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FROM DEPARTMENTAL TO DISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT:

Deepening Faculty Engagement

BY PAT HUTCHINGS

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In the late 1980s, as student outcomes assessment was first taking hold in higher education, I interviewed a number of faculty members who had been pulled into the movement's orbit. One still sticks with me: a professor of art history at a large research university who recounted the experience of having to sit down with her department colleagues—for the first time ever—to hash out their collective goals for majors. It was a difficult conversation, she told me, surfacing serious disagreements but eventually yielding a more shared vision of what students in the program should know and be able to do.

Clarifying goals is, admittedly, only the first step in the assessment process. Nevertheless, the experience recounted by that faculty member twenty-some years ago says a lot about the power of assessment at the departmental and disciplinary level to engage the professoriate in substantive ways.

That said, most of assessment's attention over the last two decades has been aimed at cross-cutting outcomes—critical and analytical thinking, problem solving, quantitative literacy, and communication—that are typically identified with general education. Just about everyone agrees that abilities like these are essential markers of higher learning; critical thinking typically tops the list of faculty priorities for student learning, regardless of field or institutional type. They're also the outcomes that have caught the attention of employers and policymakers (as well as test makers)—who are not, for the most part, asking how well students understand art history, sociology, or criminal justice (though they *are* asking about math and science preparation). And of course they are outcomes that overlap with those of the disciplines.

In short, assessment's focus on cross-cutting outcomes makes perfect sense, but it has also meant that the assessment of students' knowledge and abilities *within* particular fields, focused on what is *distinctive* to the field, has received less attention. And that's too bad.

It's too bad because we do, after all, value what our students know and can do in their major area of concentration and because students themselves typically care most about achievement in their chosen field of study. But it's also too bad because anchoring assessment more firmly in the disciplines may be a route to addressing its most vexing and enduring challenge: engaging faculty in ways that lead to real improvement in teaching and learning.

This is not a new argument (see for example Banta, 1993; Wright, 2005; and, most recently, Heiland and Rosenthal, whose volume on assessment in literary studies is reviewed by Mary Taylor Huber this issue), but it is one worth renewing. My purpose in what follows, then, is to review the current state of affairs in departmental and

disciplinary assessment, but especially to point to emerging developments that can help to deepen faculty engagement with questions about how and how well students achieve the learning we value within and across our diverse fields.

TAKING STOCK

Even though disciplinary and departmental assessment has played second fiddle to the assessment of more cross-cutting outcomes, a recent survey of program-level assessment practices released by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (Ewell, Paulson, & Kinzie, 2011) reveals that there has been significant action in this arena. Often the first on campus to seriously engage with assessment, and among the most active going forward, are fields with specialized accreditation, including teacher education, pharmacy, nursing, social work, business, and engineering (see Palomba & Banta, 2001).

But good examples are plentiful in other fields as well, with levels of activity rising as all programs and departments respond to regional accreditation requirements. Indeed, the NILOA survey report concludes that “there is more assessment activity ‘down and in’ [academic programs and departments] than may be apparent by looking at only institutional measures” (p. 9), and it points not only to accreditation but to the desire to improve as major drivers for such work.

An earlier (2009) NILOA survey found that locally designed approaches are more prevalent at the department and program level than in the assessment of cross-cutting, general education outcomes, which are more likely to use standardized, externally designed instruments and national surveys. The 2011 report fills in the details: 68 percent of programs use capstone assessments; more than half use performance assessments or final projects; and alumni surveys, comprehensive exams, and portfolios all come in at about 30 percent.

What’s also clear, although unsurprising, is that methods vary significantly from one field to another. For example, 84 percent of education departments report that all or most of their students take standardized examinations, while only 13 percent in the arts and humanities employ such instruments. Indeed, one reason to encourage greater attention to discipline-based assessment is because it’s likely to encourage further methodological creativity and invention, reflecting the fuller range of evidence and methods valued in different fields and raising the chances that what is learned through assessment will be taken seriously and acted upon by faculty.

There are other promising developments. The NILOA survey suggests that assessment is making a difference in ways that affect the experience of students, with many respondents saying that they use results “very much” or “quite a bit” for instructional improvement (67 percent), improving the curriculum (59 percent), and informing program planning (57 percent). And in contrast to provosts—who, on the 2009 NILOA survey emphasized the need for greater faculty involvement in assessment—

60 percent of program-level survey respondents indicate that “all or most of their faculty are already involved” (p. 11).

THE CHARACTER OF FACULTY ENGAGEMENT

Since I am one of scores of people who have worried and written about the need for greater faculty engagement in assessment, this last finding got my attention. Perhaps the widespread perception of low faculty engagement is just plain wrong or at least outdated. Or perhaps, for whatever reasons, programs are over-reporting participation. In any case, NILOA’s findings are significant in suggesting the need for further thinking not only about the *proportion* of faculty engagement but about its *character and depth*.

A situation that appears to be common in one form or another in many institutions was captured by a campus leader I spoke with recently, who opined that departmental engagement can often translate to a kind of “checklist mentality” in which assessment means telling the provost’s office which two or three methods from a proposed menu of possibilities—a survey, portfolios, an ETS field test, and so on—the department will employ. With deadlines looming (“our accreditation self-study is due in four months!”), this kind of mentality is understandable, especially in a context where faculty expertise is limited and time even more so. In such circumstances it’s easy to get caught up in questions of lists, methods, and instruments—important matters that can sometimes prompt deeper deliberations about program goals and purposes.

But it is, after all, the deeper thinking about how and how well students acquire the field’s knowledge, practices, values, and habits of mind—and how to improve learning in all of those areas—that assessment (at its best) is after. Without such considerations, one might say that assessment is “departmental” but not necessarily “disciplinary”—that it is situated in the relevant administrative unit but may not entail significant deliberation about what it means to know the field deeply, why that matters, and how to ensure that all students in the program achieve its signature outcomes at high levels.

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Of course disproportionate (and hurried) attention to methods is just one of the impediments to faculty engagement. Few faculty have any explicit training in documenting or measuring student learning; other pressing agendas compete for time; such work is rarely rewarded in promotion and tenure; and on some campuses, even those seriously committed to teaching and learning, there's a sense that assessment adds no real value (see Hutchings, 2010) and may, even worse, take a divisive turn that erodes collegiality.

Additionally, some have proposed that assessment's focus on broad generic outcomes has worked against deeper kinds of faculty involvement. In the introduction to their edited collection about assessment in literary studies, Donna Heiland and Laura Rosenthal argue that one of the reasons English (and presumably other) departments have been less than fully engaged with assessment is that "the best known assessment efforts have targeted overall institutional performance and general-education outcomes rather than the concerns and outcomes of specific disciplines" (2011, p. 11).

On the one hand, this argument may seem counterintuitive, since these cross-cutting outcomes are so highly valued by faculty across fields. In this sense, critical thinking (for example) would seem to be an entry point for faculty to think about assessment in their own fields. Certainly it has served that purpose in many settings, spurred on, for example, by an initiative on "Engaging Departments" led by the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

On the other hand, critical thinking looks very different from one field to another, and it often employs different language as well. Consider, for example, Rosenthal's own account (in the University of Maryland teaching center newsletter, April & May 2011) of how assessment helped her design a better way to teach upper-level students to make arguments that are recognizable as literary criticism.

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The intellectual practices she wants English majors to develop are arguably a subset of the broad category of "critical thinking." But her story starts not there but with a careful analysis of how her students *actually* respond to literary works (that is, it starts with assessment). Building on that foundation, she develops a five-stage model to guide learners toward "what my discipline generally understands as criticism" (p. 10), moving from understanding the literal meaning of the text to more nuanced arguments about its structure and historical context.

The NILOA survey finds that programs are eager to have more examples of thoughtful assessment, and it's easy to see why Rosenthal's work would be especially useful. In contrast to many accounts of program-level approaches—which typically focus on methods for gathering data—Rosenthal's illustrates what assessment can look like when it is not only *located* in the academic department but driven by and deeply engaged with the field's distinctive ways of thinking, acting, and valuing. Enlarging the supply (and increasing the visibility) of such examples would help move assessment more fully into the kind of disciplinary territory in which faculty live and work.

ENGAGEMENT BY DISCIPLINARY AND PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES

The disciplinary and professional societies to which faculty belong can play a powerful role here, sending signals about what matters and what's worth doing. Historically, support and advocacy for the research role of the professoriate has held pride of place in virtually all of these organizations, but over the last two decades many of them have given greater emphasis to teaching and learning. In the process, in various ways and to varying degrees, the topic of assessment has also been taken up, as these organizations have created task forces on the topic, issued special reports, crafted guidelines for departments, made recommendations, collected case studies, and sponsored special initiatives and projects.

Their responses are not, of course, an even weave; how and how fully they have engaged with assessment depends on the history and culture of the field, how it thinks about itself in the educational landscape, and its signature habits of mind. For example, assessment has been a hard sell in the American Philosophical Association. According to Donna Engelmann, a faculty member at Alverno College who has been active in the organization, "there has been little official activity on the part of the APA in regard to assessment in philosophy."

And yet, she notes, there are signs of progress. An earlier and "explicitly hostile" statement on assessment was revised in 2008 in ways that reflect greater openness. And the APA and the American Association of Philosophy Teachers (a separate organization) now co-sponsor a seminar on teaching for graduate students in which assessment is an important strand.

In other fields, assessment may be seen as important but in ways that have not easily connected with the language and imperatives of the larger assessment movement. In physics, for instance, one finds a robust, long-standing tradition of education research and an impressive collection of research-based instruments and tools (many readers will know of the Force Concept Inventory) for assessing student understanding of key concepts in the field (see for instance www.ncsu.edu/per/TestInfo.html and www.flaguide.org/resource/websites.php). And a search for “assessment” on the website of the American Physical Society (in June 2011) turned up all manner of resources—about assessment at the K-12 level, the impact of undergraduate research, research-based teaching, course design, and so forth—all of which speak to an interest in evidence about student learning.

But what one does not find are materials about the kind of program-level assessment of student learning outcomes that departments today are being called upon to conduct. In short, the field has a robust tradition of studying student learning, but that work has not been framed by its flagship scholarly society in ways that converge with the assessment movement.

As in philosophy, however, there are signs of movement. The APS will soon release guidelines for department review which—according to Noah Finkelstein, chair of the organization’s Committee on Education and a faculty member in the department of physics at the University of Colorado—will include attention to educational goals and “assessment metrics that attend to those learning goals” (email, June 8, 2011).

The work of the Mathematical Association of America (MAA) offers a different example, one that has engaged scores of departments. In a useful overview of his field’s response to assessment, Bernard Madison begins with the establishment in the late 1980s of a twelve-member subcommittee on assessment (he was its chair) of the Committee on the Undergraduate Program in Mathematics.

Charged with advising MAA members about how to respond to assessment, the subcommittee issued a first report in 1992 entitled *Heeding the Call for Change*. This was followed, in 1995, by a set of guidelines to assist departments in designing and implementing assessment strategies. The subcommittee also collected case studies of departmental assessment and published 72 of them in a 1999 volume.

Drawing, then, on a decade of work, the MAA secured funding from the National Science Foundation for a three-year project, Supporting Assessment in Undergraduate Mathematics (SAUM). Launched in 2002, SAUM held workshops for teams of faculty from 66 colleges and universities. Along the way, the project also shared its insights and findings with the wider field through panels at national and regional meetings, special forums at MAA

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section meetings, and an expanded and updated set of case studies. The SAUM website includes a bibliography, a communication center for SAUM workshops, links to other relevant sites and resources, FAQs, case studies and papers published earlier, new case studies, an online assessment workshop, and a downloadable copy of the project’s culminating volume, *Supporting Assessment in Undergraduate Mathematics* (2006).

This is not to say that assessment has gone smoothly in mathematics or that everyone is deeply engaged. Madison points to a number of “tensions and tethers” that have hindered meaningful assessment efforts in undergraduate mathematics, and his analysis would resonate in most fields.

But the work goes on. In 2006, Madison drew on the activities of SAUM to edit a collection of ten longer case studies entitled *Assessment of Learning in College Mathematics*—the second volume in the Association for Institutional Research’s series on assessment in the disciplines. After SAUM ended in 2007, the MAA created a new Committee on Assessment in early 2008, which continues to disseminate information about assessment activities at regional and national meetings of the MAA.

A final “middle-ground” example (more extensive than what some fields have done, less than others) is my own field, English Studies, as represented by the Modern Language Association (MLA). Encompassing rhetoric and composition (where there’s a long history of assessment research and practice) as well as the study of literature, language, and culture (where there is not), the field was once described by a prominent department chair as “not a neat, discrete discipline but a congeries of subject matters” (quoted in the essay by Feal, Laurence, & Olsen, 2011, p. 62). Like philosophy and other humanities, it is one in which assessment was not likely to find a happy reception. And yet, like the MAA, the MLA has stepped into the breach.

In 1992 (fairly early on in the assessment movement, that is), the MLA’s Association of Departments of English (ADE)

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organized an ad hoc committee on assessment to consider “what advice the ADE can usefully offer to departments and chairs engaged with the problem of developing assessment initiatives” (1996, p. 2). As grist for its work, the committee surveyed department chairs, from whom they heard stories of “hope, challenge, and frustration” and, perhaps predictably, a sense from some that “nothing need be said yet at all about this still tender and conflicted topic” (p. 2).

Accordingly, the report was cautious and open-eyed about what could go wrong as departments struggled to document their students’ learning, but (full disclosure: I was a member of the task force) it also offered smart advice, still relevant today, about the most constructive ways to think about assessment. Among other advice was this caution: “Don’t blow it off.”

Subsequently, assessment has been a thread running through various ADE and MLA activities. It is, for instance, a theme in the 2003 *Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major*. A paper prepared several years later as part of MLA’s participation in a Teagle Foundation initiative on the relationship between the undergraduate major and the goals of liberal education (2006-2008) includes as its fourth and final recommendation “the adoption of outcomes measurements” (although, in truth, the report is skimpy on this point). The Winter 2008 *ADE Bulletin* includes a special section on “Assessment Pro and Con.” (According to MLA officials, “a search on the category ‘assessment of student learning’ returns a list of 135 articles in the *ADE Bulletin* archive.”) And in a 2010 survey of department chairs, 86 percent reported that their unit had implemented

an assessment process, and 90 percent said that assessment had the potential to improve student learning in their department’s programs (developments reported in this paragraph are from the chapter by Feal, Laurence, & Olson in the Heiland & Rosenthal volume).

Recently, leaders in the field of literary study have come together to push for further progress. In their collection of essays enticingly entitled *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime: Disciplinary Assessment*, Donna Heiland and Laura Rosenthal argue for a deeper level of engagement by colleagues in the fields of English and modern languages:

While most departments . . . are conducting assessment projects, and while many faculty members currently participate in those projects, *and* while many instructors have strong opinions about assessment, few of the questions raised by assessment have attracted the kind of sustained thought that we give to other aspects of professional life. (pp. 9–10)

The volume, developed with support from the Teagle Foundation (which has funded a good deal of discipline-based work on teaching, learning, and assessment) is not an official publication of the MLA, but it features big names in the field—including recent past president Gerald Graff—and builds on statements and materials generated under the organization’s auspices. Predictably, the essays do not speak in a single voice, ranging from alarm to energetic advocacy, from theory to concrete departmental practice. But what they share is a view that assessment should be firmly grounded in the discipline and shaped by the knowledge practices and values that define it, its place in the academic and cultural landscape, and a sharper sense of the learning goals that can make students’ experience with literature matter more—to them, to higher education, and to society.

Clearly, the scholarly and professional societies have a critical role to play in promoting this kind of disciplinary view of assessment. Indeed, several writers in the Heiland and Rosenthal volume (and also respondents to the NILOA survey of program-level practices) urge these organizations to step up to the assessment plate. Their efforts can be especially useful in navigating the movement’s politics—the place where many of them start—by establishing committees, issuing statements, and the like. But their most important contribution, as well as their biggest challenge, lies in building disciplinary communities of inquiry around good questions about student learning.

BUILDING BRIDGES TO THE SCHOLARSHIP OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

One of the most vexing realities in higher education is the existence of silos that keep good ideas and practices from

traveling across the academic landscape in useful ways. Assessment has certainly been plagued by its tendency to operate as “a train on its own track” (to invoke a much-quoted image employed by Peter Ewell in assessment’s early days), disconnected from other work, functions, and initiatives to which it should, in theory, be intimately related and which would open opportunities for deeper faculty engagement and greater impact.

Most campuses today are aware of this problem and have tried, with varying degrees of success, to connect assessment more firmly to curriculum reform and pedagogical innovation. But I want to urge an additional point of connection, as well—to the scholarship of teaching and learning. In this work, faculty bring their skills and values *as scholars in their field* to their work as educators, posing questions about their students’ learning; gathering and analyzing evidence about those questions; making improvements based on what they discover; tracking the results; and sharing the insights that emerge in ways that can be reviewed, critiqued, and built on by others.

As this definition suggests, the scholarship of teaching and learning and student outcomes assessment inhabit some common ground. Both ask questions about what, how, and how well students are learning. Both bring a systematic, evidence-based approach to questions of educational quality and improvement. And both go public about the learning that happens (or does not) in college and university classrooms. In these ways, the scholarship of teaching and learning and student outcomes assessment are, if you will, members of the same extended family, both aimed at building communities of inquiry and improvement.

But the two movements have mostly proceeded on separate tracks. From its early days in higher education, assessment was “consciously separated from what went on in the classroom,” Peter Ewell explains (2009, p. 19), while the *sine qua non* of the scholarship of teaching and learning is faculty inquiry into the learning of their own

students. In turn, the emerging scholarship of teaching and learning community sought to distance *its* approach and language from those of assessment, concerned that getting too cozy with an institutional or administrative agenda could put at risk the grass-roots, intellectual impulse behind the movement. Indeed, many faculty who have taken up the scholarship of teaching and learning have looked with mixed feelings, and even alarm, at signs of buy-in from the provost or president, fearing that such work could become yet another requirement or be co-opted to advance someone else’s agenda.

Today, however, there are signs of convergence. In a 2009 survey of campuses participating in the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (the CASTL program, which ran from 1998–2009), many respondents noted connections with assessment. Asked about an array of “wider institutional agendas” to which the scholarship of teaching and learning had contributed, for instance, they ranked assessment fourth.

And attitudes toward assessment have been affected as well. Because of the climate created by the scholarship of teaching and learning, one campus reported, “assessment is no longer a 4-letter word”; faculty have begun to understand “that it can be done ‘from the inside’ according to their curiosities and remaining within their control.” Another noted, “Assessment conversations have connected to the scholarship of teaching and learning to generate more meaningful assessments.” A third reported looking for ways to “build bridges” between the two movements. It seems, in short, that the principles and practices of the scholarship of teaching and learning may have something to offer the work of assessment, and this is particularly so around the challenges of faculty engagement (see Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011).

For starters, while a focus on the academic department emerged as a kind of second-level issue in assessment (with attention to cross-cutting outcomes in the first position), the scholarship of teaching and learning has been framed from the beginning as disciplinary work. CASTL, for instance, began its program for campuses by offering up a “sacrificial definition” which pointed explicitly to the importance of “methods appropriate to disciplinary epistemologies” (Cambridge, 2004, p. 2). In this same spirit, CASTL’s fellowship program for individual scholars was organized in disciplinary cohorts, so historians could work with other historians, chemists with chemists, and so forth (though the final cohort was selected around the cross-disciplinary theme of integrative learning).

Along the way, Mary Taylor Huber and Sherwyn Morreale edited a volume on *Disciplinary Styles in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (2002), exploring the quite different contexts for such work in a broad array of fields. More recently, disciplinary communities have begun to organize themselves as special-interest groups (in history, sociology,

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geography, biology, and the humanities) under the umbrella of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

The point of this disciplinary orientation is not to deny the value of working across disciplines; some of the most powerful experiences in the CASTL program, for instance, came as a result of connections and borrowing across fields. The point is that the scholarship of teaching and learning is *practitioner* research; as such, it focuses not on learning in general or even learning across the campus (how well do this institution's students solve problems or write?) but asks (as one CASTL participant from English did) "what does it mean for me to teach *this* text with *this* approach to *this* population of students at *this* time in *this* classroom?" (Salvatori, 2002, p. 298).

This is a formulation that assessment has largely eschewed, and in so doing it has missed the opportunity to tap into a tremendous well of faculty energy. Building bridges with the scholarship of teaching and learning might help move assessment down into the discipline and the classroom, where real change happens.

The scholarship of teaching and learning has also cultivated a wide variety of methods, reflecting the range of approaches characteristic of different fields. As Huber and Morreale point out in the introduction to their volume on disciplinary styles, scholars of teaching and learning bring their fields' "intellectual history, agreements, disputes about subject matter and methods" to the scholarship of teaching and learning (Huber and Morreale, 2002, p. 2). Thus, while there are interesting instances of methodological borrowing (a microbiologist employing think-alouds that she learned about from a historian, for instance), scholars of teaching and learning have mostly relied on methods from their own fields.

In this spirit, we see English faculty investigating their students' learning through the use of "close reading," management professors using focus groups, and psychologists looking for ways to establish comparison groups. In fairness, much of the literature on assessment and many of its most exciting developments reinforce this notion of disciplinary styles. But in moving from departmental to more deeply disciplinary work, greater emphasis on the field's signature methods and conceptions of evidence and argument might well catalyze a next stage of work.

Finally, assessment could take a page from what might be called the scholarship of teaching and learning's "theory of action." Assessment proceeds on the assumption that data will prompt people to make changes: You assess, you get results, and you make improvements based on the results. As it turns out, the process is balkier than this formulation suggests. As Charles Blaich and Trudy Banta argue in a January/February 2011 *Change* article, the biggest challenge facing assessment is not getting good data but prompting action.

In fairness, the scholarship of teaching and learning has also placed significant hopes on the power of data and evidence to drive improvement. And it has faced its own challenges in this regard; translating highly contextualized findings from a scholarship of teaching and learning project into terms that can be used by those in other settings isn't easy. But the theory of action that distinguishes such work from assessment is best captured in its invocation of and identity as "scholarship."

That is, the Project (with a capital P) of the scholarship of teaching and learning is not simply aimed at local improvement. Rather, the faculty engaged in this work see themselves as part of a larger knowledge-building enterprise, studying and adding to what is understood about how students learn history or sociology or (for that matter) the integrative skills to think across fields.

This aspiration is part of what has given the work its appeal: It's local but it's not *only* local. As such, it must be captured in ways that others can review, draw from, and build on. This is what we mean when we call something scholarship. And in the culture of academic life, the scholarship of teaching and learning's larger, knowledge-building aspiration has been an engine for faculty engagement that assessment might well tap into.

MODEST STEPS TOWARD SHARED GOALS

I'm not arguing that assessment should take on the mantle of the scholarship of teaching and learning or that the scholarship of teaching and learning should become "the new assessment." There are good reasons that the two movements have kept their separate identities, and they should continue to do so. Blurring the lines between them too much could put at risk the intellectual impulse that lies behind the scholarship of teaching and learning and might not serve assessment's imperatives well either. But thinking of the two movements as not-so-distant cousins can open the door to useful exchange and cross-fertilization.

Imagine, for instance, a campus center for teaching that brings the two groups together, or an occasional lunch hosted by the provost's office. What questions about students' learning are the two communities investigating? Are there any overlaps? What projects does each have underway or in mind for the future, and how might they collaborate or inform one another's efforts?

Imagine the assessment office commissioning groups of faculty to undertake scholarship of teaching and learning projects that more deeply explore (within their respective academic programs) findings from, say, the National Survey of Student Engagement or the Collegiate Learning Assessment. Or imagine those working on assessment documenting their efforts in ways that could be peer reviewed and put in a dossier for promotion and tenure, under the heading of the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Although my focus in this piece is on the benefits that might come to assessment through the scholarship of teaching and learning, both movements would benefit from a bi-directional exchange. Drawing on the principles of the scholarship of teaching and learning can help assessment solve the movement's most enduring challenge: engaging faculty and making a difference in the classroom.

Meanwhile, a closer connection with assessment may help embed the scholarship of teaching and learning more deeply in institutional life, raising its chances for long-term viability. But not only do the two movements stand to gain from a closer connection—higher education needs their combined strengths in making student learning a site for serious faculty inquiry, meaning making, and improvement. ☐

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