Best Practices for Student Learning Assessment In Smaller-Sized Undergraduate Mass Communication Programs

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Abstract

Assessment of student learning in higher education is no longer optional, because the public increasingly expects universities to spend less and produce more. Generating detailed, meaningful assessment is challenging, particularly for smaller-sized mass communication programs with limited resources. Mass communication-focused assessment literature is scarce. This best practices essay reviews other research to illustrate proven examples of ways to assess simply and effectively in undergraduate mass communication programs to achieve maximum faculty support and curriculum improvement.
Introduction

The purpose of assessment is to make a conscious effort to support student learning, verify the quantity and quality of learning, and make changes that will improve student learning (WASC accreditation standards, 2012). Administrators and faculty often oppose assessment because they don’t think it’s necessary, or they claim it requires time and resources more worthy of investment elsewhere. Academic programs with smaller enrollments, already struggling to provide sufficient resources for curriculum and instruction, often seem to make the loudest complaints about assessment.

In the mass communication discipline in particular, faculty members often struggle to deliver high quality learning opportunities. In 2006, almost half of all mass communication faculty responding to a national survey said they had too many students and not enough time (Swanson, 2006). Surely the continued tightening of resources and expanding demands on faculty members’ time contributes to resistance to involvement in learning assessment (See also Grasser, 2013). However, in today’s higher education environment, faculty members cannot disregard or give short shrift to assessment.

Federal and state departments of education and independent accrediting agencies are zeroing in on institutions and programs that appear problematic (Grafton, 2011). In California’s community college system – the largest in the nation – more than a dozen institutions have been found not in compliance with standards in recent years. Lack of a strategic plan for assessment is a frequent complaint (Rivera, 2013). Nationwide, four-year colleges and universities are also being examined much more closely (Leserman, 2014). Even the largest for-profit universities have struggled to document that they are dedicating sufficient resources for student learning (Kirkham, 2013). Demonstration of assessment success is essential for institutions seeking national or regional accreditation, and for
individual programs seeking professional recognition such as that offered to mass communication programs by ACEJMC (Henderson & Christ, 2014).

Although the research on assessment in mass communication is extremely limited, there is affirmation that programs of all sizes struggle to keep up with assessment (Parsons, 2006). For programs that seek ACEJMC recognition, failure to present an engaged assessment effort with demonstrable results may contribute to accreditation or re-accreditation denial, or provisional status acceptance (ACEJMC issues accrediting... 2008; Major accreditation not... 2010). Regardless of whether a particular mass communication program is ACEJMC recognized or intends to seek recognition, today's reality is – administrators and faculty must have a sense of urgency in regard to the verification of student learning.

It is possible to plan and carry out an effective learning assessment plan with a minimum amount of faculty time and institutional resources. Even the smallest-sized undergraduate mass communication programs can assess in a meaningful way. The key to assessment is a balance of sound strategic planning, accompanied by a thoughtful and deliberate mapping of assessment’s intensions and goals. Then, simple but effective action steps allow evidence to be gathered and used to support incremental improvements in academic programs that facilitate improved learning.

This work reviews recent literature on assessment in undergraduate programs. It lays out the fundamental elements that must be present in any assessment plan. It presents examples of successful, easily adaptable assessment strategies. Most importantly, it ends with a discussion of “closing the loop” (Allen, 2006; Allen, 2004) that is essential for assessment to be truly meaningful and not just busy work for faculty members.

The work is supported by the author’s experience of more than 24 years in higher education, during which he has taught in eight four-year institutions and held
administrative responsibilities for assessment, accreditation, and academic advising. The author is a graduate of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Assessment Leadership Academy. The ALA is a rigorous 12-month cohort program that prepares higher education administrators and faculty members for “the full spectrum of assessment issues and places those issues in the national context of higher education policy on educational quality, accreditation, and accountability” (Assessment Leadership Academy, 2015, para. 1).

The Assessment Imperative

Appropriate assessment of student learning is critical in higher education, because assessment allows faculty members to determine whether goals for student learning are being met. “Assessment inspire us to ask these hard questions: ‘Are we teaching what we think we are teaching?’ ‘Are students learning what they are supposed to be learning?’ ‘Is there a way to teach the subject better, thereby promoting better learning?’” (Why is assessment important, 2008, para. 1).

Driscoll and Wood (2007) make the critical observation that teachers do not learn from their experience of teaching. Rather, teachers learn from reflecting on the teaching experience. Assessment of student learning provides the opportunity for teacher reflection that would not be available if universities and programs didn’t endeavor to find out what students learn and how they are learning it.

ACEJMC accreditation

Programs accredited by the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication must have an assessment plan that satisfies Standard 9, which is linked to the Professional Values and Competencies that all students in the program are expected to master (Henderson & Christ, 2014).

A variety of indicators and evidence are required. Recent communication with Suzanne Shaw, Executive Director, and with Cindy Reinhart, Assistant to the Executive
Director, indicated that in the years immediately following the 2004 implementation of Standard 9, many programs had difficulty meeting minimum performance expectations. In some years, more than half of all programs were non-compliant.

In some cases, an assessment plan was missing or inadequate. In other cases, a plan was in place but it was using inappropriate data or collection methods. In other cases, an assessment plan was in place, but insufficient time had been allotted to generate useable data. Finally, some programs had an assessment plan in place and had collected evidence, but had not discussed or addressed deficiencies. Often, this was due to lack of administrative support and/or administrator turnover.

“One school comes to mind that had 21 assessment measures and because it was trying to do too much, it could not do any of the assessment measures well. Faculty was so busy administering the assessment measures, they didn't have time to analyze data and make changes,” Reinhart said (Personal communication, 2014).

ACEJMC accreditation is not an issue for many smaller-sized mass communication programs that do not have resources or faculty desire to pursue accreditation. However, programs of all sizes should be intimately familiar with Standard 9, the ACEJMC’s recommended indicators and evidence, and the process ACEJMC suggests for documenting student learning (ACEJMC accrediting standards, 2015).

**Applying a Theoretical Model**

A theoretical model helps to integrate theory, research, and practice in assessment so there can be “a shared understanding of the value and means of studying how learners are now learning” (Banta & Associates, 2002, p. 85). One effective model to use in context with assessment is Gudykunst’s Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory.

William Gudykunst developed Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory to help explain how people deal with anxiety and uncertainty in a new communication situation. At
its most basic, AUM improves the quality of communication and helps people adjust to new cultural expectations (Gudykunst, 1998). It lays out uncertainty and anxiety as interdependent dimensions that influence intercultural adaptation (Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen, & Bruschke, 1998). It allows for understanding of uncertainty and anxiety in ways that help “demystify and foretell” current and future behaviors of people in social settings (Ni & Wang, 2011, p. 272).

Although AUM was intended to focus on interpersonal communication scenarios, it is a relevant theory around which to develop an assessment plan because learning assessment is a subject that causes a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty for higher education faculty members. AUM addresses communication at four levels: Individual, interpersonal, intergroup, and cultural.

Developing a successful assessment plan – like a successful “training program” in any workplace (Gudykunst, 1998) – involves communication, collaboration, and reduction of anxiety and uncertainty among participants at all levels. It would necessitate that participants understand their ability to reduce uncertainty, manage anxiety in an environment with new challenges, and adapt to new cultural expectations. Clearly, this is what’s required of faculty members when they become involved with assessment of student learning – particularly if faculty haven’t been involved with assessment before, or have been hostile to it in concept.

Ni and Wang found universities could successfully use AUM strategies to help international students reduce their levels of anxiety in organizational situations involving conflict. There’s no reason why the same ideas Ni and Wang identified as relevant for students could not also apply to faculty members. In fact, in the conclusion of their article, Ni and Wang recommended testing the model “in a variety of domestic samples” (2011, p. 295).
Applying the tenets of AUM in the context of an assessment plan would allow academic programs to thoughtfully put together a plan that both responds to stakeholders’ requests for information and is also proactive to initiate conversation about student learning.

**Instruction vs. Learning**

Academic program administrators should be cognizant of the organizational environment in which assessment is to be developed. Higher education institutions have traditionally been organized into bureaucracies with programs and policies that support the efficient delivery of information to large groups of people – rather than individual student mastery of important concepts and skills. This results in the widespread application of a paradigm of instruction rather than one of learning (Tagg, 2003).

As a result, a large proportion of college students are physically present but psychologically absent. Tagg cites a ten-year study in which 40% of high school students surveyed said they did not pay attention teachers or make significant effort to learn (2003, p. 41). There’s little reason to believe these attitudes don’t persist and even worsen by the time students arrive in college.

We are all aware of employers’ consistent displeasure with the knowledge and skills of entry-level workers (See Hart... 2006; Moody & Bates, 2013; Tagg, 2003; Todd, 2009). These and other studies demonstrate that the traditional instruction paradigm no longer works. A learning paradigm, on the other hand, would be one in which the purpose of instruction “is the organizing principle of our thinking and acting” (Tagg, 2003, p. 30). This paradigm, supported by a thorough assessment of what students learned and how they learned it, would have students more prepared to be creative thinkers and problem-solvers.
Key Elements of an Assessment Plan

Developing and administering a plan for "authentic assessment" of student learning (Allen, 2004, p. 8) is an issue of balance. The plan has to come together quickly but thoughtfully. The plan has to be focused, but reflect faculty collaboration and programmatic and institutional individuality. The plan must ultimately allow for curricular improvement while remaining completely isolated from the issue of individual faculty members' teaching performance. This section will offer developmental suggestions on these and other topics.

Connect to the Institutional Strategic Plan

National accrediting bodies such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges look to the each institution's strategic plan as the guiding document for every action – including assessment (WASC accreditation standards . . . 2012). The University of Florida offers an example of how the institutional strategic plan is publicly presented as a guide for all university actions, and also mapped out in such a way that it thematically focuses the assessment efforts in more than 200 academic programs (Strategic planning . . , 2014). A strong alignment should be evidenced between the institutional strategic plan and plans at the college and program level.

Illuminate Policy, Process, and Procedure

Assessment policy is the guideline for assessment that is consistent with the strategic plan(s) of the institution, college, and program. Assessment process represents who in the program is responsible for assessment, what functions are performed as part of assessment, and when the assessment function will be triggered. Assessment procedure involves the nuts and bolts of assessment: What information is gathered, from what sources is it gathered, who gathers it, and what analysis will be performed on the information to create insights about student learning. All of these questions should be answered in a single easy-to-
understand document that is supported by curriculum mapping – as detailed in the section to follow.

The policy/ process/ procedure document may wish to identify what assessment does, as well as what assessment does not do. (For example: *Assessment is undertaken to define, measure, and evaluate student learning to bring about program performance improvements. Assessment is not to determine teaching performance, and no evidence gathered in the assessment process shall be used in retention or promotion decisions.*) It is also helpful to publicly define assessment terminology, especially if the program’s assessment plan uses terms in non-standard ways (See *Glossary of assessment terms*, 2014).

**Identify and Address Learning Outcomes**

Assessment typically involves learning outcome goals at multiple levels, using active phrasing to describe what students will *display, demonstrate, or create* that affirms what students know. The institution should have learning goals for all students. Cornell University, for example, has 11 goals that apply to all students – including those in its Department of Communication and its Department of Performing and Media Arts (*What are Cornell students learning?…*, 2014). Then, regardless of academic focus or structure, every academic program within the institution needs “clear and specific learning outcomes and a clear link to the mission of the campus” (Borrego, 2006, p. 13). Learning outcomes suggest the unique aspects of a program and its learning environment, and the program’s connection to an established discipline (Komvies & Schoper, 2006). This seems especially relevant in mass communication, since so many collegiate academic programs that would not consider themselves *communication* programs incorporate communication elements into their curricula.
The Syllabus as a Guide for Learning

Every academic program course needs a syllabus that “informs, supports, and is aligned with learning outcomes” (Driscoll & Wood, 2007, p. 229). On the syllabus, outcomes are “the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that students take with them from a learning experience” while course objectives are “the tasks to be accomplished” or, what students will do in the course (Suskie, 2009, p. 117).

The syllabus should do more than just offer a to do list for students’ completion of the course (Grunert-O’Brien, Mills, & Cohen, 2009). The syllabus should help students appreciate the learning process, show students their central role in that process, and demonstrate that the program cares about what students learn. Syllabi used in Department of Communications at California State University, Fullerton include a statement to inform students about these issues:

Departmental Learning Outcomes

*Each of the five Communications subject concentrations offers students a different type of preparation for a communications career. All concentrations are similar in that their ultimate goal is to allow the development of graduates who are articulate, intelligent citizens who can think critically and communicate effectively. Learning Outcomes have been established to verify that our graduates are prepared for the realities they will face as communicators in the 21st Century.*

Also included is a hyperlink to a website showing University Learning Goals, the Department’s Program Learning Outcomes, Concentration Learning Outcomes, and ACEJMC Professional Values and Competencies. In each syllabus, the statement concludes with the Course Learning Outcomes for that particular course (*CSUF College of Communications, 2015*). Every semester, a copy of each course syllabus is stored in an online archive.
accessible to faculty. This allows for transparency across the curriculum and contributes to assessment and accreditation processes.

**Map Out the Plan**

A critical document in every academic program assessment plan is the Curriculum Map, a spreadsheet-type document that lists program learning outcomes and the courses that will allow students to demonstrate those outcomes. An effective map allows faculty to “take stock of curricula and learning opportunities” (Suskie, 2009, p. 99) and identify the best places in the program to gather evidence of student learning.

Accompanying the Curriculum Map is the Assessment Plan & Flowchart. This document is also most efficiently developed in a spreadsheet format. It lists the assessment efforts that will take place in each course, describes how schedule for assessment, the evidence collected and collection methods. It describes how and by whom the evidence will be reviewed, and how that review will initiate a process of curriculum improvement.

These two documents work together to create a visual snapshot of the assessment plan. As with the assessment plan itself, the documents are constantly in revision. Even if the academic program uses an online assessment management system to store data, it is still a good idea to have a desktop Curriculum Map and Assessment Plan & Flowchart to keep track of progress as the assessment cycle moves forward each semester. The University of Connecticut assessment website offers a detailed example of curriculum mapping (*Assessment primer: Curriculum mapping*, 2015).

**Faculty Members Must Drive the Process**

Throughout academe, it is frequently observed that faculty members do not understand assessment, see assessment as an unreasonable burden, and/or agree to it without any intent of actually following through on their promises (Allen, 2004; Diamond, 2002; Hutchings, 2010; Suskie, 2009). Much of the faculty’s resistance can be traced to
faculty who are anxious and uncertain about the future – even in an organization where extensive policy is in place with the intended goal of making future events more predictable (Theall, 2002). It can be tempting for the assessment administrator to simply step in and unilaterally develop and initiate an assessment plan without collegial support. This is a mistake.

In all disciplines, assessment can work only when there’s program-wide faculty buy-in on the process. This can occur when the assessment discussion starting point is improvement in teaching methods and outcomes, and not ‘we need to assess because we’ll get in trouble if we don’t.’

“By instead inviting faculty members to start the conversation by sharing best teaching practices and then backtracking to the evidence and observations that resulted in those teaching methods, campus leaders can place assessment in a familiar and inspiring context” (Havens, 2013, para. 5). Another way of saying this is to have assessment “measure what the faculty most deeply value” (Parsons, 2006, p 7). By doing this, assessment is likely to quickly find supporters, and those supporters will rally colleagues to join them (Wagennar, 2013).

One final point, on which all the experts agree: Assessment is about student learning and not about faculty teaching performance. This is a fine line of distinction, but it is critical. Evidence of student learning must be collected in the aggregate – meaning no student names, course section numbers, or instructors can be identified. No courses must be listed with instructor names in assessment documents. All assessment data must be analyzed in a way that the resulting findings can never be applied in the faculty evaluation-retention-promotion-tenure process. Unless a solid firewall is maintained between assessment and faculty RPT, faculty members are very likely to resist and encourage their colleagues to do the same.
Do not assume that faculty will accept assurances of confidentiality; explicitly state the existence of the firewall in all assessment and RPT policy statements and repeatedly communicate the reality of the situation. The author is familiar with a tenured professor of mass communication who has served numerous terms on his department’s RPT committee, and consistently – falsely – claims that assessment results influence retention and promotion.

**Collect Evidence Consistent with Professional Realities**

Evidence of student learning collected for analysis should be consistent with what professionals in the student’s discipline would encounter. “Collect enough evidence to feel reasonably confident you have a representative sample of what your students learned and can do. The sample should be large enough and representative enough that you can use the results with confidence to make decisions about your course or program” (Suskie, 2009, p. 47). Examples of direct evidence of academic performance that align with quantitative analysis include:

- Results of national standardized testing
- Results of localized or in-course standardized testing
- Results of course pre and post-testing (See Weir, 2010)

Examples of direct evidence of academic performance that align with qualitative analysis include:

- Embedded common assignments, essays, and course activities
- Student presentations including oral performances, speeches, and interviews
- Student-created projects and portfolios (See Light, Chen, & Ittleson, 2012)
- Faculty members’ paired reflection reviews of student work and/ or performance

Indirect evidence of student learning can be gathered, although indirect evidence is subject to interpretation that may or may not be accurate. Indirect evidence may be
collected through surveys asking students to self-assess their performance, surveys asking students to assess the performance of other students on work teams, or surveys asking employers to rate students’ individual or collective knowledge or work quality. A similar strategy involves the use of competence interviews with employers allowing for “direct assessment of some student skills, such as oral communication, critical thinking, and problem solving” (Allen, 2004, p. 101). Multiple measures are always best (2013 WASC Draft Handbook..., 2013).

The Challenge of Assessing HIPs

High-impact practice courses put students in circumstances that “demand they interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters” over an extended period of time (Kuh, 2008, p. 24). Kuh and other experts identify HIPs as critical to support student learning and generate graduates with the knowledge and skills most desired by professionals in a variety of fields.

HIP courses appear to be common in higher education mass communication programs. This may be because of the close relationship between the mass communication curriculum and expectations for practice in the real world workplace. Mass communication HIPs can involve student media organizations such as a student newspaper or broadcast station, performance-based courses revolving around theater or debate programs, campaigns courses, internships, student-run agencies and so forth.

Assessment can be challenging in HIPs because of the high level of student autonomy typically involved, client relationships that may or may not support the curricular goals and values of the teaching faculty member, and student hesitancy to report challenges or problems that need to be addressed by the faculty member. Still, there are established practice standards that guide learning assessment. If followed, these standards will go a long way toward reducing uncertainty about what students have learned.
An example of multiple measures of assessment used in a HIP course would be the student-run advertising and public relations agency profiled in Swanson (2014). In this agency, a rubric establishes a baseline for performance among the enrolled undergraduate students. Consistent with the rubric, student learning and performance is evaluated in a number of different ways, each from a different perspective:

- Student team member performance evaluation, ranking and comments
- Individual student reflection survey, with open-ended comments
- Instructor quantitative/ qualitative evaluation of student team campaign
- Co-instructor quantitative/ qualitative evaluation of student team campaign
- Graduate teaching assistant quantitative/ qualitative evaluation of student team campaign
- Client quantitative/ qualitative evaluation of student team campaign
- Time management software tracking data of student time invested in client projects and tasks
- Tracking data of student access of curriculum information and client documents via online classroom management system and cloud file sharing

The multiple measures allow thorough review and analysis of student knowledge gain and hand-on performance, and give students more feedback on their work in the agency than they are likely to get in their first job. The examples in Swanson (2014) would be directly applicable, or applicable with modifications, in other types of HIP courses.

**Co-Curricular Engagement**

Students’ co-curricular engagement can be assessed to provide a contrasting perspective to learning within the classroom. This is especially relevant for mass communication, which appeals to students who are strongly oriented toward hands-on practice (Crawford, Fudge, Hubbard, & Filak, 2013). Co-curricular engagement involves
situations where students connect their learning in class with real-world knowledge and experience (Bresciani, 2006). Opportunities would include special presentations on campus by guest experts, student field trips, job shadowing, professional association participation, research/conference opportunities and professional networking.

Because so much of the learning about mass communication occurs outside the classroom, mass communication program assessment is much stronger when co-curricular activities are considered as part of the student learning mix. A simple Survey Monkey form can be used for faculty and student organization leadership to report learning opportunities, student participation, and the linkage between the opportunities and program learning outcomes.

**Closing the Loop**

This final step is critical – because without it, the entire process of assessment is for naught. Closing the loop means that the faculty comes together and looks thoughtfully at what has been learned about student learning. As a result of this thoughtful review, decisions are made that will bring about improvement in student learning. Those improvements could include, but not be limited to:

- Changes in admissions standards and procedures
- Addition, change, or removal of remediation courses
- Addition, change, removal, or realignment program learning outcomes
- Changes in program curricula, structure, or prerequisites
- Changes in course learning outcomes
- Changes in assignments or placement of assignments within courses

Any changes that are implemented as a result of assessment must then be allowed to take root. Then the assessment process starts all over again, to verify that the changes made a positive difference (See *Closing the loop*, 2014).
Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, the point was made that a good assessment plan for an undergraduate mass communication program involves balance. Balance is achieved in a variety of ways. The assessment plan must be detailed enough to allow a clear picture of student learning throughout the academic program. At the same time, the plan must be simple enough to allow already overburdened faculty members to accept it, support it, and contribute intellectual support and labor to make it work at its outset and over the long term.

The plan must balance the structural and the creative. Assessment must support and build from the strategic plan for the university and program. Assessment must be structurally linked to the learning outcomes for the program and individual courses within it. The concepts of learning assessment must be obvious, all the way down to the level of the individual course syllabus. At the same time, there must be clear, unwavering support for the academic freedom of the faculty.

The end goal – a particular measure of student learning – must never prescribe how the faculty must reach the goal in the courses they teach. Just as the curriculum reflects the unique nature of an institution and program, the assessment of students’ learning must reflect the collective culture and personality of the student body.

The assessment plan must be simple, so that conclusions can be drawn quickly and clearly. At the same time, we all know that learning is not simple – and students learn in a variety of ways (Tobias, 1995). An assessment plan must always be open to new perspectives and relevant revision. Taking a simple, thoughtful approach to assessment allows us to “elicit more thoughtful, creative, and flexible states of mind” (Burgoon, Burger, & Waldron, 2000, p. 112).
In crafting this overview of the key elements of an assessment plan, examples were included that are especially relevant to smaller-sized undergraduate mass communication programs – but most examples offered are not taken from mass communication assessment plans. This is because there is surprisingly little published literature on assessment in mass communication programs. Searching for scholarly support for concept and practice on assessment in communication results in far more support for assessment within communication than assessment communication across a variety of fields than it does assessment within communication (See Columbia University student learning... 2012 as an example of this).

In 2013, there were almost 200,000 undergraduate students enrolled in communication programs in almost 500 programs in the United States alone (Becker, Vlad, & Simpson, 2013). It is shocking and unacceptable that teacher/scholars in the mass communication disciplines have provided so sparse a path for their peers to follow in this area so critical to our collective success. It is hoped this essay will serve as inspiration for future works by others who are committed to improving student learning.
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