Advantages and Disadvantages of Assessment Techniques
Barbara D. Wright, 8/15/02

Portfolios ...collections of student work...

Advantages:
* are adaptable to different
  * levels of assessment (i.e. individual student, program, institution)
  * purposes (i.e. cross-sectional snapshot; change/progress over time)
  * kinds of materials (i.e. written work, tapes of performances, student self-assessments)
* can tell us where students are and how they got there
* emphasize human judgment, meaning-making
* provide information likely to be used
* engage students, faculty
* are educational for both students and faculty
* reduce fears of misuse

Disadvantages:
* can be labor-intensive
* can be cumbersome to store
* require carefully defined criteria for review
* require training for reviewers

Solutions/responses:
* collect samples of work, not everything from everybody
* use electronic storage and retrieval
* give students responsibility for maintaining the portfolio
* invest in good criteria for education’s sake
* invest in training for faculty development’s sake

Capstone courses, projects, activities ...

Advantages:
* are cumulative
* are integrative
* are adaptable to demonstration of
  * skills
  * general education
  * professional field or major
  * combinations
* are motivation for students
* set standards
* provide an occasion for department-level discussion, interpretation
* invite external evaluation
* help students make the transition to
  * self-assessment
  * professional assessment
  * life-long learning

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Disadvantages:
* can be difficult to “capture” all students in their final semester
* can mean an additional course requirement
* can be difficult to coordinate multiple dimensions of learning & assessment
* can be labor-intensive
* require carefully defined criteria for review
* require distinguishing between purpose of the capstone for the students and for program assessment

Solutions/responses:
* require the capstone for graduation
* include capstone experiences within existing courses
* provide resources, staff support
* view resources, labor, as worthwhile investment

Performances…

Advantages:
* have face validity
* put emphasis on what the student can do:
  integrative
  a reality check
* give students with practical intelligence, skills, a chance to shine
* are motivating
* put the emphasis on active learning
* promote “coaching” relationship between students and faculty, especially when there are external reviewers
* promote self-assessment, internalization of standards
* are highly adaptable, even to liberal arts

Disadvantages:
* can be labor-intensive, time-consuming, expensive
* require careful definition of criteria
* require careful training of reviewers
* require coordination, esp. of external reviewers
* may frighten off insecure students

Solutions/responses:
* review a sample of students
* embed in routine, non-threatening situation (e.g., internship, clinical setting)
* regard criteria and training as an educational investment
* remind students they must demonstrate employability
Common assignments, secondary readings, and other embedded assignments…

Advantages:

* use work produced by students as a normal part of their course work
* solve the problem of quality of student effort
* are efficient, low-cost
* have face validity
* provide maximally useful information with minimum slippage
* encourage discussion, collaboration among faculty & support staff
* can create campus-wide interest

Disadvantages:

* require coordination
* can be time-consuming to create the common assignment
* can be time-consuming, labor-intensive to score
* require careful definition of criteria for review
* require careful training of reviewers

Solutions/responses:

* provide support
* remember the efficiencies, benefits
* make the investment
Classroom Assessment/Research…

Advantages:

* takes place at ground zero of learning process for:
  - maximum relevance, usefulness
  - minimum slippage
  - minimum risk

* is conducted continuously, has formative benefit
* provides feedback on both
  - what students know and can do
  - and how they got there, what helps or hinders

* motivates students to become more active, reflective learners
* can also be used by faculty collectively for the bigger picture
* is faculty-friendly, respectful of privacy, autonomy
* offers significant resources and support network, especially for community college educators

Disadvantages:

* is unstructured, particularly dependent on individuals’ cooperation for
  - administration of CATs
  - reporting of results

* presents challenge of generalizing to program or institution level

Solutions/responses:

* provide consistent, careful leadership, oversight
* get buy-in from faculty, others
* provide training
* make assessment a campus-wide conversation
* remember the potential: to generate truly useful information for improvement
Local tests…

Advantages:

* require active faculty participation
* stimulate discussion about goals, curriculum, pedagogy, etc.
* have content validity
* can change readily in response to institutional changes
* can be open-ended, highly creative in format
* can provide good quality of student effort if course-embedded
* provide directly relevant, useful information
* provide forestall comparison with other institutions

Disadvantages:

* run risk of focusing more on surface than deep learning
* provide no norms for reference
* may contain ambiguous, poorly constructed items
* reliability and validity may be questioned
* contracting out test construction is expensive
* will not elicit good quality of student effort if seen as add-on
* will create misunderstanding of assessment if seen as a threat
* tend to invite finger-pointing

Solutions/responses:

* if norms are important, supplement with purchased test
* use on-campus expertise
* be careful, pilot any test before large-scale administration
* provide a “gripe sheet”
* accept that assessment is ultimately human judgment, not psychometric science
* keep the focus on useful information & information, not test scores per se
* depersonalize, avoid finger-pointing
Off-the-shelf objective tests…

Advantages:

* traditional, widely recognized & accepted means of “assessment”
* require little on-campus time or labor
* prepare students for licensure, other high-stakes testing
* are norm-referenced
* offer longitudinal data
* technical quality generally very good
* may reflect recent, important trends in the field
* can be useful as part of a multiple-method approach

Disadvantages:

* often poor content validity
* generally do not provide criterion-referenced scores
* test students’ ability to recognize “right” answers
* reflect students’ test-taking ability
* often elicit poor quality of student effort, particularly as add-on
* reinforce faculty bias toward “empty vessel” theory of education
* reinforce student bias toward education as memorizing, regurgitating “right” answers (i.e. “surface” rather than “deep” learning)
* carry risk of misuse of scores, invidious comparisons
* provide little insight into students’ problem-solving & thinking skills or ability to discriminate among “good” and “better” answers
* give students no opportunity to demonstrate important affective traits, e.g., persistence, meticulous, creativity, open-mindedness.
* are less likely than local methods to stimulate productive discussion
* tend to invite finger-pointing, anxiety, resistance
* can be very expensive
* generally do no provide good value (i.e., useful information for cost)

Solutions/responses:

* negotiate with test maker
* supplement with other methods
* use with caution