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ABSTRACT

Noting that assessment continues to be at the forefront of the speech communication discipline and the academy in general, this paper reflects on one speech communication department's struggle to make assessment meaningful and doable. The Speech Communications Department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock uses such "low tech" assessment methods as portfolios, yet the department finds itself in the throes of learning "high tech" options. The paper provides a case study on "high tech" assessment by first describing the context and background of the department's assessment efforts. The remaining sections of the paper are devoted to describing two high tech resources the department is using and the specific lessons learned about these assessment methods. An appendix presents a timetable for assessing basic course learning objectives. (RS)

State of the Art Learning Labs and Assessment

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State of the Art Learning Labs and Assessment

Assessment continues to be at the forefront of our discipline and the academy in general (Boyer, 1990; Rogers & Mentkowski, 1996). The past decade has seen continued pressure from employers, politicians, and citizens who have doubts about the effectiveness of the academy in preparing individuals for the complex world of work (Ewell, 1998). Faculty concerns with assessment frequently center on making assessment a tool to improve student learning while simultaneously finding ways to integrate various assessment methods and feedback into an already burdened schedule (Hugenberg, 1995; Mader, 1995).

This paper reflects one department's struggle to make assessment meaningful and doable. While our department uses such "low tech" assessment methods as portfolios, we find ourselves in the throes of learning "high tech" options. This paper provides a case study on "high tech" assessment by first describing the context and background of our assessment efforts. The remaining sections of the paper are devoted to describing two high tech resources we are using and the specific lessons we are learning about these assessment methods.

Background and Context

The Speech Communication Department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock has been on the road toward formal assessment processes for the

past ten years. Our university engaged in process of first identifying core competencies expected of students who completed core courses (e.g, oral and written communication, critical thinking, etc.). Departments with core courses were then expected to develop assessment plans that translated these core competencies into general and specific learning objectives and appropriate plans for assessment of these objectives. By the year 1999-2000, all programs (not just those with core courses), are expected to not only have plans in place, but results of feedback from their assessment efforts available to the campus community.

Before the university wide initiatives on assessment had begun, our department was moving in the direction of improving our program through assessing student performance. For example, we developed a capstone course that included a standardized evaluation of a senior level paper/presentation. Feedback from these performances has resulted in major changes to our curriculum and greater communication concerning learning objectives in all of our courses.

Our assessment efforts are integrated with our already learning lab that relies on interns and computer based instruction (CBI) to assist students across campus and in our core or basic course. Our goal in developing the lab was to provide more time in the class for active learning strategies. The lab continues to be central to our efforts in that with a staff of graduate and undergraduate interns it is a source of both high touch and high tech efforts to promote oral

communication skills for students across all majors. It is in the context of this lab that our primary assessment activities take place.

The Lab

The Jerry P. Butler Speech Communication Interactive Learning Lab (better know as the SCIL Center) houses 25 Pentium PC's running off of an Windows NT server, all utilizing "Authorware Professional" to create lessons. Our use of these computers for assessment has involved three efforts. The first two efforts focus on assessment of our core course while the last effort is in place to enhance student performance on traditional tests as well as the post assessment.

Assessment of Knowledge. We have used the computers to collect data on a standard pre and post 50-item multiple choice assessment instrument. This instrument is currently being revised through the use of software that will allow us to: (a) provide the assessment on the internet so that we may assess students at other points in time; (b) focus on one or more learning objectives by selecting out key items for analysis; (c) create a larger bank of items that will then insure students receive equivalent but different assessment questions; and (d) allow us to interface with SPSS software for pre and post assessment analysis.[1]

Assessment of Apprehension We also use the PRCA to gain pre and post data on communication apprehension. These data are not only used to

[1] The software is produced by Logic eXtension Resources, 7168 Archibald Ave, Ste. 240, Alta Loma, CA 91701-6421. Voice: 909-980-0046; Fax: (909) 987-8706; Web: http://www.lxrtest.com. The name of the software is "LXR-TEXT 5.1.9. The price as of 8/19/98 was $1597.00. If you questions about the product, you may contact Al De Marchi: E-mail: ademarchi@lxrtest.com; (909) 980-0046, x110.

determine changes in apprehension levels as a result of our course, but also scores are provided to individuals students and their faculty in order to determine specific challenges the student may need assistance with during the semester.

Assessment by Chapter. We are developing chapter reviews using "Authorware" software that will give the students immediate feedback concerning the knowledge of chapter concepts. These assessments were developed as a way to enhance student performance in that students may use these modules before a class room test as well as for review of concepts missed after a test is completed. In some cases, faculty require students to complete chapter reviews if they performed poorly on an exam.

The Decision Support Center

Our second high tech resource arrived in our department about three years ago when our department was charged with maintaining and providing moderators/facilitators for an electronic meeting room. The Decision Support Center is set up with recessed computer monitors, each having a keyboard linked to a central screen that allows all parties to express their ideas simultaneously and anonymously. A few benefits of this technology include the way it:

*Cuts meeting time by 60%

*Displays statistical analysis for prioritizing and generating consensus

*Provides written and electronic records of all processes[2]

While this room is host to on and off campus groups for purposes ranging from brainstorming to strategic planning, the technology has also proven useful for assessment in two ways.

Developing a Reliable Evaluation Instrument. For the last several years our department has been devising a speech evaluation instrument that all faculty would agree to use in their classes. Determining the form and content of this instrument has been a slowly evolving process with the first stages involving consensus on criteria (e.g, use of sources, clear points, etc.) and the later stages involving agreement on categories for rating each criteria. However, the final stage, that of determining the reliability of the instrument, has been made easier by the use of the electronic meeting room. The process involves (a) viewing a taped speech, (b) rating the speech on the each of the seven criteria, and providing a grade, and (c) discussion of the results.

For example, in our first effort to use the software for reliability development, within seconds after scoring, we had a screen to view the degree of consensus on each of the items (See Table 1).

[2] The software, "GroupSystems," is produced by Ventana Corporation. 1430 E. Ft. Lowell, Tuscon, AZ 85719. 520-325-8228 (voice); 520-325-8319.

Table 1:

Table of Ratings from Decision Support Center

ITEM	CRITERIA	SA (3)	A (2)	SD (1)	TOTAL	MEAN	STD	N
#1	Definite Stop	3	4	3	20	2.00	0.82	10
#2	Eye Contact	1	7	2	19	1.90	0.57	10
#3	Purpose Clear	1	5	4	17	1.70	0.67	10
#4	Variety of Info	1	4	5	16	1.60	0.70	10
#5	Org. Pattern	1	2	7	14	1.40	0.70	10
#6	Repetition	0	3	7	13	1.30	0.48	10
#7	Attention Getter	0	1	10	10	1.00	0.00	10
	OVERALL GRADE	0	0	9	11	1.10	0.32	10

The above screen prompted a discussion of the reasons for the low consensus on three of the criteria (items #1, 3, 4). We were able to clarify rating categories/terms and determine needed changes in order to move toward greater consistency in the way we use the form. We plan to hold at least one more reliability check round and then move toward using the center as a place to train new instructors in using the instrument.

Focus Groups The meeting room has also been useful in collecting information from alumni of our program. The software can be used to create a survey or to simply gain information about program strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations. The value of the software is such data can then be

electronically collapsed into categories and made readily accessible as a document that would serve as a launching pad for a strategic planning session. In short, the Decision Center provides a way to make the move from data collection to planning seamless.

Lessons Learned

The following **four** lessons highlight just a few of the conclusions we have drawn from our high tech approach to assessment. We clearly have more to learn and have come to accept that we will be making adjustments in our process on a continuous basis.

1. **The high tech component of our assessment efforts provides a way to enhance oral communication across the curriculum efforts.** Our department is committed to supporting faculty across campus in developing the communication skills of their students. The assessment software in the SCIL Center provides local and internet access that will enable us to assess student knowledge of communication across campus after they have left the basic course. Our long range plans include collecting data from a sample of such students to determine their retention of information related to our core learning objectives. In time, we hope to provide a link to needed tutorials/CBI materials that would be linked to a student's education needs. These efforts provide the greatest promise for creating a university that engages students and faculty in discovering greater coherence in the curriculum (c.f., Tint, 1993) .

2. **Success with high tech efforts in electronic meeting rooms assume the use of a skilled moderator and a faculty willing to collaborate and compromise.**

As indicated, the electronic meeting room provides immediate feedback. At first glance, such a vehicle seems like a dream come true (i.e., instantaneous graphs, tables, etc. of data). However, we have learned that the facilitator must be sure to follow several guides. First, limit the time for each meeting. Not all of the data should be sorted and discussed at one time. We rarely allow anyone to use the room for more than 3 hours in a day. The fact that 5 to 6 hours of work may be done in that time means that participants are generally overly fatigued if they are kept longer.

Second, make the goals of the session clear. While the electronic meeting room allows for more efficient meetings, it can be less productive if a group is not clear on what can be done in the allotted time. Massive data at your finger tips does not mean a group can arrive in that same amount of time on what to do with the data. For example, we only discussed the three items on which their was a lack of consensus.

Finally, if you are not part of a faculty that enjoys the process of sorting data, collaborating, and making creative use of conflict, then such a center may only create more problems. The fact that "votes" can be caste anonymously does allow for fuller and richer participant. However, in the case of the essential discussion of ideas and views related to the data, a department must have a everyone on the same page in terms of a supportive climate. We have

found that the anonymity soon breaks down as viewpoints are expressed and reasons are given for various ratings.

3. **High tech efforts must be guided by a "doable" assessment plan (or how "High Tech" has taught us to redefine data overload).** Data from the earlier pilot version of our 50-item assessment instrument as well as the PRCA quickly stacked up as one beleaguered faculty member hustled to first relearn SPSS on the main frame and then SPSS for the PC. The data, once crunched, was unmanageable in that it was not guided by a coherent and systematically prioritized set of questions. We had data that would answer a dozen potentially useful questions. However, even though I teach organizational assessment, I fell prey to the "just get the data" pitfall. Because we were not clear as to which questions needed to be answered, we made little productive useful of the data. For example, I generated a table that showed score differences across all sections of the basic course as well as section by section. Impressive as this data was, our department never had the discussion as to how we might use such information. Our current plan calls for us to focus on one learning objective each year. Since we do not have a department or one person with the time to collect and evaluate data, we needed a plan that would allow us to limit our data collection to one or two focused questions each year. Appendix A provides a graph of our plan to rotate learning objectives over the coming years.

4. **Without low tech data we would have very little to show from all of our high tech efforts.** The same year we gained data about section

differences from our SCIL Center, we also used a portfolio method to examine our learning objectives. This data allowed us to notice differences in what students (and faculty) perceived to be our expectations for our small group component of the course. Such information was crucial in guiding changes we made in standardizing assignments and communicating expectations across the department. The statistical data alone would not have provided such a clear direction. At best, it would have helped us to notice differences in scores on the component of the course, but explanation for those differences required a different method.

Summary

High tech assessment, like all technological solutions, holds great power and promise. Our efforts at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock have reflected the potential of these efforts to create a feedback loop for program improvement as well as a learning community with enhanced oral communication across the curriculum efforts. While a number of other possibilities exist due to the capacity to link our Lab and Decision Center to the Net, we currently find ourselves committed to improving the quality of what we do by limiting the focus of our data collection efforts, recognizing the importance of our low tech efforts, and improving what we do with assessment with each step we take.

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APPENDIX A

TIME TABLE FOR ASSESSING BASIC COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES
SPEECH COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT,
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS, LITTLE ROCK

TIME TABLE FOR ASSESSING SPEECH COMMUNICATION 1300

LEARNING OBJECTIVE	YEAR
# identify principles of effective participation in a small group problem-solving discussion.	1997-98
# identify the criteria for an effective speech and be able to effectively deliver a simulated in-class report.	1998-98
# identify the basic fallacies that appear in argumentative discourse.	1999-00
# identify the methods for effectively managing a conflict situation.	2000-01
# identify concepts and terms associated with oral communication (e.g., basic components of the communication process, etc.).	2001-02

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