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Comeaux, Patricia (Ed.). (2005). *Assessing Online Learning*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

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"Bad teaching, students can avoid. Bad assessment, they cannot escape. This is the very sentiment we should all be aware of when designing assessment tasks."

~ Adapted from Boud, (1995b)

Assessing Online Learning was edited by Patricia Comeaux with a primary goal of contributing to a sparsely researched and published specific aspect of online instruction. Although there are increasing numbers of collections and texts about online teaching and learning in general, very little has been written about the particular needs and challenges of assessment in online instruction. Hence, the particular area of the online teaching and learning the book addresses is online assessment, with a specific focus on the particular needs and challenges of assessment in online instruction. The collection of ten articles in the book serves as both a conceptual and a practical guide to online assessment practices, strategies, and tools for assessing online learning in online classrooms and programs.

The contributing authors are nationally and internationally prominent educators from a variety of countries and disciplines. The countries represented by the contributing authors are Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, Greece, and the United States. The disciplines in which the contributing authors specialize also vary greatly. Computer Science, Linguistics, English, Education, Business Administration, Mathematics, Statistics, Instructional Technology, Communications, Information Technology, and Interactive Arts are the various disciplines which give the book its multidisciplinary flavor. Different undergraduate and graduate level courses are selected from these disciplines. Despite the great variety in their backgrounds and disciplines, the common threads among the authors are an advocacy for and a practice of a constructivist approach to learning. The paradigms of this constructive approach to learning were established by Comeaux,

(2002). The authors also share a unique vision which focuses on the idea that assessment and learning are integrally linked together.

The multidisciplinary and comprehensive nature of the collections and their conceptual and practical treatments of online assessment make the book a good resource for faculty, researchers, instructional designers, and administrators. The readers should expect to find valuable assessment tools and strategies, a useful assortment of rubrics, structured guidelines, multiple challenges, both successful and not so successful practices, and constructivist and learner-centered frameworks to illustrate the effects that the online assessment practices may have on the learning process.

Administrators, especially at community colleges, should be aware of the technology transformations affecting accountability at an institutional level and the resulting subsequent challenges. In Chapter 1, a detailed description of how eight community colleges in the United States have addressed the accountability issue and responded the challenges in part by devising assessment plans at institutional levels is given. The strategies and techniques devised by the eight community colleges across the country to ensure quality instruction and assessment of online student learning are carefully outlined.

The particular tools such as automatic tracking and monitoring, unlimited and self-paced access to course material, permanent records of interaction, automatic/instant feedback and multiple communication tools are the particular advantages presented by online environments. A well organized rationale is given, in Chapter 2, as to why these advantages should be capitalized on for modifying assessment in online courses. Teaching online requires a change on the part of the faculty from a teacher-centered, test-based, and outcome-based approach to a more student-centered, process-based, and problem or project-based approach (Sanders, 2001). The process of designing, developing, and implementing a new conceptual framework for assessing of online courses is outlined in great detail. The challenges faced when creating a system that intertwines teaching and assessment are shared with the audience. The particular emphasis is placed on the assessment as an ongoing activity which enables students to identify knowledge and skill gaps. The author engages students of two graduate level instructional technology courses in group projects with real-world problems for motivation. A useful rubric for assessing group work, which incorporates ongoing self, peer and instructor feedback, is given.

Following along the same thread of group work, relevant particularly to those who teach a junior level undergraduate course in interactive arts, Chapter 3 offers practical value in terms of guidelines and checklists for assessing group work. Understanding and sensible use of constructivist approaches are pointed out as the key elements in effective assessment of collaborative work. The audience is invited, through a well structured rationale, to be firm believers of the idea that assessment and learning are intrinsically related, and the assessment methods and requirements greatly influence how and what learners learn. The authors outline the development and evaluation of a multi-dimensional group assessment tool, which is based on the principles of constructivist approaches, and provide a checklist to which they refer as the Team Assessment Guidelines Checklist (TAGC).

Not only do online assessment and its relevant issues challenge the educators in the United States, but they are also topics of interest and concern for the educators in various parts of the globe. The assessment models developed in two Australian university undergraduate education courses are described in Chapter 4. The authors demonstrate that how students learn depends in part on elements of pedagogy embedded in the assessment process by using a cohort of pre-service business education teachers who are given the task of producing lesson plans to be used in their teaching. According to the authors, we, as educators, must break away from the practice of merely taking assessment tasks from face-to-face formats and transferring them online. A strong argument presented for the need to develop a whole new set of assessment models. It is recommended that these new assessment models focus on the knowledge creation with an emphasis on the interplay

between the growth of collective and individual knowledge as indicated by Bielaczyc & Collins (1999). The audience is provided with detailed steps of developing concept maps to obtain quantitative and qualitative measures of understanding. Some valuable ideas are also offered by the authors to illustrate how to use online assessment of student learning to improve instructional design in teacher education courses.

The utilization of discussion boards is considered by many to be an indispensable part of online courses. The elimination or alleviation of limitations of the face-to-face format in the areas of time, space, and place can be listed among the many advantages of using discussion boards. The authors establish the pedagogical value of discussion boards by providing a number of research studies supportive of this particular medium's potential. However, discussion boards can be tedious and cumbersome without structure and guidance from faculty. The issues of maintaining focus, assessing contributions, and fostering reflection and analysis in electronic discussion boards are addressed in Chapter 5. The authors start out by giving a detailed description of Virtual Learning Modules (VLM), a set of carefully organized activities, underlying their approach. A list consisting of eight vital components that each VLM should have is provided for the audience. The expressed intent of these components is to guide students through reading and reflective writing, and prompt student thought and interaction. Several sample VLMs are given. Assessment in VLMs where student responses are unique hybrids between short contributions to group discussions and formal written responses is a challenge. In order to address this challenge, the authors developed and provided a four-level Cognitive Complexity Rating Scale instrument, which incorporates reconstructive and constructive response components. A seven-step rubric construction with holistic and analytic assessment approaches is described in great detail. In the end, the authors point out that not only assessment, but monitoring and moderating discussion boards can be a challenge for many educators. In response to the challenge related to monitoring, the authors suggested a technique for mapping all the threads of a given discussion. As for the challenge related to moderating, a set of recommended skills a moderator needs not only to sharpen the focus and deepen the dialog in a discussion, but also to foster critical thinking, reflection and analysis is provided for the readers. This chapter has much to offer from both a conceptual and a pragmatic standpoint.

Along with the theme of participation of students in online forums, a model description and analysis to examine the relationship of quality participation to online student performance are given in Chapter 6. The framework used for the model is based on a social constructivist perspective where learning takes place through the shared construction of knowledge and negotiation. The author describes very useful strategies, and quantitative and qualitative assessment tools for structuring and assessing online discussions in a tourism and hospitality course. The reader is cautioned against the perils of using only statistics and metrics lest the usage of these tools may imply that the level of online participation reflects the level of learning. A set of qualitative assessment tools based on content analysis is developed to be used in conjunction with the metrics to capture and evaluate the evidence of social construction of knowledge. In addition, the audience will be pleased to find very useful tips, and sample material on how to develop and foster an online learning community culture.

A very unique, interesting, and apparently effective way of helping students assess and identify gaps in their learning is by way of creating an interactive/narrative digital video featuring a fictional character encountering in a "real-world digital drama" the same applied statistics problems as the senior level undergraduate students are experiencing. The authors of Chapter 7, whose motivation was to reduce failure rates, claim that this particular approach creates a more empathetic and less discouraging medium for "weaker" students. Assessing the instructional effectiveness, which is expressed by the authors as the primary focus of the article, is accomplished by using feedback from student surveys and assessments. In this chapter, the flavor seems to shift from assessing online learning to more of an evaluation of an online course design, not to imply by any means that the two are mutually exclusive concepts.

The age old question of whether we, as educators, want to assess rote memorization and regurgitation skills of learners or to assess demonstration of higher-order thinking and greater-depth of knowledge by the learner is the very same question the author of Chapter 8 asks the audience to consider. This chapter is of particular interest to educators who may consider themselves relatively new to web-based assessment and have concerns about giving up control of answers on timed tests. Some instructors deal with this issue by requiring online students to take exams on campus in monitored environments. Some others, including the author, question the value of using timed exams with controlled answers in the curriculum, in the first place. A very detailed argument is given for the benefits of online assessment. These benefits are considered to outweigh the issue of giving up control and lead to more learner-centered and constructivist-oriented assessment practices. The author discusses evolving test formats of formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments are intended to give students feedback about their progress during the learning process. Summative assessments are to give students feedback about the end products of their learning process. The audience will find a practical strategy to combine these two types of assessments for an online undergraduate linguistic course very useful.

The idea of formative and summative assessment is also implemented in a first-year undergraduate Academic Library Skills course at Coventry University in England. The aim of the author, in Chapter 9, is to create assessments in a constructive way using a model, to which the author refers as the Fluid Role Evolving Environment (FREE) model. The main feature of the model requires students as well as the teacher to be reflective and responsive. Useful practical strategies, with examples, for creating and developing online assessments to assess students' subject specific library skills are given.

The last chapter of the book examines a graduate level Interpersonal Communications course, which combines computer-mediated communications with face-to-face instruction. It focuses more on design, analysis and evaluation of the course, with some ideas presented on how to grade participation using objective and subjective criteria.

Assessment is considered by many to be the thorniest area in learning and teaching, even more so in online learning. Fortunately, this book provides a wealth of strategies and tools for assessing online learning. However, I would have liked to have seen more details and possibly different approaches in a couple of chapters to make them more relevant to the practitioners. In summary, the book is a great resource for practitioners to develop online assessments that integrate teaching, learning, and assessment with a constructivist perspective in mind.

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