



TC Program Assessment

Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication

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Introduction

The subject of programmatic assessment for Technical Communication (TC) programs has received extensive attention over the past decade. In 2007, *Technical Communication* dedicated an entire issue to this topic, and in 2010, Hundelby and Allen published a collection of essays that focused on how and why TC assessment is critical to both teaching and practice. Today, as TC programs are expanding and evolving, the issue of assessing these programs is of continued importance. As St. Amant and Nahrwold (2007) stated, it is essential that academic departments review and assess the quality of our work so that we can identify program strengths and address weaknesses. Allen (2004) further stated that assessment allows us to meet professional expectations and the needs of our students.

Questions that frequently arise in the broad arena of program assessment are as follows:

- What are we assessing?
- What standards are we using (are they internal or external measures)?
- How are we assessing?
- What would make the assessment process easier?

To address these questions, I turned both to recent scholarly literature on TC program assessment and the insights and challenges of select program directors and others who are involved in the TC program assessment process. Lists of recommended reading and references are included for further reading.

What Are We Assessing?

Scholars (see, for example, Allen, 2010; Hayhoe, 2007; St. Amant & Nahrwold, 2007) have clarified that we are assessing student learning outcomes against program learning objectives. Yet, what we are assessing often seeps into several sub-assessments or related assessments, muddying the waters a bit. Philben and Hawthorne (2007) described a program review that consists of various types of assessment, including one that is an assessment of the value added to the university, community, and profession and another that is an evaluation of their portfolio system and existence as a degree-granting institution. Program assessment also involves measuring individual courses within a program against those same program learning objectives. Assessment work at the competency- and course-level has been done on broad-ranging topics including intercultural competence (Yu, 2012) and a new TC service course (Copolla, 1999).

As Allen (2004) explained, a good assessment strategy “begins with a purpose and a direction” (p.98). We need to ask ourselves what we want to accomplish and what will we do with this information. Anderson (2010) expounded that in higher education, program assessment is used for two purposes: to judge whether the program “measures up” and to identify areas of the program that need improvement (p. 57).

According to Jablonski & Nagelhout (2010), today's assessments are more than simply measuring the "extent to which programmatic goals are observable in student performance," and are motivated by "an internal desire to achieve...curricular coherence" (p. 173).

Laura Vernon, Assistant Professor and Program Coordinator of an online graduate certificate in Professional Writing, explains a three-tiered approach to assessment:

At the individual level, we have the student demonstrate skills through papers, tests, and reflections. At the course level, students reflect on such topics as how their skills or confidence levels have changed. Their responses let me know if the class achieved what I wanted it to. At the program level, we assess how the program is doing, primarily through evaluating an e-portfolio or thesis. (personal communication, March 25, 2016).

The benefits of assessment are articulated by Johnson and Elliot (2010), who presented an assessment model that had a positive effect on students, instructors, and their program. In their words, their model "locates the students and their curriculum at the center of our efforts, makes the program as a whole stronger and makes the goals of the program clearer to the university community" (p. 137).

What Standards Are We Using?

While no formal TC accreditation board exists, TC programs have adopted various standards by which to assess their programs. Some TC programs have institutional standards that apply to multiple or all departments/schools. Others have developed departmental standards to compliment, support, or subsidize the institutional measures.

Some have what might be considered financial standards. Vernon described such a standard at her institution where the dean has made a strategic investment in the graduate TC program. The dean has given the graduate TC program three years of financial support, after which the program must pay for itself. The dean's goal, Vernon explained, is to make the program self-sustaining –to attract enough students whose tuition will pay for the cost of the program.

Other programs are beholden to external accreditation bodies such as the *Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology* (ABET). Michael Carter (2010) detailed the case of a university engineering program's use of ABET accreditation guidelines. Nadya Shalamova, Associate Professor and TC Program Director, noted that her institution's TC program considers applicable ABET criteria as well as their own TC assessment plan, which was developed by the TC Curriculum Committee (personal communication, April 9, 2016).

How Are We Assessing?

Frameworks for assessing TC programs vary and are necessarily tied to the purpose(s) and context(s) of the institution and department performing the assessment. A key component to these frameworks is the tool set used by programs.

Among the most frequently mentioned assessment tools is the student portfolio. The use of student portfolios in program assessment has been examined in the literature (see, for example, Cargile Cook & Zachry, 2010; Copolla & Elliot, 2007; Dubinsky, 2010; Yu, 2012) and is a key component to the assessment

strategy of many TC programs. As for numbers, Barker (2012) reports a CPTSC-developed pilot study found that 69% of the TC program administrators surveyed use the student portfolio in their program assessment. Tori Sadler, Associate Professor of TC who has been involved with the assessment for over eight years, explained that her institution's framework for assessing their TC program includes an electronic portfolio as part of its capstone project. These portfolios are then evaluated by the TC faculty to gauge student mastery of TC concepts and skills (personal communication, March 15, 2016). Vernon's institution also uses the e-portfolio, which she sees as being beneficial to both the student and the instructor. As Vernon explained, "They help the student get a job, and they help us assess student mastery."

In addition to using student portfolios to assess the TC program, Shalamova noted that her program assesses student learning outcomes using a variety of assessment tools, including internship reports, supervisor evaluations, exit interviews, and more. As far as assessing the program itself, Shalamova explained that the assessment plan developed by her program relies heavily on input from stakeholder including students, faculty, other departments in the university, industry partners, and local User Experience (UX) organization.

Other assessment tools noted in the literature include focus groups (Eubanks & Abbott, 2003) and participant engagement (Salvo & Jingfang, 2007).

What Would Make the Assessment Process Easier?

Besides the systematic approach suggested by Sadler and Shalamova, four factors that might make the TC program assessment process easier are faculty buy-in, institutional support, large-scale benchmarking, and assessment instruments.

Shalamova explained that sometimes faculty view assessment with less urgency because their job security is not dependent on it. As she stated,

Unlike other academic programs in our university, where assessment is paramount for the existence of the program, we do not have an accreditation body, and so we do not feel the immediate threat of program discontinuance for failure to meet accreditation standards.

For this reason, she believes it is important to have a rigorous assessment process in place and to make its relationship to the sustainability of the program transparent to the faculty.

Sadler described the importance of institutional-level support, noting that if TC programs were able to obtain data on graduates, such as job placement, faculty could survey former students and their employers about how the former students applied TC skills on the job. Sadler concluded, "This data would allow us to make more informed decisions about our programs." Vernon agreed that gaining access to this type of data is not always easy, particularly because "various parts of the institutional chain are each looking for data to prove different types of things," and this makes the data mining process somewhat arduous.

Benchmarking is another factor that has the potential to make TC program assessments easier.

Shalamova explained that for the past five years, her program has been considering points of reference

such as blogs on TC trends, curriculum of other institution's User Experience (UX) and TC programs, and information provided by CPTSC, STC, and ATTW. Sadler agreed with the concept of benchmarking and added that accreditation might make the assessment task easier. As she explained, "Assessment often feels like it's an individual program effort. An external accreditation body looking at specific evidence could help us create some type of unified assessment process."

Vernon, Sadler, and Shalamova agreed that a more systematic approach to program assessment would be beneficial. "We would benefit from a methodology," explained Shalamova, "A methodology recognized by the field would help us do a proper analysis." Assessment tools are a critical part of any mythology. Scholars (Henschel & Meloncon, 2014; Johnson & Elliot, 2010) have started creating tools for assessing both individual courses and program curricula. Further work on an assessment methodology and related tools would benefit TC programs, instructors, and students.

Recommended Reading

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