Closing the Loop:
Another in a Series of Occasional Papers on Assessment
by Joan Hawthorne

"We're 'doing assessment.' But, while we see that we're getting stuff that can be cited in annual reports (to keep our department out of trouble), we're not finding much that's of value."

Well, that's not a tremendous surprise if you're in the early stages of assessment efforts. There are at least a couple of things that typically happen when a department gets started with assessment.

First, you may find that you're generating information, but it isn't what you'd expected when you developed your plan. There's simply too much data and you're buried in it. It's too detailed, and doesn't seem to mean much. It's really broad and provides no useful insight. It's too hard to analyze, so it's just stacking up. Or several of the above. What to do?

Maybe a good comparison is with the first lecture you gave, or the first time you assigned students to write research papers. Likely that first lecture was pretty weak, and you may have run out of content before the time was near an end – or you may have buried your students in details. Probably when you read that first set of student papers, you immediately realized that the papers weren't at all what you had hoped to see. It takes time to develop the skills of good teaching.

So also with assessment. Your first efforts won't be your best. You'll probably find that what you envisioned doesn't look like what's occurring. Sometimes looking at what resulted gives you immediate insight into what you should have done – and that's good. It means that your first effort served the extremely useful purpose of helping you conceptualize a better approach. Rethink problematic aspects of your plan. Get help if you need it. Look at materials from departments that are having success with assessment (and there are now many of them at UND). But don't continue to collect information that is meaningless. Figure out how to do it better, and focus your efforts on the new plan.

A second, equally common problem results from the generally desirable fact that faculty have a high interest in equity. Especially in small departments, this often translates into the idea that everyone should share the load, which means everyone should collect data from his/her own classes.

However good this may sound in theory, the result is almost always unsatisfactory. Each person has collected data, but each person's information is really only directly relevant to her own work – so it's hard to have productive conversations among colleagues about the findings. Furthermore, such an approach reinforces the idea that individual faculty have individual responsibility for specific student outcomes.

In fact, student achievement of programmatic outcomes is a departmental or program-wide responsibility. When it's treated as an individual issue, the result is often an understandable desire, particularly on the part of untenured faculty, to present data in support of their own teaching effectiveness. That shifts the focus of assessment from "finding out how well our students are doing on programmatic goals" to "proving I'm a good teacher." Assessment of student learning is not about individual teaching effectiveness.

It's important to recognize that students could be graduating with unsatisfactory levels of knowledge and skills, for example, in research methods, despite the fact that the research course is well taught and the teacher is able to demonstrate satisfactory student learning within the course. Maybe students take the course as juniors and then encounter little additional mention of research methods or techniques before graduation, so new grads are uncertain of their skills. Direct assessment of research competencies may confirm that research is a weakness. But the problem may be too little opportunity for reinforcement and application rather than inadequate teaching in the relevant course.

Good assessment of student learning within the context of an academic program is usually characterized by two traits:

1. The data reflect what students know and can do as they near graduation. They may have been taught the skills or concepts a couple of years ago. But what can they demonstrate when they're seniors?
2. The data are so interesting that they will inevitably lead to productive, collegial discussion. If you're not looking forward to seeing what the data show, you probably aren't collecting useful data. Just as with a research project, one measure of assessment's value is its ability to provoke discussion.

The comparison between assessment and research is a good one to keep in mind. If you approach assessment of student learning as a social science research project, you will likely find yourself on the right track. As a researcher interested in finding out whether students at an unknown university are really meeting specific learning outcomes, how would you proceed? What kinds of evidence would you find interesting and persuasive? Good program assessment is like a collaborative research project, with the learning of your own students as the object of study.

What can you do if your department's assessment work isn't measuring up? Get help. Members of the University Assessment Committee and the HLC Steering Committee can offer advice, or help you identify departments which might be useful models. And remember that there's a learning curve. Next year's work will be better – more interesting and more useful – than last year's, as long as you stay engaged with the process.