FOUR DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT

Although we are still not clear about what exactly WASC will require us to do with respect to assessment and accreditation, it is clear that we are expected to begin documenting, in some manner or other, what we assess and how we assess it. So, below you will find four different approaches that qualify as types of assessment that we could present to an accreditation team as evidence that we are moving ahead on the new WASC standards.

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1. Indirect Assessment of Learning Using Self-Reported Learning Gains

A growing body of research suggests that students may provide us with accurate data about their learning when we survey them about what they think they have learned. Reviewing the extensive social science literature on the correlation between student self-reported learning gains and actual learning, Fredricks Volkwein of Penn State University suggests that it has been found to be “quite high” and concludes that “self-reports are likely to be valid and appropriate . . . providing five general conditions are met. They are: (1) the information requested is known to the [students]; (2) the questions are phrased clearly and unambiguously; (3) the questions refer to recent activities; (4) the [students] think the questions merit a serious and thoughtful response; and (5) answering the questions does not threaten, embarrass, or violate the privacy of the [student]. . .”

It’s relatively easy for instructors to administer surveys at the end of their classes (and, if they so desire, at the beginning as well, to produce pre-test/post-test data) that meet these conditions. Having identified the SLOs for the course, the instructor surveys students, anonymously, on the extent to which they believe they have achieved those outcomes (a four-point scale is likely to produce more useful results than a binary “Yes/No” scale), making it clear that she is trying to find ways to improve the course. Outcomes which students report they have achieved “to some degree” or “to a high degree” may be confidently pointed to as genuine examples of student learning in the course. Outcomes which students report they have failed to achieve (or achieved to an inadequate extent) call for melioration in the form of revised pedagogies (or perhaps simply greater attention in the classroom), curricular changes, or both. Instructors can develop, administer, and interpret the results of these surveys—writing a short report on their findings—in six (or fewer) hours.

2. The Cabrillo Model for Course-Based Assessment

The third model for doing course-based assessment is one inspired by Cabrillo College and developed there by Marcy Alancraig and her colleagues. Although I modify (and invite further modification of) Marcy’s work in what follows, she (and Cabrillo) still
deserve credit for its foundational aspects. The model meets the test of being useful and relatively easy to implement. We may need to wait for accreditation reports to know with certainty whether it will meet our final test as well. Imagine yourself an instructor of a single class (or even a single section of a class) in which collaboration is impossible or undesirable. Having defined the SLOs for the course (or with previously defined SLOs in mind), you a) choose a particular SLO to assess (some colleges will ask that all instructors focus on a particular institutional outcome, like critical thinking); b) choose (or develop) a major assignment for the course that enables students to demonstrate their achievement of that SLO; c) develop a rubric that enables you to measure student achievement of the outcome (if the assignment can be evaluated in purely objective terms, as is the case with multiple choice exams, you may not need a rubric—simply map particular questions to particular parts of the SLO); d) assess the assignment against the rubric; analyze results; and consider the implications of the data for your teaching of the course.

Since much of this work will already have been done by the conscientious instructor, it’s likely to fall well below the eight-hour limit we are trying to set for ourselves, even with an hour or two at the end of the process devoted to writing a short (one or two pages is fine) report on the project (ideally, to both the department and the college), with a particular focus on what has been learned that might help improve teaching and learning in the course. Further variations of this model are nearly endless (e.g., some instructors will want to look at more than one SLO; some might choose to collaborate, etc.), but instructors who employ it should ensure that the effort goes consistently toward documenting and improving learning.

3. The Gaither Loewenstein “Down and Dirty” Course-Based Assessment Method

In this final model, I elaborate on a method proposed (partly out of pique occasioned by a faculty member at RCCD suggesting that it would take more than a year for his discipline to assess learning in a particular course) by the Vice President of Educational Services at my campus of RCCD. It’s likely to work best in those disciplines in which knowledge acquisition is measured through objective (scantronable) means. The instructor develops (if she doesn’t already have one) a simple exam and gives it to her students on the first day of class, focusing on class-related terms, principles, concepts that some may be vaguely aware of but which the class itself will teach. Psychology 1 instructors can ask entering students to define “behaviorism”; Economics professors can ask student to explain what inflation is; even Art History teachers can see if students can distinguish Manet and Monet meaningfully. (To keep this exercise from being too frustrating for students, it’s probably best to focus on those “factual” elements of the course that are foundational, explicitly taught in the course, yet still common enough for some students to have a grasp of going in.) Then the instructor administers the same test on the last day of classes. She compares the results of the two tests, identifies areas where significant learning gains have been demonstrably achieved, and notes problem areas in knowledge acquisition suggested by patterns in some of the answers. The post-test could of course be administered as a kind of formative assessment method somewhere during the midpoint of the semester. This model scores highest for ease of use, and I suspect it is likely
to pass muster with ACCJC, assuming instructors write a short report on their projects and publicize results in program review or assessment update documents. It is not likely to improve the deeper kinds of learning we most desire, but as a first (or partial) assessment step, it is considerably better than nothing.

Here, then, are four models for DIY (do it yourself) assessment that are reasonably easy to employ, likely to satisfy ACCJC demands that CCCs assess all courses, and (most importantly) intrinsically worthwhile. (I invite suggestions for other viable models, of which I’m sure there are many.) A critical feature they have in common is that they quickly produce usable results—they complete assessment loops. From talking to colleagues up and down the state about assessment, the single thing that frustrates me most is how much time we’re all taking to define SLOs for our courses and programs. Too many of us never seem to get to assessing them. I think these models help us do that, reasonably well and very quickly. How can we develop mechanisms that encourage—or, if we want to go further, require— instructors of courses in which collaboration is difficult or impossible to implement these models? That must be a topic for another posting.

4. The Teaching or Course Portfolio

Portfolios of student work have been used for years as a grading mechanism, and they are increasingly being employed for outcomes assessment purposes—whether in hard copy or electronically. The teaching portfolio, by contrast, is a more recent phenomenon, dating from the work of Russell Edgerton, Kathleen Quinlan, and especially Patricia Hutchings that began a little more than 15 years ago. (See their eponymous book, The Teaching Portfolio: Capturing the Scholarship of Teaching, published by the AAHE in 1993.) A course-focused teaching portfolio is a purposeful collection of course materials, including the instructor’s reflections upon her teaching (usually containing an educational philosophy statement, a discussion of how she has sought to improve learning in the particular course, etc.). It is a kind of argument, developed around claims a teacher wants to make about herself as a teacher, but with supporting evidence in the form of assignments, rubrics, sample student work (perhaps including evaluations), even journal entries about her efforts to teach the particular class. (Evidence of her use of common classroom assessment techniques might be useful too.) No two teaching portfolios are identical, nor is there a “required” list of items to include. The portfolio for a particular class might eventually be folded into a more comprehensive portfolio that documents the instructor’s teaching in general. For outcomes assessment purposes, the most critical feature of the portfolio is that it be genuinely reflective. The instructor (as James Eison points out) must keep trying to answer the question “Why do I do what I do and what impact does this have on desired outcomes?” Developing a comprehensive teaching portfolio takes time, but a real beginning can be made by the dedicated instructor in fewer than 10 hours, especially given that many of the supporting documents are likely to exist already and need only to be gathered and organized. For newer instructors, particularly adjuncts who seek full-time employment, an additional value of doing such a portfolio should be obvious: it can be offered to hiring committees as compelling evidence that the instructor’s approach to teaching is serious and purposeful. The Internet contains many
examples of good teaching portfolios, as well as primers on their development and use. A particularly good website is by Cornell University’s Center for Learning and Teaching: http://www.clt.cornell.edu/resources/teh/ch2.html.