

Reflection on Assessment 2013: How to Improve Instruction

The Assessment and Evaluation in Early Childhood Services class was originally designed by Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak. When Dr. KPF was on sabbatical, I was provided the opportunity to teach the class. In preparation, I updated the content and made a number of adjustments to the assignments to allow for added flexibility for students. In the past, students were provided with a family/placement but when I was teaching it, we would allow students to choose families/placements (and we would provide options if students preferred). I also built in the opportunity for students to modify or alter assignments (with my approval) to best meet their learning needs. While this was with the best of intentions, in retrospect, providing that level of flexibility may have backfired. For students that are embarking on a journey into unexplored territory, having an abundance of choice may have caused them to both take advantage of the flexibility and lack a clear sense of direction for the course. Overall, I kept the 'spirit' or main objective of the class the same: students would be able to identify the appropriate uses of norm-referenced assessments; standardized assessments; curriculum-based and curriculum-referenced assessments; curriculum-based measurements; screening measures; family assessments; and general program/environmental evaluations.

Additionally, students would demonstrate competence in administering, scoring, and interpreting a portion of a norm-referenced assessment (this was a departure from past classes- I had students select one domain instead of using the entire tool); a curriculum-based assessment; and a family-based assessment. Students would demonstrate these competencies through a thorough written narrative that would be shared with family members and instructors (in addition to relevant scoring sheets, generated graphs, etc.). Mainly, the idea was students would be introduced to the components of eligibility evaluation, but would focus their competency development on planning for instruction, intervention, or the development of IEPs/IFSPs. Students also were expected to become critical consumers and users of early childhood assessments. This course objective was targeted through an assignment in which students were required to learn about a selected assessment's research base (validity, reliability etc.); utility; usability; etc., and to share the pros and cons of the assessment in a presentation format of their choice. Finally, students were expected to demonstrate competencies in working with families both through the administration of the family assessment; collaboration with a family; assessment sharing results in a role-playing scenario; and diversity/case-based problem scenarios provided on the final exam. The class was held face to face on most evenings, although there was a great deal of synchronous technology integrated into the course. Tom, my co-instructor, was based in Iowa and so we had to connect him to our classroom through various technologies. Unfortunately, many times the technologies malfunctioned and thus there were occasions we phoned him in through FreeConferenceCall or had him connect with us via Skype. Students were told that they were expected to participate face to face, but some students continued to connect through the technology which at times caused additional challenges (including unhappy students when the technology was not working well).

While the course went relatively well in the grand scheme of things, I find that there are a number of ways in which the class can be improved next semester. Based on class feedback, it has become clear that about half of the students had difficulty applying class content on how to use assessment administration manuals and applying it to specific tools. While Tom (my co-instructor) and I did bring into class and share with students a number of assessment tools of different varieties (e.g., curriculum-based assessments and measurements, screening tools, normed-referenced assessments, family assessments, etc.), we left the selection of tools up to students. As such, there was little class time spent walking students through how to use a specific assessment tool (e.g., how to use and score the BDI, for example). Instead, Tom and I met with students groups to scaffold their understanding of how to use the tools and provided individualized supports as opposed to class-wide instruction on each tool. We did have one class in which we spent our time together working on scoring the assessments the groups had selected, however the only example we had presented for students to refer back to before and after class was scoring a small section of the BDI. In retrospect, the student feedback on our approach (which, consequently, has been historically used in our EI/ECSE program) makes sense- with little if any background in assessment at all, students lacked the confidence to understand assessment manual instructions. It mattered little that we spent considerable class time talking about it in general, it remained quite challenging for students to apply what they were learning to the tasks they were engaged in.

Obtaining appropriate assessments that met each of the assignment requirements was equally difficult for students. While we had some tools available for use, the assessments students wanted to use were either not in our collection or we had only portions of those assessments (e.g., manuals without scoring sheets, or vice versa). Further, the two most commonly used norm-referenced assessments in Ohio- the Bayley Scales of Infant Development and Battelle Developmental Inventory II- were available at the Instructional Resource center as promised, BUT students were initially being asked to pay for copies of the scoring protocols by the staff. While we were able to clear that difficulty up for our students, it then turned out that norm-referenced kits in some cases did not have all the needed materials either. As such, Tom and I determined we would need to obtain additional assessments for the class as the experience was very draining on our students. To that end, Tom spent \$150 to send me overnight a number of full assessment kits from his colleague's own collection. This solved the issue immediately, but the previous challenges certainly affected the quality of student learning.

On a more positive note, although student feedback demonstrated at least one student that did not enjoy the inquiry-based nature of some of our classes, the vast majority of students did benefit from this approach. While student scores and comments reflect this, more importantly, student responses to the final exam Tom and I created, as well as students' impressive performance during professional-family role-playing, evidenced students' strong emerging skills in working with and supporting families in understanding assessment information and using it to plan instruction and intervention. Further, the narrative summaries students wrote to synthesize the results of a norm-referenced, curriculum-based, and family assessment were similarly generally articulated quite well. Although there were a handful of students that did not complete protocols correctly, the vast majority did. Those students that did have difficulties were provided with the opportunity to revise their work, and as such, were able to improve their grade dramatically. Student critiques of curriculum-based assessments were overall exceptionally well done. In sum, although the particular challenges of the semester likely had an impact on some students' understanding, competence, and confidence in working with assessment manuals, by and large students evidenced a number of important competencies through the products they developed and the discussions they engaged in.

Going forward, the class must be reorganized in several ways. One, it would benefit students for there to be one norm-referenced assessment tool that will be required to complete- and students should be provided with ample class time to walk through the administration manual together. Since the BDI-2 is the most commonly used tool in Ohio, this would be the ideal choice. Two, we must have 2-3 complete curriculum-based assessments available that are similarly commonly used. Three, synchronous technologies should not be used unless Kent State is able to provide us with a trouble-free platform. Four, assignments should be due earlier the semester and staggered; that is, perhaps groups of students alternate which projects are due at which times (to free up assessments) and to ensure students do not become overwhelmed towards the end of the semester. Five, it would be useful for students if we build in a way to utilize a screening tool and a curriculum-based measurement as well. Particularly in regard to the CBM, this is critical because students need to have a stronger focus on data-driven decision making and performance monitoring in this class. To achieve this without adding to the workload, we must find a creative way to combine the use of these assessments across the semester in a way that is logical to students and follows a natural step progression to the extent possible.