



A IS FOR ASSESSMENT SYMPOSIUM: The Assessment Plan: A Work Constantly in Progress

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An assessment plan should be a living document, subject to pruning and open to growth. The journalism faculty at Eastern Illinois University adopted a plan in April 2004 but then revised it in August 2004. It has since been revised three more times, including the latest version, which was approved at a February faculty meeting. On paper, that may seem like an excessive number of changes, but in practice, it is not. The assessment plan, after all, is about change. The whole point of assessment is to offer a process to critically evaluate the curriculum and then revise it as needed. For an assessment plan to succeed, faculty must be open to change, not only in the curriculum, but also in the plan itself and in the measures adopted to implement the plan.

A Brief History of Eastern Illinois University's Assessment Plan

The original plan was adopted before I joined the faculty. Department chair James Tidwell explained that in 2004, the department was under the gun to have a plan in place when it went up for re-accreditation by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. The ACEJMC adopted assessment as a standard in 2001 and expected departments to have a plan in place by September 2003 and to begin using assessment data to evaluate their curricula by September 2004 (Accrediting, 2011, pp. 15-16). Additionally, the university has long required all departments to conduct assessment activities and file annual reports on what the assessment shows and

how the departments are using that information to evaluate curricula. Until the ACEJMC pressure, the department had muddled along with only a couple of assessment measures in place. Tidwell said that at some point “it just clicked” that the journalism department’s assessment plan should be based on the ACEJMC’s core professional values and competencies. At the time, 11 professional values and competencies existed, and the department’s plan simply set those as its 11 assessment objectives.

Initially, the plan overreached by assessing too many classes. Department members simply were not gathering all the information that the plan directed them to collect. The breakdowns occurred in four main areas:

- Lack of faculty buy-in in some courses;
- Inability to figure out what constitutes a good assessment measure in a given course;
- Failure to give enough direction about assessment measures; and
- Inability to keep up with the sheer volume of work.

In fall 2006, the assessment committee began a major revision of the assessment plan. That revision was adopted in spring 2007. In the following academic year, it was tweaked further. Another revision was adopted in spring 2008. Those two revisions pared back the courses requiring assessment to eight courses in our major’s core: the entry-level Journalism and Democracy class, two writing/reporting classes, Introduction to Copy Editing, Introduction to Visual

Communication, Journalism Ethics, Communication Law, and one media and society class (chosen from among five classes offered). We set to work identifying assessment measures in those courses.

We have continued to tweak the plan until we now assess not only in those core classes but also in one course in most of our concentrations. We also added an introductory multimedia reporting class to the core a couple years ago, and that course was added to the assessment plan. Finally, we also decided to assess in History of American Journalism.

The latest full-scale revision of the plan came about because the ACEJMC changed its core professional values and competencies by adding emphasis on freedom of expression in other countries, as well as the United States, and by splitting a former single diversity competency into two separate competencies—one focused domestically and the other globally (ACEJMC Ascent, 2009). A complete list of the ACEJMC's professional values and competencies is available online (Accrediting, 2009).

Lessons Learned

Through all these revisions, the department's aim has been to produce a plan that examines what we teach, while making assessment as painless for the individual professors as possible. After all, if assessment comes to seem like just more and more work, faculty buy-in, such as it was initially, will drop off. And without faculty cooperation and commitment, any assessment efforts are dead. To that end, here are a few things we've learned.

Standardize Assessment Measures

Outside evaluators come to campus every two years to assess a random sample of students' work, using rubrics we have created. When our plan was first implemented, we asked faculty in the writing courses to submit samples of their students' work to an electronic writing portfolio. Although this meant that we weren't adding to faculty workloads, what we ended up with were myriad and different assignments. This made it difficult for outside evaluators to quickly and easily decide whether the stories covered all the basic elements we were looking for on our rubrics. This became a major stumbling block for the evaluators, who had a lot of reading to do in a very short time. We listened to what the evaluators had to say in their "debriefings" and decided to come up with standardized assessment assignments. Although this meant that faculty were forced to add an assignment to their se-

mester's work, it made the evaluators' job easier. And since we only pay them with money for gas and meals, we want the evaluation process to be as effortless and straightforward as possible.

The standardized assessment assignments for the writing classes come from a set of news simulations developed by two faculty members. These simulations are presented through multimedia and are stored on a server so students can only access them in class. They feature PDFs of documents reporters might encounter and video of interviews, meetings, or press conferences. Students in class must work their way through the reporting of a news event. (For our introductory News Writing class, it's a thwarted bank robbery; for our Advanced Reporting and Research class, it's a tornado.) Then, they write their stories. Before we bring in the evaluators, we send them the exercises on CDs, so they can see the information that was available to the reporters. This way, they can evaluate both writing and reporting (two of the objectives in our assessment plan). We believe that the use of the simulations allows students an experience closer to the "real world" than working from a fact sheet (although those are used in our writing/reporting curriculum, as well). Faculty members have access to other simulations if they choose to use them in their classes.

We have since developed other standardized assessments for Feature Writing, Multimedia Reporting, and Broadcast Writing classes and are now working on one for a PR Writing class. Once that is in place, we will have an assessment measure for every type of writing we teach. We have also set up standardized assessment measures for copy editing, photography, and design classes. All were developed with input from faculty members who teach those classes. The department chair has appointed them to the assessment committee in different semesters, and while they are members, these faculty work to develop the assignments and the rubrics. Letting faculty members set up their assessment assignments has increased awareness of assessment and participation in assessment activities.

Don't Try to Do Too Much

As noted earlier, at one point we tried to assess in all our classes. That was simply too much work and too much for the assessment coordinator to keep track of. Without consistent collection of assessment assignments, we cannot develop a clear picture of how students score on those assignments. Real change can happen in your curriculum when you look at a

few years' worth of assessment data and see whether and where tweaking your curriculum is paying off in improved scores. If you have gaps in the collection process, you cannot make those comparisons. As Cohen wrote, "Assessment, done well, provides a useful means to hone our teaching and our curricula as it sharpens our awareness and understanding of what, and how well, students are, in fact, learning from us" (2004).

So decide what's important to your program. Your assessment objectives should be centered on those things. Then decide how best to measure those things. The obvious way, of course, is to look at student work, and our plan calls for collecting student assignments on a centralized assessment server. Then, every two years (four semesters' work), we remove student names from the assignments, randomly choose 30 percent of the assignments, and call in our evaluators. But student work provides only part of the assessment picture.

Vary Your Assessment Measures

Besides student work, we also have implemented a few standardized tests: a pre-test we give to our students in the introductory journalism class—Journalism and Democracy—before they have studied anything about journalism with us; the same test given as a post-test in Communication Law, which our students usually take when they are seniors; math tests (built around the same concepts but with different questions) in our introductory news writing and copy editing classes; a math test that duplicates those questions but adds in property tax computations in our advanced reporting class; and AP style exams given in the introductory news writing and copy editing classes. Additionally, a section of the midterm exam in Introduction to Visual Communication and the final exam from Communication Law double as assessment measures.

Beyond classroom assignments and standardized tests, though, we also seek indirect measures of student performance. When our graduating seniors complete their exit interviews with the department chair, they fill out a questionnaire that asks them to rate how they feel about their ability to accomplish the various assessment objectives. We also send a questionnaire to internship supervisors, asking them to rate our students' performance of those objectives.

One of the assessment committee's remaining goals, as soon as all the writing assessment measures are in place, is to develop a survey to send to alumni that will ask about those objectives, as well.

Our aim in all of this is to provide a variety of both direct and indirect measures of student learning. Indeed, ACEJMC charges accredited programs with seeking that variety. The ACEJMC

encourages programs to develop and apply multiple measures, indirect and direct, that reflect the mission and objectives of the unit, as well as those of ACEJMC. It understands that no one measure is likely to fit all departments or sequences within an accredited program; each department or sequence may require its own measures. (Accrediting, 2001, p. 2)

Our university also seeks multiple measures for assessing learning, placing "primary importance" on such things as "internships, practica, research projects, exhibitions, performances, and so on" (Eastern, 2012). However, the university also wants to see evidence from such things as "portfolios, standardized examinations, and surveys of students, alumni, employers, and other stakeholders" (Eastern, 2012).

Be Willing to Add, Drop, or Change Assessment Measures

Although the goal of assessment is to collect data to fuel discussion of a curriculum's strengths and weaknesses and how to improve the curriculum, we've found that sometimes talking about how to assess accomplishes this goal. For example, based on the introductory News Writing scores from our outside evaluators, writing faculty discussed what they are teaching now and how students are faring in class and decided that the assessment assignment itself needed to be changed. With that decision made, the writing faculty will be meeting this semester to discuss what students should realistically be able to do at the end of News Writing and will plan an assignment that will incorporate all the objectives they want met. They will then pass these ideas along to colleagues, who create the news simulations to put together a new one. The important thing to note is that, in the course of a discussion that is ostensibly about the assessment instrument, real discussion of curriculum goals and how to reach them also takes place.

A similar discussion took place last year about the Feature Writing assignment, and the two faculty members who teach that class discussed what students should be able to do in a feature article that they do not do in a news article. They came up with a story idea that led to creation of a new Feature Writing simulation.

Our AP style exam was created because student

scores on the rubrics used by outside evaluators were low in that area. We hope the test will give us additional data about how students progress from the introductory news writing class, where AP style is introduced, to the introductory copy editing class, where AP style is emphasized. The two classes are usually taken in back-to-back semesters. Test scores should let us see whether students are showing improvement. That data will lead to discussions about any changes needed to the curriculum, such as more emphasis in the news writing class or different approaches in the copy editing class.

Use Assessment Data to Fuel Curriculum Change

The final step before the assessment cycle repeats itself is using collected data to examine the curriculum and make needed changes. Our university, in fact, requires that. Outlining the role faculty play in assessment at Eastern, the university's assessment plan states: "The faculty develop and implement curricular and program changes based on assessment data" (Eastern, 2010). For example, we were not happy with graduating seniors' confidence in their ability to do the math most frequently used by journalists. We used that data, collected from exit surveys, to discuss how we could shore up what students learn in the single general education math class most take because it is required. (See accompanying article for more on what those math scores led us to do to our curriculum.)

A similar process took place because of students' response to the question on the exit survey asking them to rate their knowledge of the history of the journalism profession. Here, this information led us to change our curriculum to require that all students take History of American Journalism as part of the liberal arts component of our major's curriculum. The course used to be an elective. The journalism professor who teaches the class wholeheartedly agreed with the change and has now put together an exam that she submits as an assessment measure in the course. We will collect that data for a couple of years before we check to see if the curriculum change leads to greater confidence in our students.

Where To Next?

Our assessment plan is by no means complete. We believe we have a solid plan in that we know what we want to measure and know how to use the information we gather to discuss curriculum. But we also know that we need to improve our assessment measures in certain areas.

For example, we need to come up with a way to assess for the domestic and global diversity objectives that we have incorporated, thanks to the ACEJMC's changes. A member of the assessment committee has taken the lead in organizing meetings with the faculty of the media and society classes to discuss whether and how faculty already incorporate those objectives in the classes and then to discuss how they can assess student knowledge of those objectives.

The assessment committee is also working to develop an ethics assignment that will present students with three scenarios and require them to write about how they would handle those scenarios, using the tenets of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics to guide them. We are also developing a rubric to evaluate students' answers. When we have implemented the assignment and have collected a few semesters' answers, we will put together a panel of faculty members to evaluate them.

Our biggest challenge will be to develop a solid alumni survey. We hope to model it along the lines of the exit survey and will then test it to see if we get a better response rate by mail or by Web survey.

We may never have a "final" assessment plan. Quite frankly, I hope we never do. I hope we never give up tweaking it, checking to make sure we are assessing in areas that need to be assessed, striving to create better assessment measures. In five-and-one-half years as chair of the assessment committee, I have found that the discussions surrounding those things are valuable and illuminating in their own right. I've learned just as much from discussions of how to assess as I have from actual assessment data. So while the goal is someday to have a plan in place and get into a routine of collecting information, analyzing it, and reporting it to faculty, I'm in no hurry for that "someday" to arrive.

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