

Writing Matters

Writing Across the Curriculum
Southwestern Community College

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What is Assessment?

A commonly held definition for “assessment” is that it is an evaluation of student achievement, a grade. This can be a test, a quiz, a discussion, a presentation, a paper—whatever helps an instructor measure a student’s knowledge or achievement in a particular area.

However, simply performing an assessment is merely an exercise, a task with a number or a letter at the end. Assessment, though, has something to say to us if we’d only listen. Assessment should be formative for both the student and the instructor. This requires a bit of reflective thought after the fact. What do those grades reflect about student learning? What might they reflect about the ways you taught the material? How might answers to those questions change your approach in class or students’ approaches to learning? That is assessment that “comes full circle” and is truly formative for both you and your students.

Using Portfolios for Student and Course Assessment

At the end of the semester, every instructor engages in the often dreaded task of assessment. Exams, projects, papers, and quizzes pile up, awaiting grading and feedback. An option for assessment that may be overlooked is the portfolio. Portfolios present instructors with an opportunity to perform assessment that “comes full circle” as described above.

In academics, a

portfolio is a means of gathering all or samples of the work a student has done over a period of time. In a semester-long class, the student’s portfolio would reflect the work from that entire semester. Some programs develop portfolios that draw from the entire time a student has studied within that program, which is often a year or more of work.

For students, a portfolio is a chance to see the

scope of the work they’ve completed. It is easy for students (and instructors) to become bogged down in the moment, what’s due right now, what exam is next, what assignment is just over the horizon.

A portfolio can give students a chance to reflect over the semester, see the progress they’ve made in their work, and make a plan for the future.

Instructors, too, can benefit from student portfolios. While an exam

may show student achievement in one particular area at one particular time, portfolios can be better indicators of student learning over time. With samples of student work from the entire semester, it is possible to get a truer sense of how students moved from one level of achievement to another, improving over the semester.

Furthermore, portfolios can be valuable feedback to an instructor. With a bit of

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The act of putting pen to paper encourages pause for thought, this in turn makes us think more deeply about life, which helps us regain our equilibrium.

—Norbet Platt

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Portfolios (cont'd)

reflection and thought, one can study what students have produced over the semester and determine what may need changing in that particular course. There may be an assignment that didn't quite achieve what you had hoped, or you may discover one that engaged students in deep learning of your content in a surprising way. In this way, portfolios can become

formative feedback for the entire course, not just for one particular student.

Practical Considerations

Assigning portfolios is a little more involved than simply asking students to put some papers in a folder. The best portfolio assignments also include reflection, an opportunity for students to write about the assignments they have put in the portfolio.

Reflective writing

encourages students to think critically not only about the assignments they've completed but also about the thought processes that went into those assignments. It is "metacognition," thinking about thinking. This kind of self-awareness and self-analysis is often a key to true learning.

Finally, when grading portfolios, be sure that you and the students know ahead of time what you're

looking for. Again, remember that a portfolio should go beyond simply gathering assignments from the semester. Keep in mind the goals of your class and use those to craft reflective pieces that students include in the portfolios.

Students and instructors both benefit from portfolios, especially from the reflection they encourage to bring assessment "full circle."



Reminder for Your Students

As the semester comes to an end, remind your students to keep any essays that they have written. The WAC Awards will return in the spring, and students can win cash prizes for writing they have completed for your courses!

Watch for more information next semester!
WAC Essay Awards—Coming March 2013!