

Assessment As An Act of Care
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By [Melanie Booth](#)

Yep – it’s the “A” word again. “Assessment.” And in higher education, that word is just about everywhere we turn. I suspect that when you saw that word, you likely got a chill up your spine – oh no! Not assessment. Not *again!* Yep – assessment. Again. But I have developed a take on assessment that might help us see it differently. I believe that doing assessment is not about pleasing accreditors or other external stakeholders (what [Peter Ewell](#), in a 2009 occasional paper for [NILOA](#), identifies as the “Accountability Paradigm”), nor is its strength in supporting continuous quality improvement (what Ewell identifies as the “Improvement Paradigm”). Though these are perfectly legitimate reasons for attending to the work of assessment, to be honest, neither truly fuels my intrinsic desire to engage in the hard work of it all. Instead, I believe that assessment is really an act of care.

I care about my students; therefore, I assess. Let me explain.

If we care -- truly care -- about our students, then we likely care about students learning what we would like them to learn. And one way we can show that we care about their learning is assessment. For me, it's that simple. That's my dogma. I care about my students, and I care about what they learn; therefore, I assess my students' learning. I care about my students in my courses; therefore, I assess my courses. I care about my students throughout the course of my program; therefore, I assess my program. I care about our students and their learning in my institution; therefore, I work with my colleagues to engage in assessment at the institutional-level.

Perhaps what’s getting in our way of creating a culture that values assessment is how we think about the work of assessment to begin with. We hear that we have to do it for accreditation and/or because our institution’s administration wants us to engage in evidence-based improvement processes blah blah blah blah. We hear that it can improve our teaching (it can!), help us design better courses and programs (it does!), and that it can help us identify the strengths of our educational offerings (surely!). We hear that it can create more collaboration among faculty (indeed!), and can further promote student learning (all true!).

But what if we thought about doing it because we *care* about our students and their learning? Because we care about our disciplines, and because we care that there will be a future generation to contribute to and create new knowledge within them? What if we engaged in assessment because we care about our society, our environment, and because we care about having a well-educated, responsible citizenry? What if we took assessment seriously because we care that the work we do – the hard work we do as faculty, staff, and administrators – makes some difference, somehow, somewhere, in some significant way.

I don’t know about you, but I want to make a difference. I care; therefore, I assess.

Ewell says that managing the tension between the Accountability Paradigm and the Improvement Paradigm requires finding a middle ground. I believe that it actually is going to require finding a different ground. In his 2003 book *The Learning Paradigm College*, John Tagg contends that higher education has existed in an instructional delivery paradigm – namely, colleges exist to provide instruction. Tagg suggests that shifting to a learning paradigm – so that colleges exist *to produce learning* – would not only change this focus (from teaching to learning), but would change the model of higher education entirely.

Let's do it, I say. Let's change everything. Let's think about a new paradigm to facilitate producing learning, and let's do so because we care. And, accordingly, let's assess because we care. *That* will make a difference. And I don't know about you, but I want to make a difference.

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