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Henry Etlinger

Rajendra K. Raj

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An Approach to Engaging Students in the Assessment Process

Henry A. Etlinger and Rajendra K. Raj

Department of Computer Science, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York

Haden, Antinori and Carr (2013) described an approach to engage faculty in the assessment process at Long Island University. Here we briefly describe a complementary approach to assessment that we have begun to experiment with at RIT: the active engagement of students in their own assessment.

Program-level learning objectives (Student Outcomes in ABET terminology) typically describe “the knowledge, skills, and behaviors that students are expected to know and be able to do by graduation.” To assess these learning objectives, most programs set up a variety of assessment instruments for use by entities such as faculty, prospective employers, or departmental advisory boards. With few exceptions (Chappuis, 2005; Ducrot, Miller & Goodman, 2008), most programs, however, typically do not involve students in assessing their own progress toward these outcomes. The ones that do involve students usually ask them to assess their overall learning at the end of their degree program, perhaps as part of an exit interview questionnaire. We wanted to engage students while they were taking courses.

We developed a rubric and assessment tool, and then conducted a pilot study to engage BS Computer Science students directly in the assessment of their own progress toward meeting both course outcomes and program-level learning objectives. The pilot project was intended to assist the Computer Science department in determining whether such student engagement represents a viable addition to assessment activities already being conducted. Our assessment instruments, a pre-survey and a post-survey, along with instructor discussion of the need for course and program objectives were administered in three different courses—Professional Communications, Programming Language Concepts, and Database Concepts—over the spring and summer terms of 2013.

While only a pilot study, results are promising to the following extent:

- Students can and should be engaged in assessing their own progress toward achieving their program-level learning outcomes.
- Faculty can and must ensure that they view the role of each course in helping students progress toward their program-level student learning outcomes.

Before we can reach any long-term conclusions, we need (and plan) to take some additional steps. We hope to gain support from our departmental Assessment Committee and then from our departmental colleagues to conduct suitably modified assessment survey instruments in all required Computer Science courses. We expect that results will be promising, but we also expect, as Haden, Antinori and Carr found, some pushback from some faculty. Demonstrating the success of our approach over multiple terms and across different types of courses will go a long way toward alleviating remaining concerns. If the results are promising, we would like to convince faculty at other institutions to adapt and use our assessment instruments, thus allowing additional data to be gathered about the usefulness of getting students involved in their own self-assessment.

References

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