

Here's an old joke. A girl is sitting on a fence when a boy happens along with his dog at his side. Trying to impress the girl the boy says, "I've taught my dog how to say the word 'hello'." "Wow!" says the girl. "I'd like to hear that!" So the boy turns to the dog and yells the command, "Say 'hello'!" But the dog just sits there. "Say 'hello'!" And still no answer from the dog. The boy turns back to the girl and delivers a triumphant, "Ta-da!" "That dog said nothing," said the girl. "I thought you said you taught him to say 'hello.'" The boy retorted, "I said I taught it to him, I didn't say he learned it!"

That little joke contains the basis of an educational reform that now permeates all levels of instruction. We know what is being taught, but how do we know what is being learned? For years in higher education we had what I like to call the "Trust Me" proof of learning. How did we know that a student who passed, say, College Algebra for instance, learned everything he or she needed. The instructor would say, "Trust me, I taught it and I gave him/her a grade." Yeah, but did they learn ALL of the parts of that course? Are they ready to move on? How do we know beyond the word of the instructor?

And beyond this, how do we know what the instructor is doing to improve the class, to make sure all students are learning all of the part of the course, and to keep the class relevant to the present and future?

Questions like these have given rise to changing the emphasis from what is being taught to what is being learned. This reform is called Outcomes Assessment and NCCC has one of the most robust systems of assessments in the country.

Outcomes assessment works like this. The instructors make a list of all of the different things a student should learn in a particular class, program, or the general education as a whole. These are called outcomes. Then they devise methods to test those outcomes. Once the assessments are complete instructors report how students did on each of those outcomes individually. This means there is not just a course grade, but a look at how the group of students did on each component of the course, program or the general education. The instructors set goals for themselves to improve those individual scores and even submit plans to the college administration showing what they are going to do differently next time this is offered to improve learning. The administration then looks at those reports to see where they can help with more resources, support services, or overall curricular changes. Outcomes assessment allows the instructor to discover where problem areas in the curriculum exist and focus efforts on those areas, while at the same time provide some accountability to the College and taxpayers as to the strength of student learning.

Fields like welding and nursing have been doing this kind of thing for years. For instance, nursing students must do "check offs" showing they know how to do each skill being taught before the instructors let them move on to the next course. But in the area of, say social science, or art, this is a relatively new concept.

The accrediting body for higher education in our region, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), now requires all colleges and universities to have a system of assessment and show how that system has improved learning at its member institutions. The HLC is VERY serious about this issue, making assessment the most cited area of improvement needed when it re-accredits colleges and universities.

In 2003 the faculty of Neosho County Community College came up with a new method of outcomes assessment where outcomes are assessed in nearly every course and every section every semester using a computerized database. A score is recorded for every course outcome in every section every semester. We also document what changes the instructor is going to make in future semester and track what requests instructors make for additional resources. These results are applied to outcomes at the program level and the general education level.

Our system has won the College two national awards and has been adopted and adapted by many colleges in the country. College employees have presented about our system at many national conventions to standing room only crowds. NCCC now enjoys a national reputation for our assessment system.

This is just one more way you can be proud of your College. We know it is learning that matters most, that classes are constantly improving, and that students got what they paid for out of a class. And we have the data to prove it.

As always I welcome your thoughts and comments at [binbody@neosho.edu](mailto:binbody@neosho.edu).