Letter from the Editors

Joe Pellegrino
jpellegrino@georgiasouthern.edu

Nikki DiGregorio
Towson University, ndigregorio@towson.edu

Delores E. Liston
Georgia Southern University, dliston@georgiasouthern.edu

Delena Bell Gatch
Georgia Southern University, dbgatch@georgiasouthern.edu

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Abstract
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Letter from the Editors

Delena Bell Gatch,1 Nikki DeGregorio,2 Delores Liston,1 and Joe Pellegrino1

1 Georgia Southern University
2 Towson University

This letter introduces issue 2 of volume 17. It discusses institutional accreditation, academic program assessment, the rigor necessary to have confidence in our curricular decisions, and how the scholarship of teaching and learning fits into this picture.

Half of the editorial team for IJSoTL is currently knee-deep in a multi-year process designed to prove to a large group of external reviewers that our home institution is effective in fulfilling its mission, complies with certain objective requirements, and continuously seeks to enhance the quality of its programs, services, and, most importantly, student learning. In short, we are seeking reaccreditation from our accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). This institution-wide project has occasioned our thoughts for this issue.

While accrediting bodies review an institution in all its areas of operation, the one we’re all most familiar with is the area of student learning. Here our accrediting body tasks us with proving that we identify expected student learning outcomes, regularly assess the extent to which we achieve these outcomes, and provide evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results of those assessments. We need to verify that this process occurs in every academic program, in every General Education area, and for every academic and student support service that concerns itself with student success. Other regional, national, and international accreditors may not phrase this requirement in quite the same way, but no matter how it’s presented, this drive to continuously improve the quality of an institution’s academic programs sits at the heart of any consideration of the efficacy of that institution. SACSCOC explains itself rather eloquently:

Student outcomes—both within the classroom and outside of the classroom—are the heart of the higher education experience. Effective institutions focus on the design and improvement of educational experiences to enhance student learning and support appropriate student outcomes for its educational programs and related academic and student services that support student success. To meet the goals of educational programs, an institution is always asking itself whether it has met those goals and how it can become even better. (Resource Manual, 67-68)

At the institutional level, we are seeking external validation that we meet a set of standards established by the higher education community, standards that are aligned with the needs of both our students and our society. We can capture all of this in a series of simple questions:

- Do our students learn what we implicitly or explicitly promise that they will learn?
- Do we avail ourselves of opportunities to enhance student learning?
- Do we critically examine the alignment between what we say we will do and what our students actually experience?
- Do we make evidence-based curricular and/or instructional changes that improve student learning?
If these questions look familiar, it’s because they are the same ones every instructor asks themselves when they consider the success of a particular class period or a semester-long class. They’re also the questions that program faculty and administrators collectively ask about their corpus of classes, looking for coherence and cohesiveness in a structured series of classes that lead to a degree. And they’re the questions that the administrators and faculty of an entire institution consider when they evaluate how successful they are in fulfilling the unique mission of that institution.

Most of us could critically address these questions for ourselves at the close of any class period, walking from one class to the next. And for many of us, such an informal level of consideration is enough. Did our students understand the content we were addressing? If not, why not? How can we pitch it differently next time? What can we use to backfill what they’re missing? So maybe during the next class period we come at the matter again from a different angle. Then we check to see if that new model worked. If it did, we’ve just made an instructional change that improved student learning. And if a university were nothing but a collection of individual instructors with classes they called their own, this independent tweaking would be enough. But when these questions are considered by more and more people, the process gets more and more complicated.

When we move beyond individual instructors and single classes, we need a common language, and a common understanding, that will allow us to answer these questions as a group. We know that there’s one sure way to get past the level of personal anecdotes, one that isn’t dependent on our personal strengths and weaknesses in the classroom. This process creates evidence beyond the hit-or-miss hunches we might have. We call this method program assessment.

Wait! Don’t stop reading now just because we’ve mentioned that word that causes so many shudders. Take a look at those four questions again. Then consider that instructor musing over the class that just ended. Program assessment is nothing more than a way to address those fundamental questions, but this time as a group. It gives us evidence that we can all consider, whether it reflects our individual experiences or not. Yes, it’s more complicated than some quick internal temperature-taking, but that’s not the fault of the assessment process; that’s what happens when any one of us tries to tell someone else what we’re thinking. We have to move beyond what makes sense only to us and arrive at a place where we can understand one another. Any decent program assessment process will give us the ability to shape both our curricula and our instruction, as a group.

We all have colleagues who consider program assessment some onerous, unpaid, unappreciated activity that we’re forced to engage in only because we have to fill out some reports that will never get read. It’s just one more hoop to jump through, rammed down the throats of the faculty by administrators who can dodge any responsibility for decision-making by appealing to a set of numbers that quantify things like “quality” or “efficiency” or “learning.” And such a scenario might be true, but if it is, it’s a corruption of the program assessment process. If you’re engaging in assessment just so you can complete a report, you’re missing the point.

But there’s an even larger point here as well. That large group of external reviewers, the ones who represent accrediting bodies? They’re the ones who read those reports. It’s probably a bit of an exaggeration to say that the continued existence of an educational institution hinges upon their evaluations of those reports, but not by much. Because those student outcomes are at the heart of the higher education experience, they’re certainly the most important matter in any reaccreditation process. There is no faster way to place the accreditation status of an institution in jeopardy than for it to be unable to demonstrate that it has a robust and ongoing process through which it seeks to address and improve student learning. There are significant consequences for such a failure. In the United States, for instance, if an institution loses its accreditation, no student attending that school is eligible for federal funding. Since almost half of all undergraduates in the U.S. receive some form of federal financial aid, enrollment would plummet. And for those students who might still enroll, the NSF has some news:

The sudden loss of accreditation, or failure to secure accreditation, can render [a student’s] degree/credits “useless” because employers often stipulate that a degree must come from an accredited college and other institutions will not recognize credits earned at unaccredited institutions/programs.
(National Science Foundation, 3)
So maybe the idea of the continued existence of an institution being contingent upon a successful reaccreditation isn’t so far-fetched after all.

**What does this have to do with SoTL?**

Take a look at this issue of *IJSoTL*, or flip through almost any other journal in the field. The overwhelming majority of the articles you’ll see all try to do the same thing: articulate a common ground, create a common and rigorous language for stakeholders to collectively discuss the improvement of either curricula or instruction. They do this by moving beyond personal impressions, striving instead for a level of clarity that is most easily guaranteed by hewing to sound scientific principles. If the process of gathering evidence is good enough, if the measurement tool is precise enough (and measures what we need it to measure), and if the analysis is insightful enough, scholars of teaching and learning can articulate the common language that leads individuals beyond the miasma of fuzzy personal meanings. In many ways, they’re the model for what program assessment should be. And if you’re reading this, you know why this is true: they, like you, have devoted themselves to improving student learning not just through trial and error, anecdotal evidence, or the outcome of just one day in one class, but through sound methodology, accurate results, and acute analysis. They are both grounded and are the ground, the common ground we can stand on as we address student achievement in any academic area.

There are no published statistics about how many SoTL scholars are involved with program assessment at their institutions. And it’s quite possible that many SoTL scholars avoid program assessment because they are ill-informed about it, or their institution presents assessment work as a necessary evil. If you work at a place like that, know that the institutional culture won’t change until you change it. Assessment won’t be meaningful and useful until you help make it so. If you value the work done in SoTL, you will understand and value the work done in assessment. But, in all honesty, it’s not the work that makes it worthwhile. Just as in this field, it’s the results that make it worth your time.

**References**


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