

**Patricia Comeaux. (Ed.). *Assessing Online Learning*. Bolton, MA: Anker, 2005. 204 pp. Hard: \$24.95. ISBN: 1-882982-77-0.**

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In *Assessing Online Learning*, Comeaux and her contributors provide a snapshot of various assessment practices and methodologies that may be applied in solely online, blended, as well as traditional face-to-face courses. Although not a comprehensive review, Comeaux presents an analysis of online assessment practices in higher education settings to include community colleges, universities, vocational and non-vocational programs. Assessment applications range from complex collaborative learning practices with electronic checklists and rubrics to simple, commonly available tools, such as discussion boards and online quizzes. *Assessing Online Learning* provides higher education practitioners with background theory supporting each of the applications, but also with structured, tested assessment modules that can be easily implemented into any curriculum.

*Assessing Online Learning's* most valuable contributions are the strategies and techniques presented. Each chapter is a self-contained unit that outlines theory, practice, and limitations or future recommendations. Hofmeister and Thomas (Chapter 5) present Virtual Learning Modules, a set of organized reading and writing activities designed to be used with any discussion board tool. For practitioners, discussion boards are often seen as a tool with much potential for improving learning (pre-class preparation, active learning, student interaction, exam preparation), but it is not always clear how to implement them ways that meaningfully engage students and measure activities that truly gauge learning. Virtual Learning Modules are disaggregated into eight components and include participation level rubrics and scoring guides that allow instructors to easily measure and assess student participation and progress.

Comeaux's contributors do a particularly good job at providing practical implementation strategies, which is especially useful considering that higher education institutions are using relatively standard course management systems (i.e., WebCT, Blackboard, Desire2Learn). For example, the chapter on online lecture or seminar-based course assessment practices (Chapter 8) details the use of WebCT tools (tools commonly available in other course management systems) to implement online quizzes, communications, online format and delivery, summative and formative assessments, and various other written learning measurements. Other chapters provide similar tool recommendations.

Comeaux argues that in order to change student learning, the methods of assessment must also be changed. However, a limitation of *Assessing Online Learning*, and arguably assessment practices in general, is the lack of comparison and outcome measure data. In other words, what are the measurable student learning improvements after the treatment—Virtual Learning Modules, team rubrics, web-based multiple choice tests—has been applied. This problem is perhaps symptomatic of the fact that many courses have not been constructed according to learning or course objectives, a critical step in developing a meaningful assessment tool. This approach allows practitioners to quickly review the research on a particular pedagogy, understand practical tool requirements and evaluate the results of an actual implementation.

One of learning technology's purported benefits is its ability to increase educational access to those in remote locations or to allow for larger class sizes without compromising the

learning experience, i.e., maintaining student-student and student-faculty interaction. Along those lines, an important piece of information for practitioners as they consider implementing these online assessment tools is scalability and learner/tool/methodological fit. Although some of the proposed methodologies specify a tool (discussion boards) or a course management system (WebCT), tools and systems are not mapped to assessment practices or, perhaps more importantly, to types of learners. For example, team activities may be appropriate for advanced or self-motivated learners, while multiple-choice pretests may help instructors transmit foundational concepts to learners in survey courses. As the menu of online assessment products continues to grow, information regarding the tool's success with learner types, learning styles, and learning environments will aid in the selection process.

As college and university instructors, we are regularly exposed to the characteristics of the net generation learner, but are seldom provided with strategies or teaching methodologies that enable us to address learner needs in a way that goes beyond trial and error. The assessment tools presented in *Assessing Online Learning* are pedagogical-supported with research in the areas of asynchronous, synchronous, learner-centered, learning communities, constructivist and other relevant theories. Commercial technology providers often offer teaching tools with little information on how they address cognitive processes, but Comeaux provides a practitioner's guide to proven strategies using existing tools, thereby closing a significant gap.

Assessment in an online, face-to-face, or blended environment, has been an ongoing challenge in post-secondary education, yet a requirement nevertheless. In a fiscally constrained higher education environment that is increasingly driven by data, costly technological systems and tools are being held accountable to their claims of improving teaching and learning. *Assessing Online Learning* is an important contribution in the area of assessment. Of equal importance, it addresses assessment in a way that is practical and feasible using online, electronic tools that are able to automate and measure learning in a way that was previously not possible, making it an valuable resource for all higher education practitioners.