

**Assessment Methods --  
A Close-Up Look**

**by**

**Barbara D. Wright**

**WASC**

## **Portfolios . . . collections of student work . . .**

### ***Advantages:***

- \* are adaptable to different  
*levels* of assessment (i.e. individual student, program, institution)  
*purposes* (i.e. cross-sectional snapshot; change/progress over time)  
*kinds* of materials (i.e. written work, tapes of performances, student self-assessments)
- \* can tell us where student are *and* how they got there
- \* emphasize human judgment, meaning-making
- \* provide information likely to be *used*
- \* engage students, faculty
- \* are *educational* for both students and faculty
- \* reduce fears of misuse

### ***Disadvantages:***

- \* can be labor-intensive
- \* can be cumbersome to store
- \* require carefully defined criteria for review
- \* require training for reviewers

### ***Solutions/responses:***

- \* Collect *samples* of work, not everything from everybody
- \* Use electronic storage and retrieval
- \* Give students responsibility for maintaining the portfolio
- \* Invest in good criteria for education's sake
- \* Invest in training for faculty development's sake

## **Capstone** courses, projects, assignments . . .

### ***Advantages:***

- \* are cumulative
- \* are integrative
- \* are adaptable to demonstration of
  - skills
  - general education
  - professional field or major
  - dispositions
  - combinations
- \* are motivating for students
- \* set standards
- \* provide an occasion for department-level discussion, interpretation
- \* invite external evaluation
- \* help students make the transition to
  - self-assessment
  - professional assessment
  - life-long learning

### ***Disadvantages:***

- \* may face a problem “capturing” all students in their final semester
- \* may mean an additional course requirement
- \* pose problem of coordinating multiple dimensions of learning & assessment
- \* can be labor-intensive
- \* require carefully defined criteria for review
- \* require distinguishing between purpose of the capstone for *students* and for *program assessment*

### ***Solutions/responses:***

- \* Require the capstone for graduation
- \* Include capstone experiences within existing courses
- \* Provide resources, staff support
- \* View resources, labor, as worthwhile investment

## Performances . . .

### *Advantages:*

- \* have face validity
- \* put emphasis on what the student can *do*:
  - require active application
  - are integrative
  - provide a reality check
- \* give students with practical intelligence, skills, a chance to shine
- \* are motivating
- \* put the emphasis on active learning
- \* promote “coaching” relationship between students and faculty, especially when there are external reviewers
- \* promote self-assessment, internalization of standards
- \* are highly adaptable, even to liberal arts

### *Disadvantages:*

- \* can be labor-intensive, time-consuming, expensive
- \* require careful definition of criteria
- \* require careful training of reviewers
- \* require coordination, esp. of external reviewers
- \* may frighten off insecure students

### *Solutions/responses:*

- \* Review a *sample* of students
- \* Embed in routine, non-threatening situations (e.g., internship, clinical setting)
- \* Regard criteria and training as an educational investment
- \* Remind students they must demonstrate employability

## **Common assignments, secondary readings, and other embedded assessments . . .**

### ***Advantages:***

- \* use work produced by students as a normal part of their course work
- \* solve the problem of quality of student effort
- \* are efficient, low-cost
- \* have face validity
- \* provide maximally useful information with minimum slippage
- \* encourage discussion, collaboration among faculty & support staff
- \* can create campus-wide interest

### ***Disadvantages:***

- \* require considerable coordination
- \* can be time-consuming to create
- \* can be time-consuming, labor-intensive to score
- \* require careful definition of criteria for review
- \* require careful training of reviewers

### ***Solutions/responses:***

- \* Focus on what's important
- \* Use "common questions" if an entire common assignment is impractical
- \* Provide support
- \* Remember the efficiencies, benefits
- \* Make the investment

## Course management programs . . .

### *Advantages:*

- \* are adaptable to wide range of learning goals, disciplines, environments
- \* use work produced electronically by students as a normal part of course work
- \* record threaded discussions, chat, ephemera that are normally impossible or cumbersome to capture
- \* can preserve a large volume of material
- \* are efficient, low-cost
- \* are completely unintrusive
- \* solve the problem of quality of student effort
- \* allow prompt feedback
- \* develop students' metacognition when assessment results are shared
- \* often include tests, quizzes, tasks as part of the package

### *Disadvantages:*

- \* rely heavily on student writing skill, comfort with technology
- \* pose challenges to higher levels of aggregation beyond individual course or student
- \* may discourage collaboration among faculty, staff, programs
- \* Managing large volume of material can be difficult, intimidating
- \* "No significant difference" approach may short circuit improvement
- \* Tests, quizzes may promote recall, surface rather than deep learning
- \* Built-in survey tools encourage collection of indirect rather than direct evidence
- \* Direct observation of student performances is difficult or impossible

### *Solutions/responses:*

- \* Develop good, focused goals, criteria, rubrics
- \* Use built-in data management tools
- \* Supplement if necessary, e.g. with "The Rubric Processor"
- \* Invest in training of faculty, external reviewers
- \* Use tests, quizzes with caution, supplement with authentic tasks
- \* Negotiate with the maker, customize the software
- \* Aim for program-level, not just course-level improvement

## **Classroom Assessment/Research . . .**

### ***Advantages:***

- \* takes place at ground zero of learning process for:
  - maximum relevance, usefulness
  - minimum slippage
  - minimum risk
- \* is conducted continuously, has formative benefit
- \* can provide feedback on *both*
  - what students know and can do
  - and how they got there, what helps or hinders
- \* motivates students to become more active, reflective learners
- \* can also be used by faculty collectively for the bigger picture
- \* is faculty-friendly, respectful of privacy, autonomy
- \* offers significant resources (e.g., T. Angelo and K. P. Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques*, 1992) and support network, especially for community college educators

### ***Disadvantages***

- \* is unstructured, highly dependent on individuals' cooperation for
  - administration of CATs
  - reporting of results
- \* presents challenge of generalizing to program or institution level

### ***Solutions/responses:***

- \* Provide consistent, careful leadership, oversight
- \* Get buy-in from faculty, others
- \* Provide training
- \* Make assessment a campus-wide conversation
- \* Remember the potential: to generate truly useful information for improvement

## Local tests . . .

### *Advantages:*

- \* require active faculty participation
- \* stimulate discussion about goals, curriculum, pedagogy, etc.
- \* have content validity
- \* can change readily in response to institutional changes
- \* can be open-ended, integrative, highly creative in format
- \* can provide good quality of student effort if course-embedded
- \* provide directly relevant, *useful* information
- \* forestall comparison with other institutions

### *Disadvantages:*

- \* run risk of focusing more on surface than deep learning
- \* provide no norms for reference
- \* may contain ambiguous, poorly constructed items
- \* may offer questionable reliability and validity
- \* may be expensive if test construction is contracted out
- \* will not elicit good quality of student effort if seen as add-on
- \* will create misunderstanding of assessment if seen as a threat
- \* tend to invite finger-pointing

### *Solutions/responses:*

- \* If norms are important, supplement with purchased test
- \* Use on-campus expertise
- \* Be careful, pilot any test before large-scale administration
- \* Provide a “gripe sheet”
- \* Accept that assessment is ultimately human judgment, not psychometric science
- \* Keep the focus on useful information & improvement, *not* test scores *per se*
- \* Depersonalize issues, avoid finger-pointing



## Off-the-shelf objective tests . . .

### *Advantages:*

- \* are a traditional, widely recognized & accepted means of assessment
- \* require little on-campus time or labor
- \* prepare students for licensure, other high-stakes testing
- \* are norm-referenced
- \* offer longitudinal data
- \* are technically high-quality
- \* may reflect recent, important trends in the field
- \* can be useful as *part* of a multiple-method approach

### *Disadvantages:*

- \* may provide poor content validity
- \* generally do not provide criterion-referenced scores
- \* test students' ability to recognize "right" answers
- \* reflect students' test-taking ability
- \* often elicit poor quality of student effort, particularly as add-on
- \* reinforce faculty bias toward "empty vessel" theory of education
- \* reinforce student bias toward education as memorizing, regurgitating "right" answers (i.e. "surface" rather than "deep" learning)
- \* reinforce everybody's bias toward assessment as testing
- \* carry risk of misuse of scores, invidious comparisons
- \* provide little insight into students' problem-solving & thinking skills or ability to discriminate among "good" and "better" answers
- \* give students no opportunity to construct their own answers verbally, numerically, graphically, or in other ways
- \* give students no opportunity to demonstrate important affective traits, e.g., persistence, meticulousness, creativity, open-mindedness.
- \* are less likely than local methods to stimulate productive discussion
- \* are more likely to elicit finger-pointing, anxiety, resistance
- \* can be very expensive
- \* generally do not provide good value (i.e., useful information for cost)

### *Solutions/responses:*

- \* Negotiate with test maker
- \* Supplement with other methods
- \* Use with caution