



## Rethinking Assessment

By Jerry Reed, Valencia Community College, Orlando, FL, and Nancy Small Reed - GReed9@valenciac.edu

In large, introductory courses, student learning is typically assessed with machine-scored multiple choice tests. This approach works well when the course is a new one or the instructor teaches part-time. Other busy faculty are persuaded to adopt the approach by the helpful test item bank that comes with the text. But students still see these tests as overly abstract, anxiety-provoking, and contrived. Based on our experience, we think that there are better ways to assess learning.

An approach that has worked well for both of us, in courses as diverse as introductory computer programming, organizational behavior, interpersonal skills and industrial/organizational psychology, is that of using *project-based exams*. In this case, student learning is defined primarily by improved performance on realistic tasks relevant to course content.

Programming students should be able to use course content such as algorithms, languages, and tools in further programming courses and actual work tasks. This means being able to understand the typical work demands for entry-level programmers as well as being better able to coordinate efforts with other programmers and project members. Business students need to function as leaders or effective team members on group tasks in class and at work. Although we cannot measure performance after the class directly, we can use project-based tests to assess student performance on model tasks in the classroom.

Typical work tasks faced by many professional services employees, including

programmers, project managers, team leaders, and supervisors include addressing abstract problems under time pressure. The more guided practice students have dealing with these types of problems, the more likely they are to perform satisfactorily on the job. Considerable research has shown that merely attending class, or even memorizing the text and lecture materials, is not enough to guarantee improved performance. Project assignments make course content more realistic and less difficult for students to remember and apply.

Multiple-choice questions may lack detail and context and appear to need a "magic insight" for solution. When that insight is not immediately forthcoming during the exam, anxiety sets in and further hinders the expression of learned material. This is just as destructive to performance in a business, management, or programming setting as "math anxiety" can be to solving algebra problems. Project-based approaches largely avoid this situation.

By midterm, all of our homework and class activities are project based, whether a full-blown programming project or several smaller business problem scenarios. Since instructor enthusiasm consistently shows a strong relationship to student satisfaction with a course, we pick projects and scenarios of interest to us. To enhance realism, we present the content as customer requirements, staff reports, consultant advice, or company procedures. This takes the form of text, Web-based materials and examples from the workplace, in addition to required readings. Students are assigned content to share with the class, either via the class website or directly in class. Working in teams, the class produces a program or solves workplace problems

that are more complex than all but the very ablest students could do on their own. We help students accomplish the project successfully by ensuring that particularly promising students are seeded into each group.

The goal is to make students comfortable using course content to produce products prior to the final examination. Then we derive final exam questions structured around these class-produced projects. These questions can often be objectively scored and are viewed as quite fair by students. After all, they helped develop the projects. There can be multiple correct answers for some questions, as in life.

Here are some sample test items using class projects as vehicles for evaluating, and perhaps enhancing, student learning:

**Recognizing concepts:** 1) "Which line(s) show a Boolean operator being used?" 2) "What management error does this statement reflect? 'Josh Smith didn't work hard enough to accurately complete his report on employee absenteeism, while I couldn't finish my report on diversity training due to inadequate information

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- We are interested in a wide range of teaching-learning topics.
- We are interested in innovative strategies, techniques, and approaches that facilitate learning and in reflective analyses of educational issues of concern.
- Write with the understanding that your audience includes faculty in a wide variety of disciplines and in a number of different institutional settings; i.e., what you describe must be relevant to a significant proportion of our audience.
- Write directly to the audience, remembering that this is a newsLETTER.
- Keep the article short; generally between 2 and 3 double-spaced pages.
- If you'd like some initial feedback on a topic you're considering, you're welcome to share it electronically with the editor.

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## Two Special Opportunities

Our fifth *Teaching Professor* Conference is scheduled for May 16–18 at the Gaylord Palms Resort and Conference Center in Kissimmee, Florida. We have been thrilled by the large and enthusiastic response this conference has generated.

The conference program is made strong by the many and varied sessions presented by faculty. We'd love to have you share your expertise at the conference. Topic suggestions and proposal guidelines can be found at the *Teaching Professor* website: [www.teachingprofessor.com](http://www.teachingprofessor.com). You'll also find the online proposal form in the section on the conference. The deadline for submitting a program proposal is October 19, 2007. You'll hear if your proposal has been accepted by December 10, 2007.

Also in October, the editor is beginning a series of Magna Online Seminars

using an interview format with authors of new and noteworthy books. The goal of this series is to give *Teaching Professor* readers as well as others in the higher education community a chance to hear authors of important books talk about their ideas and findings. These programs will be available live online, on CD, or as downloads.

The first interview in the series is scheduled for October 23. It will feature a discussion with Judith M. Gappa, Ann E. Austin, and Andrea G. Trice, authors of the 2007 Jossey-Bass book *Rethinking Faculty Work*. The book explores how faculty positions are changing and what faculty need to do their jobs well. For more information about this program, as well as information on how Magna Online Seminars work, check this website:

<http://www.magnapubs.com/calendar/156.html> ♥

### RETHINKING ASSESSMENT FROM PAGE 1

from the overseas division.”

**What If questions:** 1) “What line numbers in the program will be executed if X equals 5 at line 300?”

**Why questions:** 1) “Why was the program loop from lines 413 to 418 introduced into our program?” 2) “Why was intrinsic commitment important to the management team in the Amalgamated scenario?”

**Next action/best action questions:** 1) “Based on the information provided above concerning Maria's problem with her team, what is the best action Maria could take next?” (Responses generated using class discussions and other course material). 2) “How could the function on lines 352 to 376 be rewritten to use real-valued variables?”

For those wanting to assess a student's choice of action in more depth, or to assess the quality of the student's reasoning more

fully, multiple-choice questions can be followed up with an “Explain your response” short answer or longer essay response. These are particularly useful with items that have more than one acceptable course of action, as do many project-based questions. The student's explanation can elevate a marginally correct response to a “best” response and should be scored accordingly.

Finally, as the focus is on applied learning, it makes sense to have the exam be “open book,” “open notes,” “open Web,” or all three with few negative consequences. Yes, some students might happen upon an example in the text very similar to a traditional exam problem, or might even be able to cut and paste a snippet of relevant code from the Web. However, they will be able to find only the most general sorts of advantage from the text and Web when test questions focus on their unique project(s). As our real purpose is for them to improve future performance, learning late is better than not learning at all. ♥

# Writing an Analytical Paper in Chunks

By Rita Duarte Marinbo, Towson University, MD – rmarinbo@towson.edu

For faculty who have not received formal training in teaching writing, coaching students in the art of writing analytical papers is a challenge. Because students habitually disconnect content from one course to another, they generally do not carry over their good writing habits from the traditional first-year writing programs to other courses. And then there is the heavy burden of elevating the paper content from the secondary-education-level of reliance on description to the college-level expectation of critical analysis. Despite these and other challenges, writing teachers insist that the way to good writing is to do it, and to do it, over and over with substantial feedback and coaching.

The following system breaks up the writing of an analytical paper into four steps I refer to as “chunks.” I have used this system with lower-level and upper-level courses. I have used it with group writing projects and individual writing projects. The students are given one week per chunk. Chunks are submitted to me electronically before midnight on Friday. After the third chunk, the four chunks must be submitted appended to each other as a draft of the entire paper. Chunks may be submitted multiple times. In fact I encourage submitting the chunk due this week with a revised version of the chunk that was submitted last week. Feedback is rendered electronically within 48 hours for each submission.

Yes, this system requires a substantial amount of feedback and that means instructor time. It rests on the premise that good writing is a product of feedback and editing. The students keep editing their chunks as the process continues. I point out where there is a problem. I do not use the WORD editor; I simply embed my references in red. Here’s the handout I give students that describes the chunks and offers advice on writing them.

## Directions for Writing an Analytical Paper in Chunks

Assume that the audience is someone who knows nothing about the subject matter.

This is an important assumption that prevents you from glossing over important explanations.

**Chunk One:** WHAT is the topic? This should be articulated in one or two words or a short phrase. It is the answer to this question: What is the subject of the paper? Example: Communication and Gender (Note that the phrase may become the title of the paper)

This section of the paper frequently describes the topic. The description should contain a definition of the topic usually with historical/cultural references, including how it was defined in the past or by other cultures or value systems.

**Chunk Two:** What is the conceptual framework? Explaining the conceptual framework is often the most difficult part of writing a paper. It involves understanding two issues: *What* ideas are connected to the topic? *How* are the ideas connected to the topic?

Example: Idea that gender affects the act of communication. Idea that men and women (two forms of gender) communicate differently, through, for example, a feminist framework.

**Chunk Three:** What do experts think about this topic and framework? What do you as author think about it (based on the work of experts, compared to the evidence that you have gathered)? It is absolutely necessary to discover what experts think about your topic and framework. Otherwise you have only an opinion (yours) that does not meet research standards. In research, one deals with facts (empirically “provable” statements).

Discover what experts think by doing a search of the literature regarding the topic and framework. This is accomplished by using the library. Select those

articles/books which seem most relevant to the question posed or to the ideas which require connecting.

*Note:* The bibliography which is attached to your paper should contain about 10 references, only three of which are to be Internet references. Wikipedia is NOT an acceptable reference.

Read the findings of the experts and take into account how much they 1) agree with your assumptions; 2) differ from your assumptions; 3) differ or agree with each other. The important issue is understanding WHY they agree—with each other and/or your assumptions and evidence.

Then write up the body of your analysis based on what has been learned. One usually describes what the experts think.

**Chunk Four:** What difference does your finding make to the world, to our culture, to our country, to ourselves, to something/one? Why is it important that anyone understands why men and women differ in communication? Is this important? How is it important? If someone reads the paper, what two or three things do you want them to remember fifty years from now about this paper? Convince the reader that the topic is important and why s/he should remember the analysis.

*Ed.’s note: The author has graciously given individual faculty permission to use or revise this handout in their classes. Permission to reprint or publish the handout must be requested from the copyright holder, Magna Publications, Inc. 🍀*

## Getting to Know You: The Importance of Establishing Relationships

By Patricia Kohler-Evans, University of Central Arkansas, AR - [pattyk@uca.edu](mailto:pattyk@uca.edu)

About two or three semesters ago, I conducted an informal experiment with two of my classes. With one, on the first night of class, I asked students their names and major courses of study. I introduced myself in much the same way, with a brief statement about my chosen field. With the other class, I spent time during the first and second class sessions on activities designed to acquaint students with each other and establish how we would conduct the class. I used what I learned about students that first night throughout the rest of the course. When I compared feedback from the two classes, I was amazed at the differences between the two. For example, one student from the second class noted that these activities made the class more “user friendly.” He left class looking forward to the rest of the semester.

I'd like to share some of the activities I used to get students connected with each other and with me.

### What's in a name?

When students introduce themselves, I ask them to tell us their name and also to share what that name means, if they know that; to talk about the individual for whom they were named; and to indicate whether or not they like their name. I have also asked whether they live their name. For instance, my name, “Patricia,” means loyal. I tell students that fits because I am generally a faithful friend. In some cases stu-

dents don't know what their name means. I have found that they are very willing to do some research to find out what it means and to then share that information with the rest of the class.

### T-shirt collage

Sometimes I have students introduce themselves to each other by creating a T-shirt that represents who they are. I supply each student with a pre-drawn T-shirt pattern on a sheet of paper. I ask students to use magazine pictures, markers, crayons, etc., to design the shirt.

Usually, I bring all the materials to class. Students tend to talk to each other about themselves as they are designing their T-shirts. I do a shirt too. I believe this shows students that I value this activity. Students seem to really enjoy doing this activity, and they usually work very hard to include multiple aspects of themselves in the collage. Students listen attentively when it's time to share the T-shirt collages, and even at the end of the semester they still remember information about their classmates.

### Identification of personal interests

In many of my classes, I ask students to share information about their personal interests and learning preferences. I use a questionnaire to obtain this information, and I tell students to only share what they are comfortable having me know. A commercially available product that generates this information is the Learning Expressways™ folder. (Published by Edge

Enterprises, 708 W. 9th St., Suite 107, Lawrence, KS 66044. Phone: 785-749-1743. Fax: 785-749-0207.)

### Asking for written feedback

I frequently ask for written comments at the end of lectures. Students may comment about the class, express a concern, or share other information. I respond to all comments in writing and return them at the next class. Sometimes I ask students to rate their understanding on a 1-to-10 scale, and sometimes I ask for a brief reflection.

Since I have started to invest more time in getting to know my students, I have noticed

that my relationships with them have improved in numerous ways. When students come to me after the course has ended, I still remember their names and something about them. I have also noticed that I have more students asking questions about their chosen fields. They regularly tell me that they value the activities as well. I believe that the time invested in relationship building increases students' motivation and commitment to the course. Recently, I overheard one student commenting to another about a group assignment that I had made. She was admonishing her fellow classmate to seek out other students who were different as a way to enrich the experience. Whether these examples are a direct result of the relationship building I can't say for sure, but I am convinced that it does make a better climate for learning in my classes.

## Does the Administration Support Teaching?

Ask most faculty members if their institution supports teaching and you get a litany of examples of how they don't—first, there's the teaching load and expectations for lots of other work besides. Then there's the number of advisees and the crummy way that teaching is evaluat-

ed. That's followed with stories of dirty classrooms, meager supplies, and no money for field trips. And finally there's the teaching award, with its token \$500 check.

Now, if you ask administrators whether the institution supports teaching, you get a

much more positive response—and one that includes examples not mentioned by faculty.

The disconnect between faculty and administrative perspectives on support for

## Some Lessons Learned about Learner-Centered Teaching

Because so much of what college teachers learn about teaching they learn from experience, there is a bit of a tradition of senior faculty sharing instructional wisdom with beginners. It's not a strong tradition or one that has any consistent format, but, with some regularity, articles and sometimes even books appear in which the "senior" attempts to distill lessons that can be passed on to those more "junior." If the "senior" is insightful and the lessons are articulated ably, then those lessons benefit not just beginners but all faculty. And that is certainly the case with a wonderful piece authored by management professor David A. Whetten, who now directs a faculty development center.

Whetten admits with honesty that for some years he didn't think there was much he could learn from people who "studied" education. After all, he was in the classroom doing education and had learned much from that experience. He explains how a conversation with his golf instructor resulted in an important insight about the nature of experiential learning. "One day on the driving range, I was demonstrating my swing while remarking, 'Practice makes perfect.' His disarming response was, 'Only if you begin with a good swing. My advice to you is to either stop practicing or change your swing.' In teaching, as in golf, repeating poor teaching mechanics can actually move us away from, not closer to, our performance objective of effective student learning." (p. 340) Faculty do learn from experience; that's true. However, the more salient question is what have they learned.

"So what changes in my swing as a teacher am I trying to make that I wish someone had corrected early in my career?" Whetten asks. (p. 340) He explains that early in his career a new faculty member asked advice about teaching at a top-tier private business school where MBA students would not tolerate poor teaching. "My recommendation at the time was to find the highest-rated MBA teacher and attend every class for a semester, taking copious notes." (p. 341)

But that's not the recommendation he'd give today. Now he'd find the MBA course where students report learning the most, and then he'd carefully examine the design of that course. "It's not that we can't learn anything of value about learning by observing great teachers; it's that emphasizing classroom observation perpetuates the myth that the key to learning is a talented instructor." (p. 341)

And this leads Whetten to the most important lesson he's learned: course design. He explains with another example. As a teacher he prizes discussion and he reports working diligently to learn how to lead those discussions effectively. ". . . as I crafted provocative discussion questions, I did so with the expectation that my answers needed to be significantly more profound than those offered by the students—otherwise, I reasoned, I wasn't adding value as a teacher. In contrast, I have come to understand that the most important things I can do to influence student learning involve carefully planning what my students—not their teacher—will do before, during and after each class." (p. 341)

The remainder of this excellent article then articulates some of the most important principles of learning-centered course design. They include beginning with explicit, high-level learning objectives, using valid developmental assessments of student learning, selecting course activities that foster active and engaged learning, and aligning course design elements. The alignment issue is not one easily understood by most faculty. It relates to whether what is taught is consistent with stated objectives for the course and whether students are tested on what they have been told is important to learn.

Whetten concludes with this observation: "I went into this experience [referring to his work in faculty development] expecting to pick up some useful teaching tips for polishing my performance as a teacher; I will leave this experience with a very different view of teaching—focused on student learning outcomes and framed

as teacher-as-course-designer." (p. 356)

Reference: Whetten, D. A. (2007). Principles of effective course design: What I wish I had known about learning-centered teaching 30 years ago. *Journal of Management Education*, 31, 339-357.

*Ed.'s note: This entire issue of the Journal of Management Education is devoted to articles from senior and well-respected faculty in the field. Guest editor Janet Gillespie describes the issue this way: "Wisdom from Our Sages: Advice and Reflections for Early-Career Faculty (and for the Rest of Us)." What a wonderful idea and how appropriate for all discipline-based pedagogical periodicals to give some permanence to the lessons of those who have learned much and well.* 🍀

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### TEACHING SUPPORT

#### FROM PAGE 4

teaching is not a figment of our imaginations. It's real—supported by any number of research findings. Because both sides are somewhat vested in the answer, the truth may be a bit hard to come by. However, the analysis referenced below includes a faculty suggestion that offers a very viable answer to the dilemma.

If faculty are required to prepare teaching portfolios documenting the many and effective ways they support students' efforts to learn and grow, why not ask the local administration, say that in the department or division, to also prepare one? In this case, the portfolio, open for public view and discussion, documents all the ways in which the department and institution support faculty efforts with students.

At least this way, the discussion can start on the same page.

Reference: Frost, S. H., and Teodorescu, D. (2001). Teaching excellence: How faculty guided change at a research university. *Review of Higher Education*, 24 (4), 397-415. 🍀

# A Behavior Contract That Made a Difference

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It seemed that almost every day we would come back to our offices after our speech classes with a frown on our faces and the need to tell a story about the latest shenanigans that happened in class. A student “accidentally” showed an inappropriate image on a PowerPoint slide during his speech. A student walked in 20 minutes late during a classmate’s speech—with a pizza in one hand, a Mountain Dew in the other, and a cell phone on one ear. A student refused to give her speech as scheduled and dared us to do something about it.

Finally, one day we decided we had had enough. We created a list of behavioral expectations, which we asked students to sign, and thus was born the Speech Department Behavior Contract. Since then it has grown into a well-defined instrument that has had as much impact on student retention, success, and well-being as any other strategy we have added to the curriculum.

Initially the document contained 10 items—rudimentary things like students taking responsibility for reading the syllabus, signing the attendance sheet, taking the pretests and preassessments, meeting deadlines, etc., and understanding the consequences of making excuses for missing speeches. Even in its early format, the contract positively impacted retention and behavior in the classroom as observed by us and noted by our dean. Students told us that they appreciated the precise listing of their responsibilities because it made the rules and consequences clear.

At the end of each semester, we revise the document based on the events of the previous semester. For example, we added a statement concerning the campus electronic policy based on a serious plagiarism case that occurred in one of our sections. Once it became prevalent and blatant, we added a statement about text messaging in class. Some of our other colleagues are using

contracts similar to ours, and they report the same positive effect. We hope that by sharing our contract, you will consider how it might help in creating an ideal learning environment in your classroom.

## Speech Department Classroom Behavior Contract

1. I have received, read, and understand the general syllabus for the course, including the attendance policy.
2. I understand that failure to sign the attendance sheet at the appropriate time and date will result in me being marked absent.
3. I verify that my professor has requested that I meet with him/her first should I have any concerns about the conduct of the course. If that meeting does not resolve the concerns, then my professor will recommend I meet with the department’s lead faculty member or department chair.
4. I understand that my professor expects respect for everyone in the classroom at all times. This includes rules about sleeping, inappropriate talking, rudeness, doing homework, answering cell phones, any disruptive behavior, etc.
5. I understand it is my responsibility to take the online content pre- and posttest(s) by the assigned date(s).
6. I understand that it is my responsibility to complete the written pre- and postassessment(s) by the assigned date (PRCA, Speech Anxiety, Listening Inventory).
7. I understand that it is my responsibility to complete all assignments on time and that there are penalties for late assignments (if allowed) at each professor’s discretion.
8. I agree that if I don’t understand an assignment it is my responsibility to ask for clarification.
9. I understand my professor’s policy about being tardy and the consequences of not following his/her policy.
10. I understand the ramifications of missing a scheduled speaking day.

11. I understand that should I miss class it is my responsibility to get any handouts, etc.
12. I understand that it is my responsibility to check my email daily or weekly, depending on my professor’s guidelines.
13. I understand that it is my responsibility to follow directions and that failure to do so will result in a loss of points.
14. I understand that it is my responsibility to read and follow the Electronic Communications Policy.
15. I understand that I should not enter the classroom during a student speech. I should wait to hear applause and then enter.
16. I understand that plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated and may result in receiving a zero (0) for the assignment, withdrawal from the course, or suspension from the university.
17. I understand that cell phones must be turned off or turned to vibrate during class and that each professor may, at his/her discretion, enforce a consequence for any cell phone ringing or text messaging during class.
18. I have read, understand, and agree to abide by the student handbook guidelines for classroom ethics.
19. I understand that each professor may add additional rules in writing to this departmental document.

Student Signature

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