

The Assessment Quarterly

A Publication of the Heartland Community College Assessment Committee

Assessing Critical Thinking at HCC: *The Writing Program*

By Jennifer Swartout, Instructor of English

The Underlying Approach

Practically speaking, our students live in a society that is democratic, pluralistic and multi-cultural. A major goal of the program is to teach students how to communicate in such a society. Therefore, students (as writers) must learn to acknowledge differences and probe the reasons for these differences rather than merely dismissing them. In that way, they are better able to communicate with their chosen audience in a variety of writing situations.

We call our approach “social-cultural rhetoric.” Social-Cultural means that we investigate the **social** and **cultural factors** that affect any situation a student may write about. **Rhetoric** is both a **strategy** for effective communication as well as a **method of inquiry**.

Therefore, it is our belief and practice that inquiry is the basis for any writing project. A successful essay will not merely report the “facts” of a given situation, but investigate and analyze—offer some insight into—the underlying social and cultural factors that are a part of the situation.

Examples of a Social-Cultural Rhetoric Approach

Below are some examples of the questions that we ask our students to consider and integrate into their writing as they progress through HCC’s writing courses.

- What is a perspective? How are perspectives or opinions formed?
- How is behavior affected by experiences and/or cultural upbringing?
- How is an individual’s identity formed? What cultural practices contribute to the formation of this identity?
- What happens when a particular cultural value comes into contact with another culture’s value?
- Where does knowledge come from? How do cultural practices and values affect the way we determine what is “true”? How do they affect what is considered “knowledge”? How are knowledge and beliefs connected?
- What role does power or status play in a given problem or situation?

These kinds of questions allow an essay to delve underneath the surface of a topic. A successful paper does not merely summarize source material; instead, the student uses questions like these to form an inquiry into their chosen topic. These kinds of questions allow an essay to delve underneath the surface of a topic. A successful paper does not merely summarize source material; . . . (continued on page 3)

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Assessment Committee

R. John Muench
Chair

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Vice Chair

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Tom Clemens
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Paul Haspel
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Allan Saaf
Vice President of Instruction

Padriac Shinville
Alternative Learning &
Developmental Education
Division Chair

Katherine I. Starks-Lawrence
Business
Editor/Publisher/Designer
katherinestarks-lawrence@heartland.edu

Jennifer Swartout
English

John Wardell
Technology

Message from the Chair



Assessment Questions

I often receive excellent questions concerning Assessment from other faculty members and I would like to share a few. I have paraphrased the original inquiries to make them pithy.

Q: Why should I include the General Education Learning Outcome (GELO) codes in my student syllabi?

A: The GELO's (<http://www.hcc.cc.il.us/committees/assessment/genedoutcomes.html>) represent what faculty has thought was an important set of transferable skills that a student should obtain from our institution. For example, if I teach Problem-Solving in my course, then those students will be able to apply those skills in future coursework. That can, in theory, make the job a little easier for other instructors and allow them to build upon the Problem-Solving skills in their class.

How does this relate to the inclusion of the GELO codes in the student syllabi? Well, during the first day of class (or later), this can lead to a discussion with your students about the transferability of skills in your course to others. Have you ever heard a student say something to the effect of "how is this going to help me beyond this course?" Here is where the GELO statements come in. In my CHEM 161 classes, I tell them that improving their Problem-Solving skills is the most important aspect of the course. I then show them the five Problem-Solving statements and inform them that I expect everyone to be at least at a PS1 level. This means that I expect them to be able to solve problems that are similar to ones that I have shown them in class. I further tell them that the "A" students should be at a PS2 level. This implies that they should be able to solve problems that they have not seen before, yet should be able to answer based on the background knowledge that has been supplied to them. I further explain that this means they will see several problems on each exam that are unfamiliar to them and they do possess the knowledge to answer.

Q: Is it our expectation that a student completing a degree is able to do all of the GELO's?

A: Absolutely not. Each student is unique and has a reason for attending HCC – whether that is to get a job or to go on and complete a Bachelor's degree. What you would see is that each student would be strong in some areas and weaker in others. For example, a Sociology student might be strongest in communication and diversity but weaker in problem-solving and critical-thinking whereas an Engineering student might be strongest in problem-solving and critical-thinking but weaker in communication and diversity. However, all students will have at least some skills in each of the four areas—at what minimum level— this has never been decided.

Do you have an Assessment question? If so, please feel free to ask.

R. John Muench, Assistant Professor of Chemistry

The CT Assessment Dilemma

By Matt Felumlee

According to Dr. Peter Facione, Provost at Loyola University at Chicago, studies show that most students leave four-year institutions having only maintained their critical thinking dispositions. Even more startling is his position that just about as many students deteriorate as improve their critical thinking dispositions over the course of their four years in B.A. or B.S. programs. Facione made these assertions in his talk entitled “Student Cognitive Strategies and the Teaching and Assessing of General Education” at the “Putting Students First” assessment workshop that was held March 21 in Bloomington.

How does this affect Heartland’s own assessment goals? First, we need to differentiate between “dispositions” and “skills.” That is, it seems likely that a student who is not “disposed” or predisposed to think critically might still demonstrate considerable skill in this area. However, Facione’s research indicates that this is not the case: he argues that there is a strong correlation between “dispositions” and demonstrated “skill” or achievement. In other words, apparently skilled or capable students with no desire to think critically will probably stay that way.

Since serving on the Critical Thinking team last semester, I have become increasingly interested in the questions that logically follow (and necessarily precede) the act of constructing these outcome statements: How *do* we measure critical thinking in our classrooms? How do we know whether our students are leaving our courses as better critical thinkers? If Facione is correct in his assertion that most students merely maintain dispositions over the course of *four* years, it is probably safe to assume that growth over *two* years is even smaller, and thus that much more difficult to measure.

The Writing Program (Cont’d)

instead, the student uses questions like these to form an inquiry into their chosen topic. In-class discussion and shorter, “process” assignments support this kind of approach to writing.

Our Course Guide is the primary text for each writing course. At the end of the semester students submit a portfolio of written work, which is assessed using the outcomes in that Course Guide, including Critical Thinking Outcomes.?

Lastly, and of particular relevance to Heartland, Facione presented research that argued a correlation between sections taught and student improvement in critical thinking. His results were as follows:

Sections Taught (<i>per year</i>)	Change in Student Achievement of CT Outcomes
2 to 3	No change in student achievement
4 to 5	Optimal load—students improve
5 or more	No change in student achievement

This suggests a couple of things. One: critical thinking takes practice—not just for students, but for teachers as well. However, it also suggests the likelihood of burnout. While Facione’s data was gathered at four-year institutions—where presumably faculty are involved with research and publishing as major priorities, and where teaching is often a secondary concern—it seems clear that some correlation exists between teaching effectiveness and teaching load.

If there was one prevailing theme of the workshop, it was that assessment is slow, arduous, messy, difficult work—but it’s worth the trouble. Assessment helps shift the focus from “teachers teaching” to “learners learning”—and while this is a necessary shift in a paradigm that has been basically unchanged since the beginning of education, it is not a neat, easy one.

The Assessment Committee seeks articles

For *The Assessment Quarterly Newsletter*. The committee seeks articles on assessment activities used in the classroom or articles pertaining to assessment techniques or assessment research. Please limit articles to 400 words, if possible. Submit articles to the editor, Katherine I. Starks-Lawrence, or to the co-editor, Paul Haspel via e-mail. *The editors reserve the right to edit submissions.*

Formative Assessment in Writing Workshops: A Success Story

By Stephanie Kratz

While reading an article about encouraging faculty members to value assessment, I came across a bit of information that reminded me of HCC faculty. At a recent AAHE Assessment Conference, Raymond J. Rodriguez, Director of Assessment at New York's Skidmore College, requested that conference participants help him brainstorm what faculty members value. Among other values on the list was the value of student achievement. We faculty at HCC are not much different. Perhaps it goes without saying that we value our students' achievements. What does not go without saying is that formative assessment activities held during the semester can increase student learning—and therefore achievement.

Formative assessment activities that we work into our classes can improve our student's learning and academic performance.

In composition, I want my students to succeed by improving their writing. Of course, some students will improve more than others, and some students will achieve higher grades than others. But what is most gratifying to me is seeing improvement in a draft of a paper regardless of the letter grade earned by the student. I have found that using formative assessments (feedback given during a project rather than upon its completion) is invaluable to my students' improvement in writing. After students receive written feedback to the first drafts of any given paper, I require that they discuss their upcoming revisions with me, complete a portion of that revision, and then conference with me about that portion. All of these work-in-progress steps are vital to their learning process.

One of my English 101 students, Chris, was frustrated all semester because she had not received the grades that she expected. We engaged in the formative assessment activities that I required of all my students. Chris worked on revision after revision; her drafts improved but not enough that she could see the letter grade increases that she desired. However, somewhere in the process of conferencing about her papers, a light bulb went on in her head. As the end of the semester and the portfolio due date neared, she made great strides

in the "art" of making a claim, supporting it, and developing her thoughts into a discussion; in other words, she learned how to write an argument. She earned an A on her portfolio.

Of course, all students are not like Chris. I see many students' drafts improve but not to an "A" level. Tracy, a student in English 095, struggles to develop her thoughts beyond one page, yet the assignments require her to write three and four page papers. The first paper that she wrote was too short to fully develop the idea that she was arguing. As we neared the due date of the first required revision, Tracy confided to me that she was sure her planned changes put her on the right track. However, Tracy did not fulfill the revision conference requirement with either me or our in-class tutor. Unfortunately, her revision reflected her lack of discussions about her work-in-progress. It was still lacking in length and in development of ideas. But for the next revision, Tracy and I sat down during an in-class formative assessment workshop and discussed revisions that she had completed. In some spots, she was showing how her source evidence supported her thesis. In others, however, she was getting off track. We discussed why a portion of her work was successful and other portions were not. She asked questions, and I clarified the qualities of an effective argument. While her subsequent revision reflected areas that still needed work, the draft was improved in the areas that we had discussed. I believe that without the conference, a misunderstanding of argument and misguided insights that she thought were on the right track would still cloud Tracy's draft.

As my personal observations note, formative assessment activities that we work into our classes can improve our students' learning and academic performance. Yes, creating these types of activities occasionally requires me to rethink my approach to an assignment or how I will use class time. (This requires that I self-assess my teaching strategies.) Although changes to my own approach take time out of an already-crowded teaching schedule, the satisfaction that I receive from seeing my students learn about how to write more effectively eventually makes my job more pleasant and more than makes up for the initial time investment. If formative assessment activities can help me increase student achievement, I will continue to utilize them.

HCC Assessment Workshops



THE ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE ANNOUNCES...

Three Workshops for Faculty

Workshop #1: Thursday, April 17th, 3–4 pm, ICB 1301

Assessment 101 -presented by John Muench

Has your semester not been successful? Or could it have been more successful? If so, then this workshop is for you! Explore the benefits of Classroom Assessment and learn how to use it in your classes. An overview of Assessment at HCC will also be included. This workshop is intended for faculty new to Assessment.

Workshop #2: Thursday, April 24th, 3–4 pm, ICB 1301

What Exactly *IS* "Critical Thinking"? -presented by English faculty

The strategies and assessment of critical thinking can vary somewhat between disciplines. In this short presentation, members of the HCC writing faculty will present the ways in which critical thinking is conceived, taught, and assessed in our courses. Moreover, we will present problems in teaching critical thinking and offer discussion of how we move students towards reaching the critical thinking outcomes of our writing program.

Our presentation is geared towards helping faculty from a variety of disciplines consider ways in which critical thinking strategies can be implemented and assessed in a classroom in a way that is productive and student-centered.

Workshop #3: Thursday, May 1st, 3-4 pm, ICB 1301

Clarifying Expectations in the Classroom -presented by John Muench

Student satisfaction and achievement increases dramatically when students clearly understand what is expected of them. Beginning with the course objectives and learning outcomes, how clearly do you convey to the students what your expectations are? In addition, do you include/explain the General Education Learning Outcomes (if applicable)? Following a short overview of methods you can use to clarify expectations, faculty will have a chance to discuss their experiences and philosophies.

To reserve your seat in any of these workshops, please contact Karin Johnson at extension 8410 or accept the appointment from Groupwise. Afternoon refreshments will be available for participants and Adjunct Faculty will receive a \$10 stipend for attending.

Your Assessment Committee is: R. John Muench (Chair), Janice Malak (Vice Chair), Paul Haspel, Barb Borg, Jennifer Swartout, John Wardell, Katherine Starks-Lawrence, Missy Killian, Tom Clemens, Padriac Shinville, and Steve Herald

"Assessment is a set of processes designed to improve, demonstrate, and inquire about student learning."
- Mentkowski

Assessment Events

AAHE 2003 Assessment Conference

June 20-23, 2003, Washington State Convention and Trade Center, Seattle, WA. The keynote speaker is Mark Wilson, Ph.D. Mark is a professor of Policy, Organization, Measurement and Evaluation at the University of Chicago. Preconference workshops June 21 and 22. For more information: [Http://www.aahe.org/assessment/2003/](http://www.aahe.org/assessment/2003/)

Assessment Resources

A comprehensive, concrete handbook includes rationale for assessment, defining goals and objectives, defining the focus of course-based assessment, techniques for assessing student learning, and understanding and using assessment results. The handbook is titled *Course-Based Review and Assessment: Methods for Understanding Student Learning* published by the Office of Academic Planning & Assessment, University of Massachusetts-Amherst. The 54-page handbook can be accessed at the Website listed below.
http://www.umass.edu/oapa/assessment/course_based.pdf

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