

Authentic Assessment in Technical Communication Classrooms and Programs

Proposal for an Integrated Framework

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Abstract. Given the disconnections between technical communication classroom assessment and professional workplace assessment, the author suggests that technical communication programs learn from workplaces' best practices to develop authentic classroom assessment and better prepare students for workplace performance. Authentic classroom assessment also generates meaningful student learning evidence, which can be used in outcome-based program reviews for us to reach more comprehensive and accurate assessment of programs' education success. The article details how this integrated, two-tier framework can be carried out at both the classroom and program levels and discusses its programmatic benefits.

Keywords. authentic learning environment, program review, technical communication, workplace practice, writing assessment

An objective important to technical communication programs is preparing students for successful writing and performance in the workplace. This objective requires, as Charles Bazerman (1998) and Ann Blakeslee (2001) wrote, that we engage students in authentic learning environments. Certainly, authenticity, as both authors reminded us, is a subjective construct rather than an objective entity there is only perceived, no absolute, authenticity. But generally, we may consider a learning environment authentic when it presents students with certain tasks, contingencies, opportunities, and obstacles they may one day encounter in actual workplaces.

Authenticate Classroom and Program Assessment to Promote Student Learning

To build such a learning environment, our classes and programs have used client projects, service learning, and internships, among other approaches, to engage students in realistic writing and communication tasks. But these tasks,

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I suggest, compose only half the authentic learning environment; the other half should be concerned with authentic assessment. As Patricia A. Scanlon and Michael P. Ford (1998) pointed out, when we discover the importance of integrating student learning with real-world performance, we must also answer the question of how such integrated activities can be evaluated. How do we do that? The writings of Charles Bazerman (2003) and Brian Huot (1996) provide important clues. It is by understanding assessment, Bazerman (2003) wrote, we can understand the knowledge, skills, and experience essential to successful performance. So to prepare students for the workplace, we should first understand how workplaces assess employees and their work, and what knowledge, skills, and experience they value. Furthermore, writing assessment, Huot (1996) emphasized, must be context-sensitive and “be concerned with creating assessment procedures that establish meaningful contexts within which teachers read and assess” (p. 559). So when we give students assignments that reflect workplace realities, we should also consider assessing those assignments in a manner reflective of workplace realities.

Many teachers are doing or advocating such authentic assessment: Khushwant Pittenger, Mary C. Miller, and Joshua Mott (2004) combined classroom and industry standards to teach students presentation skills; Sam Dragga (1991) questioned the relevance of facilitative commentary traditionally preferred by English teachers and suggested learning from industry’s more direct commentary; Srivatsa Seshadri and Larry D. Theye (2000) found that business professionals judge writing more on substance and less on style and suggested that teachers learn from such standards; and Bob Bergland (1997) proposed that business writing teachers use the workplace performance review method to assess students’ small assignments.

Despite these meaningful studies and classroom experiments, individual efforts like these, I’m afraid, are not enough to make a cultural shift in professional and technical communication programs. Teachers who learn from workplace assessment for classroom use remain the extraordinary rather than the ordinary. A reason for this perspective could be a legitimate concern about transforming university education into commercial training if we are to align our practices with industry norms. But another important reason, I suggest, can be traced to how we assess educational success in program reviews. Traditional program reviews, Jo Allen (2004) argued, tend to address imperatives and generate information (such as “volumes in the library”) that do not indicate “whether students know and can exercise discipline-based wisdom and expertise at the conclusion of the studies” (p. 94). Likewise, Nancy W. Coppola and Norbert Elliot (2010) wrote that in traditional program reviews, “the really important questions remained unanswered—Did we really meet the program goals? What exactly were our... graduate students able to do?”

When program reviews do not actively and explicitly assess how programs prepared students for performance beyond the university, teachers will not be encouraged to go beyond the classroom norm to examine how graduates are assessed in the real-world. In turn, without individual teachers trying to understand and learn from workplace assessment, we miss out on important student learning evidence that can be used in program reviews. So the cycle continues. To break this cycle, technical communication programs should encourage teachers to learn from workplace assessment for classroom use and collect evidence from these classroom initiatives for program reviews. Such an integrated framework at both the classroom and the program level is what I propose in this article. In the following, I explain in detail how this framework works and what its outcomes are. But first, because readers may not be familiar with the gap between classroom assessment and workplace assessment—hence the need for learning about or learning from the latter—I tell Alex’s story.

Disconnections Between Classroom and Workplace Assessment

It’s Alex’s second day on the internship.¹ Shortly after arriving, Sarah, his supervisor, asks to see him. “Our project members,” Sarah said, “complain that the office wireless network doesn’t work well. I want you to talk to the folks and ask what is bothering them and what they want. Write up what you find and send it to me. Any questions?” Alex knows wireless networks well and this task sounded simple enough. He shakes his head “no” and leaves Sarah’s office. But as soon as Alex sits down and tries to get started, he realizes he isn’t given any specifics: how long is this “write-up” supposed to be? Should he document what everyone says? Should it be in a report format? Is there a format to follow? If only Sarah had an assignment sheet like those writing teachers distribute, Alex thinks.

Sarah is convinced that a new network service provider (ISP) is needed and asks Alex to research the local providers. Alex locates three ISPs and researches their backgrounds, products, and services. He also discovers from his colleagues that network speed and reliability are the two features most important to them. Happy with his findings, he writes a recommendation report to Sarah, confident that he did a good job. It isn’t long before Sarah emails him, although not exactly with the compliment he expects: “Alex, I’m half way through the report. How come you didn’t talk more about the cost? That is always important.” Sarah seems upset, Alex thinks. But the other folks think—and I do too—the quality of service is more important. Too bad Sarah does not. Alex sighs.

¹ Alex is not a real person but a composite persona. His stories here are based on experiences of student interns and stories told by workplace professionals.

Alex has been interning for several months when one day, Sarah calls him and several other employees into a conference room to inform them that Steve is in the process of his annual performance review. As part of the process, they the team members will be asked to review Steve's performance. Sarah gives each person a form that asks for ratings and comments on several performance goals. Walking out of the conference room, Alex sees Steve busily going through some old paper work. What is *he* given to do? Alex thinks. And what should *I* do about that review? I have some complaints about Steve, but he has been nice to me, and I don't want to upset him—especially if he knows that I will be evaluating him.

Alex's quandaries point to some apparent disconnections between the assessment and evaluation in classroom and professional workplace practices. Alex is used to receiving detailed assessment criteria for classroom assignments and does not know that in the workplace, explicit formal criteria often may not exist prior to a task. As I (2008) discovered in a previous study of workplace writing,

when there are no specific requirements to follow, people rely on informal interactions to gain better understandings of a task. These interactions may take place during meetings, a casual sitting down together, or hallway and phone conversations. With these interactions, employees try to establish common expectations with their peers and the supervisor so they will not be held accountable for requirements they are not aware of. (p. 273)

If we inform students of this reality or, even better, design ways to engage students in researching and developing assessment criteria, we can better prepare students for the kind of assignments Alex was given.

Alex is unaware that unlike in the classroom, workplace assessment and evaluation are often a collaborative and negotiated process between the employee and the supervisor. Unlike the university instructor who "is designated as the authority for the duration of the interaction... [workplace] roles are more fluid and indeterminate: there are new oldtimers and old oldtimers; fresh newcomers and more seasoned newcomers" (Freedman & Adam, 2000, p. 49). Working together on specific tasks, a "newcomer and [an] oldtimer are often on the same side: they are working together on a task that will be evaluated by some outsider" (Freedman & Adam, pp. 50–51). Although Alex is only an intern and thereby a newcomer, the research he has done on this task warrants, and indeed, obligates him to speak up so that together, he and Sarah (the oldtimer) can produce the best work, possibly for review by someone from higher management. If we inform students of such workplace realities or, better, invite students to participate in the assessment and evaluation process, we help them

see themselves and assessors as co-investors and see performance feedback as an invitation for collaboration and improvement, as opposed to disagreeable judgment. In this way, students may not be as anxious as Alex when receiving feedback and are more likely to voice opinions, both of which can help them perform better in the workplace.

Finally, Alex is not familiar with the performance review method commonly used in professional workplaces (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). The review often starts with employees establishing performance goals and collecting and submitting evidence of their performance. In particular, Alex hasn't participated in the 360-degree performance reviews that, in addition to the supervisors, involve peers and employees themselves as reviewers (Pfau & Kay, 2002; Church, 2000). Such practices help to emphasize group accountability (United States, 2006, p.4) and enhance employees' "self-awareness and subsequent behavior change" (Church, 2000, p. 99). If we inform students of these workplace practices and design similar collaborative assessment methods in the classroom, we help prepare students for important assessment and evaluation activities they may experience in future workplaces. To address these and other disconnections between classroom and professional workplace assessment practices, I propose the following authentic assessment framework.

Authentic Classroom Assessment

Authentic assessment is a term not referenced often in technical communication—a search in literature yields little published discourse. But it has been frequently written about in high-school education (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005; Kohn, 2006) and fine arts education (for instance, Dorn, Madeja, & Sabol, 2004; Fitzsimmons, 2008). These scholars define authentic assessment in similar terms: it requires students to use relevant knowledge and skills to solve realistic problems (DiMartino & Castaneda, 2007); it is contextually realistic and reflects the way information or skills are used in the real world (Svinicki, 2004). Given our field's lack of familiarity with this concept, I use a question method to describe how authentic assessment can be applied in technical communication classes.

What Are Some Authentic Classroom Assessment Methods, and How Do We Design Them?

Because authenticity is a subjective construct, whether assessment is deemed authentic depends on a pre-identified situation with which to compare (Gulikens, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004). Technical communication programs aim, among other things, to prepare students for professional workplaces, so workplace assessment practices can be used as a pre-identified situation to design authentic assessment in the classroom. Some teachers have used such practic-

es without necessarily calling their assessment methods *authentic*. For example, in an earlier study, I (2008) discussed how technical writing teachers can learn from workplace practices by having students develop individualized criteria that reflect their own writing, rather than prescribing uniform criteria that may not be context-sensitive. Mary Garay (1995) designed a classroom corporation and played the role of a “boss” instructor. This setup enabled students to converse and negotiate with the teacher regarding assignments and assessment, which, to some extent, resembled the interactions between workplace employees and supervisors. Bergland (1997) learned from the workplace performance review method to holistically evaluate students’ small assignments such as style exercises, practice memos and letters, and peer critiques rather than grade each assignment individually.

Besides these more innovative methods, our existing classroom assessment practices can be modified to better connect with workplace realities. Today’s workplaces often use the 360-degree performance review for which supervisors, peers, and external clients as well as the employees themselves jointly participate in employee assessment. By obtaining feedback from multiple sources, these reviews help to ensure assessment reliability and validity (Rynes, Gerhart, & Parks, 2005). Although teachers will play important roles in classroom assessment, to promote multisource assessment in the classroom, we can collaborate with project clients or community business partners to assess student work (Dillon, 1997; Taylor, 2006). We can also more actively involve students in self-assessment by asking them to set individual development goals for a given class. Because they will be involved in this goal-setting process, students are more likely to view those goals as relevant and realistic, and are therefore more likely to actively and narrowly assess their progress rather than write generic, lukewarm self-assessment essays. Student peers can also more actively participate in classroom assessment and evaluation. They may not only respond to each other’s work but also evaluate group members. In Marilyn Dyrud’s case, peer evaluation contributed 30% of students’ final grades. Peer evaluation criteria can be adapted from existing literature, such as those from Robert Martinazzi (as cited in Dyrud, 2001), and contain common criteria such as attending team meetings, helping other team members, and sharing group responsibilities. Or teachers may have students develop evaluation criteria that are more specifically related to their tasks.

What Are the Outcomes of These Authentic Classroom Assessment Methods?

Generally speaking, there are two outcomes of authentic assessment: (a) to improve students’ performance on classroom assignments and their classroom

learning; and (b) to prepare students for transition into the workplace. For instance, in my study (2008), students developed individualized assessment criteria for a report assignment and suggested that the process of identifying and articulating assessment criteria helped them learn the report genre, to analyze writing contexts, and to understand the requirements for their reports. Bergland (1997) concluded that classroom performance reviews encouraged students to invest in ungraded, small assignments, helped students understand course expectations, and prepared them for future performance reviews, a common practice in professional workplaces. Finally, drawing from experiences with both dysfunctional and successful student groups, Dyrud (2001) demonstrated how peer assessment and evaluation helped students identify and correct annoying group behaviors early on, be more productive working together, and as a result, produce better collaborative work. The interpersonal and collaboration skills developed throughout this process, Dyrud concluded, helped students cope with workplace tasks for which team work is often the norm.

Which Methods and How Many Should Teachers Try to Use in a Single Class?

Individual teachers must decide which assessment methods to use in a particular class based on their own classroom and program contexts. First, teachers need to consider the scope of their classes and determine how much time and which resources are available. Some methods, such as the joint client and teacher assessment Summer S. Taylor (2006) described, take extensive planning, are time-consuming, and require more institutional support. By contrast, engaging students in active peer evaluation or self assessment requires much less time and fewer external resources. Second, teachers need to examine the core competencies they teach and determine which authentic assessment methods are most relevant. For instance, a class that focuses on writing skills can have students develop individualized writing criteria to enhance their understanding of audience, purpose, and context, whereas such a method may not be as relevant in a visual rhetoric class. Third, teachers need to consider student backgrounds and comfort levels working with unfamiliar assessment methods. Lower-division students, for instance, may have a more difficult time negotiating the multiple and different assessment feedback they obtain from project clients and teachers because they see both groups as authority figures. As a result, students may experience more frustration than learning.

Is Promoting Authentic Assessment a Duplication of Workplace Practices?

I want to emphasize that by “authenticating” classroom assessment, I do not suggest we duplicate everything industry does. As Murphy and Cleveland

(1995) pointed out, workplace assessment has its own drawbacks. In performance reviews, for instance, reviewers may give inflated ratings because they want to garner the goodwill of a team member or boost employee morale. So, workplace practices are by no means the golden standard. If anything, workplaces may enhance their practices by learning from the more reflexive theory-based classroom assessment. But that topic is for a different article.

What I suggest then is that teachers invest in learning more about workplace assessment, as we have in learning about workplace writing and communication acts—by conducting original research at various work sites, reviewing literature on the topic, and having conversations with workplace professionals or other teachers with experience in workplace assessment. Knowing what workplace assessment practices are like, teachers can draw from their own pedagogies to examine which practices are promising for classroom use, what modifications may be needed, and which methods are inappropriate or altogether problematic. When introducing workplace assessment methods into the classroom, we may also share with students these methods' possible drawbacks in reality so students learn not only to adapt to existing workplace activities but also to critically examine the workplace status quo.

Connect Authentic Classroom Assessment with Program Reviews

To promote authentic assessment in technical communication classrooms and commit teachers to this pedagogical approach, there needs to be a cultural shift at the program level. This shift is arguably best initiated and manifested during program reviews when we decide the educational value of a program. If we connect authentic classroom assessment with program reviews, we send a clear message to teachers about the value of their efforts. How do we do this? The outcome-based program review model (Allen, 2004; Coppola and Elliot, in press) provides a possible solution. This model, as its name suggests, focuses on measuring student learning outcomes. In their chapter, Coppola and Elliot (in press) used this model to audit a professional and technical communication program. They identified six core competencies expected of program graduates (such as writing, editing and document design), provided descriptors for each competency and collected eportfolios as evidence for measuring student achievement. These measurements, Coppola and Elliot argued, supplement measurements of traditional variables such as institutional context and commitment or curriculum and instruction to provide a more accurate picture of the program's education success.

With this outcome-based review model, authentic classroom assessment can be meaningfully connected with program reviews. Simply put, authentic

classroom assessment activities will generate additional evidence that can reveal student learning outcomes and help us arrive at a more comprehensive and accurate picture of program success. In the following section, I detail the steps for this process using my institution's technical and professional writing graduate certificate program as a hypothetical example.

Step 1: Identify Student Learning Outcomes That Can Be Meaningfully Assessed Using Authentic Assessment

The certificate program sets the following learning outcomes for its graduates: (a) practicing writing and editing; (b) learning multimedia literacy and document and visual design; (c) understanding rhetorical theories; (d) developing cultural and social awareness; and (e) engaging with current scholarship and research. Each outcome can, potentially, be assessed using evidence from classroom authentic assessment (for instance, through self-assessment and peer evaluation). But in the limited space here and for the ease of demonstration, I focus on the first, second, and fourth outcomes. These outcomes have a more obvious connection with workplace applications and demonstrate how a variety of classroom authentic assessment evidence is useful for program review.

Step 2: Describe Outcomes to Establish Possible Connections with Workplace Practices

Working together, the program faculty should assign descriptors for each outcome. This step helps faculty establish a common understanding of these outcomes vis-à-vis authentic assessment, including what specific aspects should be included in outcome descriptions, and which of these aspects may be effectively assessed using the authentic assessment framework. The matrix in Figure 1 shows several descriptors for outcomes one, two, and four. It is important to note, however, that these descriptors are not comprehensive and that other descriptors may be identified to focus more on knowledge development rather than workplace application.

Step 3: Match Program Courses with Learning Outcome Descriptors

Working together, program faculty should determine which courses target specific learning outcome descriptors. In the matrix in Figure 1, I used three courses from the certificate program as examples: *Studies in Technical Communication*, *Grant Writing*, and *Graphic Design and Illustration*. Shaded areas in Figure 1 indicate a possible interaction of the courses and the outcome descriptors they target for authentic assessment.

	Studies in Technical Communication	Grant Writing	Graphic Design and Illustration
Writing and Editing			
Ability to write for specific professional audiences, purposes, and contexts	Student-developed assessment Performance review		
Ability to work with fellow writers and editors in a documentation project	Peer assessment	Peer assessment	
Multimedia Literacy and Document/Visual Design			
Ability to learn different multimedia technologies required across workplaces			Self-assessment
Ability to work with fellow designers in a documentation project			Peer assessment
Cultural and Social Awareness			
Willingness and ability to work with local communities and non-for-profit organizations	Community partner/client assessment	Community partner/client assessment	

Figure 1. Program Learning Outcomes, Program Courses, and Authentic Classroom Assessment Matrix

Step 4: Identify Proper Authentic Classroom Assessment

For this step, program faculty should start with the shaded areas, determining which authentic assessment methods may be used in each class to target a particular outcome descriptor. For instance, *Studies in Technical Communication* aims to, among other things, develop students’ ability writing for specific professional audiences, purposes, and contexts. To this end, the course requires students to complete a technical communication project of their choice that is applicable to their future workplaces. Because the project is open-ended, teachers may find it useful to have students develop individualized assessment criteria that reflect their own unique audience, purpose, and context requirements. By contrast, the *Grant Writing* course asks students to write proposals to funding agencies that have prescribed criteria and thus does not lend itself to using the student-developed assessment method. In this class, however, because students often write grant proposals on behalf of communities in need or not-for-profit organizations and because course objectives aim to develop students’ ability working with these parties, representatives from these com-

munities or organizations can work with the writing teacher to collaboratively assess student work.

As another example, because the Graphic Design and Illustration class cannot teach students all the software applications used in future workplaces, students need to develop the ability to learn new applications. A proper way to assess such ability is active student self-assessment. Students can be asked to research the potential employers' expectations and set learning goals based on those expectations in addition to their own knowledge base. Students can identify resources such as online tutorials and explore some unfamiliar software applications. Students will then write self-assessment reports to discuss their findings and reflect on their learning, for instance, what transferrable knowledge helped them navigate different software applications or what heuristics helped them approach unfamiliar software.

Certainly, instructors may choose to use more than one authentic assessment method to target the same descriptor. To assess students' ability writing for specific professional audiences, purposes, and contexts, teachers of Studies in Technical Communication may also assign students small case study assignments where they write for a variety of audiences, purposes and contexts.. These small assignments can then be holistically assessed using performance reviews to reflect students' overall performance and progress.

Step 5: Implement Authentic Classroom Assessment to Generate Learning Evidence

The authentic classroom assessment identified in step 4, when implemented, will generate various evidence of student learning. Some of this will be direct evidence such as students' self-developed assessment criteria that exemplify their understanding of particular rhetorical situations, or students' self-assessment reports that indicate their learning progress. Others will be indirect evidence such as peer or client feedback that reflects student performance on specific tasks, their levels of professionalism, or their collaborative skills.

Step 6: Collect Evidence to Measure Student Learning Outcomes in Program Reviews

During program reviews, instructors who have taught these three courses should collect the authentic classroom assessment evidence generated in Step 5—along with other traditional evidence such as student writing samples, syllabi, and assignments samples—and submit them to the program assessment committee. The committee should examine all evidence, produce an assessment report, and present its findings to program faculty for discussion. Faculty can then discuss the authentic classroom

assessment used in the program to identify areas for improvement and/or reinforce best practices.

But Why Do All These...?

By now, some readers might question why we want to go through all this work collecting authentic classroom assessment evidence. If our goal is to measure student learning outcomes, why is evidence such as portfolios or other forms of student work not enough? Although I do believe programs should collect these more familiar types of student work as learning evidence, I also argue that authentic classroom assessment produces additional evidence that is revealing, and sometimes more telling, of students' learning outcomes, especially those connected to workplace expectations. For instance, to develop individualized assessment criteria for writing a formal report, students need to, more consciously at least, carefully analyze the reports' purposes, audiences, and contexts before identifying relevant requirements. If, for instance, the audience is likely to have expert knowledge, then a possible criterion might ask for a focused and concise explanation of the topic background; whereas if the audience is likely to have little prior knowledge, a corresponding criterion might ask for a thorough explanation of the topic background. The student-developed assessment instruments, then, are direct evidence of students' ability to analyze rhetorical contexts while their final reports are evidence of implementing rhetorical decisions. These instruments can therefore complement and help us interpret the report evidence. When students failed to do certain tasks deemed important, is it because they did not know how to approach it or they did not believe it was an important criterion? Because workplace tasks often do not have prescribed criteria and because employees participate in shaping those criteria (Yu, 2008), the student-developed assessment instruments are particularly telling evidence of whether programs prepared students effectively for their future workplace tasks.

As another example, when students engage in peer assessment and evaluation, the peer review feedback, comments, and evaluation they produce are evidence of their ability to identify positive and negative group behaviors and to negotiate group responsibilities. Although the group work students submit is useful evidence for telling us how many students produced satisfactory group work, the peer assessment and evaluation evidence helps us understand whether the satisfactory work was a result of all students working effectively in groups or only a few members completing the majority of the work. Conversely, although the group work can tell us how many students completed unsatisfactory group work, peer assessment and evaluation can tell us whether the unsatisfactory work was indeed a result of dysfunctional groups or simply poor writing and

research choices made by otherwise congenial groups. Given the prevalence of team work in the workplace, peer assessment and evaluation can be telling evidence of how our programs prepared students for their future workplaces.

Implications for Program Development

The integrated classroom-program authentic assessment framework not only enhances student classroom learning, but also has positive implications for program development. When provided opportunities to understand and experience workplace assessment through authentic classroom assessment, students are better prepared for future workplace tasks. As such, we demonstrate to students as well as to industry stakeholders the value of technical communication education. Certainly, other educational methods such as client projects and internships also give students meaningful workplace exposure, but the authentic assessment framework has additional implications. As Brenton Faber and Johndan Johnson-Eilola (2002) argued, current models such as service classes and internships, although valuable, might result in collaborative work that is product-centered, for instance, students producing a manual for a client. True interactions, these authors believe, call for real changes “at the disciplinary, organizational, or even cultural levels” (p. 146).

The authentic assessment framework, I suggest, can help bring such cultural changes because it asks us to connect with industry in how we approach a fundamental element of our discipline and education: program reviews. As Kirk St. Amant and Cynthia Nahrwold (2007) advocated, new models of program reviews can offer mechanisms that help bridge our profession’s industry-practitioner branch and academic-educator branch—branches many scholars already admit are disconnected (Savage, 2003; Wahlstrom, 1997). I believe that the authentic assessment framework is one such promising mechanism: it urges us to redesign how programs assess knowledge production and dissemination in the university by understanding and possibly learning from how industry assesses knowledge uses and applications in the workplace.

Besides this overarching promise, the authentic assessment framework can lead to other value-added activities for technical communication programs, which can help persuade program administrators to invest in this framework. As Brenton Faber, Linn Bekins, and William Karis (2002) suggested, the return on investment (ROI) index is often biased against education because it generally sees education as “a corporate expenditure” (p. 309), and even when ROI

can display the returns generated by academic programs, [it] does not detail the quality of those returns, how those returns were

delivered, whether the process that delivered the returns is replicable, or whether the returns themselves add any significant value to the department or larger organization. (p. 312)

Instead of ROI, these scholars proposed a value-added approach to measure the “return” of education activities. This approach conceives educational activities as processes rather than static expenses or proceedings; it determines a program’s “core deliverables [that are] unique and valuable within the large university context” (p. 328) and uses them as benchmarks for determining whether programmatic activities add value to the university. For technical communication programs, Faber, Bekins, and Karis suggested the following value-added activities: teaching core knowledge, developing students’ leadership and management aptitudes, creating and maintaining portals between the university and workplace, sponsoring symposiums to feature scholars and practitioners, providing career advising and job placement, and developing affiliations with professional organizations (p. 324).

The authentic assessment framework can lead to several of these value-added activities. At the classroom level, authentic assessment helps with student learning outcomes, many of which are the core-knowledge activities programs intend to teach. At the program level, authentic assessment creates a portal where students experience and prepare for workplace activities and where workplace practitioners, by becoming co-assessors of student work, otherwise participating in classroom assessment, or participating in faculty’s workplace assessment research, can better understand and appreciate what happens in our programs. Through these portals, programs tighten their affiliations with professional organizations on and off campus, which can create more internship and job opportunities for students. Finally, when teachers research workplace practices to design authentic classroom assessment, they become better informed of workplace expectations and can thus give students better career advice, making them more competitive in the job market.

The end results of these efforts might very well include an increase in program ROIs: more students are attracted to technical communication programs and more workplace practitioners consider further education through degree or certificate programs. But this framework leads to more than financial returns; it also allows us to answer those important questions Faber, Bekins, and Karis (2002) asked: What is the quality of the returns? How were they delivered? Are they replicable? Why are they significant? In this case, we know that the returns came from a more authentic assessment framework and a better connection between education and practice, that we, while realizing the financial returns, enhanced student learning and program recognition, and that we may replicate the returns if we continue these efforts.

Conclusion

In this article, I propose an integrated classroom-program authentic assessment framework. At the classroom level, teachers learn from workplace practices to design authentic assessment methods that can enhance student learning and better prepare students for future workplaces. At the program level, faculty and program administrators collect and examine the evidence generated by authentic classroom assessment to assess programs' educational success. Working together, these two levels can reinforce each other and help bridge technical communication theory and practice, educators and practitioners, and programs and workplaces. The implementation of such a framework can start with individual teachers researching, designing, and using authentic classroom assessment. Drawing from classroom experiences, the program faculty can refine these methods or choose to standardize relevant methods for particular classes. Finally, when these authentic classroom assessment methods become mature, evidence can be collected for program reviews and the lessons learned from the reviews can be channeled back to improve classroom practices.

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