On LOs AND PIs:  
A Philosopher’s Rant on Assessment

Ronald F. White, Ph.D.  
Professor of Philosophy  
College of Mount St. Joseph

For several years now, colleges and universities across the United States have been instituting a system of assessment that is rapidly changing the nature of higher education. It’s an adventure that has already consumed vast quantities of time, effort, and resources. For us, the driving force behind this project has been a powerful cadre of administrators known as the Higher Learning Commission, which is affiliated with the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. As our accrediting agency, HLC requires that we institute a “culture of assessment.” Admittedly, I do not know exactly what HLC requires of us or how much coercive power it holds over us. I also do not know how much of what we are doing under the guise of “assessment” is self-inflicted. Nevertheless, as a citizen of the college, I’m compelled to participate in this project. But as a philosopher I find what we are doing to be grossly simplistic, incoherent, and wasteful. In precise philosophical jargon, most of what are doing is “nonsense,” that is, it is built upon a foundation of meaning rather than sense experience. As a philosopher I deal with nonsense every day. The difference is that philosophers generally recognize it for what it is, and we don’t force it upon others.

Before I get started on this rant, let me state categorically that what I have to say about our growing “culture of assessment” is philosophical and not personal. Many of my friends and colleagues find this stuff to be interesting, compelling and important. Some enjoy learning its principles and applying them here at the Mount. Hopefully, this critique will not incite ill-feelings toward me. But I am concerned with how growing “culture of assessment” will affect the academic vitality of the college and our workloads. But I am also a philosophical realist, and therefore I accept the reality of “power-based relationships.” The faculty here at MSJ resides on the lower rungs of that particular hierarchy, and I reside near the very bottom. If we are indeed being collectively coerced by powerful internal or external forces on this matter of assessment, I’m certainly willing to acknowledge that fact. My fleeting hope is that we can somehow minimize the amount of time, effort, and resources that we expend on this juggernaut. For what it’s worth, here’s my humble argument.

Human beings and other primates are naturally endowed with “intentionality;” that is, the intellectual capacity to envision desired future ends (or goals) and devise means (or strategies) that might bring those desired “ends or goals” to fruition. Obviously, we only pursue goals that we believe to be “good,” and therefore the concept of a goal is value-laden from the outset. Individual planning involves setting personal goals and devising strategies for their realization: “Bill is going to college now in order to bring about a larger paycheck in the future.” Collective planning involves setting communal goals and devising strategies for their realization: “The U.S. is going to war now in order to bring about democracy in Iraq.” Short-term planning intends to bring
about goals over a short period and long-term planning takes longer. And, sometimes our
time-estimates are way off!

Some strategies for the realization of our individual and collective goals are
obviously more efficient than others, which is what assessment is all about. Anyway,
whenever we endeavor to intentionally “bring about” ends or goals, we naturally try to
“assess” the effectiveness of our means, plans, or strategies. At a bare minimum,
rationality consists in the capacity to employ trial and error in assessing the efficiency of
our plans. Rational agents replicate efficient strategies and revise inefficient strategies.
And, of course we must also “assess” our assessment our strategies.

Some goals are easily articulated and are relatively unambiguous (eating breakfast
at 8:30 A.M.). We “know” if and when these goals have been realized. But other goals
are not so easily articulated. It is difficult, if not impossible to “know” when ambiguous
goals have been realized (winning the war in Iraq). Rational persons can disagree over
the degree to which ambiguous goals have been realized. That’s OK. But it is also
important to keep in mind that some of the best and worst things in life are unplanned,
and that our plans often change in light of these unplanned outcomes. When I entered
college I planned to be an art teacher, until I took a philosophy course. Unanticipated
consequences drive human experience and add excitement to our lives. What bothers me
most about our “culture of assessment” is that it overvalues planned learning outcomes
and undervalues unplanned learning outcomes. If a student finds value in his/her
experience at MSJ that we did not intend, we simply don’t count it.

As stated earlier, goals are pursued by both individuals and collectives (groups of
individuals). The nature of collective goals has inspired thousands of years of
philosophical discourse. Sometimes collective goals are set based on a democratic
process, and sometimes they are set unilaterally, based on the authority of powerful
individuals or groups. Collective goals are often forced upon individuals and sub-
communities by powerful internal and external constituencies. Collective planning,
therefore, tends to over-value conformity and Grand Cooperative Projects at the expense
of individual planning. Grand Cooperative Projects that deter individual planning invite
non-compliance. That’s why the pursuit of collective goals invariably requires
monitoring and enforcement by the powerful constituencies (leaders) that set collective
goals. It has been my experience that Grand Cooperative Projects start out to be voluntary
and end up coercive. And, unfortunately Grand Cooperative Projects are rarely subjected
to cost/benefit analysis, which is the only way to assess anything.

If we want to assess progress toward the realization of non-ambiguous goals, one
way to begin that process is to set up empirical criteria that signal that progress.
Assessment, therefore, requires a clear view of what we intend to do (outcome), and
empirical evidence indicating degrees of “progress” toward realizing our goals
(performance indicator). We employ performance indicators to discern varying degrees
doing toward the realization of these goals. Sometimes an assessment strategy
indicates that we have successfully realized our goals (“exemplary” progress); sometimes
we discover that we failed to accomplish our goals (“absence” of progress); and
sometimes we fall short (“developed” toward progress). And, of course we cannot lose
sight of the fact that these assessments are relative to the assessment strategies that we
choose to employ.
Two years ago, one of my personal goals was to learn how to play a musical instrument called the bouzouki. So how would I go about “assessing” my ability to “play the bouzouki”? How would the Royal Society of Bouzouki Players go about assessing my abilities? Well, obviously, assessment would depend on what we mean by “playing the bouzouki.” Suppose I decided to set performance indicators to assess my personal progress toward learning to play that instrument. I might decide that a person can play bouzouki, if and only if, he/she can play the melody and chords to at least one song. Based on that performance indicator, I have fulfilled that learning outcome. Actually, I can play about 20 songs. Based on that criterion alone I might conclude that I am an exemplary bouzouki player. However, the Royal Society might decide that a person can play bouzouki, if and only if he/she can sight-read sheet music and play any written song on that instrument. Based on that criterion my progress is probably “absent.”

I might decide to enter a “bouzouki contest” and allow a jury of experts to compare my skills to the skills of other players. Of course, the judges would then have to agree upon a set of performance indicators. If the Royal Society set the learning objectives and performance indicators, and “trained” the judges, I’d have to learn to read music and demonstrate proficiency. In the final analysis it is hard to escape the conclusion that assessment is not only about learning outcomes and performance indicators, it’s also about who sets those LOs and the PIs.

The first step in trying to assess our Liberal Arts Curriculum was for us to collectively decide upon its goals; that is, what kinds of learning outcomes, we collectively value and want our students know or do? We decided that we want our students to know or do six learning outcomes: communication, critical thinking, sociocultural relationships, ethics, interdisciplinarity, and citizenship. These collective goals were set based on a democratic process: we voted. We voted “in-favor” not necessarily because they made sense, but because the committee members spent a lot of time and effort on them. Call it a sympathy vote. (Actually, I think most of us are actually indifferent to all of this, but I have no evidence to support that claim.) I didn’t vote at all because I thought it was all nonsense.

Once “we” decided that “we” collectively “value” these six outcomes, and that “we” want our students to be able to know or do these things, then, “we” had to codify the “performance indicators;” that is set the empirically verifiable signs that “indicate” whether our students really know or can do these six objectives, at various points in their matriculation process. “We” voted on them too. Over the past few years these LOs and PIs have already been revised and re-voted several times. But I don’t know if our recent instantiations are any better or worse than the previous instantiations, and therefore I can’t say with any conviction that we are progressing toward anything substantive.

So at various stages in their academic “development” we test our students in order to decide whether they know or can do these things. If after four years, we discover that most of our students know or can do these “learning outcomes,” our assessment strategy concludes that they were “good students” and/or that we were “good teachers.” If they did not know or could not do these things, then it would conclude that either: a.) they were not very good students to begin with, and therefore we ought to recruit better students; or b.) we were not very good teachers; or c.) both of the above. If we “discover” that we were not good teachers, then obviously we must either: a.) revise our teaching
strategies; b.) hire better teachers and fire the bad ones; or c.) revise the LAS learning outcomes and/or the performance indicators; or, d.) some or all of the above.

Given rules of the game, the easiest route to institutional success will always be to modify those infinitely malleable LOs and PIs (especially the PIs!). If we’re collectively rational and self-interested agents, then we’ll set standards in such a way that indicates that most, if not all our students are “good” and all our teachers are “good.” That way, all our students can graduate and land high-paying jobs, and the whole faculty can collect “merit pay.” If we set LOs and PIs in such a way that everyone fails, then the faculty will invariably vote out members of that Assessment Committee, and students will either not enroll at MSJ or withdraw from the college. If do graduate, they certainly will not join our Alumni Association or contribute to the college.

I do not wish to labeled a “bad teacher,” so I will always “game the system.” My ethics students will appear to be exemplary. How will I accomplish that feat? I’ll follow the lead set by public school teachers. I’ll teach the exam.

So if I’m correct, our LAS Learning Outcomes and Performance Indicators have been set based on consensus, but they do not necessarily correspond to any external reality. Let’s just admit that both the LOs and PIs are socially constructed. There is nothing wrong with that! All it means is that “consensus” was established on the basis of a political process. It also means that there will always be dissenters that do not agree with the established orthodoxy. We can also anticipate that when the composition of the Assessment Committee changes, it is probable that the LOs and PIs will be changed. Unfortunately, every time we reset those Los and PIs, our new Los and PIs become incommensurate with the old ones, and long-term assessment is undermined. So if the driving force behind assessment has been to improve upon the past, this strategy simply won’t work. So unless the college decides to issue a “gag order” that prevents future discourse on the subject, this process will go on ad infinitum.

What is missing from our “culture of assessment” is the final stage of any assessment strategy: cost/benefit analysis. Is it all worth it? Assessment requires the expenditure of time, effort, and resources. Here at MSJ we are already required to teach eight courses a year, produce scholarship and exhibit citizenship. Is the added burden of participating in this Grand Cooperative Project really worth it?

Admittedly, I do not know how much of what HLC presents as “fact” is “peer-reviewed” by external scholars. Who is assessing the assessors? Even if it is based on rock-solid scholarship that does not mean that we ought to do it. What we really need to know is who benefits from this Project? Is it HLC, our administration, faculty, students, or society, and is that benefit worth the cost? All I’ve ever heard from the upper echelons of the MSJ power hierarchy is that we are required to do this stuff. I’ve never heard anyone present in compelling detail why it is worth doing over the long-run or the short-run. The same lingering questions apply to the decision to implement Writing Across the Curriculum, and E-Portfolio. No one has addressed how any of these Grand Cooperative Projects will add to our workload or who will it benefit?

If this assessment project sounds familiar to you, it is how the government goes about assessing public schools. Unfortunately, the College of Mount St. Joseph and many other colleges and universities now employ various instantiations of that process. (Here I’ll refrain from my reference to the behavior of lemmings.) If you think the government does a good job with our public schools, then you’ll be anxious to extend this model of
assessments into higher education. If not, you’ll be a dissenter and a critic of that juggernaut. All I know is that most of the public school teachers that I know have quit the profession because of the amount of time, effort, and resources they are required to expend on assessment. And, obviously there is not a lot of evidence that indicates that public schools have improved as a result of their “culture of assessment.”

My jaded view is that this model of assessment is the product of a culture that values conformity to collective planning over spontaneous individual initiative. Therefore, it “works” best when assessing courses and programs that equate knowing with memorization of facts and doing with replicating established processes. The PI’s for these kinds of LOs are easy to set. That’s why high school is all about rote memorization and skill replication. “Do you know what year Christopher Columbus discovered America?” “Can you show me how to kick the extra point after a touchdown?” But most complex, collective goals are much more difficult, if not impossible to break down into performance indicators that are grounded in any external reality. (But then again, there may be no external reality, but I digress…) All of our POs are extraordinarily complex and therefore vague. That’s OK. But let’s not spend the next ten years trying to disguise that realization. Embrace ambiguity, individual planning, and a curriculum with a lot of variation and diversity. We don’t have to spend all of our time, effort, and resources on Grand Cooperative Projects!

I am not opposed to setting a few very broad Learning Outcomes. At least five of our six LOs make sense. (Interdisciplinarity is not an end in itself. At best it’s occasionally a means of attaining the other five ends.) But philosophers have argued about the nature and meaning of communication, critical thinking, sociocultural relationships, ethics, and citizenship for centuries. Although these are certainly worthy goals for a liberal education, I could also add at least twenty other LOs that are equally justifiable and vague.

In order to for collective planning to “work,” individuals are often forced to modify their individual planning. For assessment, we are being forced to employ nonsensical verbiage, and participate in the interminable debates over LOs and PIs. Admittedly, I’m only doing this stuff because I’m being forced to do it, not because I think it’s worth my time, effort, and resources (or the College’s). Hopefully, as we gradually assimilate this nonsense, the amount of time and effort required of us will lessen. But that’s highly unlikely. Ask any high school teacher.

This semester I have 160 students and five different preps, a relatively light teaching load by my standards. I also have three unfinished books and several unfinished articles, and two scholarly presentations that I’m trying to prepare. I’m also trying to learn how to play the bouzouki, but unfortunately, I don’t have time to learn how to read music. The Royal Society of Bouzouki Players terminated my membership.

September 2, 2007.