

Assessment: A Frame of Mind

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In “Assessment: The Burden of a Name,” Bernard Madison of the University of Arkansas hints that efforts in assessing the education of our students can be hindered because of the name itself, assessment.¹ The positive outcomes of a good assessment program are often misunderstood by administrators and faculty and the program doesn’t get the attention it deserves. It appears that it might be harder for the faculty to implement the program because they have created a resistance to the very name instead of to the program. Should the name of the evaluation be changed from assessment to something else?

Perhaps it is the frame of mind in which faculty members approach this evaluation that should change. The United States Army is one of the largest leadership-oriented organizations in America. One of the keys to being a good leader is to be able to plan and implement training for subordinates and then evaluate that training once it is complete. Senior leaders take advantage of the information gained from evaluations and then develop the appropriate lessons learned (feedback) that they will then distribute to subordinates. Evaluation plans are integral to training.² In fact, United States Army Field Manual (FM) 25-100 devotes a chapter to assessment. Every soldier in the Army experiences after-action reviews throughout his or her Army career. Whether participating in a training mission at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, or conducting “hip-pocket training” of the use of a new piece of equipment, soldiers learn what the standards are and then their performances are evaluated against the standards. Soldiers know that an exercise is not over until the AAR is complete. According to FM 25-100,

The after-action review provides feedback for all training. An AAR is a structured review process that allows training participants to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how it can be done better. The AAR is a professional discussion that requires the active participation of those being trained.³

A typical after-action review consists of four parts. First, establish what happened. Next, determine what was right or wrong with what happened. Third, determine how the task should be done differently the next time. Finally, perform the task again. We submit that a quality educational assessment program is consistent with a quality after-action review.

¹ Madison, Bernard L., “Assessment: The Burden of a Name,” published as a SAUM article on the Internet at <http://www.maa.org/SAUM/articles/AssessmentTheBurdenofaName.html>.

² FM 25-100, Chapter 5: Assessment, as found on the Internet at <http://www.adtdl.army.mil/cgi-bin/atdl.dll/fm/25-100/chap5.htm>.

³ *Ibid.*

A good assessment program should have specific goals and objectives. There is a difference between mission goals and outcome goals, and those are usually established by the administration. However, Professor Madison states that assessment is really a part of teaching and learning. We agree. The AAR is not a critique. Critiques pronounce a judgment of success or failure. AARs emphasize meeting the standard and then encourage participants to self-discover important lessons from the training. Too often, faculty members associate “assessment” with “critique”. We are discovering at National Meetings that much of the assessment going on in mathematics across the country shows that we are doing many things right, so where is the critique? Just as an Army training exercise is not complete until the AAR is accomplished, we must get our students and faculty into the frame of mind that an education program is not complete until it has been assessed. Students know they have to fill out end-of-course surveys. Make the survey questions relevant to the course.

Back to the goals and objectives. What is the specific goal we want to assess? What tools (rubric) will we use to conduct the assessment? At the end of the assessment period, were we successful in meeting the goal? What can we do to get better? When a faculty member writes a course-end report, he or she usually gives recommendations on improving the course. That is assessment and not a critique. That is an after-action review. If our program is improved, perhaps student learning will improve, as Professor Madison proposes.

Soldiers in the Army are often critical of themselves in the AAR process. “In hindsight, I could have done A to accomplish B.” This could be seen as a form of criticism. Effective senior leaders will stop the criticism and stress the positive aspects of the training and they will try it again, as soon as possible. The soldiers realize that the end state (standard) is important. We need to get our students and faculty to realize that the end state of learning is what counts. Faculty members are constantly trying to improve their courses. They are assessing their current approaches and making changes. Keep going!

The assessment chapter in FM 25-100 opens with a quotation from Field Marshal Erwin Rommel: “The best form of ‘welfare’ for the troops is first class training, for this saves unnecessary casualties.”⁴ Perhaps the best form of welfare for our students is first-class education, which can be accomplished through effective assessment. The AAR and assessment cycle not only allow the individuals receiving the teaching to learn from the evaluator, but the evaluator learns by observing the individuals being taught. This is a frame of mind, an attitude.

⁴ *Ibid.*