

BOOK REVIEW

Mark Hawkes, *Book Review Editor*

***Assessing the Online Learner: Resources and Strategies for Faculty,* by Rita M. Palloff and Keith Pratt**

Crystal R. Pauli

Dakota State University

Assessing the Online Learner: Resources and Strategies for Faculty, by Rita M. Palloff and Keith Pratt (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009, 153 pages, \$28.00)

INTRODUCTION

As online learning explodes with opportunities for students, instructors are challenged with developing effective ways to assess learning in a manner that is effective, fair, and efficient. This text is a practical guide for instructors—utilizing that we know about assessment in general, and taking it to a new level to be used in online learning environments. (Along the way, the reader will come to realize this book is not only a resource for online instructors, but for face-to-face instructors as well.) An easy read of 153 pages including appendices, addi-

tional resources, references, and index, the text is practical and the reader comes away with a variety of ideas to try immediately. It is a “common sense” approach to assessment that instructors in online learning environments will find useful and user-friendly. Personally, I was drawn to the book because assessment is an area of interest, as is teaching online.

MAJOR PREMISE

The major premise of the book is to highlight assessment in the online environment by giving instructors a better understanding of what it is they might do to ensure they have assessed the learning of their online students. The information in this book gives instructors confidence to move from methods that measure only memorized information, and move

• **Crystal Pauli**, Director of Field Services, Dakota State University, 820 N. Washington Avenue, Madison, SD 57042. Telephone: (605) 256-5177. E-mail: crystal.pauli@dsu.edu

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toward techniques that measure knowledge acquisition and application. “To us, this is the measure of true learning” (Palloff & Pratt, 2009, p. xiii).

OVERVIEW

The book is designed to provide a backdrop of theory on which practice and strategies are built and discussed. It is written in two parts: Part I, “Assessment Basics” and Part II, “The Assessment and Evaluation Toolkit.” In the first part, Palloff and Pratt take us through the basics of assessment helping readers:

Know the differences between objectives, outcomes, and competencies, and how these concepts are integrated into good assessment and evaluation practice; develop competence with the concept of learner-focused teaching and assessment; design rubrics and authentic assessments that accurately measure student achievement and learning that directly relate to the activities of their courses; gain a repertoire of assessment tools that go beyond the use of tests and quizzes; develop authentic assessments that align with course content and provide direct application of course concepts for learners; use the online environment to their advantage when designing assessments; encourage students to develop skills in offering feedback by providing guidelines to good feedback and by modeling what is expected; and, incorporate feedback into the ongoing development of assessment and evaluation activities. (p. xi)

I will outline some of the components of Part I that I found particularly interesting and thought-provoking. Palloff and Pratt devote a section to the definitions of teaching and assessment, and the components of course design. Course design components of competencies, outcomes, and objectives were defined and illustrated (Exhibit 1.1). While some may find this unnecessary, I felt it helped provide an effective framework for the discussion in the remainder of the book, and worthy of note in this review.

- Competencies: How students demonstrate *knowledge or skill acquisition*, generally at the end of a program of study.
- Outcomes: What students will be able to *know or do*, generally at the end of a course.
- Objectives: What students will *learn*, generally at the end of a unit of study (p. 6).

Palloff and Pratt ascribe to the *engaged critical* model of learning in which teaching and learning are seen as a creative dialogue. “The critical model concerns itself more squarely with the function of learning and is learner focused” (p. 18). The authors explain that a traditional model of learning is more focused on teaching and is instructor-focused. The engaged critical model of learning is more in tune with online instruction methods. The lower levels of the learning pyramid, developed by National Training Laboratories in Maine in the early 1960s, include discussion, practice by doing, and teaching others. The authors promote activities that promote learner-centered instruction around these premises. This type of authentic assessment requires learners to demonstrate knowledge acquisition rather than just taking a quiz over the facts, and it contributes to the retention of knowledge gained. A detailed section on the use of Bloom’s taxonomy to write course outcomes and assessment activities further guide the instructor.

I felt the section on grading was particularly well-done, offering the reader clear, objective information with a common-sense tone. Palloff and Pratt state,

When the focus of a course remains on outcomes and when assignments are designed to elicit the kind of learning that is desired, the task of grading becomes much easier. Additionally, the assignments should (1) align with the type of desired learning, (2) be reasonable in terms of workload, (3) be strategically placed in the course, and (4) sustain ongoing learning. Furthermore, directions for completing the assessment need to be clear and unambiguous to minimize student confu-

sion and maximize successful assignment completion. (p. 23).

A comment was made about faculty wanting to help students develop the higher-order thinking skills of Bloom's taxonomy, but that often the assignments may not align with those goals, thus making the task of grading more difficult. The use of grading scales or rubrics that are designed with specific criteria based on the assignment help students understand what is expected and allows the instructor to match their expectations and outcomes with the assignment.

Angelo and Cross (as cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2009) list a number of characteristics of effective classroom assessment: it is learner-centered, teacher-directed, mutually beneficial, formative, context-specific, ongoing, and firmly rooted in good practice (p. 30). The authors note these same principles can apply to an online classroom, with some changes, as cited in their 2003 work: "The principles that should guide student assessment in an online course:

1. Design learner-centered assessments that include self-reflection.
2. Design and include grading rubrics for the assessment of contributions to the discussion as well as for assignments, projects, and collaboration itself.
3. Include collaborative assessments through public posting of papers, along with comments from student to student.
4. Encourage students to develop skills in providing feedback by providing guidelines to good feedback and by modeling what is expected.
5. Use assessment techniques that fit the context and align with learning objectives.
6. Design assessments that are clear, easy to understand, and likely to work in the online environment.
7. Ask for and incorporate student input into how assessment should be conducted (p. 30).

The authors state, "Assessment bridges the gap between what was taught and what was learned, and in the online classroom, *how* it was taught is also critical to that process" (p. 64). Evaluating the course and program are critical to the process as the authors enumerate in this section. Two of the key principles are: (1) Base program and course evaluation on the mission of the university, and (2) All evaluation should be an ongoing activity.

Part II, "The Assessment and Evaluation Toolkit," discusses the development and use of rubrics, using student feedback for assessment, authentic and performance assessment, effectively developing tests and quizzes, using portfolios as assessment, reflective assessment, self-assessment, peer assessment, using Wikis and blogs in assessment, and effectively evaluating online courses and faculty (p. 67). A tall order for such a small volume, but handled in ways that make sense and allow the reader to immediately take something away to begin using right away.

A great deal of Part II is devoted to discussion on rubrics and rubric development. Because rubrics provide clarity of expectations and help the instructor grade in a more objective manner, they are useful in grading online work. The authors cite Stevens and Levi's (2004) list of four stages involved in rubric development for any assignment:

- *Reflecting*. Take some time to think about the expectations for the assignment. What are the expectations and how will they be communicated to learners?
- *Listing*. Once the expectations have been determined, begin to develop learning objectives. What are the details and learning objectives for this assignment?
- *Grouping and Labeling*. Next, group similar expectations and skills, then label them according to performance levels. What are the categories of expectations and how are performance levels determined? What constitutes basic performance, for example? What constitutes proficiency? What would exceptional performance look like?

- *Application.* Apply the skills and labels from Step 3 to the grid format of the final rubric (Palloff & Pratt, p. 68).

The authors discuss the adaptation of Roblyer and Wiencke's (2003) rubric for assessing interaction in online courses. They contend that courses "can be highly interactive without the use of such technologies as audio and video conferencing" (Palloff & Pratt, p. 73). Examples such as this give the instructor immediate products to begin using in the online course room.

No text on assessment would be complete without serious discussion about authentic assessments. The authors outlined features of authentic assessment including effectively demonstrating knowledge acquisition, but also the ability to apply the knowledge and the use of rubrics. "Learner performance is to be evaluated under the same conditions and using the same materials as a real-world performance would present" (Palloff & Pratt, p. 76). The text provides detailed examples of authentic assessments used by actual practitioners.

The authors shared a checklist that evaluated faculty using criteria for course design, development, and facilitation. They separated the functions into course design and course facilitation (the two main areas of faculty involvement). Either or both checklists could be used, depending on the role of the faculty.

CONCLUSION

The authors briefly discuss concerns regarding academic honesty and ask questions such as "Is the student who has enrolled in the course

the student who is participating, taking exams and quizzes, writing papers, and so on?" and "How can I deal with plagiarism online?" (Palloff & Pratt, p. 4). No answers are given, just an acknowledgement of the concern. A list of plagiarism detection tools may have been a good addition to this text. According to Murray (2006), "making use of technology solutions like Turnitin ... can act as a catalyst for letting your people know that cut-and-paste plagiarism is being monitored. Using detection software is an effective way of putting the issues of plagiarism on the agenda ..." (para. 17). I would have liked to read more about the authors' suggestions on ways to deter students from acts of academic dishonesty. They both have a wealth of knowledge to share about online learning and more on the topic of academic cheating would have been helpful.

This text is a practical guide for instructors and utilizes information about assessment and application in the online environment. It is an easy read and a handy reference, with a variety of examples to illustrate topics. I especially appreciated the discussions on rubric development, authentic assessment, and evaluating faculty. At a time when online education is becoming more popular with faculty and students, I believe this book is a great read for anyone who aspires to teach effectively online. I recommend it to my colleagues in higher education.

REFERENCE

- Murray, W. (2006, October). The plagiarism phenomenon. *E-Learning Age*, 22-25. Retrieved from ABI/INFORM Global. (Document No. 1151038961)