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ABSTRACT

The Communication and Theatre Arts Department at Heidelberg College (a private liberal arts college in northwestern Ohio) developed a departmental assessment plan. The department faculty began by working to establish "exit criteria" during an all-day meeting. Unlike other disciplines, communication has no standardized tests and performance measures which can easily be adapted to an institution's needs. Also, since Heidelberg College does not offer release time, all assessment activities had to be added to full loads of teaching and co-curricular activities. Given the difficulties of participation in a junior year pilot assessment program, the department elected to conduct most assessment activities in the required senior seminar course where participation could be mandated. The Watson Glaser Test of Critical Thinking was administered, as well as instruments to measure writing skills, speaking skills, and student attitudes. None of the first-year data from these measures was significant by itself nor did it reveal much collectively. Informal discussions of the process and initial attempts in assessment have changed the focus of the faculty's thinking about the program. An alumni survey was developed and administered. Only about 25% of the surveys have been returned so far. In papers written for the senior seminar, students indicated they are pleased with hands-on experiences and the range of opportunities both academic and co-curricular. Preliminary response to the assessment program is that the process may be more valuable than the results. (Contains 18 references and a list of exit criteria.) (RS)

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Assessment Mandates

ASSESSMENT IN THE CAPSTONE COURSE: TRIAL AND ERROR

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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The 1980's was the decade of talking about assessment; the 1990's, the decade of doing assessment. Patricia Thrash (1990), Executive Director of North Central's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, termed assessment and accountability "the most important emphasis of the new decade." The impetus for this activity came from national reports critical of higher education such as the Association of American College's "Integrity in the Classroom" as well as from state and accrediting agency mandates (Backlund, Hay, Harper and Williams, 1989). All six accrediting agencies now require some form of assessment as a condition for accreditation (Wolff, 1990).

As the decade opened, El-Khawas (1990) found that 82 percent of American colleges and universities had some form of assessment activity underway. The ACE/Winthrop survey (Prus, El-Khawas, Anderson, Johnson and Cowart, 1990), however, revealed that only a third of the assessing institutions were operating a comprehensive program to measure student learning and development. Although another national survey found that a majority of communication departments were not engaged in assessment (Hay, 1992), more will begin or intensify activities as their accreditation time draws near.

From the beginning of the movement, several questions have been particularly vexing. "What should we measure?" "What measures should we use to obtain the desired information?" "Are we looking at individual students or at programs?" "Should we start with the institution or the department?" This paper details the efforts of the Communication and Theatre Arts Department at Heidelberg College¹ to answer these and other questions as a departmental assessment plan was developed.

Although those involved in assessment have always contended that the department is "an appropriate and powerful context for assessment" (Hutchins, 1989), even there the process is not without difficulties. While in large universities departmental assessment may be more

¹Heidelberg College is a private liberal arts college located in northwestern Ohio with an enrollment of about 1200. The Department of Communication has four full time and three part time faculty. Eighty students are enrolled in the single major which is divided into Theatre and Communication/Media tracks.

manageable than is institutional evaluation, the small college department also encounters a formidable array of problems. There is much the assessment literature does not mention.

SIMPLISTIC ASSUMPTIONS

In M. Scott Peck's words, assessment is difficult. Hay (1992) noted that communication educators face a variety of challenges. Some of our courses are general education courses; some are required for the range of majors found in our departments. We develop a variety of skills, behaviors and attitudes which are difficult to measure with traditional measures. In small institutions and departments where there may be only two or three faculty members, we often function with heavy teaching and co-curricular loads. In addition we face several problems common to all assessors. Among these are simplistic assumptions about (1) goals, (2) measurement tools and (3) required time.

Assessment by definition is measuring how well goals are met. The Denver Conference Program Assessment Group's First Principle (Hay, 1991) reads, "Assessment should be based on goals/objectives defined and operationalized by the faculty of specific programs within the context of a particular department." Smith and Hunt (1990) comment, "If nothing else, assessment has commanded that programs, departments and even entire institutions express in unequivocal terms who they are, what they do, and how they know when they have achieved it." Similarly, Kean College's Statement of Principles (Knight and Lumsden, 1990) describes the purpose of assessment in operational terms. An assessment program should:

- a) articulate the goals of each academic program
- b) gain feedback on the progress toward those goals
- c) use feedback to modify aspects of each academic program to ensure that goals are being achieved

Thus, assessment programs assume that departments have clearly defined goals which drive the academic and co-curricular program. Yet for many, those goals are only implicitly understood. In a national survey, Hay (1992) learned that only 34% of the responding

departments had defined learning goals and objectives for their majors/minors. In 1989, Heidelberg would have been included in that group. During a day-long meeting in August of that year, departmental faculty worked to establish "exit criteria." Attempting to identify the characteristics we want our graduates to have, we found formulating lists of desired attitudes, values and skills time consuming but possible. Since that time, we have struggled to determine knowledge objectives for all majors and more specialized objectives for those students who take either the Communication/Media or Theatre tracks. Agreeing upon common and essential knowledge has been an on-going, major challenge.

A second simplistic assumption is that once goals are set, doing assessment is easily completed. Unlike other disciplines there are no standardized tests and performance measures of communication which can be easily adapted to an institution's needs. This comes as no surprise to those in the discipline. Wartella (1993) in her ICA presidential address, described communication education as haphazard, with no canon, no core knowledge we can expect from undergraduates. Further, Pearson and Daniels (1988) pointed out that we do not agree on expected communication competencies. Attempts to develop nationally accepted measures have been made with Rubin's Communication Competence Assessment Inventory being the most well known but it is not used in all institutions. Nor do we necessarily agree on the interpretation of a given instrument. Those attending the Assessment Short Course at the SCA convention in Chicago (1992) will remember the spirited disagreements over the application of "The Competent Speaker" speech evaluation form.²

SCA's Principles of Assessment (Hay, 1991) reveal additional concerns. Principle 5 reads, "Assessment should be based on multiple methods appropriate to a given program rather than any single test." Principle 6 asserts, "Assessment instruments and procedures should be externally validated." Thus, SCA recognizes our different needs, suggests we develop our own measures and use external validation measures. For the small department in a small

²The short course was conducted by Sherwyn Morreale and Ruth Hulbert-Johnson both of the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs and by K. Phillip Taylor of the University of Central Florida, Orlando and Donna S. Tatum, University of Chicago.

institution, these may be almost insurmountable hurdles. Many will not have time, money and/or expertise to develop such measures. Indeed, 40% of the respondents to Hay's survey (1992) indicated that "their department was in need of measures and instruments to use in gathering information."

The third common assumption is that these activities can be easily fitted into the time frames of communication faculty. For some departments, somewhere, that might be possible. But for many, defining objectives, gathering information and interpreting data is an additional, heavy burden which needs to be acknowledged at the outset.

Beginning the process is especially time consuming. After our first one-day meeting, Heidelberg departmental faculty attempted to devote some faculty meeting time to further planning. With the press of regular problems this was very difficult, although as will be noted later, these sessions produced some of our best insights. When we held a half-day session in 1993 to continue our work on objectives, members likened the experience to the Allen Alda movie, "Same Time Next Year." It had been a long time since we had last worked on objectives.

An example of the required time commitment was detailed by Parker and Drummond-Reeves (1992) of Boise State University. They concluded that an entire year was necessary to develop an alumni survey. They further argued that one-quarter release time for a semester was inadequate to design and complete an alumni survey and recommended that release time span at least two semesters. Heidelberg does not offer released time for activities, so all assessment including an alumni survey must be added to full loads of teaching and co-curricular activities. Many other communication departments will probably be working assessment into already busy schedules. College officials mandating assessment need to be reminded of the large amounts of time required and be asked to support the process in some way.

Having noted some of the difficulties and simplistic assumptions, we must do assessment.

TRIAL AND ERROR IN THE CAPSTONE COURSE

An early, important decision is whether assessment will be formative or summative or both. According to Tucker (in press), formative assessment is that which provides feedback directly to the student. In the classroom, formative assessment is conducted at the end of a class or section of material. Institutionally, information may be collected at some point during the student's academic path so that corrective measures may be instituted. For example, a junior year assessment which reveals that a student has less than average critical thinking skills can help that student identify strategies to improve those skills during the final year of study. Such information can also be used for program improvement.

Summative assessment is the collection of information at the end of the collegiate career and is used primarily for program improvement. Tucker (in press) points out that this information is "not nearly as close to the problem and is subject to a myriad of intervening variables."

Formative Measures Used at Heidelberg

In 1990 and 1991, a junior year appraisal program was conducted by Wolff as a pilot for a possible institutional model. In that program, first semester junior communication and theatre arts majors were asked to voluntarily take part in several assessment activities. Among these was the creation of a portfolio to demonstrate writing and critical thinking skills. Demonstrations of attitudes and participation in the fine arts and the students' understanding of other cultures were also to be included. The Watson-Glaser Test of Critical Thinking was administered and students were asked to develop a functional resume³, and submit a videotape of an oral presentation. After the materials were submitted and evaluated, a student-faculty conference led to the creation of a goal plan for the student's final three semesters⁴.

³This resume emphasizes skill development more than educational and work experiences. The resume serves as a self-report of student perception of the development of skills.

⁴At Heidelberg, students learn to write goal plans during the freshman Total Student Development program. They are urged to keep these updated during their academic career.

The junior year appraisal was highly valued by participating students. Getting students to participate and to collect materials even after entering the program was, however, very difficult. Evaluating the portfolios also proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Listening to portfolio devotees at national meetings made the process sound easy, but the need to create standards which could then be tested for reliability was a task requiring both expertise and large amounts of time. Administering and interpreting the program took inordinate amounts of time. While the approach provided useful feedback to the student and the department, it was deemed unworkable for both the department and the college as a whole.

Other formative assessment strategies, including Minute Papers and Muddiest Point, have been used on occasion by departmental faculty. Angelo and Cross's (1993) informal classroom assessment procedures are well described by Tucker (in press), as are a variety of classroom research strategies. These have much merit but systematic classroom research has not been undertaken in the department.

Formative techniques are most useful to faculty and students, providing the opportunity for corrective responses to less than desirable situations. It is unclear, however, if they will be acceptable and/or sufficient to meet the accrediting agencies' mandates. Relying on these alone would be risky even though they could, and should, be used in combination with summative measures.

Summative Measures Used at Heidelberg

Given the difficulties of participation in the Junior Year Appraisal Program, the department elected to conduct most assessment activities in the required Senior Seminar course where participation could be mandated. The course was chosen because we consider it a capstone experience in which we ask students to demonstrate skills of analysis, synthesis, writing and speaking. In place for over 25 years, the course has evolved into a study of communication criticism where students produce a critical study in both written and oral formats.

Northeast Missouri State University has been using capstone course assessment for several years. They report the following:

Capstone courses in the major field integrate both university-wide general education requirements and subfields of the discipline. They also provide a systematic focus on knowledge, skills and attitudes outcomes; create opportunities for multiple assessment; prompt faculty discussion; and encourage reexamination of discipline requirements and teaching approaches. (*Update*, November-December, 1992)

The first step in developing the assessment plan was to identify strategies to evaluate the department's skills and attitudes objectives. The assessment programs of several institutions were used for guidance. Among these were Northeastern Missouri State University (Heisserer), Kean College, and King College. Goals and selected strategies are included in Appendix A. Plans were then made for implementing some of the strategies.

In the first year (1992-93), the department decided to assess primarily critical thinking, writing and speaking skills. As two faculty members were also working on the institutional subcommittee to evaluate speaking and writing, the department elected to pilot that committee's evaluation instruments. Criteria for speaking were selected from SCA's *Communication is Life* (1990) and from the college's speech evaluation form. Writing criteria were written by members of the English Department. Both sets were submitted to the general faculty for comment and instruments to evaluate student achievement were drawn up.

A student survey to determine student participation in and attitudes about the department's co-curricular and social activities was also created and administered.

During the fall semester, we engaged in the following formal assessment activities:

- The Watson Glaser Test of Critical Thinking⁵ was administered.

Critical thinking was also evaluated as part of the regular grading in the course.

- Writing skills were evaluated using the pilot instrument of the Writing and

⁵The Watson-Glaser Test was used because the College is beginning to collect entry level Watson Glaser scores so that in 1994-95, it will be possible to do individual pretest-posttest. In addition, by using the same tool as the rest of the college (whatever the limitations of that tool), across campus comparisons will also be possible.

Speaking Subcommittee of the college's Evaluation Taskforce.

- Speaking skills were evaluated using the pilot instrument of the Writing and Speaking Subcommittee of the college's Evaluation Taskforce.
- A survey of student participation in and evaluation of departmental activities was administered.

Results of Initial Assessment Strategies

Evaluation of the information followed in the second semester. The following data was obtained:

- The Watson Glaser test results when compared to the norms for upperclass in four year colleges indicated a bi-modal distribution of scores. Three students whose scores were below the 50th percentile had high GPA's. This is a flag to both the department and the college.
- The instruments for evaluating speaking and writing were unsatisfactory and yielded little information beyond that obtained informally in regular grading. Newer, simplified instruments will be developed and tested before the completion of 1993-94 seminar.
- Administration of the participation and attitude survey indicated that students were generally supportive of departmental social activities such as the fall dessert and the spring awards banquet. Participation in co-curricular activities was linked to the student's track (theatre students participated in and attended theatre productions while Communication/Media track majors tended to be more active in radio and television.) Only a small percentage of the students had completed the required speech competition requirement.

None of this data was significant by itself nor did it reveal much collectively. The first trial did establish the beginnings of a data base for the Watson Glaser and Student Survey results. The trial use of the writing and speaking instruments, while not productive for the department, provided a service for the institution. As the college begins to collect entry level data on these

skills (probably in 1994-95), using the same instrument will allow us to compare our students with those in other majors. Until then, we will be able to compare across years.

In short, formal assessment the first year didn't tell us much we didn't know. We started and learned what not to do in several instances. As assessment continues in 1993-94, computer files are being established to facilitate comparison of yearly data.

Informal Assessment

Informal assessment has been perhaps more significant. Discussions of the process and initial attempts to do assessment have changed the focus of the faculty's thinking about our program. For example, in one session, the faculty considered the ability of students to raise and handle questions. In a discussion session with the seminar members, students raised similar concerns. Several found the questions following their prospectus presentations⁶ threatening while others considered it a learning experience. As a result of these sessions, the faculty recognized that we do not systematically teach handling of questions.

Further, these informal sessions have led the faculty to acknowledge that while there is agreement on the core curriculum required in each track, we have only sketchy knowledge of what is actually taught in courses other than our own. Teaching of skills is generally apparent but a comprehensive plan for identifying where concepts are taught has never been created. This accounts in part for our difficulty in identifying knowledge objectives.

Assessment in 1993-94

During the summer and early fall, an alumni survey was developed. The objectives of the survey were these:

1. to learn alumni evaluation of the academic program, including specific courses
2. to learn alumni evaluation of the co-curricular program

⁶As a part of the seminar, all students write a prospectus of their study. These are presented orally before the class and the departmental faculty. Students stand for questions after the presentation.

3. to determine the career paths of graduates
4. to assess graduates' attitudes of the department's role in skill building, particularly speaking, writing and critical thinking
5. To obtain alumni reaction to the creation of the two tracks (1991)

In developing the survey, the department consulted earlier surveys done by the department and the college, the survey prepared by the Computer Science Department for assessment purposes (Van Vleet), and the work of Parker and Drummond-Reeves (1992) of Boise State University.

Although the advantages of a telephone study are many, factors of cost and available time led to a mail survey. The instrument was sent to all graduates of the past ten years, a total of 127 persons.

Students in the seminar were asked to write a paper in which they identified concepts which they believe to be key to their four year study in communication and theatre. This is similar to the Senior Letter activity used at Karen Wilson College (McKinley and McWilliams, 1992). There all seniors submit a letter requesting graduation. Students provide a global survey of educational activities and evaluate the general outcomes of their education. They are asked to comment on what has been of especial value, their contributions to the college and education and what recommendations they might make for the future of the college.

After writing their concept papers, our students were invited to a discussion meeting with the faculty. The essays and meeting notes were analyzed and compared to the knowledge objectives which the faculty has identified at this point. We had hoped this would give us significant insight into our effectiveness in teaching concepts.

Writing, speaking and critical thinking will be evaluated when students present their final papers and make the oral presentations.

Second Year Assessment Results

- We have about a 25% return for the alumni survey; a second reminder has been mailed. First reading suggests that those students who rate our program highly are

those responding. We hope some of the not-so-positive also comment.

- Results of the student surveys are almost identical to the first year.
- The second administering of the Watson-Glaser Test of Critical Thinking again revealed a bi-modal spread of scores. It is becoming apparent that the curriculum will need to be modified to include more overt development of critical thinking skills.
- The senior essay and meeting indicated that students are pleased with the hands-on experience opportunities and the range of opportunities both academic and co-curricular. They expressed concern for the courses required in each track, generally supporting a broader curriculum. Students identified a problem concerning the public reporting of internships which will be altered.
- In general, students did not respond to the request for "significant concepts learned." We need to work on the assignment details if this is to work as a measure of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The process has been challenging, time consuming, rewarding. In spite of many models of assessment available, we have found that in many ways we must reinvent the wheel as we focus on the effectiveness of our particular program. Has all of this been worth the time? We don't know yet. Our preliminary response is that the process may be more valuable than the results. Much of what we've learned about the program and our teaching, we have at least suspected. But the process of setting objectives, gathering and analyzing data has provided an opportunity to focus *our* attention on what it is we do and how we do it. That may be the most valuable result of the exercise.

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APPENDIX A

EXIT CRITERIA FOR ALL CTA MAJORS

GOALS Skills

I. Critical Thinking

- A. Ability to draw conclusions from data
- B. Evaluate sources
- C. Use of library resources
- D. Be able to distinguish and use artistic, humanistic, and empirical methods of learning
- E. Identify observation, inference

II. Expressivity

- A. Use adequate and appropriate vocabulary
- B. Use grammar correctly, both written & oral
- C. Organize and structure ideas appropriately
- D. Use language concisely
- E. Have effective questioning skills
- F. Have developed the ability to assume roles/act
- G. Develop the ability to read aloud

III. Interpersonal skills

- A. Empathic listening
- B. Leadership skills

IV. Develop career potential

- C. Appropriate self-disclosure
- D. Conflict Management
- E. Confidence in own abilities
- F. Use assertive behavior
- A. Take advantage of career help
- B. Be able to take career risks
- C. Set and achieve career goals
- D. to have prepared career materials --resumes, tapes, audioton programs

V. Academic and Comprehension skills

- A. Critical Listening
- B. Reading
- C. Writing
- D. Accept responsibility for personal growth and individual projects

OBJECTIVES

ASSESSMENT

- Seminar paper
- Seminar
- Seminar
- Upper level courses
- Watson Glaser
- Seminar presentation
- Seminar
- Seminar
- Seminar
- Participation Theatre
- Participation I.E.
- Co-curricular reports
- Internship reports
- Seminar

****VI. Performance Skills**

- A. The ability to reach an audience effectively through the components of
1. Public Address
 2. Oral Interpretation
 3. Radio/Television Production
 4. Theatre

Knowledge

- I Critical judgment of communication/theatre performances/artifacts

- A. Knowledge of historical background of areas and persons in theatre/public speaking/broadcasting
1. to be able to identify and discuss at least one (five, ten) classical work in each
 2. to be able to describe the contribution of at least one (five, ten) famous person in each field
- B. Ability to apply scholarly criteria in evaluation of the works (of one areas).

- II. Understanding of freedom of speech/art/expression/press (First Amendment)

- III. Understanding of communication differences across cultures

- A. To be able to identify major culture general differences in human communication
- B to be able to identify major cultural in specific cultures
- To be able to describe major periods/events in history of

- *IV. Historical knowledge

1. Rhetoric
2. Media
3. Theatre

- To describe the major human communication theories and models in

- *V Models

1. Rhetoric
2. Media
3. Theatre

- *VI Production, performance, directing techniques

1. Oral Interpretation
2. Media
3. Theatre

***VII. Message in context**

- A. to have a knowledge of public speeches in their historical and cultural contexts
- B. to have a knowledge of drama in their historical and cultural context
- C. to have a knowledge of media messages in their and cultural contexts
- D. to have knowledge of structure, function and style of communication messages in social, political, cultural and economic context

***VIII. Relationship of Communication & Drama to the Human Condition**

To have knowledge of intertextual approaches to societal political, economic and cultural problems in issues inherent in the human condition

****IX Public Speaking**

- A. Purposes, types and forms of public address
- B. Audience Analysis
- C. Invention and Organization
- D. Persuasive Strategies

****X. Communication Variables**

- A. Verbal and Nonverbal Codes
- B. Conflict
- C. Self-Disclosure, Trust
- D. Climate, Power
- E. Relational variables

Attitudes

I. Imagination and Creativity

II. Appreciation of communication/theatre/media as fine arts

A. Appreciation of drama

1. Read and attend at least _____ Heidelberg theatre productions
2. Attend/view _____ professional performances
3. Attend performances of music and dance

Senior Survey

B. Appreciate TV/Film

1. Watch _____ hours of WHEI-TV and analyze
2. Analyzing _____ hours of professional productions.

Senior Survey

C. Appreciation of Public Address

1. Attend _____ Artist-Lecture series per semester
2. Analysis of _____ public addresses