



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

USING PORTFOLIOS TO ASSESS WRITING OUTCOMES

Outcomes Assessment

The issue of stating and assessing educational outcomes has gained attention at our college in recent years. This interest was sparked by an upcoming visit from North Central Association's Higher Learning Commission—we wanted to remain accredited. However, when we began examining outcomes assessment, we found that it had more to offer than simply a way to retain our accreditation.

When we in the writing program asked ourselves what our students were learning and how we could improve the teaching/learning process, we realized that we didn't know. We had ideas—we stated goals and taught to them, and we applied assessments such as essays and writing projects that were designed to find out whether our students knew and could do what we thought they should. These practices certainly gave us data, but what was lacking was a systematic way to gather specific data that was directly tied to course outcomes and to track that data semester-to-semester. We also wanted to gather data on the writing program as a whole—rather than individual instructors grading essays in isolation, we wanted to develop an assessment that would tell us about student learning department-wide, yet still provide specific feedback to each instructor.

The Portfolio Process

The first assessment we developed in the writing program was a portfolio assessment. This targeted English 101, the first course in our "regular" composition sequence, and English 091, the developmental version of the course. We began by researching how other institutions were assessing writing, adapting some models we had seen to our program's context by meshing them with ideas of our own. In *An Overview of Writing Assessment*, Willa Wolcott and Sue Legg write that "the concept of portfolios...implies that students' best or most representative pieces are displayed, that

students have a choice in selecting what goes into the portfolio, and that their selections are based on knowledgeable reflections about their own work done over a period of time." This outline appealed to us, and we decided to work toward it.

We settled on an assessment. All students assemble portfolios containing an evaluation essay, an in-class essay written to a common prompt, and an essay of their choice (written in that class). All essays but the one in-class are open to extensive revision through the course before submission. Each portfolio is read by at least two instructors who rate it a pass or a fail according to a common rubric that represents some of the outcomes of the course. If an instructor fails a portfolio, she fills out a comment sheet (described later). If the first two readers disagree, the portfolio is read by a third instructor. This system ensures that, in order for a student to receive either a pass or a fail, two instructors must agree. If the student fails the assessment, he fails the course. If the student passes, he may receive any grade at the instructor's discretion. All readings are anonymous—the readers do not know the identity of the student, the instructor, or the other reader(s).

In order to assess the portfolios fairly, all instructors of English 101 and 091 must come to a similar understanding of the outcomes of the courses and a consensus as to what those outcomes look like in student writing. Required sample readings of student essays are held over the course of the semester during which instructors have the opportunity to reach this consensus. In these sessions, we not only read and discuss sample portfolios, but we also share frustrations and successes, assignments and techniques. This is an excellent outgrowth of the assessment process—the opportunity to engage each other in dialogue about what makes student writing "good" and to discuss how best to encourage our students to write at that level.

Implementation

To implement the process, we first formed a pilot group consisting of three full-time and one adjunct faculty. We tried the process on our own sections of English 101, meeting several times throughout the



semester to refine the assessment. We then piloted the assessment over all sections of English 101 and 091 in subsequent semesters; and finally, in winter semester 2002, we implemented it for real. Each semester's experience led us to revision; we're still revising the process in ways that can improve the "feedback loop"—using the assessment data to help us increase our students' learning.

One recent innovation is a feedback sheet that allows readers to indicate specific areas of concern with individual portfolios. The sheet follows a format similar to the rubric, but is more detailed. While the rubric indicates A, B, C, D, and E levels of content, structure, style, and mechanics, the feedback sheet breaks them down still further. For example, there are four sub-statements under the area of content (such as "topics were vaguely focused"), and instructors use a Likert scale to indicate their level of agreement with each statement. This allows us to represent qualitative data numerically.

Instructors then aggregate the sheets for each course they teach, and I use that data to create a report representing all sections of English 101/091. I also track pass/fail rates and the numbers of third readings, indicators of instructors' common understanding of the outcomes and what they look like in student portfolios. We use those data to hold workshops and discussions on where we are succeeding and how best to help students learn what they seem to be lacking.

Pairing Summative and Formative Assessments

Because students can revise two out of three essays before they submit them for the portfolio (even after they have submitted them for a grade in the course), the portfolio assessment encourages them to view writing as a continual process and to apply skills and techniques learned later in the course to revise essays written earlier. However, the assessment is summative. It is designed to find out how well students can write at the end of their course. While these are useful data, they need to be paired with formative assessment to be effective.

Consider the following scenario. When I aggregate the data from my last semester's failing portfolios, I find that most students who failed did so due to insufficient development of ideas. In response, I focus my teaching this semester on development—new techniques, more time spent on it, etc. Instead of waiting until the portfolio assessment to see whether I was effective, I should perform periodic classroom assessments targeted on idea development. In *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, Thomas Angelo and Patricia Cross write that formative assessments "are almost never graded...almost always anonymous" and

that they "provide faculty with information on what, how much, and how well students are learning, in order to help them better prepare to succeed—both on the subsequent graded evaluations and in the world beyond the classroom." An example might be an in-class writing assignment in which I ask students to develop a specific idea or thesis, maybe in a format we recently had discussed in class. Then I would collect the results (anonymously) and read through them. I would use what I saw to adjust my teaching, and then I would conduct another assessment. The point is, if I wait until the portfolio assessment to find out if my students are learning how to develop their ideas, it is too late. I want to find out if I am helping these students *before* the portfolio when the stakes are much lower and I still have time to adjust my teaching practices.

Conclusion

While the portfolio assessment serves as a way to evaluate whether students have attained the necessary writing skills to progress to the next course in the sequence, its primary purpose is to provide us with data about how well our students can write at the end of their writing course. When we find that they don't know what we thought they did (or what we think they should), we think of ways we can help them learn better the next time around. By pairing the summative portfolio assessment with formative classroom assessments, we can target areas for improvement and monitor our progress throughout the semester. We have seen positive effects on our students; and as we continue to revise our process, we should see more.

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