

## Book Review

*Learning Assessment Techniques:  
A Handbook College Faculty.*

Elizabeth F. Barkley & Claire H. Major.  
San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2016. 480 pp.  
ISBN 1119050898. Paperback. \$40.00.

REVIEWED BY:

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Elizabeth F. Barkley and Claire Howell Major's book, *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Wiley & Sons, 2016), strives to take a fresh look at course-level learning assessment techniques. The admirable aim of the book is to integrate teaching, learning, and assessment to serve multiple purposes: improve student learning, enhance pedagogy, use faculty time efficiently, and fulfill (external) demands for learning evidence. Certainly Barkley and Major tackle an important topic that will interest educators, assessment practitioners, and support personnel. The worthy goals of *Learning Assessment Techniques*, explained in the preface and introduction, create lofty expectations for readers of this latest handbook for college faculty and staff. They situate their book in (a) the scholarship of teaching and learning and (b) classroom assessment techniques by Patricia Cross and Thomas Angelo. Many of us have the *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* (Angelo & Cross, 1993) on our bookshelves and it is not gathering dust in my office. That is quite an accomplishment for an academic book to maintain relevance and usefulness for decades. Will Barkley and Major's book experience the same fate? I'm not sure.

The authors want to help faculty, assessment practitioners, and instructional designers effectively and efficiently "draw teaching and assessment together to create a seamless and unified process" (p. xiv) and, just as important in today's competitive higher education context, help them "document, interpret, and report student learning to a variety of stakeholders" (p. xv). Thus the authors address a need that did not exist when Angelo and Cross published their handbook. Although individual elements of Barkley and Major's book are valuable, the book as a whole could be more carefully presented to maximize use for readers.

The authors' qualifications and experiences give them credibility on the topic of teaching and learning, which is evident in their accessible, easy to understand introductory chapter. Barkley is a pianist and music educator who has also worked with faculty at many higher education institutions. Major specializes in instructional design and technology and qualitative research. She has taught at several types of institutions. The two have co-authored, along with Cross, another book for college faculty, *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Resource for College Faculty* (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005). Readers should be aware that some of the techniques in this book appear in the previous books or have

been modified from the previous books in the Handbook for College Faculty series.

*Learning Assessment Techniques* has two main parts. First, an overview of why they promote learning assessment techniques (LATs) and how to implement, report results, and improve student learning. Second, they describe 50 specific LATs divided into six learning domains: knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn. In the overview, Barkley and Major describe why the LATs promote learning. First, "in order to effectively guide students in their own acquisition of knowledge, a college teacher also needs knowledge of pedagogy" (p. 2). Second, they explain that the LATs employ elements of effective pedagogy: "1. Identifying and communicating clear learning goals 2. Helping students achieve these goals through activities that promote active, engaged learning 3. Analyzing, reporting, and reflecting upon results in ways that lead to continued improvement" (p. 3). Third, Barkley and Major illustrate how LATs intertwine learning goals, learning activity, and outcomes assessment in a unified whole and how "it is impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends" (p. 4). In other words, by using LATs, the faculty member is teaching, engaging, and assessing students all at the same time. This is an important point because it places the assessment-for-improvement concept as foundational to an effective educational experience. I applaud the authors for their stance.

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The authors draw from Suskie (2009) to differentiate assessment and grading and from Wiggins (1998) (embedded and authentic assessment) to clarify assessment for readers, which is appropriate and supports their overarching goals for the book. The parts on selecting and implementing LATs will likely be useful to readers because the authors give sufficient details, examples, and practical steps. The authors also describe basic ways to analyze results from the LATs—from descriptive statistics to cross-case comparisons—which support the authors' goal of helping faculty report results to multiple stakeholders. The last chapter in the overview ('Closing the Loop') addresses a particularly important question: how can faculty improve student learning after the results are in? They provide five recommendations: modify the goals/objectives/outcomes, assessment purpose, LAT, implementation, or analysis of findings. Given that the authors themselves state the importance of this chapter because their primary goal is student learning improvement, a more in-depth discussion was needed than this two-page chapter. "Closing the loop" has been notoriously difficult; this

chapter could benefit from a richer analysis of what results might be best addressed by which of their five recommended changes or from a discussion of how to choose one of these five solutions so that improved student learning is likely.

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The second and final section of the book has 50 LATs. Each LAT includes examples from different academic disciplines, lists the amount of time involved, the steps to implement, a consideration for use in an online course, a description of how to report to external audiences, and variations. LATs range from quick (e.g., entry tickets, sequence chains) to involved (e.g., think-aloud protocols, editorial reviews, e-portfolios). The authors’ inclusion of rubrics, tables, and charts that illustrate how to report aggregate results is good, although, in some cases I found myself disagreeing with the table/chart format or rubric content. For example, the detailed oral presentation rubric (p. 326) seems mismatched to the LAT’s three-minute, one-slide presentation. I encourage using the tables, charts, and rubrics as starting points for faculty and professional staff to modify, not as the ideal models.

The 50 LATs provide evidence of learning because students produce written documentation or an observable behavior (such as a debate). Most of the LATs are very good in providing formative information and developing student knowledge, skill, or values but not all of the techniques are designed for summative evaluation. More important, faculty/staff may need an additional evaluation tool to provide information on whether learning in the specified domain actually occurred. My primary criticism of this work is highlighted in a brief description of the book’s organizing framework using Fink’s (2013) taxonomy and examples from the chapter on the caring domain.

The authors use Fink’s (2013) significant learning taxonomy to organize the 50 LATs, but it does not provide readers with practical insight. Fink’s work is a fresh departure from the psychometrically-influenced taxonomies of educational objectives for cognitive and affective domains, popularly called “Bloom’s taxonomy” (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956; Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). These two taxonomies have categories that are hierarchical, developmental, and non-overlapping. However, unlike Bloom et al., Fink’s taxonomy is intentionally non-hierarchical; the six domains of learning overlap and are interactive and synergistic. Half of Fink’s categories specify what content makes the learning significant. Fink’s human dimension involves learning about the self and others; the

caring domain involves caring primarily about learning; and the learning how to learn domain involves, well, the subject of learning. These and the other three domains—foundational knowledge, application, and integration—are intertwined and meaningful and that is their strength in Fink’s taxonomy. The synergistic nature of the taxonomy makes assigning each LAT to a single domain difficult and probably impossible but Barkley and Major insist on doing so. I think the book would have been more successful if they did not use Fink’s taxonomy.

The authors try to address unfamiliarity or potential confusion with Fink’s taxonomy and terminology by starting each LAT chapter with a definition and description of the domain. Fink’s terms such as human dimension, integration, and caring have particular meaning so readers might benefit from reviewing the opening pages of each domain chapter. For example, Fink (2013) describes the human dimension as “important relationships and interactions we all have with ourselves and with others” (p. 50) and the caring dimension as caring more deeply about something— that is, to “value something differently” (p. 55).

Barkley and Major give us “action verbs” (p. 19) for Fink’s six categories. Their suggested use of this verb list is inappropriate because it does not correspond to Fink’s taxonomy nor to the spirit of the taxonomy. For example, they list adapt, evaluate, and propose as verbs in the human dimension category. But if faculty create learning objectives such as the student adapts mathematical models, evaluates geographic regions, or proposes a feeding schedule for fish, that learning does not fall into the human development category because it does not directly honor and advance relationships with the self or others as Fink’s taxonomy specifies. Appropriate objectives using these verbs and the human dimension category could be that the student adapts one’s self, evaluates interactions with others, or proposes ways to develop better relationships among people. Fink’s domains of significant learning do not hinge upon verbs or generic behaviors, as is more the case in the cognitive taxonomy by Bloom et al. (1956). Fink’s domains intentionally involve what is being learned and thus a verb list as proposed by Barkley and Major is not a useful match.

I had particular problems with the “Teaching and Assessing for the Caring Domain” chapter. The LATs themselves are useful and some have the potential to develop caring for the subject at hand but the LATs do not help to adequately evaluate students’ levels of caring as a result of the educational experience. Readers who are in fields that explicitly value caring—e.g., medical education, nursing, social work, teacher education—will likely find these LATs not at all useful for figuring out if they have succeeded in developing caring students.

The disciplinary examples in the caring domain chapter include tasks for the student such as communication of original research results, editorial writing, and problem

identification and solution development. I remain unconvinced that evaluating these tasks using the rubrics provided would allow faculty to infer that caring occurred. In my experience, in order to evaluate caring it should be an explicit part of the teaching, the task, and the rubric. On the oral communication rubric (p. 326) the enthusiasm dimension might be a proxy for caring but the advertisement (p. 332), editorial (p. 341), and debate (p. 348) rubrics do not evaluate students' degree of caring. We cannot automatically conclude that changes in caring occur when we compel a student via grades and credits to argue one side of an issue. For readers interested in evaluating students' caring, I recommend adding an explicit caring dimension to a rubric or using an additional evaluation tool (e.g., a self report) to connect the task to the caring domain. Despite finding the LATs in this section to be useful as classroom teaching, learning, and assessment tools, I do not see their direct connection to caring.

Faculty, instructional designers, assessment practitioners, and others who want to use this book to implement changes in pedagogy or learning measurement need to think carefully about the LATs and what learning claims can be made from their application and results. As I describe in the paragraph above, the LATs may not provide evidence related to their chapter title/learning domains. Readers may also benefit by considering which LATs give

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students sufficient time and guidance in order to produce their best work. If they do not, the learning artifact is likely best used for formative assessment, not summative. If the authors would have fully immersed the reader in Fink's overlapping domains and the implications for teaching, learning, and assessment, Barkley and Major's book would be more helpful to the academic and assessment community who are actively engaged in student learning improvement. Although I found the book to fall short in this area, the book's description of how to implement the LATs and the LATs themselves are useful.

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