



## ***Making Assessment Everyone's Business***

### **The Use of Dialogue in Improving Teaching and Learning**

**John Chetro-Szivos & Lauren Mackenzie**

*Fitchburg State College*

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jchetro@fsc.edu • lmacken4@fsc.edu

**Abstract:** In the 2007/2008 academic year, five faculty in the Department of Communication Media at Fitchburg State College came together to seek ways to be proactive in addressing the challenges imposed by outcomes assessment. The goal of this study was to see if opportunities existed to find constructive ways to engage assessment beyond the positions of those who are opposed or cautious about it. This article introduces a communication perspective for studying assessment; provides a detailed overview of the components of the study; discusses the findings and connects them to a systemic approach for looking at assessment; and concludes by emphasizing the importance of synthesizing assessment, dialogue, and self-reflection.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

There is little doubt that outcomes assessment has become the cornerstone of the accreditation process. Regional accreditation bodies regard outcomes assessment as vital to measuring the effectiveness of institutions of higher education and require institutions to develop outcomes assessment plans. In the current climate there are faculty and administrators who wholly support assessment and those who are vehemently opposed, with many falling somewhere in between these positions and cautiously observing the movement towards assessment.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the opposition and caution, assessment is a reality and part of the life of the academy. This is evi-

dent as external bodies, including the federal government, routinely ask to what degree students reach the goals of an established curriculum.

Our goal in the conduct of this study was to see if opportunities existed to find constructive ways to engage assessment beyond the positions of those who are opposed or cautious about assessment. We designed the study so that faculty could experience and explore the challenges of the outcomes assessment and its effect on

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the New England region differs somewhat from other regional accreditation associations. The New England Association has been less directive in terms of outcomes assessment than what occurred in other parts of the country.

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John Chetro-Szivos is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Media Communications at Fitchburg State College. His interests include human interaction in a wide variety of setting most notably intercultural encounters, artistic dimensions of experience, conversational spaces in educational and organizational settings, cross-gender issues, and building dialogue for civic transformation. Lauren Mackenzie is Assistant Professor at the Department of Media Communication at Fitchburg State College. Her research interests include ethnography of communication, interpersonal communication theory, and community service learning.

teaching and learning in our classes and ultimately our department.

We brought together five faculty in our Department of Communication Media to seek ways to be proactive in addressing the challenges imposed by outcomes assessment. During the Fall 2007 semester, these five faculty experimented with the development of assessment outcomes for one assignment in one of their courses. The courses ranged from introductory communication theory to advanced communication theory courses and included two courses in film production. Each faculty member selected one assignment and developed a rubric according to guiding principles that would assess what students learned. The rubric served as a guide to evaluate the students' work. In the study, rubrics served as an instrument to assist the faculty in measuring student work as clearly and consistently as possible by defining the criteria to judge and measure performance. Although this was not a study in rubrics, we found them helpful as a means to organize and interpret data gathered from observations of student learning.

The faculty met several times throughout the semester and participated in discussions about rubrics, teaching, learning, and the assessment process. After the assignments were completed, the faculty held a discussion about the effectiveness of all aspects of the project. This study provided the faculty with an opportunity to reflect and learn about ways to approach the assessment challenge.

In completing the study we certainly became aware of the challenges of assessment and soon discovered the opportunities it provided for a group of scholars. We recognized that the strengths of the assessment process lay in the kind of critical inquiry and thoughtful self-reflection we were able to engage in as a result of our discussions.

The remainder of this article will be or-

ganized as follows: first, we introduce a communication perspective for studying assessment; second, we give a detailed overview of the various components of the study; next, we discuss our findings and connect them to a systemic approach for looking at assessment; finally, we conclude by emphasizing the importance of synthesizing assessment, dialogue, and self-reflection.

## A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

Our work is grounded in what has been called the communication perspective (Pearce, 1989). Briefly, the communication perspective contends that communication is more than a simple process to express our inner thoughts or a way of describing objects and events in the world. Instead it recognizes communication as the primary social process—meaning, it is the way that we create, sustain, and change our understanding of all things. We come to know things in our world through the process of communication; this includes persons, relations, and institutions. The communication perspective argues that communication is necessary for human association, and our lives become the sum total of conversations and exchanges with others. We achieve understanding, or a like-mindedness, when we have the ability to act with others and share the meaning of objects, events, and actions (Chetro-Szivos, 2006).

In this study, the dialogue between faculty served as the key element in coming to understand the assessment process and co-construct ways that assessment could enhance teaching and learning. We intentionally designed the study so that the faculty had ample opportunity to exchange ideas by meeting face-to-face and sharing numerous emails and postings about the project. Communication was not reduced to mere epiphenomena, it became the basis for building new understandings and

shared knowledge of how assessment could contribute to the improvement of our teaching and learning practices.

Given the focus on communication, we found the strength of the study lay in the ability to use dialogue to think about the challenges of teaching and learning. Our inquiry was centered on several guiding questions. We asked:

1. In what ways can faculty learn to use the assessment process to think and act systemically so they may enhance their teaching and learning?
2. When faculty engage in dialogue about teaching and learning, what impact can it have on helping students attain the stated outcomes of a curriculum?
3. What improvements come about in teaching and learning through the dialogic process?
4. In what ways do rubrics enhance or limit teaching, learning, or measuring student performance and what alternatives exist aside from rubrics that can help us assess student learning?

## THE STUDY

As stated above, the study included five faculty who each selected one assignment and developed a rubric to assess their students' work. The participating faculty included four junior faculty at the assistant professor level and one tenured faculty member at the associate level. This was the first semester of full time teaching for two of the assistant professors and the other two assistant professors were in their second year of full-time teaching. Prior to coming to our college on a tenure track, all had extensive records of teaching as adjuncts or on temporary appointment. The remaining faculty member was in his eighth year of full-time teaching. The faculty met over a ten-week period during the semester. The first meeting was used to de-

scribe the study and explain the rubric template for assessing students' work. The rubrics were designed as a template but each faculty member selected the elements of the assignment used to grade the degree of the students' demonstrated competency. What was consistent across the rubrics was the use of a four-point scale with a score of one being equivalent to beginning level of performance; two indicated that the student was developing and moving towards mastery; a score of three meant that the student was reflecting mastery; and a student could earn a score of four as an indication of the highest level of performance (see the Appendix).

In our first meeting we invited faculty to feel free to express their opinions on outcomes assessment, rubrics, and grading. The faculty did talk about their skepticism and fear about outcomes assessment. Generally, faculty saw assessment as a threat to academic freedom and in conflict with their pedagogical beliefs. Most of the faculty felt that rubrics presented limitations as a reliable or valid measure of student performance. However, all faculty agreed to enter into the assessment process and remain open in evaluating its effectiveness.

At the second meeting, the faculty reported on the positive and negative aspects of the assignment they selected and the rubric used to evaluate it. This was a lively discussion about teaching, learning, and assessing students' work. Faculty exchanged many ideas and resources about approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment. The faculty found that in the process of identifying and articulating the expected outcomes of the assignment they clarified the purpose of the assignment (which also made the faculty verify that they were consistent with overall course goals) and were able to give students more direction and feedback on their performance.

Some of the faculty expressed concerns about the validity of measurement, asking

how could they be certain that their rubric was measuring the students' knowledge. This became a pressing issue for the two faculty teaching film production courses. The film courses included a scriptwriting course that required students to prepare a storyboard and a lighting course where students were asked to light a set. These two faculty expressed concerns about grading creative work against established standards. Their primary concern was that standards might limit the students' choices in completing the assignment. They felt students could find other ways of completing the assignment that were highly creative, but outside of the boundaries of the rubric. The three remaining faculty teaching communication theory courses did not express such concerns about grading the ability to think critically or thinking in original ways. It is worth noting that this may in part be attributed to the difference in the educational preparation of the faculty. The two film faculty were educated in art schools, both earning Master of Fine Arts degrees, while the three theorists earned Doctor of Philosophy degrees in communication. Their respective fields may place values on different aspects of student and work and perhaps there are pedagogical differences between the two fields.

Overall, the faculty agreed that the experience was helpful and provided them with new insights into teaching, learning, and assessment. They stated that they enjoyed the meetings and the opportunity the meetings offered to reflect on their teaching. Prior to the third meeting, we asked the faculty to write a one-page reflective summary of the process and their participation in the study. They were asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the project and share thoughts they had about the experience. We analyzed their summaries and identified the major themes in the faculties' writing. The findings were categorized into five areas and given to the faculty to review before the third meeting. The fac-

ulty identified the following insights and concerns in the five areas listed below:

1. Clarity – defining the outcomes created greater accountability and provided students with an explanation of the grading process and the requirements of the assignment. This helped faculty to be more clear with students about expectations of the assignment and its purpose in the course. Overall, they felt this study led them to constructively question what they do and how they can do it better.
2. Dialogue – the dialogue between the faculty was regarded as reassuring and deepened a sense of belonging to the department. The faculty pointed to this exercise as effective in encouraging collaboration and providing an opportunity to reflect together on teaching and learning. Faculty stated that they learned more about teaching and learning through these sessions than other events they had participated in on campus. They felt the dialogue created a sense of working together and made them feel more positively connected to the department. Through these discussions they could see positive aspects of outcomes assessment and ways it could strengthen teaching, learning, and the institution.
3. Overlap – faculty felt they could better understand the overlap between what is taught in production courses and what is taught in theory courses giving them a better sense of their part in the curriculum and the students' education at our college. This helped faculty to think of ways to help the students make connections among the courses they take in the department and the importance of faculty learning about what their colleagues do.
4. Resources – the discussions encouraged faculty to share a number of resources such as books and journal

articles that they found helpful in learning about assessment. Faculty found that the dialogues introduced them to a wider variety of resources than they would have found on their own.

5. Rubrics – faculty found that the rubrics both reduced the time spent in grading and worked as an effective instrument for evaluating most assignments. The faculty agreed that the act of identifying the criteria for evaluation helped them to think critically about the relationship of the assignment to the course objectives. It also refined their ideas and expectations for competencies the students should be developing through the assignment and in the course. Some faculty did not share the rubric prior to the grading of the assignment and those faculty decided that in the future they would review the rubric with the students prior to the assignment due date. The use of the rubric allowed the faculty to question how they teach and assess creative work as well as critical thinking.

At the third meeting the faculty discussed the five areas listed above and came to consensus that the process was valuable in teaching them about their own teaching. In addition, the faculty talked about how important it was to work together on issues that they all faced, and how what they taught was related to the other faculty in the department. Most of the participants reported that approaching assessment in this format made them feel less anxious about the process of outcomes assessment. Faculty felt that it was important to take an active role in establishing the outcomes and measuring what the students achieved as opposed to an assessment program imposed on them from above or from an external body.

## MAKING SENSE OF THE FINDINGS

We regard the concern faculty expressed about grading and the validity of grading students' competencies as a positive feature of the project. Faculty and administrators of institutions of higher education have a responsibility to use their expertise to establish a curriculum and make sure each course and assignment contributes to meeting the goals and objective of the curriculum. Reflecting on the role of each assignment is a responsibility that should not be taken lightly. It is the role of faculty to ensure that what is done in the classroom and what is expected of students are closely related to the established purpose of a course or a curriculum. As we witnessed in the dialogues, the assessment process brought greater clarity for both the students and the faculty as they determined what was important in the course and how the assignment and their teaching relates to the intended outcomes.

We found the project provided faculty with a forum where they could express their concerns in a supportive atmosphere and receive feedback as well as discover that others share similar concerns. Their participation in the study helped to alleviate the isolation faculty may feel. A sense of isolation may come about as faculty often work independently and there is little time to share ideas about teaching and learning due to the many demands they face. Creating the time for these faculty to share their ideas about teaching and learning was a unique experience and contributed to a sense of being part of a good department. Dialogue was effective and perhaps the most important aspect of the project.

Generally speaking, dialogue is a means for two or more people to create new levels of understanding and share a common understanding. Dialogue in this instance can be called a facilitated dialogue as the faculty were presented with questions

and ideas to reflect upon. Working in this way allowed the faculty to discover and gather information about teaching and learning with the purpose of promoting new ways of thinking about teaching, learning, and assessment. Consistent with Bateson's (1972) systems orientation, the faculty found ways to exceed simple cause and effect ideas about assessment and move towards a process of conjoint action that operates in a recursive manner among the faculty. Here we see evidence that communication served a far more important function than a simple exchange of ideas. Instead we saw a complex interactive process that generated, sustained, or changed the meanings of teaching, learning, and assessment for the members of the system through recursive interaction. It is clear that the faculty had a new experience with assessment and in sharing this experience it helped them to recognize the positive aspects of assessment and to work together as members of a system. Through their conversations, faculty found that assessment is not about keeping score cards on students and program performance. In this instance, assessment became a means to ask what we do with students, what happens to students in our classes, and it helped us envision how all parts of the system contribute to teaching and learning.

Thinking systemically requires that we account for all parts of the system and understand the interdependence among the parts of the system. Krippendorff (1977) indicated that systems theory emphasizes properties of wholes and parts, and relationships and hierarchies. A college or university is a complex system that is made up of many parts which includes the internal aspects such as faculty, administrators, students, curriculum, staff, and the physical plant, to name a few. There are also important aspects of the system that may be thought of as external to the institution such as accreditation bodies, prospective employers, and in the case of a public insti-

tution, the legislature. Systems theory stresses the property of wholeness, which points to the fact that the institution is a nonsummative collection of its parts. Non-summativity refers to the notion that a college or a university is more than the sum of these parts. Together the parts create a synergy that render the entire organization greater in its capacity to function than would be recognized by simply listing the parts.

In addition to being instrumental to a successfully functioning organization, all systems exhibit the characteristic of self-regulation. Through self-regulation, the system (or in this case, the institution) makes use of feedback to set its goals and guide the actions of faculty and all members of the system. The quality of the feedback allows institutions to make better decisions and adapt to the demands of its environment. It may be argued that outcomes assessment is crucial to the institution in making decisions and setting its direction about what it provides or should provide for its students. Assessment efforts can generate information about the effectiveness of the institution's curriculum, programs, and services. As we see in the comments made by the faculty, the information they discussed and gathered through their participation in the study allowed them to think and make new connections about teaching, learning, and the department's curriculum. Making distinctions in this way allows faculty to move closer to understanding how what they do contributes to the overall purpose of the system and how their efforts are connected to the system or the institution. It is easy to lose sight of the interdependence of the parts of an institution when days are filled with teaching classes, grading, advising, committee work, and other duties that contribute to thinking of oneself as working in isolation. Thinking systemically gives faculty the ability to understand the relationship between the parts of the department, the institution, and their role in

helping the institution meet its missions and goals. We saw clear evidence of systemic thinking when the faculty recognized the overlap in their courses and how important it is to make connections to the curriculum and among their colleagues.

We found that through this project, faculty created a community that focused on their practice as educators. The impact of this association is evident in the kinds of conversations we now see among faculty. Humans are special kinds of creatures whose survival is contingent upon interacting with others and forming distinctive kinds of association called community (Cronen & Chetro-Szivos, 2001). The strength of these communities relies on the members' ability to develop appreciation for others and the interdependence they share with all parts of the community or system. These faculty dialogues became an important aspect of redefining the community and constructing new understandings about assessment and each faculty's member's role in contributing to the institution.

Angelo (2000) noted the importance of academic departments thinking and acting systemically. In his view an ideal department is one that builds a shared trust, motivation, and language. When faculty work together to construct new ways of thinking about teaching, learning, and assessment, they are meeting the components of Angelo's conception of an ideal department. They become a community that is capable of calling upon its resources to adapt to the tasks and challenges presented by academic life. The faculty who participated in the study began to make connections between the course they were teaching, their colleagues' courses, and the curriculum offered by the department. This web of interdependence became evident to them and an important part of establishing outcomes for their courses that were in concert with the curriculum. In this instance, the community bond and the awareness of this interdependence motivated the faculty to be-

come better teachers. This community of faculty elected to extend the study into the spring semester and asked other department faculty to join. The continuation of the study is testimony to the value of the experience and the strength of the community that was constructed.

When we look more closely at the actions of the faculty, we recognized they created a community focused on inquiry. The faculty inquired about assessment together and attained a better relationship between them as well as their relationship to the students in their classes. As was evident throughout this project, inquiry is not limited to the laboratory. Following Dewey's notion, inquiry is a natural process of living and, as he stated, inquiry is the directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is determinate and converts elements of the original situation into a unified whole (Dewey, 1938). For Dewey, inquiry occurs as people act into the world so as to make a difference and to take into account the effects our actions have. The efforts of the faculty involved with the project indicated a willingness to adopt an attitude of curiosity and openness about the assessment process and how to become better teachers in the process.

Creating a culture of inquiry is consistent with Banta's (2008) perspective, which maintains that assessment shares many of the features of inquiry since it begins with the questions and moves along to data collection and analysis. Assessment is a kind of research which focuses on what institutions and teachers do and what students are capable of demonstrating. It is only natural that the faculty in this study became a community of inquirers as they collected data and reflected on their practice.

Teaching and learning are two terms that have been linked in the literature for several decades and have attracted attention from both researchers and administrators (Becker & Andrews, 2004). As faculty focus their inquiry on how students learn,

they are capable of developing and extending their capacity to teach. The Center for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning at Indiana University has found that faculty make improvements in undergraduate learning by exploring a variety of approaches and reflect on questions about student learning derived from their own experiences in the classroom. For the faculty of Indiana University, the scholarship of teaching and learning is self-renewing and self-broadening. The University believes as its faculty members address more learning outcomes and explore more alternative learning environments, they come to use more diverse and increasingly sophisticated techniques to examine the effectiveness of their strategies.<sup>2</sup>

What we find noteworthy is the joint nature of the action of teachers and students. As we indicated above, outcomes assessment is concerned with what students learn and what teachers do. These are not mutually exclusive as there is continuity in the relationship between teachers' actions and students' learning or outcomes. As we found in our faculty discussions, there was less time spent in talking about assessment as a program imposed by the external world and more time spent focusing on becoming effective teachers so that students may become effective learners. Coming to the realization that this is the central focus of assessment was clearly helpful to our group and reminded us that it did, indeed, have a place in our teaching practices.

Our inquiry into teaching and learning and the role of assessment continues. The faculty have not yet found a satisfactory answer to alternatives to rubrics in measuring student performance, especially in the area of measuring creativity. In the spring semester faculty will move away from the template they used in the fall. The idea is that by encouraging each faculty member

to design their own rubric it would allow for more freedom in making decisions about measurement. Then faculty can focus more precisely on the course content and develop more refined measures with their assignments. However, the faculty decided they would share their rubrics and outcomes standards for their assignments and give each other feedback on what they developed before they are shared with students. We feel this is further evidence of the quality of the community that has been formed through this study, and how our community has learned to use dialogue to sustain and strengthen their community and their practice.

Our findings are consistent with Andrade (2005) who found the strengths of rubrics lie in the ability to clarify learning goals, design instruction that addresses the goals, and provide students with feedback. Like our study group, Andrade raised the issue of validity and noted that educators should be concerned with the quality of the rubric. It is logical to assume that there are good rubrics and those that are less effective and incapable of providing a reliable measure of student performance. It is our contention that faculty will need support and encouragement to develop and refine reliable and valid rubrics or grading criteria. This support may come from within our department, the institution, and through the faculties' continued scholarship. It is also reasonable to assume that rubrics are dynamic and must change as teachers encounter new information, new students, and face the challenges of the environment of which they are a part. We learned that rubrics are not assessment. Rubrics are no more than instruments or tools that help us go about the business of establishing standards and measuring performance. Assessment comes about as we think purposefully about what goes on in our classrooms and across the institution to contribute to our students' development as educated citizens.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.indiana.edu/~sotl/community.html>.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ted Marchesse who is the former Vice-President of the American Association for Higher Education stated, "assessment is a rich conversation about student learning." This statement rang true in our study as our conversation and dialogues were imbued with ideas, aspirations, and critique about what they do and can do better. Communication between colleagues has the potential to free us from grammatical confusion about such things as outcomes assessment. Consistent with a communication perspective, dialogue worked by allowing us to create a new language about assessment and apply it to our teaching theories and practices.

We found outcomes assessment is not something faculty should fear and more importantly it should not be imposed upon faculty. Faculty are more than capable of constructing a culture of assessment that establishes meaningful outcomes to assist them and their students move towards attainment. The strength of this study was its openness and the level of active participation the faculty engaged in. Assessment can serve as the means to bring faculty together to inquire about their teaching practices and see the interdependence of the objects, ideas, and people that make up their institution. We have found renewed energy and enhanced our relationships with one another by embracing assessment rather than taking a defensive stance. Assessing our teaching, student learning, and the efficacy of our curriculum is what the academy asks of us and we see it as our responsibility to fulfill this request.

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Appendix

<b>Rubric for COMM 1105 Systems &amp; Theories Assignment Communication Theory &amp; Popular Culture Presentation</b>		<b>Beginning</b> 1	<b>Developing</b> 2	<b>Accomplished</b> 3	<b>Exemplary</b> 4	<b>SCORE</b>
To work in pairs to develop an 8-12 minute presentation on an assigned communication theory or concept	Description of identifiable performance reflecting a beginning level of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting development and movement toward mastery of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting mastery of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting the highest level of performance		
To further students' understanding of a concept or theory of communication by requiring them to "teach" it to the class	Description of identifiable performance reflecting a beginning level of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting development and movement toward mastery of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting mastery of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting the highest level of performance		
To use some aspect of popular culture (i.e., movie, sitcom, magazine article, self-help book, etc.) to compliment students' presentation of the assigned concept/theory to the class	Description of identifiable performance reflecting a beginning level of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting development and movement toward mastery of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting mastery of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting the highest level of performance		
To enhance students' self-presentation skills	Description of identifiable performance reflecting a beginning level of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting development and movement toward mastery of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting mastery of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting the highest level of performance		
To develop a concise, informative handout that summarizes the students' understanding of the communication theory/concept and serves as a study guide for the final exam	Description of identifiable performance reflecting a beginning level of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting development and movement toward mastery of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting mastery of performance	Description of identifiable performance reflecting the highest level of performance		