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## Important Dates

### November 4, 2010

9<sup>th</sup> Annual  
Leadership Day

### November 5-6, 2010

16<sup>th</sup> Annual  
Fall Conference

*Assessment is...  
knowing how we know*

Shaw Conference Centre,  
Westin Edmonton

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AAC *Communique* is also available  
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Spring 2010

## Quality Assessment Practices in Post-Secondary Education

Sherry Bennett, AAC Executive Director

Occasionally a comment is made that we can't really make changes to our classroom assessment practices because we have to prepare the students for what they will experience in their post-secondary studies. If that thought has ever crossed your mind, take heart! In this issue of *Communique* we are excited to share some of the successes and challenges that advocates for quality classroom assessment are experiencing in Alberta faculties of education. The students who are benefiting from the modeling and instruction in these post-secondary classrooms will soon be in our schools as student teachers and eventually as colleagues. They will be looking for mentors to assist them in further refining their classroom assessment practices.

Part of the AAC Vision states that "universities prepare teachers to provide classroom assessment practices that support learning for their students" and "assessment practices at elementary, junior high, senior high and post secondary institutions are closely aligned."

Have we met our goal? Perhaps not completely, but we are definitely on our way. ■

## Unpacking Assessment

Joanne Neal

Assessment is a significant topic for beginning teachers, and so, at Concordia University College of Alberta we strive to provide our students with multiple opportunities to learn about this very broad topic and to have several occasions to practice their skills in this area.

Prior to the second practicum experience, our students have an intensive 3 week planning course which includes portions of the Wiggins and McTighe text, *Understanding by Design*. One assignment for this course is to create a performance based task with accompanying rubric for the culmination of their practicum experience. At this time we introduce our students to the resources on the AAC website which will support them during their field experiences.

Following the practicum, students return for their final semester and another opportunity to refine their assessment knowledge and skills. This time they look at provincial achievement exams. After *taking* both the grade 6 science and social studies exams, students work in teams to analyze the types of questions that are asked on the exams in relation to Bloom's Taxonomy. They then brainstorm appropriate instructional strategies for each level to ensure there is a flow between the cognitive level of the Program of Studies, the instructional strategies, and then the assessment.

One midterm exam in the final semester provides students with a performance based task and a rubric. Their challenge is to critique the rubric, noting what is positive and what requires change. Invariably, the rubric is a difficult one, and so it requires a solid understanding of what constitutes a quality rubric in order for them to be successful. We believe that this kind of work will assist them greatly when they are in the classroom and exposed to a range of rubrics that will vary in quality.

These are just some of the strategies we use for teaching assessment. However, we also know that practice in the field will be very valuable. We encourage our students to stay in contact with us after graduation, sharing their assessment successes and challenges. ■

## Enhancing Assessment in Teacher Education

Keith Roscoe

The Alberta Assessment Consortium has a vision of contributing to the advancement of research-based classroom assessment practices in Faculties of Education. In January 2008 the AAC proposed that the University of Lethbridge Faculty of Education collaborate in a two-year assessment project, *Enhancing Assessment in Teacher Education*. The AAC offered assessment materials, consulting services, and professional development seminars to a participating group of instructors who attended seminars, implemented their choice of appropriate assessment tools and techniques in their classroom, and collaborated in gathering data on the implementation and effectiveness of their assessment initiatives. Sixteen of the approximately fifty U of L faculty members expressed interest in joining the project in its first year, including tenured faculty, contract instructors, and seconded teachers.

Our initial results show that current ideas about K-12 assessment—as advocated in the work of assessment authorities such as Stiggins, O'Connor, William, Davies, Guskey, Sutton, and the AAC—are applicable to post-secondary education and in particular, teacher education. Student teachers seem to respond well to assessment approaches being used in Alberta schools, and are more than willing to become active partners in their own assessment. It is not enough to just describe current assessment practices in teacher education courses; teacher educators should also be modeling good practice in their own assessment work. We also found that building of a collaborative community in teacher education classroom seems to be a co-requisite for engaging students actively in their own assessment and supporting the assessment of their peers. If K-12 students can be involved as active assessment partners, then student teachers certainly can, and should be fully involved, as professional partners in education. ■

## Two Successful Assessment for Learning Approaches

Auriana Burns

Communication Through Mathematics is a required course for elementary preservice teachers in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. In this course, students learn methodologies for teaching mathematics in a problem-based, hands-on, interactive manner that encourages discussion, questioning, and reasoning – methodologies missed by many students in their own school experiences. So many students find teaching mathematics challenging, which presents a strong rationale to use Assessment for Learning. As an instructor, I use a number of Assessment for Learning strategies; here are two of my most valuable approaches.

A one-minute paper asks a question on the topics we've been working with or invites a general comment or question that the student has about class. By using one-minute papers, I am able to gauge student understanding and then adjust my instruction as needed to achieve deeper understanding of concepts. In addition, I am able to answer questions or address misunderstandings that specific students share. Numerous students have commented on the value of one-minute papers for their own reflection and learning.

For the past six years, I have experienced great success with the "Met/Not Yet Met" approach from Anne Davies (1997), *Setting and Using Criteria*. Students bring their assignments to class a few days before they are due, even if they are still works in progress. Using the "Met/Not Yet Met" structure, students provide written and oral feedback to their peers. Students have the opportunity to reflect upon and revise their assignments prior to submitting them for evaluation. This process ensures students have a better understanding of assignment expectations on both a knowledge and evaluative level.

Modeling these assessment for learning strategies allows students to experience their power in the teaching / learning process. ■

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## Are you interested in working as a sessional instructor with pre-service teachers?

Karen LaRone

Each time I respond to an invitation to teach a course in elementary education, my primary consideration is not one of scheduling, travel requirements, or balancing the workload with my full-time job. My most significant concern is whether or not I will be able to effectively model, and have the students experience, principles and practices of fair and authentic assessment.

Experiences with teaching pre-service teachers over the past six years have pushed me to seriously reflect on my beliefs and principles regarding assessment. I believe that assessment and instruction are inextricably linked. I believe that assessment for learning (AFL) positively impacts student achievement. And I truly believe that our actions reflect our beliefs and values about assessment. Ruth Sutton's first presentation slide at the 2009 AAC Conference struck a chord. "Old habits die hard. We know what to do to improve assessment for learning, but how do we turn knowing into doing?"

What makes it "hard" for me? Resisting the temptation to teach (and assess) as I was taught makes it hard. Limited opportunities in a 13 week course to establish relationships and trust that are foundational to AFL make it hard. The huge investment of time and effort involved when modeling AFL makes it hard. Worrying about University expectations regarding a specified distribution of marks makes it hard. Anticipating the anonymous *Universal Student Ratings of Instruction* (IDQs) makes it very hard.

What makes it "hard" for the students? Cognitive dissonance makes it hard. Familiarity with the definitions and theoretical constructs of AFL but limited personal experiences with it as a learner make it hard. The power attributed to, and familiarity with, receiving a mark at the top of the page instead of descriptive feedback makes it hard. Competition for those marks makes it hard. Having to "do everything twice" makes it hard. What seems like an inordinate expenditure of time, effort, and commitment compared with other courses makes it very hard.

So why will I say yes the next time I receive an invitation? My observations regarding significantly enhanced achievement relative to modeling AFL make it easier. Students sharing *aha* moments where they make connections between what they have been reading about assessment for learning and what they are personally experiencing in the course make it much easier. Requests for reference letters prefaced with comments regarding how challenging the course was, yet how much was learned, make it easier. An occasional message of appreciation received long after the course is over and the pre-service teacher is now in-service, makes it easier. And Ruth Sutton, telling the audience that "if it feels comfortable, you are not doing it right" convinced me to reflect on lessons learned and *have another go*. ■

Assessment is ... knowing how we know

### AAC Fall Conference

Shaw Conference Centre, Westin Hotel  
Edmonton, Alberta

**Keynote Speakers: Spencer Kagan, Allison Zmuda**

**Leadership Day November 4**

AAC Members: \$175  
Non-members: \$225

**Main Conference November 5-6**

AAC Members: \$290  
Non-members: \$400

Registration begins Monday, May 17, 2010

[www.aac.ab.ca](http://www.aac.ab.ca)

## So You Think You Can Do Quality Assessment in Post-Secondary Education

Darlene Montgomery

When I was asked to teach a course in classroom assessment for the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary, I was challenged to “walk the talk” about classroom assessment practices I had been advocating to teachers in my role as a system specialist and a member of the AAC for almost two decades. My course would be offered as part of the U of C’s “Expanding Horizons” program, designed to provide courses for educators from other countries who want to qualify for permanent certification in Alberta and for teachers with an undergraduate degree who want to improve their grade point average to qualify for entrance into a graduate program. I wondered if the structured grading system of a post-secondary institution would enable me to create a context for learning in which my students could be significantly involved in the assessment process.

The grading policy. I was surprised and relieved that the faculty grading policy was much less constraining than I had imagined. It was described in clear, but quite broad parameters in less than one page. I could easily make connections between the faculty’s performance level descriptors and those of the AAC.

Identifying the learning outcomes and developing criteria. I had freedom, subject to administrative approval, to design the course for my students. I decided that it would be logical to adopt the Alberta Teaching Quality Standard (TQS) as the “Program of Studies” for the course. I selected the expectations in the TQS that describe the knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA’s) that Alberta Education expects teachers to develop in relation to classroom assessment. I then had the students work in small groups to develop criteria for the assessment-related KSA’s we had selected. This proved to be quite challenging for my students. I realized that I had to model the process more precisely for them, showing them how to draw upon our reading and discussion of Anne Davies’ *Making Classroom Assessment Work* and the AAC resources we had examined.

Designing the performance task, providing exemplars and developing a rubric. My students and I developed an authentic performance task that would demonstrate their achievement of the criteria we selected. They would create an assessment section for their professional portfolios that they could present to a school administrative team in an interview for a teaching position. The assessment section would be a short instructional unit for a grade level and subject area of their choice demonstrating their ability to plan and implement both assessment FOR and OF learning, based clearly on the Alberta Program of Studies. We were challenged by the fact that because this was the first time I had taught the course, I had no student exemplars of the finished product to show them. I compensated for this by offering as many professional examples of the parts of the project as possible. Some students decided to use the AAC template for developing a performance task; others evolved or adapted methods of their own. I developed a rubric for the performance task and gave the students opportunity to suggest changes.

Giving and receiving feedback on the work-in-progress. I provided opportunities for students to receive feedback from their classmates in one of our classes and from me in one-to-one meetings outside of class. I also arranged for them to receive feedback from an authentic audience by inviting four colleagues who were school and system administrators to our class. They each met with a small group of my students, listened to the students present the assessment sections they had designed for their professional portfolios just as they would in an interview situation, engaged them in discussion and provided feedback to affirm what they had done well and give suggestions for further thought and refinement of their work. The students’ comments indicated that for many of them this was the most valuable experience in the course. The administrators provided invaluable feedback, helping them to see the larger context and potential significance of their work – something that can be lost in a focus on the details.

Self-assessment and teacher assessment of learning. I provided space at the end of each performance level of the rubric for student comments. I asked the students to circle the grade they believed they had achieved for each criterion, direct me to the specific pages where I would find evidence of their achievement, and give reasons to support the grade they had circled. Their self-assessments and explanations helped me see evidence I might have overlooked and also gave me additional insight into the depth of their understanding of important concepts in assessment.

My first teaching experience in a post-secondary educational setting has convinced me that some of the stereotypes we have about the outdated assessment practices our students will be subjected to in these environments need to be re-examined. I received a very open and appreciative response to enlightened approaches to assessment from both the faculty administration and my students. Their assessment of me was generous; I would give myself a “B”. I will need to improve my organization of the course so as to provide more opportunity for students to practise and receive feedback. There was too much pressure on them at the end of the course. In spite of that, when I teach the course again in July, I will have outstanding student exemplars to show my next group. I’m going for an “A”. ■