

## Exploring Assessment Alternatives for Deaf Students\*

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At a time of growing concern about assessment and increasing need to prove successful learning outcomes, professional educators who work with deaf and hard of hearing students may find themselves in a quandary. For many students who are deaf, as well as for hearing children who learn English as a Second Language (ESL), traditional, standardized English-based tests often do not adequately reflect their potential. Yet no other institutionally accepted form of educational assessment is currently available.

As a teacher working with deaf adults who are making the transition from high school to college, I continually face the challenge of locating assessment tools that accurately diagnose their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Talking to colleagues who work with ESL students, I discovered that we share similar challenges; the non-traditional learners we serve, no matter how impressive their classroom performance, tend to struggle with standardized assessment methods.

While these tests may offer neat, clean statistics, they seldom provide adequate information about the students involved. Standardized tests serve one primary institutional purpose; they are considered a quick way to predict a student's ability to succeed in the college or university environment. But as we have repeatedly seen, standardized tests do not provide an accurate gauge with regard to students who are deaf. For these and other nontraditional learners, such tests seem only a way to reduce their achievements to a neat, numerical score, which is then used to determine their future educational placement.

### **The Search for a New System**

A more accurate and equitable system of educational assessment is clearly needed, one that will measure a student's actual skills and knowledge without strict reliance on English, usually the student's second language. Two things are essential: a) students must feel that they are active participants in the evaluation process; and, b) tests need to provide more reliable measures of actual student learning experiences.

A search for innovative, realistic assessment strategies is taking place on several campuses in the state of Washington. The emphasis is shifting toward an assessment approach that empowers students to develop decision-making skills and that evaluates critical thinking and lifelong learning. That approach may take the form of written self-assessments, applied critical thinking, and portfolios of student-generated work. Rather than reinforcing passive behavior, these methods encourage active student participation in the learning and evaluation process.

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While the students I teach are high school seniors and graduates, I believe that the assessment tools we have developed can be used with equal effectiveness for junior high and high school age students. With some adjustments in content material, these methods can be adapted to fit a great variety of educational settings, subject areas, and ability levels.

Worthwhile assessment strategies should include the goals of encouraging critical thinking and the development of lifelong learning skills. The assessment examples that follow can help students reflect on what they are learning and develop connections among concepts and principles, applying them to their lives and the larger society. These methods can be used with students of a variety of ages and grade levels, with teaching materials tailored for the target audience. They can be used successfully for the collection of pre- and post-test data, as well as for evaluation of unit-specific learning.

### **Student Self-Assessments**

Written self-assessments require students to critically analyze what they have learned and its application in their lives. In teaching transitional courses for deaf students about to enter college, written self-assessments encourage them to evaluate and synthesize important information they have learned.

For example, Seattle Central Community College offers a college transition program for deaf students called "Orientation to College Success." Among other things, it encourages students to think critically about a variety of health matters, including HIV and AIDS awareness. After participating in several concept building sessions about the issues of HIV/AIDS and personal responsibility, students take part in a directed group activity that includes a model for making decisions. They learn that they must think about the topic, seek additional information as necessary, and formulate their responses to the problem. They then develop ideas of how and why they can support their responses, as in the following example:

You have been dating someone for about four months. Both you and your partner were tested for HIV, and you both tested negative. Now your partner refuses to use condoms during sexual contact, claiming there is no risk.

Based on what you have learned about HIV and AIDS, how would you respond to this situation? Why? What would influence your decision? Why?

A modified written self-assessment would encourage young adults to think critically about how they might respond in a similar situation, while providing teachers with a method for evaluating their grasp of key concepts. This kind of exercise gives students an opportunity to relate new concepts to their own lives and to envision how they might cope with similar situations.

### **Critical Thinking Analyses**

Teachers can assess critical thinking skills through a variety of nontraditional methods. Videotaped scenarios can be used to illustrate key concepts, encouraging students to analyze what they see,

and to apply newly learned concepts. Dr. George Bridges, a University of Washington Sociology professor, has developed the following method of using videotaped material to collect pre- and post-test data for an introductory sociology course.

On the first day of class, students watch a racial confrontation in a film clip from Spike Lee's film, *Do the Right Thing*. Dr. Bridges asks them to respond to the clip through written analysis, incorporating appropriate sociological principles. At the end of the quarter, Bridges repeats the clip and asks students to evaluate the scenario again. Comparing pre- and post-test analyses provides valuable information about student learning and achievement.

My course, "Orientation to College Success," uses a limited version of this assessment technique. I introduce a portion of the course that deals with date or acquaintance rape with a segment from *The Grey Area: His Date/Her Rape*--an educational video tape developed for deaf high school and college students by the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. The segment depicts a dating situation that leads to rape. I do not describe the material before showing it; I simply ask students to pay attention to the behavior of the people involved.

After watching the scene, students write what they noticed about the behavior of the characters. I ask whether they think the woman in the scenario was actually raped, or was a willing participant in a sexual situation. Students discuss their observations as a group.

Then I present information about date and acquaintance rape, and introduce a workshop about date rape presented by an educator from the Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services agency (a local service for abused deaf women and men). Students complete a variety of relevant reading and writing assignments. At the end of the unit, students watch the initial video segment again for assessment purposes. After the second showing, students think critically about what they have learned and reapply those ideas to the situation they have seen.

### **Analyzing Communication**

Another example of critical thinking assessment involves consumer responses to mass media. It can be used in reading, writing and language arts classes. This teaching unit encourages students to look beyond slick television and magazine advertisements and to analyze the techniques of manipulation advertisers use to sell products and services. Students begin by bringing samples of magazine advertisements to class. I provide videotapes of television commercials and overheads or copies of print advertisements for class discussions. Students learn about the various propaganda methods advertisers use to appeal to consumers and pinpoint examples of these techniques in actual advertisements.

One classroom activity might be to analyze an ad that shows a group of people having a good time together, seemingly enjoying the use of a particular product. The actual function of the product may have little or nothing to do with the fun and excitement portrayed in the advertisement. But lonely consumers may be struck by the fact that the people in the ad seem to be having a good time -- a situation infinitely more appealing than feeling alone and left out.

After discussing and reviewing these concepts, students -- either individually or in groups--prepare presentations for the class and submit written analyses of a variety of advertisements. This is an effective way to get students involved in critical thinking as well as in reading, writing, and presenting their ideas.

### **Students and Their Portfolios**

Another popular assessment approach is the student-generated portfolio. Creating a portfolio gets students personally involved in the assessment process, as they evaluate and select their own best work for revision and re-submission.

Student portfolios can document progress and growth in virtually any area of academic or technical study. They can be used to highlight student achievement in a variety of skill areas, from reading and writing to the development of mathematics and technical skills, including word processing, desktop publishing, photography, and apparel design. Students can also use portfolios to provide clear evidence of their ability to evaluate and improve their own work, thus indicating self-monitoring and self-correcting skills that are invaluable in personal life and the world of work. Portfolios offer an added benefit during the search for a job, giving potential employers a realistic way to evaluate the abilities of prospective employees.

Teaching students about the kinds of materials to be included in a portfolio begins the process. They should begin the school term by creating a folder to hold most of their work for the coming quarter. As assignments are completed and evaluated, they are placed in the folder, culminating with a final critical thinking, skills-based evaluation. I give students my evaluative criteria, which may be course specific or oriented to general competency, before they select items to include in their final portfolios.

As part of the basic criteria for item selection, students examine all of their work for the class and include materials that will demonstrate progress over time, and items that can be revised to indicate mastery of concepts or skills. After they make their selections and revisions, students write reflective papers, summarizing what they liked about the process and what they have learned. Students then present their final portfolios to the class and submit them for evaluation.

### **Personal Involvement**

These innovative approaches have the virtue of minimizing the cultural and linguistic biases of traditional assessment. They get students involved in the assessment process, taking responsibility for their own education and their own future. Clearly, having a personal stake in the outcome is great motivation. When students play an important role in the evaluation process, the appropriate techniques can spotlight learning and achievement. Rather than simply a way to constrict and evaluate performance, assessment becomes a useful tool for growth and learning.

As teachers become increasingly responsible for teaching to and monitoring achievement of educational goals and objectives, it seems likely that creative assessment approaches will be more widely accepted. At Seattle Central Community College, instructors in the Regional Education Center for Deaf

Students and the Adult Basic Education Program (ABE) use portfolios to aid in making decisions for student placement.

At this time, most colleges continue to rely on standardized tests for student placement in English and mathematics courses. But as we continue to collect data and empirical evidence that supports the use of non-standardized assessments, I believe we can make a strong case for that approach.

As teachers, it is helpful for all of us, to the extent that is feasible, to keep data on the assessment techniques we find useful in our classrooms. Only through clear evidence of their validity will alternative assessment methods gain the widespread respect and acceptance they--and our students--deserve