Evidence: Program Assessment for Continuous Improvement

Writing Rubrics: We've Entered the Matrix

from Emily Van Duyne, Professor of Writing

Teaching in Stockton's Writing Program allows us to treat writing as its own inherent discipline, distinct from its traditionally understood sister-in-arms, English Literature (I often tell my students on day one of College Writing "Breathe easy. You will likely read no poetry this semester") and a skill set which, if studiously learned and applied, can aid their success in nearly every class they might take at Stockton.

But how to teach them to catch a huckster at their game, to read an essay which wields language with supreme efficacy, but which, when laid bare, is ultimately a hot mess of sexism, fallacy, and the occasional outright lie? For an answer, we turned to Camille Paglia's "The Modern Campus Cannot Comprehend Evil," which appeared in last October's *Time,* and which takes as its premise the idea that contemporary American campuses are not "real," reports of campus sexual assault are "wildly overblown," and women's sexual assaults are provoked by their "bared flesh and sexy clothes." Students were initially dazzled by the writing, which resembles nothing so much as the image of Pottersville, the imaginary town in Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life*—Sex! Evil! Wolf Eyes Glowing in the Dark!— and then baffled when they began to take it to pieces for facts.

The assignment, then, was to refute one of Paglia's claims using their own thoughts, and 2-4 credible sources. My biggest challenge? Create and refine a rubric that operationalizes words we, as teachers and scholars, take for granted—*claim, credible, structure, sustain*—and that acted as not only a grading tool, but as a thorough point of reference, a teaching tool which combined the course content (gender as a construct, body as commodity) with the practice of writing (evaluating sources, paragraph unity) and furthered their weekly classwork. What follows is my best attempt, thoroughly revised since my experience at the Assessment Institute this past August.

FRST 1101: College Writing with Professor Emily Van Duyne
Assignment: Isolate a single fallacious claim from Camille Paglia's "The Modern Campus Cannot Comprehend Evil" (*Time,* 2014). In a 3-4 page essay, refute the claim, using a combination of your own ideas and 2-4 *credible* sources.

Objectives:
Student should be able to:
 -identify and isolate a given claim in a piece of writing
 -evaluate the credibility of a source
 -integrate a credible source into their own writing with proper signal phrasing, quotation, and paraphrasing, using APA citation
-structure and sustain a logical argument with a complex thesis

Rubric: On page 2

Criteria	7-10 (Exemplary)	4-6 (Competent)	1-3 (Needs considerable work)	0 (Does not appear in the essay)
Writing: Global Issues (Logic, transitions, critical thinking)	Essay contains a logical, structured argument with unified paragraphs, a clearly identifiable thesis, and a conclusion which moves beyond summary.	Essay contains elements of a logical argument, but occasionally goes off topic, or misses a critical thinking connection; paragraphs are somewhat unified, but need stronger transitions; contains a identifiable thesis, and conclusion.	Essay's argument is unclear, or obviously contradicts itself; paragraphs are not centered on a single concept; lacks a clearly stated thesis and conclusion.	Essay entirely lacks *at least two* of the following essential items: a clear argument, a thesis, paragraph unity, and/or a conclusion.
Writing: Grammar & Mechanics	Essay contains almost no **errors***, and reads clearly and fluidly, i.e., the grammar, style, & mechanics lend themselves to supporting the content and logic of the writing.	Essay contains between 2-5 errors, which do not effectively take away from the logic or the content of the writing.	Errors are frequent enough to detract from the content and logic of the essay.	Errors are so frequent that the essay is essentially unreadable, and makes no logical sense
Credibility/Usefulness of sources	Sources are properly evaluated and integrated into the essay, using APA Style. Each source is introduced with a signal phrase; each paraphrase or quotation is used with intent, i.e., supports the position of the writer, and is in line with the concept of the paragraph it exists within. Essay adheres to the standards of APA Style and formatting, with everything that entails (title page, abstract, reference page, et al).	Sources are properly evaluated, but integration suffers from a lack of signal phrasing and/or the presence of occasional dropped quotations. Essay adheres to the standards of APA Style and formatting with occasional minor **errors.***	Essay lacks proper amount of sources, and/or sources are not relevant to the topic at hand. Essay paraphrases to the point that it could be deemed plagiarism. Essay contains dropped quotations, and has major errors in APA Style and formatting.	Essay entirely lacks *at least two* of the following: more than one relevant, scholarly source, a reference page, direct quotations and/or paraphrase, or an abstract.

*Errors here are defined as the presence of the following:

-sentence fragments, or run-on sentences
-comma splices/unnecessary commas
-improper use of capitalization, or conversely, proper nouns without capitals
-improperly marked possessive nouns/improper use of apostrophes
-consistent lack of subject-verb agreement, i.e. "This recipe are good for beginning chefs."

**Errors are defined here as:
-an improperly punctuated entry on a Reference page or in-text citation
-improperly executed running header, author's note, heading, or abstract

Unpacking Complex Learning Outcomes
By Dr. Marc Richard of Chemistry Program

Prior to the start of the 2015 Summer Assessment Institute on rubrics, I received a copy of our agenda. Besides noticing it was a packed schedule, I was also drawn to some unfamiliar terms – "operationalizing complex outcomes." Not wanting to be the only student in class that was unsure of exactly what this meant, I tried a quick Google but search with little luck. It was not until the workshop began that I started to understand exactly what operationalizing constructs meant and the challenges it poses in constructing a useful rubric, both from a faculty and student perspective.

The Institute provided the opportunity to work with colleagues from within my discipline (the sciences) and from other fields in an effort to "unpack" complex ideas that form the criteria for evaluating student work using rubrics. We learned that one of the biggest challenges in rubric construction is defining the various dimensions and associated performance levels of a rubric. These definitions need to translate concepts that may be second nature and unambiguous to a faculty member into concrete language that can be understood by students while completing an assignment as well as used in the evaluation of student work.

For example, the rubric I worked on during the Institute was designed to assess manuscripts that students prepare in reporting the results of a multi-week capstone laboratory project. The report is modeled after a standard scientific journal article, a format that is familiar to faculty but may be new to students. One of the dimensions for evaluation is "Figures & Tables", an essential element of the report. My first draft of the rubric used terms such as "appropriate tables" and "key results" in my description of the performance levels in this area, which as an experienced scientific writer were perfectly clear to me. However, for a student who is a novice technical writer, these terms are ambiguous and would limit the usefulness of the rubric. With the help of the other institute participants, I was able to "unpack" or operationalize these terms to more clearly define my expectations. My refined rubric contained more explicit information and details about these areas. The challenge of translating vague ideas or abstract concepts into practical or operational dimensions became an easier task when working with faculty across the disciplines.

From Data to Information: Using Assessment to evaluate learning

The Assessment Data Use Cycle
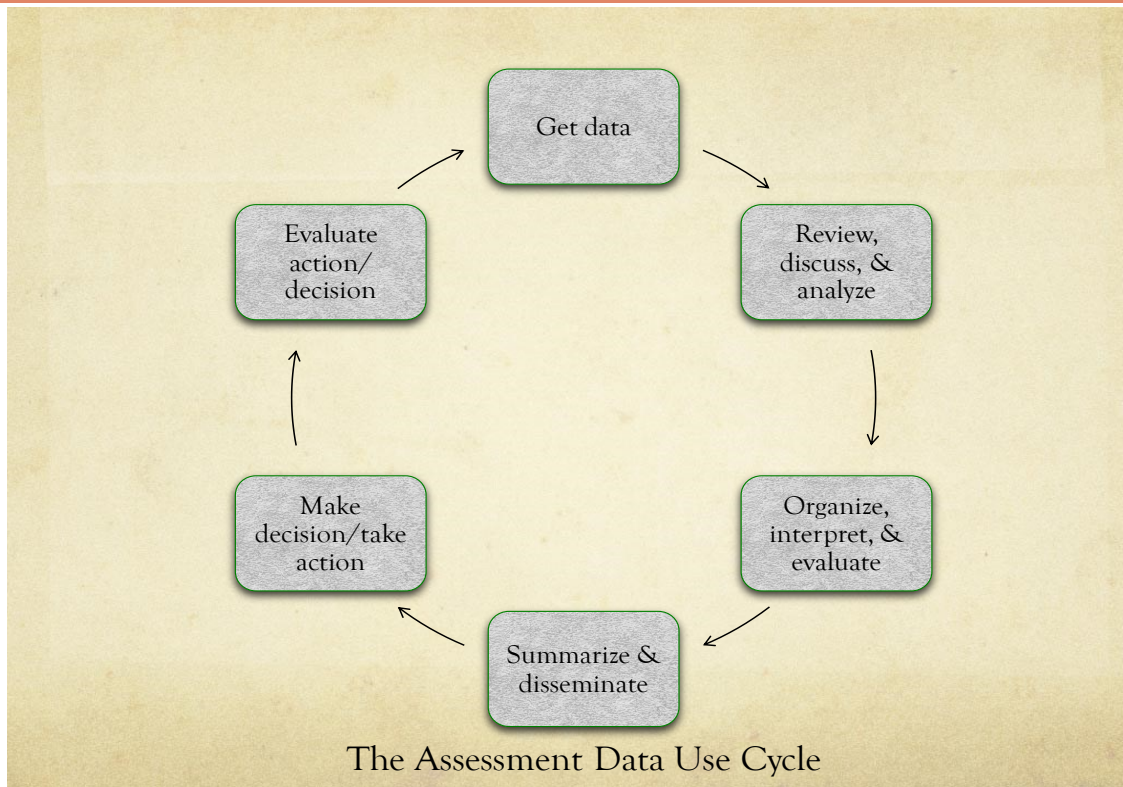
Nearly all programs and minors have taken some steps to assess student learning. Certainly instructors routinely do their course assessments to provide students with feedback and for assigning grades. An important part of the assessment dynamic is the information flow from groups of students to instructors about what is working well and what can be revisited and reviewed. Instructors are having these conversations informally, but these evaluations are not finding their way into the coordinators' reports with any regularity. A review of the reports from all the programs shows much assessment activity but fewer instances of actionable information resulting from completing the assessment process. Assessment should answer questions about what students are learning well, what groups of students are doing better than others, how well First Time In College (FTIC) students do when compared to students who started college elsewhere, and how effective the changes are that we make in our pedagogy.

Assessment does not end when your tests, surveys, quiz scores, or performance ratings are complete. This is the beginning of a new cycle, the assessment use cycle.

Whether we consider on-hand data such us past exams or senior papers, or new data such as current presentation rubric ratings, we must share, discuss, evaluate and take action on our data to get to the real purpose of doing the assessment – reliable information about student learning.

The cycle above shows five important steps in harnessing the power of data for action. Sharing the findings with all relevant parties is one step that seems obvious but is often overlooked. When program members work together to interpret and bring meaning to measurements the outcomes are most powerful and the impact most wide ranging as it relates to student learning.

The Periodic Review Report

This year, Stockton is drafting our Middle States Periodic Review Report (PRR) that is due in 2017. The PRR updates our self-study and summarizes the progress that we have made since the self-study was written in 2011.

A steering committee of 8 volunteer faculty and three administrators will work with co-chairs Michelle McDonald and Sonia Gonsalves to draft the report. The report will be ready for review by the entire college community in the summer of 2016.

The report will highlight our progress in the assessment of student learning and in integrated planning. Steering committee members from each school are seeking instances of cases that represent good assessment practices. We would particularly like to feature program or minor assessment stories that -

a. show effective closing-the-loop by illustrating some use of assessment findings to make changes in pedagogy, curriculum, co-curricular support for learning, or other forms of engagement

b. demonstrate alignment with the ELOs and/or the strategic themes of engagement, global perspectives, or sustainability

c. illustrate good measures of non-cognitive outcome (affective, performance, metacognitive, performance, behavioral, etc.)

d. show evidence of change, for example pre-post assessments or longitudinal measures

e. uncovered sub-group differences in performance or learning, for example differences in students who started at Stockton and those who transferred to Stockton, gender differences, traditional/non-traditional age student differences, etc.

f. showcase teacher-made instruments that have proved to be robust in their reliability

g. use authentic assessments, embedded assessments, and/or standardized rubrics (such as AAC&U VALUE rubrics)

h. have had longevity and can be used to show a trend

Send your assessment stories to assessment@stockton.edu