Executive Summary

It has been thirty years since the creation of ATHE’s first white paper on assessment\(^1\). Understandably, the practice of programmatic assessment has undergone considerable change in the intervening years, but the focus remains the same: measuring student learning. Whereas the burden of proof used to fall on regional accrediting agencies\(^2\) to determine whether or not colleges and universities were meeting the standards of academic excellence, that way of measuring has been almost completely reversed in the twenty-first century. Colleges and universities must now demonstrate to their accreditors that they are able to define, measure, and report on their own standards of excellence and, most importantly, that they can use their assessment findings as the basis of making improvements to academic, co-curricular, and extracurricular programs. As a result, every regionally accredited institution of higher education must allocate resources to maintain and enhance its assessment practices. These practices often

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\(^1\) 1990 ATHE White Paper Introduction, “The purpose of this document is to identify Outcomes and Assessment Sources and Instruments for the field of theatre in higher education. When it is necessary or desirable for a theatre program to augment its means of departmental and institutional assessment, the Sources and Instruments of Outcomes Assessment described in this paper may be useful. The discipline of theatre in higher education encompasses theatre as an artistic form and as a social and cultural institution. Its artistic form, which is defined through production, involves the collaboration of theatre artists, scholars, and technicians. Needed for this collaboration are theatrical knowledge and skills acquired through study and practice in classrooms, studios, and public performances. Historical, theoretical, critical, and cultural studies provide perspective on both theatrical performance and the theatre as a social and cultural institution, both past and present.”

\(^2\) In the United States, regional accreditation is made up of these six groups: Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC), Higher Learning Commission (HLC), Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)
include purchasing software designed to simplify the assessment process, demonstrating institutional commitment to the process through participation in regional and national conferences, and providing continuing education for faculty members on how to introduce or embed assessment practices into the classroom learning environment.

The authors of the new white paper on assessment seek to build on the foundation established by our predecessors. Far from dismantling or correcting the previous document, we offer this white paper as a continuation of our colleagues’ work, complete with examples of best practices for assessing theatre programs in a twenty-first-century academic context.

Many programs place goals upon their graduates and require them to demonstrate the acquisition and development of skills in the courses that make up the programmatic curriculum. While theatre faculty members have an inherent understanding of what artistic growth looks like, we may not always be effective in measuring that growth in an assessment context. Additionally, discerning the differences among goals, objectives, and outcomes, and determining which characteristics and/or qualities are important to the program can be complex. Learning Outcomes (LOs) articulate measurable goals that every student in a program should achieve prior to graduation. The challenge, however, is wording the outcomes in a way that allows for ongoing, sustainable assessment without overburdening faculty members, and that allows a program to grow, adapt, and improve over time.

The process of assessment of student learning is intended to be reflexive, and specific to
an individual program. Learning outcomes designed for a conservatory-style program, e.g. B.F.A. Acting, will not work for a small, liberal arts program, e.g. B.A. Theatre Arts. Faculty need to work together to determine what they want students to be able to do upon graduation (LOs), what they will use to demonstrate that learning (artifacts), how they will evaluate those artifacts (rubrics), and what information can be gleaned from the process to make the program more effective.

**Terminology**

**Assessment**
The systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development. (Palomba & Banta, 1999)

An ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance. (Angelo, 1995)

**Benchmarking**
An actual measurement of group performance against an established standard at defined points along the path toward the standard. Subsequent measurements of group performance use the benchmarks to measure progress toward achievement. (New Horizons for Learning)
Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives

Six levels arranged in order of increasing complexity (1=low, 6=high):

1. Knowledge: Recalling or remembering information without necessarily understanding it. Includes behaviors such as describing, listing, identifying, and labeling.

2. Comprehension: Understanding learned material and includes behaviors such as explaining, discussing, and interpreting.

3. Application: The ability to put ideas and concepts to work in solving problems. It includes behaviors such as demonstrating, showing, and making use of information.

4. Analysis: Breaking down information into its component parts to see interrelationships and ideas. Related behaviors include differentiating, comparing, and categorizing.

5. Synthesis: The ability to put parts together to form something original. It involves using creativity to compose or design something new.

6. Evaluation: Judging the value of evidence based on definite criteria. Behaviors related to evaluation include: concluding, criticizing, prioritizing, and recommending. (Bloom, 1956)

Classroom Assessment

The systematic and on-going study of what and how students are learning in a particular classroom; often designed for individual faculty who wish to improve their teaching of a specific course. Classroom assessment differs from tests and other forms of student assessment in that it is aimed at course improvement, rather than at assigning grades. (National Teaching & Learning

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3 This is the original Bloom’s Taxonomy; a revision to Bloom’s was published in the 1990s. Other taxonomies of learning include Facets of Understanding (Wiggins and McTighe), Fink’s Taxonomy, and The Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO) Taxonomy (Biggs and Collis).
“Closing the Loop”

It is important to remember *Assessment is only effective if used to make improvements.* Not using the information you collect to make positive changes to your program or department is akin to a student actor taking adjudication feedback and throwing it in the trash. The data you collect is exceptionally important for making meaningful changes and innovations to your program or department. The data can become even more valuable when programs include students, colleagues, deans, and administrators in the assessment process and results.

The expression “Closing the Loop” refers to the continual nature of assessment. It is not sufficient just to declare LOs, create rubrics, identify artifacts, and measure learning once a year and then stop. Good, effective assessment requires continued vigilance and the flexibility to make changes based on the data you collect. Assessment of student learning is not something that will work if faculty approach it as a “one and done” type of process, or if they are unwilling to acknowledge what is working and what is not.

**Curriculum Mapping**

A process of looking at the courses that students in the major have in common and connecting specific courses within a program to the outcomes you have identified. This way, faculty begin

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4 There are other uses for the phrase “curriculum mapping.” Competency-based curriculum uses the phrase to outline the ordering of courses in the development of the student to emphasize how a student progresses
to create a picture of what the assessment process looks like, so that everyone is on the same page.

*Sample curriculum map*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course number</th>
<th>Title/description</th>
<th>Artifact</th>
<th>LO 1</th>
<th>LO 2</th>
<th>LO 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TH100</td>
<td>Intro to Theatre</td>
<td>Performance Analysis</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TH300</td>
<td>Theatre History</td>
<td>Paper</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Direct Assessment**

Gathers evidence about student learning based on student performance that demonstrates the learning itself. Can be value added, related to standards, qualitative or quantitative, embedded or not, using local or external criteria. Examples are written assignments, classroom assignments, presentations, test results, projects, logs, portfolios, and direct observations. (Leskes, 2002)

**Embedded Assessment**

A means of gathering information about student learning that is built into and a natural part of the teaching-learning process. Often uses for assessment purposes classroom assignments that are evaluated to assign students a grade. Can assess individual student performance or aggregate the information to provide information about the course or program; can be formative or summative, quantitative or qualitative. Example: as part of a course, expecting each senior to complete a research paper that is graded for content and style, but is also assessed for advanced

through the program towards a specific program-goal. In most cases, this demonstrates for the student that if they take course X, course Y, and course Z they will build skills and advance to degree completion. Despite the difference in usage, the goal of pointing specific courses towards a goal (competency or assessment) is similar.
ability to locate and evaluate Web-based information (as part of a college-wide outcome to demonstrate information literacy). (Leskes, 2002)

**Evaluation**
The use of assessment findings (evidence/data) to judge program effectiveness; used as a basis for making decisions about program changes or improvement. (Allen, Noel, Rienzi & McMillin, 2002)

**Formative Assessment**
The gathering of information about student learning during the progression of a course or program and usually repeatedly to improve the learning of those students. Example: reading the first lab reports of a class to assess whether some or all students in the group need a lesson on how to make them succinct and informative. (Leskes, 2002)

**Indirect Assessment**
Acquiring evidence about how students feel about learning and their learning environment rather than actual demonstrations of outcome achievement. Examples include surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and reflective essays. (Eder, 137)

**Learning Outcomes**
Operational statements describing specific student behaviors that evidence the acquisition of desired knowledge, skills, abilities, capacities, attitudes or dispositions. Learning outcomes can be usefully thought of as behavioral criteria for determining whether students are achieving the educational objectives of a program, and, ultimately, whether overall program goals are being successfully met. Outcomes are sometimes treated as synonymous with objectives, though objectives are usually more general statements of what students are expected to achieve in an academic program. (Allen, Noel, Rienzi & McMillin, 2002) The formula for creating LOs that we find most straightforward and efficient is as follows:

**Who (graduates of your program) will be able to + Active verb + What**
**Norm-Referenced Assessment**
An assessment where student performance or performances are compared to a larger group. Usually the larger group or "norm group" is a national sample representing a wide and diverse cross-section of students. Students, schools, districts, and even states are compared or rank-ordered in relation to the norm group. The purpose of a norm-referenced assessment is usually to sort students and not to measure achievement towards some criterion of performance.

**Performance Criteria**
The standards by which student performance is evaluated. Performance criteria help assessors maintain objectivity and provide students with important information about expectations, giving them a target or goal to strive for. (New Horizons for Learning). This information is generally unpacked in a rubric for a specific outcome. For example, if the outcome is _analyze a text for theatrical performance_, and a paper is collected as the artifact for evaluation, performance criteria may include comprehension, genre, and style.

**Portfolio**
A systematic and organized collection of a student's work that exhibits to others the direct evidence of a student's efforts, achievements, and progress over a period of time. The collection should involve the student in selection of its contents, and should include information about the performance criteria, the rubric or criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection or evaluation. It should include representative work, providing a documentation of the learner's performance and a basis for evaluation of the student's progress. Portfolios may include a variety of demonstrations of learning and have been gathered in the form of a physical collection of materials, videos, CD-ROMs, reflective journals, etc. (New Horizons for Learning)
Qualitative Assessment
Collects data that does not lend itself to quantitative methods but rather to interpretive criteria. (Leskes, 2002). An example of qualitative assessment could be a student’s reflection paper on participation in a departmental production. Validating qualitative data may come from the use of rubrics.

Rubric
Specific sets of criteria that clearly define for both student and teacher what a range of acceptable and unacceptable performance looks like. Criteria define descriptors of ability at each level of performance and assign values to each level. AAC&U offers a bank of 16 VALUE rubrics—Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education—on topics including the following: inquiry and analysis, oral communication, written communication, critical thinking, creative thinking, and teamwork. Faculty and education professionals from more than 100 institutions developed these rubrics, which you can customize for your program. Some faculty have found that when they are starting out in assessment, these provide an excellent guide for creating a rubric.

Rubrics are most effective when they are very descriptive; simply indicating ratings without providing descriptions of the differences among ratings is insufficient and may lead to subjective interpretation by the assessors. When considering how many points to use for assessment, it is up to the faculty, but they should be consistent across all rubrics with respect to style and content. Similarly, how you choose to name the points is up to you. Our recommendation is that you find a way to word the points positively rather than negatively. Additionally, you will note the sample rubric has numerical values for each point, but you may choose to eliminate the numerical values altogether and focus instead on the descriptors.
### Sample rubric for production/text analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area Evaluated</th>
<th>Beginner (1)</th>
<th>Developing (2)</th>
<th>Proficient (3)</th>
<th>Mastered (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>Student doesn’t indicate the method of analysis used</td>
<td>Student identifies method of analysis, but does not elaborate</td>
<td>Student identifies method of analysis and provides one or two examples of how the method is used</td>
<td>Student identifies method of analysis, provides several examples of how the method is used, and connects the methodology to her/his thesis statement and conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
<td>Student doesn’t indicate play’s genre</td>
<td>Student identifies genre, but does not elaborate</td>
<td>Student identifies genre and provides one or two examples of how the play represents the genre</td>
<td>Student identifies the genre, provides several examples of how the play represents the genre, and connects the genres to his/her thesis statement and conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Student doesn’t indicate the style</td>
<td>Student identifies style, but does not elaborate</td>
<td>Student identifies the style of the play and provides one or two examples of style</td>
<td>Student identifies the style of the play, provides several examples of style, and connects the style to his/her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic Structure</td>
<td>Student doesn’t indicate dramatic structure</td>
<td>Student identifies the dramatic structure, but does not elaborate</td>
<td>Student identifies the dramatic structure and provides one or two examples from the play</td>
<td>Student identifies the dramatic structure, provides several examples from the play, and connects the dramatic structure to his/her thesis statement and conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot Structure</td>
<td>Student doesn’t indicate the plot structure</td>
<td>Student identifies plot structure, but does not elaborate</td>
<td>Student identifies the plot structure and provides one or two examples from the play</td>
<td>Student identifies the plot structure, provides several examples from the play, and connects the plot structure to his/her thesis statement and conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summative Assessment**

The gathering of information at the conclusion of a course, program, or undergraduate career to improve learning or to meet accountability demands. When used for improvement, impacts the next cohort of students taking the course or program. Example: examining student final exams in a course to see if certain specific areas of the curriculum were understood less well than others. (Leskes, 2002)
### Template for an Assessment Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcome</th>
<th>Direct Assessment</th>
<th>Assessment Method</th>
<th>Improvements Made Based on Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Express her/himself effectively in oral and written communication.</td>
<td>Portfolio (Stage management, directing, design, dramaturgy, theatre history, performance)</td>
<td>Outside reviewers will use a rubric created by the faculty to review specific pieces of the portfolio for evidence of stated outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Best Practice Example in Writing Learning Outcomes

Upon graduation from our program, students will be able to:
• LO1: Analyze (*Bloom’s level four*) a text for theatre practice.

• LO2: Express (*Bloom’s level two*) herself/himself effectively in oral and written communication. (Note, we recognize that this outcome is a compound sentence, but typically oral and written communication go hand in hand.)

• LO3: Apply (*Bloom’s level three*) critical thinking skills to theatre courses.

“The Big Picture”

Ultimately, we use assessment to prove to national accrediting organizations that our program, and by extension, our institution, is delivering the student learning it claims to deliver. Entrepreneurial faculty can use the data in grant applications, community projects, state budget discussions, state educational regulatory commissions, and in talking with potential donors. The time has passed for programs to state, “we are good because we recruit and graduate students.”

Today, there is pressure from state and national regulatory agencies and the public at-large to demonstrate program value. Like it or not, your assessment program can be your greatest asset, as long as the data is used to make innovations and program changes.

Assessment is active and dynamic. It is a form of “shared governance” in curriculum development. The faculty conversations during and around assessment are as meaningful as the data collected, focusing less on whose class is more important and more on “How do we give our students the opportunities to succeed after our program?” By mapping program learning
outcomes to institutional learning outcomes and publicizing the assessments, we demonstrate a deliberate attempt to forward the institution’s vision, establish clear pathways for student-centered learning, and show to the greater community the value-added benefits provided by the theatre program. The results are stronger theatre programs, a stronger discipline, and a more dynamic student-centered approach to theatre pedagogy.