Assessment *in* Practice

Hands on with Digital Communication!

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Good assessment practice is critical to the learning experience of both faculty and students. Good *digital* assessment practice is even more important, given the rapid rise of social media tools and other instructional technologies in the classroom. Since a digital communication ability was incorporated into the assessment plan at LaGuardia Community College in 2013, faculty in the Communication Studies program have worked to create assignments that enable students to adequately showcase their digital communication ability. Outlined here are the challenges we faced, and our success in employing wikis to develop and assess our students' competence in digital communication.

A two-year diverse urban community college, LaGuardia chose to define and assess general education through a series of competencies required in all majors. "Conceiving of general education as competencies across the curriculum would allow for a relatively uniform outcomes assessment process in each major: each and every program would take responsibility for graduating students proficient in those competencies" (Arcario & Wilson, 2007, p. 206). In 2012, as a result of Middle States recommendations and consultations with faculty, the assessment plan was revised to include three general education core competencies and three communication abilities. Digital communication was added to the existing oral and written abilities. The Report of the Core Competency Task Force mentions the need for students "to be more than 'consumers' of technology" and must "become fluent as digital authors, creating websites, digital stories, and other multimedia products that incorporate complex mixtures of sound, audio and visual design to communicate with power" (Eynon & Klages, 2013 p.8). According to a 2016 Education Week Research Center survey, digital assessment is "booming" in K-12 education, with 83 percent of school district leaders claiming to use some digital tools to assess Common Core state standards (Molnar, 2017). Yet, higher education circles are slow to catch up. Much of the current research on digital assessment in the college setting highlights the lack of academic

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scholarship in this area or the gap between faculty knowledge and practice (Eyal, 2012; Jackson & Rodgers, 2012; Chase, Ross & Robbie, 2017).

UNDERSTANDING THE RUBRIC

Defining the parameters of digital communication and creating a rubric to assess student work proved to be a challenging task: Is an email digital communication, written, or both? A speech delivered to an audience in person is clearly oral communication, but when it is recorded and uploaded online, does it become digital? These are some of the questions the team, composed of faculty and staff, had to consider. In the end, the following definition was adopted:

> "[Digital communication] is the ability to create, evaluate, present, and communicate using a range of digital technologies. It requires one to manipulate and adapt digital media in order to effectively express ideas to others. For our purposes, digital communication emphasizes multi-media forms of expression, such as text, image, and/or video, as well as various platforms for digital interaction, including discussion threads, instant messaging, and social media."

The rubric developed for assessment outlines the efficacy of digital communication based on two technical dimensions: *Digital composition with diverse media elements*, and *Collaboration and Interaction* in addition to the three other dimensions, *Content Development and Organization*, *Purpose, Audience, and Genre*, and *Control of Language, Syntax and Mechanics*, common to written and oral abilities. These are measured on a scale from "Novice" (1) to "Proficient" (4).

In creating assignments to assess digital communication, two key terms emerged: *multimedia* and *interactive*, which describe our students' daily digital communication. Students increasingly live in a world defined by the interplay of various media formats. Social media, which plays an important part in their lives, is inherently interactive—it is based on people being able to comment, react, and give feedback to each other. It is increasingly multimedia, with most platforms supporting text, emoticons, images, videos and gifs. These features, however, do not always transfer easily to academic work. A word processing document with text and an image is multimedia, but fails to be interactive. A discussion board is interactive, but if it is limited to text only, it is not multimedia.

USING WIKIS

Supported by a mini-grant from the LaGuardia Center for Teaching and Learning, we decided to assess the implementation of the digital competency in the curriculum. Before looking at the assignments, we looked at student work already submitted as "digital" in Spring 2017. We were unable to score any of the student work with the rubric designed to assess digital communication. Looking closely, we realized the problem was not necessarily in our students' abilities to communicate digitally, but

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rather in the assignments that were not designed to enable students to showcase that ability. To introduce digital communication to faculty and students without stress, the three authors decided to explore wikis.

A wiki is a webpage that can be built and edited collaboratively and though largely text-based (such as Wikipedia), can include a wide variety of media. Most online learning platforms contain wiki tools, including Blackboard, Moodle, Sakai, and Canvas, and a variety of free wiki platforms—such as Wikispaces, PBWorks, and Wikia—are also available. In Fall 2017, we created wiki assignments in three different courses for three very different purposes. All three courses used Blackboard's "Wiki" function as the platform, a technology already familiar to both students and faculty. To demonstrate ease of use and to clarify the goals of the assignment, we modeled the creation of a wiki during class.

First, in a broadcasting course, students used wikis as an interactive space to host audio podcasts that were developed throughout the course. They created textual narratives enhanced by images, videos, and/or gifs to explain the theme and content of their recordings. Each student designed a wiki page and then reacted to one or more of their classmates' posts. The students in this course are primarily Communication Studies majors; the faculty member is an expert in digital communication.

Next, in a public speaking course, each student created a wiki to share their research about a famous person connected to a theme they chose to explore during the semester. The wiki also served as a visual aid during the presentation. In addition, each student was instructed to comment on two different wiki pages. Students usually take public speaking in their first or second semester and may or may not be fluent in technology. While it is the basic course for majors, it is also a required course for other majors. The faculty member was not familiar with wikis before volunteering for the project.

Finally, in a course on speech and hearing disorders, students used the wiki tool to collaboratively create a study page. Students built a wiki containing text, image and/or gifs to teach their classmates about the anatomical feature assigned to their group. Students in this course are enrolled in the speech pathology concentration of the Communication Studies program or the Childhood Education Program. The faculty member is familiar with wikis and other digital platforms.

We scored 54 wikis: 20 in the public speaking class, 18 in the broadcasting, and 16 in the speech and hearing disorders course. Using the same rubric, we similarly scored all artifacts, thus building reliability into the assessment process. Our attempt represents the first time that all 54 artifacts were considered scorable by the College's standards. On a scale of 1 to 4, the majority of the scores fell in the 2 and 3 categories; 29 twos and 16 threes; 5 ones and 4 fours. The low number of 1's may reflect how easy it is to learn how to create a wiki. In addition, the public speaking students did as well as the students in the other classes with more experienced faculty. While the

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sample is small with only three faculty involved, the results may point to the fact that wikis are easy to learn and to teach.

The low number of assignments scoring 4 may be attributed to the weakness in the other three dimensions described above; that is, in the design of the wiki rather than in its technical aspect. Composing a digital artifact requires more than technological skills. To ascertain this claim, we would need to score each dimension separately instead of scoring holistically.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Overall, the students seemed to navigate the wikis with relative ease, likely due to their familiarity with platforms such as Wikipedia and the way in which Blackboard frames its wiki space very similarly to a typical word processing software. However, in the areas of content and design, the difficulties varied. In the public speaking course, when students presented their wikis, they were not always able to explain their design choices. In the broadcasting class, the wiki was often used as a mere repository for podcasts rather than a page to engage visitors to listen to the podcasts. In the speech and hearing disorders course, the connections between the images and the video were not always explicit.

While we modeled the creation of a wiki in class to demonstrate ease of use, we did not insist on the importance of composition. A wiki has built-in interactivity because of its collaborative potential and space for comments. Taking this a step further, we asked students to provide hyperlinks, videos, and other playable content that require the audience to interact with the wiki page itself. Going forward, we will add a reflection question or ask for a narrative of the creation of the wiki to prompt our students to articulate content and design choices.

Upon testing the digital communication ability, we decided the best courses in which to implement digital communication would be Fundamentals of Communication, Mass Communication and Society, Normal Language Development, and Small Group Communication. These courses span the core curriculum of the program, allowing faculty to assess digital communication at the beginning, middle, and end of the program. With the help of our Speech Center, we organized workshops to support faculty development of wiki assignments.

From introducing wikis in three different courses in our program, we have confirmed that the flexibility and ease of use of the wiki make it a good entry tool into digital communication for both students and faculty. Implementing wikis in a wide variety of fields and courses is a simple way to develop and assess students' digital communication ability. We especially recommend wikis to faculty who are not technologically savvy as an entry to include digital communication in their courses. For these faculty, using wikis can also offer new possibilities to learn from their students.

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- NILOA's Founding Director, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.

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