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Slaying the Assessment Dragon: One Department's Efforts to Tame the Beast and Survive as the Knights in Shining Armor

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Assessment looms large across our campuses as an instrument of evaluation, accountability, and development. Communication departments are called on to establish assessment programs for their graduate and undergraduate curriculum programs. Additionally, departments that offer courses in the general education programs are often the first departments approached for assessment of those courses as part of general education assessment. This case study describes the successes and challenges of a communication department's experience in establishing and maintaining a general education assessment program of their Basic Oral Communication course. Preliminary data and analysis is included in reporting the outcome of these efforts.

Key words: Benchmarks in Public Speaking, Case Study, Competencies, General Education, Value Rubric

Assessment is here. Clearly, the role that assessment of curricula has taken at public universities should not be underestimated. As might be expected, those university courses that are requirements for most undergraduate students have garnered the lion's share of early assessment efforts. Nationwide, those courses include critical thinking, mathematics, English composition, information literacy, and public speaking, among others. The need for assessment is heard loudly and clearly across campuses as universities require more and more accountability for productivity, substance, and success in the classroom. University assessment directors are populating administrative staffs and measuring success in the classroom as a function of that accountability. Accrediting bodies and faculty support organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) have shifted their priorities significantly over the past twenty years in response to the demands for the evidence of an institution's effectiveness. Coordination of these efforts, however, currently exists without significant budgetary assistance (Kramer & Swing, 2010). In lieu of financial assistance, university administrative support is called upon to lead successful assessment program implementation often at the expense of other programs (Meyer-Adams, Potts, Koob, Dorsey, & Rosales, 2011).

For many universities, the general education communication competency course is a very visible target for assessment. These courses are often straightforward public speaking courses, but also include interpersonal and hybrid courses. In a mid-size university, it is not unreasonable for there to be 35-50 sections of these kinds of courses offered each semester. As a result, there is a large data source available for assessment. With a coordinated effort, assessment can actually help a communication department transition and grow. However, if faculty members teaching the course are using a variety

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of assignments, methods, and approaches, how can assessment be accomplished? This article addresses that challenge. From identifying criteria for assessment to establishing a process for data collection and analysis to communicating the success of the project to other departments and administration, this paper explores successes and challenges.

Our efforts to implement a department-wide assessment program for the general education-required Fundamentals of Oral Communication (a public speaking course) are the article's focus. As a case study, the description of our process is not intended as a blueprint; rather, individual departments and colleges might read this case study as a narrative that outlines our preliminary data collection, our challenges, our successes, our as-yet unanswered questions, and our future steps as a department. From that, departments that have not yet initiated assessment but have been asked to do so might adapt our process to their local needs. Departments should develop an assessment plan before the utility of such a course is called into question (Hess, 2012).

The Case Study Approach

A case study is both product and process (Stake, 1998). It may be simple or complex, but it is bounded by parameters of time, activity, or purpose. As such, we are able to not only conceptualize what happened in the case—in this example, the assessment implementation process—but also produce a report that summarizes both the efforts and results. Cresswell (1994) describes a case study as a report of a researcher (or researchers) exploring a single entity and gathering detailed information using a variety of data collection methods during a specific period of time. The value of a case study is that it is holistic in its exploration and analysis (Patton, 1990). In this case study, we are exploring the assessment process of a multi-section general education course, Fundamentals of Oral Communication. Data were collected during the 2011-2012 academic year. After identifying three specific and observable behaviors important to the performance of a public speech, faculty rated students using the Dreyfus competency scale (Dreyfus, 1989). The aggregate of that data was then used to assess the success of specific learning outcomes.

While the use of a case approach can serve many purposes, the purpose of this case study fits the definition of an *instrumental* case study that provides specific insight into an issue. The case is secondary to helping us understand the process and results (Stake, 1998). The in-depth evaluation of the details helps us evaluate what was done and the outcomes achieved. Although the primary purpose of this case is instrumental, the case is also intrinsic because we want to understand this particular case. It is of interest not only because it might be typical of other cases, but because of the information that can be gained.

According to Stake (1998), the process of completing a case study includes (1) defining the parameters of the case and identifying what is of interest in the case, (2) selecting an issue to explore, which becomes the research question, (3) looking for patterns in the data, (4) finding overlaps in the data and methods of data collection to allow for interpretation, (5) conceptualizing alternative interpretations, and (6) making claims based on those interpretations. These steps help organize the details of the case into a substantive artifact with purpose. That purpose can either be for the researcher's own benefit or for helping others understand the process.

Once the details of the case are collected and reviewed, interpreting those details can be accomplished by looking for patterns in the data and by comparing those patterns with what was predicted. The researcher can also engage in explanation building by looking for causal links or by looking for alternative explanations. Finally, the research might also try to identify trends or changes over time (Cresswell, 1994; Patton, 1990). In this case, we looked at how the data changed from the Fall to the Spring semester and drew conclusions to explain those changes. Understanding the process and product of assessment efforts in a multi-sectional general education course (such as Public Speaking) is best accomplished using the case study approach. This approach not only helps identify particulars of this specific event, but also clarifies the process for others.

Context of Eastern State University

Eastern State University (a pseudonym) is a member of the State System of Higher Education (also a pseudonym). The Board of Governors oversees the State System which includes a total of 14 public universities. The Council of Trustees is the local governing body for Eastern State University. The Officers of Administration for the university are the president and members of the president's cabinet. In 2011, enrollment at the university included over 10,000 students. The university employs 365 tenured/tenure-track instructional faculty and boast a favorable 20:1 student-faculty ratio. Eighty-eight percent of our tenured and tenure-track faculty have doctorates or terminal degrees. The university is accredited by Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and approved by the State Department of Education (Eastern State University, 2012). Eastern State University adopted a new general education program in the Fall of 2011, of which oral communication is a core requirement for all majors across campus. Unfortunately, the university recently closed its Center for Teaching and Learning as a result of budget cuts. The loss of this resource is significant when faculty are unfamiliar with how to establish an assessment program for general education.

This oral communication requirement is fulfilled through the Department of Communication Studies and Theatre; overwhelmingly, students meet the oral communication requirement by enrolling in Fundamentals of Oral Communication (COM010). The department offers approximately 90 sections of this course per academic year with a cap of 25 students per section. Serving over 2200 students per year, the course is taught by tenured, tenure-track, and adjunct faculty. The communication studies faculty consists of 20 members, all of whom actively teach the basic course. Typically, five to six adjunct faculty teach four sections of COM010 a semester, accounting for almost half of the sections. All full-time faculty teach four courses per semester and this load frequently includes one or two sections of the oral communication course. Despite the prevalence of the basic course in the curriculum, there are no common course materials such as a common textbook or common final exam. Faculty members are required to consult the master syllabus that does stipulate that three speeches are required, one of which must be the persuasive speech presentation. Specifically, one of the objectives on the master syllabus includes a "demonstrated ability to present an extemporaneous speech, which has a central idea, significant purpose, and a clear-pattern of organization with appropriate supporting evidence and reason." The Fundamentals of Oral Communication course is a typical public speaking course. It is not a hybrid course attempting to introduce students to the discipline.

Getting the Assessment Process Started

In Fall 2009, the University hired an assessment director. In anticipation of assessment grant-funded opportunities, several faculty agreed that it would be a good idea to collect some preliminary data to establish the Department of Communication Studies and Theatre as a campus leader in assessment. The first and second author had significant prior experience in assessment in communication effectiveness, and communication competence in medical education, respectively. These experiences helped frame assessment as a conscious effort to measure our claims and demonstrate the significance of a course that the university requires of every student. Additionally, it provided an opportunity to improve and further develop the course.

The assessment office at our university soon began offering grants to faculty members interested in spearheading assessment efforts for core requirement General Education courses. At our university, those courses included our Fundamentals of Oral Communication course, Mathematics, English Composition, and Wellness. In order to make a better case for one of these competitive grants, five members of our faculty decided to participate in some preliminary data collection by measuring three cognitive qualities through the final examination as well as three behavioral qualities collected through the final persuasive speech assignment in their courses. Most basic communication courses consist of both skill and knowledge components. Not only do students need to know what good communication is, they also need to be able to demonstrate that knowledge in a practical way. Behavioral aspects of a student's success are demonstrated through a classroom presentation: the persuasive speech. Selecting basic criteria for success is accomplished for multiple sections of the same course by identifying and exploring what is at the heart of demonstrating good communication skills. In our faculty discussions, some of these behavioral qualities included the requirement of "oral footnotes," adhering to time requirements, and declaring persuasive intent in the introduction of the speech.

Collectively, the enrollment figures for those sections assessed during this preliminary data collection in Fall 2010 totaled over 300 students, or approximately 27% of the total number of students enrolled in the course that semester. Overall, students met the minimum criteria approximately two-thirds of the time. With this baseline data, we applied for and received a modest grant. The grant was structured to provide stipends for interested faculty members to (1) observe digitally recorded student speeches in order to "calibrate" our understanding of what effective eye contact is and whether a student's thesis for the persuasive speech assignment has a persuasive intent; (2) identify additional observable behaviors for future assessment projects; and (3) refine a rubric for our local expectations and purposes. Other components of the funding enabled us to purchase sophisticated digital recording equipment, pay student workers to provide support (converting existing videotape to digital, and so forth.) for the project, and travel to a conference to present our findings.

Meanwhile, the second author was invited to join a multi-disciplinary group of university faculty and administrators that were attending an AAC&U conference with a focus on assessing General Education courses. At this "Institute on General Education and Assessment," campus teams were provided "with opportunities to refine and advance general education programs and their assessment." Among other benefits, conference presenters provided a thorough description of the AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubric development and use. These rubrics were developed along with representative members of appropriate associations so, for example, the Oral Communication VALUE rubric was constructed along with multi-institutional representation arranged through the National Communication Association. In addition to providing rubrics for intellectual and practical skills (i.e., critical thinking, quantitative literacy, and oral communication), VALUE rubrics are also available for assessing aspects of personal and social responsibility (i.e., civic engagement, intercultural competence, and ethical reasoning) and integrative and applied learning.

Summer 2011 Grant Work

Armed with the AAC&U's Oral Communication VALUE rubric, our team of five met for six hours a day for three days in order to observe digitally-recorded student speeches with the purpose of "calibrating" our understanding of significant observable behaviors. An observable behavior was defined as a behavior that can be perceived through one of the senses and can be described using action words. Observable behaviors, then, do not include feelings or intentions. In the world of assessment, in order to have measurable data, behaviors must be observable. After watching dozens of speeches performed at various levels of skill and complexity, we began with the VALUE rubric for oral communication and converted it for our local interests and foci. In our approach to assessment, we decided that we would rather record micro-behaviors associated with delivering a speech, rather than assess a speech in its entirety. One step we took in this conversion was to utilize components of the Dreyfus (1989) model for skill acquisition. This model employs labels—novice, advanced beginner, competent, and proficient—rather than the AAC&U number system of 1-4 that, we believed, in a university environment, would be too easily translated to the letter grade system associated with grade point averages. That is to say, demonstrating advanced beginner behaviors in the category of eye contact, for example, does not equate with a "C" in our use of the rubrics. Additionally, our rubrics added a category that indicates that a student did not attempt a behavior at all. We felt strongly that we needed to differentiate between students who performed a behavior in the novice category as opposed to students who did not even attempt such a behavior. For example, a student who reads a speech and does not make eye contact at all would be categorized in a category titled "not observed" when compared to a student who makes minimal eye contact but who does, at least occasionally, glance up from his or her outline or manuscript.

Moving Forward with the Faculty

When the faculty reconvened at the beginning of Fall 2011, we presented them with two documents and an invitation to identify those components of the VALUE rubric that—collectively—we thought might be a good place to begin a department-wide effort of assessing the Oral Communication course. The first document we presented to them was the AAC&U VALUE rubric for Oral Communication. This was followed by the second document, our local adaptation of the rubric. We invited feedback and encouraged discussion about the specifics of each. While some faculty members unambiguously articulated a preference for their own rubrics, others recognized that our general education requirement course—Fundamentals of Oral Communication—had to produce results in order to remain a requirement for virtually every Eastern State University undergraduate. Furthermore, the members of our assessment team made it very clear that individual faculty were invited and encouraged to adapt the descriptions of observable behaviors on the rubric to their specific assignments and rubrics. What we wanted to measure—at least in part—was how students in *our* classes responded to guidelines. Understanding how students respond to constructive feedback, we reasoned, must include a component that acknowledges the tendency for some students to be unclear about expectations.

Once the rubrics were constructed and tested, it was necessary to convince the faculty not only of the importance of the data collection and the relevance of the process for the program, but also the need to teach behaviors associated with public speaking in an explicit manner. The autonomy of the professoriate and the values of academic freedom often get in the way of assessment. Individual faculty do not, as a general rule, like to be told what or how to teach or what to measure. Therefore, it was important that faculty could identify with the outcomes as something they deemed important and already accomplished in their normal instruction. Assessment efforts often fall short if faculty see it as something "extra" to do that will eventually just find its way to a file cabinet. To ensure the participation of as many faculty in the process as possible, the faculty was asked to submit the three to five most important observable behaviors in the final presentation that students give in the Fundamentals of Oral Communication class, in this case, the persuasive presentation. Using a consensus model, the behaviors that were most frequently cited as important were identified. These behaviors included stating the central idea of the presentation, making eye contact, and citing sources using "oral footnotes" to substantiate the claims made.

Another concern expressed by faculty, both in our case and heard generally (at the AAC&U conference, for example), is how the assessment data might be tied to them and used to evaluate their teaching. This concern is very real. Assessment practices, therefore, must be framed in terms of program development rather than individual evaluation. Anonymity in this case was achieved by each faculty member totaling the results for each section taught on a separate tally sheet, and submitting them to an envelope in the main office. (In the future there may also be a way for submissions electronically that also do not tie the results to a faculty member.) Anonymity must be assured if participation of all faculty members is to be achieved. During the last two weeks of classes data was collected from participating faculty.

In Fall 2011, 30 of 49 sections (61%) reported data for 670 students. The three behavioral criteria selected by faculty for assessment of the final persuasive speech—clearly stating the central idea, maintaining eye contact, and including oral footnotes—were assessed using "not observed) plus four levels of the Dreyfus scale: 0-Not Observed, 1-Novice, 2-Advanced Beginner, 3-Competent, and 4-Proficient.

This Fall data provided a baseline. This baseline would allow us to assess (1) ease of data collection, (2) evaluate faculty participation, (3) identify areas for improvement, and (4) set a target for closing the loop and measure anticipated growth. "Closing the loop" means interpreting the evidence and using that interpretation to generate ideas for improving the quality of teaching, learning processes, and outcomes (Ohia, 2011).

The data collection guidelines allowed faculty to establish their own criteria for each of the behaviors outcomes. For example, instructors utilized their own specific criteria for oral footnotes; there were no departmental guidelines established for the number or format of these citations. However, through conversations with the faculty it was revealed that citations were expected to be complete (whether two were required or ten), easily discernible, and demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of the material in order to achieve the level of proficient. By comparison, a novice level of oral footnotes was defined as "citations are occasionally included and might be incomplete." Advanced beginner and competent levels occupy the definitions "in-between" as defined by the instructor and informed by the rubric.

We determined that the preliminary target for success for each observable behavior would be 70% of participants achieving advanced beginner level or higher. Of the three observable behaviors, stating a central idea achieved the highest level of success with over 85% of participants achieving advanced beginner or higher. This was followed by maintaining eye contact in which 75% of the students demonstrated acceptable skill. Finally, the ability to include oral footnotes was achieved by just over 60% of the students and provided us with the target for improvement.

What the Fall Data Told Us

Over the winter break we began to explore the data collected in Fall 2011. Also over the break, we were contacted by the Director of Assessment to describe our process and share our preliminary findings at a university workshop held in January. The university workshop also featured a representative from the AAC&U who would be delivering a keynote address. While preparing for the workshop, we discovered that during freshman orientation, first-year students are assigned either College Composition (the introductory writing course offered by the English Department) or Fundamentals of Oral Communication for their first semester depending on their verbal SAT scores. Students with higher verbal SAT scores were assigned College Composition while students with lower verbal SAT scores were assigned Fundamentals of Oral Communication. And then for the Spring semester, these assignments are reversed. This policy, we hypothesized, would have an impact on assessment results. What improvement might we see in from Fall to Spring in concepts that both courses cover? Specifically, because both courses forefront the value of central messages and source citation, we might expect students who have already completed College Composition to perform better in the Spring than students who come into Fundamentals of Oral Communication directly from high school. We thought continuing with our data collection would help us answer this research question.

During the university assessment workshop, we shared our results in one of the breakout sessions. Our breakout session was well attended because departments at our university are looking for ways to expeditiously and efficiently implement assessment programs. As a result of the discussion during the session, faculty began to see ways in which departments might work together on similar competencies. For example, the idea of a central message is evident in composition and oral communication, as well as in language studies. If all three departments included this behavior, whether through speaking, writing, translating, or identifying, how might we then more holistically assess a student's knowledge? These questions gave us a focus for further research questions and data collection for the future, as well as possible collaboration.

At the beginning of Spring 2012, the data from Fall were shared with the department faculty along with our observations and conclusions from the university assessment workshop. One of the first observations made about the Fall data was the 61% faculty participation rate. While this was a strong showing, it was unclear why some faculty members perceived it to be a voluntary participation. The chair removed ambiguity by declaring that participation for Spring would be 100%. The process was further refined so that submission of the tally sheets would be directly to the department chair, who would collect results in an envelope as well as to continue to keep the results anonymous and confidential but mandatory. She would know who did and who did not turn in their tallies without knowing specific results. We also discussed the need for an informal discussion at a future faculty meeting about ways to better teach oral footnotes. We also confirmed that we would measure the same three observable behaviors during the last speech of the semester.

Second Time Around—The Spring Data

In Spring 2012, participation by faculty was 100% with data reported for 38 sections or 870 students. As indicated in Table 1, Spring semester results show an increase in the proficient category of all three observable behaviors.

Table 1
Comparison of Competency Levels for Observable Behaviors Achieved

	Clearly Stating Central Message (Fall 2011)	**Clearly Stating Central Message (Spring 2012)**	**Maintaining Eye Contact (Fall 2011)**	**Maintaining Eye Contact (Spring 2012)**	**Including Oral Footnotes (Fall 2011)**	**Including Oral Footnotes (Spring 2012)**
Proficient (4)	19.1%	43.1%	17.3%	20.2%	17.2%	37.7%
Competent (3)	40.6%	23.6%	28.6%	31.3%	22.2%	20.4%
Advanced Beginner (2)	27.7%	22.4%	29.3%	27.9%	19.9%	17.5%
Novice (1)	9.2%	7.7%	19.3%	13.4%	21.9%	16.7%
Failure (0)	3.4%	3.2%	5.2%	7.1%	18.1%	7.7%

Using the benchmark of 70% of students achieving Advanced Beginner, Competent, or Proficient as success, Table 2 compares the percentage of students reaching the benchmark for each behavior.

Table 2
Percent of Students Achieving Benchmark in Two Sequential Semesters

Behavior	Percent of students achieving Dreyfus Levels 2, 3, or 4 in Fall 2011	Percent of students achieving Dreyfus Levels 2, 3, or 4 in Spring 2012
Clearly Stating Central Message	87.4	89.1
Maintaining Eye Contact	75.2	79.4
Including Oral Footnotes	59.3	75.6

Using the same benchmark of 70%, the assessment indicates that the target was reached in all three behaviors. Additionally, the percent of students achieving the proficient level increased in all three behaviors: stating a central message went from 19.1% to 43.1%; eye contact went from 17.3% to 20.2%, and including oral footnotes went from 17.2% to 37.7%.

The reasons why the number of students who achieved our definition of proficient increased from Fall to Spring include several possibilities. First, some of the improvement should be attributed to faculty interventions. We had one faculty brainstorming session where we discussed various classroom activities designed with the expressed intent of improving student comfort and confidence with including oral footnotes. Even though no formal discussion about how to improve teaching central message and eye contact occurred among faculty (at least not in the form of a faculty meeting), understanding how the data looks after collection may have influenced how instructors taught the behaviors during the second semester. Second, Fundamentals of Oral Communication is taken in the Spring by freshmen who entered college with higher verbal SATA scores and have a semester of college experience. They know how to use the library, what to expect from a college professor, and how to study. Also, students who flunk out during the Fall semester are not part of the sample. Therefore, we would expect students to perform better during the second semester. Furthermore, and as suggested earlier, Spring semester Fundamentals of Oral Communication students have already taken College Composition where the ideas of central message and citing sources are introduced and then reinforced in Fundamentals of Oral Communication.

All faculty had provided input on the behaviors to be measured and were aware of them during the Fall semester, but seeing the data and interpreting it makes it more concrete. Whether purposely or not, knowing that central message, eye contact, and oral footnotes would be measured in the final speech may have influenced how the instructor approached the teaching and assessment of that behavior. If the behaviors continue to be measured in Fall 2012 and the percentages remain at the level of Spring 2012, we might attribute the increase to faculty performance. If they revert back to the Fall 2011 levels, our hypothesis about student experience might be more correct. Regardless, because students reached the 70% benchmark in all behaviors in the Spring, we will need to raise the benchmarks and/or add new behaviors for assessment.

Challenges Encountered

While identifying specific course and programmatic goals for assessment is one challenge, fitting into the university assessment plan is another. Often, university assessment committees will have a standard formula or rubric that they want departments to use for consistency. At first, our university assessment committee asked us to holistically categorize students' oral communication skills as four, three, two, or one without wanting these numbers to be thought of as A, B, C, or D. They did not understand that a student could excel in one area of the speech while failing in another. For example, a student might be extremely charismatic with proficient delivery skills and yet not demonstrate the use of appropriate sources or communicate a central message. Attaining a level of competence in oral communication, in our view, is not the average of all behaviors. Furthermore, facts and figures from that type of data collection do not allow us to identify where changes in curriculum or instruction need to occur. As a department, we needed to convince the university assessment committee that the behaviors we were assessing were more relevant and helpful for developing the course and program as well as student skills. We also needed to adapt their reporting form to include each of our three behaviors as well as a "not observed" category. Nonetheless, when the university assessment committee presented our data at a university forum (along with the data of other departments) they merely averaged our totals.

Another challenge is maintaining buy-in from the faculty as well as from the department chair (the chair in our department serves a three-year term). Some faculty may see assessment as an opportunity for scholarly activity (Wang & Hurley, 2012). For others, participation in data reporting can be intimidating and a spirit of ongoing improvement needs to be encouraged as data are collected and ideas for teaching strategies exchanged. As scholars and learners, faculty should always want to learn new ways to improve their teaching and student outcomes, but in an era of budget crisis and other university demands, faculty need to feel as though their way of doing things in the classroom is not threatened. Continuous discussion among members of the faculty on defining objectives and behaviors and contributions for improvement need to be considered. Faculty need to feel part of the process as well the results, even if they are not the ones compiling and analyzing the data or publishing the results.

Finally, our process is challenged by the moving target of success. Benchmarks and behaviors will need to be refined and adjusted yearly. This can become confusing for faculty as they continually try to identify the goal. Once a benchmark is reached it is time to change either by raising what is defined as an acceptable standard or by adding additional observable behaviors (such as vocal delivery, the use of transitions, or choosing effective language). If behaviors for assessment change, original behaviors need to be periodically checked to be sure we are continually meeting the benchmark after the behavior is no longer the subject of assessment.

Lessons Learned

One of the reasons for our perceived success is that we did not try to measure everything. In fact, we chose one speech and three behaviors that represent of what we want students to be able to do by the end of a sixteen-week course in public speaking. The reader will recall that we started really small when five of us identified this project as both useful for our department and necessary for the university. Starting small allowed us to reconsider what we wanted to measure, especially with the input of our faculty colleagues who were not members of our assessment team. As we consider the many competing demands of faculty we wanted our plan to be achievable; that is, we did not want our assessment goals to be thought of by faculty colleagues as extra work and we wanted them to see its relevance.

Making assessment relevant to department faculty means seeking their participation in the decision-making process. First, we shared our preliminary data with faculty and we then asked for their participation in thinking through the selection of observable behaviors. Using a consensus model we asked faculty to identify three to five observable behaviors that are typical in a persuasive speech. The combined results of that inquiry meant that every faculty member had at least one of their suggestions show up in our final total of three. Consensus models of decision making reveal the results so that faculty members who did not have one of their suggestions selected in the final tally can see that others united around another behavior. Second, the relevance of assessment to faculty becomes apparent when the chair shares the department report with the university assessment committee. It is hard for a faculty member to dismiss the importance of assessment when a local entity is demanding participation. Hess (2012) notes that faculty involvement in teaching the public speaking course and an effective assessment plan is essential not only for the growth of a department, but even for that department’s vitality on campus.

Closing the loop means interpreting the evidence and using that interpretation to generate ideas for improving results. It is not enough to simply report results to the faculty. Because we did not achieve our definition of success for the inclusion of oral footnotes in the Fall semester, we enjoyed a spirited brainstorming session early in the Spring semester where we interpreted those results through our local lens. Some faculty members defined their expectations as more rigorous than others. Others revealed that they did not weigh the oral footnotes component of the persuasive speech assignment as much as their peers. We also shared ideas for how to teach oral footnotes. All of these aspects of unpacking the results meant that, as a faculty, we were dialogic and respectful of differences. We also recognized that with the success of central messages and eye contact, we could move to other observable behaviors—such as vocal delivery, completing an audience analysis, or demonstrating more complex organizational patterns—if we felt we were ready to do so.

Our assessment team (all tenure-track professors) understood completely that we were not going to get much in the way of data if we could not assure anonymity. Even with a couple of naysayers among our tenured faculty (who were worried that the data could be used to terminate adjunct faculty) our team was able to collect over 60% of the possible data in that first semester. Once the data was presented to the faculty in the Spring, faculty members were able to see how the data was used and how the numbers were reported for the department as a whole without regard to any individual section or faculty member. Having a department chair that was able to articulate both the need of this data as well as its relative harmlessness was crucial to the 100% participation in the Spring.

The second author's participation at the AAC&U national conference in June 2011 and the first author's participation at a regional Faculty of the Future conference in May 2012—both at the university assessment director's invitation—are indicative of the university's recognition that we are assessment leaders on this campus. One big reason for this recognition is that we can talk the talk. The language of assessment is not overly complex but it does contain some key concepts (i.e., observable behaviors and formative versus summative assessment) as well as a familiarity with learning scales (e.g., the Dreyfus Scale). This has been crucial in our communication (which has included both dialogue and debate) with the university assessment committee.

Discussion—More Dragons to Slay

This case study is limited by several factors. First, the data and process is limited by the structure of the case study. The data measure one department's experience with assessment in the general education course. It is not necessarily reflective of other courses or programs. The case study approach does, however, tell the story of the process of how this department was successful in starting an assessment program that won favor at the university.

The data also only reflect two semesters of student performance. While initial lessons learned are important, the sustainability of the program has not been tested. The story is still unfolding with additional chapters to be written and more dragons to slay.

Finally, it is difficult to measure specific behaviors when the department does not require a common textbook, and thus a common interpretation of rubric definitions is non-existent. Arriving at common interpretations for observable behaviors would enhance the claims made about the assessment of competence. If all faculty were teaching from the same textbook, definitions would be more consistent. It should also be noted that a number of textbook publishers offer all kinds of bells and whistles that could enhance assessment—from grading software to digital cameras—to departments that commit to one of their offerings. But this is not a point we are ready to belabor, neither in our department nor in this article.

Two components are useful in the expansion of assessment criteria of the basic course: (1) successful buy-in from departmental, college, and university stakeholders, and (2) university support. Administrators with a focus on assessment were impressed with our results because we were able to demonstrate that results can be achieved without radically altering what faculty already do in their classes. Colleagues within the department who are interested in participating are encouraged to offer suggestions. Finally, institutional officials have provided resources.

Assessing student knowledge and skill in one section can be challenging enough. That challenge is often multiplied when multiple sections are taught by many faculty. How do the university and department assure consistency and individuality across sections? Once criteria are selected, the implementation of data collection for assessment needs to be precise, objective, and easily collected so that it can count as data. Communication among faculty is crucial and working collaboratively helps meet these challenges. The rewards can win favor at all levels of the university.

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