



Episode 03 Transcript

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Dr. Brian Bourke: You're listening to the *I'm Curious* podcast. Welcome on *I'm Curious*, a weekly podcast for students' affairs educators looking for thought-provoking questions and insights to help advance their fields. I'm your host, Dr. Brian Bourke.

On this episode of *I'm Curious*, I want to start digging into my thoughts on the world of assessment, because after all these things I've said I do, I keep talking on assessment, I teach on assessment, I practically mostly consult on things related to assessment. So I want to make sure I'm addressing that very early on here in the life of *I'm Curious*.

And this particular topic I'm addressing today, the idea of assessment being reframed as inquiry is drawn in large part from a post I previously shared on LinkedIn in November 2015. And this idea around inquiry also connects to my overall approach in perspective on curiosity which is, after all, my whole stake here with *I'm Curious*. When I teach or present about assessment I often reference assessment as being cyclical.

In doing this, I reinforce that assessment practice should be iterative. If our assessment process is cyclical and through that cyclical perspective the process becomes iterative, then that's the reason assessment practice in student affairs can be construed as inquiry. What I mean by this idea of it being iterative is that doing something engaging in the practice generates more questions. It provides us opportunity for reflection and what we've done and what we might do differently in the future.

So when I talk about assessment as a cycle rather than a linear series of actions, I talk about the importance of having a feedback loop. We need to use results not only to spur discussions that lead to data-driven decision making but also to learn about the assessment cycle of process itself. There are a number of visual depictions on the assessment cycle, and I'm going to include some examples of those in this show notes.

I include variations of these images that I have on the show notes in my course that I teach on assessment, but they're typically consistent with the goals and objectives that are at the top of the circle or the cycle. We've got ideas, we've got objectives, we've got our acting principles and goals that we're trying to reach and then we progress through identifying our various approaches and methods may be we're going to keep learning along the way and then we conclude with making some sort of changes or and that's our vehicle for using the results.

But what I think is missing from this, and many other visual depictions of the assessment cycle is an evaluation piece, where we look at the process and our assessment practices themselves. So this is the iterative nature that I'm thinking



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about. Again, I think that it would be a perspective where we're taking the process reflecting on it and adapting it is missing.

Now generally, as you see in the images that are linked to in the show notes it's drawn as a cycle that the process starts over and over and it's seemingly unending, and that's a great way to think about assessment, that the work never ends that it's not just about administering one survey analyzing its results and creating the next binder that goes on somebody's bookshelf.

But again what's missing for me is not only what we do with that information but what's the real application but then what are we doing to make sure that we learn from that process. What are we doing to make sure that we're learning from that survey administration for example?

So, I don't like making that assumption. So I want to offer some thoughts about how we can reframe our discussions and the ways that we think about assessment in student affairs along this idea this line of thinking of inquiry.

When I recently wrote this post that I'm drawing this from on LinkedIn on November 2015, I'd just presented on this idea of thinking about assessment as inquiry at the 2015 conference for the Southern Association for College Student Affairs which was held in Greenville, South Carolina that year. And in that session, I shared some thoughts about how shifting our thinking about assessment practice towards inquiry isn't simply semantics. It's not just about the language we use and the way that we talk about things.

Shifting our thinking towards inquiry is about spurring conversations that seek to connect student affairs educators through questions. This goes back to the idea that we should drive assessment are really big questions? And that if we focus on asking questions and seeking answers through those questions sometimes what we end up with, and really I think often times are more questions and again this connects to my whole idea around curiosity.

In another incidence, I was part of a pre-conference workshop on teaching assessment with Lisa Endersby and Ann Gansemer-Topf. And we did this as a preconference at the 2014 NASPA Annual Conference in Baltimore. One of our big points was that it's not just about asking big questions but figuring out how to ask the right questions and what the right questions are. If we shift our thinking towards inquiry, the cycle moves from a series of tasks to a dialogic progression. The questions we ask drive our conversations about the work that we do.

As Keeling and his colleagues noted and assessment reconsidered we need to address assessment for, rather than of learning. Assessment for learning situates learning at the center of an organization, instead of treating learning simply as a method to be evaluated.



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As we engage each other through an inquiry-based framework, the inquiries cycle becomes an iterative process that is nonlinear. We ask big questions; we ask the right big questions, not as a pinnacle from which assessment efforts cascade but throughout the cycle of inquiry.

Within an inquiry framework, we ask questions about evaluation methods; we ask questions about analysis strategies. We ask questions to discuss every part we generate. We ask questions about what's next. We ask these questions in the midst of our efforts not as an addendum to the end of the assessment process.

Rethinking our practices toward inquiry can be one strategy to build the culture of inquiry in student affairs. Based on the way I've described inquiry in this podcast episode involvement of, and discussion with members of our communities, i. e. our departments is essential to inquiry practice.

You might have noticed that I've used the words inquiry and assessment back and forth. I did this intentionally to reinforce that shifting our thinking to inquiry again is not just about semantics of word choice. It's ok to call what we do assessment especially if there's a reframe of what we're working on. But what I want us to think about is adopting an inquiry-based framework.

And doing this isn't about doing a find and change for assessment inquiry in our documents. The move is about shifting our thinking towards engaging each other in dialogue around key questions throughout the assessment cycle and adopting our practices as we learn to answer the questions.

My hope for talking about inquiry is to help student's affairs as well as other organisations within our education to enhance their curiosity. After all without gathering information critically examining it and reflecting on what it means to us in the work that we do how can we ever hope to really understand our work and the students that we serve?

So let's get curious and start answering some deeper questions about ourselves. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this idea of shifting to inquiry and the way that we approach our assessment work. Do you think there's something meaningful there or is it just a semantic exercise?

So hit me up on twitter @drbbourke or head on over to drbrianbourke.com and send me a message.

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There're a couple of people I'd like to thank. First, big thanks to Christine Abel for her web design services without her drbrianbourke.com would not look like it does and without that space, I wouldn't have a platform for sharing show notes and episode transcripts.

Second but just as importantly big thanks to Austin Gordon for his exceptional graphic design efforts. Austin is responsible for the logos, splendid imagery and cover image for the *I'm Curious* podcast.

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