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**Le développement et l'application d'une
évaluation à interprétation critérielle
commune à deux disciplines (anglais et
sciences politiques)**

par

Yvon GEOFFROY et Glenna LOERICK,
professeurs
Collège Régional Champlain - Campus St-Lambert

Association québécoise
de pédagogie collégiale



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Le développement et l'application d'une évaluation à interprétation critérielle commune à deux disciplines. (anglais et sciences politiques)

Yvon Geoffroy et Glenna Loerick
Professeurs
CEGEP Champlain, St.Lambert.

Résumé de la communication:

Dans le contexte d'un projet PAREA et de l'implantation du nouveau programme de sciences humaines, deux professeurs, un d'anglais et un de sciences politiques, collaborent étroitement au développement d'une habileté commune à deux cours différents, et se penchent notamment sur l'apprentissage de l'utilisation de la théorie par leurs étudiants de sciences humaines à travers le médium d'un travail de session commun au deux cours. Cette communication décrit la démarche collaborative suivie par les deux professeurs pendant deux ans dans la mise au point d'un instrument d'analyse et dans son application subséquente pour évaluer le niveau d'habileté atteint par leurs étudiants. Les résultats obtenus démontrent l'utilité de cette pédagogie collaborative pour développer et appliquer un instrument d'évaluation.

In May 1991 a team of CEGEP Champlain St. Lambert teachers requested and obtained PAREA funding to develop, operationalize and evaluate a two semester transitional project for incoming Social Science students. Two major objectives of this project were (1) to identify the abilities needed by a student to complete a DEC in Social Science and (2) to design learning and assessment tasks that would ensure the ongoing development of the identified abilities in the students while, simultaneously, demonstrating their achievement.

The decision to focus our efforts on incoming social science students was based on well known data which indicated that dropout is highest in the first year of college and that historically social science students are the largest at risk population.

We were also influenced by the projected ministerial changes to the social science curriculum which would place even higher demands on already at risk students. We recognized that the addition of two new methodology courses as well as the inclusion of an integrated project spanning more than one discipline would require students over their four semesters to engage in progressively higher levels of cognitive processing in order to achieve the main objectives of the curriculum: (1) a rigorous thought process, (2) an understanding of the fundamental concepts and methods particular to the social sciences, and (3) the ability to apply these concepts and methods. An important outcome of the new curriculum is that students acquire a methodological framework that can be applied in any social science discipline.

We saw the new curriculum as having important implications for both teaching methods and assessment tasks in that it no longer emphasized merely the mastery of content knowledge, but aimed also to develop cognitive abilities which could be applied to a variety of complex problem-solving situations. Also implied is the assumption that language competency is crucial to success in college. Without the ability to read actively and purposefully and to write coherently and logically, students are unable to perform those tasks which form the basis of their curriculum.

Given, then, the aims of the new social science curriculum and the goals of our transitional project, it seemed clear that among our primary objectives should be the identification and assessment of those cognitive and language abilities inherent in scientific enquiry. For social science students, we decided, those abilities should involve "understanding the concept of theory" and "applying a theoretical framework".

The teaching of theory, we determined, could be linked to the development of language abilities by structuring two

courses, english and political science, around one major assessment task: the research paper which would assess understanding and application of theory as well as the ability to read analytically and to write a college level paper involving summarizing, paraphrasing and correct documentation procedures.

This presentation charts the cooperative process of the english and political science teachers in the development of this research paper as a common-referenced assessment of levels of ability across their two disciplines.

Fall 1991: Attempt No. 1

The purpose of the joint political science/english assignment was to assess the student's ability to apply the theory of comparative politics to the study of contemporary political regimes in a well organized and correctly documented research paper. The objectives of the political science course spelled out that the successful student ought to be able to describe the concepts of the comparative method in the discipline, describe the interactive processes characterizing political regimes; somehow organize these concepts and processes into a framework for the analysis of regimes and top it all by applying the framework to the study of two contemporary political regimes. A tall order for students just out of high school!!!

Although we succeeded in integrating the teaching of reading and writing strategies with the content of the political science course in this first attempt, we nevertheless experienced considerable difficulty in operationalizing the abilities assessment. The first problem we encountered arose from a too sharply defined separation in evaluation criteria. The english teacher developed criteria focussing on presentation, documentation, organization and writing style; the political science teacher focussed on the ability to understand and to apply the theoretical framework of comparative politics. By separating *form* from *content*, rather than developing criteria for measuring abilities, we merely formulated a new set of rules which our students had difficulty transferring to the written application of a theoretical framework.

A more fundamental problem arose from our attempt to provide students with an appropriate organizational pattern to follow. Because the political analysis theory involved *comparison*, we based our teaching in both classrooms on the rhetorical model known as "comparison-contrast", a model already familiar to our students. However, in political science, the term comparative politics refers to that part of the discipline concerned with the development of theoretical frameworks applicable to the study of political behaviours and institutions across different states and cultures. The objective of the comparative method is the discovery of useful theoretical generalizations in order to clarify relationships among variables and seek key explanatory independent variables. In that sense it goes well beyond the rhetorical "compare and contrast" in that the identification of similarities and differences occurs within the conceptual confines of an abstract framework, such as systems theory and structural functionalism.

Unfortunately the results of this dual in terpretation of "comparative" were that our students tended to emphasize the concrete rather than the abstract. They produced papers comparing countries rather than regimes and the object of their comparisons was concrete and factual information rather than the evaluation of two political systems within a rigorous theoretical framework.

Our evaluation of the objectives of the political science course carried out the following January revealed that our students had not mastered the ability to compare two political regimes according to the a theoretical framework. The evaluation went on to add that the ability of applying theoretical concepts to an analysis of concrete situations was a complex affair and ought to be divided into levels. It suggested that level one be the identification and description of theoretical concepts; that level two be the application of selected concepts to a simple comparative situation in a controlled classroom setting; and that level three be the selective use of the appropriate concepts of comparative theory to real life situations. This last level would be the desired outcome at the end of college. Through analysis of the students' papers, we began to develop a much clearer understanding of weaknesses of the rhetorical model as an organizational device to provide unity and cohesion in a written task which requires conceptual thinking. In fact, we discovered, it was the process of analysis itself which should provide the organizational pattern for the paper and it was to the theoretical framework that the student should refer to make transitions and to create connections between components. This would ensure that it would be the abstract and logical bonds provided by the analytical framework which would give the paper its cohesion and coherence, rather than the concrete bonds provided by the organization

of facts and information into a pattern of similarities and differences.

This discovery required a shift in emphasis from the traditional methods of composition teaching which focus on organizational models to a methodology which focusses on the patterns of thinking which are embedded in the theory. The ability which we were trying to define we now saw as involving the use of theory both as a heuristic to discover logical and abstract bonds and as an organizational tool to communicate the results of this discovery.

Fall 1992: Attempt No. 2

During the second year of the project, while continuing to teach reading, writing and documentation, the english course focussed more explicitly on analytical thinking. The two ability levels, "understanding the concept of theory" and "applying a theoretical framework" were extended and reinforced in the english classroom by introducing students to theories of literary analysis. Similarly in the political science course these ability levels were reinforced by teaching the systems approach and the theory of structural functionalism through exercises in concept mapping and the introduction of an intermediate comparative task in a controlled classroom situation. As well the students attended a joint dialogue-lecture session where we explained the use of theory in both disciplines.

A number of formative writing tasks involving the process of analysis were introduced in both courses. For each task students were given an organizational model to follow which reflected the thought processes involved. Out of these tasks we developed a revised set of performance criteria for the joint political science/english research paper. In January 93, after the end of our second attempt, we created a master organizational model based on the process of analysis which we then translated into specific performance criteria for the political science paper. We subsequently carried out an evaluation of the more successful second set of student papers in order to develop clear assessment criteria. Finally, we developed an instrument of analysis which allowed us to verify empirically the accuracy of our assessment. Indicators of the ability "use of theory as a heuristic" were isolated and performance categories were developed. This instrument was then applied to the evaluation of student papers to test for its applicability and utility as an assessment tool and to verify the students' competence in using theory.

The application of this instrument enabled us to identify the characteristics of the successful student paper, to zero in precisely on the conceptual difficulties encountered by the student and to determine accurately the levels of ability attained by the students. Moreover its application also unmasked the weaknesses inherent in some of the assessment tasks.

Thus the concept of theory combined with a focus on a specific ability became the collaborative pedagogical tool which led to a more integrated approach to the development of higher cognitive processing in the two courses and allowed us to abandon the problematic rhetorical model as an organizational device. At the same time it gave us a common focus for the development of assessment instruments which would operationalize conceptual thinking.