And so...you give your multiple choice tests on computer. Are there methods and/or technology that can assess students’ strengths and weaknesses on an item-by-item basis, and based on student responses, allow students to “test out” of material where they demonstrate proficiency? There are, and that methodology is often referred to as “computer adaptive assessment” or “adaptive testing.”

Adaptive assessment/testing methodologies select questions at a specific level of difficulty based on the student’s previous responses. Thus, the test engine “adapts” the question selection process according to the test-takers’ abilities, eliminating questions that are too easy or too difficult. This computerized method of testing permits the collection of required feedback with fewer questions.

Adaptive questioning is therefore a very efficient and effective means of knowledge-based assessment. The benefits of this approach include:

- Time isn’t wasted on inappropriate questions
- Assessments are not burdened with information that isn’t needed for a reliable measure of proficiency
- Results show areas of strength and weakness clearly and accurately

During test administration, the adaptive testing engine evaluates each response and determines the appropriate level of difficulty for the next question; the next test item is then randomly selected from a pool of questions at a determined difficulty level depending on whether or not the preceding question was answered correctly. For this purpose, several pools of questions at various difficulty levels (often called item banks) are set up and maintained. The random selection process allows individuals to be assessed more than once in a content area and receive different questions at the same level of difficulty each time they take the test. This process helps ensure the test result is a true measure of the individual’s knowledge, and not a reflection of her or his ability to learn and study test questions.
CALL FOR PROPOSALS
Portfolio Workshop and Capstone Projects

The Office of Assessment Services (OAS) and the University Assessment Panel (UAP) are pleased to offer resources to NIU faculty and staff to support their efforts in using portfolios and capstone courses in their assessment programs.

Submission forms for portfolio/capstone proposals, as well as the current guidelines for submitting proposals, were mailed to all faculty, department chairs, and deans in early November 2004. Proposals should be submitted through the college office. The completed packet (submission form, one electronic copy of the proposal, and 5 paper copies of the proposal) must be submitted to the Office of Assessment Services by 1 February 2005 to be eligible for consideration; your college will notify you of its deadline for the receipt of proposals.


Please contact Craig Barnard, University Assessment Coordinator at barnard@niu.edu or 753-7120 if you have questions about these initiatives.

PROFILES IN ASSESSMENT
Michael Day, First Year Composition

Michael Day, Associate Professor in the Department of English, is beginning his third year as the Director of First Year Composition at Northern Illinois University.

Michael indicates that his first love is in teaching English, and he has taught a number of courses in technical writing, electronic media, and composition. He also has a background in rhetoric, and is currently teaching the course for new teaching assistants in the department, which incorporates learning to use electronic media and the Internet in English classes.

His most recent involvement in assessment came through his interest in and work with electronic portfolios in the Department of English.

Click either picture, above, to hear Michael Day’s assessment philosophy. Windows Media Player is necessary to view these files. Download Windows Media Player for free.
BEST PRACTICE
English Department Writing Skills Rubric

Developed by the NIU Department of English, the following is an excellent example of a clearly articulated scoring rubric. It has been used for a number of years for inter-departmental assessments, and has also been used as the scoring rubric for all iterations of the Office of Assessment Services’ assessment of junior-level writing skills. The NIU Department of English offers more information on the rubric and related topics.

### ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CRITERIA FOR JUNIOR-LEVEL WRITING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptors Upper Half</th>
<th>Descriptors Lower Half</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demonstrates adequate understanding of the writer's task while persuading reader of writers commitment</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fails to understand fully the writer’s task</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and responds to the full range of issues raised by the prompt</td>
<td>and may lapse in response to the prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Establishes an appropriate writer’s presence</strong></td>
<td><strong>Establishes an inappropriate or tenuous writer’s presence</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and establishes a strong sense of the writer's voice or authenticity</td>
<td>or fails to establish a coherent writer's presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demonstrates communicative awareness of an educated audience outside the discipline</strong></td>
<td><strong>Demonstrates unsatisfactory awareness of an audience outside the discipline</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and communicates proficiently with this audience</td>
<td>and fails to communicate this to the audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clarifies major aims, arranges material to support aims, and provides enough material to satisfy expectations of readers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Does not always make major aims clear, arrange material to support aims, or provide enough material to satisfy expectations of readers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and arranges material to create confidence in readers</td>
<td>and confuses readers about its major aims or develops no major point adequately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moves beyond summary into analysis and demonstrates critical engagement in the topic</strong></td>
<td><strong>Summarizes material but lapses in critical analysis or is unable to demonstrate the interrelatedness of ideas</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and demonstrates complex critical engagement with material or formulates innovative relationships between ideas</td>
<td>and is unaware of connections or lacks critical engagement with material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controls sentence level features of written language, including grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage</strong></td>
<td><strong>Loses control of one or more elements of written language at the sentence level (such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, or usage), but without significantly impeding communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and shows mature command of these features, particularly as regards clarity and precision</td>
<td>or fails to acknowledge the conventions of standard written English, thereby impeding the communication process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>and exhibits mastery of these features in an especially effective or innovative rhetorical style.</strong></td>
<td><strong>and may be unable to communicate any meaning at all.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DID YOU KNOW?

Employer Evaluations Results

The Career Planning and Placement Center has been active in working with employers who come to campus to recruit NIU students. The forms have been distributed at all campus based recruiting functions; the information gleaned from the evaluations has been used by the Center to improve the quality of the services that it offers.

In 2003, the Office of Assessment Services asked the Center to attach three items to the existing Employer Evaluation. These items requested feedback regarding students’ skill levels in general education-related areas. Areas surveyed included effective writing skills, analytical skills, and computer/technical skills.

With a response rate of 47% (responding employer n =148), this table shows how NIU students were rated.

The results of this survey will be shared with NIU’s General Education Committee, and serve as one piece of feedback on the success of the General Education Program at NIU. The survey is being continued.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Education Skill Areas Surveyed</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The NIU students I am interviewing have the computer/technical skills required for this job.</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The NIU students I am interviewing have the analytical skills required for this job.</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The NIU students I am interviewing can write effectively for the requirements of this job.</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contributions Solicited!

Contribute to Toolkit’s newest feature, “Sharpen your Pencil: Assessment Tips from the Inside” or any of our other regular features. We’re looking to share the wisdom of NIU faculty and staff, making the work of assessment more productive. If you’d like material to be considered for inclusion in a future edition of Toolkit, submit a Word document of no more than 300 words as an email attachment to barnard@niu.edu.
FAQ

Assessment Literature

“Where can I read more on how to accomplish authentic assessment in my department?” Try these resources:


Banta, Trudy W., and others. 1996. Assessment in Practice: Putting Principles to Work on College Campuses. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass [387 pp.]. The authors identify and describe six steps that characterize successful assessment programs.


ANOTHER FAQ

Principles of Assessment

“Could you recommend a good source for some principles of assessment?” Here are some excerpts from 9 Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning, posted at the American Association of Higher Education website:

1. Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement.
2. Assessment is most effective when it reflects...not only what students know, but what they can do with what they know.
3. Assessment...entails comparing educational performance with educational purposes and expectations.
4. Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.
5. Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic. Assessment is a process whose power is cumulative.
6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.
7. Assessment makes a difference when it [is] connected to issues or questions that people really care about.
8. Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.
9. Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public. There is a compelling public stake in education.

--Astin. Reproduction permission granted.
Students’ Perceptions of Online Courses

As one avenue to measure student perceptions and satisfaction concerning online courses, a pilot project was initiated through the auspices of the Office of Assessment Services and the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center. The survey was designed in-house and was administered online to students (n = 149) in both the fall of 2003 and spring of 2004 semesters.

Major findings of the project include:
- 34 percent of students had been enrolled in more than one online course at NIU
- 24 percent surveyed had taken an online course at another institution of higher education
- 76 percent accessed course materials from their home base
- Students were pleased with the degree of technology support they received from all sources
- The majority felt that their effectiveness in using required technology was increased by the completion of their current online course
- 79 percent indicated that the greatest benefit of online courses was “time flexibility”

A report containing detailed results of this study has been mailed to key stakeholders across campus, with an articulated goal of obtaining direct feedback, programmatic feedback/use, and results obtained from application of the contained data.

For more information contact:
Craig Barnard; barnard@niu.edu
Murali Krishnamurthi; mkrishna@niu.edu
Carol Scheidenhelm; cscheidenhelm@niu.edu

Kathleen Blake Yancey: Portfolio Conference Keynote Speaker

With a firm date of March 4, 2005, planning is well underway to offer NIU’s first-ever, one-day, multi-session portfolio conference! The keynote speaker is to be Kathleen Blake Yancey, the R. Roy Pearce Professor of Professional Communication at Clemson University. Yancey has edited three books on portfolios and is the author of Reflection in the Writing Classroom (1998), a study of many kinds of reflective activities that can be used with students.

Mark your calendar now for March 4, 2005, and watch for a formal program announcement!

Toolkit is brought to you by the Office of Assessment Services:
Craig Barnard, Assessment Coordinator
Donna Askins, Editor-in-Chief
Joyce Rossi, Assessment Secretary
and George, Amy, and Lohita, the Assessment Research Assistants.