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Reflections on assessment, rubrics and e-portfolios

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"There is little that can be measured with any degree of certainty." (Fryschman, 2008)

A few months ago I read an interesting and provocative article entitled "Do we assess learning? Pull up a chair..." (Fryshman, 2008) which criticized the way institutional assessment of learning was carried out in undergraduate education.

In that article, the author argues that assessment of learning is so complex because of the many variables it entails, and that making any kind of (institutional) generalization is missing the point.

"Learning outcomes are not numbers. We simply can't assimilate all the variables ...without papering over most of the things that really matter".

In short, he sums up by stating:

"Every individual coming in has so complex a series of characteristics, and emerges after so many different activities and variables, that any comparison or generalization is meaningless. Sometimes, when large enough numbers of students from similar enough backgrounds travel through a narrow program that is relatively unchanging, one can reach some general conclusions. But only on a discipline by discipline basis — anything broader brings to bear so many different variables as to make assigning a numerical value to student learning outcomes an exercise in futility."

The author was sufficiently provocative as to evoke a response from Dr. Terrel Rhodes, currently the Vice President of the Office of Quality, Curriculum and Assessment at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

Responding with an online comment, Dr. Rhodes starts off by saluting Fryshman for "thinking through the reasons for why many common assessment approaches to student learning are not useful, especially most of the measures that campuses are currently being urged to adopt" and for recognizing that assessment should be grounded on the individual student (my emphasis). But he also adds that we "do not have a choice to **NOT** assess student learning".

So what are we to do? According to Rhodes, the answer lies in collecting individual student course work as well as co-curricular activities/work in **e-portfolios (or portfolios)**. In these e-portfolios, learning would be assessed according to **rubrics** based on the expectations of the faculty. As a matter of fact, the AAC&U, he says "*are engaged in a pilot project¹ with faculty and campuses across the country in developing an assessment process that relies upon*" such portfolios.

This then brings us to the subject of rubrics and e-portfolios at AUC.

Rubrics² generally mean a scoring guide that explains to students the criteria by which they will be evaluated. They have become very valuable tools especially when assessment of student learning became a hot issue in education.

With AUC's emphasis on campus wide systemic approach to assessment, encouraging evidence of student learning has become a priority, and many AUC faculty are now developing and using rubrics for various types of assignments.³

Unfortunately AUC falls behind when it comes to implementing a comprehensive approach to portfolio adoption. These portfolios would allow students to show multiple examples of their work in all their courses and would offer a view of development over time, i.e. they would track student progress and curricular effectiveness across a multi-year program. Portfolio assessments offer a powerful solution, and as Dr Rhodes suggests, they allow "*for individuals to be the units of analysis*" which "*can be aggregated to inform programmatic or institutional needs*".

The advent of web-based e-portfolio systems has the potential of assessing both student and programmatic success. However, making the case for e-portfolios will have to be the topic of another New Chalk Talk issue.

Sources:

- Fryshman, B (2008/08/07). Do we assess learning? Pull up a chair.... *Inside Higher Ed*, Retrieved November 30 2008, from <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2008/08/07/fryshman>
- VALUE: Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education. Retrieved December 2, 2008, from The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Web site: <http://www.aacu.org/value/index.cfm>

Share with us your experiences by contributing to the New Chalk Talk series, or by simply sending comments/suggestions to aellozy@aucegypt.edu and/or pandeli@aucegypt.edu

¹ AAC&U's "VALUE" project, VALUE: Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education at <http://www.aacu.org/value/index.cfm>

² A term derived from the Latin "rubrica" (which means "red ochre") originally indicating a word or a section of a text that was highlighted in red for emphasis. It then developed to mean the notes that a teacher penned in red ink while grading a paper, and today it refers to a grading guide.

³ If you have not attended this week's CLT workshop on "Designing Rubrics" by Ann Boudinot Amin (Director of Assessment), we encourage you to do so next semester.