

Assessment to Improve How an Organization Learns

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When we completed the updated version of outcomes-based program review good practice research to inform how postsecondary educational institutions improve student success, close equity gaps, and select responsible performance metrics as well as learning analytic practices (Bresciani Ludvik 2018), none of us had a global pandemic on our radar. And here we are, fully steeped in it. So, what does it all mean for outcomes-based assessment and outcomes-based assessment program review?

As you have read from other articles in this special issue of *Assessment Update*, the awareness of inequities and decreased economic capacity to improve student learning brought about by a global pandemic has created an upheaval in the way we engage in providing and, yes, assessing student learning and development. While many would argue that our inquiry methods per se do not need to change, the process we use to design assessment tools, collect data, interpret that data, and make evidence-based decisions does. You have read article after article about how continuing to engage in business as usual is no longer an option; neither is returning to normal even when a vaccine has been successfully and affordably deployed. Higher education and assessment will never look the way they used to; that is a given. But what does all that really mean?

While you have already read several articles from respected thought leaders and poured over emerging research, this article seeks to provide yet another perspective. And this one, too, is based on emerging research...research in the attempt to leverage outcomes-based assessment program review as a form of organizational learning. Learning how your organization learns, whether you move fully to competency-based assessment or not, is necessary. As highlighted in the 2018 good practice book (Bresciani Ludvik), inquiry into how an organization learns is not new. Yet, what evidence do we have right here and now that our organizations are learning from increasing racial injustice awareness, increased online provision, a severe economic downturn with a guaranteed slow and painful recovery, and increasing demands from all the higher education stakeholders to do more and to do better?

We do not have to look far to read newspaper headlines of institutions being criticized. Some of them are being condemned for needing to reverse their course of actions – course of actions that sought to return their campuses to “normal” operation. While other institutions are being blasted for literally attempting to capitalize on the situation by boasting they have been online for decades. Which set of institutions in these two scenarios (a) return to normal or b) capitalize on the situation by illustrating they have already been online appears to be learning from this current situation? Neither one. They are both simply doing what they have always done before. How can engaging in outcomes-based assessment or outcomes-based assessment program review change the course of trajectory for these two types of institutions?

It cannot, unless those practicing evidence-based decision-making shift the focus of their inquiry.

Five Basic Steps to Consider to Become a Learning Organization

In returning to the 2018 research to ascertain what would be relevant now, here are a few findings that may be of service.

- 1) In 2018, one of the primary changes reported by good practice outcomes-based assessment program review institutions began with the organizational leaders, across all levels, posing questions for which they care to find answers. These were not questions resulting from reactivity to accreditation or seeking good practice award recognition. They were questions, collaboratively and genuinely constructed across a multitude of stakeholders (e.g., students, parents/guardians, faculty/staff, administrators, and community stakeholders such as employers, social entrepreneurs and activists, as well as graduate schools), that guided how inquiry would commence. If this is a common practice of a learning organization, then whatever is happening within and around the organizational environment is continually integrated into the inquiry process.
- 2) In articulating the questions that matter to leaders across all levels of the organization, the organization becomes clearer about what it is co-creating and how all the stakeholders contribute to creating it. And in regard to whatever the organization is creating, exploring how leaders know they are doing well emerges. Leaders engage in connecting delivery and inquiry processes. And they explore how to demonstrate their organization is learning from what they have discovered.
- 3) When you become clear about what you are co-creating and you are clear about what it looks like when a quality version of it is has been created, then you can prioritize resources toward that co-creation. That does not mean you cannot diversify creation; it does mean that you get clear on what organizational capacity there is to diversify. Right now, we are seeing examples of colleagues experiencing tremendous stress and anxiety because they are being asked to diversify their efforts with decreasing organizational capacity. At the other end of this spectrum is our witnessing other organizations merge resources to create additional capacity. The question resides in whether your organizational leaders, across all levels, are having the resource prioritization conversation. A learning organization responds with resource re-allocation to stay in inquiry about how well it is designing, delivering, and evaluating what it cares deeply about.
- 4) Commence your systematic inquiry process to learn about how your organization can improve its decision-making process. “What is true about any systematic inquiry process is that its existence alone cannot fix problems within an organization where problems are allegedly caused by (for lack of a better term) ineffective organizational leadership” (Bresciani Ludvik 2018, p.4). Systematic inquiry can cultivate a dynamic learning organization if leadership across all levels are willing to engage in the process.

Learning organizations are where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. The basic rationale for such organizations is that in situations of rapid change, only those that are flexible, adaptive, and productive will excel. For this to happen, it is argued, organizations need to discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at *all* levels. (Senge 2006, p. 114)

- 5) Change whatever does not work as quickly as possible (especially within your systematic inquiry process); however, avoid throwing out the systematic inquiry process all together. In other words, devise a new process if needed, but make sure inquiry is occurring on a regular basis. How a learning organization manages itself (e.g., organizes itself into departments and divisions and functional areas) will influence the manner in which it engages in inquiry of how well it does what it is supposed to create (Senge, 2006).

While this may seem a simplistic solution to what needs to change with outcomes-based assessment, competency-based assessment, or outcomes-based assessment program review during these trying times, consider for a moment, that our attention may need to become focused on what outcomes-based assessment and outcomes-based assessment program review are focused on: is the organization learning? If the organization is not learning; likely, particularly now, neither are the students.

References

Bresciani Ludvik, M. J. 2018. *Outcomes-Based Program Review: Closing Achievement Gaps in and outside the Classroom with Alignment to Predictive Analytics and Performance Metrics* (2nd ed.). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Senge, P. M. 2006. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York, NY: Random House.

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