



The Language of Assessment: Humpty Dumpty Had a Great Fall . . .

Assessment Tips With Gloria Rogers



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In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice and Humpty Dumpty have an interesting conversation:

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t – till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you.’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it

Faculty should represent a *discourse community*. A discourse community is a group of people who have a particular way of talking to one another. This implies the ability to communicate freely and clearly about issues that matter most – especially student learning. A discourse community builds knowledge together and represents a knowledge community. Community members develop a particular way they talk about what they know. This knowledge can only be constructed through a common language and understanding of what that language represents. Assessment and evaluation professionals have the same general mental models around the discipline of assessment but do not necessarily use the language of the discipline consistently in communicating those models to those outside the discipline.

What is meant by the word *outcome*? *Objective*? *Goal*? *Standard*? *Performance criteria*? *Triangulation*? . . . And the list goes on. Unfortunately, the language of assessment is not precise, and **there is no one right way to define many terms associated with assessment**. Because the terms are often used differently, and sometimes interchangeably, the ability to communicate becomes strained and sometimes impossible. The danger is that faculty spend an inordinate amount of time debating which terms mean what – a pastime in which there are no winners. In the absence of a standardized language, it becomes difficult to communicate and reach agreement on more substantive issues of assessment – assessing student learning.

means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”

The importance of the use of language to convey meaning is poignantly illustrated here. In the current accreditation environment, where there are ongoing debates about the role of the assessment of student learning in the accreditation process, there exists growing frustration to understand the “jargon” associated with the process. Confusion over the meaning of the language of assessment, and the inconsistent and careless use of it, often alienates the very people who need to be engaged in the development and use of assessment processes – the faculty.

Term	Definition	Other Terms Used
Objectives	Statements that describe the expected accomplishments of graduates during the first few years after graduation.	Goals, outcomes, standards
Outcomes	Statements that describe what students are expected to know and be able to do by the time of graduation.	Objectives, standards, goals
Performance Criteria	Specific, measurable statements identifying the performance(s) required to meet the outcome; confirmable through evidence.	Standards, rubrics, specifications outcomes, metrics, objectives
Assessment	Processes that identify, collect, analyze, and report data that can be used to evaluate achievement.	Evaluation
Evaluation	Process of reviewing the results of data collection and analysis and making a determination of the value of findings and action(s) to be taken.	Assessment

This table provides some of the common terms used to describe the various concepts surrounding the assessment of student learning. The definitions have been taken from ABET evaluation criteria. The terms in the left-hand column are those that are used in the accreditation criteria. The terms in the right-hand column illustrate other terms that are

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En-Visioning Our Future

Part 2 of a Series on the ABET Board Visioning Process

In Part 1 of *En-Visioning Our Future*, we discussed the first step in the Visioning process: identifying strategic issues. We defined a strategic issue as meeting *all* of the following criteria:

- ⇒ It's an agent of change.
- ⇒ It's composed of two variables impacting each other in a way that demands attention.
- ⇒ It's a single statement that begs the question, "What are you going to do about it?"

With that definition in mind, the ABET Board constructed, worked, and reworked a comprehensive list of strategic issues for ABET. As promised, here is the complete list as of the last ABET Board meeting in March 2002:

1. Emerging technologies and changing disciplines challenge traditional approaches to educational delivery and assessment.

- Multi-disciplinary educational approaches linked to an application, an industry, a service, or a product challenge the assignment of programs within the traditional ABET structure.
- Increased specialization within technological disciplines makes it difficult for ABET to identify a common core of knowledge for engineering, technology, applied science, and computing.

2. Alternative delivery systems challenge traditional methods of assessment.

- Accreditation/certification of new providers
- The site-specific requirements of the laboratory experience
- Interpersonal requirements for counseling students
- Examination security concerns
- Traditional methods of assessment
- Development of teamwork skills and of the cultural norms of the profession

3. The shifting profile of the student-candidate pool is changing the nature of educational providers and delivery systems due to
 - diverse skill sets, learning styles, and changing interests;
 - changing expectations of educational delivery modes; and
 - changing expectations for skill sets of graduates by employers.
4. The upcoming wave of retirements from education and practice will impact educational providers and ABET by
 - reducing the pool of leaders and volunteers.
 - creating additional demands on new faculty members.
5. Globalization of the professions - industry, the work force, education, and practice - results in an increased need for
 - portability of educational credentials,
 - authentication of educational credentials, and
 - quality assurance for educational programs in other countries.
6. Boundaries among technological disciplines are blurring; therefore,
 - emerging technologies may not fit existing categories,
 - the proliferation of new programs and professions creates the expectation that accreditation will be readily available,
 - distinct program criteria will be increasingly impractical,
 - assignment of programs within the existing ABET commissions will become more difficult.
7. Accreditation process requirements (cost, time, information, people) question the perceived value of accreditation to the institution.

Stay tuned for **Part 3** of *En-Visioning Our Future*, when we'll take a look at how the Visioning process is working to help ABET address these issues. □

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commonly used for the same concepts. Although the term *performance criteria* is not found in any of the ABET evaluation criteria, it is added here to stress the importance of statements that identify specific knowledge, skills, etc. that students must demonstrate in order to show that the desired *outcomes* (left-hand column) have been met.

Each program has to decide what terms they are going to use to describe the various aspects of the assessment process and use the terms consistently. In other words, set a good example for all of us in the assessment community. If possible, the terms

should be consistent with those used by the college and/or institution, thereby expanding the local discourse community. Of course, if there is not currently a common language, it might be useful to be consistent with that used by ABET. If you have already established a common language, don't confuse the process by trying to instigate a change. Just provide ABET (as well as others external to your program) with a brief glossary demonstrating alignment of concepts, and move on.

Humpty Dumpty has another lesson for those who believe they can continue to use assessment terminology interchangeably: "And all the king's horses and all the king's men"