

HALE Comprehensive Exam: Part One

PhDSS17 – 10

There has been considerable attention across postsecondary education in recent decades to the improvement of teaching and learning. Write an essay that (1) describes two key reforms for the improvement of teaching in U.S. higher education and (2) the specific ways such reforms suggest teaching and learning in the U.S. be improved and why? (3) Then choose one sector of higher education (e.g., community colleges, for-profit colleges and universities, minority-serving institutions, research universities, liberal arts colleges, comprehensive universities, etc.) and explain the key challenges each of these reform efforts will face in it?

### **Introduction**

In U.S. higher education, growing doubt over the quality of education, decreasing student engagement in classes, growing diversity of students, and employee dissatisfaction with recent graduates have compelled educational leaders and educators towards reform efforts to improve teaching and learning (Bok, 2013). This essay will explore some these reform efforts and their implications. In this essay, I maintain that despite improvements to teaching and learning from assessment and culturally responsive, these reforms face challenges to implementation in research universities that stem from characteristics of this sector. To begin, I will describe the two aforementioned key reforms of for the improvement of teaching in U.S. higher education. Next, I will elaborate on the specific ways these reforms suggest teaching and learning in the U.S. be improved and their rationales. Finally, I will discuss the key challenges that these reform efforts will face in research universities in particular.

### **Key Reforms for the Improvement of Teaching**

Recognizing the need for improved teaching, a number of reform efforts have been introduced in U.S. higher education. In this section, I discuss two of these reforms: 1) assessment, and 2) culturally responsive pedagogy. For each reform, I begin with a descriptive overview consisting of a definition, brief history, and purposes of each, followed by a discussion of the specific ways each reform suggests teaching and learning in the U.S. be improved and why.

### **Assessment Overview**

Assessment is a multi-faceted process and refers to the “systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 4). Assessment has multiple uses and purposes: a major one is that it is a tool to be utilized by educators in order to improve teaching so that teaching can best contribute to student growth, development, and learning (Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Palomba & Banta, 1999). As outlined by Lattuca and Stark (2009), assessment can help to “to guide student progress,” “to improve course planning, program planning, and teaching,” and “to help students understand the purpose of their educational activities” (p. 235). Thus, assessment is not just the gathering of data from students, but also the examination of the data and taking action based on assessment results in order to improve educational programs (Marchese, 1997). Assessment allows educators to explore whether their courses and curricula make sense to students and make adjustments as deemed needed (Palomba & Banta, 1999). As Bok (2013) asserts, “any serious attempt to improve the quality of teaching...must be accompanied by rigorous efforts to assess the results to determine whether progress has occurred” ( p. 198).

A number of authors distinguish between two major categories of assessment. These categories are usually referred to as formative and summative assessment (Banta & Blaich, 2010; Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Palomba & Banta, 1999). Formative assessment is conducted during a program or class in order to gather feedback which can help to improve it, and is initiated by faculty who desire to have a better understanding about what and how students within their courses and programs are learning (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Informal formative assessment enhances instructors’ ability to get direct feedback and make timely teaching adjustments (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Furthermore, the perspective that students can learn from assessment

has resulted in increased formative assessment focused on individual students (Palomba & Banta, 1999). On the other hand, summative assessment is conducted at the conclusion to help form future iterations of a program (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Because formative assessment is more closely linked to the purpose of improved teaching than summative assessment, my subsequent discussion of assessment will focus on formative assessment.

Since first acknowledged as a need by educators as well as the public in the mid-1980s, reform efforts to adopt assessment tools and strategies have been far-reaching (Palomba & Banta, 1999). As demonstrated in *Campus Trends* data in 1995, 94 percent of institutions were engaged in assessment activities, while 90 percent had reported increasing their assessment activities compared to five years prior” (El-Khawas, 1995). Because of increasing nationwide attention on assessment, increasing numbers of faculty have been called upon to engage in assessment (Palomba & Banta, 1999). At the institutional level, “genuine commitment to assessment is a clear public statement of its desire to offer quality programs and improve student learning and development” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 18). Additionally, assessment at its most effective is linked to an institution’s mission and goals (Palomba & Banta, 1999).

### **Ways Assessment Suggests Teaching and Learning Be Improved And Why**

By seeking input from students, assessment “puts students at the center of higher education” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 18). This is not to say that students are the only consideration for educations when it comes to teaching, but rather that considerations of the learner are important and should not be ignored (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). With a better understanding of how students are making sense of their academic environments as evidenced by assessments, both teaching and learning can be improved. In this section, I will discuss how well-chosen assessment methods give faculty valuable insight to improve their teaching so that

their teaching better serves the purpose of student learning, as well as give students the opportunity to reflect on and improve their own learning.

Strategically-chosen assessment methods can produce information that can lead to improvement of teaching (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 14). In order to best utilize assessment, faculty need to establish selection criteria and learn about different assessment methods (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Assessment methods can include surveys, interview, and discussions to learn how students fared with varied goals in classes. Assessments can also be quantitative or qualitative in nature (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Assessments can gather a range of different types of information that instructors believe is important to evaluating educational outcomes, or may simply ask for students' goals and expectations (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Better understanding students through well-chosen assessments can aid in teaching because assessment results “can better help instructors connect classroom principles and theories to student concerns and interests as well as enhance students' understanding of the field” (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 233).

Yet, assessment does not only need to be beneficial to educators in making teaching decisions, but is beneficial to student learning as well. In fact, “educators increasingly believe that assessment itself should contribute to learning” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 13). Since learning is enhanced by active doing, it is advisable to design assessment strategies which actively engage students. Faculty can ask themselves regarding their assessments: “Will it, by itself, enhance student learning? Will it provide students with opportunities with self-evaluation” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 13). Learning is improved because the more a student is engaged in an academic task, the better the quality of student learning (Pace, 1998).

Course-embedded formative assessment is one such tool through which teaching and learning can be improved (Shulman, 2007). Course-embedded assessment addresses the “what”

questions of teaching and learning, and can provide instructors with information related to students' course-related knowledge and skills, learning attitudes, and reaction to instruction. Based on this information, instructors can determine specific areas to improve their teaching. Through student participation, students' learning benefits as they reflect on their own learning and strengthen self-confidence through realizing that instructors care about their success (Lattuca & Stark, 2009).

One of the most widely-used course-embedded assessment techniques used by faculty members is the "one-minute paper" (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). In this assessment technique, instructors have students write on index cards in response to questions such as the important thing learned during class during that session. Through examining responses, instructors can gauge what students have learned and if outcomes have been met (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). In a study with undergraduate students, Light (1990) concluded that students appreciate these types of class assessments and that they have positive effects on their attitude toward a course as well as their actual learning.

Some who oppose the use of assessment argue that faculty already engage in evaluating their students through grading papers and examinations (Bok, 2013). However, grading by itself has limitations in giving insight to potential areas of improvement for teaching and learning. Grade averages only tell educational leaders how individual students compare with others, rather than what they have learned. Furthermore, some professors do not gain insight to improve their teaching through the grading process if they leave grading tasks to graduate teaching assistants (Bok, 2013). As a student-centered practice, assessment enhances teaching and learning in ways grading cannot, such as increasing motivation (Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Tagg, 2003).

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Overview**

Culturally responsive pedagogy as an approach to improve teaching and enhance student learning has been a part of educational discourse since being introduced in the mid-1990s (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally responsive pedagogy holds that instructors need to understand the cultural orientations of diverse students in order to foster equitable educational experiences and outcomes (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). This pedagogical approach respects and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful resources for creating and fostering optimal learning environments (Klump & McNeir, 2005).

Culturally responsive pedagogy consists of three teacher-student dimensions: social competence, academic success, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Social competence refers to teachers helping students developing positive cultural identities. Academic success maintains that teachers promote high expectations for their students, though not to the detriment of losing a cultural identity. Finally, critical consciousness can be seen through students' ability to understand and critique social issues and inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The purpose of culturally responsive pedagogy is to “encourage students to carefully examine, challenge, and reconstruct knowledge by asking questions about what they believe they know and what they are taught” (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 209). This inquiry leads students to an understanding of why the “views of their instructors, peers, and authors do or do not fit with their personal understandings” (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 209). Culturally responsive teachers call for active learning as well as ask students to explore social and political facets of their social worlds (Lattuca & Stark, 2009).

**Ways Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Suggest Teaching and Learning Be Improved and Why**

In order to ensure all students have the opportunity to learn, culturally responsive pedagogy “asks instructors to create classroom environments in which students feel that they matter” (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 209). Instructors acknowledge students’ prior learning so that students understand that their experiences and beliefs are an important part of the learning process (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). In this section, I highlight how culturally responsive pedagogy suggests teaching and learning be improved through faculty adoption of certain pedagogical methods and curricular choices for the purpose of attending to learner needs and better serving diverse student populations.

Students of minoritized identities often experience classrooms in which they are stereotyped and feel disengaged (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015). As Wertsch (2002) asserts, instructors need to understand how cultural norms and mores can hinder learning. For students of minoritized backgrounds, “official” knowledge can be contradictory and exclusionary, having the effect of creating a schism between knowledge students encounter in schooling and within their home communities (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Racial stereotyping in the classroom can negatively impact engagement in learning activities and academic performance (Museus, 2008). Indeed, pressures from stereotypes can result in anxiety, which can then lead to lower academic performance (Steele, 1997).

In response to such negative learning experiences, culturally responsive pedagogy requires the instructor seek “insight into the students’ world and into the use of teaching strategies that access and engage information about and from students. This...helps to ensure cultural relevance” (Hamdan, 2014, p. 208). Teaching is improved with culturally responsive pedagogy through faculty prioritizing students’ perspective and use of pedagogical techniques appropriate to students’ beliefs, values, and needs (Hamdan, 2014).



For minoritized students, teaching strategies can incorporate practical activities that help the students to better understand “how the values, beliefs, and practices of their families and home communities intersect or even oppose the values, beliefs, and practices they encounter in dominant society” (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 209). Faculty can also use low-risk learning activities in supporting students to explore non-traditional skills and knowledge and fostering the development of positive cultural identities. Because such activities will reveal different aspects of cultural identities and histories unfamiliar to the instructor, the instructor becomes a “co-learner” in the process (Hamdan, 2014, p. 214). In this process of co-learning, instructors’ teaching can improve as they come to better understand more of their students’ backgrounds and how various teaching strategies interact with them.

Those who adopt a culturally responsive pedagogical approach will also improve their teaching by including culturally responsive curricular content. This is important from an equity perspective because the histories, cultures, and issues of minoritized student communities are often left out of classroom curricula (Banks, 1996) and higher education settings more generally (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015). The focus on dominant cultures “sends the message to students of color that Whiteness is normal and that other practices or beliefs from different cultures are not valued” (Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015, p. 17). On the other hand, research demonstrates that curricula that reflects and engages the cultural backgrounds of minoritized students positively impacts their engagement and success (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005; Quaye, Griffin, & Museus, 2015). Such calls for curricular changes have made in the context of many minoritized identities, including that of women of color (Patton et al., 2015), multiracial students (Ozaki & Renn, 2015), and lesbian, gay, bisexual students (Stewart & Howard-Hamilton, 2015).

Culturally responsive pedagogy suggests such improvements because of the growing need to better serve student needs as learners in the context of an increasingly diverse society and student population. Like assessment, culturally responsive pedagogy is student-centered in nature. Thus, learner background and characteristics, such as cultural background, are critical to consider for teaching and designing course experiences (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Because play a role in helping to shape student motivation (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 165), instructors adopting culturally responsive pedagogy and content can increase motivation and improve learning for minoritized students in particular.

### **Key Challenges of Reforms in Research Universities**

Despite reform efforts being supported by research, change is arguably slow, and adapting such reforms is limited. For instance, regarding assessment, arguably too few faculty are “closing the loop - that is, studying assessment findings to see what improvements might be suggested and taking the appropriate steps to make them” (Banta & Blaich, 2011, p. 22). Using culturally responsive pedagogy too, is limited. Despite growing concern over meeting the needs of culturally diverse students, a study by Maruyama and Moreno (2000) found that few instructors reported actually making adjustments to their teaching strategies in response to a diversifying student population. Educational reform in itself is challenging (Bok, 2013), yet the challenges are exacerbated within research universities due to some of the defining characteristics of this sector. Indeed, research universities in particular have faced criticism for not focusing enough on undergraduate instruction (Rhoades, 2000). In this section, I discuss key challenges that reform efforts to further integrate assessment and culturally responsive pedagogy into teaching will face within research universities. Specifically, I highlight the challenges posed

by faculty work incentivizing research, limited graduate training in teaching, and limited support from administration for teaching innovation.

### **Faculty Work Incentivizes Research Over Teaching**

The missions of research universities include a heavy emphasis on research, “the production of new knowledge” (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 27), and this emphasis is growing (Bok, 2013). Because teaching is less emphasized than research, faculty have less incentive to learn and incorporate new tools to improve instruction, such as assessment, or pedagogical approaches, such as culturally responsive pedagogy, into their routines. To become proficient in culturally responsive pedagogy and assessment requires time and energy (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Hamdan, 2014) and “time they spend on assessment means time away from their scholarly work” (Banta & Blaich, 2011, p. 24). It may be unrealistic to expect faculty at research universities to devote time to attending recommended assessment conferences, on-campus seminars, and workshops to inform themselves of available assessment methods (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Those who work at research centers within research universities may feel particular strain between their roles as researcher and teacher (Boardman & Bozeman, 2007).

As part of the mission, research projects and publishing are more heavily emphasized in tenure and promotion for faculty at research universities than teaching. It is now prevalent to base promotion and tenure on the quantity of books and articles published (Bok, 2013). Unfortunately, in research universities, “the reward system... [does not] encourage faculty to engage in such experimental approaches to their teaching” (Shulman, 2007, p. 25).

### **Limited Graduate Training in Teaching**

The challenges faced by reform efforts are also experienced at the level of graduate training. In most graduate programs, there is no required course that covers what is known about

effective pedagogy or motivating students (Bok, 2013). Neither do graduate students usually learn about what cognitive research means for teaching and learning or ethical obligations of instructors (Bok, 2013). Such facts suggest that most faculty are unfamiliar with best practices in assessment and culturally relevant pedagogy. Furthermore, “the senior faculty in research universities who control graduate training are the least likely to feel any pressing need to change the content of their programs... many senior professors are not convinced that teaching is something that needs to be taught” (Bok, 2013, p. 245). This lack of training and mentorship in teaching (Hamdan, 2014) means the instructors must make it their prerogative to educate themselves on teaching innovations such as assessment and culturally responsive pedagogy, which, as previously discussed, can be very difficult due to time constraints and prevailing reward structures in research university settings.

### **Limited Support from Administration for Teaching Innovation**

Finally, implementing teaching reforms requires support and collaboration from university administrators. However, as Bok (2013) describes, “many academic leaders, at least in research universities, appear to have accepted too limited a role in influencing educational policy (p. 245). Shared governance has evolved in a way that gives increasing levels of influence to faculty regarding curriculum and pedagogy, with little administrative input (Bok, 2013). The problem “is most acute in research universities, where professors are busiest and feel least willing to take the time to give serious consideration to basic changes in their accustomed way of teaching” (Bok, 2013, p. 245). The relatively low levels of engagement of administrators in matters of teaching innovation does little to further needed collaborative organizational cultures that embrace assessment and culturally responsive pedagogy reform efforts (Bok; 2013; Morgan, 2006; Palomba & Banta, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

Assessment and culturally responsive pedagogy are two reforms that have emerged as part of educational discourse to improve teaching and learning in the U.S. Both reforms are student-centered, placing an emphasis on characteristics of the student in response to theory and research that demonstrates the necessity of considering the student in teaching one's teaching practices. While assessment takes into consideration student feedback in order to adjust teaching methods and determine the scope of student learning that has taken place, culturally responsive pedagogy takes into consideration students' cultural backgrounds in order to better serve an increasingly diverse student population. Though evidence exists that supports the positive impacts of assessment and culturally responsive pedagogy, within research universities the characteristics of research being emphasized over teaching, limited graduate training in teaching, and limited support from administration for teaching innovation challenge and hinder their broader integration into university teaching. These challenges to such teaching reforms in research universities are particularly troublesome, for "it is in...these...institutions that improvement is more important, since their departments are the ones most likely to attract attention, inspire emulation, and thereby speed the process of reform" (Bok, 2013, p. 245).

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