

● NOTES

¹ Our university has an attendance policy stating that any student who misses one fourth of the classes will fail the course; our department policy is even more strict. Both policies are in place because we know that students who attend class regularly will usually learn more. From studies and from our own personal experience as teachers, we know the importance of regular attendance in learning a foreign language.

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Teaching, Learning, and Assessment: A Computerized Supplement for the French Literature Survey

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As we move, or are moved by our administrators, to undertake assessment within our disciplines, departments, and courses, we teachers are beginning to ask exactly what is all this fuss about assessment? What do we have to do, and what is in it for us? Assured by well-meaning administrators that we *need* academic assessment to insure quality education and teaching, we nonetheless cannot help but view this current trend as one more task, one more "add-on," one more administrative requirement.

"While the term still means many things to many people, the symbolism of assessment increasingly has moved from instructional improvement to institutional accountability" (Ewell 23). This tendency, coupled with a belief that a "legislative trail is being laid that will make assessment a permanent part of higher education" (Marchese 4), have led to a growing feeling of dread among the faculty on the majority of college campuses.

For assessment to gain the acceptance of the teaching faculty, a distinction must be clearly drawn between a summative goal of academic assessment (i.e., assessment for external accountability) and a formative goal (i.e., assessment for the improvement of the College as a whole or of individual departments and courses). With the process of assessment being imposed primarily from outside the institution as a requirement for accreditation, however, "many seem directed toward reviving the once common notion of a comprehensive examination in either the major field or general education" (Ewell 26).

Rather than comprehensive examinations that would be given to our students at the end of their college studies, we should envision more creative strategies. Teachers can explore the possibilities and benefits of assessment and use what we discover to transform the assessment process into a pedagogical technique. According to Ewell, "...the primary thrust of most current state initiatives is to encourage institutions to undertake their own appropriate local assessment efforts" (25). He also points out that, while most accreditation agency and state guidelines lean toward quantifiable methods of assessment, they do not impose specific requirements on how to demonstrate institutional effectiveness (26). Let

us take the accreditation agencies at their word. Instead of making a selection from the laundry list of suggested procedures, however, let us devise our own instructional methods and evaluation measures. By using them, perhaps we can better understand our students and better determine if we are actually reaching our own educational goals. At the same time, these methods and evaluation measures might serve to improve the learning experience we are providing for our students.

A recent administrative appeal to departments "to investigate 'key courses' and 'course clusters' within major curricula" (Ewell 27) led me to examine our French Literature Survey course. As it is the only course required for both the major and the minor, the survey course seemed the logical place to start. Bearing in mind the generally accepted principle that "assessment impels greater self-consciousness about purposes and practice" (Hutchings and Reuben 50), I began by outlining the major goals of a basic literature survey course. My next step was to poll the other members of my department on their appraisal of our current level of success at reaching our objectives in this particular course. With respect to the ability to approach literary texts in a sensitive, creative, analytical way that leads to a solid understanding and appreciation of the works studied, we agreed that students who had completed the course did remarkably well. Where we found the most room for improvement was in student retention of more mundane aspects of literature study such as: chronology, concept definition, author and plot identification, and quotation recognition.

Given the rather mundane nature of the material that needed to be reinforced, I decided to turn to the most patient delivery medium of all — one which could repeat questions an endless number of times and could be relied upon to provide consistent information and unbiased correction — the computer. My prototype program for the literature survey uses a multiple-choice format and consists of these ten basic question sets:

1. Given the literary work, identify the author;
2. Given the author, identify the century;
3. Given the quotation, identify the author;
4. Given the literary work, identify the genre;
5. Given the main character, identify the work;
6. Given a statement about/from a work, answer a true-false question;
7. Given the quotation, identify the literary work;
8. Given the author, identify the philosophy;
9. Given the author, identify the literary movement;
10. Given a short plot description, identify the work.

(an example of question set four is given in the Appendix). The authoring program used was MENTOR (an Australian authoring system that is no longer available under that name). MENTOR has been in use for French students on the mainframe DIGITAL VAX computer system at Hollins College for the past seven years. It allows for a good deal of text to appear on the screen for both correct and incorrect answers. It also provides the student with a second chance whenever a wrong answer is initially selected. MENTOR automatically keeps track of the student's score and displays the percentage of correct responses at the end of each session. If the students do not score at least 80 percent, they are told to repeat the question sequence. A record-keeping "LOG file" maintains a list of students' scores for the teacher. The current plan is, in consultation with the teacher of the French Literature Survey class, to create five 20-question modules for each of the two semesters. These modules will serve to clarify and reinforce for students the kinds of factual material that they should assimilate along with their ability to analyze texts during the course of each semester. A final 50-question module will provide a yardstick to measure how well the students have assimilated the typical material presented throughout the course. Student performance on this last module would provide one measure for the overall assessment for this two-semester class.

Should these computer programs be used only as a testing device, there would be quantifiable data produced and the "dieties of assessment" would no doubt be appeased. As a teacher, however, my main objective is to create a flexible instructional resource for individualized student learning. Using the capability of varying the length of the text displayed, I furnish additional information after each of the right and wrong answers. Thus, if a student already knows the correct answer to the specific question, even just making her selection exposes her to supplementary material that increases her knowledge of the subject. With every wrong answer, a student is not only notified of the incorrectness of her choice, but is also given appropriate facts concerning her response. Then the computer allows her to attempt to choose the correct answer. Ultimately, by not making their scores a part of the overall course grade, I hope that students will explore all the information in the programs by doing the different modules several times and purposefully selecting items about which they would like to learn more.

As an example of how this might work, let us examine Alternate Question Set 4: Given the literary work, identify the genre. (For the complete text of this question see the Appendix.) In this specific question, the student is asked to tell if Racine's *Phèdre* is either: A. Farce, B. Comédie, C. Mystère, or D. Tragédie. (The correct answer, of course, is: D. Tragédie.)

When the student chooses the right response, she will be able to read a short plot summary of *Phèdre* which clearly demonstrates why this play is classified as a tragedy. In this way, even if the student has made an educated "guess," she will nonetheless learn something about the tragic genre as well as about the content of Racine's *Phèdre*. If, however, the student has selected one of the other answers, she will find, first, that this is not the correct choice and, second, a definition of the theatrical genre she has indicated along with the names of famous examples of that type of play. The student is then given another chance to select the correct answer. Thus, by choosing even the *wrong* answers, the student will still learn something about the various genres in the French theatre tradition.

By beginning with the goal-setting phase and then constantly consulting with colleagues, I produced the original concept for the computer program. After we implement these programs, we will be able to analyze the results and use them to reevaluate our original objectives for the French Literature Survey. If necessary, we can then re-design certain course components in order to achieve our goals. The programs can then be revamped to reflect any changes in the classroom approach or any new materials that may need to be added and the cycle can start again.

The lesson to be learned from all this is fairly obvious yet, at times, it can be somewhat elusive. If we let our teaching objectives structure assessment and then let what we discover in the assessment process help us improve the way we deliver course content, the strengths of both endeavors will reinforce one another to our mutual benefit. However, the circular nature of this process should not form a closed circle. As it becomes desirable to add new materials and to experiment with innovative approaches to teaching, the process of assessment should not have only one fixed goal but, rather, should lend itself to the discovery and reinforcement of that which is best for students' learning. Provisions will have to be worked into the system to insure that new factors can be taken into account and that the teaching and assessment process does not preclude the consideration of new elements. If we work toward the improvement of the overall educational experience, "then assessment methods offer rich opportunities to empower teaching and learning..." (Ewell 28). We can take up the challenge of insuring the accreditation of our institutions by undertaking the creation and implementation of innovative assessment methods. In turn, we can use the results of these evaluations to help us teach more effectively and enhance student learning.

The administration's call for academic assessment has focused the spotlight squarely on the classroom teacher. Some of us may shrink from the light, but, before we move away too quickly, we should remember that: "Assessment may mean headaches, squabbles, and threats to facul-

ty autonomy; it can also give faculty something most of them have never heard very clearly: a signal that teaching matters" (Hutchings and Reuben 55).

APPENDIX

ALTERNATE QUESTION SET 4

GIVEN WORK IDENTIFY GENRE

Phèdre de Racine est quel type de pièce?

- A. Farce
- B. Comédie
- C. Mystère
- D. Tragédie

.RIGHT,D,D.

Oui, c'est ça. La tragédie de *Phèdre* est très célèbre. *Phèdre*, épouse de *Thésée*, croyant son mari mort, avoue à son beau-fils *Hippolyte* la passion qu'elle éprouve pour lui. Surprise par le retour de *Thésée*, torturée par la jalousie, elle laisse accuser *Hippolyte* d'avoir tenté de la séduire. "Un monstre furieux" sorti des flots sur la prière de *Thésée*, provoque la mort du prétendu coupable. En apprenant cet événement, *Phèdre* s'empoisonne. Avant de mourir, elle confesse son crime.

.WRONG,A,1,YES.

Non. Une farce est une pièce de théâtre d'un comique bouffon. Un exemple du XVI^e siècle c'est "La Farce de Maître Pathelin." Imprimée en 1470, "La Farce de Maître Pathelin" est d'auteur inconnu.

.WRONG,B,1,YES.

Non. Une comédie est une pièce de théâtre qui excite le rire par la peinture des moeurs, des ridicules ou la succession de situations inattendues. Quelques comédies de Molière sont: "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" (1670), "Le Médecin Malgré Lui" (1666), et "Le Malade Imaginaire" (1673).

.WRONG,C,1,YES.

Non. Un mystère, c'est le nom donné à des pièces de théâtre du Moyen Age, à sujet religieux, et où l'on faisait intervenir Dieu, les saints, les anges et les diables.

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FICTION