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Assessment Measures and Rubrics in a Business Communication Course

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Assessment to assure continuous improvement has increasingly become a requirement imposed by accrediting agencies and state legislatures on secondary and post-secondary schools. This paper describes a seven-semester study conducted at a regional university accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Using existing course assignments in the Business Communication course, the study, conducted from fall 2006 through fall 2009, measured student performance related to six state-mandated communication objectives. The faculty used the results to close the loop for continuous improvement, the driving force of the assessment movement.

Ravitch (2002) reported that policy makers believe that student performance should not be contingent solely upon the effort students provide, but also should be the responsibility of teachers, schools, and school districts. Assessment at every educational level has become a mandate that educators must add to their already extensive list of duties. The call for accountability in education resulted in state legislatures mandating high-stakes testing in grades K-12. Increasingly, educational institutions from grades K-12 in public schools, community colleges, and universities are required by federal mandate, state law, or an accreditation entity to develop methods of assessment not only to gain or maintain accreditation but also to receive needed funding. As a result, administrators are confronted with developing effective assessment programs. To illustrate this point, according to a Google[®] search conducted during spring 2010, about 31,900,000 sites exist that pertain to assessment in higher education.

As a result of the call from many legislators for greater accountability in higher education, in 1997 the Texas Legislature required the Higher Education Coordinating Board to mandate that institutions of higher learning assess their core curriculum including communication (Core curriculum: Assumptions and defining characteristics, 1999). At the regional state university in this study, one of the core courses, Business Communication (BCM 247), was designated to assess communication. The exemplary educational objectives related to the communication component of a core curriculum were:

1. To understand and demonstrate writing and speaking processes through invention, organization, drafting, revision, editing, and presentation.
2. To understand the importance of specifying audience and purpose and to select appropriate communication choices.

3. To understand and appropriately apply modes of expression, i.e., descriptive, expository, narrative, scientific, and self-expressive, in written, visual, and oral communication.
4. To participate effectively in groups with emphasis on listening, critical and reflective thinking, and responding.
5. To understand and apply basic principles of critical thinking, problem solving, and technical proficiency in the development of exposition and argument.
6. To develop the ability to research and write a documented paper and/or to give an oral presentation.

These objectives were used to develop an assessment schedule to comply with the state mandate.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Accreditation

Accreditation agencies such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), and state higher education agencies have published guidelines that universities must follow in order to attain ongoing accreditation (Core curriculum: Assumptions and defining characteristics, 1999; Eligibility procedures, 2008; Principles, 2008). By gaining and maintaining accreditation, institutions assure prospective students that they meet exacting standards. Therefore, it is imperative that educational institutions develop and administer assessment programs to ensure accreditation requirements are met.

Like most accreditation agencies, both SACS and AACSB require that universities identify competencies within the general education core and, then, provide evidence that graduates have attained those competencies or have achieved specified learning goals. Through assessment, accomplishment of the intended goals may be more easily quantified for review, validation, and reporting.

Assessment

Assessing students' ability to communicate is an area of interest to researchers. The Core Curriculum: Assumptions and Defining Characteristics (1999) communication objective is to enable the student to communicate effectively in clear and correct prose in a style appropriate to the subject, occasion, and audience. Different assessment modalities are required to assess the understanding and demonstration of writing and speaking processes, of specifying audience and purpose, of selecting appropriate mode of expression, of effectively participating in groups, of applying basic principles of critical thinking, and to research and write a documented paper.

The National Center for Education Statistics affirms that: "an effective and meaningful evaluation of postsecondary writing assessments is predicated upon a comprehensive understanding of the definition of writing competency" (NPEC sourcebook, 2000, p. 45). Therefore, in order to appropriately assess students' writing samples, the definition of the

competencies to be assessed must be clearly outlined. At a minimum, all students should receive adequate instruction to produce a writing sample with acceptable results in content, mechanics, and format. When learning goals and outcomes have been determined, then the learning environment can be structured to ensure student learning and sufficient practice of the objectives. “Just by defining their learning objectives and deciding where and when these will be covered, faculty improves their curriculum delivery because they will ensure that essential skills are introduced and practiced in a variety of settings” (Banta, 2005, p. 36).

Fraser, Harich, Norby, Brzovic, Rizkallah, & Loewy (2005) list multiple resources of how researchers define effective assessment in business writing and business communication in the context of institutional standards.

Acceptance by Faculty

Without faculty buy-in, the assessment process will not be very effective. According to DeMoranville (2010), there are three reasons why there is faculty resistance to assessment: (1) they are already so busy with research, teaching, and service requirements that adding another perceived “busy-work” requirement is not appealing, (2) faculty “question the value of assurance of learning activities because the benefits are abstract, while the costs are concrete” (para. 2), and (3) faculty members think assessment impinges on their academic freedom. The perceived loss of academic freedom is the most important reason for lack of buy-in by faculty. Five key factors to make faculty enthusiastic about assessment are (1) a supportive administration, (2) an evolving development process, (3) a well-defined structure, (4) an emphasis on excellent communication, and (5) a faculty champion. A faculty champion is an active faculty member who believes in and supports the assessment process—in fact, serves as a faculty cheerleader to encourage involvement (DeMoranville, 2010).

PURPOSE

The purpose of the study was to determine at what level student performance in the business communication course met the six objectives established by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board for a core communication course. The time frame for this study was fall 2006 through fall 2009. The challenge was to get eight instructors to support and believe in the assessment process (buy-in) and to come to a consensus on the appropriate place in the already established curriculum to add the different assessment instruments. The goal was to use existing assignments rather than additional assignments designed solely for assessment.

PROCEDURES

Business Communication (BCM 247), a sophomore-level course, is a required part of the business core, an option for the university general education core, an option for General Business minors, and an elective. Students in the business communication course are involved in learning communication theory, writing reports, memos, good news messages, bad news messages, and persuasive messages. The business communication faculty wrote an assessment plan for Business Communication (BCM 247) which involved seven semesters of evaluation. The faculty chose two assessment measures: embedded test questions and assignment review. Embedded

questions are test questions designed to measure knowledge of a specific objective. They are included in regular exams or quizzes. Assignment review involves selecting random classroom writing assignments for assessment review. To retain the curriculum already in place, embedded questions that were selected by a panel of instructors were added to existing exams. Existing writing assignments were selected and were judged based on a rubric (See Appendix). Each of the six communication objectives was evaluated at least twice with two objectives evaluated in each semester.

Embedded Test Questions

The faculty decided to use embedded questions for two of the objectives where critical thinking was important. All of the faculty agreed upon the five questions that were written to measure each objective. These questions were then embedded in regular class exams. Examples of embedded questions are located in Table 1.

Table 1
Objective and Related Embedded Questions

***Objective 2:** To understand the importance of specifying audience and purpose and to select appropriate communication choices.*

1. A manager is faced with having to lay off some of his staff due to financial losses that the company has suffered. Which of the following channels of communication would be most appropriate for sharing the news with employees, given the sensitive nature of the message?

- a. A face-to-face meeting with each employee
- b. A well-written, empathetic letter
- c. A telephone call
- d. Electronic mail

ANSWER: A
Concept: Channel choice Ref: Ch. 1 pp. 4-5

2. Which of the following characteristics of nonverbal messages should be considered?

- a. A verbal message will receive more attention than a nonverbal message.
- b. The meaning of nonverbal messages will be the same across cultures.
- c. Sending a nonverbal message cannot be avoided.
- d. Nonverbal messages will not be considered.

ANSWER: C
Concept: Channel - Nonverbal Messages Ref: Ch. 2 p. 30

3. Which of the following statements should a manager use to effectively communicate with an employee who has recently learned to speak English?

- a. We have our competition between a rock and a hard place.
- b. Your quarterly sales figures have gone through the roof.
- c. Bob must be off his rocker if he expects us to complete the report today.
- d. The points in your proposal are exactly what I was looking for.

ANSWER: D
Concept: Audience Ref: Ch. 1 p. 17

-
4. Management creates the ____ communication channel to achieve the organization's goals and to control individual and group behavior.
- informal
 - formal
 - email
 - oral

ANSWER: B

Concept: Channel – audience Ref. Ch. 1 pp. 7-8

5. In the examples below, which one is an example of an individual primarily communicating to inform:
- You request a vendor to provide cost comparisons for a copy machine.
 - You write a letter of application to accompany your resume.
 - You tell a customer how to fill out a form.
 - You respond to a customer claim.

ANSWER: C

Concept: Purpose Ref: Ch. 4 p. 56

Assignment Review

The faculty decided to evaluate two different assignments in order to meet the goals of the remaining four objectives. One assignment was the persuasive message, and the other was the written report. Analytic scoring was used through faculty-developed rubrics that measured specific areas of the objectives (See Appendix for rubrics). Three assignments were randomly selected from each class resulting in a writing assessment of approximately 10% of the students.

FINDINGS

During the seven-semester assessment plan conducted from fall 2006 to fall 2009, 3,040 students were enrolled in various sections of the course. In semesters where embedded questions were used, all students who took the exam were included. In semesters where writing assignments were reviewed, students' work was selected randomly with 10-15% of the students' work being assessed. The assessment committee applied a random number system to class rosters to determine which three students' assignments per class were to be assessed. Instructors are then notified which assignments to submit for assessment. Table 2 indicates the number of students and faculty per semester included in the assessment process.

Table 2
Students Involved in Assessment Process, 2006-09

Semester	Number Enrolled	Number Assessed	Percent Assessed	Number of Faculty Involved
Fall 2006	459	44	9.6%	7
Spring 2007	395	*327	82.8%	8
Fall 2007	431	65	15.1%	8
Spring 2008	399	*367	92.0%	7
Fall 2008	461	44	9.5%	8
Spring 2009	417	56	13.4%	8
Fall 2009	478	*448	93.7%	9
Total	3040	1351	44.4%	

*Number of students who took exams with embedded questions.

During the spring semesters of 2007 and 2008 and the fall semester of 2009, embedded questions were used to measure Objectives 2 and 4. Of the five questions asked relating to Objective 2, 100% of the students met the assessment goal of scoring 70% or higher on these questions in 2007 and 2008. Due to the high success rate, the faculty rewrote the test questions to be more specific and a little more challenging. This resulted in a change for fall 2009 with 80% of the students meeting the overall goal. Responses by students to questions relating to Objective 4 varied. In 2007, 80% of the students met the goal of scoring 70% or higher. While the students did well on four questions, they had difficulty with one question. By spring 2008 a different textbook was in use and 60% of the students met the goal of scoring 70% or higher. While students did well on three questions, two of the questions were apparently unclear. As a result, questions were revised for clarity. This area improved by the third measurement in fall 2009 with the highest results so far on this objective as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Assessment Analysis of Educational Objectives for
BCM 247 Business Communication Embedded Questions, 2007-09

***Objective 2:** To understand the importance of specifying audience and purpose and to select appropriate communication choices.*

Measure	Date	Goal	Question Results
First Measure	Spring 2007	70%	100% on 5 questions
Second Measure	Spring 2008	70%	100% on 5 questions
Third Measure	Fall 2009	70%	Overall 80%, One question at 68.2%

Objective 4: *To participate effectively in groups with emphasis on listening, critical, and reflective thinking, and responding.*

Measure	Date	Goal	Question Results
First Measure	Spring 2007	70%	Overall 80%, One question at 65.4%
Second Measure	Spring 2008	70%	Overall 60%, Two questions at 54.6% and 48.4%
Third Measure	Fall 2009	70%	Overall 80%, One question at 68.2%

In using an analytic scoring rubric for assignment review of persuasive messages, students in fall 2008 had higher ratings than those in fall 2006 (See Table 4). In fall 2008, 79.8% of the students met the objective of 75% or higher while in fall 2006, 73.5% met the goal of 75% or higher. After the measurement of 2006, the faculty decided that the rubric really needed to define the content category more precisely. A revised rubric added a section on persuasive argument to clarify that objective for the fall 2008 measurement.

Table 4
Assessment Analysis of Educational Objectives for
BCM 247 Business Communication Persuasive Message, 2007-09

Objective 3: *To understand and appropriately apply modes of expression, i.e., descriptive, expository, narrative, scientific, and self-expressive, in written, visual, and oral communication.*

Objective 5: *To understand and apply basic principles of critical thinking, problem solving, and technical proficiency in the development of exposition and argument.*

Measure	Date	Goal	Question Results
First Measure	Fall 2006	75%	Overall Measure 73.5%
			Content: 65.9%
			Mechanics 69.3%
Second Measure	Fall 2008	75%	Format 96.6%
			Overall Measure 79.8%
			Persuasive Argument 76.1%
			Content 71.6%
			Mechanics 79.5%
			Format 92.0%

In fall 2007 and spring 2009, analytical reports were assessed (See Table 5). After the first measure, the faculty determined that the report procedure varied more than expected per section and steps were taken to clarify the report writing assignment. After the second measure, it was determined that the research component had improved slightly but other issues had intensified. This will be an area for continued revision for the business communication faculty.

Table 5
Assessment Analysis of Educational Objectives for
BCM 247 Business Communication Analytical Report, 2007-09

***Objective 1:** Requires students to understand writing and speaking processes through invention, organization, drafting, revision, editing, and presentation.*

***Objective 6:** Requires students to develop the ability to research and write a documented paper and/or give an oral presentation.*

Measure	Date	Goal	Question Results	
First Measure	Fall 2007	75%	Overall Measure	61.0%
			Research	53.0%
			Mechanics	63.3%
			Analytical approach	66.7%
Second Measure	Spring 2009	75%	Overall Measure	50.6%
			Research	55.4%
			Mechanics	39.3%
			Analytical approach	57.1%

CONCLUSION

One of the issues in assessment is continuous improvement, commonly referred to as “closing the loop.” Closing the loop occurs after the assessment measure is completed. Continuous improvement is determined by what is done with the result of the assessment. For this study, after each semester the faculty met to discuss the results and to see what changes should take place for an improved measure in subsequent semesters.

As a result of the assessment plan, the faculty is more cohesive and willing to improve the course than before the assessment plan began. The reason for this success was early buy-in and involvement of business communication faculty at all levels including tenure track and adjunct teachers. Part of the result of the buy-in was that the faculty understood that student performance would not be linked to individual faculty members. In fact, results were sent to the college and university level with anonymous faculty and student information. The rubrics and embedded questions were designed and approved by all faculty. Meetings to discuss the procedures were held before and after each measurement.

The collected data from assessment is of no value by itself. Success in assessment is the result of using that data to see how changes can be made to more effectively meet the goals of instruction. The ultimate goal of any university is to produce graduates who are equipped to be successful in their chosen careers. Assessment plays an integral part in the process that effectively prepares students for the world of work.

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APPENDIX

ID # _____ / _____ / _____
 Section/ Student # /Business (1)
 Non-Business (2)

Evaluator # _____

BCM 247 Assessment Criteria
 Writing Assignment - Persuasive Letter/Message

Objective 3: To understand and appropriately apply modes of expression, i.e., descriptive, expositive, narrative, scientific, and self-expressive, in written, visual, and oral communication.

Objective 5: To understand and apply basic principles of critical thinking, problem solving, and technical proficiency in the development of exposition and argument.

	Excellent 5	Above Average 4	Average/ Acceptable 3	Below Average 2	Poor 1
Persuasive Argument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent persuasive argument 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good persuasive argument 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate persuasive argument. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marginal persuasive argument. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited or no persuasive argument.
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outstanding creative, attention-getting opening. • Engaging interest-building coverage. • Inclusion of convincing evidence/support. • Excellent action closing. • Outstanding accuracy and clarity of message. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative, attention-getting opening. • Clear and complete interest building coverage. • Inclusion of necessary evidence/support. • Strong action closing. • Strong accuracy and clarity of message. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention getting opening. • Interest building coverage. • Some evidence or support offered. • Acceptable action closing. • Accuracy and clarity of message. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lackluster attention-getting opening. • Limited interest building information. • Limited evidence or support offered. • Vague action closing. • Errors of accuracy and/or limited clarity of message. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Missing elements of persuasive pattern. • Numerous errors or omissions in message.
Mechanics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent word choice. • No spelling errors. • No grammar errors. • No mechanical errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good word choice. • One spelling error. • One or two grammar/mechanical errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable word choice. • One or two spelling errors. • Two or three grammar/mechanical errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some awkward word choice. • Two or three spelling errors. • Four to six grammar/mechanical errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illogical word choice. • Four or more spelling errors. • Major mechanics errors: sentence fragments, run-on sentences.
Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No errors in format as specified in assignment. • Signed or initialed as appropriate. • No spacing errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One or two errors in format as specified in assignment. • Signed or initialed as appropriate. • One or two spacing errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three or four errors in format as specified in assignment. • Signed or initialed as appropriate. • Two or three spacing errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than four errors in format as specified in assignment. • Signature missing or incorrect. • Three or four spacing errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inappropriate or unrecognized format.

ID # _____ / _____ / _____
 Section/ Student # /Business (1)
 Non-Business (2)

Evaluator # _____

BCM 247 Assessment Criteria
 Researched Analytical Written Report

Objective 1: To understand and demonstrate writing and speaking processes through invention, organization, drafting, revision, editing, and presentation

Objective 6: To develop the ability to research and document a paper and/or to give an oral presentation.

	Excellent 4	Good 3	Below Average 2	Not Acceptable 1
Analytical Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear statement of purpose. • Organized presentation of supported argument(s). • Logical/supported conclusions/recommendation(s). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of all elements of Analytical Approach, with only minor issues in clarity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of all Analytical Approach elements, but underdeveloped or with weak coherence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to include one or more elements of Analytical Approach and/or incoherent development.
Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate selection and description of research methods. • Adequate inclusion of appropriate sources/ references. • Accurate use of in-text referencing method. • Inclusion of accurate and complete list of references. • Adequate and effective use of appropriate graphics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of all required Research elements, with only minor errors or omissions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of one Research element, OR underdevelopment or inaccuracy in two or more elements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of two or more Research elements, OR underdevelopment or inaccuracy in three or more elements.
Mechanics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate word choice, sentence structuring, and paragraphing . • No spelling errors. • Absence of grammatical errors (subject verb agreement, plural/ possessive, adjective/ adverb, etc.). • Accurate formatting and page layout. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor errors or awkwardness in wording, sentence structure, and/or paragraphing. • No spelling errors detectable with spell check. • One or two grammatical errors. • One or two formatting/layout errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major errors in wording, sentence structure, and/or paragraphing. • One or more spelling errors detectable with spell check. • More than two grammatical errors. • Several formatting/layout errors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numerous major errors in wording, sentence structure, and/or paragraphing. • Multiple spelling errors detectable with spell check. • Many or serious grammatical errors (run-on sentences, fragments). • Numerous formatting/layout errors.

Comments:

One report per section (make one copy of each) evaluated by a panel of two teachers.
 Goal: 75% or higher will score a 3 or 4.