

**The Anti-Assessment Manifesto: Why We Must Resist**  
by  
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**Abstract**

For years now, administrators at many colleges have been asking faculty to document how they assess their teaching methods and their students' learning. At my college, faculty are required to design an assessment project for each semester and report the objectives and results of that project on a standardized form to the Director of Assessment. The majority of us begrudgingly complete this task, but it is not assessment that we oppose. It is the edict requiring us to document it officially that irritates even the most tractable among us.

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**The Internal Requirement**

One reason faculty are bothered by this is that we do not need to be told to assess. As professional educators, we are bound to assess. The need to know how we are doing is part of the fiber of being a teacher. We constantly assess our teaching against our students' successes and failures. Before the mandate for documentation, we assessed ourselves and our students because we love our content, and how well we convey that content to our students deeply concerns us. Assessment, for a teacher, is an internal requirement.

The origin of this internal requirement is what the Greeks called "eros." Socrates speaks of this in the *Symposium*. Eros can be defined as passion for work, any work -- whether it's teaching calculus, playing the saxophone, or plumbing a house. It depends on the individual. Eros is the reason I fill with unabated joy when doing the work that I love. It is what causes time to fly while engaged, and what also causes time to stop when forced to do work that is, as Audre Lorde put it, "a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread" (55). Yes, we all must do things we'd rather not do, but we do them because they are necessary. The problem emerges when what we don't want to do is unnecessary.

Eros is why we assess our teaching on some level at every moment of our professional day, and why we often cannot stop assessing at the "end" of our day. Teachers will do what they must to process their successes and failures. If there is a need to write it down, we will, but often the most productive plan of action emerges through a conversation with a colleague or mentor who shares your passion for the content and its pedagogy. Faculty do not understand what there is to gain by submitting a report to an assessment official who does not have the same interests. Proponents of documentation often respond by saying, "If faculty are constantly assessing their teaching and their students, it should be easy to document it." Indeed, they are right. It is easy, but this does not answer the question of why it needs to be documented. We complete our assessment projects and submit the requisite paperwork, but the eros in us can't help but wonder whether the time it took us to do the report was well spent.

**The Pursuit of Excellence**

When we achieve eros, we settle for nothing short of excellence. We continually push ourselves to be better at what we do, and this is why we are concerned with how we use our time. In our pursuit of excellence, we know that our time is best spent engaged in the work that we love. We demand from others, what we demand of ourselves. This means that we expect other people to put forth their best efforts because this is what we put forth. Incompetence, carelessness, ineptitude will not go unchecked. We know it exists; we're not crazy. However, we expect better and will almost always ask for it. Because we care so much for how we use our time, we are forced to assess every minute and every aspect of our lives. So, when asked to do something that is redundant and unnecessary, we ask why. Our irritation is left to fester because no one satisfactorily answers this question. Instead, faculty often get a sermon about why assessment is important. We already know it's important; as I said, we are bound to do it. So now, even the most obedient among us feels resistant because it appears that the request for documentation is really about a centralized power misunderstanding our commitment as professional teachers.

**The Gap**

The most useful assessment comes from an evaluator with expertise in the content area. Assessment officials are aware of this fact. They tell us to design projects that are meaningful to us and to our disciplines. In response, the projects faculty design are varied and complicated, and this makes the assessment official's work difficult. There's a gap between our understanding of what we are doing with an assessment project, and the assessment official's understanding of what we are doing.

The original motive, to create assessment projects that are meaningful, gets lost in attempts to make our projects more uniform or more adaptable to compilation and reporting. Then, instead of carrying-out meaningful projects, some faculty respond by simplifying their assessment, such as administering pretests and post-tests that better enable the assessment official to comply with bureaucratic requirements, but offer faculty little substantive information to help improve teaching.

Eros closes the gap. It creates an indispensable kind of intimacy with another person who has passion for the same work. This intimacy is neither familial nor romantic. It is intimacy based upon each individual's deep relationship with that work. It is an intimacy grown out of a common interest, an intimacy of the mind which Socrates knew to be both longer lasting and more satisfying than the corporeal. This intimacy exists between colleagues and this is why I go to my colleagues to discuss issues addressing our teaching, our content, and our students' learning.

My heart goes out to Directors of Assessment because they're caught in the crossfire. It's an impossible job, and this is likely the reason my college has seen five Directors of Assessment in the last eight years. Faculty have been told that they must complete an assessment report to "demonstrate that learning is taking place," that it is occurring in the classroom. But if the Director of Assessment has no background or interest in, for instance, the field of Composition/Rhetoric, do my reports demonstrate to him or to her that learning is occurring? Even if these reports do demonstrate to these officials that learning is taking place, why must it be documented? What is it that we are ultimately trying to accomplish through documentation? The answer to this question is becoming increasingly clear.

Requiring documentation of assessment is a failed attempt to hold educators "accountable." We have manufactured a method to demonstrate our "worth" because what we do doesn't lend itself easily to any perfect quantitative measure. There are no financial statements that give evidence of a teacher's solvency in the classroom. Teachers can't be measured by the number of sales we've closed, or the amount of revenue we've generated. Education is a muddy business that makes some economically powerful people uncomfortable. "What are we paying for?" they ask. The official documentation of assessment is an attempt to answer that question in a profit-oriented capitalist culture that knows no other way to measure success than by counting it.

Teachers have chosen a path that promises neither material reward nor prestige in the United States. This is the reason we are often asked why we chose to teach. We teach because our profession fulfills us in ways that are often hard to measure or articulate, in ways that can't be boiled down to that which can be counted. A colleague once likened this question to being asked why you fell in love with your spouse. You can come up with practical things -- he does housework, she's a great parent -- but there is something deeper than this that defies a rationale. In the same vein, asking me to give evidence that I am assessing my teaching and my students' learning is akin to having an in-law ask me what my wife's middle name is or what her birth date is. What's the point? Is this a test? Do you not think I love your daughter? Do you not think I love teaching?

So, I am resistant to the formal documentation of assessment. I admit, though, that my resistance is passive. I have done what has been asked of me. I have submitted an assessment report for every semester I have taught at my college, and I have copies neatly filed away in chronological order. It is easy. And I will continue to do what is asked of me because fighting it is not worth jeopardizing a job in which I get to do what I love doing. But when I'm asked to document assessment, excuse me, but I feel mildly violated. There is an element of distrust, of suspicion and doubt, in asking for documentation. The American perspective, based on capitalism, is that only within a system fostering competition will individuals strive to improve. "Teachers?" the argument goes, "they work in a non-profit setting. What possible incentive do teachers have to improve?" In response we've created a system that appears to hold teachers "accountable,"

as if I weren't accountable to the students I meet everyday, not to mention to myself and to the eros that drives me.

**Work Cited**

Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *Sister Outsider*. NY: The Crossing Press, 1984. 53-59.