Managing Accountability Innovations in Distance-Learning Programs

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Abstract: Accountability is a complex process in any organizational learning experience and even more so in distance-learning environments. Some of the complications include issues of measuring performance, using àuthentic assessments, meeting performance-based standards, and integrating all with distance-learning technologies. This paper describes online-accountability innovations used in distance-learning programs and how these online tools help students provide evidence of their readiness for educational-leadership positions.

Key words: Accountability, self-assessment, project-based learning, reflective-justification rubric, professional-growth charts.

1   INTRODUCTION

Colorado led the nation (USA) in the adoption of performance-based standards for preparing both principals and superintendents. The Interstate Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards quickly followed and were adopted in whole or part by forty-four of the fifty states. In addition, the Technology Standards for School Administrators (TSSA) were adopted by a consortium of organizations and provide further direction for leadership preparation. More recently, the Educational Leadership Constituent Council and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (ELCC-NCATE) adopted program performance standards set forth by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2002) and used them to accredit both schools and colleges of education and individual program areas. The ALPS program faculty, like many others, found themselves facing multiple sets of standards. As a result, our redesigned program meets the following sets of standards: (a) Colorado Principal/Administrator licensure

standards, (b) ELCC-NCATE program standards, and (c) Technology Standards for School Administrators.

The Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies (ALPS) faculty responded to issues related to accountability, performance-assessment standards, and distance-learning technologies (Baker, 2003; Hutchins, 2003; Howell, Williams, & Lindsday, 2003) by designing online accountability tools for managing assessment 'of learning' and 'for learning' (Stiggins, 2001; Chappius, Stiggins, Arter, & Chappius, 2003) in an online principal-licensure program.

Baker (2003) provided a framework with twenty-six elements for the design and evaluation of Internet–based, distance-learning courses. We focused on seven of these elements listed below:

Practice – provide online activities that require students to practice the skills necessary to achieve the desired behavior and provide a feedback mechanism to correct student mistakes during practice activities.

Variety – create a variety of learning experiences (and distance learning tools) to enhance student learning.

Outcomes – match distance learning tools and the required outcomes.

Integration – create activities that include skill development that would be related to a variety of contexts and other subjects/fields.

Baseline evaluation – use self-assessment tools to determine a baseline for growth comparison.

Successive evaluations – have students repeat self-assessments during the program.

Appropriate evaluation type – ensure that the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully complete the evaluations representative of the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve the intended behavior.

Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, and Chapppius (2003, p. 35) provided our faculty with the concept of assessment 'for' instruction. These authors claim that assessment 'for' instruction is far more than was intended through a formative assessment process. We adopted the following elements of assessment for learning:

Understanding and articulating *in advance of teaching* the achievement targets that their students are to hit.

Informing their students about those learning goals *in terms that students understand* form the very beginning.

Engaging students in regular self-assessment with standards held constant so they can watch themselves grow over time and thus learn to become in charge of their own success.

Making sure that students understand how the achievement targets that they strive to hit now relate to those that will come after.

2   ONLINE-ACCOUNTABILITY TOOLS

Accountability tools used in the distance-learning program include: (a) online project-based learning, (b) performance-based standards; (c) self assessments (d) a reflective-justification rubric, (e) professional-growth charts, and (f) the scurry matrix. These tools are used in programs that require both face-to-face and online experiences (hybrid programs) but were developed specifically for the distance-learning cohort. Each of these online tools is described below.

2.1   Project-Based Learning

As standards were first introduced in Colorado the ALPS faculty responded by transforming their course-based program into four eight-credit learning domains. With the addition of performance assessments and the opportunity provided by the online program to *stretch* projects over four semesters, instructional teams moved to project-based learning. The projects crossed traditional course and semester boundaries and provided an organizing structure for our principal-licensure program. These projects are vehicles for transforming learning experiences for cohort students and faculty. They provide opportunities for both student and program assessment and facilitate optimal integration of traditional curriculum, real-world assignments of principals in the field, and the requirements placed on programs by various sets of performance-assessment standards and accrediting bodies..

A description of these projects is beyond the scope of this paper but a partial list can provide an overview of the type of work students tackle during their four-semester-long program: (a) a knowledge-base journal, (b) mission-vision project, (c) culture study, (d) legal audit (e), instructional-leadership work sample, (f) school improvement planning, and (h) a leadership resume. Each online project is presented to students complete with rationale, description, guiding questions, relevant literature, learning activities, required work products, and a detailed process for writing up the project in artifact format.

The artifact format requires three components or sections: (a) a cover page, (b) a reflective justification, and (c) any work products produced during the learning experience. Project-based learning is the first online accountability tool and provides students and faculty with authentic learning experiences upon which to build both personal and professional knowledge of the field of leadership.

2.2   Performance-Based Standards

Students in our online programs must present evidence that they have met the Colorado Principal/Administrator licensure standards. These standards are organized into eleven categories: (a) foundations for learning, (b) contextual understanding, (c) planning and organizing contextual understanding, (d) content knowledge instruction, (e) individualization of instruction, (f) management and evaluation of instruction, (g) supervision of personnel, (h) supervision of student conduct, (i) resources, (j) school safety and maintenance, (k) parent and community involvement. Each of these categories has a set of associated standards. Electronic versions of these standards are provided to support student work. The first instance was a copy in PDF format. The second was a file set up to print on the front and back of name-card stock. Once printed separated, these name cards become a deck of performance standards for students to sort into piles related to specific program projects. The third file was in word format so students could cut and paste individual standards into the artifact product.

2.3   Self Assessments

Using principles of assessment (Stiggins, 2001; Chappius, Stiggins, Arter, & Chappius, 2003) and effective online delivery (Baker, 2003; Hutchins, 2003) faculty designed a complete set of online assessment tools for each set of standards. These electronic forms were linked to online learning environments and students were able to complete these self-assessments four times during the course of their program.

Data collected included student name, cohort instance, survey instance, and for each standard and standard element the level of understanding as well as evidence supporting the selected level reported by the student. Four levels of understanding/evidence (little evidence, some evidence, conceptual evidence, and performance evidence) were constructed based on the ELCC-NCATE requirements and are described in the reflective justification rubric section of this paper. If students selected either conceptual evidence (level three) or performance evidence (level four) to describe their level of understanding, they were required to provide a description of that experience or a reference to a particular portfolio artifact in a text box option on the online survey.

These self-assessments tools served both purposes of assessment '*of*' and '*for*' learning (Stiggins, 2001; Chappius, Stiggins, Arter, & Chappius, 2003). These assessments are used by faculty to determine the learning needs of the students before finalizing learning projects for the group or customizing projects for specific partnership districts. Students use self-assessment

results to document their learning progress on the growth charts describe below. At the end of the program, students were able to determine which standards they had mastered and which standards required further attention. These unmet standards became targets for professional growth and were listed in students' professional-growth plans.

2.4   Reflective-Justification Rubric

The reflective-justification rubric in Table 1 is an online tool used by students and faculty to evaluate student performance. The rubric outlines four levels of performance evidence. Students use the rubric to construct their reflection justifications, one of the three components of the artifacts students must produce. Faculty members use the rubric to evaluate online submissions of student work. Students are expected to write their reflective-justification at level three or four. Artifacts are returned to students until each standard referenced meets these minimum levels. Each of these levels is described below.

2.4.1   Evidence Level One

Initially, when students begin to address standards they reference the standard and allude to its importance. They may say that professional development strategies were important for a principal to use with the staff. However, in this statement there is no evidence that the student knows anything about professional development. No standard was referenced and no authors or work was cited. Many students have level one reflective justification instances in their earliest work in the program.

2.4.2   Evidence Level Two

As students begin to integrate literature, research, and concepts with school contexts they are able to provide some evidence by citing authors and referencing a standard. A student might write that DuFour and Eaker (1998) know how to create professional learning communities and that when they become a principal they will build a learning community. Such a statement fall shorts of evidence of conceptual understanding. Missing are the six characteristics of a professional learning community and the strategies a principal might use to develop such a community. At this level program faculty have little confidence that this student would be able to provide leadership for developing a professional learning community. Level two work would be returned to the student for additional work.

Table 1. Reflective-Justification Rubric

CAPABILITY	CAPABILITY is defined as the application of knowledge and skills to specific problems of practice.
Level Four	**Evidence of Practical Experience:** Student evidence meets all criteria specified at Level Three but also references one or more instances of actual practical experience in a school setting. ---
UNDERSTANDING	UNDERSTANDING is defined as integrating knowledge to school environments, integrating concepts with practice, and using knowledge and skills in context.
Level Three	**Evidence of Conceptual Experience:** Student evidence includes a description of the context of the school, the conceptual frameworks and understandings used for interpretation, citations of relevant literature, and supported references standards with evidence of knowledge or skills level requirements. ---
AWARENESS	AWARENESS is defined as acquiring information, concepts, definitions, and procedures.
Level Two	**Some Evidence of Awareness:** Submission includes references to literature and performance standards without any evidence of student's knowledge or skill level.
Level One	**Little Evidence of Awareness:** Submission did not include references to literature or standards.

2.4.3   Evidence Level Three

To achieve level three on the rubric, student reflections must include the following elements. First, they must describe the context in which their leadership strategies would be implemented. Second, students must reference authors and provide evidence of the models, frameworks, characteristics, or concepts developed by those authors that provide ideas and successful implementation strategies that might be employed by the future principals in the actual practice of leadership. Level three reflections include the use of *'I'* statements. Initially, students may write that *'principals'* (third person reference) should have a particular position on some issue. We typically return this work to students, ask for personal evidence of what each would do in the situation, and request that *'I'* statements be used to communicate their leadership intentions. Reflections written at level three express what each student would do, whose research they would use, and what frameworks and authors would inform their practice. If these elements are present for each standard referenced, students are writing at level three and are rewarded with signatures from instructional-team members. Once artifacts are signed, they are placed into the students' program portfolios.

2.4.4   Evidence Level Four

This evidence level includes all requirements listed for level three but must include evidence of actual performance in a school setting. Many of these standards are met through clinical-practice activities. Students would reference standards, authors, research, models, recommended strategies, results achieved, and would perhaps reflect on the success of these activities or changes they might make on future instance. In our program, level three is the minimum requirement for signature and level four can only be attained through clinical-practice experiences.

2.5   Professional-Growth Charts

As students complete the online self-assessment surveys and use the reflective-justification rubric to measure their learning, they record their progress on the third online tool, professional-growth charts. Figure 1 provides a view of one of the eleven growth charts for standard eight of the Colorado Principal Performance Standards. There are six additional charts for the TSSA standards and six more for the ELCC-NCATE standards. Students enter self-assessment scores into driver cells on these growth charts and the graph lines adjust to represent the scores. Students repeat the self-

assessment three more times during the program and record the results on the growth charts. Students save and print these growth charts at the end of the program as work products for an artifact. Standards not achieved are targeted by the students as elements to be addressed in their professional-growth plan.
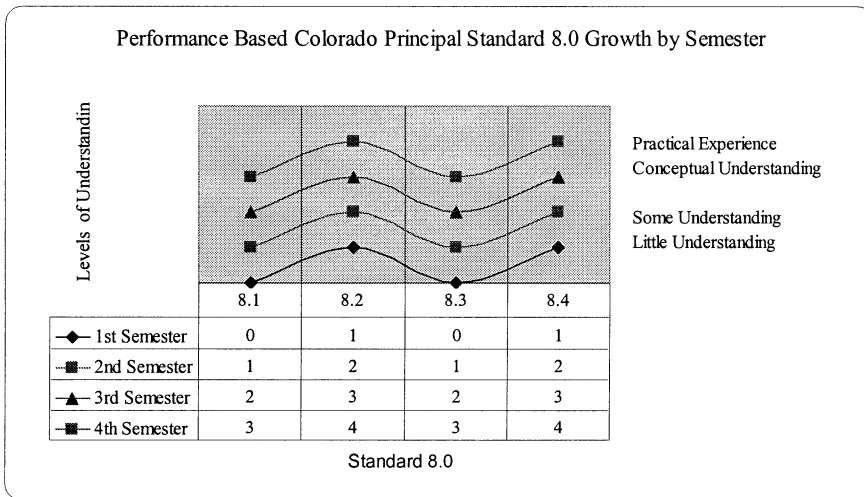

Figure 1. Professional growth charts where students record their self assessment scores. The chart illustrates student progress in mastering performance standards by academic semester.

2.6   The Scurry Matrix

The scurry matrix, depicted in Table 2 and inspired by the mouse character in *Who Moved My Cheese* (Johnson & Blanchard, 1998), is another online-accountability tool developed to help students keep track of both standards met and artifacts completed. The matrix guides students as they develop artifacts and demonstrates evidence of their learning. Faculty members use the matrix to assess the scope and sequence of not only student projects rendered in artifact format, but also the extent to which students covered particular standards across artifacts. The matrix provides yet another way to manage accountability in an online leadership program.

3   EFFECTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY INNOVATIONS

The effects of these online innovations are distributed across all of the accountability tools and all levels of stakeholders (students, faculty, and

program). The use of the online tools (project-based learning, performance standards, self-assessment surveys, the reflective-justification rubric, growth charts, and the scurry matrix) in the leadership program produced students

Table 2. The Scurry Matrix: Evidence of performance standards mastered by project.

	A[a]	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
8.1[b]	✓[c]			✓				✓	
8.2				✓			✓		
8.3	✓		✓			✓			
8.4					✓				✓

[a] Names of specific students artifacts are listed on the matrix.
[b] Specific standards are typed into these areas on the matrix.
[c] Denotes the standard was met in this particular artifact

who were able to think about and write reflective justification evidence at level three and four, demonstrating that they have met state and national performance standards. This practice results in students who have a developed their own personal and professional knowledge base as well as strategies for a variety of contexts in which to demonstrate their leadership capabilities. All of these online-accountability innovations are used in distance-learning leadership cohorts to help students develop and faculty to determine student-readiness levels for important educational leadership positions.

Since implementing these accountability tools, faculty have reported that the transition for students from teacher to leader that traditionally occurred near the end of the program or during their clinical practice experiences was occurring much earlier in the program. With their first artifact, students are asked to report what they would do, what literature or research supported their intended strategies, and how those strategies might be mediated by the context of their particular school during the course of the program. The perceived impact of these accountability tools appear to result in the development of administrator perspective in students during the middle of the second of four semesters rather than at the end of the program or not at all. Prior to the implementation of the online-accountability tools, student work was less focused and evidenced fewer instances and lower levels of intensity of leadership efficacy. Since implementing the online tools, students report that they feel prepared to be principals, are looking forward

to their first assignments, and are already considering geographical moves to obtain that first leadership position.

   Next steps for ALPS faculty include designing research that will result in not only a thick description of the transition from teacher to leader tracked by the accountability tools but other data that will track self-assessments collected over time, by individual student, and by cohort group. These data will be used to continue to modify projects and learning activities to enhance instances and degree of leadership efficacy in principal candidates.

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