Assessment Conversations

Qualitative Methods for Assessment? Yes!
By Melanie Guentzel

One of the great assessment myths is for assessment to be valuable it must be quantitative. Assessment like all research should be driven by your questions. What do you want to know? Qualitative methods, such as individual interviews and focus groups can be used to examine attitudes and opinions, identify program strengths and weaknesses, interpret results from quantitative studies, like NSSE, or provide you with a base of information to develop a survey. Qualitative methods can also be used to assess student learning.

While surveys and other quantitative tools can provide broad or generalizeable information on a population, qualitative methods offer a deeper understanding of a narrowly defined topic or issue. Whereas, a survey might tell you which groups of students are more or less engaged on campus, a qualitative study with these students might tell you why.

Focus groups in particular can be a powerful assessment tool. A focus group is a facilitated group discussion about a specific, supplied topic. Focus groups are used to explore and understand student experiences in a particular activity or student perceptions of an event or environment. They can also be used to explore student knowledge, student misconceptions and how they know what they know. For example, focus groups could be used to explore how well students articulate the foundational concepts in a discipline. Or, explore the effects of a first year seminar on student adjustment to the university.

Focus groups and other qualitative strategies are sometimes seen as less systematic or rigorous than quantitative research. It appears easy because we are social beings and we enjoy interaction but socializing is not qualitative research or assessment. Qualitative methods used well are systematic, intentional and focused. The study grows from a specific question or questions. The best population of individuals to provide information is identified along with a strategy for sampling that group. Open-ended questions are developed to elicit rich responses, and facilitators are trained to manage the group discussions. Finally an analysis plan is identified that will allow the researcher(s) to sift through the data and see what was learned.

The requirements of rigor for assessment are less than those for research, so you can be more or less systematic based on your need. A qualitative study can be “quick and dirty” with a convenient sample and quick analysis or it can be a well designed systematic study or something in between. It is always a great way to understand the richness and diversity of individual experiences and understanding.

There are many resources on qualitative research and on focus groups. A couple resources that I have found helpful include:


Focus Group Primer

How can focus groups be used for assessment?
Focus groups are used to:
• Examine attitudes and opinions;
• Explore why opinions are held;
• Identify strengths and weaknesses of programs;
• Interpret results from other assessment projects; and
• Provide information to develop surveys

What are some advantages of focus groups?
• Relatively low cost;
• Quick results (sometimes);
• Flexible and dynamic, can learn more than you anticipated;
• More comfortable for participants than individual interviews;
• Interactions generate discussion and more information; and
• Qualitative data – words, lots of words.

What are some disadvantages of focus groups?
• Difficult to assemble enough participants;
• Groups can influence individual response and some individual experiences may be lost;
• Small numbers of participants limit generalizability;
• Dependent on the skills of the facilitator; and
• Qualitative data – words, lots of words.

Are there times when focus groups are not appropriate?
• For assessments that require statistical data;
• In situations where participants are not comfortable with each other; and
• In situations that are emotionally charged,


USING RUBRICS TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTION, STUDENT WORK, AND ASSESSMENT
By Joe Melcher

As a new freshman, getting my first philosophy essays back from Fr. Ryan was a shocking experience. Masses of red ink made them look like a slasher’s victim. His mostly blunt comments were undoubtedly dead-on; their sheer numbers made me grateful for my passing grades, but I really had no idea about what his standards were, outside of figuring them out as the term progressed. Furthermore, I did not know how they related to the specific grades I received.

Although the red-ink approach has shock and awe value, there is an equally effective and more broadly useful tool for providing feedback. It serves three teaching/learning purposes:

1) provides clear guidance to students by making assignments less ambiguous,
2) makes it easier to provide principled and consistent feedback to individual students, and
3) lends itself to the systematic collection of evidence about students’ learning.

That tool is called the rubric. (Incidentally, the word comes from Latin for “red”—and hence, red-inked instructions or comments.)

A rubric is simply a set of characteristics (subjective/qualitative and/or quantitative) that an assignment should have, along with descriptions of the various levels of achievement of each quality. Rubrics are suitable for any type of assignments, including essays, projects, and presentations, etc.

If you provide a rubric to students before an assignment, you provide clear guidance about what constitutes excellent or poor work, be it for a paper, a performance, a project, or a presentation. It also shows them

“Using Rubrics” cont’d on page 3
specifically what elements that they need to address. Creating the rubric will help you be more precise about what you expect, and students usually respond by turning in better work.

When it comes time to grading, rubrics also help keep the grader focused on the stated criteria, which promotes more consistent grading and helps prevent bias in the form of subtle shifts in evaluations over the course of grading many assignments. Finally, rubrics adapt well to spreadsheets, leading to a couple more benefits:

- If you set up a class spreadsheet with a tab for each student, in addition to any comments you make, just enter a number corresponding to your assessment of each rubric element. It will then compute each student’s grade for the assignment by averaging the rubrics elements.

- Finally, one additional tab in the spreadsheet can be set up to display the class average for each element. This way, you can instantly see which elements have relatively high scores (great!) or low (suggesting changes you might want to make to the course, assignment, or rubric, etc).

Of course, you can also have gut feelings about these things based on your experience with a set of student artifacts, but using a rubric yields greater precision and an empirical record. It can also reduce student grade challenges because the criteria were more explicit and because it encouraged you to stick to those criteria when grading.

The sample below is part of a rubric I use to grade research proposals. The full rubric has four other major elements, plus one for “mechanical” issues of grammar and formatting. Note that it is essentially qualitative and requires expertise to evaluate the characteristics. Note also that it can be used quantitatively (it’s not coincidental that the 5-point scale maps onto the A-F grade scale!).

A rubric provides students with a more accessible explanation for their grade, but also provides instructors with the strengths and weaknesses of related topics covered in the course. For instance, I now know that on the aforementioned research proposal, students scored 84% on the “Introduction” section of this assignment. They scored 100% on describing their sampling procedures, but did worst (69%) on assessing threats to their proposals’ research validity and on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ratings (Pts)</th>
<th>Poor (0)</th>
<th>Minimal (1)</th>
<th>Adequate or emerging (2)</th>
<th>Strong (3)</th>
<th>Superior (4)</th>
<th>Student’s Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rubric Element</strong></td>
<td>Provides little, if any, empirical research supporting the topic. Synthesis and organization is based on limited information. Little or no link between the cited literature and the hypothesis or question.</td>
<td>Minimal review of the literature and little mention of empirical sources. Poor synthesis and organization of the literature, minimally links it to the hypothesis or question.</td>
<td>Adequate review of the literature and empirical sources. Good synthesis and organization of the literature, clearly linked to the hypothesis or question.</td>
<td>Good review of relevant and empirical sources; occasional strong insight. Good synthesis and organization of literature, clearly linked to hypothesis or question.</td>
<td>Insightful review of relevant and empirical sources, citing important works in the field. Exemplary synthesis, organization and critiques of literature, clearly linked to hypothesis or question.</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Using Rubrics* cont'd on page 4
Assessment Peer Consultants

Here to help

Don’t know where to begin? Have questions? Need help? Let our assessment peer consultants come to your aid. They are available free of charge to assist programs, departments and units with any aspect of assessment of student learning.

Visit our website for additional details.

A.P.A.D.

Advancing Program Assessment through Discussion.

Would you like to start a conversation about assessment in your department? Let us help you by subsidizing the purchase of books to feed the conversation.

Visit our website for additional details.

USING RUBRICS cont’d

Describing statistical procedures appropriate to the research design (72%).

Rubrics can be a bit difficult to specify, but once done, can easily be updated on the basis of experience and used over and over to enhance student work and your assessment of that work. There is a good collection of rubric resources on the assessment website. We are also looking for donations to an SCSU specific collection of rubrics to be housed at that same site. If you have one you would like to share with your colleagues across campus, please email it to: assessment@stcloudstate.edu

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Calendar

February 18-20, 2010
AAC&U: General Education and Assessment- Maintaining Momentum, Achieving New Priorities
Seattle, Washington

February 19-20, 2010
The Collaboration: Assessment for the Changing Learning Environment
Sheraton Bloomington Hotel
Bloomington, MN

February 21-23, 2010
Texas A&M Assessment Conference: Seeing 2020- Building on a Decade of Assessment
Hilton Conference Center
College Station Texas

April 9-13, 2010
The HLC Annual Meeting
Hyatt Regency Chicago
Chicago, IL

April 11-12, 2010
The Atlantic Assessment Conference: Collaboration in a Changing World
Cary, NC

June 17-19, 2010
ACPA Student Affairs Assessment Institute: Tough Times Call for Good Measures
Charlotte, NC