



### **Assessing the Online Learner: Resources and Strategies for Faculty**

Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt: Jossey-Bass, 2009.

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**R**ena Palloff and Keith Pratt, both authors and speakers of note, provide faculty, department chairs, and administrators with a guide to assessment strategies in *Assessing the Online Learner*. The book comes at a perfect time—when there is a lot of talk of assessment and accountability, but very little in the way of substance or guidance. As an instructor and faculty developer for a state system of colleges and universities, I read this guide with an eye on my center’s systems-level approach to helping faculty understand assessment and on improving my own courses. In 141 pages, this book provides a concise, yet comprehensive manual for both purposes.

The authors begin with a thorough investigation of course design, which naturally must be addressed before assessment methods are devised and before outcomes are measured. In the processes of discussing best practices in course design (aligning competencies and outcomes with course elements and assessment methods), they provide a solid base of assessment knowledge for ANY course, online, face-to-face, or blended.

The book then moves to the specifics of online courses, such as the design of learner-centered online classes, learner self-reflection, and the use of quizzes and quiz tools. In this section and in all the others, the authors provide helpful, real-classroom examples that illustrate theory in practice. They also include a thorough review of the literature of teaching and learning and assessment throughout the book (e.g. Boyer, Chickering/Gamson, Fink, Taylor, etc.) and punctuate each chapter with helpful summaries that read like lesson reviews.

The pitfalls associated with the use of tests are a recurring theme as well as quizzes, and other traditional means of assessment and the use of alternative methods in online environments to avoid these pitfalls. We may still be in a transition period in terms our embrace of online education. Faculty are trying too hard to hold on to tests and quizzes and finding difficulty using them in any meaningful way. The authors acknowledge this, and give sound advice in the use of authentic assessment and alternative or non-traditional assessment methods. The use of these is critical to knowing that our students are learning what we intend for them to learn.

To this end, the authors discuss in detail—and with examples—the use of devices such as e-portfolios, blogs, critical reflection (differentiating between critical and non-critical writing), and Internet-based case studies. They provide much assistance in gaining an understanding of the breadth of e-portfolios and the tailoring of them for use in specific courses. They make an excellent case for the use of collaborative assessment methods, and provide insights that will help faculty understand how to incorporate these techniques into their courses in meaningful, substantive ways.

Many of the assessment techniques outlined for use in the online classroom would actually be just as useful to instructors teaching face-to-face. For example, they give useful tips for assessing interactivity in online courses, which could easily transfer to interactivity in face-to-face situations. The authors discuss these and other assessment methods in the larger context of the advantages of teaching in an online environment. This discussion could be of benefit to some readers, as the disadvantages of teaching

A book on assessment would not be complete without a guide to writing rubrics. This book shines in this area. The sample rubrics that are provided will be helpful to both the beginning and the experienced instructor. In keeping with other sections, the chapter on rubrics will assist instructors working in online, face-to-face, or blended environments. I was struck by the diversity of rubrics that the authors provided, and the possibilities for adaptation for use in ANY course and for ANY content. The presentation rubric, for example, will be of use to those non-speech/communications faculty who wish to employ student presentations as an assessment method in their classes.

In a book largely focused on the needs of faculty teaching in the online classroom, the sections on course and program evaluation and effective faculty evaluation are “bonuses” for administrators, department chairs, or anyone needing to take a more systems-level view of institutional or programmatic assessment. In this chapter, the authors cover peer review and mentoring programs for online educators, as well as other effective practices.

I saw Palloff and Pratt present on the topic of effective course, faculty, and program evaluation at the 2008 Distance Teaching and Learning Conference in Madison, Wisconsin. At the end of that session, I witnessed a barrage of hopeful questions from faculty and administrators about the possibility of a book relating to the topic of online assessment being published in the near future. This book thoroughly meets the needs of those who are venturing into the world of online instruction, and is a great introduction for those who faced with the task of evaluating online courses or programs.