Assessing the student group poses rewards and challenges for on-line instructors. This chapter offers five principles for assessment, derived from field research among on-line instructors, with some cautionary discussion on how to handle plagiarism.

Group Assessment in the On-Line Learning Environment

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Academic assessment engenders opportunities for students to grow as intelligent agents of their disciplines. Within the learning community, we gauge success through formal and informal feedback to the participants. This is no less true of the group experience. Students routinely engage in collaborative scholarship in their classes through group projects, generally team efforts to produce a single essay on a topic in support of class learning objectives. The group project is a popular way for on-line educators to mimic social exchanges similar to those that might emerge in traditional classroom environments when individuals are compelled to work together to achieve a common outcome. The hope is that the ability to navigate differences and forge alliances will reside with students beyond the constraints of the course itself. However, the on-line experience can be so negative that students willfully shun the experience if given the election opportunity. Teamwork is not for everyone, yet we make it so as educators in electing this form of exercise. Educators find themselves compelled to make sense of the experience, rationalize its appropriateness, and invariably wrestle with the dynamics of the interaction between people who depend on each other to meet personal goals.

The group exercise takes on a variety of forms, and generally assessment of this performance settles into the “all for one and one for all” flavor,

The survey reported in this study was an open-ended instrument with follow-up discussions. I extend my appreciation to Alan Carswell and Cam McEachern for their assistance in this regard.
although some instructors require students to self-assess or to assess their peers (for a critical review, see Reynolds and Trehan, 2000). Unless the group is disbanded or the faculty member requires that students take ownership in their specific contributions to the project, the group is assessed as a unit and the grade distributed evenly regardless of how individual members might have contributed to the final submission or how they judge their peers’ worthiness in the group effort. This can be problematic (Weisband and Atwater, 1999).

Invariably, some form of faculty assessment always takes place for group exercises, although this assessment may not always be understood by the students or rigorously applied by the assessor. Other chapters in this volume adequately defend the principles of assessment in academic environments. This chapter proposes five broad assessment guidelines that evolved through survey research done at two major universities with extensive experience in on-line education.

Faculty at Troy State University and the University of Maryland University College provided feedback on their general practices regarding student assessment with a narrow inquiry into their practices toward group experiences. They report that the group assessment experience cannot be disassociated from the overall class performance requirements. Faculty begin their courses by discussing the overall evaluation experience. Four basic components of formal on-line assessment emerged: (1) term projects produced by the individual student, (2) periodic participation within the course through electronic conversations or individually submitted reports, (3) examinations, and (4) the group experience. In each case, the professor begins the course with a detailed report on term expectations and how these expectations are to be met. This report is followed by a question-and-answer dialogue on the term requirements.

The Learning and Teaching Context

Both Troy State University and the University of Maryland University College use a Web interface engine that allows for individual postings in a discussion forum format for all class members and a restricted forum to which only assigned members of the class have access and is used for group discussions. Group discussions can take place in chatrooms, posting forums, or collaborative documents. In collaborative documents, members can add to, edit, or delete a common document. Troy State uses the Blackboard software. Maryland uses its own software engine, called Web Tycho. Neither software approach is necessary for a meaningful learning experience on-line, although these forums are a convenient archive of information transactions.

The University of Maryland provides instructors and students with narrative statements for grade performance expectations. In this way, it is clear to the students that the highest grades are reserved for the outstanding
performers and the standard expectation for a graduate student is a B. Hence, the initial expectation for students and instructor is that a B will be achieved. While this alone may suffice to set a benchmark of expectations, it assists neither evaluator nor student in understanding the subjective experience of evaluation within a specific course, nor does it lend objectivity to the process. Still, institutional norms for grading are critical to the grading experience. The institution sets the tone for expectations, albeit painting only with a broad brush what these expectations are.

The Assessment Context

Instructors set the course tone at the start with concise statements of performance expectations. Students demand precision in these standards if only to judge their ranking relative to peers and dispel arising cognitive dissonance when the external standards do not match internal ones. Beyond providing students with a proportional grading scale and a clear rationale for what this scale means, faculty should frame the grading experience from their own perspective, with deference to institutional concerns (Haertel, 1999).

Ideally, grading should possess both construct validity and intergrader reliability. Investigations of the reliability and validity of grading or assessment practices are rarely done. Most studies of assessment across the curriculum tend to deal either with grade inflation, which is the tendency to award students beyond their capability relative to other students (Lawler, 2001; Compton and Metheny, 2000), or student perceptions of grading fairness through exit surveys. The latter are notoriously flawed (Marsh and Roche, 2000; Kerridge and Mathews, 1998). Institutionally across the curriculum, grading standards would be difficult to judge, and as a consequence most universities settle on reminding faculty that the proportion of A’s to B’s is not satisfactory, hence forcing the introspective evaluator to rethink distribution scales rather than performance differences.

Many universities provide statements of expectations for grading outcomes. The following generic descriptions guide faculty toward crafting meaningful assessment standards:

To achieve an A, the student or group demonstrates a mastery of learning objectives or project objectives; provides evidence of good research skills; demonstrates creative and critical thinking; and adheres to academic standards of writing style and citation. The writing arises from reasoned articulation that is both clear and persuasive.

To achieve a B, which is the expectation, the student or group demonstrates mastery of learning or project objectives, reasonable research skills, a thought process through which the student has made conceptual connections between course resources and writing challenges; and adheres to the
published standards of writing style and citation. Good writing is valued of a student, and must be mastered. The grade of C or less demonstrates that the instructor has serious concerns about the integrity of the work or the ability of the student or group to work at a graduate level.

Clearly, faculty cannot avoid subjectivity. If a B is the expectation, perhaps wisdom dictates error on the side of the B grade, not the A grade or C grade. The A grade clearly reflects excellence that is consistent across the various measurements in a class. Of all grades, instructors should be satisfied that any evaluator reviewing the C grade performer would have come to the same conclusion. Ultimately, it is the judgment of the instructor that must withstand scrutiny. It will stand as long as the instructor divorces himself or herself from capricious or arbitrary grading standards in the absence of objective testing instruments.

The Normative Aspect
The collaborative experience is foremost a social and cultural one. Like any other academic benchmark, group assessment is a critical part of the learning experience and requires standards and experience (Race, 1998). Accepting this, collaborative experiences differ from private contributions to the class. The exercises driving this experience require discursive communication skills, a surrender to the norming of the group regarding deadlines and self-evaluation, and a clear road map to closure on the exercise. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2001) refer to this type of collaboration as the co-creation of value for which the positive affect arises along a continuum from “arm’s length relationships” to “shared goals and resource leverage.” The latter requires “unified information access, collaboration tools, and capacity for rapid knowledge creation and insight building” (p. 38).

The norming process reflects on how groups themselves create internal expectations for performance and then acquiesce to these standards over the term of the course. In the worst-case scenario, these norming experiences approximate what Irving Janis (1972) dubbed “groupthink.” Groupthink is the process by which members of a group capitulate to the values of the strongest members while camouflaging their own points of view for the sake of comity or expediency. The instructor cannot intend this social experience, but it plays a dramatic role on how the group performs.

Five Principles of Assessment
An open-ended survey on grading practices was sent to colleagues at two universities. The twenty-two on-line educators responding identified the salient issues of constructing effective group assessment. Their responses cluster around five broadly classified principles.
**Principle One: Thoroughly Structure the Project**

- **Project assignment.** This is a narrative statement regarding the scope of the project and what the research and writing will involve: length, library research, citations, and format (for instance, the American Psychological Association’s guidelines). Case studies represent a major class of research topics favored by many in this study. Some faculty allow students to determine their own topics following faculty approval. Others prepare a list of topics from which students select one of interest.

- **Assignment of members.** Most respondents allow students to self-select. My preference is to assign a senior class member as the group facilitator and randomly assign members from the class to complete the group composition. The typical group size is five. Random selection diffuses talent and gender, providing weaker students with opportunities to engage with stronger members. The pretense of stronger students propels weaker students who self-select topics. If assessment is to be meaningful, weaker students need opportunities to grow.

- **Suspense dates.** Suspense dates are required to keep the group moving. Consequently, respondents provide deadlines for defining individual assignments within the group, reporting first drafts, responding to comments on the first draft, responding to the final draft, and submitting to the faculty member. Group facilitators monitor suspense dates. As warranted, failure to meet suspense dates evokes a note from the faculty member to individual offenders. This contributes to an assessment criterion and could have an effect on the final grade, although I do not value it highly.

- **Writing expectations.** Teaching graduate students how to write can be daunting. Perhaps it reflects instructors’ own lapses in quality or the mechanisms available to incorporate writing assessments into on-line course structure. Faculty enforce group assessment standards through the weekly writing exercises. At both Troy State and Maryland, students post weekly discussions to a conference. It is to this individual conference that other students and the instructor can provide circular narration or feedback.

For example, when I require students to participate in individual weekly conferences, I prepare a compilation of comments about their writing that I have edited in Microsoft Front Page. Off-line editing allows me to manipulate the student’s text directly to point out writing and content issues that typically cannot be addressed in a posting forum directly as would traditional marginal notes on a hard-copy term paper. Front Page easily allows the editor to insert text in a different font color to differentiate it from the main body of writing. Students learn from their own efforts, the efforts of their peers, and the faculty member as expert. Failing to provide concise feedback on writing perpetuates the problems associated with weak writing. Of course, the faculty member must be competent as an editor.

Most faculty value extemporaneous contributions in weekly conference forums, but they are difficult to assess in a meaningful way. Faculty who require a weekly posting of substance find assessment easier. Hence, the
student who performs at the A level as articulated will strive to do so consistently, but the faculty expectation is a B, and the student must muster to the A at each evaluation intervention. Faculty members expect students to use course resources to construct their answers, move the conversation forward from previous postings, and rely at least in part on additional resources in the answer. This provides ample opportunity to provide individually tailored critiques of each student’s work.

A serious writing problem is nonattributed paraphrasing or plagiarism (McCarroll, 2001; Laird, 2001). Most professors in this study do not tolerate plagiarism or nonattributed writing yet respond casually when it is detected in the group exercise. Not all educators can detect or care to detect these problems, although there are Web sites that provide some assistance to this end. Many approach it lightly; others impose the severest sanctions: a course grade of F or, at the extreme, expulsion from the program. In our courses, professors clearly promulgate the university’s position on plagiarism. Initial reactions to such activity in routine student submissions should minimally result in a reprimand with the sanction of a C grade. This leads to the anticipation that the student will clearly understand the ramifications if this behavior continues. In an electronic age, there is no more serious problem to academic writing integrity.

**Principle Two: Construct the Groups and Match Membership**

- **Group size matters** (Fay, Garrod, and Carletta, 2000). Five is a convenient group size, with one member of the group designated as the facilitator. This person’s role is to initiate correspondence with members, start the discussion on the project scope, invite postings on dividing the workload, and make these assignments once members develop an outline of the project. The facilitator edits the project, verifies resources, and writes the introduction and the conclusion.

  The survey respondents begin each class with the electronic posting of introductions. They ask each student to identify his or her status in the program of study. Selecting a senior class member is one way to identify a facilitator for the group project. The role of facilitator is critical to a successful group endeavor. The facilitator is the watchdog and project editor. My routine correspondence with group members is through its facilitator.

- **Wait two weeks to make group assignments.** This allows for late arrivals or class members who drop the course.

- **Distribute class members randomly across groups.** Student dispersal allows for a gender balance and talent distribution within the group. Other demographics may also serve as important determinants of membership, such as age, race, and ethnicity, but in a distance-learning environment, this is hard to know or to plan. Narrowing the selection demographics could also serve as a fertile ground for a later *prima facie* “arbitrary and capricious” complaint. That is, students could complain that the professor did not give careful consideration when groups were selected but formed groups using an arbitrary and capricious method.
**Principle Three: Monitor and Communicate Effectively**

- *Monitor learning frequently.* Distance learning requires frequent monitoring and at least weekly communication with the class and timely response to inquiries. Both subject universities have an “Announcements” section of general information as it arises within the Web interface for the class. Here, faculty post something every week, including caveats to get on track with group projects. Most faculty have a posting forum for questions and answers, where student questions are addressed.

Encourage students to e-mail concerns about personal issues. Venting about the group experience will surface here. We visit the group posting pages about every two weeks and send an e-mail to the group applauding their progress or nudging them from lethargy. While many groups will elect the ease of e-mail over these posting forums, we encourage students to use the forum because it allows us to converse with the entire group at once.

There is the unfortunate expectation with electronic forums that feedback will be immediate. Most respondents make it clear that they monitor but do not respond to every submission as it occurs. However, the key to successful communication is to convey the feeling of availability and to develop a rapport. Such relationships pay benefits in academic integrity (Mercuri, 1998).

**Principle Four: Evaluate Consistently**

- *Weekly or biweekly assessment.* The group project is one assessment. A culture of assessment arises through application of standards throughout the course. Frequent performance assessments provide students with the opportunity to grow accustomed to the grading expectations of the instructor. At every opportunity, the student should see the relationship between the grade received and the work completed. This is common practice in evaluation situations. As a faculty, we should allow for growth and development, and this happens only when the student is provided with feedback more often than at end-of-term submissions.

  - *Checklists.* Some faculty members use a grading checklist or heuristics provided through course prefatory materials. These components—perhaps writing, the research component, the contribution to the study projects, and creativity and critical thinking—fairly match the prologue to grading provided above. Weighting of the elements varies.

**Principle Five: Evaluate the Many as One**

- *The group performs as a group and earns as a group.* As it is in life, individual frustrations will surface regarding perceptions of group performance or cohesiveness. If an excellent student feels trapped by the mediocrity of the group’s performance, then the student can shoulder the burden of revising the project as either group facilitator or volunteering to revisit the project to assist. All projects should be subject in draft to a final reading by the group.
One way to diminish the potential impact of the group project on an excellent student’s chance at an A is to reduce the value of the group project in the grading scheme. My preference is that the group project serves duty to no more than 25 percent of the student’s total class assessment. Thus, a B (80 percent) reflects a loss of 5 points against a course total of 100 points, and a C (70 percent) reflects a loss of 7.5 points. A strong student can shoulder this single devaluation of his or her term work.

- **Student-driven group assessment opportunities.** Many colleagues provide students with the opportunity to evaluate their group project peers. Although I am in the minority on this issue, my view regards this as a shift in burden from the professional evaluator to student, who is less likely to have an objective view of the group process. At times, I do allow students to assess a general discussion conference after I have completed grading but before I have posted grades. This exercise allows students to experience assessment without any effect on their grade. Interjudge reliability on such exercises never musters unanimity. Rarely do students’ own meaningful agreement with peers or with their faculty evaluator on class performance outcomes.

Knowledge of a peer review process among group members possibly serves as an internal check on performance. Students disgruntled with a particular member might use such an instrument to vent their frustrations or rouse their peers. There is evidence to suggest this is especially true in male evaluations of female members of the group (Falchikov and Magin, 1997). I do not believe a faculty member can value such internal assessments in constructing assessment outcomes. A Supreme Court case argued in late 2001 on the practice of student grading of student work in elementary schools casts a cautious shadow over this approach to assessment (Toppo, 2001). (The Court ruled in 2002 that peer grading did not violate the privacy of educational records.) The student does not share the expertise of the instructor and should not have knowledge of that student’s performance, even though it may be casually obvious to them. It is the instructor or his or her own contemporaries who most fairly judge performance. Students are more likely to assess along social variables than performance. The instructor who occasionally witnesses the group’s performance and encourages communication with him or her directly will more quickly discern the problems.

**Conclusion**

The survey research reported in this chapter pointed to five principles for assessment of on-line group performance:

*Principle One: Thoroughly Structure the Project.* The project is well defined with broad opportunities for original research. Suspense dates are set for accomplishing various components of the project, including opportunities for the group to review drafts before submitting it for final evaluation.
Principle Two: Construct the Groups and Match Membership. Group membership should proportionally mimic the demographics of the class. Assignments should be random otherwise.

Principle Three: Monitor and Communicate Effectively. Feedback should be routine and regular. Students need to develop a rapport with their instructors. Effective communication always begs the question, “Did I address your concerns? Please let me know.”

Principle Four: Evaluate Consistently. Instructors should apply the standards defined in Principle One and provide critical feedback on the submissions throughout the term so as to create normative expectations for performance.

Principle Five: Evaluate the Many as One. The group receives one grade for its project. The uses of self-assessments or peer review are not encouraged.

Group assessment is an important component of the students’ overall course achievement. The group experience provides opportunities for students to discover strategies for collaborative scholarship, as well as develop avenues for social exchange that are found in traditional classroom environments. Group assessment standards should mirror the assessment experience found throughout the course and be a reflection of the learning culture expectations of the university.

References

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