

Alternative Assessment Methods across the Disciplines

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Pamela B. Childers has been interested in alternatives to grading student writing since she began teaching in the sixties. Currently, she is Caldwell Chair of Composition at The McCallie School in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where she directs the writing-across-the-curriculum program and works with teachers from all disciplines to find alternative assessments for writing.

Introduction and Aims

The purpose of this workshop is to help you and your colleagues across the disciplines to consider the “hows” and “whys” of assessing writing in all subject areas. The workshop also focuses on the importance of real audiences in the assessment methods. For a good background in educational theory, I suggest that you read the introductory essays in this collection to consider the pedagogical beliefs and commitments of the authors. Through this workshop you can

- examine your current writing assignments and their assessments across the disciplines, considering strengths and weaknesses;
- study alternative grading methods that have worked;
- design a series of writing activities directed at different audiences and with alternative assessment methods.

Following are some caveats about assessing writing assignments across the disciplines:

- Use an assessment tool appropriate to the purpose of the assignment.
 - Consider allowing the students to determine the assessment tool.
 - Give the students a checklist to help them revise the assignment before you read it.
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- Consider using another evaluator. For instance, if students are writing to another audience, then publication or a letter of response may be enough of an evaluation.
- Try peer editing for assessment of grammatical and structural considerations, and then you can focus on content.
- Consider giving several sequential assessments that are prerequisites for the next part of a sequential, long-term assignment.

Resources

In This Volume

Adkison, Stephen, and Stephen Tchudi. Chapter 13: "Grading on Merit and Achievement: Where Quality Meets Quantity."

Bauman, Marcy. Chapter 11: "What Grades Do for Us, and How to Do without Them."

Chandler, Kelly, and Amy Muentener. Chapter 12: "Seeing How Good We Can Get It."

Robbins, Sarah, Sue Poper, and Jennifer Herrod. Chapter 10: "Assessment through Collaborative Critique."

Other Resources

Farrell-Childers, Pamela, Anne Ruggles Gere, and Art Young, eds. *Writing across the Secondary School Curriculum*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1994.

"Reporting What Students are Learning." *Educational Leadership* 52:2 (Oct. 1994).

Tchudi, Stephen, and Stephen Lafer. *The Interdisciplinary Teacher's Handbook: Integrated Teaching across the Curriculum*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1996.

Discussion Topics

- Why have alternative assessments? What's wrong with the current grading methods? How will alternative assessments help our students learn more than they're learning now?
- What kinds of alternative methods have worked? How have they worked in other disciplines?
- What audiences are your students using other than the teacher? What audience might you have for writing other than the teacher? Why have real audiences for real assessment?

Activities

- Team up with a teacher from a another discipline. Each of you bring a writing assignment that you've graded. Discuss why you gave the assignment (purpose), and what you intended the students to learn in the process. As a team, design a new assignment that focuses on a different audience and uses an alternative assessment tool.
- Consider the link between the assignment and the assessment. Determine the relationship between what you, the teacher, want and what you want the student to learn—that is, what you want the student to remember and apply long after the assessment has taken place.
- Work with another teacher through e-mail. Consider a college education instructor as a partner. Examine the possibility of having his or her future teachers respond to the writing of your secondary school students. The college students would gain experience preparing them for classroom teaching, and your students would have a real audience responding to their writing in a much more objective way (Sam Robinson, University of Saskatchewan, and Michael Lancaster, The McCallie School).
- Try portfolio evaluation in a science, math, or history class.
- In order to practice using technology, have students subscribe to a listserv, focusing on a particular topic from a list of possibilities in a particular course. For instance, in a biology course, some of the topics might be air pollution, water pollution, rain forests, endangered species, ecosystems, conservation issues, orphan diseases, etc. Have students participate in the discussion online. By saving and printing their involvement in the discussion, they are proving their study of the topic. Response from the teacher could be nothing more than pass/fail for demonstration of knowledge of their topic. Students will have found audiences with common interests, knowledge, and the ability to respond to their ideas.
- Design a set of holistics and rubrics for a writing assignment that reflects humor and demonstrates a knowledge of content. At my school, for instance, in chemistry, students wrote a one-page story on an element, written in the first person. Students received an A for "very creative stories full of wonderful information" (Cissy May, The McCallie School). In an economics class, the teacher determined evaluation criteria with 75 percent focusing on content and 25 percent focusing on structural considerations (Skeeter Makepeace, The McCallie School).

- Have students write a letter to you at the beginning of your course. Ask them to describe their history with the subject, what they liked and disliked about it, and what they would like to do in class this year.

Also, ask them to share anything they think you should know about them to help you as a teacher and learner. Respond in one letter back to the class that reflects ideas voiced in specific letters.

Additionally, let students know that you will try to use some of their ideas to help you design some aspects of the course. You may even want to use the letter at the end of the year to evaluate what happened with learning during the course. A letter response from you, even a class letter, is a good alternative to a grade.

- Try a journal writing activity that either helps students reflect on what they have learned or becomes a response to a prompt. Rather than grade, count the number of entries per marking period only to meet a minimum requirement. Since these journal entries may lead to classroom discussion, the goal is to get students to write and allow their ideas to flow. Allow students to highlight anything they want you to read and respond to (Michael Lowry, The McCallie School).
- Try an interactive journal assignment that focuses on writing to think, responding to a topic, and demonstrating critical thinking (David Hall, The McCallie School).
- Try having students describe, in a letter to their parents, a concept or idea they have learned in a particular course. Then ask the parents to respond as to whether they understood the concept or idea.

Follow-up

- Make a list of possible alternatives to grading student writing for the activities suggested.
- Also, make a list of possible real audiences to use in responding to student writing.
- Involve parents in their children's learning by informing them of some of the ways that you are improving learning without always putting a grade on a paper.
- If you have two sections of the same course, use writing-to-learn activities in one class (experimental group) and your old methods only in the other class (control group). Give a pretest at the beginning of the year, and then a final test, and compare the results of the experimental and control groups. In two algebra classes, we discovered the experimental group

improved much more than the control group (David Perkinson, Charlotte Country Day School).

- Keep a journal of what you try in your classes. Include the learning activities, what was successful, and what failed. This kind of classroom research will be valuable to you and to others.
 - Correspond through e-mail with a partner. Sometimes it is easier to tell a real audience what you are doing and how it is working. You also have someone to ask questions of. Your partner may do the same with you, and both partners will learn from the experience.
 - Ask students to evaluate the assessment methods you have used. You could revise something you tried earlier in the year and use the revised method (on the basis of student evaluations) later in the year.
 - Save copies of significant data that you may want to use in an article or in a presentation you make before parents, the school board, administrators, or colleagues.
 - Collaborate with colleagues, either within the same or different disciplines, to write an account of your study or to make a presentation before your department or at a professional conference.
 - Collaborate with students to write an article or to make a presentation. If you have a writing-across-the-curriculum program, keep files of alternative writing assessments that have worked. If you don't have such a program, request a faculty file or notebook as a resource for your colleagues to record alternative writing assessments in all disciplines.
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