

Vol. 3, Issue 1, 2017

Examining Critical Theory as a Framework to Advance Equity Through Student Affairs Assessment

Ciji A. Heiser Krista Prince and Joseph D. Levy*

Apr 14, 2017

Tags: critical theory, critical practitioner, equity, assessment cycle

* **Institution:** University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, National Louis University
Department: See "about the authors"

Abstract

Inquiry in student affairs plays a critical role in advancing equity efforts since it is utilized for the improvement of programs and services supporting student learning and experiences. Assessment practice, when undergirded by a critical theoretical framework, employs intentional approaches corresponding to each phase of the assessment cycle. Critical practitioners begin by acknowledging their own subjectivity and the ways their positionality influences their practice. Further, they acknowledge the agency of participants as knowers and collaborators in this work. Additionally, practitioners employ methodological diversity and center marginalized voices not only in evidence gathering, but also in interpretation and when implementing change. Employing such approaches enriches assessment practice and enables data to be used in transformative ways in the pursuit of equity. This article explores critical theory and its implications for assessment practice. Examples and considerations are provided throughout as well as questions posed for institutional and personal practice reflection.

transformative for all students by considering the positionality of the evaluator, recognizing agency of the participants, employing methodological diversity, and extending analysis strategies.

Critical Social Theory and Assessment

Cultural theorists began their work at the Institute for Social Research within the Frankfurt School in 1923 (Hanks, 2011, p. 81). Forerunners such as Karl Marx, analyzing capitalism as a form of domination, brought to light the ways in which market values left power in the hands of few (Levinson, Gross, Link, & Hanks, 2011, p. 26). In the context of assessment, this critique of capitalism is relevant today given how assessment has served to answer calls for institutional accountability; to show that institutions are creating workers and knowledge for economic development (Wall et al., 2014). For example, reporting systems often emphasize “graduation rates, job placement, and debt-to-earnings ratios” (Banta & Palomba, 2015, p. 6) rather than student learning. Drawing on Marx’s work, Max Horkheimer named critical theory and described emancipation as its central feature. In pursuit of a more just society, he and others sought to better understand and expose the systems and institutions that regulate behavior and perpetuate inequitable outcomes. He named critical theory to highlight a change-oriented approach in contrast to traditional theories that only sought understanding. While it was originally concerned specifically with the effects of capitalism and its structures on socioeconomic status, now “critical social theories are those conceptual accounts of the social world that attempt to understand and explain the causes of structural domination and inequality in order to facilitate human emancipation and equity” (Levinson, 2011, p. 2). Such theories question common sense assumptions and taken for granted norms. Critical inquiry’s multiple branches include critical race theories, LatCrit, queer theory, critical feminist theories, critical discourse analysis, and theories of power and marginalization. Critical theory, in any of its many forms, centers lived experiences in order to “identify and locate the ways in which societies produce and preserve specific inequalities through social, cultural, and economic systems” (Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015, p. 8). In this way, critical approaches oriented towards equity differ from those motivated by economics and accountability.

An emphasis on economic outcomes for higher education has led to assessment for

and behaviors originating in our multiple identities...In addition, identity influences experiences and perceptions of power or lack thereof and affects how we think about and practice within power structures of colleges and universities. (Chávez & Sanlo, 2013, p. 9)

Attention to our identities and experiences is imperative because “our positionalities -how we see ourselves, how we are perceived by others, and our experiences- influence how we approach knowledge, what we know, and what we believe to know” (Bettez, 2015, p. 934-935). In order to address the influence of one’s subjectivity on their work, a critical practice of critical inquiry engages in self-reflexivity by interrogating “how [their] experiences, knowledge, and social positions might impact each aspect and moment” (Bettez, 2015, p.940) of the assessment cycle.

The influence of one’s positionalities is pervasive, reaching even the most fundamental of assessment practices such as the notion of asking the right questions. When designing instruments and employing different methodologies, acknowledging the myriad of intersecting identities that shape one’s own’s

further amplify instances lacking perspective. Critical inquiry encourages evaluators to account for implicit biases pertaining to one's identities. Implicit bias is "a descriptive term encompassing thoughts and feelings that occur independently of conscious intention, awareness, or control" (Nosek & Riskind, 2012, p. 115). Thus, our exposure to societal messages and our experiences may subconsciously influence our associations both about groups to which we belong and those we do not. For example, when career coaches evaluate resumes they may subconsciously associate either positively or negatively with student name, perceived race/ethnicity, education background, experience, or geographical location; but a rubric may mitigate the effects these associations could have on review and feedback. When utilizing rubrics, recommended practices of calibration and norming activities help ensure reliability and work to minimize subjectivity of the evaluator. Having a well-designed rubric and conducting calibration activities can norm evaluators with content and scoring, ultimately aiming to account for existing subjectivity or implicit biases. Beyond assisting the practitioner, rubrics support students by clearly communicating examined content and how scores are determined. Sharing rubrics with students ahead of an intervention as in the example of reviewing a resume provides transparency, while also enabling students to set themselves up for success and familiarizes them with process prior to interacting with a career coach. Critical approaches such as this work to navigate positionality and subjectivity, while improving traditional approaches to assessment, by empowering students and honoring their agency as subjects in the assessment effort.

Agency of the Participants

Rather than positioning the participant as the object of study, critical practitioners acknowledge the agency of the human "subject," who is expert and authority on their own experiences because "all critical inquiry is grounded in lived experiences, and power relations and social justice are central concerns" (Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015, p. 3; Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). Facilitating collaborative processes by inviting stakeholders to operate as partners in assessment work, rather than objects of it, recognizes agency of participants and strengthens assessment work. Collaboration can occur in multiple elements of assessment

practice: mapping learning experiences and programs provided to larger outcomes or competencies of the institution, writing and approving learning outcomes, and identifying what is meaningful and measurable. Of note is that time is a significant consideration for many practitioners. Culp and Dungy (2012) assert that institutional leaders should encourage their staff to block off time on their calendars for assessment related activities such as analysis and reporting. Incorporating collaborative approaches to assessment work may be more time intensive than initially planned, but such approaches build both assessment culture and competence - which is strongly supported throughout assessment literature as not only appropriate, but necessary.

Engaging in collaborative processes brings the voices of students, staff, and faculty from across the institution to the assessment table. Accreditation standards and criteria already expect students to be consulted and engaged by institutions in decision making and providing feedback on university goals and overall governance processes, not to mention be actively engaged in assessment (Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, 2016; Higher Learning Commission, 2014; Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2015; WASC Senior College and University Commission, 2013). The responsibility rests with the institution to execute and determine how to engage students and ensure all student voices and needs are represented. Maki (2010) reinforces this concept, stating, "assessment is not a task for small groups of experts but a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better-informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement" (p. 41). Inviting stakeholders to operate as collaborative partners in assessment work honors agency of the stakeholders by prioritizing how their experiences inform data collection and provide meaningful insight during data analysis.

One suggestion for considering the agency of the participant is empowering students as content developers. Seeking perspectives from minoritized populations for experiential feedback when creating educational workshops related to race, diversity, or social justice is one example. Frustrations, concerns, and fears, as well as points of pride and praise, could also be coupled with theory and existing needs or campus climate data to generate workshop

content. These approaches establish minoritized students as subject matter experts on the topic of their lived experiences, enhances engagement, and may attract students to attend given their role in program development. Student feedback and positioning may also inform the methodological approaches taken to collect relevant data.

Methodological Diversity

An emphasis on economic outcomes has led many practitioners to employ positivistic and detached methodological approaches. Critical approaches to methodology encourage practitioners to consider what to measure and how, using multiple modalities for triangulation, and questioning whether a tool measures the intended topic for different groups. These practices, guided by principles of critical theory, compliment the notion that learning is complex and multifaceted; it needs methodological approaches that work for students engaged in the learning process who are equally complex and multifaceted (Maki, 2010).

Practitioners employing approaches to assessment grounded in critical theory reflect thoroughly on the implications of what is measured and how. In determining what to measure and how, critical evaluators consider the effects of economic drivers and which values are attached to what is measured (DeLuca Fernández, 2015). For example, the outcome that students living on campus will have higher average grade point averages than those living off campus may be driven by the economic need to boost occupancy, by the level of academic support provided to students living in the residence halls, or both.

The different ways in which participants make meaning and process information around their experiences influences how their experience is measured. Approaches to measurement undergirded by critical theory include exploring multiple modalities and multiple methods of data collection. Because learning can be multifaceted and non-linear, Maki (2010) encourages "...employing a diverse array of methods, including those that call for actual performance, using them over time so as to reveal change, growth, and increasing degrees

assumptions or they fail to interrogate underlying disparity (Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015). When selecting assessment methods, practitioners operating from an equity orientation pose questions such as: Will this method reinforce a power dynamic? Does this method work for this population (e.g. survey or storytelling)? What additional method would provide a more comprehensive narrative around a program or service? Employing multiple measures can open new possibilities and resistance to a universal truth or interpretation of data. This is important given tra183 Td((e.g.) TjEmeth345 684.6183 Td(trapograch) TjETBT433391794684.

critical approaches question whether a specific tool measures the intended topic across diverse groups. Matsuda et al. (1993) recommend:

recognizing the experiential knowledge of people of color. Such recognition is filtered through counterstorytelling, narrative, biographies, and life histories. When the experiences and knowledges of people of color are shared, the process allows for a more authentic and unique understanding how they experience racist, oppressive structures. (p. 197)

Intentionally asking questions that resonate across groups, and not just for the majority population, in ways that empower diverse groups to respond with their truth provides richer, contextualized, and valid data for practitioners. The medium and method with which practitioners can collect data also provide opportunities for sharing.

Data Analysis and Reporting

The transformation of data from a raw mass of material to easily digestible information is a core component of assessment practice. Making data easily understandable is fundamental for the usability of the data in order to facilitate data-driven discussion and decisions that influence students, staff, and other stakeholders. Making meaning of the data through analysis and reporting makes data actionable and closes the assessment loop. Employing critical approaches to data analysis and reporting, assessment practitioners begin to ask: how do one's identities or lived experiences influence data analysis? Do institutional values and norms influence data processing? Who are the findings serving? Critical theory can be used to strengthen core assessment practices and advance equity efforts by centering the lived experiences of populations typically left at the margins by examining how meaning is assigned to data and employing collaborative approaches to analysis and reporting.

A common practice for the analysis of quantitative data is reporting the average or mean of the data. Generally, it is thought that by aggregating individual measures, evaluators can find group trends that guide decision-making about curriculum, policy, services, and programs. The common practice of reporting aggregated data has positive merits including the identification of

patterns throughout variables and across time. A critical

important step toward redressing inequity by utilizing a collaborative approach to discussions and interpretations of data,

When only looking at end-results or metrics according to external entities, the importance and meaning can be lost on the student experience. This includes factors influencing success and elements contributing to a safe, encouraging, and inclusive learning environment. Consequently, there becomes less incentive to examine the interaction of identity or diversity elements with institutional interventions. This can have dangerous consequences such that “the implications of methodological conservatism for individuals and communities who regularly encounter individual, institutional, and/or societal oppression include the preservation of discriminatory educational practices, policies, and environments and perpetuation of the inequitable status quo” (Pasque et al., 2012 p. ix). It becomes increasingly important to treat data sets as part of an inclusive batch of information rather than in a silo or vacuum. For example, while student success rates point to particular courses as critical to success, early interventions for students struggling in those courses may need to be tailored to their identities or circumstances. One student on scholarship may struggle in chemistry because they are not studying enough or taking advantage of tutoring resources available to them. Another student may struggle in chemistry because their job, which provides income necessary for them to make tuition payments, prohibits them from making their lab section every other week. Intervention for this latter student needs to be different from the former, as there are additional circumstances for consideration in which to offer guidance beyond coaching time management or study skills.

Implications for Inquiry and Equity

Pasque et al. (2012) asserts that, “equity concerns are foundational to students’ lives: marginalized identities, opportunity to learn, access, persistence, attainment, pedagogy, and the social stratification produced by participation in higher education” (p. 7). The application of critical theory positions assessment practices to expose inequalities. An integral component of assessment

Because issues of equity are central to students' experiences in higher education, and critical approaches to assessment facilitate the exposure of inequities in programs and services offered, practitioners taking a critical approach to assessment will be better able to serve all students.

To that end, it is important to examine assessment practices, processes, and resources for opportunities to integrate critical approaches. As plans are put together, is consideration given to involving appropriate stakeholders? When designing an instrument, are demographics and identity-related components stressed for inclusion? Could report templates have built-in sections or prompts encouraging reflection of overall data? Are findings disaggregated with respect to particular populations or identities? Such questions should be posed by assessment professionals, integrated in areas involved in assessment work, and focused on populations that are often the subject of inquiry.

To best inform focus and approach, institutional needs should be considered. As critical inquiry examines identity and equity-related topics, professionals need to be knowledgeable about the populations of students served and existing institutional equity issues. Examining pain points, areas to improve, and strengths surrounding these topics could give purposeful direction when integrating new approaches for programs and services. Knowing institutional priorities and trends could provide a baseline or framework with which to direct initial efforts. This may mean priorities themselves are challenged to evolve and serve equity aims.

Finally, integrated reflection of practice and efficacy will be crucial. Examining over time if professionals are truly taking a critical approach or exemplifying needed inquiry. If not, additional education or professional development may be needed. Questions to help facilitate this reflection may include: Has assessment effectiveness been impacted positively or negatively after integrating critical inquiry? Is critical assessment yielding actionable and meaningful data in relation to inquiry and equity needs at the institution? Like any other assessment approach, where problems, barriers, or opportunities for improvement exist, , iterate for improvement.

Conclusion

Traditional approaches to assessment characterized by impartiality, validity, and objectivity may provide useful data in the age of reporting and accountability based on economic measures of success. However, such objective approaches to assessment may obscure critical questions, methods, and data interpretations that would enable us to uncover and respond to systemic inequities that render differential outcomes in learning or experience for students. Therefore,

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