution. The present study aimed to determine if beliefs were congruent between student and faculty responses to open-ended survey items. Using a phenomenological approach to investigate students' and faculty members' conceptions of assessment, the researchers found discrepant results when qualitative data were compared to the results of past quantitative studies (Brown, 2004; DiLoreto, 2013; Fletcher, Meyer, Anderson, Johnston, & Rees, 2011). Additional results of this inquiry and implications of these findings for educational settings are discussed.

Keywords: conceptions of assessment; teaching; learning; higher education

Introduction

Research suggests that conceptions are derived from past experiences. Thus, one's past experiences with assessment influences how one conceives the purpose of assessment. Multiple studies conducted in various low-stakes environments around the globe have suggested that a primary purpose of assessment is to improve student learning. However, when a similar study was conducted in the high-stakes assessment and accountability culture found in the United States, students reported a belief that a primary purpose of assessment is to evaluate their performance instead of improve their learning. In order to further investigate how students and faculty conceptualize assessment, this phenomenological study sought to explore deeper meanings of the term as well as the various activities that both students and faculty members associate with it.

Review of the Literature

In the realm of education, the conceptions of educators and students alike are often developed and refined through pedagogical endeavours.

Specifically, conceptions of assessment are shaped by the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptual experiences of the perceiver. These preconceived notions can potentially negatively impact student outcomes (Struyyen et al. 2005; Fletcher et al., 2011). Nonetheless, assessment serves a valuable and necessary purpose in the hierarchical chain of higher education. Assessment data can be fundamental to the continuous improvement of both teaching and learning. It is through the use of assessments that data can be gathered to support needed changes in academic courses and programs. Thus, the conceptions of assessment could be considered as important to the current and future health of the academic process.

Beliefs are meanings that are based on lived experiences and cultural norms from which sense is made about these experiences (Ekeblad and Bond, 1994, 343-353). Furthermore, conceptions are defined as mental constructs or representations of an individual's reality (Brown and Lake, 2006; Fodor, 1998; Kelly, 1991; Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Thompson, 1992, 127-146). Consequently, an individual's conception of assessment and its importance are thus invariably connected to learning outcomes. Faculty members are not immune to these predilections either, and their experiences affect the way in which they implement their own assessments in the classroom. Indeed, past research indicates that beliefs about assessment impact the way instructors teach and the way students learn (Brown, 2004; Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens, 2005). Therefore, because conceptions are filtered through an individual's belief system, the conceptions of assessment held by students may be different from those held by their teachers (Brown, 2004; Hidri, 2015).

Assessment serves multiple purposes for all stakeholders of institutions of higher education. As such, assessment practices have evolved as a result of the demands of external accountability measures imposed by various policy-makers. One dilemma faced by stakeholders is the fact that the term assessment is often used within different contexts and with different meanings (Shepard, 2000). Wang and Hurley (2012) indicate that an assessment movement in higher education began in the 1980s with an emphasis on student learning. Since that time, accrediting agencies have required institutions of higher education to implement program-level and institution-level assessment procedures in addition to documenting student learning. Wang and Hurley (2012) found that the way assessment is perceived by faculty might impact student achievement. In a quasi-experimental study, Brown, Chaudhry, and Dhamija (2015) researched the beliefs of teachers about the purposes of assessment and found that such beliefs were impacted by the perceived roles of assessment.

Due to a shift in various educational reforms, during the 1990s institutions of higher education began placing a greater emphasis on research-based practices and quantifiable evidence to demonstrate that students were capable of attaining course learning outcomes. A common practice is to measure the efficacy of students' performances on various assessments in order to identify the most effective institutions for subsequent funding and resource allocations. Consequently, high-stakes assessment results seem to have become the key measure of outcomes in today's educational climate.

Brown (2011) suggests that the increased accountability pressure to have institutions show improvement in student learning outcomes has impacted the

high-stakes classroom environment for teachers and students alike. Due to these external pressures, it is possible that faculty may inflate test results to demonstrate larger gains in student learning with an absence of true comprehension (Brown, 2011).

While it seems that the disparity of belief systems and their effects on the conceptions of assessment among the various stakeholders in education is real, it is also clear that the increased accountability pressure (often politicized and marketed as value added) to have institutions, schools, and teachers show improvement in student learning outcomes advocated by politicians, public policy, and parent populations, has impacted learning (Brown, 2011) and its measurement in various ways. The multifaceted purpose of assessment includes obtaining information about student learning, student progress, quality of teaching, as well as program and institutional accountability (Brown, 2010). Each facet of this purpose is affected by the beliefs of those who are implementing the assessments as well as those who are being assessed. Clearly, such research is complicated by these multi-faceted variables. However, Baird (2014) suggests that a standardization of approaches to conducting research on teachers' views about assessment would be useful. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Oprea (2015) found that this complex field of research has produced only a small number of studies that have delved into all the complexities of this topic. An attempt to connect two fields of research was done by Xu and Brown (2016) when they investigated the connection between educational assessment and teacher education.

Brown, Lake, and Matters (2011) report that differences in policy, cultures, and the purpose of assessment lead to differences in how assessment is conceptualized by various stakeholders. Specifically, Brown et al. (2011) hypothesize that when there is a high-stakes environment for students associated with the use of assessments, teachers and students will report a student-accountability purpose of assessment. Research studies completed in New Zealand, where a low-stakes assessment environment is routine, confirm that faculty members' and students' conceptions of assessment differ from those belonging to more high-stakes assessment cultures, such as that of the United States. According to Fletcher et al. (2011), higher education faculty view assessment as an aid to the learning process whereas university students view assessment as needed simply for accountability purposes or even irrelevant to the educational process. The difference lies in the outcome of these assessments based on the educational climate. In low-stakes settings, test scores have little to no impact on students or schools, whereas these scores heavily regulate tenure, promotion, and graduation rates in high stakes climates.

Prior research indicates that students, who conceptualize assessment in terms of personal accountability rather than external accountability, achieve more (Brown et al., 2011). Furthermore, researchers found that Australian students became increasingly negative in their attitudes regarding assessment as they progressed in education level and hypothesize that this shift may be the result of students becoming more aware of the pressures and risks associated with the result of assessment. However, research on the impact of students' beliefs about assessment is lacking (Brown and Harris, 2012). A simple wording modification of Brown's (2006) abridged Conceptions of Assessment III (CoA-

III) instrument was initially intended to be used by the researchers to determine faculty members' and undergraduate students' self-reported conceptions of assessment. However, in order to gain further insights, to identify trends and to explore faculty members' and undergraduate students' beliefs about the definition of assessment, an open-ended question developed by the researchers was also added. Specifically, participants were asked what the term assessment means to them. Furthermore, as part of the researchers' modification of the CoA-III, participants were asked to select from a list of possible responses what types of activities come to mind when they think of the term assessment. Consequently, the present study used a phenomenological approach to investigate the written responses of the participants in order to illuminate any differences between students' and faculty members' conceptions of assessment.

Method

Participants. Undergraduate students (n = 404) and faculty (n = 156) located within the Southern Association of College and Schools (SACS) region of the United States were invited via email to participate in the study. Faculty members were included in the present study if their primary duty was pedagogy, research, program coordination, or academic dean. Additionally, students were identified as undergraduate students attending one of the institutions within the SACS region. One hundred and eleven institutions were contacted to participate in the study. Of the 111 institutional contacts emailed to participate, a total of ten institutions agreed to allow their students and faculty to take part in the research.

Instrument. In order to explore students' and faculty members' beliefs about the meaning of assessment, both faculty and students were asked to provide a written response to the open-ended question, "What does the term assessment mean to you?" Next, participants were asked to 'select all that apply' to the question, "What types of activities come to mind when you think of the term assessment?" These two items were added by the researchers to the abridged version of the CoA-III (Brown, 2006). These questions were used to gain further insight into what these dichotomous groups conceptualize as the meaning of assessment in a high-stakes testing culture.

Design. A cross-sectional design using survey methodology was employed for this study. In an attempt to describe rather than explain the quality of participants' responses to written items on an open-ended items on the questionnaire, the researchers used a phenomenological approach to explore the differences, if any, that exist between student and faculty responses to what the term assessment means to them. A phenomenological approach allowed the researchers to identify the specific perceptions held by the participants

Procedures. Participation in this study was delimited to faculty members who are employed by, and undergraduate students who attend, institutions of higher education located within the SACS region of the United States. Participants were offered an invitation to be included in a raffle for one of the newest versions of an Apple iPad as an attempt to increase participant response rate.

Participants' responses were anonymous and any identifying information inadvertently collected remained confidential. Thus, member checking was not completed. Both student and faculty participant responses to the question, "What does the term assessment mean to you?" were analysed separately and then coded in order to develop themes. Colleagues familiar with such analyses validated the coding and themes.

Conclusion

Summary of findings. Responses to the open-ended question demonstrate distinct differences in how faculty members and students conceptualize the term assessment. The word test, testing, quiz, and/or exam appeared infrequently in faculty responses (9%) compared to students (36%). Thus, students used the word(s) test, testing, quizzes, and exams nearly four times more often than faculty. Faculty mentioned the term evaluation in either program contexts or student learning contexts 40 times in the 146 responses (27%). Students, on the other hand, mentioned evaluation only 77 times out of the 394 responses (20%). The vast majority of the evaluation-related responses for both faculty and students referred to the assessment of students' knowledge and skill set. A trend was observed where faculty connoted evaluation in respect to a course or program, while students assumed more external responsibility for the purposes of evaluation. Interestingly, faculty participants and student participants rarely mentioned formative assessment, personal feedback, or improvement purposes in their responses. In the overwhelming majority of responses, the term assessment was defined as meeting external demands imposed by someone within or outside of the educational institution. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the findings of the present study have been impacted by the students' recent emersion in a high-stakes assessment culture.

In order to answer the second research question, a crosstab analysis was employed. The selected responses to "When you think of the term assessment, what types of activities come to mind?" were analysed. Participants were asked to check all that apply from a list of 15 items (*standardized test, self-reflection, program evaluation, oral questions/answers, portfolios, homework, course grades, written reports/research, conferencing, teacher made tests, tenure and/or promotion dossier, performance evaluation, accreditation, student evaluation, other*). Table 1 contains the frequency of responses to each item by faculty and students. It is evident that the majority of faculty indicated *standardized tests, program evaluation,* and *teacher made tests* as the most common activities associated with assessment. Congruent with faculty, students also indicated *standardized tests* in their conception of assessment most often, along with *performance evaluation* and *course grades*.

Table 1: Types of Assessment Activities

Item	Faculty		Students	
	# of Responses	Percentage of Faculty (n = 158)	# of Responses	Percentage of Students (n = 404)
Standardized tests	122	77	357	88
Program evaluation	118	75	262	65
Performance evaluation	107	68	301	75
Student evaluation	110	70	262	65
Course grades	103	65	277	69
Teacher made tests	114	72	253	63
Written reports/research	109	69	191	47
Homework	100	63	174	43
Oral questions/answers	98	62	185	46
Portfolios	98	62	139	34
Self-reflection	90	57	141	35
Accreditation	90	57	121	30
Tenure and/or promotion dossier	53	34	42	10
Conferencing	52	33	70	17
Other	15	9	15	4

Researchers identified an unusual discrepancy in self-report responses in the present study compared to previous quantitative research on the topic. When asked to acknowledge the meaning of assessment from a personal standpoint, faculty overwhelmingly indicated that assessment involves the evaluation of programs and/or student learning. Yet, in past quantitative research, faculty indicated that the primary purpose of assessment was for improvement purposes. The discordance in faculty responses between the current research and a prior study was highlighted when faculty were asked to select from a list of activities about assessment. In their responses, standardized tests were selected 77 percent of the time by faculty. Standardized testing activities were followed by program evaluation and teacher made tests — none of which align to what faculty indicated in their responses to the open-ended question earlier on in the survey. Students, on the other hand, were more consistent in their responses to both the open-ended item and the list of activities associated with the term assessment. These results align to both past quantitative studies about students' conceptions of assessment as well as the current students' definition of the term assessment.

Implications. An overarching purpose in the present research inquiry was to understand if and how students and faculty differ in their conceptions of assessment, if responses to survey items are congruent to past quantitative research, and finally, if membership conceptualizations of assessment match the represented activities that come to mind in a practical application. As past research indicates, the term assessment has various contexts and connotations dependent on the individual. Understanding attitudes about the purpose of assessment can help inform policy makers regarding the impact of their policy

decisions and the projected outcome. Knowing that attitudes, beliefs, and past experiences with assessment can affect future learning and outcomes of students (Ajzen 1991; Bandura 1986), and that the assessment practices of instructors can improve student outcomes (Brown and Hirschfeld 2008; Struyven et al. 2005), it is important for policymakers to take into consideration the conceptions of both instructors and students if they expect these implemented policies to have a positive impact on learning and achievement.

Limitations. The recruitment of participants limited to the Southeastern region of the United States is a potential limitation in the current research. Furthermore, there is a large disparity between the number of faculty members (n = 159) and undergraduate students (n = 404) who participated in the study. Finally, due to the nature of the data collection, member checking was not possible. Future research should aim to collect a larger number of faculty members to provide additional support for the underlying assumptions of the population. It is also recommended that additional qualitative data be collected via traditional means of data collection (focus groups, interviews, etc.) in order to delve deeper into the meanings of the term assessment held by these individuals.

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