

ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING

A COMMON SENSE GUIDE

Linda Suskie

Anker Publishing Company, Inc.
Bolton, Massachusetts
2004

(331 pages)

Wedged between the table of contents and the preface, the foreword is a curious literary tradition. Neither introduction nor summary, review nor publicity blurb, perhaps the foreword is best seen as a sort of toast. Like a good toast, a good foreword should be personal, forward looking, and brief.

Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide deserves such a toast, for it contains much to celebrate. It is a notable contribution to the growing literature of academic assessment – one which will have a positive influence on assessment practices and publications for years to come.

In Assessing Student Learning, Linda Suskie sets a high standard for practicality, readability, breadth, and scholarship. It is, first and foremost, a practical, easy-to-read, what-to-do and how-to-do-it guide, providing readers with a wide range of good options and sage advice. In chapters that are both brief and rich with examples and illustrations, Ms. Suskie responds to the full range of issues faculty and administrators face when planning and implementing assessment. Drawing on extensive professional experience as an assessment specialist and as a teacher, she illuminates technical questions other assessment books rarely touch, such as writing items and calculating sample size. At the same time, she educates readers in the why-to-do-its of learning assessment, helping us weigh opportunity costs and make difficult choices. In short, this book aims to make us not simply more informed and skilled technicians, but also wiser, more independent practitioners.

Thanks to Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997) and the Carnegie Foundation, we possess “a powerful conceptual framework to guide evaluation” (p. 25) of applied scholarship. This framework evaluates scholarly work on clarity of goals, adequacy of preparation, appropriateness of methods, significance of results, effectiveness of presentation, and reflective critique. Linda Suskie’s goals for Assessing Student Learning are quite clear, her preparation for the task impeccable, her methods well chosen, results of her synthesis of research and practice significant, and presentation effective. She demonstrates reflective critique, having learned from her own mistakes and those of others. Consequently, I consider Assessing Student Learning a mature work by an accomplished scholar – an excellent example of the scholarship of assessment.

Lastly, as the subtitle announces, this is also a commonsensical book for busy, hard-working professionals. In this case, as Emerson noted, “Common sense is genius dressed in its working clothes.”

May this worthy book find its way to all the right readers – those who will use and benefit from it – and may it and its author prosper through many future editions.

(Foreword)

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