

## FORUM

### MAKING ASSESSMENT WORK FOR US

**Editor's Note:** Emily West, in the following article, presents some practical approaches for addressing assessment, a growing presence on college campuses. Because this is such a timely and important topic from a discussion of which we can all benefit, *CJ* invites thoughtful responses to Dr. West's article. Such responses should be contributions to our greater ability to address assessment at our own institutions and especially in our own departments and classes.

*Abstract: The Assessment movement may be here for the long term, and though it brings unwelcome frustrations, it also offers opportunities to showcase the special strengths and virtues of our discipline. Classics is uniquely well-equipped to navigate the Assessment maze successfully. Not only is our field a venerable one with well-established norms, we can make the case that studying the classical languages has a measurable impact on the holy grail of today's educational goals: better writing.*

**T**wo years ago, my University committed to becoming a "Culture of Assessment." To my ears "Culture of Assessment" sounded eerily close to "nightmare dystopia" and, in the way that one's deepest fears always seem to come true, I was promptly elected as my department's "Assessment Lead" (DAL), dispatched to meetings and training sessions, and instructed to shepherd the preparation of the official "Outcomes-Based Assessment Plan" (yes, *of course*, it goes by the acronym) for History, Political Science, International Relations and Classics. As committee assignments go, this one was relatively heavy for an untenured faculty member, and I will confess that my attitude towards it was not, initially, positive. As many of those reading this article already know, capital-A "Assessment" is concerned with evaluating, measuring and tracking the

effectiveness of an institution's educational practices. The Assessment movement is a growing part of the academic landscape, and if it is not an issue at your institution yet, it will be within a few years. At St. Catherine University (my institution), Assessment fever arose in anticipation of our upcoming Higher Learning Commission visit.

A comprehensive assessment program requires clear statements of an institution's goals for student learning at every level (institution-wide, departmental or program-specific, and ultimately for every individual course), along with built-in, standardized systems and procedures that measure the institution's effectiveness at meeting those goals. At many schools, a premium is also placed on coherence and uniformity within the whole: St. Kate's, for example, has an official set of 7 college-wide Liberal Arts Goals (e.g. "Critical and Creative Inquiry," "Discipline-Based Competence," "Leadership and Collaboration," etc.), which serve as the foundation for Assessment efforts within individual programs.

In spite of my initial reluctance, in my capacity as Department Assessment Lead, I ultimately surrendered to the opportunity for meta-analysis that wrestling with the goals, priorities, standards and objectives of four diverse fields offered, and found that the experience of looking in-depth at what my colleagues actually did in their classes was quite stimulating. I enjoyed the opportunity to discuss and compare objectives, and after confronting these issues for other fields, the answers I was looking for regarding my own became clearer. Though my assessment program for Classics has only been in place for a year, I am sufficiently pleased with it to want to share both my procedures and my initial results with the Classics community at large, in hopes of providing help to the foundering and of soliciting advice or input from those who have them to offer. In particular, I would like to make the case that teachers of ancient languages have a secret

weapon in the Assessment battle: we enlarge students' vocabularies and we teach grammar. Both are critical parts of being a competent writer, and no institution can afford to ignore evidence that a particular course of study can have a positive impact on student writing.

*A little background*

My university houses a large and prestigious nursing school, as well as a number of professional programs in medicine and business; within the Humanities, Arts and Sciences, the sciences occupy most of the space and funding (or so those of us in the non-science departments tell one another). Many of these programs serve fields whose learning objectives have, of necessity, been standardized for years, because they prepare students for specific goals and events such as state nursing boards or the American Chemical Society's national exam. The very idea of Assessment was born in fields like these, and we should all be grateful for that whenever we are treated by an EMT, or use products that were tested for safety in labs staffed by chemists. But the humanities specialize in intangibles and unmeasurables. The few standardized methods for testing gains in critical-thinking skills (e.g., the Collegiate Learning Assessment) are costly and labor-intensive; even providing reliable measures of improvement in student writing is a nightmare of time and expense.

I believe I speak for many of us in my resistance to the idea of Assessment, and my reluctance to believe that it can improve education in the ways that really matter. Great teaching is born from expertise in the subject coupled with mindfulness: that ability to be "right there" in the moment, when shared attention and open channels of communication allow the teacher to be responsive to students' needs, and the students to be receptive to instruction. Anyone who can figure out how to reliably create that environment

among the students who populate his or her classes is going to be a successful teacher. It is that simple, and that difficult, and if a simple path to getting there existed, our jobs would be a great deal easier. Trends in academics (such as Assessment) are often like fad diets: they promise some shortcut to the elusive goal of mindfulness (Don't eat fat! Don't eat carbs! Don't eat anything after 6 p.m.!), and all shortcuts are equally subject to misuse or the creation of a false sense of accomplishment. Still, as I eventually and reluctantly concluded, when used responsibly, new approaches—like fad diets—can be a way to re-examine one's core values. Once I accepted the inevitability of Assessment, I was determined to make productive use of the effort I was going to have to put into it. The emphasis on outcomes, at any rate, did resonate with me as an opportunity to examine how well my curriculum delivered what I wanted it to, so that became my starting point.

*The Parts of an Outcomes-Based Assessment Plan*

According to the *Assessment for Dummies*-esque volume that all DALs were assigned to read, a departmental assessment plan generally starts with a Departmental Mission Statement, ideally one explicitly aligned with the mission statement of the institution. Since three of my classes ("Greek History," "Roman History," and "Women in Greece and Rome") also fall under the "History" designation, I elected to assess them along with the History courses, allowing me to restrict the Classics OBAP to my language classes. This streamlined the process considerably, and allowed me to keep language study at the center of the mission statement:

The Classics program at St. Catherine University offers students the chance to acquire reading competence in the Latin and Greek languages, either for their own sake or to enable the student to pursue

other academic goals to which the classical languages may contribute. Latin and Greek are not only cornerstones of both the Catholic tradition and the liberal arts, they provide students with the foundation for a rich English vocabulary, improved grammar and spelling, and well-honed verbal and thinking skills. Additionally, these classes offer an enhanced understanding of the history and culture of the Classical period and of early and medieval Christianity: both language sequences include the reading of a wide assortment of excerpts from classical literature, as well as from the Septuagint, Vulgate, and New Testament. Finally, the Classics program is committed to fostering a sense of community among its cohorts of Greek and Latin students, since opportunities for a class to stay together through two years of instruction are rare and precious.

This statement reflects many issues specific to my program's situation, including our lack of a major. Although the objective of simply teaching Latin and Greek effectively is the central part of my mission, few of my students consider pursuing graduate study in Classics. I therefore stressed that the study of classical languages has valuable ancillary functions as well: part of an ongoing struggle to emphasize my department's relevance at the institution. Since Classics is second-to-none at providing opportunities for cross-disciplinary work, I emphasized my ties with History and Theology. Other programs may have closer links to Philosophy, Theater, Psychology, Mathematics or even Biology. (I once team-taught a seminar on Ancient Medicine with a member of our Biology faculty). I also made sure to delineate the separable intellectual benefits of studying the Classics (for reasons which will be made clear below), and I included an explicit statement about the ties of friendship and teamwork my program provides. Administrators cannot easily dismiss student happiness and personal development when dealing with the millennial generation, and

fostering an active Classics community has been a key component of my success so far at my institution.

The process of composing the mission statement itself did, in fact, have direct, productive outcomes on my teaching: thinking about my goals and methods in a programmatic way strengthened my commitment to them. I thought of a few more text excerpts I wanted to cover, and quickly wrote them into my syllabi, and I made a few other changes discussed below. But in my experience, the key to making the process work is to think long and hard about what you actually do and why you do it; do not automatically approach the task with the idea that you need to do anything more than tweak what you already have. If it works for you and your students, you are doing it the right way, and you simply need to articulate it in your assessment plan.

### *Creating Goals for Student Learning*

#### *1. Reading Competency*

Our OBAP template next requires the delineation of Student Learning Goals. These are supposed to arise from the components of the Mission statement, and each must refer to the Liberal Arts Goal it addresses. Every goal must also be accompanied by an “Outcome,” a pre-determined, measurable marker of success at meeting the goal. For all of us, of course, the primary goal is to produce competent readers of Latin and Greek:

Goal 1: Students who complete the sequence in Latin or Greek will have mastered the basic grammar and vocabulary required for the reading of Classical texts. This contributes to the Liberal Arts Goal of developing discipline-based competence.

Outcome: Students who complete four semesters of Latin or Greek will be able to pass a final sight-reading proficiency test at an 80% or better.

As Assessment markers go, this one is clear-cut and productive: because most language students begin

with zero proficiency, progress is unmistakable. This again gives Classics assessment an advantage over areas such as writing or critical thinking, where baseline assessments, like assessments of the degree of progress, are time-consuming and difficult. Assessing knowledge of Greek or Latin is also far more manageable than assessing, e.g. knowledge of History, where authorities frequently disagree on what the most important areas might be.

I administer the one-time sight-reading exam with no warning sometime toward the end of the official two-year sequence in each language. On a day when no one is missing, I give the students a short paragraph to translate from an original text with any necessary glosses, along with a set of identification questions. Since the test is primarily for assessment purposes, it does not figure into course grades (although I do use the score as a major factor when I determine the recipient of the Latin prize awarded at graduation).

Setting my goal at an 80% was a tactical decision: I wanted to set a test difficult enough that a good score would be a legitimate indicator of reading knowledge of Latin, and on which 100% would be a rare mark of true mastery.<sup>1</sup> Students come to my institution with vastly different levels of preparation and ability, and I know that many will inevitably come in under the mark. But so far I am pleased with the results: my 2010 Latin cohort had an average of 83%, with a high of 92% and a low of 75%, while my 2011 Greek class had an 89% average with a high of 92% and a low of 86%.

## 2. Grammar

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<sup>1</sup> Living in Minnesota, I am particularly sensitive to falling into the Lake Wobegon “all of our children are above average” mindset.

In a small program like mine, assessing discipline-based competence might have been enough. But as I moved through the process of creating the plan, and spent hours in the training sessions listening to other people talk about their fields, I realized that the study of ancient languages offers something that almost no other discipline can match: a chance to markedly improve students' knowledge of English grammar, and thereby writing skills. Grammar for its own sake may seem stuffy and outdated to many outside of our field, but it is easy to make the case that it can improve students' writing. You cannot teach someone to correct subject-verb agreement problems if they don't know what subjects and verbs are, or what "agreement" means. When I look at the writing of my worst students, I see a number of issues which grammar study could remedy: adjectives used as adverbs, incorrectly formed comparatives and superlatives, issues with tense, and misuse of nominative and accusative forms of personal pronouns (particularly after the word "than" or in sentences with compound subjects). I know that I sometimes spend more time teaching English grammar than Latin, so I had a strong conviction that by the end of two years with me, my students were knowledgeable about how both English and Latin work. Goal #2 in the OBAP, therefore, was the following:

Goal 2: All students who take courses in Latin or Greek will increase their knowledge of English grammar and usage in ways that should have a positive impact on their ability to write effective English prose. This contributes to the Liberal Arts Goal of developing effective communication in a variety of modes.

Outcome: All students who take courses in Latin or Greek will increase their knowledge of English grammar, earning an 80% or better on a grammar test after three semesters of language study.

To carry this out, I first wrote a test of English grammar that covered issues commonly addressed in the teaching of Greek and Latin. The end result, after two years of development, is a 30-question multiple-choice battery on the following areas:

Nouns: Nominative and Accusative, Singular, plural  
 Direct and indirect objects  
 Predicate nominatives  
 Verbs: Person, Number  
 Subject-verb agreement  
 Tense: present, future, perfect, future perfect, pluperfect  
 Voice: active, passive  
 Mood: indicative, subjunctive  
 Infinitives, split infinitives<sup>2</sup>  
 Transitive & intransitive  
 Definite & indefinite Articles  
 Adverbs  
 Adjectives: positive, comparative, superlative  
 Pronouns: relative, interrogative, possessive  
 Prepositions  
 Participles  
 Conjunctions

I set the Assessment benchmark at the third semester because that is the point at which my institution's language requirement is fulfilled; students in the fourth semester are generally those aiming for a minor in Classics, and the group is much smaller. The test is administered anonymously, although I attach a

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<sup>2</sup> N.B.: I myself favor split infinitives, but everyone should know what they are in case they encounter opposition to them.

unique identifier to each one.<sup>3</sup> I grade the test via Scantron, and use the “item analysis” feature to get a sense of the areas in which students are still struggling. I plan to use the results to improve my curriculum if I can discern clear trends of ignorance in specific areas.

The test has only been officially in place for a year, but the results I have gathered so far make me optimistic about its value and long-term usefulness. During the 2010-2011 academic year, I administered the test on the first day of the first semester and the last day of both semesters, always without any warning or any explicit references to preparation for it. I am also scrupulous about refusing to go over any of the questions, and about not allowing students to keep the test booklet. I run my beginning language classes in alternate years, so my data-set for the first run consisted of sections of First-Year Latin and Second-Year Greek.

In the Latin cohort, the average score on the first day of class in Fall 2010 was 51%, with a low of 28% and a high of 75%—magnificently dismal, and ripe with promise. I waited with bated breath until the end of first semester, and was overjoyed to find that the average had risen to 68%, with a low of 39% and a high of 89%! Assessment gold! I was desperately impatient for the second semester’s results, but failed to take into account that the composition of the class changed slightly (we lost about six students and gained two new ones), and I regret not having re-administered the test at the beginning of the semester. Though the lowest score had risen to a 43% and the highest was now a gratifying 100%, the average

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<sup>3</sup> To create the identifier, I use a 8-digit system to ensure that I can keep track of the data over the long term: 1 digit for Greek (8) or Latin (9); the three digits of the course number (e.g. “112”); the last two digits of the year (e.g. “10”); and two digits registering the number of students in the class, assigned consecutively.

remained at 68%. In the future, I will take no chances and I will take a benchmark at the beginning of each course if the enrollment has changed at all. The data also revealed something I should have anticipated: the standard deviation moved from .11 to .18, indicating that while all the students seemed to be improving, the brighter students were improving more, and the pack was beginning to split. This suggests that perhaps grammar testing as part of the regular curriculum, perhaps followed by occasional remedial work, might be a good addition to my program—and may be necessary to meet my goal of scores of 80% by the end of third semester.

The Second-Year Greek scores were flat-out thrilling: at the end of the Fall semester the average was 82% (meeting my assessment goal for the cohort with two percentage points to spare), with a low of 75% and a high of 89%. At the end of fourth semester the average had ascended to 92%, with a low of 85% and a high of 100%. Though these results are certainly promising, I had no benchmark from the students' first year, so I cannot be certain that they are replicable; this was an extremely bright and committed group.

I was overjoyed to have hard numbers to put on an Excel spreadsheet on my university's Assessment Drive. But I am even more overjoyed at the thought that my students are learning more than just Latin and Greek: engaging with English can be a rewarding and enjoyable life-long pursuit (provided they do not use this power to spend their lives attacking the grammar and spelling in other people's comments and blog posts).

### *3. Vocabulary Building*

Grammar was a good start, and easy to test for. As we all know, however, the impact of the Classical languages on vocabulary is even greater, so my next goal addresses that area:

Goal 3: Students who take courses in Latin or Greek will increase their English vocabulary as measured on a test administered along with the grammar test during the first year of language training. This contributes to the Liberal Arts Goal of demonstrating effective communication in a variety of modes.

Outcome: On an anonymous test of English vocabulary derived from the Classical languages, the class average will increase by at least 50% by the end of the first year of language study.

Here, alas, we have reached uncharted territory. Producing this test in time for my next Greek sequence to begin in the Fall 2011 semester is one of my summer tasks. My plan is to pick out 20-25 relatively difficult and uncommon English words derived from Greek vocabulary covered at the beginning of first year, and to use them as the basis for a multiple-choice vocabulary test. I will create a similar test next year before the Beginning Latin sequence begins. I elected to limit the test to the first year for now, but I may consider expanding it later. I may also change my "Outcome" ("the class average will increase by at least 50%") in the future; I am unsure how difficult to make the first round of the test, and it seems safer to concentrate on "improvement" rather than on absolute measures of performance. Here again, I would be delighted to hear from anyone who has employed a similar strategy, and happy to share the results of my work with others.

#### *4. Community Building and Personal/Academic Development*

I have worked hard to make my program student-friendly, and I enjoy teaching more when the students are happy, relaxed, and engaged. Like most teachers of Latin and Greek, I constantly require proof of knowledge through rigorous questioning, pop quizzes on unpredictable subject matter, and

spontaneous sight-reading exercises. Many students have told me that learning to speak up while remaining relaxed in the demanding but familial environment of Latin or Greek class made them more active participants in their other classes as well. All Latin and Greek students are also invited to join our Latin and Greek Club group on Facebook, and the majority do so. Since it is clear that student satisfaction cannot easily be disregarded in higher education today, my fourth goal takes up my students' perception of my program's success at fostering community building and at encouraging students' personal and academic development:

Goal 4: The 2-year sequence in Latin or Greek offers students a singular opportunity to form a long-term supportive academic home-base for themselves. Data collected from students will indicate agreement with the above statement. This contributes to the Liberal Arts Goal of leadership and collaboration.

Outcome: Beginning with the end of the Fall semester of 2011, the grammar tests will include three additional questions asking the students to report on their level of agreement with the following statements:

- 1) This course provided me with a supportive home base within my larger college experience.
- 2) The instructor accommodated my learning style and created an atmosphere where I was not afraid to speak up.
- 3) This course provided me with academic tools and skills which will be useful in achieving my career and life goals.

I confess to some trepidation about seeing the answers to these questions in black and white, but I hope they may help me understand my students better and legitimately improve my classes.

*Conclusion*

Assessment is an issue that we must all face in our own individual ways, but we should not have to do it alone. There is good reason to believe that with careful preparation, Assessment data can be a valuable ally in the promotion of our discipline. We all know why we love classical languages and literature and what they have done to shape our minds and build our characters. If Assessment is a way to turn this into an Excel spreadsheet that makes deans smile kindly on us, then it is worth all the time and effort, and then some.

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