Implementing Blackboard Outcomes for General Education Assessment

In recent years, the Assessment Committee has also been attendant to the complex and burdensome essay collection and evaluation process. In particular, the challenge of managing a blind review process using paper copies of essays has been noted. For that reason, as well as the desire for more consistency and ease of storage of essays and reports long-term, the Committee began a review of assessment management software packages in 2010. After extensive exploration and testing of 6 comparable packages, consultation with IS&T about the demands that would need to met by a system, etc., the university chose to invest in Blackboard Outcomes (in large part because Blackboard’s classroom management tool Learn had just been adopted for use across campus). And in 2011-12, all members of the Assessment Committee were trained in its use, and, as mentioned above, an online version of Literacy Assessment was piloted in Fall 2012.

The literacy assessment was first deployed in the fall 2012 Writing 1 course (which had an enrollment of 660). Given that these students were enrolled in 60 distinct sections with 38 different instructors, and that the Committee did not want to burden each instructor with the task of uploading the assessment prompt, a “faux” course was created in Blackboard by IS&T with input from the Assistant Director of Teaching and Technology (the primary Blackboard instructional support person in the Teaching Center). The course was made “available” to students for just 3 days in the second week of classes (Sept. 4-7th) and they were asked to take one hour to compose an essay in response to the standard prompt. More than half of all students completed the assessment on Friday, and by midnight all but 34 had submitted essays. The course was reopened for those who missed the deadline, and by Sept. 19th 654 of 660 students had submitted essays.

The Assistant Director of Writing 1 was responsible for all communication during the deployment. He briefed instructors on the process and importance of assessment during an August staff meeting, and asked them to help create a sense of seriousness and commitment. Instructors read a message about the assessment prompt aloud in class, fielded student questions about the task, and followed up with students who did not complete the assessment. He also sent a series of emails to all students, which are documented in the <Collection of Evidence – Plans for Execution for Freshman and Seniors>, and individual emails to students
who failed to complete the assessment by Sept. 7 as well as their instructors. There were very few problems during deployment. Some students felt they should be exempt from the assessment and others lost work in the system or submitted essays before they intended. Staff at Student Technology Services (STS) was available for support, and developed informational handouts (see http://sts.wustl.edu/images/bb/Spring%20literacy%20assessment%202013%20Upper%20Division.pdf) for students who were taking the assessment. STS received no questions during deployment, however; a few technical questions were fielded by the Assistant Director of Teaching and Technology, and complaints were handled by the Assistant Director of Writing 1.

Given this successful first run, the literacy assessment was delivered to seniors enrolled in Writing Intensives near the end of the Fall 2012 semester with identical procedures. The Committee was able to follow the Literacy Assessment Plan with input from the Assistant Director of Teaching and Technology as needed. Although many juniors take these Writing Intensive courses, Blackboard allows for easy separation, and the Committee only needs a sample of seniors. Thus, only seniors were asked to respond to the prompt; the vast majority did so within the week window and the 2-day extension of the window and participation rates were high. In the past, the assessment was taken in class and graded pass / fail by instructors. In Fall 2012, instructors are not asked to grade the essay as a percentage of students' final grades, but to assess a penalty for those who do not complete the assessment.

The challenge in both cases has been getting everyone invested in an assignment that is unrelated to the writing courses’ curriculum. By and large, instructors bought in and students complied, but the quality of these essays and the care with which they were written remains to be seen. Previously, literacy assessment was entirely classroom-based, so instructors could monitor students and answer questions as they composed. Because online assessment could not be timed, students could spend as much or little time as they desired on the assignment. The Committee has no way of ensuring that students submit their own work and do not consult outside sources for help, although Blackboard may be adding a function in the coming year(s) that would allow the assessment to be timed. And it remains to be seen if the seniors will put forth the same effort as in the past. One Writing Intensive course that should have been part of the collection was excluded because its course number was inadvertently excluded when the faux course was created. There was considerable discrepancy in how instructors handled grading penalties, and the Assessment Committee will need to decide whether a more firm
policy is in order. In addition, there are still a number of logistical matters to be worked out. In the year to come, the Committee will more thoroughly evaluate the use of Blackboard Outcomes for Literacy Assessment, and refine its process. In addition, the Office of Assessment will consider the possibility of a small-scale pilot of Blackboard Outcomes for Departmental Assessment.