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Report

Beyond Multiple Choice: Assessment for Online Learning

Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti

Assessment is a critical topic for faculty and administration in all facets of university life, but for none more so than those involved in online learning. As greater numbers of courses are offered partially or totally in an online and/or asynchronous fashion, some of the more traditional markers of student learning are minimized or absent. No longer can professors rely on the “a-ha” look on students’ faces to gauge understanding of a lecture, and they no longer have absolute control over the time, place, and circumstances under which students take an exam. But while control is disappearing, focus on accountability is increasing, meaning that program constituents are more and more concerned about the effectiveness of learning.

Assessment is also a concern for Kay Wijekumar, assistant professor in the School of Information Sciences & Technology at The Pennsylvania State University-Beaver. She shared her thoughts on assessment with *Distance Education Report*.

Relinquishing Control

Assessment has typically been a lofty project that often use limited tools. These efforts seek to understand how well students have learned course content in either a short-term context, such as for a paper or midterm exam, as well as in the long term, such as for development of necessary job skills. It also lets instructors learn about the effectiveness of their own teaching, allowing them to make changes to their methods or to the course content.

However, these important efforts are often measured by methods that may be less than accurate, such as true-false and multiple choice tests. The limitations of these instruments are only multiplied in the online environment. “Even in a traditional environment, we don’t always measure what we think we are measuring,” said Wijekumar. “Online, [the problem] is magnified a great deal because you have very little control.”

For example, Wijekumar explains that those in the traditional environ-

ment can devise an assessment instrument, then subject it to reliability testing to insure that it accurately tests what it is designed to without too much impact from external factors. In fact, a particularly diligent researcher can examine the degree to which environmental factors such as heat impact affects student performance and then control for these factors, perhaps by requiring students to all take the examination in the same room, with the same light, heat, and noise.

Contrast this with the online environment, which allows students to take courses—and exams—anywhere they have access to a computer and the course materials. “I currently have people in Iraq taking courses,” Wijekumar said of her online students. Clearly, neither Wijekumar nor these students have much control over the light, heat, and noise surrounding their study efforts.

But environment is not the only thing out of a professor’s control in the online context. Professors also lose the ability to control the resources that students may use to complete an exam. “There are many ways to circumvent the system,” said Wijekumar, citing an example from popular culture. On the current quiz show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, it has become common for one of the contestant’s lifelines, a helper at home accessible for a brief phone call, to be standing by ready to perform a Google search for the unknown answer to a critical question.

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President: William Haight
(billh@magnapubs.com)

Publisher: David Burns
(dburns@magnapubs.com)

Editorial Content Director: Bob Bogda
(bbogda@magnapubs.com)

Managing Editor: Christopher Hill
(chill@magnapubs.com)

Creative Services Director: Debra Lovelien
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With the ubiquity of this kind of online assistance, it is impractical to ask online students to complete examinations with no external resources. "Why shouldn't you have two windows open and cut in one and paste in the other?" asks Wijekumar. However, she does express concern that this phenomenon is allowing students to fail to understand the material presented in favor of the assurance that facts can always be looked up when needed. "You have to know what you are looking for to look it up," said Wijekumar.

Finding Synchronicity

To combat the problems and address the challenges of assessment in the online classroom, Wijekumar recommends professors consider portfolio-type assessments for their students. But more important than the construction of a collection of assignments is the opportunity these portfolios present for interaction that will truly measure student learning.

Wijekumar suggests that professors insist on interaction with the students, either individually or in a group setting, that will allow them to ask questions and require the students to think on their feet and apply their learning. For example, an engineering student asked to create a project design will be asked how to adapt the design to different situations or how to solve problems that may impact their proposed solution. These questions can be discussed in a group environment in a chat room, or the professor can use a two-way video conferencing program to hold a meeting with the student.

What of the students with a dial-up

Internet connection that cannot support video conferencing? Wijekumar has a suggestion that may impress even the most high-tech professor or administrator: the telephone. "Synchronous follow up can be a telephone call. I don't know why we don't do phone calls anymore," she quipped, explaining that this is a very common approach in European distance education. Professors and students can set a time for a follow up phone call to a project, or an entire class can meet via conference call at a preset time.

This approach is most successful if these synchronous check-ins occur regularly throughout the portfolio creation process, forcing students to continually think about the material at hand and be prepared to discuss it. "It has to be an ongoing process," said Wijekumar. This goes a long way toward combating the Google addiction that may be a student's standard approach to addressing assessment items. "Just from answering questions, [a student] doesn't learn a great deal, but they do if they have to explain," said Wijekumar.

Advice for Others

Wijekumar offers two pieces of advice for colleagues examining their own assessment processes for online learning. First, she recommends that professors embed thought questions, mini-assignments, and check-ins throughout a reading assignment to encourage students to read completely and to begin to organize their understanding of material before they even finish the assignment. "The worst thing is to give students a whole list of

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personnel are answered accurately and quickly, with a structured system in place to address student complaints.

- **Intended learning outcomes** are reviewed regularly to ensure clarity, utility and appropriateness.
- **Periodic assessment** of the program's educational effectiveness and teaching/learning process, data on enrollment, costs and effective use of technological resources as they relate to program effectiveness.
- **Evaluation and Assessment of Benchmarks** – the institution periodically evaluates how well they are achieving these institutional benchmarks.

According to IHEP, there are also **Faculty Benchmarks** that must be met in order for institutions to optimize the online learning experience for their students:

- **Student interaction** with faculty and other students is an essential part of every online course and program, and is facilitated in a number of ways, including e-mail and voice-mail. Communication is not limited to the course discussion boards alone.
- **Feedback to students** is provided in a constructive and timely manner. This includes posting grades in a timely manner.
- **Students are instructed in proper methods of research** and in assessing the validity of resources.

Institutions must meet student expectations

“There are several other things that institutions need to think about if they want their program to serve the

students – and if they want to increase retention. These are simple things. For instance, before a course begins, the course syllabus and online course materials should be reviewed to ensure that links to articles, readings and resources are live. It's frustrating for both students and faculty when they find inactive links,” says Sparrow.

Sparrow also advises instructors to let students know right from the beginning what to expect. For instance, instructors need to establish for students a pattern of availability – much the same way instructors would do in the mainstream environment where a certain number of “office hours” are required.

“Instructors need to do something similar in the online environment,” says Sparrow. “First, let students know that their e-mails will be returned within a certain timeframe – let's say, within twenty-four hours. Or, let them know that if they send you an e-mail during a particular timeframe – let's say Wednesdays between 2:00pm and 5:00pm – you'll respond within a few minutes. Otherwise, you'll get back to them later on in the day or the next day. And, let them know when they can expect grades to be posted. Grades are part of feedback – an essential communication tool in the online environment.”

Communication and feedback are the most important faculty benchmarks, according to Sparrow. Students need to know how instructors view their performance in online courses.

“It's not enough to simply issue grades for assignments. You must also provide constructive criticism so that students understand the strengths and weaknesses of their assignments and how their grades were determined by the instructor,” says Sparrow.

And, Sparrow also advises that if an institution's online courses and programs are delivered asynchronously

only, the institution should think about adding a synchronous component.

“Even a chat session now and then works well. It fills the students' need for interaction,” says Sparrow. “There are ways to conduct chat sessions so that you're mimicking a classroom setting. For instance, I know an instructor who waits a certain amount of time for students to respond in a live chat. If they don't respond within that timeframe, he directs questions to them in the chat, calling upon them specifically by name, just like you would do in a physical classroom setting. It deters students from thinking that they can log on to the chat and then just walk away from the computer. And, really, that's not what students want, anyway. They really do want interaction with their instructors and fellow students. It helps keep students interested and motivated. And that leads to student retention.”

Susan Gaide is President of GaideCom, Inc. Strategic Communications and is an online instructor/facilitator for Indiana Wesleyan University. She may be reached at gaide@att.net. ●

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links to click on,” she said, noting that these lists of web sites at the end of an assignment may seem to be an effective use of online resources but actually send students on a chase without structure.

Secondly, she reiterates the importance of a synchronous follow up on assignments, whether it is conducted one-on-one, via group conference call, or in an electronic chat room. The key, she said, is to create an environment for students “where they have to think on their feet.” ●

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