

Early Assessment of Student Writing

By Don Sutherland

At the beginning of each semester, I give my BBA 407 Strategic Management students a diagnostic exam to measure student learning. This exam allows me to assess where students stand in terms of knowledge at the beginning of the semester and then estimate how much they expand that knowledge at the end of the course.

At the end of the semester, students are again tested on the concepts covered in the diagnostic exam. Afterward, the results are compared with those on the diagnostic exam. Those comparative outcomes make it possible to determine how much of the student learning potential was actually realized and where.

For the first time, the diagnostic exam included a short passage from a recent business news article asking students to write a short piece based on the article. In their short essay, most students were able to identify a number of clear facts. However, when it came to describing the context related to the situation, the students did not fare as well. Examining, analyzing, and diagnosing environment conditions impacting companies and industries is something that will be taught during the semester.

The short essay also required students to take the information that was available in the news report and determine the impact of the described situation on U.S. companies. The news article provided no such analysis, but students who are approaching graduation should increasingly be able to apply evidence to reach informed conclusions. Usually, students improve their capacity to fulfill such tasks toward the end of the semester. As with the environmental context, students had difficulty identifying possible implications of the information.

Finally, I incorporated the short essay to gain early exposure to student writing mechanics (grammar, sentence structure, clarity, etc.). My goal was to see where the class stands and to determine whether any students had particular challenges. The distribution of writing outcomes had somewhat longer tails than a normal curve (59% of students were within 1 standard deviation of the mean vs. 68% under a normal curve). Students whose short essay was 1 or more standard deviations below the class average will be furnished with additional guidance and asked for early drafts of their research paper. Moreover, as the research paper is a group project, there will be no groups comprised entirely of students who are weak or developing writers.