

Semestermorphosis: Possibilities for Assessment and Learning¹

Wayne Hall
Vice-Provost for Faculty Development
University of Cincinnati

One recurring analogy to describe semester conversion for the University of Cincinnati (UC) follows a crisply electrical trajectory: In autumn 2012, we'll "flip the switch" on semesters. But the semester-conversion project feels a lot messier than that, spread out through a longer and more painful process. Besides hoping that we're not currently operating in darkness, we also want for the conversion to usher in some transformative changes in the ongoing business of classroom teaching and student learning. For such reasons, a more organic analogy seems the more apt one: metamorphosis.

This analogy also resonates within the rhetoric of our President, Gregory Williams, whose presidential web page begins by declaring, "I believe deeply in the transformative power of education...."² Much of what we already and most typically do in education, quarter in and (as of Autumn 2012) quarter out, comes down to transformation, metamorphosis, change. Semester conversion itself serves as yet another transformational vehicle (yet another analogy), helping higher-education systems to serve students better, improve teaching and learning, create a more consistent delivery of our courses and our curricula, and streamline transfer and articulation. But how do we keep a semester-based way of doing business from transforming in turn right back into the old shapes and patterns?

Assessment and Accountability

Yes, here come the tag-team "A" words already, dreaded in much of higher education as the inescapable new normal. While assessment and accountability have been part of national conversations about higher education for decades, many current discussions point to the Spellings Commission report in 2006 as an occasion for a major increase in the volume and scope of those conversations,³ with one response to this heightened attention being the development of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA).⁴ With its emphasis on nationally standardized tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, the Measure of Academic Proficiency

and Progress, and the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, the VSA sought to address demands for accountability within a context that higher education could help to shape and control.

Such developments were framed within the state of Ohio in 2008 by the Board of Regents' implementation of a state-wide plan for participation in the VSA, with particular focus on the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) as the means of measuring student learning outcomes. Through such participation, it was thought, higher education in Ohio would provide more institutional accountability and comparability through a more accurate measurement of student learning outcomes, particularly through a value-added assessment model.

These growing academic emphases upon assessment and accountability in Ohio came in turn to include plans for semester conversion, as well. A more uniform academic calendar would help Ohio institutions to maintain a more unified and coherent system of higher education. For UC, then, along with many other Ohio institutions, semester conversion has taken some of its shape from a variety of external considerations and pressures. In similar fashion, perhaps such external forces can not only help to facilitate these internal transformational processes but also to sustain the new shapes and patterns that semesters make possible. Moreover, if we are able to improve our assessment of student learning, might we simultaneously strengthen our efforts in scholarly teaching as well as the scholarship of teaching & learning (SoTL)?

Reaccreditation Review

Other external factors have also made their influence felt within these complex processes. Even without Margaret Spellings or the Ohio Regents or semester conversion, UC would still have had to begin attending much more closely to student learning outcomes under pressure from its reaccreditation agency, the Higher Learning Commission / North Central Association (HLC/NCA), which conducted its site visit at UC in April 2009. The timing of this visit, coinciding as it did with early developments towards semester conversion, worked to advance both conversion and reaccreditation in mutually reinforcing ways.

In their "Advancement Section," the HLC reviewers provided a number of suggestions towards expansion of UC's assessment efforts and initiatives. For instance, UC should "create a university-wide planning process for academic assessment" because of the "need to cultivate formative as

well as summative assessment practices.” More specifically, UC might foster “the value of research on teaching, learning, and assessment.”⁵

Such recommendations for strengthening its assessment efforts did not prevent UC from sailing through the reaccreditation process with a clean review, although that depended to a great extent upon the HLC team’s expectations regarding planning for semester conversion: “On UC’s horizon is the conversion to semesters, which presents a unique opportunity to further embed assessment into classroom, program, and General Education student learning. The team strongly recommends that UC seize the opportunity provided by the conversion . . .”^{vi} The reviewers thus linked, in explicit and specific ways, the HLC reaccreditation criteria and expectations with the promise and opportunity of semester conversion. . . assuming that semester conversion would develop the appropriate assessment criteria and procedures.

Observable and Measurable

For the HLC, one implication of these suggestions focused on student learning outcomes (SLO’s), specifically defined in ways that were *observable and measurable*. As UC developed the online procedures by which faculty could create semester-based courses, then, one feature of the course template called for a listing of the SLO’s. This course-creation system, called eCurriculum, consisted of a single-entry data and storage system to support (but also to continue beyond) semester conversion. Data entered into eCurriculum would also directly populate other systems such as the student data system, the schedule of classes, various websites with program information, and systems for OBR reporting.

For assessment purposes, as well, eCurriculum provided powerful new categories to capture features of courses that contributed towards general-education requirements. For instance, faculty indicated the extent to which such baccalaureate competencies as “critical thinking” would be addressed in a course (whether “introduced,” “developed,” or “assessed”). Faculty also predicted the extent to which a writing component would be built into each course, now allowing whole programs to gain a better view of the likely development of their students’ writing skills. Assessment of general-education outcomes is currently done in connection with UC’s undergraduate capstones. Looking towards semesters, faculty can already begin to study the data in eCurriculum to assess the extent to which earlier courses in the curriculum might contribute towards student achievement of those outcomes.⁷

Other information provided by faculty within the eCurriculum form allows for curricular planning around courses that might have a service-learning component, a study-abroad/international experience, any undergraduate research, or an Honors designation. Such courses can now be tagged within the curricular system, with follow-up resources then developed to address future plans for these courses.

UC's Center for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning (CET&L), in particular, has focused on resource development within the overall needs and patterns of semester conversion. Here is a typical list of workshop offerings from the CET&L's web site:

- Defining program-based Student Learning Outcomes & Translating them into a Curricular Structure (a two-part seminar)
- Defining Course-Based Student Learning Outcomes (a workshop)
- Examples of Rewritten Student Learning Outcomes (online resources)
- Student Learning Outcomes Rubric (online resource)
- Course Redesign Seminar (a year-long faculty learning community)
- Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Seminar (a year-long faculty learning community)

The general questions shaping these workshops and resources: In light of the new opportunities made possible by a 14-week term, what types of activities, projects or assignments will allow students to practice their learning and provide more efficient mechanisms for assessing student learning? And, how might these be integrated into and reflected by a course syllabus?

Best-Practices Developments

One example of effective program-wide planning around semester conversion has been provided by Prof. Mike Zender, Director of Graduate Studies in the School of Design within the College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning. According to Zender, faculty began by envisioning the "portrait of a designer," that is, an ideal graduate from their various programs. This process also relied on the perspectives of professionals and alumni, as well as sources such as peer institutions, professional organizations, and conference proceedings. From portraits developed by each faculty member, then, an analysis revealed both distinctive and common features. Zender notes that "The common features

eventually became School-wide student learning outcomes (SLOs), with the distinctive ones becoming the seeds of Program-specific SLOs.”⁸

A newly formed Assessment Advisory Committee at UC, reporting to Gigi Escoe in her position as Vice Provost for Assessment & Student Learning, is also charged with promoting best-practices examples, now within a “comprehensive assessment vision” for UC. The Advisory Committee’s scope takes in the institution as a whole as well as its academic programs, individual courses, and the students themselves.⁹

Semester-Conversion Timeline

As Year One in the process, 2009-2010 focused primarily on helping faculty to define student learning outcomes (SLO’s) and course descriptions for each semester-based course as well as for academic programs. Remaining years take shape along these general lines, up to and extending beyond the transition point of autumn 2012:

- Year Two (2010-2011): develop the pedagogies to achieve the SLO’s as well as the assessment strategies to measure student achievements; pilot via quarter-based courses
- Year Three (2011-2012): fine-tune, pilot, develop syllabi
- Year Four (2012-2013) and beyond: review and revise; conduct research into student learning (outcomes, changes, value added, SoTL)

Semester conversion thus serves as a kind of laboratory, with the period of 2009 to 2012 for trying things out under quarters, and with 2012 and beyond thus allowing for semester-based comparisons. In support of these parts to the process, and through a proposal from Prof. Richard Harknett in his role as chair of the University Faculty, UC’s Faculty Senate has approved a motion to designate one day during spring quarter 2012 – that is, the last major quarter in advance of semesters – as a “Curriculum Transformation Retreat.” This event will facilitate discussion and provide final-touches resources besides its emphasis on the faculty as “creators of the learning process.”¹⁰

Transformative Pedagogies

But in preparing for semesters and revising their syllabi, what might UC’s faculty be doing, in particular to create transformative pedagogies? And why are these innovations likely to happen under semesters when quarters did not produce them?

The second question is the easier one: the addition of four weeks creates space for assignments that need preparation and scaffolding. Students can now learn the pedagogy itself before being asked to apply it in meaningful ways. The results should allow for a great many transformative approaches in the classroom, such as:

- Experiential learning (such as service learning, study abroad, internships)
- Inquiry-based learning
- Undergraduate research
- Writing-intensive courses
- Collaborative learning, team-based assignments
- Hybrid courses
- Use of ePortfolios

Sustaining the Transformations

The difficulty, of course, is to sustain these changes. To that end, and as part of the same semester-conversion process, we are seeking to align individual courses much more thoroughly than before with other parts of their own program as well as with related programs. More importantly, though, we hope that a heightened awareness of student learning outcomes as well as a more focused assessment of student learning in relation to those outcomes will become embedded within the entire teaching and learning enterprise. The lengthened academic term itself will foster this by more readily facilitating mid-term, formative assessment as a foundation for the summative efforts at the end of the term, as well as giving faculty more scope for SoTL projects that draw data from their own students.

In short, one general principle underlying the semester-conversion process has emerged with new focus: Assessment is pedagogy.

One final question, then: what if our assessment of a semester-based curriculum comes to show that students actually learned more under quarters? Should we then consider reversing our semester-morphosis with autumn 20/20 hindsight? But to ask that question is to obscure the most essential point in all of this, the importance of assessing, in the most meaningful ways we can, what we do in our classrooms and what our students achieve because of what we do. Assessment really is pedagogy, and whether student or faculty, we are all learners all of the time.

Notes

- ¹ Much of the material in this essay was originally presented at the Fourth Annual Mini-Conference on Teaching, sponsored by the OSU Academy of Teaching, on May 21, 2010, in Columbus, Ohio.
- ² The web site of UC's Office of the President is available at <http://www.uc.edu/president.html>.
- ³ The "Spellings Commission Report" – A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education. A Report of the commission appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings – was prepared in 2006 for the U.S. Department of Education and is available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/final-report.pdf>.
- ⁴ The web site for the Voluntary System of Accountability Program is available at <http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm>.
- ⁵ From p. 5 of the HLC Advancement section, available within UC's web site for its reaccreditation review and at http://www.uc.edu/hlcaccreditation/documents/UC_Advancement_-_Final.pdf.
- ⁶ From p. 6 of the HLC Advancement Section.
- ⁷ The Ohio State University is, of course, following a very similar template for semester-based courses. See: <http://oaa.osu.edu/semesterconversion.html>
- ⁸ Prof. Zender's comments here are drawn from the November 2010 edition of UC's quarterly semester conversion newsletter (also called Semestermorphosis), distributed electronically to UC faculty by the Provost Office.
- ⁹ Well before the Assessment Advisory Committee came into being, a semester-conversion steering committee, co-chaired by Senior Vice Provost Kristi Nelson and Professor William Whitaker, was meeting on a regular basis throughout the 2009-10 and 2010-11 academic years. Part of their more recent work has been to begin planning for a state-wide semester-conversion summit to take place in autumn 2010. Previous summits have been hosted by Wright State University (autumn 2009) and the Ohio State University (autumn 2010).
- ¹⁰ This phrase is drawn from Prof. Harknett's draft version of the proposal for the retreat, considered by UC's Faculty Senate in December 2010.

