

QUESTION #13: HOW DO I ASSESS THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS?

A conversation with Reed Mencke

I suggest we start by sketching the kinds of individual needs students are likely to bring to a Learning Assistance Center (LAC) for which assessment may be helpful. Obviously, the concerns students bring will be closely tied to the mission of your LAC and how that plays out in terms of specific roles. Three assessment roles are: 1) study skills, particularly text reading, notetaking, time management and test

taking; 2) learning style assessment and 3) assessment of skills needed to master specific course content, particularly tutoring assessments, placement assessments, and basic skill assessments. Different kinds of assessment approaches are required for each area. And within areas we have a choice between "formal" and "informal" methods of assessment.

How do you distinguish between "informal" and "formal" assessment?

Informal assessment refers to any kind of non-standardized assessment. Formats for informal assessments include: direct observation of study behavior, interview questions, and the short quiz you make up on the spot to see where a student stands on some particular area such as time management. The possibilities are endless. At the University of Arizona we start every workshop with a short, informal assessment, typically a 5 to 10 item, "self-assessment" quiz, designed to ask workshop participants to think about the topic of the workshop.

Formal assessments are standardized instruments and are usually more carefully developed and structured than informal assessments. This development may include setting the assessment up in such a way that it can be taken and scored on a computer. An example of a formal assessment device would be a test like the MSLQ, Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire, that has been normed to facilitate comparison of one student's result to a reference group such as "freshmen in science classes."

An informal assessment based on direct observation of behavior is often more useful than a formal assessment. For example, when discussing text reading I like to examine the student's text to see how they approach the task of text marking. If I'm helping a student with notetaking I assess a copy of the notes from the class they particularly want help with.

And in workshops I get the students to take responsibility for assessing their own work. I may, for example, ask them to look at and evaluate each other's style of notetaking using some guidelines such as Norm Stahl's criteria for good notes. Informal assessment combined with constructive feedback is the essential backbone of any intervention.

Can you describe some informal and formal methods of assessment? Would you start with study skills? I'm already finding that students don't always know what skills they need help with because they lack a clear model of what good study skills are.

Very true. And that means your first challenge may be to motivate them to consider doing an assessment of their study skills. You increase motivation by beginning with an informal assessment. First, ask your students to identify the one course they find most challenging this semester. Then ask to see a work sample from that course. The kind of sample depends on the content area. I always try to

start by focusing our mutual attention on an area that is central to improved performance in their most challenging class. Students are practical. They expect us to be. Informal assessments, carefully tailored to the problem the student brings, serve to establish rapport and motivate. The students get immediate feedback on a task with which they have been struggling.

So far we have spoken only about informal assessments. Aren't there some formal devices, like paper and pencil tests and computer scored tests that we can use to help students assess study needs? I hear a lot about a test called LASSI.

There are a number of good formal assessment devices we use at the university and LASSI, the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory, is one of them. Others I consider useful are the Survey of Reading/Study Efficiency II, the Student Behavior Inventory, the Motivated Strate-

gies for Learning Questionnaire, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. It is handy to have one or more of these instruments available in your center and set up in such a manner that you can walk your student out for immediate on-the-spot assessment during the first conference.

I can see that the informal assessments you talked about earlier have the advantage of being inexpensive and relevant to the students. What do formal assessments offer?

One potential advantage of a formal assessment device is breadth of coverage. These instruments ask students a lot of questions, more than you have time to ask during a student interview. Potentially, you and the student get to look at the whole spectrum of study behavior. This may pinpoint problem areas that didn't come up in the interview. Equally important, you learn something about the student's strengths not just weaknesses. That allows for positive feedback, something we know is vital to self-esteem and making changes.

But each of the particular instruments has its own particular set of strengths. Some are better for individual diagnosis, some for research, some allow you to insert customized recommendations that refer a student to LAC programs. The *SRSE II* was designed for individual and group sessions. The *SRSE II* and *SBI* have been set up so that your LAC can enter a set of customized recommendations that direct the student to particular LAC resource materials and programs or to other campus resources you want them to know about. *LASSI* is widely known, fairly inexpensive, and has been researched fairly extensively.

I have a question about student learning styles assessments. Are they useful?

Learning style inventories help faculty and tutors become more sensitive to individual differences in the learners they serve. I consider that to be their major utility. So we have built the *Myers-Briggs* and various other learning style assessments into our tutor-training program. And I sometimes use learning style as-

sessments in student conferences. Taking a learning style inventory helps some students to understand themselves better. It can lead to a clearer picture of how they need to stretch their personal learning style to meet the teaching style of a particular instructor.

Can you sum up what you have said about the uses of assessment in the Learning Assistance Center?

Assessment is the essential ingredient of any effective academic intervention. Students lack information about where they stand in relation to effective study strategies, their per-

sonal learning style, and whether they have really attained mastery of key concepts in the courses they are taking. So any effort designed to help students improve should incorporate

some good assessments that students understand and relate to. Often, in my experience, the simpler assessments work the best. But, for students motivated enough to take the time, formal assessments provide more thorough,

comprehensive feedback. And certainly for situations where we are making decisions, we want a well-developed test that predicts success, in other words, a formal assessment.

What about the use of technology for assessment?

Technology can help us. It is helping us by making assessment available on the web, by providing interactive tutoring software that helps students process information more intensively and by providing forms of computer adaptive testing that make the placement process more friendly and accurate for our incoming students.

Technology is a tool the LAC can use, but we should use it always in a setting that is human and which provides the individual support that is a necessary condition for change in human behavior.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

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Pintrich, P., Smith, D., Garcia, T., & McKeachie, W. (1991). *MSLQ (Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire)*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.

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Reed Mencke joined the University Learning Center of the University of Arizona as Associate Director July, 1993. Prior to that he held positions at the U of A as Associate Director of Counseling, Lecturer in Psychology, and Associate Director and Director of Student Affairs Research. Reed's publications span the fields of psychology instruction, psychological counseling, institutional research and college student learning and development. Most recently he initiated a partnership between the University Learning Center and a group of general education faculty called Teaching Teams. This project has received three year funding from the Fund for Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) and the Kellogg Foundation and has been described as "highly transformational" by an independent evaluation team from UCLA's ACE program. Reed served as a mentor at the Winter Institute, January, 1999. At U of A he has designed and conducted tutor training programs for a credit tutor training class (MCB 497a) in the Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology as well as for the Preceptor Program. He works closely with the Department of Geosciences and, with Peter Kresan has designed a series of study strategy workshops that are integrated into the introductory geology course. Mencke, Kresan and others co-authored a new instructor manual for introductory geology courses that incorporates learning principles into the teaching of geology.