

Abstract

Academic assessment faces many challenges, one of which is low participation on the part of faculty members (e.g. Smith, 2005). Here we present a case study from our assessment work in higher education. In addition to updating the instructions we created assessment documents for Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as a template for faculty to use. The data suggest that presenting assessment to faculty in a humorous way, and geared toward faculty concerns, can both increase participation and the quality of the participation.



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The Use of Humor in Assessment: A Case Study

I joined the Academic Assessment Committee (AAC)¹ at one of my previous institutions for the same reason that everyone did: because I was volun-told to. The dean noted that, since my husband worked in our administration in institutional assessment, I must be well suited to the position. At the time, all I knew about assessment was that the word left a bad taste in everyone's mouth and that the entire process was seen as a bureaucratic waste of time. The reality was much worse.

At the time of my joining only seven academic programs were fully participating in Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) assessment requirements for accreditation. There were seven members on the AAC (We encourage the reader to draw their own conclusions about that coincidence). Without any incoming plans or annual reports to review, the work of our small committee was largely drafting increasingly irritated emails begging departments to participate.

Eventually, I surmised that the resistance to participation was likely due to two factors. First, the faculty and the administration had very different views on the purpose and usefulness of assessment—a concern that will, no doubt, sound familiar. Though it is easy to dismiss faculty disengagement as a byproduct of laziness (Smith, 2005), the reality is probably more complex. My observations are in line with Ewell's (2002; see also Banta, 2002) observation that faculty find assessment redundant and invasive: As part of their annual renewal process (and just being good at their jobs more generally) they already review their teaching methods and attempt to find better pedagogy, so AAC's insistence on external assessment struck faculty members as questioning their faculty with self-review (Emil & Cress, 2014). This was a source of particular anxiety for pre-tenure faculty, who worried that the assessment procedures would be used against them when it came time for renewal, tenure, or promotion. Moreover, if the faculty were already instituting the necessary pedagogical changes to increase student learning, what was the purpose of the assessment cycles beyond keeping the administration at bay? It was little wonder

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¹ School, committee, and office names changed to protect the innocent.

that so few departments participated. As Driscoll and De Noriega (2006) pointed out, resistance dramatically decreases when the usefulness of assessment is linked to the issues that matter to professors: increasing student learning and improving the craft of teaching.

The second problem was the instructions AAC used to assist departments in creating their assessment documents. Beyond being nearly incomprehensible and filled with assessment jargon, they did nothing to combat the misconceptions held by the faculty about the purpose and usefulness of assessment. It was clear to me that the answer was to rewrite the instructions document in a humorous and accessible way that would painlessly explain the purpose and the benefit of assessment. In keeping with Emil and Cress's (2014) observation that faculty's belief in the usefulness of assessment is directly proportional to the amount of effort they are willing to expend on it, I hypothesized that the release of such a document would increase both the participation and the quality of participation.

Hogwarts to the Rescue

With the help of my assessment-savvy husband, I created a series of documents as if I was the chair of the Defense Against the Dark Arts Department at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (Rowling, 1997-2007). These documents were then integrated into an entirely new set of instructions written with the express goal of clarity and transparency. We took care to address every situation that might arise at our institution. For example, one of our departments relied on an external test as an assessment measure so we worked in the Ordinary Wizarding Level test—an external test that already existed in the universe of Hogwarts.

We also addressed the primary issue: explaining how assessment might be useful to the departments. From our view, academics do not need help being explicit about changes that they can make to help improve student learning outcomes. Explicit self-reflection is already included in the renewal, tenure, and promotion process (not to mention department meetings, countless informal discussions, and internal reflection). What the assessment process can uniquely offer academics is communication. Faculty do not get many opportunities to communicate their needs in a way that is compelling to administrators (Williams, 2013). When the assessment process is focused only on what individual professors or departments can do to improve student learning outcomes, it is unsurprising that it feels redundant and useless. Our instructions shifted the focus of the final “closing the loop” section from exclusively internal solutions (such as reorganizing the presentation of material) to including external ones (such as decreasing class size or changing the course prerequisites).²

Method

Corpus and Design

In order to complete a within-subjects design we used records from those departments for which recent historical data were available ($n = 28$). Some programs were discontinued, and some were in their first year after the Hogwarts plan was released. Additionally, some departments were excluded because they had previously not participated in assessment, either because they had not been required to, or because they had refused to. For completeness, for all analyses, we also performed between-subjects comparisons that included all departments and found identical results. For each department, we compared the timeliness of three-year assessment plans and timeliness as well as quality of annual report submissions before and after the release of the new instructions.

Materials and Procedure

The new instructions were sent to all departments at the end of the previous assessment cycle (i.e., after the last annual report had been submitted but before the new assessment plans were due) as part of the standard reminder email.

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²See full instructions and Hogwarts documents in an OSF repository online: <https://mfr.osf.io/render?url=https://osf.io/85muj/?action=download%26mode=render>

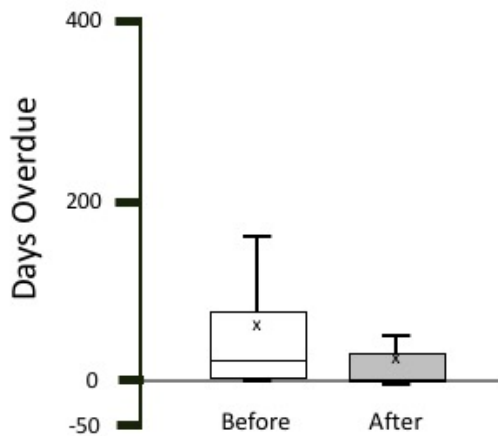
The message did not deviate from previous reminder emails except to mention that the instructions were (a) new and (b) included example materials from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Anecdotally, several department chairs reported that reading “Hogwarts” in the email intrigued them into opening the instructions. All other interactions with the departments followed the usual protocols (e.g., responding to inquiries, offering in-person help when requested). Per standard procedure, the instructions were sent again after the assessment plans had been approved but before the first annual report was due.

The date of submission was recorded for all assessment plans and subsequent annual reports. As part of the typical assessment procedure, annual reports were rated on quality (1 = does not meet expectations, resubmission required; 2 = approaches expectations, dean’s approval recommended after AAC endorses suggested changes; 3 = meets expectations, dean’s approval recommended by AAC).

Results

Assessment Plans

Although the instructions were sent only a couple of weeks before the plans were due, the plans were still turned in notably earlier (M = 24.5 days late, SD = 43.0) than the previous cycle (M = 58.1 days late, SD = 83.7; see Figure 1). Although on average the plans were still overdue, it is worth noting that only 21% of the plans were on time (or early) before the new instructions and that 61% of the plans were on time (or early) after the introduction of the new instructions.



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Figure 1. Box and whisker plots of timeliness of assessment plans, new instructions significantly decreased the number of days overdue by an average of 33.6 days.

Annual Reports

By the time the first round of annual reports was due the Hogwarts documents had been circulating for almost a year. Previous participation in annual reports had been particularly low; therefore, even though every department submitted an assessment report, historical timeliness data were only available for 16 departments. For those departments, the annual reports were turned in considerably earlier (M = 9.2 days late, SD = 19.42) than the previous year (M = 77.2 days late, SD = 111.02; see Figure 2).

In addition to missing historical data, quality assessments were absent from some submitted reports because of turnover in AAC membership; therefore only nine departments’ data were available for direct comparison. For these, however, the post-Hogwarts annual reports were also found to be of higher quality (M=2.89, SD=0.33) than those pre-Hogwarts (M = 2.44, SD = 0.53; see Figure 3).

Perhaps the most important result from this endeavor is that the release of these instructions coincided with an increase in assessment participation from 22.5% of departments to 100% within a year

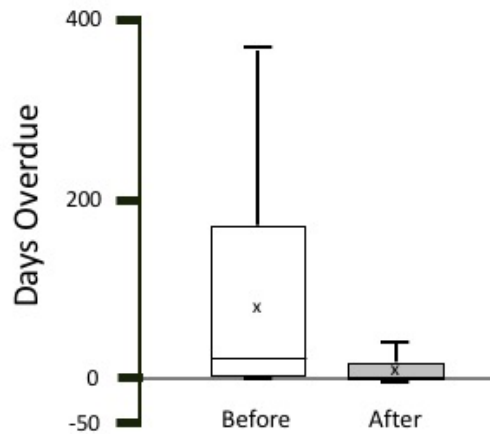


Figure 2. Box and whisker plots of timeliness of assessment reports, new instructions significantly decreased the number of days overdue by an average of 68 days.

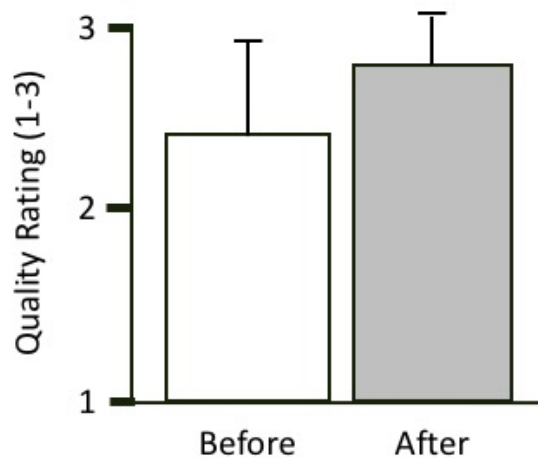


Figure 3. Assessment reports were rated at significantly higher quality after the release of the new instructions.

Closing the Loop

Perhaps the most important result from this endeavor is that the release of these instructions coincided with an increase in assessment participation from 22.5% of departments to 100% within a year. The assessment plans and annual reports were turned in earlier and the latter were of higher quality. Anecdotally, interactions with the departments were also smoother: Once the departments realized that we were trying to offer them a direct line of communication with the administration that could be collaborative instead of combative, they were far more inclined to participate.

It is worth noting that this endeavor was not undertaken with the usual precautions of a scientific study. While we kept everything but the instructions constant from one cycle to the next, the instructions themselves altered many things simultaneously. They referenced a popular series, they were humorous, they were written clearly and without jargon, and they stressed the importance of assessment for meeting the department's goals (rather than the administration's goals or for accreditation). Further research would need to be done to tease apart the relative

influences of each of these, but our intuition is that the Harry Potter references made them curious enough to start reading, the humor and clarity of writing made them finish reading, and the shift of purpose convinced them to follow through.

Ours is far from the first attempt at improving faculty engagement in assessment (e.g. Calegari, Sibley, & Turner, 2015; Haviland, 2009; Smith, 2005; Williams, 2013). Others have written extensively about the best ways to engender institutional change—see, for example, Calegari et al.’s discussion of Kotter’s (1996) model as compared to Lewin’s (1947) model—but one common finding is that increasing the desire for change on the part of the people involved is crucial. It is impossible to convince people if you cannot get them to listen, and this is fundamentally why we believe our approach was effective.

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