Understanding and Sensemaking of Institutional Assessment: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Perceptions and Experiences with Assessment Work

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Abstract

The focus of this article is to convey the findings of our individual and collective perceptions and experiences with assessment work. We intentionally employed collaborative autoethnography as the methodological approach to evoke storied accounts of our understanding and sensemaking of institutional assessment. We reflected on this phenomenon in relation to our respective academic community context and cultural context. The narratives extend our academic story illuminating the results of our sensemaking about assessment. Our discovery of major themes and subthemes address the guiding research question: "describe my/our experience(s) and perceptions of assessment" to four research strands/prompts about (1) understanding assessment, (2) work of assessment, (3) impact and significance of assessment, and (4) implications of assessment. We provide rich descriptions, storied accounts, to support the themes and subthemes across the four research strands/prompts. Discussion of the findings, implications and further research suggestions, and conclusions on scholarly significance of the research are offered.

Keywords: Assessment, Higher Education, Academic Community, Cultural Context, Collaborative Autoethnography

Introduction

This article describes in rich detail our collaborative research work that examines the phenomenon of assessment in higher education. Guided by an overarching research question with four research strands/prompts, three faculty members in a higher education context in the Western Pacific region sought to qualitatively explore our individual and collaborative understanding and sensemaking of institutional assessment. The results of our investigation yielded rich narratives depicting common and unique revelations of an understanding and interpretation of assessment as a function of institutional data evidence generation, but more so remarkably with such diverse academic and cultural experiences, the commonalities surprised the researchers.

Our stories, unfolded in this article, are presented in an academic research report style. Yet it is the voices of our stories that situate our findings to our unique experiences about assessment given the context of our institutional setting, the people, place, and process of assessment. We first orientate readers to select literature on the concept of assessment and how we situate the term in the study. Next, we describe the methodology and thereafter describe our findings depicting the major themes and subthemes with detailed quotes in support of the themes. Our discussion of the results follows with noted literature connections to support claims. We close our writing on our collaborative research by conveying implications, proffering further research suggestions, and concluding remarks on the scholarly practice and significance of the research.

Perspectives on Assessment

In this section, we provide a brief orientation to the topic of assessment, the phenomenon of focus in our research. Assessment as a topic in higher education has been well researched and is a commonly known and used term within an institution. As Ghaicha (2016) notes, "Educational institutions worldwide, across all educational levels,

are involved, to some extent in the development and implementation of some kind of academic assessment" (p. 213). Assessment as a tool ultimately provides evidence to show areas of success and areas of improvement related to teaching and learning. Thomas et al. (2019) state, "Assessment is at the heart of teaching and learning in higher education" (p. 546). While Munna (2021) notes, "Assessment in higher education always considered as one of the systematic process[es] of documenting empirical data and knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that encourage and improve student learning" (p. 426). Ewell and Cummings (2017) describe the "evolution of assessment" (pp. 3-14) and noted that "... the term *assessment* meant different things to different people" (p. 8). They wrote that primarily there were three definitions of assessment that underscored/undergirded "the traditional use" of the meaning (p. 8.). Further, Ewell and Cummings (2017) expound the first understanding referenced "continuous feedback on individual performance," (p. 8) the second meaning concerned "large-scale assessment" stemming from K12 practice "... in the name of accountability, " (p. 8) and the third meaning described it "... as a special kind of program evaluation, whose purpose was to gather evidence to improve curricula and pedagogy" (p. 8). In our study, we refer to the term assessment and specifically institutional assessment as an overarching phrase that encapsulates the many levels or layers of assessment processes and functions in a higher education context. Our reference to this phrase as an all-encompassing term was purposeful to explore our research question and this phenomenon of assessment, without boundaries, to evoke storied accounts of our experiences and perceptions of assessment.

Literature on assessment in higher education germane to our investigation is situated across many subcomponents of the intent and uses of assessment. Across the broad review of an institution's academic programs, assessment of programs such as academic program reviews are helpful to generate evidence to continuously improve programs, and data as support evidence for institutional accreditation reports. Moreso,

assessment data is useful to support decisions for resource allocation (see Rizvi & Jacobsen, 2018). Rizvi and Jacobsen (2018) discuss the value of and need for creating an institutional assessment plan that reinforces and integrates the multi-level decision-making processes across micro-, macro-, and institutional-levels that can inform outcome assessment (pp. 59-64). They (Rizvi & Jacobsen, 2018) explain, "Outcome assessment is all about improvement and using our [institutional] resources more efficiently" (p. 59).

There is also a broader concept of assessment as a term that ushers or embraces the phrase "culture of assessment" (see Walker, 2020). Walker (2020) describes this "culture of assessment" as "[t]he broadening assessment culture moving beyond academic assessment means the inclusion of strategic planning, assessment, institutional effectiveness, and regional accreditation in a manner that is fluid, inclusive, and continuously evolving" (p. 1).

Further, we operationalize the phrase "institutional assessment" to mean a holistic view and understanding of the academic health of an institution, and the processes and functions used to collect data and analyze such data for continuous improvement of teaching and learning. Also, at the foundation of carrying out these assessment processes, practices, and functions are the people doing the work and engaging in collaborative work to move forward on a path of continuous improvement. As Miller noted, "It is easy to take for granted the idea that assessment has to look one way or follow a specific methodology to be valid, when, in reality, it is about relationships and people" (p. 6). Hence, our investigation of this phenomenon "assessment" unfolds in our story provided herein this article.

Methodology

Study Purpose and Guiding Research Question

The purpose of our research was to explore our individual and collaborative understanding and sensemaking of institutional assessment. We had a guiding research question in which we addressed four research strands/prompts:

Guiding Research Question/Prompt

Describe my/our experience(s) and perceptions of assessment about:

- Understanding of assessment

- Work of assessment

- Impact and significance of assessment

- Implications of assessment.

Approach and Design

For this research study, because we wanted to understand our individual and collective lived experiences, and individual and co-sensemaking about institutional assessment (the phenomenon of our research focus), we followed the qualitative methodological approach of *Collaborative Autoethnography* as outlined by Chang et al. (2012). This approach is defined "… as a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data" (Chang et al., 2012, pp. 23-34). Further, collaborative autoethnography (abbreviated as CAE in Chang et al., 2012) allows for "each participant [to contribute] to the collective work in [their] distinct and independent voice" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 24). First-person voice is inherent when doing/following the CAE approach.

Institutional Context

We reflected or recalled our experiences in higher education contexts which grounds the foundation for reflection of the phenomenon of "institutional assessment." We delved deep into critical reflection about our current institutional context, a higher education institution in the Western Pacific region. For the purposes of our study, we have unpacked "institutional assessment" to encompass the various subtopics of assessment including individual performance, program performance, and accountability. Our individual perspectives bring in classroom (student), program, unit, and institutional experiences to our reflections and contributions.

Data Sources

Participants as Researchers [Researcher/Participant]

We three faculty researchers were the sole participants in the study. Hence, we are the researchers and the research participants. No other participants were asked to participate in this study, which followed the specific methodological approach of collaborative autoethnography.

Researcher Positionality

We came into this study and our collaborative research effort by way of a connection to assessment and a discussion of our individual experiences with assessment. The first author has worked in higher education for 17 ½ years and has varied experiences with assessment for instructional purposes and at the program and institutional/university levels. Recent experiences include assessment for new degree/new program development and presentation at a national accreditation conference. The second author has over 30 years in education with more than 20 years involved in higher education assessment and accreditation. Participation in institutional-level assessment implementation and committee work, and attendance at national assessment conferences has molded this researcher's perspectives and guided subsequent contributions. The third author brings 18 years of experience in the field of

education with five years in higher education. This researcher's assessment roles span instructional (student and course), committee, and program assessments. Together we found numerous diverse experiences yet interwoven with common language, similar emotions, and a common appreciation for the commitment to doing assessment.

Data Collection Procedures

To emphasize, our topic emerged as a "hallway conversation" – casually discussing our role and involvement in assessment and the focus of our contributions. This collegial chat sparked an idea of studying this phenomenon of "assessment" and we noted we each had common experiences and yet there was more to explore and share.

Following the research process/research approach of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as described by Chang et al. (2012), we independently reflected and journaled and then collaboratively shared our initial writing, engaged in conversation and sensemaking of our reflections, and then continued to write and reflect independently, to further collectively examine, question, and probe for meaning and meaning-making about institutional assessment. We approached our data collection by addressing/answering the guiding research question, noted above, as the foundation to begin our reflection and writing/journaling about institutional assessment. The data collection process of reflection, journaling, sharing, sensemaking, journaling again is an iterative process of meaning-making. As Chang et al. (2012) note "...the combination of individual and group works adds rich texture to the collective work. When the group works together, individual voice is closely examined in community. Others' questioning and probing add unique depth to personal interrogation" (p. 24). Further, Chang et al. (2012) suggests a data collection process for doing CAE. Yet, this process is fluid, and we can return to each step as many times as needed, as reflection and meaning-making is evoked by the sheer nature of doing qualitative research and the process to understand the phenomenon of interest from the perspectives of the participants. To reemphasize, the process is iterative: "Each step combining individual and group activities can be

repeated for as many iterations as necessary. Also, researchers can return to a previous step to enhance data collection, analysis, or interpretation" (Chang et al., 2012, p.24). The specifics of our data collection process and data analysis are described in the following section.

Our Data Collection Process and Data Analysis

Following the research approach of CAE as noted in the work of Chang et al. (2012), we convened a plan for individual and collective data collection. We received institutional research approval for the study in late December 2022. We decided to embark on carving out intentional "conversation time" to discuss our individual story. We conversed and then set a schedule for individual journaling then group discussion, group writing, then back to individual, etc. This process is dubbed by Cohen, Duberley, and Musson (2009, cited in Chang et al., 2012, p. 92) as "interactive introspection." A woven series of conversations, questions, and sensemaking of our own perceptions and of each other's as we voiced our stories to each other and with each other. We listened, questioned, reflected, and engaged in co-shared writing and further individual reflection and writing, and repeating these actions; truly an iterative pattern of shared meaning and understandings emerged that shaped our interpretation of the phenomenon while "data collecting."

Our data collection period spanned over several months during the calendar year of 2023 through May 2024. Being faculty members in academia and our dual role as researcher/participant in the study, added to the dynamic of planning time for research and attending to our faculty roles for teaching and service. Overall, we met collectively over 32 weeks to parcel out individual and collective data stories on our research question and the four strands/prompts. "[D]ata collection [in CAE] is not a mechanical or linear process. ... it involves multiple negotiations with your research colleagues [in sensemaking about the phenomenon]. It will take many rounds of conversations with them to reach creative compromises..." (Chang et al., 2012, p.73).

The types of data that informed our research question consisted of self-reflection on the phenomenon, recollecting lived experiences with the phenomenon, self-analysis of our individual story about the phenomenon, interviewing each other, and self-observation as we engaged in conversation and cross-conversation with one another about the phenomenon. These types of data are usual data that encompass doing collaborative autoethnography. As Chang et al. (2012) typify there are a variety of CAE data that can be collected, and this includes data from: self-reflection, personal memory, interviews, self-analysis, self-observation (p. 74, "Table 4-1 Autoethnographic data types"). Collection of data from multiple means, multiple sources serve to anchor the credibility of our storied accounts with the phenomenon. "... rich data coming from multiple sources will contribute to the "thick description" of your life and sociocultural context and will enhance the credibility of your stories and interpretation through triangulation of data sources" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 74).

At the heart of our data collection process, we engaged in collaborative reflection, and this process was enmeshed with simultaneously engaging in collaborative analysis of data. Thus, punctuating that our process of data collection centered on "conversational and interactive data" (Chang et al., 2012, pp.85-86). As Chang et al. (2012) purport, "interaction" is a source of data as they describe that the "[c]ollection of conversational and interview data must engage one or more partners in conversations; therefore, interaction among research teammates becomes a unique source of data for CAE" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 85).

Data Analysis

Data analysis and sensemaking of our individual and collective data were intertwined with our data collection process. Again, we followed the general research principles of collaborative autoethnography as espoused by Chang et al. (2012). This data analysis, much like the data collection, was an iterative process. It began with individually coding each strand by identifying quotes and recording initial impressions

and then collectively, with further interviewing or probing, identifying emerging ideas. A second round of coding was completed individually and then with each other to cross-check and "reconcile" emerging themes, deepen understanding, and participate in collective meaning-making. We often repeated this sequence of data analysis from individual to collaborative and collaborative to individual. The overall "doing" autoethnographic research from start to end is described by Karalis Noel et al. (2023) as phases that are "intricately interconnected" (p.7).

We also approached data analysis from a micro and macro level of sensemaking. From the micro-level, we reviewed our individual writing within and across the research strands and made initial impressions. We also reviewed each other's data stories and made initial impressions. "In other words, [we] read different researchers' autobiographical materials separately to gain a deeper understanding of each case" (Chang et al. 2012, p. 103). At the macro-level, we reviewed data from the three means of collection (i.e., the data types and collection periods): 1) our individual writing; 2) the interactive interview process; 3) the collective sensemaking – thus, we engaged in a holistic and time intensive examination of all our data. As Chang et al. (2012) state, "At this [macro-] level, you do an uninterrupted and undisturbed review of your entire data set to gain a holistic sense of what your data are about" (p. 102).

The macro-level led us to form initial codes of our analysis. We read data literally, line-by-line, as part of the initial coding of the individual and collective written narratives. "This micro-coding ensures that every sentence of data is examined carefully and included in initial coding" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 104). We next merged categories of coded data and/or regrouped categories. "These activities of segmenting, categorizing, and regrouping iterate in a dynamic process [of data analysis]. [And with the intent] to reach a manageable number of categories that can show topical distinctiveness from each other" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 105). Thereafter, "[t]he purpose of reducing topical categories to the essential minimum is to serve the ultimate goal of

data analysis—identifying themes" (Chang et al., 2021, p. 106). The following section presents and discusses the themes of our research study.

Results/Findings by Themes

"Finding themes is an important task in data analysis, enabling [researchers] to explain to the community of scholars what you have discovered from your data and how your data support your claims" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 110).

To recapitulate, this collaborative autoethnography centered on sensemaking of "assessment" – the phenomenon of focus and specific to our professional practice. Our guiding research question evoked our storying about institutional assessment, specifically we asked ourselves and each other to: Describe my/our experience(s) and perceptions of assessment about: (1) understanding of assessment, (2) work of assessment, (3) impact and significance of assessment, and (4) implications of assessment. Themes are presented across each of the four research strands/prompts and within each strand. Echoing earlier explanation of data analysis, the themes emerged from our collective sensemaking of the data collected and analyzed.

Figure 1 below presents a visual of the thematic representation of the data findings organized by each strand/prompt of the research question.

Figure 1: Major themes and subthemes of each of the four research strands/prompts.

Our Experience(s) and Perceptions of Assessment			
Understanding of Assessment	**Work of Assessment**	**Impact and Significance of Assessment**	**Implications of Assessment**
Major Theme Intentional Authentication **Subthemes** *People Process*	**Major Theme** Multi-dimensional Process **Subthemes** *Empathetic Ongoing reflection Holistic Approach/Holistic*	**Major Theme** Communication of Perspectives **Subthemes** *Interconnectedness Communicates Excellence*	**Major Theme** Guide/Playbook for Educational Arena **Subthemes** *Ethos of Education Educational Process*
Major Theme Empowerment and Trust **Subthemes** *In the Process In the People*	**Major Theme** Sensemaking/ Reflective Lens **Subthemes** *Evolution Feedback Loop Demystify Purpose*	**Major Theme** Shapes Brand or Image of Academia **Subthemes** *Credibility, Standing*	**Major Theme** Push and Pull Effect **Subthemes** *Resources Involvement*
Major Theme Evolution: Purposeful and Continuous **Subthemes** *Of People Of Process*	**Major Theme** Catalyst for Continuous Improvement **Subthemes** *Involves Actions Communicates the Focus*	**Major Theme** Insight & and Awareness of Academic Performance **Subthemes** *Reflective Actions Far-Reaching Effects Shaping Practice*	**Major Theme** Relevancy or Aversion **Subtheme** *Perceptions*
	Major Theme Grand Event **Subtheme** *Big Picture to Granular Details*	**Major Theme** Illuminates the "Value" **Subtheme** *Educational Environment*	

Through individual reflection and robust and rich cross-dialogue and collaborative sensemaking of the data (journals/individual reflections and collective notations and reflections), salient major themes emerged, with subthemes, providing nuanced exemplification of the guiding research question to each of the four research

strands/prompts. To reinforce or support the themes, excerpts/quotes are provided and italicized to denote it as data (quotes).

Research Question Strand/Prompt 1: Understanding of Assessment

The first strand or prompt of our guiding research question called for us to recollect on our lived experiences of "Understanding of Assessment." Three major themes with subthemes emerged from the sensemaking of our data and represent perceptions of understanding assessment as viewed at the institutional, collective, and individual level.

Intentional Authentication (Major Theme 1)

Intentional Authentication was evident at our individual-level of data sensemaking and our collective interpretations of cross-data examination (sharing individual data with each other and further coding as collective sensemaking). At its root definition, we discoursed that our data about "understanding of assessment" yielded responses of *intentional authentication*, that we interpret and define as the deliberate or intended use of assessment as confirmed or endorsed by its specific process and the people involved in the data/assessment process. As one of our data quotes capture this definition:

> *It [assessment] is collectively defined. If I am the assessor, and there are others, we all [the people involved] should understand what we are assessing and what it [the assessment process] is defined as.*

Terms or phrases that stirred a connection to people embedded in the intentional authentication of assessment surfaced as we cross-reflected on our data and engaged in concentrated dialogue and sensemaking of our individual and collective "understanding of assessment," our research strand/prompt one (1). Our word equation or word summary captures both people and process as interlocked in this notion of intentional authentication.

Intentional work, shared collective work, human process, formal process, reflection on process, individual and shared connotations = Intentional Authentication

Thus, our distinct subthemes emerged as *people* and *process*. Our data excerpts/data quotes presented below are illustrative examples of how people and process are intertwined in this notion of intentional authentication.

Subtheme: *People*.

It [the process of doing assessment and understanding assessment] is also complicated, depending on who is the recipient, … it can be messy – in people's response to it – **we cannot separate the people from the process [bold for emphasis]** *because the people are doing the process. [The process is an] action and a movement of producing work and knowledge but as a person [or persons] we are nested in the work. I view assessment as an avenue in which individuals can reform, celebrate, or enrich themselves. It serves as tools in which people can gain an understanding of where they are within the norms [of the] assessments.*

Everybody's role is important, and they bring value [in understanding assessment.]

Subtheme: *Process*.

Coming back to the idea that "assessment" is intentional work. It is identifiable work with a specific purpose. It follows the scheme of assessment and planning of ideas, stakeholder input, analysis, and action steps for continuous improvement. This rationale undergirds our sensemaking of the subtheme *process*. As the following data excerpts/data quotes support this finding:

I've seen assessment and related data influence change in course requirements, change programs, and change teaching strategies. Using the language of assessment and linking outcomes and data to continuous improvement can really begin to drive everything you do.

Assessments not only serve as a tool for analyzation for excellence, but when thoughtfully designed, [the assessment process] can motivate students to engage with course materials and strive for academic excellence.

It is about documents/documentation, and it [assessment] provides us tangible effects and results, and all involved have something to go back to reflect on and actions [to take for improvement.]

Empowerment and Trust (Major Theme 2)

The second major theme that emerged under the prompt "understanding of assessment" was empowerment and trust. Through a review of our reflections and discourse, it was evident that the use of data can strengthen and empower the user to advocate for or against a practice or program. The converse of that empowerment needs to be trust or certainty that the data is authentic, and the use is for improvement. Terms or phrases that were evident in our storying of "empowerment and trust" resonated as:

Facilitator of improvement, reassurance, and expansion, validation of engagement, facilitation based on trust and the growth mindset = Validation and Empowerment Through Assessment

Thus, our nuanced subthemes emerged as *in the process* and *in the people*. Our data excerpts/data quotes presented below are illustrative examples of *in the process* and *in the people* as intertwined in this notion of empowerment and trust.

Subtheme: *In the Process.*

We need to be very intentional with our selection of artifacts or evidence when it comes to assessment. We also need to be intentional with our review of the data. If the philosophy behind what we do is continuous improvement, then the evidence and outcomes should be reviewed with that in mind.

It [assessment] serves as a sense of validation of the parties engaged in the use of the evaluation process based on skills taught and obtained.

Trust in the process supports validating the roles of stakeholders and the process.

Subtheme: *In the People.*

Understanding assessment is coupled with understanding that there are people doing the assessment, as the following quotes capture this notion of *in the people.*

Once people began to understand it and the acceptance and initial change in culture began to take effect, the attitude began to change from compliance to maybe more of an understanding of its purpose [understanding assessment].

Flow of commitment (trust) and empowerment of the assessment process and the stakeholders to support the movement/catalyst towards continuous improvement.

Evolution: Purposeful and Continuous (Major Theme 3)

Like the meaning or definition of assessment, its purpose has changed over time. The understanding of assessment by people and the process has also evolved intentionally. The quotes below highlight the researchers' reflections on their understanding of assessment through the purposeful and continuous evolution.

Subtheme: *Of People.*

Having a common language [using] student learning outcomes, program learning outcomes, means of assessment and criteria of success, and closing the

loop really leveled the playing field and provided everyone an opportunity to discuss data, review results, and look at next steps.

When I present assessments in my classroom it is portrayed as a "superpower," a "secret weapon," and a "compass." This reveals my effort to make the abstract concept of assessment more concrete and meaningful. It's apparent that I was striving to convey that assessment is not just about grades; it's a tool for self-discovery and improvement.

Subtheme: *Of Process.*

There was pushback and frustration [during implementation]. There wasn't a clear understanding, and there was resentment of the prospect that administration was just adding one more thing to the faculty/program's plates. But with more training, discussion, and overall awareness it seemed to create more buy-in.

Assessment is a tool used to provide perspective of a skill being evaluated. It serves as a facilitator for opportunity for analysis of need for improvement, reassurance, and expansion on a given proficiency... [it]serves as a sense of validation of the parties using the evaluation. Not one assessment format validates the measurement of one's abilities. Assessments should serve as an adaptable instrument that meets the needs with a set criterion that gives the student a chance to validate their need for improvement, reassurance, or expansion of the given skill. Assessments should be inclusive not discriminatory...

Further capturing this sense of understanding assessment and the purposeful nature of the process, our data quote below supports this theme and subtheme of process:

[It] serve[s] as a critical tool for measuring learning, promoting equity, motivating students, and driving continuous improvement; ultimately contributing to the overall quality and reputation of the institution.

Overall Summary: Key Findings of Research Question Strand/Prompt 1: Understanding of Assessment

This strand explored the researchers' understanding of assessment. Three key themes: intentional authentication, empowerment and trust, and purposeful evolution emerged in the sensemaking process. Within these themes, the *people* and the *process* were integral and consistent in the researchers' understanding of assessment.

Research Question Strand/Prompt 2: Work of Assessment

The second strand or prompt of our guiding research question called for us to recollect on our lived experiences of the "Work of Assessment." Four major themes with subthemes emerged from the sensemaking of our data. The major themes included: multi-dimensional process, sensemaking/reflective lens, catalyst for continuous improvement, and grand event. The subthemes will be discussed under each major theme.

Multi-dimensional process (Major Theme 1)

The work of assessment is a multi-dimensional empathetic process embedded with a feedback loop for continuous improvement and reflection.

Subtheme: *Empathetic* [involvement of participants].

I take pause and reflect on my agenda in the process of assessment [as a] tool and reflect on the current state of the individual of who I am assessing.

Identifying the personal needs of the students and stepping into their shoes at the moment of the assessment.

Subtheme: *Ongoing Reflection.*

I invoke the CHamoru metaphor "atan y espehos" (look in the mirror) meaning reflect on yourself. This metaphor was intended to communicate that assessment doesn't just show strengths but also highlights weaknesses, and this can be a means of personal development. This personal growth aspect was something I wanted to emphasize, highlighting that assessment is a two-way street that benefits both educators and learners.

In consideration of the work of assessment at the classroom level, one of us reflected:

I need to go back and reflect on what was different [in terms of results] and what I missed for that 'one' student.

Subtheme: *Holistic Approach/Holistic.*

The work of assessment involves examination of all data evidence; it is a holistic approach. Our data excerpts/data quotes support this perspective:

The work of assessment is and should be holistic. Looking at or reviewing all the pieces of data evidence that explain the focus of review.

…. [C]ultural responsiveness has shifted away from conventional considerations and has evolved towards more holistic approach. One that prioritizes meeting the distinct needs of every individual, irrespective of their backgrounds, precisely when they require educational and social-emotional support… I find myself grappling with delicate balance between maintaining objectivity and understanding the unique circumstances of each student…assessment doesn't become a mere checklist of standards but remains a holistic evaluation.

Sensemaking/Reflective Lens (Major Theme 2)

Inherent in the nature of the work of assessment, is the act or process of sensemaking the data collected, reflecting on what was collected, how and when it was collected and for what purpose(s).

Subtheme: *Evolution.*

The subtheme *evolution* of assessment work entails understanding the work and participation of the people involved in assessment. The quotes below capture this essence of the meaning of the work evolves with participation in the work.

When the college began to be recognized for the work, while not perfect and not everyone, there really was more of a sense of pride than a sense of burden. The work of assessment involves actions conducted at the individual level and collective actions with others. The meaningfulness of the work rests in both individual actions and collective stakeholder actions that can extend in the time doing the work.

Subtheme: *Feedback Loop.*

Assessments, when designed well, provide valuable feedback to both students and instructors. This feedback loop is essential for continuous improvement. Professors can use assessment results to refine their teaching methods, update curriculum, and enhance the overall quality of education.

Being an educator, I think our lens on assessment is different from many others on campus, at least in terms of the intent behind gathering scores and closing the loop. This [annual] report demonstrates how we meet our program learning outcomes (PLOs) and allows us to reflect on what we will do with the results of that data.

Subtheme: *Demystify Purpose.*

The work of assessment is specific to roles and process. Specifying roles can demystify the work and minimize confusion of the intent and purpose of doing assessment. As the quotes illuminate:

The work of assessment and the intent behind it needs to be transparent. While we know assessment can bring about change, that change can be positive or negative and ultimately the philosophy behind the intent will make the biggest difference in buy in. Assessment serves as [a] compass striving to convey its purpose as a self-discovery tool for improvement.

Clear and specific roles of stakeholders enhance the validity and applicability of the work of assessment and can serve to demystify the actions of engaging in the work and minimize confusion about the process and the intent.

Catalyst for Continuous Improvement (Major Theme 3)

Our individual and collective sensemaking absolutely support this finding of our reflection of assessment as a catalyst for continuous improvement.

Subtheme: *Involves Actions* [individual actions and collective].

[It] serves as a critical tool for measuring learning, promoting equity, motivating students, and driving continuous improvement, ultimately contributing to the overall quality and reputation of the institution.

The work is significant when each stakeholder uses the results of assessment to inform the current state and identify aspects of success and areas for improvement.

Subtheme: *Communicates the Focus* [aspects or facets of "doing assessment"].

Communicates the focus resonated on the individual level and collective level of the people or stakeholders involved in the doing the work of assessment or assessing academic practices. The quotes below illuminate this notion:

As a professor, I find it important to periodically step back and put myself in my student's shoes. This practice allows me to reflect on the expectations I have for them and, in turn, review these expectations to ensure that I don't diminish the importance of any aspect of the coursework. It's crucial to me that the activities and individual assignments I design scaffold the development of essential skills in each course. When I mention not wanting to "devalue," I mean that I want to avoid giving the impression that certain elements of the courses…. hold unequal values.

The work is further magnified as significant when the stakeholders invest in action steps or next steps that fruitfully benefit and improve the phenomenon and its impact on the collective stakeholders for whom the assessment is intended for.

Grand Event (Major Theme 4)

Our individual and collective sensemaking of the work of assessment signified this imagery of a "grand event." This concept infers there is a time investment in the process, and it involves viewing or moving from the big picture to granular details. As the data excerpts below demonstrate.

Subtheme: *Big Picture to Granular Details.*

What is interesting is when you have data from the big picture aspects, and you review [it] for anomalies and those anomalies help you identify gaps that you can work with.

Assessment can be like a funnel; the mouth of the funnel is like the program outcomes and as it narrows you can really dig in and look at specifics.

Overall Summary: Key Findings of Research Question Strand/Prompt 2: Work of Assessment

The second strand or prompt explored the researchers' "work of assessment." Four major themes are: multi-dimensional process, sensemaking/reflective lens, catalyst for continuous improvement, and grand event. A number of subthemes emerged under each theme and data to support the themes and subthemes was provided.

Research Question Strand 3: Impact and Significance of Assessment

The third strand or prompt of our guiding research question called for us to recollect on our lived experiences of the "Impact and Significance of Assessment." Four major themes with subthemes emerged from the sensemaking of our data.

Communication of Perspectives (Major Theme 1)

Assessment communicates a message of academic performance to stakeholders – internal and external. As the impact and significance of assessment predicate that "assessment is the foundation of academic improvement."

Subtheme: *Interconnectedness.*

Aspects of this interconnectedness are illuminated in the following data excerpts/data stories.

[We must be] committed to continuous improvement in the educational process…embracing a student-centric and growth-orientated approach to assessment, I can truly harness the transformative impact of assessment.

It affects all stakeholders internal to the academic community but most importantly external community as it … [communicates] the quality of work we are doing and its far-reaching effects into the communities – into shaping the professional practice.

Subtheme: *Communicates Excellence* [progress towards excellence of academic function].

The impact is broader than an internal to do list. The impact is a notice to the public that we are as good as any other institution, at least in terms of educator preparation.

Assessment really can tell you and others what needs to be improved upon or even what needs to be continued.

Shapes Brand or Image of Academia (Major Theme 2)

Assessment used to support recognition of academic excellence goes a long way in communicating the image of academia. An image to the external community that can resonate positive characteristics of academic quality, credibility, and standing.

Subtheme: *Credibility, Standing* [of academic programs/institution].

There is both an internal and external perception of the academic image of an institution that can be bolstered by assessment outcomes. The following quote captures this sentiment.

Assessment brings credibility to programs. Identifying outcomes; measuring the ability to meet those outcomes; and then reviewing, revising, and refining the curriculum to better meet those outcomes the next time, can really make for a stronger program and hence, a stronger impact.

Another data quote exemplifies:

Internal to external ... it [assessment] has the hallmark or stamp of endorsing quality of programs and institutional operations of academic functions to a broader community of academic peers and experts.

Insight and Awareness of Academic Performance (Major Theme 3)

Assessment adds to or is part of the continuous improvement processes that communicate excellence or progress towards excellence of academic functions. This

communication of using valid assessment tools aligned to professional or industry standards enhances the brand or image of a program and the institution.

Subtheme: *Reflective Actions.*

As an assessor you try your best to ensure that the tools crafted to meet a standard should be free of bias. However, many times aside from trying to ensure the tool is inclusive you also need to step back and think about the mindset of you as the assessor.

This is when emotional intelligence comes to play. Assess the atmosphere and the individual, re-evaluate your approach to the given circumstances in which the assessment is delivered, and the circumstances of the individual being assessed.

Assessment can really tell you and others what needs to be improved upon and what needs to be continued. [Assessment provides insight] looking in and beyond.

Subtheme: *Far-Reaching Effects.*

Assessment evidence, data and action steps have an impact on making higher education functions (i.e., curriculum and student success or progress) transparent to all (internal and external to an institution).

Subtheme: *Shaping Practice.*

Assessment serves as a means to an end for academic improvement and to shape/influence academic achievement and student success.

Illuminates the "Value" (Major Theme 4)

Our data stories advanced the theme of "illuminates the value" when we considered the data that supported/addressed the prompt of our experiences and perceptions of assessment. Nested with this theme is the focus on the value of the "educational environment." The data excerpt below supports this focus.

Subtheme: *Educational Environment.*

Capitalize on the deeper understanding for growth of educators and the learners... Moreover, my exploration extends to the broader context of education. I reflect on the impact of assessment practices on students' motivation and self-esteem. It becomes evident that a student's perception of assessment can significantly influence their approach to learning. This leads me to question how we can further refine our assessment methods to inspire and empower students rather than induce stress or anxiety.

Overall Summary: Key Findings of Research Question Strand/Prompt 3: Impact and Significance of Assessment

In this third strand, we recollected on our lived experiences of the "Impact and Significance of Assessment." The major themes that emerged included: communication of perspectives, shapes brand or image of academia, insight and awareness of academic programs, and illuminates the "value." Subthemes are discussed under each major theme.

Research Question Strand 4: Implications of Assessment

The fourth strand or prompt of our guiding research question called for us to recollect on our lived experiences of the "Implications of Assessment." Three major themes with subthemes emerged from the sensemaking of our data.

Guide/Playbook for Educational Arena (Major Theme 1)

Assessment is an indispensable component of education that unveils the depths of comprehension or knowledge and embracing the pedagogical importance embedded within the arena or realm of assessment.

With more and more focus on accountability, the importance of assessment and continuous improvement isn't going anywhere.

Subtheme*: Ethos on Education.*

This subtheme resonates to the essence of the beliefs of the education system (i.e., people and process). As the following data excerpt captures:

Assessment may have implications on the community perceptions of valid and credible personnel in such academic programs and the institution. [Further] implications towards student interest in such programs and/or the institution.

Subtheme: *Educational Process.*

To whom and for whom and where does this assessment information go – the communication loop (not just the improvement loop). Some best practices and reminders – it is essential to communicate those pieces that are going to add value to those receiving the information. Part of the responsibility must be taking care of assessment messaging. Where we've been and where we're at – those conversations need to be had to move toward the "now what."

Push and Pull Effect (Major Theme 2)

The data pinpointed the push and pull effect concerning assessment data and its uses, as the quote exemplifies:

What do we do with the data? It should be what we do with the data – [it should be] shared to be valuable and require a conversation with others. … [we are] missing rich discussion [with] pushback on the evidence… [we have a] shared

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responsibility [to] post the assessment – [for] continuity or flow of improvement.

Subtheme: *Resources.*

Resources surfaced as a subtheme of the push and pull effect of assessment as it considers aspects of people, operations, program improvement, and supporting program continuance.

If the intent is to eliminate programs [as opposed to improving them] …. people won't believe in the process and there will be the possibility of data being altered so a "program" doesn't look bad.

Implications of assessment can be [considerations of] sustaining operations, aborting operations.

On the resources needed to support academic programs, students, student personnel services, tuition, faculty, staff …

Subtheme: *Involvement* [people with process(es)].

The process and the people need to be involved [in the process] for the continuous improvements. By and large – would anybody do assessment without being told to do it? The external prompt, the urgency that evokes us to do it.

[There is this] bureaucracy of doing assessment – we're bringing in the symbolic, empathetic, cultural aspect that is germane to just doing human work.

We can't prompt the individual to engage in the changes or reflections, but we can entice them to, we can encourage them to, to make it [assessment] meaningful – everyone has to be in that community of advancement [mindset].

Relevancy or Aversion (Major Theme 3)

The doing of assessment and the actors involved should be a facilitated process

Subtheme: *Perceptions.*

The implications of assessment results may trigger misinterpretations of the data. As the quote illuminates,

> *The public is drawing conclusions based on the results of assessments that many may know nothing about. They won't understand the data, they won't understand the variables and yet they're going to make significant comments and in some cases recommendations that will have an impact on the teachers and the students.*

Another quote on this aspect of *perceptions* expounds,

> *Assessments provide a means of evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and the quality of education being offered, thereby promoting institutional excellence. Higher education should prepare students for real-world challenges and careers. Assessments, when designed appropriately, stimulate real-world scenarios and tasks, ensuring that graduates are well-equipped to excel in their chosen fields. In conclusion, assessments are linchpin in higher education for professors who strive for institutional excellence, maintain high expectations, and embrace a culturally responsive approach.*

Overall Summary: Key Findings of Research Question Strand/Prompt 4: Implications of Assessment

We, the researchers, recollected on our lived experiences of the "Implications of Assessment" in this fourth strand/prompt. Three major themes emerged: guide/playbook for educational arena, push and pull effect, and relevancy or aversion; and specific subthemes presented and supported with quotes/data.

Discussion

This discussion section articulates our response to the question "so what, now what?," and addresses questions of "what do these findings mean?" "how are the

findings useful to understand the phenomenon we investigated?" and "how does it connect to literature on the overarching topic of assessment?" Data interpretation is the storying or storied accounts of sensemaking or meaning-making to address: what is going on here? Frankly answering the question: "So what does all this mean?" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 110). Data interpretation substantiates results/findings to the broader community. In doing collaborative autoethnography (CAE), "...the task of data interpretation is critical because it allows you to discuss matters beyond yourself and to connect yourself with others and the sociocultural context" (Chang et al., 2012, p. 110).

 The "So What, Now What?" Question. As we reflected on the themes holistically across all four research strands/prompts, we knew that our initial separation of the research strands/parts served the process of recollecting experiences and journaling to each strand to address the guiding research question. Yet, the big picture takeaway from the findings is that assessment is about the process and the people. All the major themes and subthemes embody the people aspect and the process aspect that together confirm our experiences and perceptions of assessment. People drive the process. People propel empowerment of actions. People collaborate and develop trust in the process and in each other. People are the receivers and actors in the assessment process. People shape the conversation and communicate the data from assessment. People represent the institution and carry out actions to continuously improve academic functions. No surprise in our findings, for research strand one, that assessment is about understanding and supporting the people and the process. And illuminated in our data excerpts/data quotes for overall major themes and subthemes of our research, depicts and highlights people inherent in the assessment work and process. As Miller (2023) emphatically notes, "... it [assessment] is about relationships and people. . . . The better determinants of the success of assessment are related to trust, collaboration, transparency, and relationships" (p. 6). Miller's viewpoints on assessment as rooted in "people" confirm and support our understanding of assessment and anchor to people. Further, Munna (2021) states "Assessment should be designed in such a way so that the

assessment becomes meaningful to the people involved in it because the assessment has a vital role in learning. The assessment generally has a mission to improve standards, not just measuring students" (p. 427). Our findings, connect to Munna's work, as we highlight the evolution of assessment as purposeful and continuous.

Interestingly, our findings illuminated ideologies of assessment in practice and raised   thoughts on aspects related to the impact and significance of assessment and the value of assessment. Wall et al. (2014) posed "Assessment for Whom" (pp. 5-17) and concluded that, "Assessment practice should be constructed as a place of inclusive, sustained, and informed dialogue ..." (p. 17). While Lance et al. (2023) state, "Institutional assessment processes are most meaningful when campus stakeholders can learn about each other's needs in this effort" (p. 15).

We summarize from our findings that assessment creates an intentional imprint on the community - the people internal and external to the institution. Assessment is also about shared accountability and each of our major themes and subthemes allude to this aspect. Shared accountability when the data confirms academic progress, and shared accountability must be rallied in support of actions for improvement. As one of us reflected that assessment and all the components of assessment is like "a woven basket," noting:

> *It [assessment] can take various forms and shapes based on its utility. Metaphorically assessments at the level of higher education can be viewed as individual leaves that are carefully intertwined to create a corroborative and utilitarian structure, serving the suitability and growth of all stakeholders within the educational setting. Each layer of assessment like a leaf has a specified role and purpose to contribute to the holistic design and quality of the learning process. ... just like a [woven] basket, it can take various forms based on its purpose, differentiated (culturally relevant) assessments are crafted to meet the diverse needs of the assessee and the assessor.*

We close this discussion section by reflecting on what is missing from our data stories, what aspects we did not fully address. As Chang et al. (2012) state "... searching for meaning is looking for what is obviously missing in your data. . . . Data interpretation gives you an opportunity to pay attention to cues that may be potentially critical in gaining a fuller understanding of the phenomena" (p. 112). We stated earlier our roles are as researchers/participants in our study. We also noted we are faculty members in a higher education institution in the Western Pacific region. Our data story is situated and informed by our experiences in our community and cultural community context. Expanding on such dialogue of our storied accounts of the phenomenon can lend itself to another round of data analysis that intentionally further explores how this contextual aspect evoked our unique accounts of understanding and experiences with assessment. As Chang et al. (2012) note, "Examine how contextual factors—cultural, social, economic, political, organizational, and interpersonal— might have affected your findings, and speculate about how the findings might have turned out differently in different contexts" (p. 112).

Implications and Further Research Suggestions

Implications of our primary findings support advancement and introspection on the effect or intent of assessment within a context and the emotional connection that comes with the work. This effect is nested in the community and cultural community context of which the phenomenon was both situated and investigated. Our next step is a reexamination of the findings and with intentional emphasis on the cultural and interpersonal aspects inherent in the original data findings. A suggestion for other researchers is to employ a collaborative qualitative approach to examine how institutional assessment is understood in terms of the participants involved and the outputs to your institutional stakeholders and communities.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to describe in detail our collaborative research study that examined the phenomenon of assessment in higher education. As strongly evident in our findings, assessment involves working with multiple stakeholders and is intertwined with people and the process. The major themes of authentication, empowerment and trust, evolution, multidimensional process, sensemaking, perspectives, and educational arena clearly involve people enveloped with the process. The overall findings with subthemes support both the process and the people as we explored the research question on our experiences and perceptions to four research strands: understanding of assessment, work of assessment, impact and significance of assessment, and implications of assessment. Literature on assessment (see for example: Miller, 2023; Munna, 2021) affirms that people are crucial in assessment. Thus, the work, impact, significance, and implications of assessment are about people. The meaningfulness of assessment work and its implications for people and its focus for continuous improvement cannot be underestimated. Much care and attention should be given to the "meaningfulness" of assessment work. As this notion of "meaningful" assessment is specifically addressed in the work/writing by Munna (2021) and Lance et al. (2023).

In reflecting on using collaborative autoethnography (CAE) to understand assessment, we evoked academic stories by way of our individual story and our collective stories to elucidate interpretations and co-sensemaking of assessment. In essence, this research highlights our shared story or (re)storying – combining our individual lens into a co-joined lens to re(story) together about the phenomenon. Through this work, the researchers have appreciated the in-depth examination of the phenomenon of institutional assessment, and the insights the findings illuminated to spark a reframing of the ways we can further participate in and engage in respective assessment work in meaningful dialogue with people. Following the methodological approach of CAE provided us with a valuable introspection on assessment through

unifying multiple experiences and our understandings of the intricacies and complexities of the process and people doing assessment. By capturing and sharing our understandings and experiences on assessment, we open a lens with which others may view their own practices. It is our hope that this research is insightful for others who aspire to qualitatively make sense of assessment within their own institutions and academic communities.

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