ASSESSMENT GETS SAVVY: MAKING & EXTENDING CONNECTIONS THROUGH TECH(NOWLEDGE)Y

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2012 ASSESSMENT SYMPOSIUM

Friday, May 4, 2012
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INTRODUCTION

Technology has become integral to today’s society. There are very few activities that do not involve, indeed, that do not rely on automation systems; and there are very few people without easy access to these systems. Not surprisingly, then, technology has become integral to institutions of higher learning as well, and is employed in all aspects of instruction and administration.

Each year, the Academic Senate Assessment Committee conducts an annual seminar to bring timely assessment information to the Nassau Community College community. The main theme of the 2012 Assessment Symposium was how automated technologies are or can be employed for assessment at the College.

Professors Tine and Masi introduced Taskstream, the institution-wide automation system that will eventually manage program and course-level assessment data throughout the College. Departments are currently entering their program level data, and the presenters demonstrated how to enter the data into the appropriate sections of Taskstream. Once the departments have entered their program level information, they will be ready to enter course-level data. It is expected that when the college switches entirely to Taskstream, paperwork will be sharply reduced, and reporting will be greatly facilitated.

Assistant Vice President Spiro provided guidelines for the design of an effective online course. She described the Backward Design paradigm, which begins by looking at the end to be achieved (the desired learning outcomes and their assessment) then working backwards, choosing the most effective activities and syllabi to reach that goal. The results are courses that engage and challenge students.

The remaining presentations dealt with the application of various automated technologies to assist instruction and, in some cases, to assess course level learning outcomes. Professor Kaebnick discussed the pros and cons of using Pearson’s MyCompLab and Turnitin.com to build student competency in writing skills. Both programs can be used for any course that requires writing. Although Professor Kaebnick found that neither program is perfect, she concluded that both are fundamentally effective in improving student writing, and she will continue to use them.

Professor Shaw discussed her use of several automation systems for summative and formative assessments of student learning outcomes in two fully on-line and one web-complemented course. Summative assessment involves evaluating and grading what students have learned after instruction; formative assessment occurs in small steps, throughout the
semester, allowing instructors to adjust techniques or assessment tools if learning is not taking place as expected. Many of the tools of both kinds of assessment can be used help develop community building, an instructional technique that enhances student learning in the online environment.

Professor Schopp discussed his use of quizzes and discussion boards in his on-line courses to replicate the essential low-stakes, day-to-day assessment (e.g., basic question and answer with students, listening to collaborative group work, interpreting facial expressions to assess understanding) that typically occurs in face-to-face courses. Low-stakes (or formative) assessment is just as crucial as more formal (summative) assessment (e.g., grading papers, exams, etc.), and achieving it can seem virtually impossible in fully online courses; but his method has proven successful.

Professors Golde, Newlin-Wagner, and Novins discussed how the use of Facebook and Tumblr has enabled students to expand their knowledge of topics discussed in the classroom and share their thoughts and opinions after critically reading information found by their peers and shared on these social networks. They also described how they assess their students’ use of these social networking resources.

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Faculty Symposium Speakers

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Kerry Golde (READING/BEP)                                         Andrew Schopp (ENG)
Suzanne Kaebnick (ENG)                                            Ines Shaw (ENG)
Sal Masi, D.C. (AHS)                                               Deborah Spiro (DISTANCE ED)
Richard Moscatelli (MATH/CS/IT)                                   Lisa Tine (AHS)
TRANSITIONING TO TASKSTREAM

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Sal Masi has been a member of the Department of Allied Health Sciences at Nassau Community College for twelve years. He has served on the Academic Senate Assessment Committee for four years and is the Co-Chair of the New Faculty Assessment Orientation Committee. Dr. Masi earned his B.S. in Biology from the State University of New York at Binghamton and his Doctorate of Chiropractic from the University of Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Lisa Tine has been a member of the Department of Allied Health Sciences at Nassau Community College for eight years. She has served on the Academic Senate Assessment Committee for four years and is the Co-Chair of the New Faculty Assessment Orientation Committee. Professor Tine earned her B.S. in Healthcare Administration and her M.B.A. in Healthcare Management from St. Joseph’s College. She is a Registered Radiologic Technologist and Mammography Technologist.

Abstract

The last few years has fostered a new commitment to Assessment at Nassau Community College. The recent purchase of new assessment software called Taskstream will streamline and reinforce this college wide commitment. The College Community is currently working on the first step in the transition to Taskstream by populating it with Program Level Assessment data. Each department is working diligently to enter their program level assessment information into individual workspaces. The workspaces should be completed and ready for data collection in the fall of 2012.

Our presentation introduces and outlines the Taskstream program to our faculty in order to facilitate the transition to Taskstream using a sample of the Allied Health Sciences workspaces and a step by step demonstration of the completed Radiologic Technology Program Level Assessment in Taskstream.
Summary of Presentation

Taskstream: An Overview

Taskstream provides transparency by allowing other members of your department to see your assessment practices. This leads to greater collaboration with faculty members in your department and improves the overall assessment process. Taskstream also allows you to link your program goals with the departmental goals as well as to the institutional goals. Taskstream employs standard terminology that will be used across all disciplines on campus. This leads to greater standardization and less confusion. In addition, Taskstream allows you to customize your workspace in a way that will best suit the needs of your program. The workspaces are organized in a clear format which promotes ease of use. The data fields allow for easy text descriptions. You also have the ability to add attachments such as documents or videos for greater clarification. For example, you can attach the actual measurement tool that you are using, or the actual findings for each measure. This benefits the reader by providing background information and benefits the user by permitting all relevant documents to be stored in one place. It even benefits the environment, as it eliminates the need for printed material. Finally, Taskstream generates reports electronically. It collates and analyzes data, and facilitates the identification of modifications that may be necessary.

A Glance Inside a Taskstream Workspace for Program Level Assessment

The Three Standing Requirements

In order to use Taskstream for Program Level Assessment, users must first provide three bits of information (called the Three Standing Requirements). These are described below, using the radiological health program from the Department of Allied Health as an example.
Standing Requirement 1--Mission Statement

The Program’s Mission Statement should be a broad statement of what you want your students to accomplish once they have completed the program. For example: "Provide an educational experience that prepares competent, entry-level health care providers."

Standing Requirement 2--Learning Goals / Outcomes

All Program Learning Goals should be consistent with the Program Mission Statement. They should be written as a broad statement focused on student outcomes, not program outcomes. For example, an appropriate wording for a learning goal might be, "The student will function as a vital member of a healthcare team." It should not read, "The program will provide an environment which creates vital members of a healthcare team," which is an admirable functional goal for the program but it is not a learning goal.

Each learning goal should have at least 1 to 3 learning outcomes. Outcomes should be more specific than the goal and act as measurable indicators that the goal has been achieved. Outcomes should include words such as, knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions that the students should acquire. For example, using the learning goal above, possible learning outcomes could be, "demonstrates excellent patient care skills" and "able to effectively communicate." Both of these outcomes are related to the goal in that you must demonstrate excellent patient care skills and effectively communicate to work as a vital member of the healthcare team.

Standing Requirement 3--Curriculum Map

This feature allows you to see the relationship of each course to your program level learning goals and outcomes. It is an area where you can link each course to particular program goals and outcomes. All courses will be entered into the program over the next two years.

The Assessment Cycle

Taskstream displays the current three Assessment Cycles.

Each Assessment Cycle has the five requirements as outlined below.

1 - Assessment Plan

Your Program’s Assessment Plan is listed in this section of Taskstream. You have the ability to view each learning goal, its outcomes and the associated measures in this area. All your data is clearly displayed in a flow chart format that allows all faculty in your department to easily view and understand these relationships.

Measures. Each outcome should be matched to a measurement tool and/or strategy. The measurement tool should be able to provide you with data demonstrating whether the outcome has been achieved and to what degree. You should use multiple tools but don’t overwhelm yourself with too many for each outcome. Use only the tools that measure the outcome. Possible measures are: case studies, term papers, reports, course evaluations, and quizzes.

Direct and Indirect Measures: Task Stream will ask if the measure you indicate is a direct or indirect measure. A Direct Measure demonstrates that learning has occurred by directly measuring students’ knowledge and skills. For example: tests, homework assignments, case studies, and reports. Indirect Measures demonstrate characteristics that imply learning has occurred. For example: course evaluations, graduate surveys, job placement, and employer surveys.

Acceptable Target/Ideal Target: When setting up your Acceptable and Ideal Targets these scores should be realistic and attainable. Ideally we would like all of our students to score 100% but that is not realistic nor is it likely to occur. There is an art to setting targets. If you set your acceptable and ideal targets too high and the targets are not met, it will indicate that an action is needed, even if that is not the case. But if you set targets too low it will appear that you are meeting goals that in fact may not be challenging enough. If the acceptable target is 80% of your students pass the exam and 80% do pass, there would appear to be no need to put an action into place because your
acceptable target was met. If you have reason to believe you may have set the target too low, you may want to consider revising the target. Even if that is not the case, you might still want to consider actions to move your results toward the ideal target. This is why we say that the results are only the beginning of the analysis to improve learning.

**Implementation Plan (also known as Timeline):** Implementation plan defines your schedule of action and lays out a timeline of how often a measure is introduced and when data is collected.

**Key/Responsible Personnel:** This is asking who is responsible for ensuring that actions are implemented, including the data collection. These individuals may implement the actions themselves or they may assign actions to others and then monitor the implementation. An example of key personnel: Program Directors, Instructors or the Department Chair.

2 - Assessment/Reassessment Findings

In this section you will see the findings for each measure.

**Summary of Findings.** This demonstrates actual findings. For example: 95% of students scored 85% on the exam.

**Results.** This area asks you if your acceptable target has been *Met, Not Met or Exceeded* based on the findings that you entered. This also demonstrates whether your ideal target has been achieved. It prompts you to enter *Moving Away, Approaching or Exceeded* The department’s Taskstream coordinator(s) will input this information. These results are used to generate reports.

**Recommendations.** Based on the summary of findings you may need to make recommendations for actions to be taken for improvement. This is a critical goal of the assessment process.
3 - Modifications

This area is a narrative summary discussing the modifications that you will implement. After you have reviewed your summary of findings you may need to make modifications to improve your learning outcomes. The data is used to indicate if a modification is needed. A modification for improvement could be a change in pedagogy, in course content, in the structure of the curriculum, etc. For example, if the findings show that effective communication has not been met a modification can be implemented in the course that will improve communication skills.

4 - Operational/ Action Plan

If you indicate that a modification is needed your action plan should provide detailed descriptions for how you are going to execute the modification.

**Action Detail.** For example, if your findings indicate that effective communication has been identified as “not met” the action plan can be to introduce group discussions and an oral report.

**Implementation Plan (timeline):** This indicates when the actions/modifications will take place. For example: end of semester

**Key/Responsible Personnel.** Who is responsible for ensuring the implementation of the action plan? For example: Course Instructor

**Measure.** What measurement tool will be used to determine the effectiveness of this Action Plan and whether modifications result in improvement of learning? For example: If the modification is to improve communication, a measurement tool you may want to use can be a grading rubric for an oral report.

**Budget Approval Required/Budget Request Amount.** Some actions identified through assessment as having potential to improve outcomes have little or no cost associated with them. Other actions or modifications may require resources to implement them. In this section you will
use assessment findings to describe the need for funding to implement an action to improve the learning outcomes for your students. You will assign a dollar amount to be included by your Chair in her/his annual department budget. NOTE: Nearly all such needs will require reallocation of existing resources by the Chair or the institution so it is important to provide a strong, evidence-based case for the resource need.

5 - Status Report

In this section of Taskstream you will describe the status of your modifications and the steps moving forward to improve your learning outcomes.

References


www.Taskstream.com
USING ONLINE INTERACTIVE SOFTWARE TO DEVELOP STUDENT WRITING SKILLS

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Dr. Suzanne Kaebnick teaches English 001, English 101, and English 102 as well as a number of literature classes. She has taught Modern American and British drama online and will be teaching The Modern American Short Story online in fall 2012. Suzanne also teaches “Introduction to Women’s Studies” in the Women's Studies Program at NCC.

Abstract

This presentation discusses the use of Pearson’s MyCompLab, a relatively inexpensive courseware, and Turnitin.com, for building student competency in writing skills. They can be used for a number of courses across the disciplines that require writing of some kind; for example, reports, summaries, memos, essays, or research papers. I discuss my experiences using MyCompLab in both a web-enhanced English 101 class as well as in an online English 101 class. I emphasize both what I liked about MyCompLab as well as what was problematic or could be designed better. I also emphasize some of the unique difficulties encountered with my online English 101 class as opposed to my traditional, face-to-face English 101 class. I believe that some of the issues that I have encountered with English 101 classes might not be encountered with student population groups that are more advanced in their studies and/or especially motivated.

MyCompLab can be packaged with many textbooks, traditional or e-texts; it can also be purchased as a stand-alone generic courseware. This last is what I chose for my classes. Among its features are: written and video presentation of rules on grammar, punctuation; short written pieces on writing strategies and research; examples of different types of writing; software for student composing and for instructor as well as peer feedback on writing; interactive grammar and punctuation exercises; and an automatic, computer-generated grammar check. I have found it especially useful in developing student competency in basic writing skills.
Summary of Presentation

Using MyCompLab

There are three main areas of pertaining to a link called "Resources." These are Grammar, Writing, and Research. Each area has subtopics presented through a drop-down menu. For Grammar the subtopics are: Basic Grammar, Sentence Grammar, Usage and Style, and Punctuation. Under each of these subtopics there is another dropdown menu. I'll discuss the Resource area of Grammar first.

If I wanted to review the punctuation of coordinate conjunctions that join sentences, I could click on grammar/ punctuation, then punctuation, then commas, then coordinate conjunctions. Alternately, I could open up grammar, then coordination and subordination, and then using commas with coordination. I could also put "coordinate conjunctions" or "coordination" in the search box.

From the home page of MyCompLab, student and instructor tutorials are available. It is advisable to make using them mandatory. Students who did not use the tutorial had trouble locating tools such as the "search box." In a traditional course, it is easier to make sure the students do the tutorial. (Indeed, it may be that much student frustration with Blackboard, and courses on Blackboard, is due to students not completing Blackboard tutorials.) While most of my students reported preferring the written rules as opposed to the videos for learning about grammar and punctuation, about 20 percent of my students claimed, in a course survey, that the videos were helpful, especially when they found a rule confusing.

A major plus of MyCompLab is that the grammar and punctuation exercises have the interactive feature of immediate feedback. After submitting her/his answer, the student immediately gets feedback on whether the answer was correct or not and an explanation of the rule as well. In addition, a pop-up window which clarifies the rule can be opened in the middle of the exercise. Students generally love this. In my traditional class, which met in the computer
lab once a week, I actually had the issue of some students wanting to do interactive grammar exercises when I needed them to do other work such as work on the draft of a paper, or complete small-group written discussion in Blackboard.

The improvement that I would like to see in Grammar is: Many students skip the written or video lesson and go straight to the exercises. Thus, if they are learning the rules during the first set or two of exercises, and there are only two sets of exercises for a rule, there is a bit of a problem. They do not have many exercises left for practice.

Also, while some grammar exercises had more sets available, student responses to my survey suggest that students were not aware of them. Several students expressed the desire for more practice on rules. It would be good if MyCompLab asked students if they want to complete more exercises on a rule.

Partly because of the student tendency not to read the rule first, it is probably best to use the diagnostic exams and personalized study plans which MyCompLab offers at the beginning of the course. On the home page, students find a link for completing a diagnostic exam. After completion, the courseware generates a list of the rules and exercises the student needs to review and practice based on their errors. It is possible to follow up with another diagnostic exam at the end of the semester to test student growth in understanding and mastery. Many of my students had twenty or so areas of exercises assigned, which they did find a bit daunting. I found that not all of my students completed all of the exercises that I had assigned, and the list of work to be done could be far greater when assigned by MyCompLab. However, a second and third diagnostic exam could be good motivators.

The second major area in Resources is Writing, and it also has a link on the home page as well as from a top horizontal menu. The major subtopics of its drop-down menu include: The Writing Process (with subtopics such as planning and editing); Writing Strategies (with subtopics such as narration, cause and effect, and argument); Writing Samples (with subtopics
such as emails, memos, reports, formal letters, etc.); and Writing Purposes (with subtopics such as to persuade, and to explain). There are no interactive exercises in this area. I thought explanations and sample materials were clear and useful.

The third main Resource area is Research. Its drop-down menu includes Avoiding Plagiarism; the Research Assignment; Finding Sources; Integrating Sources; Writing the Research Paper; Citing Sources; Research Writing Samples; Citing Sources (MLA, APA, CMS works cited formats); and Writing Samples of research essays in the different formats used by different disciplines. Diagnostic exams to test student comprehension of terms and rules are a feature of this section. There were no interactive features in this section. Written discussions tended to be long and detailed; perhaps a bit more thoughtful “chunking” into digestible pieces for the online format would help.

One key writing skill that is not well taught in MyCompLab is how and when to quote or paraphrase. Explanations and exercises on when to quote, how to quote, and how to paraphrase were limited. In the Punctuation link from Grammar, the focus was when to put the titles of works in quotes as opposed to italics. In Research, the page on Integrating Material was too long and unwieldy for students. It needs to be broken down into smaller units. Furthermore, there are no interactive exercises for quoting or paraphrasing. Even if they were not strictly interactive (with computer generated feedback and grading), but relied on instructor grading, this would be an improvement.

This absence is perhaps connected to another area which MyCompLab does not really address. This is that essential aspect of teaching and assessing the craft of writing in which attention is given to the sense of sentences, the logic of paragraphs, good phrasing and accurate paraphrasing. These are things that can not be graded by a computer, and for which one can not create interactive exercises. (This is, by the way, one of problems that the English department is encountering with Writeplacer, which the College recently began to use to assess student need
for remediation.) The student must learn to consider the logical flow of thought from clause to clause and sentence to sentence.

In addition to the three areas of Resources, there are links in the top horizontal menu for Composing, Portfolio, Gradebook, and To Do.

In Composing, students can upload a document and work on it using a full range of word-processing options. A menu on the left-hand side, presents to students: 1) Writing tips, which include Getting Started, Writing the Introduction, Writing Interesting Sentences, Shaping Paragraphs, Writing the Conclusion, and Revising. 2) Finding Sources, which opens to the EBSCO Database (Pearson's database comes with Pearson's course). 3) Cite My Sources, which opens to a page enabling students to create a working bibliography, using Noodle. Students can also connect online with a Pearson Tutor.

This editing software allows for instructor feedback on a draft beautifully: instructors can insert pre-made links (such as “awkward”) to create their own or insert comments about content. One could also give some feedback on grammar and punctuation with pre-made links to help students develop their editing skills. Unfortunately, there is no wiki tool or discussion tool with which students and professors can access and view previous drafts and instructor comments. I'm hoping that the new version of Blackboard addresses both these needs: the need to use editing software on drafts and store student drafts and professor comments for later review by both parties.

MyCompLab offers WriteClick, an automated grammar/punctuation/spelling check software that students may download to their personal computers. My students found it difficult to find and difficult to download. When I downloaded it to my personal computer, I also found the download process to be tricky. Another problem is that it didn't look at much text at a time; its limit is 5000 characters. A worse problem is that it makes wild suggestions in terms of synonyms; it seems to not understand the use of capital and periods outside of the beginnings and
endings of sentences. And it certainly doesn’t read for meaning; thus, students who themselves
don’t know the meanings of many conjunctive adverbs and subordinate conjunctions, etc., may
be in for lots of misunderstandings and frustration. (Many of these problems are, again, similar
to our frustration with Writeplacer.) A minor aggravation is that WriteClick began to open every
time I turned on my laptop.

What else is missing from Composing? There is no ability to do peer reviews; there are
no discussion tools for small group work. Also, something I like about Blackboard is that from
virtually every tool, a professor has a link for sending a student an email. In MyCompLab, there
is an email tool, but it connects to an account/mailbox outside the courseware such as the student
and professor’s NCC account. Also, it can not be reached from whatever tool one is working
within. Both of these aspects make it time-consuming and clumsy; in other words, something to
avoid.

The Portfolio tool offers the instructor and students the ability to use portfolios. Students
select and move the finished pieces into a Portfolio. While students will not have access to the
Portfolio after their subscription to MyCompLab ends, they can download documents to their
computer. Also, prospective employers do not have access to the portfolio unless the student
made his/her ID and password available to them.

I found the Gradebook tool to be remarkably underdeveloped. The instructor has two
options here: Topic Results Summary, which I found worthless, because it failed to report the
work my students did. In contrast, the Students Results Summary did report individual student
work; unfortunately, however, I could not access in-depth information on a particular student.
The software could not tell me how many questions in a set had been attempted, which questions
the student had missed, or whether more than one set for a rule had been completed. I also
couldn’t tell whether students had opened or completed tutorials. In short, I couldn’t get in-
depth information, if I wanted it, on particular students. If a student’s score on a topic was 760, why was this the case?

Another link in the horizontal menu is To Do. Here the students find Assignments created by the professor. Creating Assignments, such as grammar and punctuation assignments, was not as smooth and easy as I would have liked. For instance, I found it hard to be able to see, in one window, all the assignments and due dates that I had already made, for example, if I wanted to check all the different due dates. Also, students were only shown assignments that were currently open, they weren’t able to see what would be scheduled and due in later weeks. Partly to get around these difficulties, I ended up giving all my grammar assignments the same due date: the end of the semester although students were instructed in my class calendar to complete them earlier in the semester.

The Calendar offers the option of clicking on dates (with alarm clocks on them) to see what is due on that date, but this is also a bit awkward, as then students would have to write this down since the list disappears when you click on another marked date.

To wrap up, almost all the students in my traditional, face-to-face class that met in the computer lab once a week bought MyCompLab courseware and liked it. However, interestingly, I discovered quite a bit of resistance among the students in my online English 101; they were slow to buy the courseware or simply never did. Once they bought it, most of them completed about 70 to 80 percent of the assignments. These less than perfect statistics are despite the fact that a portion of the course grade was based on MyCompLab work.

It may be that the online students found learning to navigate another website, in addition to Blackboard, too much.

I really like MyCompLab’s interactive grammar and punctuation exercises. This is a type of learning that is accomplished by rote, by drill work and by memorization. It is an excellent thing to be able to send students off to work on this at their own pace outside of class time.
Using Turnitin.com

I think most people are familiar with the Originality reports that Turnitin.com generates and which help spot plagiarism. I won’t say too much here; I like the feature of allowing students to see Originality and Grademark reports before due dates so that students can correct mistakes ahead of time. However, I recently found that the Turnitin failed to spot an eight word sentence that I had deliberately plagiarized in a demo student submission. Thus, there is still an argument for getting copies of the secondary sources to check on paraphrasing, quoting, and reading comprehension.

Grademark is Turnitin.com’s new grading/editing software. It uses the Educational Testing Service’s e-rater to automatically generate feedback on grammar/punctuation issues. Professors then may remove the comments or/and add their own comments to the student paper. I found it a little tricky to position my cursor. I also found that it could be time-consuming to read all the e-rater comments, in addition to the student essay, and judge which were good and which were not good suggestions, and which might need clarification. One possibility is to tell the students that as a professor, on drafts, you will not be reading/removing e-rater comments and that while some e-rater comments will be useful, others the students will find incorrect, such as spelling comments on an author’s name. Another problem with previewing all the e-rater commentary for the student is that then you are essentially editing the paper for the student. (It is perhaps good to know that the ETS e-rater was far more advanced than MyCompLab’s WriteClick.)

Turnitin.com can be set up to allow students to see Originality and Grademark reports before their final submission. Some of my students liked and used this feature. However, we found that located within Blackboard, the Turnitin.com links opened very slowly. Some students thought, erroneously, that Grademark wasn’t working because it took so long to open.

Peer Mark allows students to give a peer review to each other’s essay. I have not used
this feature yet. While the interactive nature of peer work seems ideal for an online class where students often want a sense of community, the second of my two peer review assignments in my online class fell apart as not enough students had completed their drafts on time and thus could not participate.

If there is one quality I would wish for Turnitin.com, it would be the ability to access previous drafts and teacher’s comments on an evolving project in a wiki/discussion format. Currently, one can build a revision assignment of an earlier paper with Turnitin.com. However, there is no comment box for instructor comments on student essays. Finally, it would be very nice to be able to incorporate Turnitin to a student journal in Blackboard, so when a long assignment has many steps, as in a research essay, student work can be viewed and analyzed in relation to earlier steps more easily.

In conclusion, I will continue to use these interactive software programs. I also hope and expect that they will be improved upon. I look forward to the time when the journals of Blackboard, the interactive computer-generated grammar exercises and grading software of MyCompLab, and the originality reports of Turnitin.com are all offered in one site. This will be my next project: to see if I can integrate all this better when we have a new version of Blackboard.
DIVERSE ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

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Abstract

A number of common tools work to assess student learning both in face-to-face classroom and online courses, but their applications may differ. Community building is an instructional technique that has a particular role in student learning in the online environment. In this presentation, Dr. Shaw explains how she uses diverse tools to assess student learning and how they help develop community building in two fully online courses and a web-complemented course she teaches.

Summary of Presentation

Assessment may be understood as the coursework and instructional techniques that are used to judge to what extent students are learning what is taught. Although face-to-face and online courses may share tools of assessment, some tools play a more significant role in the online environment. These tools are the ones that can be used for assessment and for building community. Student involvement and interaction combat isolation or alienation and promote
learning (Palloff and Pratt 232). As Rovai puts it, “The virtual classroom has the potential of building and sustaining sense of community at levels that are comparable to the traditional classroom.” Students in an online community with shared expectations and goals interact with classmates and instructor; develop a sense of belonging; feel connected to others; and trust or rely on them. Flannery makes a case for the importance of cooperative, collaborative learning for racial or ethnic groups that hold strong communal values, or “knowledge that is valued, how learning occurs, and communication patterns of working together for the good of community” (154). Most importantly, student online interaction and engagement associated with a sense of community have been found to be strongly correlated to success (Sadera et al).

Some scholars highlight the importance of authentic instruments and techniques for assessment (Meyen et al. 2002; Kellough and Kellough 1999). Authenticity refers to the assessment tools that are aligned with course objectives and real-world applications. These tools correspond to instructional activities and techniques commonly associated with active learning: cooperative or collaborative team or group work, simulation or case study, portfolio, small and large group discussion, chat, reflection, and peer evaluation. These diverse types of assessment tools respond to different students’ needs and learning styles and are thus more likely to aid learning.

The illustrative materials for this presentation are drawn from two fully online courses, Eng 314 Studies in Children’s Literature and WST 101 Introduction to Women’s Studies, and from a web-complemented course, Eng 030 ESL Writing III. Although both summative assessment and formative assessment are covered, more attention is given to the latter because it is more compatible with active learning and authentic instructional materials. Moreover, as Kellough and Kellough point out, “Teaching and learning are reciprocal processes that depend on and affect one another” (147). Therefore, this interdependence is also addressed in this presentation.
Summative assessment is the process we instructors use to evaluate and grade what students have learned after instruction. Student learning is compared against course and/or assignment objectives, standards, or benchmarks. In my online and web-complemented courses, I use written assignments, discussions, and tests to measure what students have learned (details on how they are used as tools of summative assessment are found in the course of this summary). Developing rubrics designed for assessment is made relatively easily nowadays with software such as Rubi Star. However, although I use rubrics, particularly in Eng 030, in the fully online courses I prefer to give students feedback in the form of comments. These comments focus on select key features and highlight select strengths and weaknesses in the students' work. Feedback is more properly regarded as a tool of formative assessment. It allows students to gauge what they don't know and still need to study to learn (Bransford, Vye, and Bateman 174).

Formative assessment takes place throughout the semester, typically prior to graded coursework, although it can also be incorporated into graded coursework. It encompasses ungraded practice, diagnostic coursework, and student self-assessment. If learning is not taking place as expected, instructors can adjust techniques and/or revise and edit the written parts of the assessment tools. Integrating formative assessment in graded coursework can be accomplished by creating a phase of feedback prior to grading. A web tracking service, such as Turnitin, issues a report for essays and papers I assign. It requires students to assess how well they complied with the guidelines for citations and non-plagiarized writing. I think this report should always be made available to students because it is the feedback they need to evaluate what they need to learn. Instructors can also ask students to submit a draft of any type of coursework prior to grading for feedback. This formative phase gives students the opportunity to apply the knowledge they gain in a new round of learning before their work undergoes summative assessment. In addition, instructors can provide feedback in the comment box of a Blackboard assignment and follow-up on specific issues via email or a Chat session.
In the online environment, it is particularly important to monitor the results of various forms of formative assessment because they can help instructors clarify, modify, or add coursework content, delivery, and instructional techniques. However, changes sometimes may take place in response to students’ needs we do not always anticipate. For example, students in their first semester do not know very well yet how to organize and process learning materials effectively. I have found that stating the chapter or article on which a test question is based draws students’ attention to the relevant instructional material. This technique results in less anxiety and better performance. In another instance, I modified a description of an electronic magazine assignment (known as an eZine). I had previously instructed student groups to be creative when organizing the information and illustrations they gather. However, this kind of creative organization seems to challenge students who need more structure. Therefore, I made a simple inclusion: templates. They provide structure but leave room for some creativity.

The introductory week in the fully online courses is devoted to formative assessment and learning. I start online interaction by setting up chats to talk to students in small groups. These chats begin building community. In addition to the chats, students are asked to read informational and teaching documents. In the online environment, informational or teaching documents replace lecturing, explanations, instructions, and demonstrations that instructors deliver or present orally in face-to-face courses. Teaching documents include one-page mini-lectures I author in print. Students are also asked to complete a practice assignment, take a practice test, and answer a discussion prompt. None of these assignments are graded. They have a common purpose: to get students to learn how to use Blackboard tools (assignment, assessment [tests/quizzes], discussion, email, chat) and prepare for the graded coursework.

In both of my fully online courses I assign a teaching document entitled “Academic Honesty & Plagiarism,” which is linked as a course objective. In ENG 314, it serves as a review of what students are expected to have learned in ENG 102: the basics of citing sources and
avoiding plagiarism in writing. In the introductory WST 101, a first-semester course at NCC for many of the students, this document introduces them to the need to cite sources and paraphrase, summarize and quote appropriately to avoid plagiarism. Given the expectation in ENG 314, a short test allows them to practice recognizing when a text is plagiarized and when it is not. Students must assess their knowledge and what they need to learn every time they take the test. There is no limit to the number of times they may take the test to get one hundred percent of the questions correct. In WST 101, I expect incremental development of the ability to cite and avoid plagiarism, so I monitor assignments and provide formative feedback before and after grading them. Students are given a chance to correct plagiarism; the only time they are penalized is when they do not make the effort to do so.

In addition, students in both courses are assigned a Practice assignment. They are asked to write about a course-specific topic in two paragraphs. It prepares them for their first graded assignment, the Journal Essay; students can also measure their ability to work with the Blackboard assignment tool. They can seek help and learn how to use it during this week. I include a topic that I hope will interest them, but knowledge of the topic is not measured. There is clear evidence that students engage in a process of self-assessment. They review the assignment description and instructions multiple times, self-correcting and seeking help for what they don’t know how to do or can’t manage to do correctly.

I also use discussion prompts as a diagnostic tool. A diagnostic tool is useful for both formative and teaching assessment. It evaluates students’ prior knowledge and gives instructors feedback on student learning. The instructors can then adjust the curriculum and address students’ needs in order to improve student learning. I am able to judge the students’ ability to use the Discussion forum as a Blackboard tool, to communicate appropriately, to use critical thinking, and to write (develop and organize thoughts, express themselves clearly, support what they say, show a reasonable command of Standard English). From the perspective of teaching
assessment, this tool allows me to see if the description of the assignment and the instructions are understood as I intend them to be and to make adjustments if needed. From the perspective of formative assessment, students evaluate their ability to use this tool and make up for deficiencies by seeking help and learning how to use it effectively. Very importantly, discussion prompts trigger interaction that builds community. Students read each others’ prompts and respond. Then they read the responses to their responses and respond. In the process, they confirm shared experiences and knowledge of some issues and learn from others’ experiences and knowledge. In WST 101, we begin to see empathetic comments in response to certain experiences or situations.

Finally, in the introductory week, students can take a practice test, an ungraded 4-question test that allows students to judge their ability to use this Blackboard assessment tool, practice taking a test, and to become familiar with the four types of questions used in graded tests. In ENG 314, students have the option of taking a graded test linked to a mini-lecture they are assigned to read. The purpose of this option is to allow students to see what a full scale graded test is like without the pressure to score well since the points they obtain do not count toward their final course grade. Not all students make use of this option, but many do. Therefore, during the first week of classes, students in the fully online courses are engaged in applying what they are learning, practicing, and self-assessing.

Giving students in fully online courses more than one opportunity to take a test (or Assessment in Blackboard parlance) and selecting certain settings allows students to assess their knowledge and lack thereof. Although they receive points and a grade every time they take a test, they know they can gauge what they have learned and still need to learn. A required minimum period of time in-between takes is needed for students to review and study (for example, 10 minutes or half an hour) Randomizing questions and selecting the all-or-nothing criterion for scoring answers in multiple choice questions forces students to read the questions and answers.
every time they take a test rather than automatically re-check correct answers. In other words, whenever they take the test, students must again assess what they know and what they still need to learn. Although not all students use test results to evaluate progress, some do. Some students email me: they ask me what they miss; sometimes they ask me why a certain answer is not correct, giving me an idea of what they know. These questions and my answers create learning opportunities. This kind of student feedback also offers me an opportunity to modify materials to enhance student learning.

The first graded assignment in both of my fully online courses, the Journal Essay, has a double function. It is a tool of summative assessment in that I measure and grade their ability to write, use Blackboard to produce an assignment following instructions, and produce a topic-specific assignment. It also serves to build a community. One of the objectives of the Journal Essay is to help a student’s classmates and instructor to get to know her or him (the first and last paragraphs are devoted to personal information the student chooses to share). Another objective is to get students started on the content area; the related technique consists of prompting questions that direct them to the main course topic: children’s books in ENG 314 and gender issues and experiences in WST 101. More specifically, in ENG 314, for example, students are asked to share their history of reading as children.

I encourage interaction both in and outside the course. For instance, in regard to the reading history of the Journal Essay in ENG 314, students are encouraged not to rely only on their memory and to seek information from relatives if possible. The get-to-know component of the Journal Essay is a technique to build a sense of community in the class and to facilitate various cooperative group assignments the students will need to undertake. Sharing personal information, experiences, and thoughts helps them see what they have in common and empathize. References to commonalities and empathetic remarks emerge in a related assignment that requires interaction and feedback. Students are asked to read their classmates’ essays and
respond not only to the essays but to their classmates’ responses; thus, a conversation ensues. This interactive technique is used for all the discussion assignments in the course, keeping the students connected.

After students submit their assignments in the online courses and a summative assessment is completed, I provide feedback in the assignment comment box. I have found that the assignment description and instructions influence students’ performance, so instructors need to evaluate how they work. The questions students ask me before and after they start working on an assignment help me assess my students’ understanding of the description and instructions. Of course, their final performance also tells me whether I need to adjust these parts. Furthermore, I use some students’ work as models (with their permission). A model assignment shows the successful application of the assignment objectives and correct understanding of the assignment descriptions and instructions. Students engage in self-assessment when checking the adequacy of what they are doing against the proven adequacy of the model. Therefore, in online courses, the model builds confidence and lessens the need for clarification.

In my section of ENG 030 ESL Writing III, a web-complemented face-to-face course, formative assessment takes place throughout the semester. The only graded assignment in the course is the essay exam students take at the very end of the semester. Students read, write and make oral presentations otherwise. They receive feedback from me and their peers, and in the case of some students, from Writing Center instructors as well. I use the Discussion Forum to ask questions about the readings. Their answers give me feedback on their comprehension, language, and grammar skills. The students use the feedback they receive to revise and edit their writing. From day one, I emphasize the development of the ability to recognize certain compositional, language, and grammar points in their writing and the role of editing and proofreading. These are skills that require self-assessment and are crucial steps in their final essay exam. In this way, they are accessing what they know and what they need to know.
Recognition reinforces what they know and help them learn what they don't know. In addition, students can take advantage of tests and exercises I make available in the course website. They work independently on these and the software gives them immediate feedback. Again, these types of coursework involve and reinforce self-assessment.

Given our large number of first-year teenage students, assignments that pique their interest work well for formative assessment. Instructors that are technologically inclined can make use of freeware or open source programs to create assignments that cannot be created with Blackboard. For example, "Hot Potatoes" is a freeware (not open source) with six applications. Jumbled-sentences and crosswords are among other types of activities that cannot be created in Blackboard. "Quandary" allows you to create web-based action mazes. For more ambitious instructors, "Eclipse" is open source and allows individuals and organizations to put together commercially-friendly open source software.

As for instructional techniques, I would like to highlight some points that I think are relevant for formative assessment and community building. Most of us are familiar with small and large group discussion, a non-graded activity that allows instructors to do an informal summative assessment of student learning and for students to self-assess their own knowledge. In online courses, students can also participate in discussions and work in small groups. Asking certain types of questions is also a useful tool. Some of these questions are pertinent at the beginning of the course or before readings, assignments, or tests. Others are relevant after readings or assignments and at the end of the course. For example, questions that ask students what was most or least important or valuable; what they didn't understand; what remained unanswered; what they feel they need to learn more; and what they wish they will learn or had learned. I use such questions in the discussion forum, assignments, and end-of-semester course feedback (or course evaluation). In my experience, students' questions and comments have shown that providing model student assignments in connection with graded assignments
provides more than an illustration of an assignment to students. In the process of doing the assignment, students are self-assessing their work. The same type of self-assessment occurs when students cooperatively work in groups. My instructions specifically state that they can divide up the work initially, but that they are to seek feedback from and give feedback to each other during the entire time they are working together. It is not unusual for students to make evaluative comments in the comment box as they submit the assignment or after they submit the assignment. Indiana University has an excellent list of active learning activities that embody many useful instructional techniques for formative assessment.

In summary, as illustrated, many of the tools of summative and formative assessment may be successfully employed to build community in the online environment. The instructor determines the tools to be used to build community, but it is the students who largely carry on this activity. In conjunction with community building, formative assessment offers many learning opportunities that students who work in isolation in online courses do not have. Therefore, I believe that instructional tools of assessment in online course should always be linked to community building.

Works Cited


MIMICKING INFORMAL ASSESSMENT IN ONLINE COURSES: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

We often may not think of low-stakes, day-to-day assessment (e.g., basic question and answer with students, listening to collaborative group work, interpreting facial expressions to assess understanding) in face-to-face courses as Assessment (i.e., the kind of significant assessment that requires study and consideration). While low-stakes assessment is just as crucial as more formal assessment (e.g., grading papers, exams, etc.), achieving it can seem virtually impossible in fully online courses. I discuss how I use quizzes and discussion boards to replicate that kind of assessment and the benefits and challenges involved (including the need to re-educate the students).

Summary of Presentation

When I was first asked to speak about assessment in online courses, I thought of Assessment with capital A. I teach English, so I grade papers and have exams, and those are not really all that different in face-to-face or online courses, so I thought I had nothing to contribute. Then I began to think about assessment with small a, which is the kind of assessment we do every day, the kind of assessment that we don’t always consider as assessment and certainly that
our students don’t think of as assessment: question and answer, observing group collaboration, even reading facial expressions to assess whether a point is clear or not. This kind of assessment is crucial, but it is virtually impossible in online courses because they are asynchronous (i.e., the students do not meet at the same time).

With an online course the question becomes: how can I conduct that kind of assessment, the more low-stakes kind that helps teachers know that the material has somehow gotten through? Today I will talk about a couple of ways I try to mimic this kind of low-stakes assessment in online classes and the benefits and challenges that come with these methods.

I have been offering fully online courses here at NCC since 2005, but I first began teaching online in 2001. Back then and at the school where I taught, online education was very new and there were not many guidelines, so you learned mostly by trial and error. In my face-to-face classes I employ many low-stakes assessments, so many that I don’t even think about it. It is just part of what I do. In my experience teaching online, I didn’t realize the lack of such low-stakes assessment until I had problems i.e., students not understanding key ideas or not following directions on assignments though they thought they were.

Here at NCC I teach English 102 online and two upper level literature courses. While the specific content and assignments differ, my basic structure is the same. Students have a set of assignments due each week and due at the same time each week, and habituating them is crucial since too many students take online courses when they really should not because they do not have the time management skills that they need.

Their work includes reading, reviewing PowerPoint presentations, taking quizzes over the readings and posting and replying in discussion board forums. Papers and exams are the high-stakes assignments and vary depending on the course. In my composition courses, weekly discussions sometimes focus on elements of writing and sometimes focus on literature. In my upper-level courses the content is literature-based.

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I mimic the kind of low-stakes assessment that goes on daily in my face-to-face classes via the quizzes and the discussion boards. Now obviously, a quiz is an assessment. But I structure the quizzes, and use them in class, as a way to ascertain how well ideas are getting across. My quizzes are not timed. Students have the entire week to take the quiz and can leave and return to it at will. I do not foreground this fact, but they pick up on it fairly quickly. Thus, they can review the quiz, and then review the Power Point presentations to look for the answers. However, they should eventually learn that the quizzes are not solely asking for them to repeat exactly what they read in the Power Points. In fact, while for some key ideas I do want them to just repeat something I covered, in most cases my questions ask them to apply a principle covered in the presentations. Some students eventually start just cutting and pasting from the Power Points, but all that shows me is that they know where in the presentation that material is covered and not that they understand it.

Since my purpose is to use the quizzes in order to see how well ideas are getting across, I grade the quizzes as students do them and if certain ideas are not getting across, I can discuss those ideas in the discussion boards. In short, I use the quizzes the way I might use question/answer or even an interpretation of student facial expressions in a face-to-face course. Some might think that this is not a fair practice since those who take the quizzes first and miss ideas lead me to reinforce ideas that the others may benefit from. True enough, but there are three reasons I don't feel bad about doing this. First, the students who do the quizzes early are by and large the ones who read most carefully and do the best. Second, I only emphasize a point if it is really crucial and I am seeing people consistently missing it. Third, and most importantly, the quizzes count for very little of the student's course grade. In my composition class the entire semester's worth of quizzes and discussion board grade averages combined only counts for 15% of the course grade, the same as participation in my face-to-face class. In my upper level classes quizzes only count for 10 percent of the course grade.
Here is where we see some benefits and challenges. Students interpret "quiz" as "exam," so some will kill themselves to take a quiz and not submit a paper. Or in my upper level class where the discussion boards count for 30% of the course, they will do the quiz and not the discussion boards. I have learned that you have to re-educate the students about what counts most. In my face-to-face classes students are being assessed, but they are not receiving weekly grades. In the online courses, they are receiving weekly grades because if I do not grade them, they will not do the quiz and I will have nothing to assess. The weekly grading means they focus on that and sometimes do not realize that the grade counts for very little.

Discussion boards function as both class discussion and assessment. I want them to develop ideas, develop a voice and gain confidence in their voices, but I also want to assess how well they understood what was covered in the readings and the presentations. So the questions are geared toward that. Usually, there are three required forums, and the questions vary in type. Some are from the presentations—i.e., I will cover an idea and then ask questions and they must select 2-3 and answer them in the forum. Or I will specify questions which are raised in the presentations and they must answer those. Or I ask them to pose a question about the reading or presentation.

The students are required to reply to at least one student in each forum, and I emphasize that their grade goes up the more they contribute. What I have learned is that often when students post an idea that they have misunderstood, even before I have time to reply, another student has pointed the issue out. Thus, the benefit of the discussion boards is that we all participate in the assessment. Also, students learn very quickly that they can raise questions about ideas they did not understand. However, discussion boards are limited because many students wait until the last minute to post or to reply, and thus I have no way to be sure whether they read my comments if I offer a clarification.
The biggest challenge that I have noticed in terms of this kind of low-stakes assessment comes with respect to basic directions. Often what seems very clear to me in the instructions is confusing to some students. For English 102, if I am teaching both face-to-face and online courses that semester, my face-to-face students raise questions that I then address with my online students. But in purely online courses, I often do not realize that an instruction is not being understood until the assignment is submitted. The closest I have come to a remedy for this is to offer samples of assignments that do follow the instructions and try to anticipate what students might not understand. I have sometimes even asked them to email me with a brief description in their own words of major assignments where I fear they might not grasp a key idea.

**Concluding Remarks**

With regard to trying to mimic low-stakes assessment in online courses: 1. you cannot presume that you have been as clear as you think you have been, so try to anticipate where you may not have been clear; 2. no matter how often you need to repeat something in a face-to-face class, plan on more emphasis in an online course; 3. using tools like quizzes and discussion boards can help, but you must remember that students interpret “quiz” as “exam,” and they often do not think about grades the way we do, so you will need to re-educate them about what the overall weight of these low stakes assignments is.
FORWARD THINKING WITH BACKWARD DESIGN

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Abstract

How to design for the online classroom is a challenge facing many educators today. Paradoxically, "forward thinking" course design begins by looking at the end to be achieved and working backwards to reach that goal. The "Backward Design" framework focuses on determining desired learning outcomes and creating assessments before deciding on content to be taught, creating learning activities, or developing a syllabus. The results are courses that engage and challenge students.

Summary of Presentation

How to design for the online classroom is a challenge facing educators. Good course design is essential in bringing about new knowledge and understanding for students. Paradoxically, forward thinking course design begins by looking at the end to be achieved and working backward to reach that goal. This requires a shift from "content to be covered" to "learning to be demonstrated." What should students be doing as a result of this course, and how will we know they’ve gained this knowledge? These are the questions instructors should ask as they begin the process of designing their course.
An assessment driven model that provides a framework for designing courses around learning goals is the Backward Design model (Wiggins and McTighe, 2008). This model lends itself well to the online environment by providing a conceptual framework and a means for planning instruction. The Backward Design framework focuses on determining desired learning outcomes before deciding on content to be taught, creating learning activities, or developing a syllabus. The results are courses that engage and challenge students. The Backward Design framework also conceptually integrates well with Blackboard Learn 9 through learning modules that provide students with a roadmap to navigate their course. Applying this instructional design model to practice will connect course structure and design with learning effectiveness in the online environment.

**How do Instructors Design and Develop an Online Course?**

The Backward Design model uses an integrated approach in which the three components support and reinforce each other. There are three stages to backward design:

- **Stage 1:** Identify desired results
- **Stage 2:** Determine acceptable evidence of learning
- **Stage 3:** Design learning experiences and instruction around desired results and evidence

**Why is it Called “Backwards”?**

With this model, the design of the online course starts at the end of the learning process and works backward to design quality assurance into courses. As a result, instructors need to think about assessment before deciding what and how content will be taught. This is a conceptual shift from the traditional approach of planning course design in which content to be taught is the priority. Instead of beginning with the conventional strategy of moving through a textbook chapter by chapter, this approach looks at the end and builds on what students should come away with. As Wiggins and McTighe note, “If you don’t know exactly where you are headed, then any road will get you there” (p. 14).
How does the Backward Design Model Work?

![Backward Design Model Diagram]

What Happens during the Three Stages of Course Design?

**Stage 1** asks designers to consider what they want students to understand and then to frame those understandings in terms of questions: What should students be able to do at the end of the course? Instructors should distill approximately five major learning outcomes, identify associated learning objectives, and then work backwards to design the course.

**Stage 2** asks designers to consider a variety of assessment methods for gathering evidence of desired understandings. What evidence can show that students have achieved the desired results of Stage 1? How do instructors assess that students have accomplished what they have set out to do? If students complete the assessment successfully, then they will have demonstrated their understanding of the content material.

**Stage 3** calls for the design of major learning activities and lessons. What are the major learning activities and lessons that will assist students in reaching the goals of Stage 2? Instructors should create instructional activities that take advantage of digital resources including library databases, multimedia and mashups, open educational resources, and social media tools. Instructors should ask the following questions to provide active learning resources:

- Do the learning activities support learning goals?
• Are the rich resources of the web being utilized?
• Are the students doing things?
• Is student-student interaction being facilitated?

This conceptual model also illustrates the distinction between distance education as it was originally conceived through correspondence courses, and what it can be today with the evolution of technology and instructional design. The use of varied content materials and diverse teaching strategies serves to enhance the capabilities for interaction and to create interesting educational opportunities that appeal to different learning styles. Examples of activities that work well in the online environment include:

• Discussions
• Case studies
• Group work
• Reflection
• Peer review/editing
• Debates
• Presentations

What is the End Result of this Assessment Driven Model?

Online learning can be both engaging and effective. An online course is more than a collection of PowerPoints and lecture notes but instead reflects varied content and collaboration between students. It has the capability of driving students deeper into the subject. In planning, instructors should think about assessment first before deciding what they will teach, which ultimately will bring about designing for understanding.

References


Cheryl Novins is an Associate Professor in the Reading and Basic Education Department at Nassau Community College. Her recent research has focused on reading workshop, assessment, and using technology including social media to empower students in the classroom. Most recently, she has presented "Incorporating Technology in Remedial and Credit Courses" at NYCLSA 2013 (Syracuse, NY), "Examining Students' Morals Using Critical Thinking and Technology at CCHA 2012 (Cambridge, MA), "Reading Workshop: How Do We Assess Our College Readers" at NADE 2012 (Orlando, FL). Her second textbook "The Pearson Textbook Reader" was published in February 2010. Dr. Novins' focus in the classroom is to make her students responsible for their own learning and teach them the needed skills to become life-long learners.

Susan Newlin-Wagner is in the Reading and Basic Education Department at Nassau Community College. She has co-authored two new courses for her department, "Reading the New Media" and "News on the Net." The goal of these two courses is to encourage students to become knowledgeable consumers of information.

Abstract

This presentation discusses how the use of Facebook and Tumblr has enabled students to expand their knowledge of topics discussed in the classroom and share their thoughts and opinions after critically reading information found by their peers and shared on these social networks. The presenters also describe how they assess their students' use of these social networking resources.
Summary of Presentation

Introduction

In today’s world of never-ending technological advances, it makes perfect sense that a great number, if not all, college students are "plugged in" to their Smartphone and other devices and are constantly interacting with their peers using social media sites. These students, who live in today’s blink-and-you-miss-it world, often find it difficult to engage in learning when asked to abandon the devices that they rely on throughout their daily routines. We have tried to capitalize on this by implementing the use of social media in the developmental classroom to build students’ background knowledge and to extend classroom discussions. This has been an exciting venture for us as we have run many pilot programs in our classes.

Wingfield (2012) found many advantages to using social media to support formal and informal learning to engage the learners by employing familiar media that they were already using. The author found that social media are highly collaborative, provide equal opportunity for all learners, and encourage Real Life Skills, such as sharing knowledge and developing dynamic/adaptive learning. While research indicates that student use of social media is integrally related to how they engage in the world, there has been little research on how the use of social media might be linked to college engagement and how this might affect academic outcomes (Junco, Elavsky, & Heiberger, 2012). Initially, our objective was to engage students by using technology, and social media specifically, when we modified some of our teaching methods; however, we soon realized that we would have to expand this by focusing on how we would assess our students’ learning using these new mediums.

Tumblr in the Classroom

The focus of BEP 091: Basic Education Writing is for students to progress through the writing process and learn how to write well-supported grammatically correct essays. During the
last few years, we have noticed that while our students have ideas to put in their essays, they are having a harder time supporting these ideas. They had limited background knowledge and if we were going to help them learn how to create depth in their essays, we were going to have to facilitate a way to build their knowledge base. We decided to use tumblr. (a miniblog which allows a fast way to share links, photos, articles, videos, quotes, etc. without the use of lengthy commentary) to help our students help themselves learn more about the world (and their essay topics).

Since tumblr. is not as popular as some of the other social media sites, not all of my students were familiar with it. We spent one class session introducing tumblr. and helping the students create accounts on their smart phones. A few students didn’t have smart phones so they used the computers in our classrooms to create their accounts. We then introduced the idea of microblogging. We showed them how they can search for a topic on the Internet and find useful information for their essays. It was explained that they would be accountable to the entire class when they shared information on tumblr. and that they could not just share a link, video or article without a personal message added. They were expected to inform their classmates about the information they shared. They were required to notify their classmates, their followers, in one sentence what they should be looking for in the shared information.

As the semester progressed, students became more comfortable with tumblr. as a platform to share their articles and journals and as a resource to use their classmates’ finds to support evidence in their own essays. While the information they shared with their posts was limited at first, they eventually became secure in their own findings and included additional information. For example, they began to accompany their findings with insightful messages such as: “This article is from a newspaper in Ohio and is from last week and has 4 problems young single parents face.” “Check out this video! Skip to 2:45:04 and watch it b/c it is an
This article talks about the signs of suicide, causes, how to help and other serious considerations. But be careful because our essay question only asks for reasons and this article talks about a lot more stuff.

We used two criteria to assess students’ use of tumblr. Initially, students were given credit for finding useful articles and videos and accompanying them with insightful messages that directly related to their weekly essay questions as long as this was completed within forty-eight hours of getting their weekly assignments. The second part of the assessment process focused on how they used their new found tumblr information in their essays. In their essays, students were required to use information from the class’s tumblr page and cite the initial sources of the information as well as show that they were able to work the information into their essays in a useful and thoughtful manner. While some students did not post articles or videos and neglected to use the information on tumblr, in their essays, the majority of students in our classes did take advantage of using tumblr.

The use of tumblr in the classroom proved quite beneficial to students in our classes. Many of our students noted that they didn’t feel overwhelmed by all of the information bombarding them as they searched on the internet since they were only looking for one or two articles/videos that would serve as solid support for their essays. They also mentioned that they felt responsible for sharing information with their peers and it made them complete their homework tasks of finding articles and videos a bit more readily. As instructors, we feel that it gave them the ability to take a bit more ownership over their learning and it also fostered a close-knit community of learners in our classes.

**Facebook in the Classroom**

The focus on BEP 090: Basic Education Reading, which is run as a Reading Workshop, is to improve the skills of reluctant readers through reading (both in and out of the classroom),
class discussions, and correspondences. Many of the students in our BEP 090 classes are not comfortable sharing their ideas about what they read in front of their classmates, while other students find the quick pace of classroom discussions overwhelming and do not feel their ideas would significantly contribute to class discussions. Introducing the use of Facebook in BEP 090 felt like a very natural progression since our focus is to get our students comfortable sharing ideas with one another, and this is similar to how they respond to their friends’ posts on their own Facebook pages.

To separate the academic use of Facebook from the students’ personal use of Facebook, we created a private Facebook group for each of our class sections. Each student was invited to become a member of their class’s group which gave them access to the postings of their classmates and instructors. Almost every one of our students had Facebook accounts, but not many of them knew how group pages work on Facebook, but they were interested in using a social media that was well known to them, even though it was for academic use.

We used Facebook to extend the conversations that occurred during our class sessions in many ways. During our class discussions in BEP 090, students talk about the self-chosen books that they are reading and share information with their classmates regarding how they feel about their books. On Facebook, we often asked our students to go beyond their initial thoughts about their books. We would post questions such as, "As you can recall the discussion we’ve been having in class is about characters spiraling toward destruction. Which character in your book is headed for disaster? Why and what do you predict will happen to him or her? Respond to this question AND respond to at least two of your classmates." This allowed students to take their time and think of their responses outside of class. We found that students were able to express themselves clearly and compose posts that were thoughtful and provocative when they were outside of the classroom setting.
We also used Facebook as a way to continue conversations about articles we brought into the classroom that are related to issues in our students’ books. After reading an article in class, we posted on our Facebook group page “What is your opinion about the Newsday article “Heroin article isn’t the half of it”? Are you able to relate anything in the article to your book? Also, please try and respond to your classmates’ postings as well.” From students’ responses, it was evident that they were able to connect the article with their books and their personal lives. The online discussion that ensued revealed some very interesting information. Students showed compassion for classmates who shared that they had lost loved ones to heroin overdoses. It was apparent that their online conversation brought them closer together and they seemed to have a better understanding of each other. Their ability to connect their online reading online with their classmates lead to their growth as students.

Assessing students’ use of Facebook was based on the guidelines given for each assignment. The number of submissions required and the fullness of the students’ replies were analyzed. Some students neglected to read their classmates’ responses and that was quite evident in their own postings. The students’ subsequent literary letters and class discussions also gave us insight into how much information they brought back into the classroom from their online Facebook discussions. We will continue to use Facebook in our BEP 090 classes.

Concerns & Social Media

Using social media in the classroom did not come without some issues. Students are quite proficient in using many social media sites but are not accustomed to using formal language when posting information. We discussed at length with our students how and what we expected them to post. We also spent time with our students establishing clear boundaries using both tumblr and Facebook. They needed to understand that they did not have to become “friends” with their classmates and that we would not accept any type of bullying or harassment.
Finally, as instructors we are constantly discussing the fine art of assessment and the benefits of holistic grading over finite grading, and we plan to continue its use in our courses. We have found that using social media makes students more comfortable with their classmates and with the material discussed in class.