

A Mixed Methods Approach to Assessing the Effectiveness of General Education Programs: What we learned from the *Global Village Playground*

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Southern Association for Institutional Research Conference
Dallas, Texas
October 17-20, 2009

Abstract:

The *Global Village Playground (GVP)* was a capstone learning experience designed to address institutional assessment needs while providing an integrated, contextualized, and authentic learning experience for students. In the *GVP*, students work on simulated and real-world problems as a design team tasked with developing an alternate reality game that makes an impact on the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. This session presents the methods of data collection and analysis, which include a blend of qualitative and quantitative approaches to the task of assessing program effectiveness, along with implications for program evaluation and directions for future research.

Session Description:

Developing the means to assess the overarching goals of a general education curriculum and aligning such assessments with those goals are complex tasks, particularly in an educational climate conditioned to rely principally on assessment test-scores, grade-point-averages, institution ratings, and other numerically quantified scores of completer success. Indeed, a recent AAC&U sponsored survey found that employers are dissatisfied with such measures, calling instead for “faculty-evaluated internships and community-learning experiences” as well as “essay tests, electronic portfolios of student work, and comprehensive senior projects” (Hart Research Associates, 2008).

Tasked with developing a means to assess the state level outcomes for the general education curriculum, a large, urban community college in the southwest determined that an electronic portfolio would serve this purpose. The use of portfolios to assess student learning outcomes that result from engagement in courses as well as entire programs of study has become a popular approach (Barrett, 2007; Juniewicz, 2003; Pullman, 2002). However, while portfolios might be preferable to standardized test scores, they don't necessarily provide means for students to develop “real-world skills” as well as demonstrable products of performance in problem-solving and readiness for the workplace. Moreover, research has shown that for a portfolio assessment to be effective, the means by which it is implemented must provide scaffolding and feedback to learners throughout the portfolio creation process (Segers, Gijbels, & Thurlings, 2008; Van Tartwijk, Driessen, Van Der Vleuten, & Stokking, 2007).

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GVP is an interdisciplinary learning community in which students work as a team tasked with developing an alternate reality game (ARG), a genre of online game that blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction and compels players to seek resources, evaluate the relevance of them, and apply them to solving the puzzle at hand. Such skills are invaluable in a knowledge-based, information-saturated workplace. Moreover, the *GVP* as a capstone experience simulates a real-world work scenario in which students collaborate to create a deliverable product that meets the specifications of a client agency. The scenario compels students to engage with global issues, devise solutions collaboratively, communicate effectively in small and large groups, and manage a project timeline. The course combined speech communications, composition, literary studies, and humanities. Instructors also guided students as they compiled portfolios of work completed across their general education coursework.

Blending qualitative data collection methods with quantifiable portfolio scores, the research team interviewed students, asking them to articulate what they learned about each of the overarching program outcomes. Although the purpose of this approach was to formatively evaluate the pilot implementation of the course, this data provided deeper insight into both the effectiveness of the course design and the entire program. This session described the methods of data collection and analysis used in this pilot project, implications for institutional research, and directions for future evaluation and assessment.

References

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