

Prior Learning Assessment: A Web-Based Model for Adult Learners

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Abstract: This paper profiles a fully online writing course for adult learners enrolled in Bowling Green State University's Prior Learning Assessment Program. In addition to providing an overview of the goals of prior learning assessment and the role of writing instruction in achieving those goals, we include a rationale for the development and delivery of the online course format. Ultimately, the paper addresses issues of student motivation, appropriateness and availability of curriculum, alternative assessment measures, adult learner needs, and administrative support in the success of this and future online learning initiatives for BGSU's adult learner population.

Introduction: Prior Learning Assessment at Bowling Green State University

Bowling Green State University has acknowledged for many years that college-level learning may be acquired from experiences outside a formal classroom setting. Since 1987, BGSU has offered adult learners the opportunity to obtain recognition for college-level achievement through its Portfolio Assessment Program. The primary goal of the program is to offer potential college credit to adult students for documented college-level learning that they may have acquired through their significant volunteer activities, work-related training, and employment experiences. Essentially, portfolio assessment allows students to demonstrate through focused, descriptive writing and through selected supporting documentation the knowledge and skills they already possess. If a student's knowledge and skills correspond to expected learning outcomes in a specific BGSU course, he or she may be granted credit for the course by a faculty assessor from the academic unit in which it is offered.

There are several benefits to students who qualify for the portfolio assessment program:

- It can significantly reduce the time needed to complete a degree. Adult students can earn up to thirty credit hours toward a degree through the program. Since most of the students in the program have jobs and families and must necessarily attend on a part-time basis, earning credits for even a few courses may make a tremendous difference in the number of semesters required for degree completion.
- Credit by portfolio is significantly less expensive for adult students than the costs of normal tuition. The \$70 assessment fee per portfolio is the only cost to the student. No tuition is charged for course credits earned by portfolio.
- The process can serve as an affirming experience for nontraditional students returning to school after an extended absence. Often, these students are anxious about their ability to succeed academically, hesitant to reenter the academic environment, and, at the same time, eager to expand their horizons. The portfolio class can serve as a transition course where adult students are able to interact extensively with others who may share their concerns, and where they can validate their often extensive knowledge.

The portfolio process at BGSU is designed to ensure the maximum opportunity for student success while maintaining the academic integrity of programs and courses. This is accomplished through careful screening of candidates for the program, through thorough student preparation regarding the development of portfolios, and through vesting of credit-granting authority in faculty only.

The program is administered by the Director of Adult Learner Services (Stan Lewis) who screens candidates for the program through a comprehensive interview process that allows students to identify the knowledge and skill sets they have that may make them eligible to earn credit and which allows the Director to make an informed decision regarding a prospective student's viability. If a student is a viable candidate for the portfolio process, the Director of Adult Learner Services will enroll the student in a mandatory portfolio preparation class.

The class is a special section of English 207 Intermediate Writing and is the core component of the program. The purpose of the class is to enhance the portfolio students' writing skills, to provide them with a structured template for producing multiple portfolios worthy of credit, and to introduce them to the policies and procedures governing the portfolio process. By having students develop at least one course portfolio as a product of the preparation class utilizing a uniform and consistent format, we are able, to some degree, to ensure that the expectations faculty have about what a good portfolio should contain are met. There are, from time to time, requests from faculty or students to include unique components in a particular portfolio, but for the most part, the structured format has been seen as sufficient and appropriate, including an autobiography, a goals statement, a resume, a proposal to receive course credit, and documentation to support the proposal.

During the early stages of the process, students are encouraged to identify one or two courses for which they would like to develop portfolios, and they are asked to meet with the faculty members who normally teach those courses. If the faculty member believes that the student can make a reasonable case for credit, he or she will agree to serve as the faculty assessor for that particular portfolio. It is important that this is done early on so that students will not spend valuable time working on development of portfolios for which there is not a high likelihood of success. Upon completion of a portfolio, it is submitted to the faculty assessor and credit is awarded or denied based on the faculty member's evaluation. The integrity of the portfolio process lies in the fact that only faculty are empowered at BGSU to grant portfolio credit.

This process has worked well for BGSU's nontraditional students for many years but not without some drawbacks. We found, for example, that even though we offered the face-to-face class in a one evening per week format, it was still difficult for some of our nontraditional students to attend. They are the most place- and time-bound segment of our student population. Although we offered an extensive library of past portfolios for student review, samples could only be seen if a student made a campus visit. In short, although many students participated in the program, they did so with significant

inconvenience. Ultimately, two events contributed to our decision to pilot the course as a web-based offering: the emerging technology on the BGSU campus for providing distance education, and the assignment of an instructor (Kris Blair) to this course both qualified and willing to experiment with it.

The First-Time: Face-to-Face

In teaching the adult learner section of Intermediate Writing for the first time, Kris was pleased to be working with adult students, something she experienced as an instructor in California, Indiana, and Texas, in both four- and two-year college settings. Yet from the beginning, there were indications that the course format, a three hour evening class offered once a week, was not necessarily the optimum delivery system for the teaching of college-level writing, as well as for establishing a community of adult learners. This first version of the course included seven students, five males and two females, all of whom were over forty, all of whom had full-time jobs, and all of whom commuted over an hour to make it to the weekly session on the BGSU main campus. In one instance, a student who had frequent job-related travel began to submit assignments electronically, and while he was not able to review the assignments of others in a peer-coaching model that characterized much of the course format, his own work was reviewed by others, and he ultimately was able to produce as equally strong a portfolio as his peers. Based on this class profile, and the success of the one virtual student, we concluded that through the development of a consistently structured Blackboard course shell we would not only achieve the same learning outcomes in writing skills and portfolio development but would perhaps foster as much if not more of a sense of classroom community than the once a week face-to-face format. Moreover, because of the standardized nature of the documents produced, particularly the need for a biography, a resume, and general proposal for course credit in another department, there would be less need for direct instruction on the composition of these documents, with students able to work independently on the texts to be shared online with both peers and the instructor for feedback.

The Second Time Around: Fully Online

Over the summer 2001, Stan and Kris brainstormed the ways in which various elements of the face-to-face course would be maintained or altered in the online version. One key component to students' completion of the portfolio is the ability to review successful models of both individual documents and entire portfolios. To enable this online, we obtained permission from a number of students who developed portfolios in a variety of disciplines, including manufacturing, early childhood education, and interpersonal communication, to allow us to scan documents into .pdf format for viewing within the Blackboard system. Along with dividing and revising the course syllabi and other documents for online delivery, a consistent pattern of activity was set-up through Blackboard's discussion forum. First, students were able to review the .pdf models of the various documents and conduct readings from the core texts about elements of document design and specific genres such as resumes and proposals. Based on those reviews and readings, students would discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the samples, ask

questions about the actual construction of the document, and collaboratively develop criteria for what would constitute a successful resume, for instance. Often, adult learners, as returning college students, are faced with the question: “How much is too much?” In this sense, the pre-writing forums related to each document were helpful in establishing a focus and a context for shaping their extensive life experiences to a particular course. Students then drafted independently, and at a consistent time each week (usually Wednesday evenings by 9 p.m.) posted their documents as attachments to a discussion forum, where they were reviewed by at least one other student, who posted specific comments and questions, by Kris, who sent more extensive feedback via private email, and by Stan, who usually read all documents and posted a larger commentary to the whole group. Based on this feedback, students then posted a “revision plan” to the entire group, with specifics about what they would be working to change in content, format, grammar and style.

Because this procedure was consistent for each document produced, the course ran rather smoothly. There was little confusion about what was due, when it was due, and where it should be posted. Stan and Kris also established one face-to-face orientation to explain these and other technical processes of using the Blackboard portal. However, because of a number of external variables involving access, experience with computers, and general motivation levels, we encountered some typical problems with the online format. While the original population of Kris’s Intermediate Writing course was in fact conducive to online delivery, we had questions about the fit this time around. There were seven males and one female in this section, with a more varied age range from around twenty-four to fifty-plus. Of the seven, six had never taken an online course—we later discovered that one had never utilized email before the course—and although four commuted, three students were residential. All did work full-time, however.

Perhaps the largest problem with the course involved differences in motivation levels among students, reducing participation among some and discouraging those who were assigned to exchange documents for peer review. In a face-to-face course with a larger number of students, motivation issues are expected and can be alleviated through group re-assignments, and more increased opportunity to dialogue with students about their individual learning styles and study habits. In an online course with a smaller number of students such as this one, however, the “absence” of even two students can diminish the opportunities for community and collaborative knowledge making that the course is meant to promote. As Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt (1999) contend, “Without the purposeful formation of an online learning community in distance learning, we are doing nothing new and different.”

Also compounding such problems were traditional expectations of teacher-centered delivery on the part of students; indeed, in one instance, a student regularly logged in once per week on Wednesday evening to ask “what are we doing tonight?” With some private emails, Kris was able to stress the importance of more frequent and meaningful participation with this student, although additional problems surfaced when the student’s home computer crashed, and he was forced to rely on one located at the public library nearest his Cleveland suburb. Similar motivation and access issues surfaced among

students, including the desire on the part of some students to access the course from work because of network rather than modem access, only to find security problems due to the workplace proxy servers that hindered connection to BGSU's Blackboard portal system. Despite these problems, all students did complete the course, several with stronger portfolios than some of those produced in the context of a face-to-face course. Because of the differences in motivation levels, we received a number of valuable recommendations, particularly from one student, a product designer at Owens-Illinois, who encouraged better communication about both student and instructor expectations:

Expect apprehension. Students trying something new for the first time feel in the 'guinea pig' mode, regardless of how technology-savvy they are. Some will try to get by with the minimum interaction. If I saw something like that happening, there would be immediate demands. Each individual is responsible for the whole class achieving success.

The Third Time's the Charm?

Because of what we deemed a "moderate success" in the first online incarnation of the course, we did little to change it, keeping such elements as a required learning styles inventory (Fleming, 2001) that measured preferences for visual, auditory, reading, or kinesthetic learning environments and allowed the students to introduce themselves to each other and to the instructor in light of these preference and their needs within the course. Our population this time around was much more consistent in that most of the students, four females and six males, were over forty and did have full-time jobs, and again, seven of the original ten students enrolled had never taken an online course. Although in most all versions of the course, students were living in Northwest Ohio, in this instance, a student took the course from Texas, based on an unexpected job-related move. All of the students in this version were hard-working, with incredibly strong work ethics, which in itself led to some pedagogical problems. Specifically, some students were much more interested in being a part of an online community, sharing drafts, exchanging life experiences, than others who preferred to work independently. While in most cases this did not create a gap in responsibilities in that students completed most work on time, the level of interaction with several students was low. Part of this was due to in part to heavy work responsibilities: For instance, one student was a CEO of a small company, and several others were working their full-time jobs and maintaining a twelve-course load. In at least one instance, there was a personality clash with a particularly vocal student who others claimed diminished their desire to participate. What became clear was that students for whom the online community was less necessary were not any less effective in document design and development; rather, they simply had different needs and expectations of an online course. Often, these students finished assignments early, expected prompt feedback from the instructor, and were prepared to revise and move ahead in ways that fit in with their work and family routines. For these students, online dialogue about improving their writing, while from our perspective a vital part of the class, wasn't a top priority for them. Regardless, the quality of conversation was high in most parts, with students providing consistent, critical and courteous feedback to each other. In comparison to the first online version of the course, dialogue increased among

all students. Overall, as the following student comment indicates, most appreciated the convenience and the opportunity to collaborate with equally responsible students:

As an adult learner with work and family to manage in addition to classes, the online course format has been perfect. I am able to work on the course assignments when I have the time and I still meet the required deadlines and learning objectives for the course the same way I would by going to a classroom each week. The discussion forum is great for submitting work assignments and review comments. Keeping the same weekly due date is also very helpful. The only drawback I could see is if you are partnered on larger project assignments with someone who does not participate equally or regularly in the class, you may have a less robust experience or may be required to do additional work as a result. This same thing can happen in a regular classroom setting, too, but it seems like it could get perpetuated in an online forum since you do not meet regularly and things can "slide by" more easily.

A Win/Win Situation?

In addition to the convenience of students being able to fit a writing course into their schedule, the online version of Intermediate Writing has possessed a number of pros and cons for the program and the instructor:

- **Team-Teaching Opportunities:** In the face-to-face setting, Stan attends the first class and explains some of the procedural and administrative aspects of portfolio assessment at BGSU, including contacting instructors and department chairs, timeline, and interview and data collection procedures about the course(s) for which the students will be seeking credit. He is also available during the semester for individual consultation and for portfolio checkout. In an online course, the collaborative teaching partnership between Stan, as Director of Adult Learner Services, and Kris, as an English professor, shifted significantly in that Stan was now a part of the course and was able to view all aspects of it in a formative way. Part of this included establishing a Frequently Asked Question forum in which Stan was available to answer questions, as well as Stan participating in review processes for some documents and consulting with Kris on ways to approach students who were having participation problems.
- **The Move Toward E-portfolios:** The traditional format within the prior learning assessment program is a print-based portfolio, completed with dividers, tabs, and sections on life experience, course credit, and documentation. What we soon found, however, is that students' work experiences, or the particular discipline in which they were seeking credit, dictated alternative formats for documenting comparable work experience. In two cases, because students were seeking credit for coursework in technical communication and online documentation, an e-portfolio option was approved, demonstrating that the prior learning assessment portfolio itself could be as easily developed online as off. Moreover, because many of the students in the program seek credit for courses in the College of

Technology, some faculty are already experimenting with the use of e-portfolios as student assessment and professional development tools, and thus have been more amenable to this approach. Other documentation formats included audio-CDs (as opposed to more cumbersome audio tapes) in the case of one student who had an extensive background in broadcast journalism and was seeking credit for courses in Telecommunications. Such trends suggest that an e-portfolio approach would likely be viable for future sections of the course.

- **Interaction Between Students and Instructor:** While it is true that an online environment diminishes some aspects of human interaction, such as facial cues and body language, other elements of online dialogue can be particularly beneficial in improving the quality of interaction. Although the discussion forum was the primary mode of communication, Kris exchanged private email with many students, some of whom had a number of personal difficulties over the semester. As well, such exchanges allowed for a more formative assessment of what was working in the course and what could be improved, as students' were often very reflective about elements of their own performance, the performance of others, and the general ways in which the course was "working" for them or not. In addition to virtual office hours in Blackboard's synchronous virtual classroom tool, the private dialogues allowed for more interpersonal communication than a teacher might experience in a face-to-face classroom that relies less on individualized instruction. In this sense, the role of the teacher, as many distance learning theorists have noted (Hanna, et al. 2002), becomes that of facilitator or coach, a mode that is very appropriate in a college-level writing classroom.
- **Understanding and Evaluating Faculty Workload:** Because of the amount of work required of the students in completing the portfolio, the course has been deliberately kept small to allow for more individualized consultation as well as to allow a more reasonable workload for the instructor in reviewing documents several times before they are actually part of the finished portfolio. Furthermore, the increased email and online commentary required in a fully online course necessitates a smaller class size. Given the need for maximum enrollments in all classes, the size of the course has often been difficult to justify to administrators expecting a full class of 25 students. Another problem exists in the readiness of academic units to evaluate instructors teaching fully online courses. In the Department of English, for instance, there is no separate instrument for student evaluation of online courses, and the current measurement does not account for how course quality may manifest itself differently online. Because student evaluations, as well as faculty peer evaluations, are so much a part of the merit and promotion processes at many institutions, more efforts to acknowledge the increased design, development, and delivery aspects of online courses will be vital for faculty "buy-in" to distance learning.

Conclusion: Future Online Opportunities for BGSU's Adult Learners

BGSU's current climate for online course development is strong; however, a key issue for students is consistency of course offerings and the availability of instructors to teach fully online courses. Faculty themselves often face a number of constraints, particularly that the online course not interfere with traditional course responsibilities within their unit, and that there exist instructors who know how to structure and deliver online courses. In an attempt to alleviate these constraints on the online prior learning assessment process, Kris developed a second online course "Online Learning for English Educators," in hopes of creating a train-the-trainer model in which advanced graduate students who enroll in the course can become likely candidates for future sections of English 207, Intermediate Writing. In fall 2003, an advanced graduate student who has completed the online learning course will teach the course, and Stan and Kris will serve as co-curriculum developers with her for this section. Additionally, because of proposals to develop a fully online Bachelor of Liberal Studies, adult learners will have more opportunities to achieve both academic and career goals through the online learning process. In concluding, we've highlighted a number of continuing reasons for sustaining online learning opportunities for adult learners at BGSU and beyond:

- In degree programs where there have been many portfolios done in the past (Bachelor of Liberal Studies, Manufacturing Technology) that are now offered in part online or are under development to be fully online, the online portfolio class will be essential.
- E-portfolios will become more prevalent and much more convenient for truly remote students with web skills and will better fit those disciplines that call for more electronic genres.
- Native BGSU students who left prior to graduation, now live away, have several years of experience and would like to complete their BGSU degree will be able not only to take online courses, but accelerate their degree progress through totally online portfolio (the course and the submission).
- Due to the small numbers for this class, we could never offer multiple face-to face sections to meet the scheduling complexities of busy adults. Online courses will provide wider access to adult learners.

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