



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Applying Sports Analogies to Assessment

Assessment is a process of inquiry rooted in questions of “How are we doing?” and “How can we improve?” These fundamental questions are often set aside if faculty members feel that assessment initiatives increase their workload unnecessarily or yield irrelevant data and artifacts. When this happens, the connection between performance and feedback is interrupted, and the dynamic between teaching and learning is viewed as unquantifiable.

Yet we quantify all sorts of dynamic performances, like the scoring of an athletic performance in the Olympics. While the score does not tell the whole story, it does provide insight into the preparation, mindset, and collaborative work of athletes and coaches. Using analogies based on dynamic sporting performances helps academic teams conceptualize the intent of outcomes assessment by creating mental models that connect formative feedback to performance.

Practical Use

During the 2018 Faculty Development Days at Waubonsee Community College, the outcomes assessment team explored the attitudes towards assessment held by faculty and administrators. Many viewed assessments as extra work rather than an integral part of teaching and learning improvement. In response, the team distributed images of the whiteboard that Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon drew up with his team in preparation for their World Series win. They highlighted some of the phrases Maddon wrote to help his players combat their mental stress and prepare for the upcoming season: “The process is fearless.” “Do simple better.” “Embrace the target.”

Faculty and administrators applied these words of motivation to the task of an inaugural, institution-wide assessment. They began to shift their mindsets and view assessment not as a chore, but as a vital part of the learning process. They replaced the original mental model they held, one that viewed assessment as unhelpful and time-consuming, with a mental model that viewed assessment as a team effort that led to the betterment of faculty, students, and the institution. Many faculty members taped the whiteboard image to their walls and file cabinets as a reminder of this mindset and returned to Maddon’s phrases when they needed a boost of motivation.

When building outcomes assessment efforts at health professions institutions, the American University of Health Sciences found that faculty and administrators tend to be health-conscious people who naturally relate to sports examples. Sharing photos of true inspirational events, teams working together, and inspiring coaches helps convey the purpose and benefits of assessment, as well as the physiological dimensions of learning.

Learner-Centered Assessment

While coaches can be great, they are nothing without the support and inclusion of the entire team. Cohesive assessment efforts invite and incorporate student feedback about programs and courses. Learner-centered assessment is achieved when faculty members focus on building consensus around their expectations and taking student input into consideration. When assessment leaders exhibit respect for the entire team and create an appropriate context of safety in which to hold conversations about assessment, faculty experience a shift in perspective—from an individual instructor who imparts his or her specific knowledge, to a coach or guide who facilitates student learning.

Conclusion

As with sports performance training, great assessment work is not easy and it’s never done. The sporting world provides a wealth of inspirational examples from which to draw upon, including struggles and failures, resiliency, and motivational coaches and trainers. Applying sports analogies works best when the facilitator provides context and authenticity to motivate his or her teammates towards continuous improvement efforts.

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