

WEBER STATE UNIVERSITY

ASSESSMENT UPDATES

May 2009 Newsletter

Resolving the Inherent Philosophical Conflicts in Assessment

In *Disappearing Through the Skylight: Culture and Technology in the Twentieth Century*, O.B. Hardison wrestles with two conflicting paradigms of the 20th century. He sees these changes as so “fundamental, [that] the concepts -- and even the vocabularies and images in which the concepts tend to be framed, no longer seem to objectify a real world.

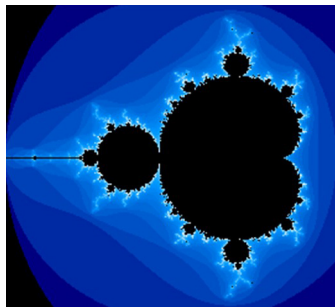
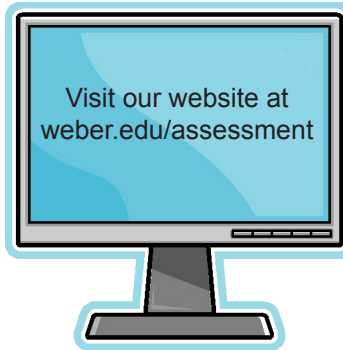
The first, in which he loosely identifies with Analytical Philosophy, Hardison would have us disappear through a sub-atomic view of the world that loses all meaning in its search for underlying fact.

The second, which he identifies with Pragmatism and Existentialism, would have us disappear by abstracting the patterns and meanings to the point that all that is left is the individual.

Hardison’s answer to the dilemma of finding meaning in a world, which focuses on the macro and micro vision, is instructive for us in considering assessment. He suggests that we seek for the “middle distance” to find patterns and meanings that disappear if something is viewed to briefly or too intently.

“At any given moment, life is completely senseless. But viewed over a period, it seems to reveal itself as an organism existing in time, having a purpose, trending in a certain direction.” Aldous Huxley (1894-1963).

Benoit Mandelbrot, the father of Chaos theory, showed mathematically and graphically how nature uses the fractal dimensions and “**self constrained**



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Please call or email

Ryan Thomas
at
801-626-6006
or
ryanthomas2@weber.edu

chance” to create the complex and irregular forms of the real world. His is, in some ways, a “middle distance” view of the world.

What does the “middle distance” mean in assessment?

- Higher education is a complex system, not merely a complicated one.
- A complicated system may have many interactions, but they are linear.
- A complex system has many interactions, but the results of the interactions may not be linear, or easily ascertainable at the outset.
- Assume that modern avionics, a complicated but not a complex system, had the same degree of precision as assessing learning in higher education. Would any of us choose to fly?

• The trip would be interesting, but not particularly predictable, except over time, where the multiple trips would reveal patterns. This imprecision is not simply a matter of imprecise measurements; it is “hard-wired” into the system.

“Middle Distance” Principles of Assessment in Higher Education

- Assessment in higher education is best used to account for long-term patterns and to trace the effects of gradual change.
- Highly precise measurements of a moment in time are not causal predictors in higher education.

- Increasing the “digits past the decimal point” does not increase the accuracy of most higher education data and its inferential value.

- Each measurement is an approximation that can help us understand the broad picture over time.

- Assessment is not the “end” but a process.

- The joint purposes of assessment, accountability and improvement, have a secondary, rather than a primary relationship to the actual goal of learning.

- Accounting may help us “prove our value,” but it is not why we teach.

- “Improvement” only has meaning in relationship to something else; it defines direction, not substance.

- Successful assessment needs to be framed around the core of our academic enterprise.

- “Assessment works best when faculty can see that it does not invade their classrooms but grows out of them, when faculty can accept the goals of their own teaching and the goals of assessment as both compatible and mutually reinforcing, when faculty feel valued and valuable because the tests reflect their own input into the whole teaching, learning, and assessment process” Pat Belanoff, Director of Writing Programs at [New York] University at Stony Brook (1994).

- Some things may be “true, but not very useful.” *Benjamin Franklin Journal* (1734).

- “Assessment techniques are of little use unless and until local academic cultures value self-examination, reflection, and continuous improvement. In general, already existing assessment techniques and methods are more than sufficient to meet the challenges we face. It’s the ends toward which, and the ways in which, we use those tools that are the problem.” Thomas A. Angelo “Doing Assessment As If Learning Matters Most,” AAHE Bulletin (1999).

“Middle Distance” Assessment Focuses on Outputs Rather than Inputs.

- Input Measurements of faculty preparation, numbers of volumes in the library or faculty publications have limited utility.

- What we need to ask is, “What changes as a result of the experience?”

- Focus on the learner; not on the instructor or the institutional resources.

- If we focus on the institution, rather than the individual, we are in danger of “The ‘Cooling-Out’ Function in Higher Education.” Many higher education systems, particularly open enrollment institutions, allow students to fail “softly” by giving the apparent opportunity to compete in a contest that they can’t win. B. Clark,” *American Journal of Sociology*: Vol. 65, Num. 6, page 569-576.

Many Different Processes may Draw Attention to the Critical Issues of Learning

- Even with flawed data, questioning and considering the issues may lead to improvement over time.

- “Much of the value of assessment comes from the systematic way it makes educators question, discuss, share, and observe. As a result, assessment contributes greatly to the understanding of what educators do and to the choices they make about future directions for their work” Palomba and Banta of Spartanburg Technical College (1999).

Middle Distance” Assessment Recognizes that, Even Without Direct Causality, Approximation Over Time May be Enough

- “If something is worth doing, it’s worth doing badly.” G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, (1910).

- Approximate assessment is not only inevitable; it is also sufficient.

Departments - Please submit your 2007/08 Program Assessments if you have not already done so.

And

A big “Thank You” to all the departments who have submitted their 2007/08 Program Assessments.