



## Let's Talk About It: Oral Discourse as an Assessment Strategy

**M**any techniques can be used to assess student learning in higher education. The exact menu of assessment tools chosen by instructors depends largely on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions found in a course's learning outcomes. Singh (2011) suggested that, although typical assessment practices tend to focus on written products (e.g., examinations, research papers), the boundaries could be reasonably extended to include oral discourse. These structured, one-on-one conversations with instructors, when thoughtfully conceived and implemented, allow students to talk about what they have learned, demonstrate an understanding of their knowledge and class objectives, and apply course content in new ways.

Joughlin (1998), in a review of the literature on assessment practices related to oral discourse, identified four areas to guide instructors in evaluating student performance: (a) knowledge and understanding (e.g., recall of basic concepts, facts, and principles), (b) applied problem-solving ability (e.g., application of the knowledge base in derived scenarios), (c) interpersonal competence (e.g., communication abilities), and (d) intrapersonal qualities (e.g., self awareness, poise). Oral discourse can be a primary mode of summative assessment, focusing on the outcome of instructional goals, or can be linked with written assessment strategies as a formative function, allowing the instructor to monitor how well students are meeting objectives as the course progresses. For example, faculty members might engage students in an oral discourse and then later ask them to elaborate further in a written assignment, including external references and resources that focus on one of the questions or topics of discussion that emerged during the conversation. Combining oral and written assessment reinforces students' understanding of course content and accomplishment of learning outcomes.

### Creating a Structure for Oral Discourse

Adopting oral discourse as an assessment tool will require instructors to do some intentional planning, but the energy spent will pay dividends later in the quality of the experience for students and the ease with which their performances can be evaluated. For example, an instructor teaching a course in which "Goldilocks and the Three Bears"<sup>1</sup> is a primary text decides to use an oral discourse as a strategy to assess course learning objectives. To begin, the instructor creates a list of questions that will guide the conversation with students—this step is critically important. Heritage and Heritage (2013) suggested that initial questions and answers should stimulate further response and elaboration (i.e., initiation, response, feedback, response, feedback). This interactive process facilitates an organic, self-sustaining conversation rather than a simple question-and-answer session.

<sup>1</sup>The use of the story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" in relation to the assessment of student learning can be found on numerous websites with no attribution to the original author. Thanks to the originator of this concept, whoever you may be.



**“Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards.”**

**—Theodore Zeldin,  
English philosopher and  
writer**

Also, these prompts (i.e., questions) should be designed to assess student learning at varied levels of thinking (e.g., remembering, applying, analyzing, creating). For example, when focusing on “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” the instructor, using Joughlin’s (1998) model, might begin the conversation with one or more of the following prompts to assess students’ basic knowledge and understanding:

- What are the three main events in the plot of this story?
- Describe the personality and characteristics of Goldilocks.
- What kinds of observations can you make about Goldilocks and her character or personality?

Other prompts might assess problem solving and application:

- Create a scenario where this story occurs in a 21st-century setting.
- What are some of the lessons intended from this story?
- What elements of this story explain its longstanding popularity?

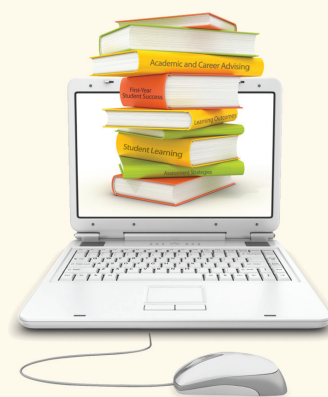
When planning an oral discourse, instructors also should create a rubric (Figure 1) to guide the assessment of students’ performances during their one-on-one dialogues. Students would receive the rubric before the conversation to give them a sense of how the dialogue will progress and how they will be evaluated.

Criteria	Exemplary	Competent	Emerging	Below Expectations
<b>Basic Knowledge And Understanding (40%)</b>	Demonstrates a full understanding of the topic	Demonstrates a good understanding of the topic	Shows a good understanding of parts of the topic	Does not seem to understand the topic very well
<b>Problem-Solving and Application (40%)</b>	Is able to accurately answer almost all questions about the topic	Is able to accurately answer most questions about the topic	Is able to accurately answer a few questions about the topic	Is unable to accurately answer questions about the topic
<b>Interpersonal Skills (20%)</b>	Consistently uses gestures, eye contact, tone of voice, and a level of enthusiasm in communicating	Generally uses gestures, eye contact, tone of voice, and a level of enthusiasm in communicating	Sometimes uses gestures, eye contact, tone of voice, and a level of enthusiasm in communicating	Seldom uses gestures, eye contact, tone of voice, and a level of enthusiasm in communicating

Figure 1: Oral discourse rubric based on Joughlin’s (1998) model.

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Finally, when preparing for meetings with students to conduct oral discourse sessions, instructors should

- identify a location for these conversations that will not be overly intimidating for students (e.g., campus coffee shop, student center). It is probably best not to meet in a faculty member's office to reduce possible distractions and interruptions;
- select the combination of questions to ask each student, starting with a basic knowledge question and proceeding to questions that require higher levels of thinking;
- begin the dialogue with a brief description of the process;
- remember the importance of creating a conversation, using the first few questions to create the rhythm of a dialogue; and
- make some initial notes and impressions after the student leaves to evaluate his or her performance based upon the criteria outlined in the rubric.

Using oral discourse assessment strategies will provide added opportunities for students to demonstrate their newly acquired knowledge and skills and for instructors to determine how well students are meeting or have met learning objectives.

## REFERENCES

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Singh, P. (2011). Oral assessment: Preparing learners for discourse in communities of practice. *Systemic Practice and Action Research, 24*, 247-259.

Zeldin, T. (2000). *Conversation: How talk can change our lives*. Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring.



**College Students in Transition:  
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Stephanie M. Foote,  
Sara E. Hinkle, Jeannine Kranzow,  
Matthew D. Pistilli,  
LaTonya Rease Miles, and  
Janelle G. Simmons  
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126 pages. \$30.00

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# Journal

## of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition

A semiannual refereed journal providing current research and scholarship on significant student transitions. The primary purpose of the *Journal* is to disseminate empirical research findings on student transition issues, including:

- explorations into the academic, personal, and social experiences—including outcomes related to success, learning, and development—of students at a range of transition points throughout the college years. These transitions include, but are not limited to, the first college year, the transfer transition, the sophomore year, the senior year and transition out of college, and the transition to graduate work;
- transition issues unique to specific populations (e.g., nontraditional, traditional, historically underrepresented students, transfer students, commuters, part-time students); and
- explorations of faculty development, curriculum, and pedagogical innovations connected to any of the transitions identified above.





# What's Happening at The National Resource Center

## Conferences and Continuing Education

### Conferences and Institutes

#### 33rd Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience

February 15-18, 2014

San Diego, California

*Early Registration Deadline: January 16, 2014*

Diane R. Dean, associate professor for higher education administration and policy at Illinois State University; Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and president emeritus of Teachers College, Columbia University; and Vasti Torres, dean of the College of Education at the University of South Florida, will be the featured speakers at the 33rd Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience. Conferences are meetings where educators from two- and four-year institutions come together to openly share ideas, concepts, resources, assessment tools, programmatic interventions, and research results focused on the first college year. Registration and proposal information is available at <http://www.sc.edu/fye/annual>.

#### Save the Dates

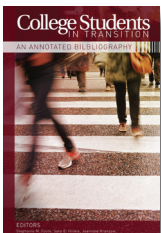
#### Institute on Creating Effective Partnerships for the Success of Returning Veterans

April 4-6, 2014

University of South Carolina (Capstone Campus Room)

## New Releases

#### College Students in Transition: An Annotated Bibliography



Stephanie M. Foote, Sara E. Hinkle, Jeannine Kranzow, Matthew D. Pistilli, La'Tonya Rease Miles, & Janelle G. Simmons

The transition from high school to college is an important milestone, but it is only one of many steps in the journey through higher education. Interest in the many other transitions students make—through the sophomore year, from one institution to another, and out of college—has grown exponentially in the last decade. At the same time, educators

recognize that each transition experience is unique, shaped by the individual student context. A new annotated bibliography helps researchers and practitioners navigate the emerging literature based on college student transitions beyond the first year, with special focus on adult learners, student veterans, and those studying in different cultures.

Please visit us online at <http://www.nrcpubs.com/p/119/annotated-bibliography-on-college-student-transitions> to order your copy.

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## Call for Proposals

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition and the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education are collaborating to produce a new scholarly practice book on the intersection between first-year seminars and learning communities, slated for publication in late spring 2015. The editors invite high-quality case studies describing the integration of first-year seminars into learning communities. Cases will be selected to represent a variety of seminar types, learning community models, and institutional contexts. Preference will be given to those cases that describe assessment results beyond academic performance (i.e., GPA) and retention.

Visit <http://www.sc.edu/fye/publications/development.html> to review complete case guidelines or submit a case study. For more information, contact the volume editors Lauren Chism Schmidt at [Ichism@iupui.edu](mailto:Ichism@iupui.edu) or Janine Graziano at [janinegk@gmail.com](mailto:janinegk@gmail.com). The deadline for case submissions is January 14, 2014.

## Call for Reviewers

*The Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* is a semiannual refereed journal published by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. The *Journal* disseminates empirical research findings on the first college year and other significant student transitions that inform practice in all sectors of postsecondary education. The *Journal* currently is accepting nominations (including self-nominations) for members of the editorial review board. Editorial review board members serve a three-year term (January 2014-December 2016) and can anticipate being asked to review approximately six manuscripts per year for the duration of their term.

Members of the editorial review board hold advanced degrees (PhD or equivalent preferred); have a minimum of five years experience in higher education; are affiliated with an accredited college or university; and have expertise in quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods research design and analysis. Further, editorial review board members agree to return reviews within six weeks of receipt and to assume a dual role of gatekeeper and shaper of research in the first-year experience and students-in-transition field by providing a rigorous review of manuscripts submitted for publication while also offering constructive and encouraging feedback to mentor fellow researchers.

Individuals who meet these qualifications are invited to submit the following information to Paul A. Gore, Jr., editor, at [paul.gore@utah.edu](mailto:paul.gore@utah.edu): letter of intent, including a list of specific scholarly pursuits (e.g., bridge programs, transfer students, sophomores, senior capstone courses); a description of interest in reviewing studies employing qualitative, quantitative, and/or mixed methods; and a current curriculum vita. The deadline for receipt of completed nomination packages is December 1, 2013.

## National Resource Center Exhibits and Presentations

Like many of you, the staff of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition is actively involved in the conference circuit. We are pleased to share the following upcoming opportunities to hear about the results of research studies conducted by the Center, learn about best practices, and meet National Resource Center staff members.

## Institute for the Success of Student Veterans

April 4-6, 2014

University of South Carolina  
Columbia, South Carolina



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Looking for new teaching strategies or fresh ideas for first-year seminars? *E-Source*, the National Resource Center's online newsletter for college transitions, offers a wealth of information. *E-Source* also is accepting submissions for the fall 2014 issue. To view the archives, review submission guidelines, and to receive content alerts for new issues, please go to

[www.sc.edu/fye/esource](http://www.sc.edu/fye/esource)

**National Research and Trends on High-Impact Practices in the First-Year Seminar.**

Concurrent session by Jennifer R. Keup, National Resource Center director, at the 2014 Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Conference, 3:30-4:30 p.m.; Thursday, January 23, 2014; Grand Hyatt Hotel, Washington, DC.

**Intellectual Oomph in First-Year Experiences.** Panel session including Jennifer R. Keup, National Resource Center director, at the 2014 Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Conference, 8:45-10 a.m.; Friday, January 24, 2014; Grand Hyatt Hotel, Washington, DC.

## Research

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The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition named Forrest Lane and Georgianna Martin recipients of the 2013-2014 Paul P. Fidler Research Grant. Lane and Martin will be acknowledged during the 21st National Conference on Students in Transition in 2014.

The grant, designed to encourage and enable scholarly research on issues related to college student transitions, includes financial support and travel to two national conferences. Lane and Martin's study is entitled *Examining the Importance of Attachment and Engagement in Predicting GPA Across Stages of Transfer Student Transition*.

The application window for the 2014-2015 Paul P. Fidler Research Grant will open April 1, 2014, and close at 11:59 Eastern, July 1, 2014.

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### The Toolbox

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*The Toolbox* is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

The online subscription is free. To register for newsletter alerts and access back issues, please visit [www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox](http://www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox).

### Publication Staff

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