

The CTL Assessing CTL: A Message from the Editor-in-Chief

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Whenever I think about assessment in higher education, two quotes come to mind. The first is sociologist William Bruce Cameron's (1963) remark that "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts" (p. 13). At the same time, I also tend to think of the concluding lines of W. S. Merwin's (2005) poem "Berryman." In this piece, a young poet is speaking with his mentor and comes to ask him "how can you ever be sure/that what you write is really/any good at all," and the elder poet responds:

... you can't

you can't you can never be sure
you die without knowing
whether anything you wrote was any good
if you have to be sure don't write

Granted, neither of these responses would cut the mustard as summative reports a Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) might relay to its school's chief administrators. However, the quotes persist for me as reminders that the value of educational development is often difficult to measure, even at times beyond measure. The desire "to be sure," however, remains, and the need to make changes in the wake (and at times in the midst) of what we learn about our impact (or lack thereof) is imperative to our continual improvement as well as our institutional and social relevance.

This issue of *JCTL* features CTL workers who view assessment (of what can and cannot be counted) as integral to a CTL's ever-evolving effectiveness. Angela R. Linse and Larkin N. Hood lead us off with a description of the ways they have used strategic plans to shape the day-to-day activities of their center's faculty developers. They argue that "Centers that report information directly connected to their purpose and future aims will be in a better position to articulate their value to constituents and institutional leaders" (p. 30, this volume). In the following article, Brenda M. Stoesz shares ways

Google Analytics can be employed to gauge the effectiveness of a CTL's webpages; data derived through this assessment support evidence-based decisions in regard to the information that centers offer to their constituents. Chad Hershock and his colleagues then describe ways a collection of "thin-slices"—targeted pre/post-assessment instruments, the data they render, and interventions that follow—form a broader process of formative assessments not only within but also across workshops. The article indicates such a method fosters "an inclusive, collaborative culture of formative assessment among educational developers" (p. 80, this volume). In the following contribution, Jessica Raffoul and her collaborators provide us with a framework for narrative reports on CTL programming, arguing that narrative accounts might best convey the value of our work, convey not only what is performed but also what is "lived and felt" (Al-Mahmood et al, 2020, p.82). In this issue's concluding article, Patrick A. Lach, Lisa M. Russell, and Robin K. Morgan report on their efforts to assess the impact of faculty "power users" who transport what they have learned in formal CTL programs to informal interactions with faculty peers. The authors' study deepens our understanding of the roles power users play in educational development and ways CTLs might view their role in filtering the informal learning these faculty provide.

While there are still multiple aspects of a CTL's operation that can be and should be counted, one thing all of the articles in this issue have in common is that drive to gauge the effectiveness of their center's practices, to explore possible revisions to programming in light of assessment, and to convey insights derived from those assessments to those who have the power to sustain innovation and effect change. At this point, we are well beyond just counting the number of attendees at a brown bag, and we are now thinking more and more deeply about how to really tell (ourselves and others) if any of our programming is "really/any good." While Merwin's elder poet opens up a space for us to value still what we can not ever know for sure, this issue of *JCTL* moves in places this side of the ineffable, through methods we deploy to determine value among things counted and uncountable, "lived and felt," and toward creative ways to respond to what we find.

References

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