

**Moore's Musings:  
Staying the Course with Standards and  
Assessment: The Challenges of Loosely-  
Coupled Systems**

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In "General Education and the Assessment Reform Agenda," a recent [mono-graph](#) produced by the Association of American Colleges and Universities as part of their *The Academy in Transition* series, [Peter Ewell](#) reiterates the oft-heard claim that the influence of the national assessment reform movement on higher education has been underwhelming:

Although we have some small victories to show for our work, we have hardly achieved the large-scale transformation of teaching and learning we once envisioned. (2004, p. 1)

He suggests some reasons for this situation, including the tendency for many institutions to approach assessment in such a "mechanical" and "process-centered" way that faculty were rarely fully engaged in the work; more often than not, assessment at many institutions was clearly viewed as an external add-on to the real work of teaching and learning. Ewell argues that higher education's reluctance to embrace fully the potential of the assessment movement is becoming increasingly problematic in an era of growing federal pressure related to education, including higher education, and presents a case for pursuing an

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**Creating Effective Learning Environments**

**2005 Teaching and Learning Conference**

The 2005 Teaching and Learning Conference is just a month away, so I do hope you are making plans to attend. The Program button on the conference website links to information on the conference keynoter, pre-conference workshop descriptions, and concurrent session descriptions. Also available on the website is information on lodging, the Schedule At-a-Glance, conference fees, and online registration. To avoid a late fee, registrations must be made on or prior to April 22. This promises to be a really great conference so if you have not yet registered, put this on the top of your 'To Do' list. See you in Spokane!



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## Including Alternative Assessments in Competency-based Education

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Have you ever stopped to think how unnatural it might be for an adult learner with an abundance of life experience and very little or no recent classroom time? Many are seeking re-training at our Technical Colleges and fit in well with achieving the outcomes set forth through competency based curriculum. Some adult students, in my experience, seem to have no trouble meeting competency standards when they are measured in an untraditional format.

I am not suggesting that all traditional standardized written tests be abandoned. As a matter of fact the publisher's of many text books now provide test generators which I occasionally take advantage of. However, for many technical training programs it might be beneficial to include alternative assessment measuring tools. Some good ideas can be gleaned from an article by Moskal (2003).

These alternative assessments have been recognized for some time. Gronlund (2003) includes them in his writings, as well as McQueen (1999) and Wiley (2003). They are gaining popularity in the E-education (online modality) sector of distance learning. When properly designed and compared to traditional written tests, alternative assessment methods can exhibit equivalent validity and reliability characteristics.

I have utilized alternative assessments to measure skills and knowledge, as well as attitude, in training

programs. For example it seems much harder to recognize the achievement of an appreciation objective by scoring a written test, than it is to observe that attitude during a performance assessment. Whether it is scored by a rubric or some form of checklist, the learners' application of and synthesis of the learning can indicate their enthusiasm. I am of the mind that all of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy levels of learning can be measured by several different alternative assessments including but not limited to, a) projects, b) portfolios, c) role-plays, and d) skills performance.

### References

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### Featured Website

#### Partnership for 21st Century Skills

<http://www.p21.org/>

Partnership for 21st Century Skills is a leader in bringing together the business community, education leaders, and policymakers to define a powerful vision for 21<sup>st</sup> century education and provide tools and resources to help facilitate and drive change.

## STUDENT VOICES

This issue features a poem by Lue Moue, a student at Shoreline Community College 1993. Titled Immigrants' Struggle, the poem resulted from an assignment in an Integrated Skills in English class at Shoreline. This English translation was originally published in the 1993 edition of Shoreline Community College's *Terpsichords*.

Lue Moue  
ESL 068  
Integrated Skills in English  
Kathleen Lynch-McCloy

### Immigrants' Struggle (English Translation)

We immigrants, young and old,  
struggle to survive  
like plants in changed soil.

Our elders,  
nostalgic for homelands,  
face America's cities  
depressed like fading flowers.

Silently they sit in churches,  
listening to American prayers,  
as if listening to voices of singing birds,  
not understanding a single word.

Our youths, in two cultures,  
struggle to create identities,  
and then to maintain them  
like the expanding roots of a tree  
with desire to keep its leaves green.

Sometimes it is sad  
to watch the light of hope  
disappear from our parents' faces,  
like cloud shadows sliding across a field.

Despite all the trials,  
we are grateful to be free.  
we place our dreams in our hearts,  
and rest our lives upon god,  
just like the puritans and pilgrims.

Dia Cha, Laos

## Conferences and Workshops

**Why We Teach What We Teach...and How** - Washington's college and university composition and literature faculty will convene for a two-day workshop this month around "Why We Teach What We Teach...and How" (e.g. What are the assumptions that form the foundation of our syllabus choices? What are the "Big Ideas" our students will remember from our courses in five years? What are the ingredients of an effective assignment in composition or literature?). Look for a follow-up article in either the May or June issue of eWAG.

**2005 Summer Math Institute** - The [Transition Math Project](#) (TMP) is a private-public partnership committed to developing and disseminating clear and consistent information about math expectations. The project's goal is to ensure students successfully transition from high school math to college-level math and beyond. For the second year they are sponsoring a Summer Math Institute set for June 28 - July 1, 2005 at the Sleeping Lady Mountain Retreat in Leavenworth, WA.

**Developmental Math Workshop** - Interested in a professional development opportunity this summer, or know developmental math faculty who might be? The Mathematical Association of America (MAA) is offering a 5-day workshop on the campus of University of California-Berkeley titled "Revitalizing Your Developmental Mathematics Courses: A Context-Driven, Activity-Based Approach." The workshop will explore ways to incorporate more student-active and contextually-rich experiences into developmental mathematics courses. Scheduled for June 19-24, the cost is a \$250 registration fee plus travel to Berkeley (MAA pays for room and board). If you are interested in obtaining additional information, details are at [www.teachmathapplications.com/maaprep.htm](http://www.teachmathapplications.com/maaprep.htm)

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agenda with respect to assessment in general education that addresses not just one “A word” but four—**abilities, alignment, assessment, and action**—toward the goal of achieving a fifth: genuine professional **accountability**.

Peter is one of our best thinkers about higher education in general and assessment in particular, and he’s as eloquent as ever in this monograph. As I’ve written in earlier eWAG issues, however, I do think that part of the problem with such a glum view of assessment’s impact is that the cultural transformation at the heart of the work is hard work and difficult to quantify, let alone sustain in some kind of clear linear progression. If our work here in Washington is any indication, things move forward in fits and starts, with plenty of sidetracks and setbacks, and while you’re in the middle of things it’s hard to see the forest of incremental change for the trees of problems all around you! Moreover, many of the changes are subtle shifts in the kinds of questions we ask and approaches we take to the day-to-day business of education, both inside and outside of the classroom, and many institutions really don’t have the assessment tools and/or resources to document fully such influences. (I also think it sounds like part of the problem he’s identifying is that some reformers were a bit too Pollyannish in their expectations—as an inveterate cynic, I never seemed to have that problem!)

That said, however, I do acknowledge that from a national perspective, the assessment movement’s impact has been modest and haphazard; my main point for mentioning Peter’s monograph is that it does get me thinking about some of the underlying reasons for the admittedly enormous challenges we face in our work to address issues of standards and assessment in higher education. Some core explanations, if not solutions, have been around for some time, and I was reminded of that not long after I read Ewell’s monograph when I ran across an article from [Richard Elmore](#), another outstanding thinker about educational change issues. For some time one of my favorite articles has been Elmore’s “Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practic-

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es” (*Harvard Educational Review*, 1996, v. 66, p. 1-25), but I just discovered a more recent [piece](#), “Building a New Structure for School Leadership,” that builds on and extends some of the arguments in the 1996 article. Elmore’s work focuses on the K-12 public education context, but while some of the specific pressures and issues may be different between sectors, for the most part the argument holds for higher education as well (and in some ways is even more relevant in a postsecondary context!).

Elmore’s essential point is that while standards-based reform, done well and thoughtfully, has a great deal of promise and has had a significant impact on public education over the past few years, ultimately it will fail to have a long-term positive influence on student achievement and success unless it can find a way to influence what Elmore calls the core of educational practice: teacher beliefs and classroom practices around teaching, learning, and the nature of knowledge. The problem with profoundly and systematically influencing this core is that the people who manage educational institutions do not in any meaningful sense manage the core functions related to instruction; rather, as Elmore puts it, “Teachers, working in isolated classrooms, manage the ‘technical core.’” That disconnect is a primary characteristic of what in a classic article Karl Weick has called “loosely-coupled systems” (“Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1976, 21, p. 1-9). Weick defined both significant strengths and challenges related to such systems, but in this context the particularly salient challenge he noted was that they are notoriously difficult to change systematically. Among other things, the inherent buffer between the managers and the technical core results in most innovations in schools being much more about structures and the appearance of reform—in schools that could be things like site councils, block schedules, adding/changing graduation requirements; in colleges, a great example is the revamping and re-shuffling of general education requirements on a regular basis—than about anything that might actually impact what teachers do with students in their classrooms. Elmore suggests that this disconnect also virtually guarantees that even successful new instructional approaches emerging from research or exemplary practice will be implemented only on a haphazard and piecemeal basis: “Because teaching is isolated work, improving instruction is strictly

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a matter of individual initiative.” (2000, p 2-3) As a result, schools and colleges are usually buzzing with innovation and “change” of one kind or another, but rarely is it focused or coordinated in such a way that there’s likely to be any sustained or collective impact on student learning.

And there’s the rub: standards-based reform in the K-12 system, or to some extent the comparable outcomes assessment movement in higher education, are explicitly and directly concerned with the instructional core of education, arguing that educational institutions and their faculty/staff need to be accountable for student learning. As Elmore notes:

The black box is open, and what teachers teach and students learn is increasingly a matter of public scrutiny and debate, and subject to direct measurement and inspection. (2000, p. 3)

Elmore acknowledges that some aspects of these trends represent legitimate threats to the educational system, but he argues, persuasively I think, that in the long run it would be extremely counterproductive for K-12 education to use its loosely-coupled nature to successfully resist genuine standards-based reform.

If public educators insist that the instructional core is inviolate and the role of administrators is to support it, they are inviting policymakers simply to agree, and then to shift public education by degrees into a [market solution] system based entirely on personal taste, preference and judgment. (2000, p. 4)

The alternative, he suggests, is for the system to take advantage of the opportunity presented by standards-based reform to redefine significantly the notion of educational leadership in schools so that teachers can be meaningfully involved in collective and substantive improvements in core instructional practices.<sup>1</sup> The challenge, especially for K-12 schools these days, is to move beyond a typical approach that research cited by

Elmore characterizes as “long on pressure and short on support;” his response, based both on theoretical work and his own experiences with school districts, involves thinking about a new model of **distributed leadership** that provides the impetus people need to unlearn, at least to some extent, the behaviors and values of a loosely-coupled system and to learn new behaviors and values associated with “collective responsibility for teaching practice and student learning.” (2000, p. 8) Next month I’ll finish up with more on this notion of distributed leadership and in particular how it pertains to the kind of work we’re doing with outcomes assessment in higher education, where I would argue the system is more loosely-coupled than K-12 folks can even imagine!

<sup>1</sup> On a related note, Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves, (“[Teacher Change](#),” August 1998, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of The University of Toronto), argue that people need to move beyond the simple-minded notion that getting rid of the so-called “deadwood” in teacher ranks is the solution to all that ails public education; the more powerful solution to the real problems would be sustaining and motivating good teachers throughout their careers by creating an environment that honors and rewards:

- discretionary judgment as the heart of professionalism;
- collaborative work cultures;
- norms of continuous improvement where new ideas are sought inside and outside one’s setting;
- reflection in, on, and about practice in which individual and personal development is honored, along with collective development and assessment; and
- greater mastery, efficacy, and satisfaction in the profession of teaching.



## WEB RESOURCES

### [State Board for Community & Technical Colleges \(SBCTC\)](#)

Provides resources and information on activities/events related to assessment, teaching and learning in Washington State's Community and Technical Colleges.

### [Office of Adult Literacy Competencies/EFF](#)

Equipped for the Future (EFF) is a National Institute for Literacy research project that seeks to improve the quality of adult education services by offering the field a comprehensive content framework, better-defined results, and standards that enable programs to focus on achieving those results.

### [Policy Center on the First Year of College](#)

The Policy Center on the First Year of College has as its basic mission the improvement of the first college year through enhanced learning outcomes and the success of first-year students. A particular focus of the Policy Center is the development and dissemination of a range of first-year assessment procedures and tools that can be used to strengthen or confirm practices in the curriculum, the co-curriculum, and institutional policy. In addition to improving practice, this process will contribute to the body of research on best practices in first-year programs.

### [First Year Assessment Listserv](#)

The First-Year Assessment Listserv (FYA-LIST) is sponsored by the **University of South Carolina's National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition** and the Policy Center on the First Year of College. The Policy Center is an initiative funded by a grants from **The Atlantic Philanthropies** and **Lumina Foundation for Education** and hosted on the campus of **Brevard College** in Brevard, NC.

This list is designed to promote nationwide dialog among college and university faculty and academic and student affairs administrators on methods and tools for evaluation first-year programs, policies, and procedures. It is intended to help gather and share information on best practices and procedures

for assessing the first college year. People responsible for the administration, assessment, and instruction of first-year programs (such as faculty, academic administrators, student affairs professionals, institutional researchers, and accrediting agency personnel) are encouraged to participate actively in the electronic forum by posing questions and sharing qualitative information that could aid other subscribers

### [Student Learning Outcomes: Recommended Reading](#) Western Washington University, Bellingham.

### [AAHE American Association for Higher Education](#)

The AAHE Assessment Forum is the primary national network connecting and supporting higher education stakeholders involved in assessment. It promotes thoughtful, effective approaches to assessment that involve faculty, benefit students, and improve the quality of teaching and learning. It helps campuses, programs, and individuals to plan, implement, and share the results of their assessment efforts by publishing, networking, and sponsoring an annual national conference.

### [AIR Internet Resources for Institutional Research](#)

The Association for Institutional Research (AIR) is a professional association of more than 3,100 institutional researchers, planners, and decision-makers from higher education institutions around the world. AIR exists to benefit its members and help advance research that will improve the understanding, planning, and operation of higher education institutions.

### [Outcomes Assessment Resources on the Web](#)

Provides links to web sites related to assessment in higher education and educational evaluation in general. They are loosely organized into eight categories: University Assessment Pages, General Resources, Agencies, Institutes and Organizations, Assessment Instruments and Techniques, Assessment Papers and Reports, Commercial Resources on Assessment, Benchmarking, and Software.

## Check out these Resources:

For descriptions of the following books, just click on the title.

### [General Education and the Assessment Reform Agenda](#)

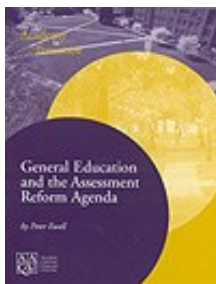
[Integrative Learning: Mapping the Terrain](#)  
[Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction](#)

[Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments and General Education](#)

From: [Association of American Colleges and Universities](#)

### [General Education and the Assessment Reform Agenda](#)

Peter Ewell, 2004

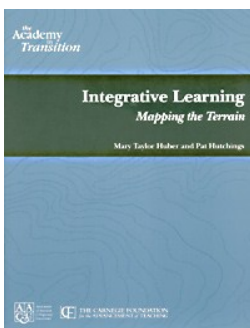


Written by national assessment expert, Peter Ewell, this paper reflects on the challenges of general education and assessment reform in the context of recent calls for accountability in higher education. The author argues that by focusing on abilities, alignment, assessment, and action, campuses can both improve general education programs and demonstrate student achievement of learning outcomes key to success in the 21st century. This book is ideal for general education or curricular reform committees and campus discussions about assessment, general education, and accountability.

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### [Integrative Learning: Mapping the Terrain](#)

Mary Taylor Huber, Pat Hutchings  
2005



Published by AAC&U and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

This paper explores the challenges to integrative learning today as well as its longer tradition and rationale within a vision of liberal education. In outlining promising directions for campus work, the authors draw on AAC&U's landmark report, *Greater Expecta-*

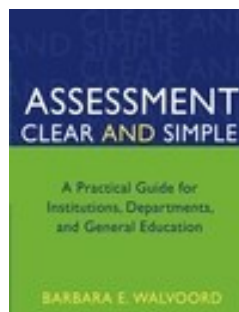
*tions*, as well as the Carnegie Foundation's long-standing initiative on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Readers will find a map of the terrain of integrative learning on which promising new developments in undergraduate education can be cultivated, learned from, and built upon.

From: [Jossey-Bass](#)

### [Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education](#)

Barbara E. Walvoord

April 2004



*Assessment Clear and Simple* is "Assessment 101" in a book--a concise and step-by-step guide written for everyone who participates in the assessment process. This practical book helps to make assessment simple, cost-efficient, and useful to the institution, while at the same time meeting the requirements of accreditation agencies, legislatures,

review boards, and others. *Assessment Clear and Simple* explores a variety of topics and shows how to:

- Build on assessment already in place
  - Use classroom work and grading process
  - Get faculty and department on board
  - Assess hard to define goals such as moral and civic development
  - Development workable learning goals
  - Tailor assessment to its purposes
  - Select sensible assessment measures
  - Make criteria explicit
  - Use assessment to improve learning
  - Establish effective oversight without an assessment bureaucracy
  - Write an assessment report
- Interpret the institution's culture to external audiences