



Only Birdies!

Every once in a while, golfers need to step back and assess their play. Whether it's their putting, chipping, or driving of the ball, taking some time to assess their play allows golfers to improve.

Many program leaders know that assessment is part of what improves a program and keeps it working. Assessment also allows for determination of success in the program goals and practices. Jennifer Trainor and John Holland's chapter lays out their program self-assessment based on the PARS framework to help readers engage in their own conversations about student writing and their faculty's professional development.

What we like about Trainor and Holland's chapter is that it is so focused on student perspectives and taking into consideration what their student users are saying about their courses. But along with this student focus, they don't forget faculty, and they discuss how important it is to assess one's faculty professional development on an ongoing basis in order to fill gaps and improve instructor performance and satisfaction.

Chapter 10. Personal, Accessible, Responsive, and Strategic Assessment: Creating a Faculty Community of Practice

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Abstract: In this chapter, we apply the PARS framework (Personal, Accessible, Responsible, Strategic) to a program self-assessment we designed and implemented for faculty teaching first- and second-year writing courses. We explain how we used our institution's request for an assessment of student writing to build a community of practice in which teachers meet regularly to read and interpret end-of-semester student reflections. Our goal has been to transform traditional assessment of student writing into an opportunity to engage with faculty in regular conversations about our pedagogical approaches, seeking to close the loop by noticing what parts of our teaching connect with students and what gaps we need to fill with professional development.

Keywords: assessment, professional development, community of practice, rubrics, faculty engagement

You know how to play the game. It is program assessment time, and the game is a kind of paint-by-rubric. Judge and rate student writing, and the result, as everyone already knows, will be filed away in a committee report too divorced from context to be useful to anyone, let alone the teachers dutifully ranking the students' writing.

As both writing teachers and leaders in our writing program (John, a full-time lecturer faculty who has led program and campus-wide initiatives related to online learning; Jennifer, a professor of composition who has served as writing program administrator (WPA) and regularly teaches first-year writing), we have been highly skeptical of this game: rubrics that flatten student learning, boilerplate descriptors of "good" academic writing, norming sessions that paper over students' writing process and raters' reading process, results that feel to teachers like a condemnation of their work. The assessment game is always followed by "business as usual" when we return to our classrooms.

And on our campus, as is the case in writing programs across the country, "business as usual" can feel very isolating. We sit alone in our offices. Schedules are aligned so that office mates do not work on the same day; doors can be

closed to avoid distractions. Most writing teachers work at multiple campuses, the proverbial freeway fliers in an urban landscape where two-hour commutes are not unusual. We fly solo. We teach solo. Assessment, in this context, is not grounded in listening, reciprocity, or community, and judgments about student performance can land hard on vulnerable students and teachers working without job security or institutional enfranchisement.

Theory and Practice

Rethinking Assessment with PARS

In 2019, we began using the PARS framework to refocus assessments, looking beyond rubrics and judgments of student writing and toward the longer view, positioning ourselves in opposition to the standard rules of play. We needed an approach to assessment that were asset-based and equity-focused, that broke down teaching silos, and that led to meaningful changes and growth among teachers. To use Jessie Borgman and Casey McArdle's (2019) golf analogy, we needed an assessment process that focused less on the score and more on how and why we practice and play the game.

As researchers, our strengths complemented each other: John brought expertise in online pedagogy and a strong sense of design at all levels (from hole-in-one evidenced-based workshops that could change how teachers understand their work to an understanding of research methods to a sense of how to facilitate online teacher learning). Jennifer brought a commitment to accessibility, social justice, and community-building. Together, we set out to create a different assessment game in our program— one imbued with long-range vision; rooted in a stronger sense of teamwork, collaboration, social justice, and community; accessible via multiple modalities; and drawing on faculty expertise and experience.

Our personal, accessible, responsive, and strategic approach has resulted in evolution, even a revolution. We have moved from silos and empty hallways to a community of practice—a model of collaborative leadership and collaborative operational work in our writing program that takes place across multiple modalities. Our work has shown us that just as PARS shifted teachers' and administrators' perceptions of online education—from transactional and linear to human-centered and process-oriented—it can similarly change how we approach assessment, which is often initiated in a top-down way by those who view education, including literacy education, as transactional and skills-based. Faculty tend to resist such assessment because they perceive it as divorced from the complexities and relational aspects of teaching and learning they value. PARS helped us to construct an organic, contextual, local approach to assessment that reflected the faculty's experience, promoting improvements in curriculum and pedagogy while removing the silos teachers had been working in.

In the following sections, we share key takeaways as a blueprint—of sorts—for using PARS to create a meaningful assessment. Our assessment was personal in that it brought faculty together for weekly discussion and reflection, accessible in that it transformed assessment from obscure rubric language and acontextual scoring of anonymous students driven by administrative need to a faculty-owned and faculty-led process of transparent interpretation and improvement, responsive in that we adapted our assessment continually to meet emerging faculty and program needs, and strategic in that we have continued to garner funding for the program by bridging our goals with university priorities.

Personal Assessment: Identify Program Values

Scholars in writing studies argue that assessment should be locally controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically based, and accessible (i.e., transparent to all interested parties) and that assessments should be consistent with contemporary theories about language, learning, and literacy (Moore et al., 2009). Most importantly, they argue that assessment must involve teachers—“Members of the community are in the best position to guide decisions about what assessments will inform that community” (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2022)—and that it must focus on *closing the loop* and creating meaningful changes in teacher practice.

We saw connections between these scholarly perspectives on assessment and our PARS-driven approach. Following Broad (2003) and Gallagher and Turley (2013), we designed a self-study assessment project that would engage as many faculty as possible in the process of reflecting on and expressing their educational aims, creating an iterative process in which the resulting knowledge became part of our ongoing inquiry. We invited a team of teachers to meet each week as part of a self-study assessment project. In the first year of the project, we asked teachers to reflect on their pedagogical goals and to bring in class samples from students who they deemed to be strong writers as well as from those who they considered to be struggling.

Rather than requiring teachers to submit student work for assessment, we invited teachers to talk together about what they value in student writing. Each week, we discussed a different teacher’s struggling and strong students. These conversations were a tough, but critical, shift for all of us. For most teachers, assessment meant objective judgment (think about those rubrics to judge student writing). Instead, we encouraged an interpretive process focused on teachers’ perceptions of their students and classrooms—what was working, where they and their students were struggling, and what success looks like for them. In the ensuing discussions, silos began to dissolve as teachers listened to one another and identified our shared teaching values and goals.

While assessment is usually focused on the performance of broad indicators of academic writing (appropriate use of thesis statements, source citation,

analysis), teachers on our assessment team revealed in these early discussions that for them, “success” was indicated by signs of student growth over time—e.g., when teachers saw that students had learned something new, tried something new, took a risk, showed ownership and independence in their literacy practices, gained a new perspective, grew in confidence and self-efficacy, overcame negative experiences or associations with writing. These signs of success were not reflected in typical outcomes-based rubrics, but they are central to how teachers in our program think about their teaching and their students’ learning.

Identifying these values was slow work, involving weekly meetings as an assessment team for an entire year. At times, the meetings felt aimless, more like a graduate seminar than an assessment. Nevertheless, we took notes on emerging themes and questions throughout the process. As a result, by the end of the year, we could articulate a set of organic program values that were rooted in community and personally meaningful to teachers. Next, we codified those values into assessment tools—a critical move that made assessment *accessible*.

Try This!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What typifies a strong writer, in your view? • What characterizes a struggling writer? • What evidence in this piece of writing tells you that a student is struggling or strong?
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Accessible Assessment: Use Local Tools Designed by Faculty

Borgman and McArdle (2019) point out that “mitigating confusion is central to accessible design” (p. 45). As they write, the best way to encourage student success is to design materials that are transparent, intuitive, and meaningful to students. We quickly discovered that the same principle applies to assessment practices with faculty. Too often, assessment materials are couched in alien and distancing, if not obscure and confusing, terms. Rubrics, for example, are often tautological or assume shared understandings of rhetorical and writing terms that in reality do not exist.

To avoid these problems, we wrote threshold concepts (TCs) that embodied teachers’ values and created a kind of learning map of the growth teachers told us they looked for in their students. The learning map consisted primarily of teachers’ descriptions of typical students’ progress toward understanding the threshold concepts rather than mastery of outcomes. Our TCs and learning map were both derived from the values and goals that emerged in the first year of our community-based assessment project. We wanted to ensure that the assessment language we were using was familiar—that it came from teachers themselves.

We ultimately created seven TCs describing teachers’ learning goals and 35 (five for each TC) descriptions of students’ unfolding development in relation to those learning goals. These descriptions were essential because they represented

teachers' core value when they read and assessed student writing: growth over time. Ultimately, these tools gave us an accessible language for talking about the student writing we were starting to collect for a more formal phase of our assessment.

Try This!	<p>Ask faculty to map typical students' journeys toward learning goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where do students begin? How would you characterize students at the beginning of the semester in relation to each learning goal? • How would you characterize students' location in relation to each learning goal by the end of your course? • What do students still need to learn?
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In the second year of our assessment, teachers developed, beta-tested, and revised the threshold concepts and learning map we used to analyze student writing. The learning map, although it resembles a rubric, is different in several key ways. For example, rather than leading assessors to a judgment about student writing, the map prompts assessors to consider learning and literacy development over time. Rather than student performance, the map focuses on aspects of literacy that support performance, such as reading and writing processes and metacognition, as well as attitudes about literacy and school. Rather than focus on one moment of student performance, the map captures growth and change over time and articulates typical milestones that students meet in their first year of college. Finally, the map describes students' understanding of the seven threshold concepts at the beginning of their college journey and articulates learning goals that we expect students to meet by the time they finish their upper-division writing-in-the-disciplines courses.

As discussed in the next section, we used these teacher-created assessment tools to create a *responsive* assessment, listen to students' experiences of our courses, and create a community of practice among faculty.

Responsive Assessment: Listen to Students and Teachers

For Borgman and McArdle (2019), responsive means that online instructors are available to respond to and collaborate with students [faculty] (p. 51). In the context of our assessment practices, responsive meant listening—both to students and teachers—while attending to what we hear. Our assessment began with listening to teachers describe their values and goals. As we moved into data gathering, we similarly prioritized listening to students. Instead of collecting student papers, we created a reflection assignment that asked students to tell us about their literacy learning and growth. From there, we asked faculty interpretive questions about those student reflections: How do students

experience our courses? How do they develop as students and as writers? What do they struggle with? What do they learn?

Our reflection assignment asks students to choose two from a list of the learning goals we identified in the first year of our assessment and to write a 400-word reflective mini-essay for each. We collect the students' reflections (anonymously and with permission) and archive them. Teams of teachers then meet weekly for a semester to discuss student reflections and place the student using our learning map.

Our assessment is *responsive* in that teacher growth emerges from collaborative interactions between faculty. These interactions create community and offer teachers a rare space to talk freely about their teaching. As Lynn Hilliard (2020) says, faculty need permission to be vulnerable as a precursor to building mutual respect and trust: "We need a place where we can share what's happening in our classes—including what isn't working—without fear of retribution" (p. 210). Our assessment teams are the backbone of the larger community of practice in our program; our weekly meetings function as a space for teachers to reflect on their teaching and to see their teaching reflected through the eyes of students.

Participants in our assessment program have consistently told us that our weekly meet-ups were the highlight of their work week, a time to put the day-to-day stress of teaching on the shelf to talk with colleagues about student writing, reflect on their practices, and begin to alter their perspectives about writing assessment. "It's like a weekly graduate seminar for practicing teachers," said one of our recent participants. "What's different," said another participant, "is that our sessions are built around a focused heuristic for close reading and close discussion of student work."

<p>Try This!</p>	<p>Here are the discussion questions we use to structure our weekly assessment meetings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What learning goals did the student focus on? • What does the student say they learned? What evidence (reasons, examples) do they cite to support their claims about what they learned? • What evidence of learning or growth do you see in their writing? Using your skills of textual analysis, close reading, and interpretation, how would you characterize the student's reflection? • Place the student on our threshold concept learning map. Why did you place the student as you did? • Thinking about this student's reflection, what do you think is working in our classrooms, and what do you think we need to change or improve?
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This process is grounded in responsiveness: a cycle of listening in which students reflect on their experiences, faculty listen closely to students and each other as they discuss their interpretations of student learning, and WPAs collaborate with faculty, listening to both students and faculty about what is working in the program and what gaps need to be filled.

We facilitated most of the sessions in much the same way as we would lead class discussions in a graduate course. Each week, we began by asking one or two participants to share a sample from the student reflections they read that week. The sample can be one that surprised, intrigued, confused, or impressed them. The discussion takes off from there. These are not norming sessions; instead, we encourage teachers to read student work with an interpretive lens as we try to understand a particular student's learning journey through our course. Through this process, our weekly meetings build community, as trusting relationships emerge via discussion of students' growth, learning, and experiences.

Try This!	<p>Our Self-Study Team Wrap-up Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you characterize the most meaningful take-aways from our work this semester? These takeaways might be about your own curriculum, or about our program. • Our focus has been on mapping student understanding (via TCs and student reflection) rather than assessing their skills and/or their written products. How can this approach inform your teaching? • What has it been like for us to not judge student writing? • What would be most beneficial for our program regarding our following faculty professional development session [state the date] for 20 minutes of seed planting? • What do we want to share about our self-study experience at back-to-school meet-ups in the Fall semester?
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Strategic Assessment: Tie Teachers' Perspectives to University Priorities

Our assessment process has morphed into professional development as teachers on our semester-long assessment teams formed communities of practice and as we took insights gleaned from their discussions back to the larger program, creating workshops and learning opportunities for faculty that drove program improvement.

Turning assessment into meaningful professional development required us to be *strategic*. First and perhaps most importantly, every teacher who has

participated in our assessment for the past three years has been paid in either stipends or course releases for their work. Securing this funding required that we continually tie our internal goals and values, as well as teachers’ perspectives and experiences, to university priorities. For example, in our third year of this assessment project, we focused on equity gaps and drop, fail, withdraw (DFW) rates, both of which are high priorities on our campus. We proposed to use our assessment teams and protocols to conduct a deep dive into the issues that impede student success. But we grounded this proposed deep dive in our teacher-driven assessment practices.

We asked faculty on our assessment team to identify and analyze a current student who was struggling in some way. Our team then filled out a shared Google Doc with notes and reflections about each student. We tracked interventions and success across the semester, creating case studies of students, some of whom made it successfully through our courses, and some of whom did not. At the end of the year, we wrote a report that reflected the insights we gained from these case studies, including the professional development we identified as necessary to improving our program’s efforts to support struggling students. Sharing these insights with the campus and administrators helps bridge the gap between administrative focus on student success data and teachers’ experiences and expertise. Strategically, such bridging helps administrators better understand our work and strengthens our ability to secure future funding.

<p>Try This!</p>	<p>Consider strategically translating university priorities into issues and language that faculty care about. In our case, for example, we translated the “bean-counting” aspects of our university’s focus on equity and student success (e.g., numbers of DFWs in first-year courses, equity gaps presented as percentages) into questions that faculty value and respond to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you see/don’t you see re: this student that worries you? • Where is this student on our threshold concept map so far? • Student-Reported Struggle - What have they told you/not told you? What do you surmise (unknowns)? • Your Response to the Struggle: How do you hope to support the student? What kinds of interventions might help? • Post-Script - (mid-term check-in): What happened with the student? What were the results of your intervention? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Where are they now? ▪ What can we learn from your interaction/experience with this student?
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Conclusion and Takeaways

While most of us in writing studies would agree that assessment can feel like a burden, our PARS approach has transformed this burden into an active, vibrant community of practice. We hope we can inspire other programs to chart a similar course by sharing our process here. Aligning assessment practices with PARS has increased teacher collaboration, agency, and ownership of our program. It has helped us understand students' learning in a more fine-grained way, which helps us create curricula and classroom strategies that address where students are in order to move them toward more profound learning and a deeper relationship to literacy.

Most importantly, it has provided us with a constructive set of practices to build and sustain teachers' professional communities in our program, and it has contributed to larger changes in the culture of assessment on our campus. Our Center for Teaching Excellence now offers workshops on anti-racist classroom assessment, for example, and there is a movement afoot to find more holistic ways to evaluate teaching, moving away from over-reliance on teacher evaluation surveys given at the end of the semester.

Both teachers and students themselves need support in resisting narrow definitions of assessment. As Doug Downs (2020) writes, a college writing classroom should function as “a space, a moment, an experience—in which students might reconsider writing apart from previous schooling and work, within the context of inquiry-based higher education” (p. 50). Aligning our assessment practices to match this definition of our work has, more than any other professional development, created supportive communities of practice in our program and created a culture of meaningful improvement in our classrooms. Here are some final thoughts:

- Get personal with your writing faculty. Ask faculty to articulate their assessment goals and create meaningful assessment tools. Find your own local lens on what your program values in student writing.
- Promote accessible outcomes by transforming your assessment practices from a top-down acontextual mandate (standard rubrics) to a faculty-owned and faculty-led process of interpretation and improvement.
- Be responsive in designing institutional assessment mandates by listening to your teachers and students.
- Design strategic assessment practices that leverage university dictates with faculty values and student voices.

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