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# The Big Picture: A Practical Model for the Meaningful Development, Implementation, Tracking, and Utilization of Assessment in Your College Music Program

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**Paper Presentation by Dr. Kyle Gullings, Assistant Professor of Music, The University of Texas at Tyler  
The Big Picture: A Practical Model for the Meaningful Development, Implementation,  
Tracking, and Utilization of Assessment in Your College Music Program**

## **INTRODUCTION**

I've made a huge mistake. Sometime in late 2012, during my second year of employment, I was meeting with my Director to discuss "assessment". I had only become aware of the notion of "assessment" in higher education one semester prior, when I was asked to submit some test data for a course I had taught. At the end of our meeting, during which I got a brief overview of our department's overall assessment strategy, the following words exited my lips: "Assessment sounds fun." ... I've made a huge mistake.

Since that time, I have become the person primarily responsible for "all things assessment" in our department. I've reviewed, completely redesigned, and expanded our department's assessment efforts. I think we still have a long way to go, but in the process I've learned a lot, and I've come to believe that assessment, when carried out mindfully, can be a powerful tool for improving student learning. This morning, I hope to share some of the experiences and resources I've gained along the way, with the aim of inspiring and helping you to improve your own department's assessment schemes. Maybe by the end, you, too, will think "assessment sounds fun."

I'm going to organize my talk today around four stages of running an effective assessment program, and within each stage I'll highlight one or two particular challenges I've encountered and suggest some possible solutions. Those stages are: Development, Implementation, Tracking, and Utilization.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

The development stage is the most involved, so I'm going to cover two challenges here – one big, and one small. The big challenge is organizational: what will our graduates learn and achieve (the Student Learning Outcomes), and which courses cover each of those areas (the Curriculum Map)?

When I took over, our department had nine Student Learning Outcomes, three of which were no longer active, and a few others of which were rarely actually being assessed. I removed and combined some outcomes, and created an additional one – Sight Reading – in response to recommendations from our recent NASM accreditation process.

Next up was the Curriculum Map. I got a list of every course, ensemble, and applied lesson in our Catalog, and mapped each one to one or more of the Outcomes. Then I selected three courses per Outcome to assess as representative of "Basic", "Proficient", and "Advanced" levels of achievement for each Outcome. By the end, I had a good summary of what our students are taught, and how we could begin documenting that. More word later on how I cross-referenced this Curriculum Map – which courses cover which outcomes – with our Course Rotation Schedule.

With these two pieces in place, I was ready to tackle the small challenge of Development: creating individual course-based assessment instruments. I'm a strong believer in involving every instructor in your program in the assessment development process. So, as a particular course came up for assessment in a given semester, I would ask its instructor to develop his or her own course-specific assessment instrument with some guidance from me.

Because my colleagues are professional, responsible, and invested in their students' success, this generally resulted in an effective instrument. However, at UT Tyler and elsewhere, I have encountered a few patterns you should watch out for when designing assessments. Here are some approaches that sometimes pass for assessment, but in my view really don't help us improve student learning.

The first is “mere grading”, or using raw scores from entire exams as stand-ins for actually measuring learning. Have you ever had a student fail your final exam, but somehow still pass the class with a C, or even a B? Clearly one-time entire exams aren’t always the most refined measurement tool. Instead, I like to focus on one or two meaty questions or skills that can better answer the achievement question. This allows a finer level of detail, and separates a student’s final grade from whether or not they could truly demonstrate a particular set of knowledge or skill, which is what we’re trying to determine. (One could argue of course, especially if one is a proponent of competency-based grading, that these two points of data should really always line up. But I think that’s a topic for another paper.)

A second poor assessment practice I’ve seen is weak pre-test / post-test designs. The general plan is this: I’ll give students a pre-test in the first week of the semester, then give them the exact same questions as a post-test in the Final Exam. If they improve, I’ve taught them something! I understand the appeal of this approach. It requires very little in terms of assessment instrument design, and is already prepared as part of the course. Also, it provides some specific, objective, quantitative data on learning. Attention, this just in: post-test scores are up 38 points! Well, clearly students will learn *something* over those fifteen weeks. But that is answering the wrong question. It’s not, “Have they learned *anything*?”. It’s, “Have they achieved the level of content or skill mastery you’ve set out for them?” A better approach here would be to attach specific benchmarks to both the student-specific raw score improvements, and to the aggregated class performance on the post-test Final Exam. This way, we can tie our measures of success to not only how far they’ve come, but also where they’ve ended up in terms of achievement. Combine this improved pre-test / post-test measurement with the previously-mentioned specific selection of meaty questions (rather than the fuzzier full-exam approach), and you’ve got some rich data worth writing home about, or at least worth showing your accrediting agency.

I want to close this section on assessment development by discussing a different sort of challenge to creating individual course-based assessment instruments – namely, getting other people to do it for you! Or, to put it more professionally and correctly, to get buy-in from your colleagues. It’s not uncommon for instructors to view assessment as just another layer of administrative tedium being forced upon them from above. And I sympathize with that opinion, as I am very much concerned with not wasting time on meaningless tasks. Efficiency is key! (No, I’m not German. I just teach Music Theory.) I do find it strange that university professors, who have supposedly devoted their lives to exploring and pushing past the very boundaries of knowledge and expression in their sub-fields, and who are committed to citing their scholarly sources and defending their methods of critical analysis in print and behind a podium, can be at the same time quite reluctant to leverage evidence-based assessment methods to improving their teaching methods. But thankfully I’ve found such responses to be very much in the minority, at least in the small circle of colleagues I’ve spoken to about this topic.

In any case, you are going to need the support of the instructor to develop authentic, content-specific assessments in each of the courses being assessed. After all, assessment doesn’t *improve* student learning; it merely measures it. The instructors are the ones who are going to have to make some specific changes in how they teach or assess the course next year, in thoughtful response to the information gleaned from this year’s assessment. And if the instructor doesn’t buy into the idea that assessment is worthwhile, it won’t be. It’s a self-fulfilling pessimism. Without actual program improvement in the form of different teaching and/or assessment methods, all the work you’ve put into the assessment plan, not to mention my entire talk today, really is just busywork.

I don’t have a long list of suggestions for building support among hostile, eye-rolling colleagues, mainly because I’ve rarely encountered that myself. But there are some in my department a little less gung-ho than I am about the magic potential of assessment. So here’s what I’ve done to help win them over. First, I get to know more about the course they’re teaching and how they’ve approached it, either by speaking to them or reviewing the syllabus. From there, I can make it easier on them by giving concrete suggestions for designing the

assessment instrument. But, in the interest of engendering a collegial atmosphere around assessment, and of not doing all the work myself, I prefer to show them some of my own assessment instruments and how I've used them, and have them take the lead in building their own. If all else fails, buy them a coffee.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

Now that you've got your assessment plan all developed from top-level organization to course-specific instruments, it's time to implement it. The topic of implementation has less to do with the overall design or specific instrument you're using, than with how you view the role of assessment in your classroom. To that end, I'd like to say a word about the student perspective. Of course the students don't always need to know every detail of what goes on in the department. But I've found that talking to my students, especially my new freshmen, about assessment really engages them in the class and earns the trust of many of them. What says "I care about your learning" better than taking a few minutes to explain what assessment is, and why you're using it to track your own performance on the level of the entire class and from year to year?

It sounds hokey, but my students really do care that I care about their learning, and I think it makes a difference to show them how that specifically impacts my teaching, not just this year, but in coming semesters. So, in terms of actually implementing your assessment, I recommend engaging your students directly and enthusiastically about the specific instruments you're using. The more they hear and know about your efforts and achievements in improving the efficacy of your instruction, the better.

## **TRACKING**

A few weeks before the start of the Fall 2014 semester, after I had finished revising my department's assessment plan, including a new set of SLO's and updated Curriculum Map, I was pretty proud of what I had built. I finally got my head around how all these pieces fit together. Then my Director asked me a very simple question: "Kyle, what are we assessing next semester?" I fumbled back and forth a few times between my new Curriculum Map and the department's Course Rotation Calendar and said I'd get back to him.

Like many institutions, we track our assessment plan using a particular piece of specially designed software. That's where our Curriculum Map lives and is edited. If you'll look on your handout – the messy side – you'll see our current Curriculum Map. This is actually the cleaned-up version we use, after I combined approximately 234 separate applied and ensemble course numbers into 14 course categories. Before this revision in 2013, the print-out was literally unreadable. After staring at this document and various corners of our tracking software for long enough, I finally realized the problem: There was no single page that showed all the learning outcomes, all the courses, how they are tied together, *and* when those courses are taught and assessed. (Maybe your own tracking software is more user-friendly.)

Essentially, I needed to cross-reference this Curriculum Map with our Course Rotation Schedule, to create a new Assessment Rotation Calendar. The other side of your handout gives a portion of the final product I use today to solve that problem. As you can see by the filled-in circles in the "Semester Taught" columns, I targeted a small number of courses to actually assess each semester, to keep my assessment workload manageable. This resource has helped me immensely both in terms of summarizing all the program-level details of our assessment plan in one place, and in visualizing and describing these plans to other parties. I highly recommend that you develop a similar resource of your own, or that you email me and steal mine for your own use.

## **UTILIZATION**

The fourth and final stage of running an effective assessment program, and in my view the most important, is Utilization. After you've designed your overall plan and your semester's course-specific assessments, and the various instructors have carried out their respective assessments for the semester and reported their data back to you, and you've recorded that data in its proper place, it's time to actually *do something with that data to try and improve student learning*.

This comes in two stages: The Use of Results, and the Implementation Feedback. The Use of Results should be completed fairly soon after the semester is over, while the semester is still clearly in mind and proper reflection can take place. In this portion, the instructor is called on to reflect on what he or she learned in the process of this specific assessment, how effective the instrument turned out to be, how well the students met the expectations set up for them, and, crucially, what changes to the instruction methods and/or the assessment instrument itself should be instituted the next time this course is taught to improve the teaching and assessing process. (Of course, this projection in time implies that this year's instructors are reviewing and responding to prior years' Use of Results statements!)

Implementation Feedback is the final step in the assessment life cycle. Assessment geeks call this step "closing the loop." Here's where the following year's instructor can respond to the prior Use of Results statement, and gauge what changes were actually put in place, and how that impacted student learning, as hopefully evidenced through the next round of assessment. Once this is complete, all that remains is to redesign that course's assessment instrument, and the rest of the assessment scheme if needed, to more accurately capture the data you're seeking.

There are two challenges in this Utilization phase. The first is admitting, "I've made a huge mistake" – or hopefully just, "I see some room for improvement" – and actually making a change in how you teach the course next time. This takes time, planning, and effort, and doubly so if you're convincing some other instructor to do the same. The second challenge is, as the person in charge of your department's assessment efforts, to avoid the temptation of looking at your mountain of data and Use of Results statements, and calling those products "assessment." After all that work, it's easy to fool yourself into thinking that checking these boxes somehow adds up to program improvement. It doesn't. The improvement only starts the next time the course is taught, and that instructor, whether it's the same or a different one from last year, engages with the existing assessment data and uses it to improve his or her instruction.

Let me highlight a few aspects of the assessment program I've overseen in the University of Texas at Tyler Music Department in the past two years, which has changed significantly, and I think for the better. As I've mentioned already, our overall assessment plan received a near-complete makeover, with revised and newly-created Student Learning Outcomes, an entirely new Curriculum Map, and a first-ever Assessment Rotation Calendar. These documents have aided greatly in the organization, planning, and record-keeping of the overall assessment plan for our department. They are updated regularly, leading to more efficient and consistent assessment planning, data collection and reporting, and use of results.

One recent lower-division theory course came back with a very narrowly-missed criterion for success: one student needed 3% more on the final exam to meet the benchmark percentage of planned student achievement. Still, because specific questions were embedded into this exam, specific solutions could be proposed to improve instruction. Combining these data with insights from an upper-division course assessed that same semester, the Use of Results for this course reads, in part: "Faculty member plans to spend less time on smaller forms in Fall 2015, and more time on large-scale forms. Faculty also planned to include one or two in-class quizzes that reinforce the drawing of large-scale formal diagrams, in preparation for this repeat assessment." These are very specific, helpful notes for the next time that course is taught in the future.

In a recent pedagogy and literature course, our criterion for success was set at 85% of students achieving a particular level of performance, while only 70% of students met that level. The Use of Results explained, citing the biggest reason was "because they did not follow the required format for the lesson plan. Many left out the TEKS, objective, and some did not list the steps to their lesson." This statement also identified a pattern of students not paying attention to all the written requirements in submitted work – sound familiar? – and closed with a call to make these requirements more specific and clear the next time the course is taught in Fall 2017.

Of course, I haven't yet pointed out a number of recent positive results in which students did meet the criteria for success. But "Students met expectations, no changes for next year" doesn't make for the most helpful illustration of the merits of assessment.

As I also hinted at earlier, probably the most significant change in this area is something that I believe few if any other institutions are currently assessing on a program level: the ability for musicians to play unfamiliar music correctly on the first try. This Sight Reading Outcome is a direct result of our NASM accreditation bid. While it is notoriously difficult to assess, we've had a plan in place starting Fall 2014, which is being revised by our applied faculty for Fall 2016. We hope to capture useful data in this area, and use it to improve our instruction and share our results with other institutions in the future. Our most recent Use of Results for Sight Reading reads as follows:

"Faculty perceived a disconnect in this first attempt at sight reading assessment. The examples prepared, combined with the prescribed method of administering the test were likely too difficult. A meeting was planned with the faculty the week before the Fall 2015 semester begins to redesign our assessment. Faculty are encouraged to devise their own, instrument-specific sight reading materials, but the method of administering the assessment will be uniform for all. Faculty will also be encouraged to include sight reading as part of weekly lessons. Despite the room for improvement to the assessment materials themselves, the results of this assessment pointed to a distinct need to improve students' sight reading."

Yikes! In short, our first attempt at assessing sight reading across the department was a disaster. Only 3 of 19 students met the Criteria for Success we established! In our wrap-up meeting, the faculty discussed how this was mostly attributable to the specific sight reading excerpt chosen (I wrote it – oops!), the way the instructions were given, and inconsistencies in the way it was applied among instructors. Plans are underway to improve this assessment instrument for Fall 2016. But more importantly, despite an imperfect measurement tool that only took a few minutes per student once per year, this process definitely opened some applied faculty members' eyes to a real need for their students to improve their sight reading abilities. While we don't have a perfect solution yet, we've identified a real area that needs work.

As this last example demonstrates, this business of assessment can be messy, and a successful assessment does not always involve students meeting the criteria for success. It's very important that your colleagues understand and separate the difference between an authentic assessment such as this and a job performance evaluation. We as the faculty are the ones designing and carrying out this work.

All the Use of Results statements I've just gone over, and their respective Implementation Feedback responses completed or yet to be written, are part of that all-important "closing the loop" section. I know I've lavished a lot of podium time on this one point, but that's only because it's so important to student learning. Yes, I know assessment is crucial for accreditation reviews. It may also come in handy when trying to convince your administration or your students' parents or the public at large or potential donors or any other stakeholders that your music program is actually imparting the knowledge and skills it purports to impart. I don't know; I'm not an administrator. But I do know that assessment can make your teaching better. I think that's what possessed me almost four years ago to utter the words "Assessment sounds fun" to my boss. And that's what keeps me devoted to using assessment as a tool for improving my instruction.

I hope this talk has helped you to improve the design, implementation, tracking, and utilization of your own department's assessment schemes. But more importantly, I hope it's convinced you that assessment is worth doing, and that I've in some way inspired you to bring this spirit of constant and efficient evaluation and improvement of teaching back to your own institutions, to foster an environment where measurable progress is valued. I'd be happy to take any questions. Thank you.