The Molding of a Master

by Barbara Glesner-Fines and Colleen Kelly

During the 2013 academic year, UMKC graduated 954 students with a degree declaring them to be a master. We have twenty-one Master of Arts degrees, with 267 graduates this past year; eighteen Master of Science degrees, with 245 graduates; seven Masters of Music degrees (32 graduates). There are fourteen other types of master’s degrees in the graduate and professional programs, two of which (the MBA program in the Bloch School of Management and the MSN program in Nursing) have the largest classes of master’s degree students of any single degree program at UMKC. Other master’s programs are smaller: some may have graduated only one or two master’s students in any given year.

With such diversity of degree programs that all share the title “Master,” one might wonder if there is a core of learning goals that these programs expect all graduates to have achieved? Some master’s degree programs are research-intensive and intended as preparation for a Ph.D. program; others are intended as a terminal degree, preparing students for a particular career; still others are better viewed as professional degrees, leading to licensure in a particular field. Yet with all these variations, there may also be some core goals that are consistent with all master’s programs.

One way to think about the student learning outcomes that all master’s degree programs share is to step back and ask the more theoretical question, “What does it truly mean to be a master?” When viewed in isolation, the language is archaic: calling to mind medieval master tradesmen with their apprentices. Could this historical analogue provide a helpful perspective from which to begin to discern the common learning goals of all Masters degree programs?

If we follow the analogy through, we conclude that a master is one with expertise, passion and an ability to expand and share that expertise. A master is also one who is recognized by others in their craft, not only for their expertise, but for their integrity in their use of the craft.

Expertise

When one thinks of a master, one logically begins with expertise. A master is someone with a breadth and depth of knowledge of their field. The master has the skills and habits to put that knowledge to use to produce predicta-

ble, high-quality results. The master blacksmith, for example, knows not only how to work the forge, hammer, and tongs to produce a full range of high-quality products, but also knows how to use that knowledge to meet the demands for new products or the challenges of new materials.

How does one assess that expertise? Again, the medieval guilds provide us with some measurable outcomes. Obviously to acquire knowledge in a specific field, one would expect that the master will have spent a considerable amount of time acquiring the knowledge and skills required to reach mastery. Indeed, time spent

Continued on Page 5
Assessing the Capstone Experience in Political Science

The Political Science Department requires seniors to successfully complete a senior thesis as part of our degree requirements. We believe effective research and communication skills are critical to the future success of our students. The capstone course (Pol-Sci 492WI: Senior Seminar) serves as the forum for students to hone these skills as they develop their thesis.

The capstone course also plays an integral role in our department assessment. When we developed the Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for our degree program, we agreed that research and communication skills were a must. While many of our courses include activities and assignments assessing this SLO, we decided to assess the degree SLO with the Senior Seminar.

By 2011, it became clear that the course was not producing the achievement targets we set for the SLO. Generally, attendance and participation in the course had become haphazard and the completion rate was lower than desired.

Moreover, faculty had concerns about the level and quality of the theses being produced. Students were not mastering the SLO and had come to view the thesis as a barrier to graduation, not an opportunity to develop communication and research skills.

In response to student and faculty concerns, the Department decided to place more emphasis on the Senior Seminar. For years, the course had been taught as an overload course. As such, the instructor had very little time to devote to the course and relied too much on other faculty as advisors.

We altered our degree requirements to ensure the course could be taught as part of a normal teaching load. We also switched instructors to signal to students that their preconceptions about the course no longer applied. I taught the course for the first time in spring 2012. I am in the midst of my fifth iteration of the course and have been asked to share the changes I have made to the course.

To begin, I developed seven course-level SLOs: (1) formulate a research question, (2) design a plan for answering a research question, (3) locate and synthesize political science research, (4) employ a methodological approach to answer the research question, (5) recommend future research or policy prescriptions, (6) evaluate peer research, and (7) demonstrate effective oral (presentation), visual (poster), and written (final thesis) communication of one’s research. Students demonstrating competency of these learning outcomes pass the course. All course activities and assessment methods are geared toward achievement of these SLOs.

Additionally, I incorporated periodic (and graded) assignments to guide students through the various elements of thesis writing including choosing a research question, reviewing the literature, proposing hypotheses, gathering and analyzing evidence, summarizing findings, and articulating conclusions. Previously, students were encouraged to submit parts of their thesis as they went along, but this was not mandatory to complete the course. For each assignment, I have developed a rubric that assesses students’ achievement of the objectives of the assignment.

These rubrics are provided to the students along with their feedback and grade on the assignment. I believe this transparency in assessment and grading has facilitated improvement in the achievement of the course SLOs. For example, the achievement target for effective oral communication was met by 63% of the students in fall 2012 and 87% in fall 2013. As a result, the feedback on the assignments gives students formative feedback. The final thesis now serves as the summative assessment for the SLOs, not the only assessment.

I continue to modify the course in response to the assessment data and feedback from students. At the end of each term, I have the class complete an extensive survey of the course. Survey questions gauge the students’ satisfaction with the assignments, instructor feedback, peer feedback, and skill development. I rely on this survey and the assessment data to continuously tweak the course to better serve students.

~Beth Miller Vonnahme
Using Rubrics in the
Blackboard Grade Center

If you use rubrics to grade student work, you may not know that Blackboard has created an integrated rubric tool that can be used to assess assignments, discussion boards and any other graded work in a course. The scores that are entered into the Blackboard rubric will automatically appear in the grade center column associated with that assignment. When rubrics are associated with assignments in Blackboard, students can see them before they turn in their work, helping them to better understand the assignment expectations. Rubrics are time intensive to develop but many instructors find that a well-designed and descriptive rubric can make the process of grading student work much less arduous.

Rubrics can be developed for a variety of assignments: papers, group projects, oral presentations, participation, etc. Rubrics can be used as a grading tool as well as a formative evaluation tool which might help an instructor better understand the strengths and weaknesses of his/her class. Instructors could use a rubric at the beginning of a semester to gather data on specific criteria important to the course.

Once a summary of the findings from the rubric has been generated, the instructor can pinpoint concepts or skills where more practice and instruction may be necessary.

The rubric tool is found in the instructor control panel under Course Tools. Rubrics can be configured with as many columns and rows as are necessary for the assignment. Setting up the structure for the rubric is intuitive and fairly simple. The most difficult part of creating and effective rubric is composing the descriptions of student work at each level of competence. There are a wide variety of scoring options with this tool. Rubrics can be scored with no points, points, point ranges, percentages and percent ranges. Criteria can be weighted to place emphasis on different parts of the assignment.

Once an assignment in Blackboard is scored with a rubric, instructors can run Rubric Evaluation Reports, which give analysis of the overall scoring of each of the criteria in the rubric. Statistics such as mean, median and standard deviation are provided for each of the rows in the rubric. These reports are simple to run and can provide helpful summaries of student scores throughout the semester.

Rubric development can be a tedious task and it is often difficult to accurately describe what a student generated product at several levels of proficiency looks like. There are some helpful resources to use that may make the process easier. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has developed a set of 16 rubrics that are meant to be used, adapted and shared. The rubrics address topics such as critical thinking, inquiry and analysis, quantitative literacy and written/oral communication. These rubrics can serve as inspiration as you develop rubrics for your assignments. The rubrics can be downloaded from the AAC&U website (http://www.aacu.org/VALUE/rubrics/).

~ Molly Mead

Rubric Example courtesy of Online Learning
How to Create Effective Surveys

Creating effective survey instruments can be among the most important pieces in the development of a strong assessment model. There are six basic ingredients necessary for designing strong surveys. They can be summed up in a handy acronym of “DESIGN” developed by Campus Labs:

**Determine Your Purpose** – What do you want to show, why do you need to show it, who is the source of your data, and how will you use the results?

**Examine Past Assessments** - Did you use the data? If you used the data, was it useful, and what feedback was taken from past survey participants?

**Select an Appropriate Method** - This could include choices such as indirect or direct assessment, formative or summative assessment, quantitative and qualitative assessment, and even whether to use an entire population or a sample of the population.

**Identify ethical/logistical considerations** - Are the necessary resources available, will IRB approval be required, are demographic questions necessary, are there political issues involved, and should a pre/post analysis be part of the process?

**Generate the best question and answer format** - Consideration should be given to matching scales, questions should be mutually exclusive, and should exhaust all areas of the survey’s purpose. Neutral and not-applicable options should also be made available to participants.

**Note the purpose for each data point** - When writing surveys it is important to be on the lookout for overlap, to try to identify gaps in the survey, and to eliminate “nice to know” questions that are not directly relevant to your assessment model.

Hopefully, this can be a good start for designing your survey. One last aid in survey development is to contact the Office of Assessment and we will be glad to assist you in this important process.

~ Dan Stroud

From Nathan’s Desk: A Dashboard for Assessment Reports

For the third year in a row, the University Assessment Committee and my office reviewed all of the assessment plans for the 160+ academic degrees at UMKC. Feedback has been sent to all assessment coordinators, and we are tracking each degree’s progress as well. I am pleased to report that we continue to see improvements across the university, and we are especially delighted by the curriculum maps and efforts to “close the loop” this past year. I commend so many of you for your excellent work!

Our office uses a “traffic light” dashboard spreadsheet to identify which assessment plans are good (green), which plans need improvement (yellow), and which plans were not submitted (red). Thankfully, none of the assessment plans for academic majors have a “red” status. However, too many degrees are in the “yellow” category of needing improvement or having items missing. Each program needs to collect data each year and outline action plans that are connected to the data. Any program that has not developed a curriculum map needs to do so this year as well. I will be conducting a workshop on curriculum mapping on Wednesday, April 23rd from 2:00-3:00pm at FaCET. Please RSVP if you plan to attend.

The other item to keep on your radar is the assessment of General Education courses. Similar to the degree assessment plans, these reports are due on October 1st, 2014. Please encourage your colleagues to collect data this semester if they haven’t already done so.

As a closing thought, Pat Cross has described assessment as the “zipper that connects teaching and learning.” I hope that your classroom zipper is working well, making the learning expectations and results more transparent to the students. We want to ensure that students can demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and values we are working hard to help them develop. As we truly put student learning first, it is hard to go wrong!

~ Nathan Lindsay
learning is often used as a rough proxy for expertise, and the route through apprentice and journeyman to master in medieval guilds could feasibly take decades. Likewise, most dictionary definitions of “master’s degrees” speak in terms of the time sequence (following an undergraduate degree) and the time commitment (one to two years) required to acquire an advanced degree.

Journalist Malcolm Gladwell has popularized the notion that success in any field is the product of 10,000 hours of practice (Gladwell 35-68). One need not accept his 10,000 hour rule to recognize that developing expertise takes time. Yet time alone is insufficient to guarantee mastery.

Certainly, time must be spent in acquiring the core knowledge and skills of the trade. In acquiring a trade, much of this knowledge is tacit, learned through observation, practice and critique – so that the apprentice standing alongside the expert over time absorbs the habits, schema, and values of the expert (Bransford, et. al. 29-50).

In this regard, academic master’s degree programs differ from the guild method of preparing masters, as the academic programs presumably have translated the tacit knowledge of the field into explicit schema, core concepts, and patterns for organizing knowledge, all of which students are expected to learn in their coursework.

Nonetheless, a student cannot be simply given these schema to “learn” in order to move from novice to expert. Rather, just as the apprentice would be given an increasing range of tasks with regular correction in learning those tasks, the student in an academic program requires a similar cycle of regular practice focused on a particular goal with an appropriate level of challenge and with timely feedback (Ambrose, et. al. 127-136).

The role of formative assessment in building expertise is critical then. While our assessment plans in master’s degree programs focus on summative assessment methods, if the results of those assessments are disappointing, the answer is to be found in more opportunities for assessment of student learning while that learning is still taking place.

A Masterpiece

In terms of summative assessment, one of the traditional prerequisites for recognition as a master was the production of a masterpiece (Holt and Turner, 264). From an assessment perspective, a masterpiece is more difficult to use as an assessment measure because it is likely to be highly individualized.

Yet, the medieval guilds may have recognized the power of the requirement of a masterpiece for its demonstration of hard-to-measure criteria such as commitment, creativity, and the development of one’s identity as a master.

Likewise, in our own master’s degree programs, nearly all require a thesis or a capstone project or performance that provides similar motivations and assessments. The key for assessment is in faculty agreement on the criterion to evaluate those projects or papers. Some degree programs have developed rubrics, assessing such factors as critical thinking, writing, research, but also collaboration, leadership, or perspective.

The master is also someone who has the ability to share their knowledge. Our image of the master tradesman would seem incomplete without the image of the apprentice at their side. Thus, a master must be someone who can translate and extend knowledge. Of the master’s degree programs at UMKC, few have an express goal for the ability of their graduates to be able to teach. Many include research as a core learning outcome. Some include outcomes that go to the heart of both these skills: the commitment to the field, to extending knowledge, to serving the public in some form.

Here again, the challenge lies in assessing commitment, an outcome that is not as easily subject to objective criteria. That challenge should not stand in the way of trying to gather whatever observations or data we can. At a minimum, relevant information from these observations and data can further inform our own formulation of learning outcomes.

Likewise, sharing our methods and standards for measuring growth of these more nuanced learning outcomes can inform our assessment practices. For example, master’s degree programs with clinical practice components such as the Nursing MSN degree use clinical practice observations for assessment, while the accomplishments of master’s students in the Conservatory are measured by juries. The criteria for each might be useful to the other in interesting ways.

Identity and Values

What else defines a master besides knowledge and skills? Essentially, a master must be a lifelong learner, with a passion for growth and continued learning. For that type of outcome, assessments that look to the student’s performance after graduation are the best measure. A number of our master’s programs here at UMKC use alumni and employer surveys to assess student success after graduation. These assessment methods also reflect the understanding that our notion of a master is one that includes some recognition within the

Continued on Page 6
For those unfamiliar, Google Books now has a product called the Ngram viewer that counts the frequency of words that appear in books and have been digitized for use online. Our resident assessment mentor entered the words “assessment” (in blue), “testing” (in red), and “grades” (in green), since 1800. The chart above shows some very interesting results. Thanks Barb!

What is a Master? Continued from Page 5

...community of artisans as well as among the general public.

While the reputation for expertise and quality work is the touchstone of the peer reputation, reputation among the general public would just as likely include components of ethics and integrity in the practice of one’s craft. While one might suppose that integrity and ethics should be a critical component of any master’s program, in fact, only about one third of the UMKC master’s degree assessment plans expressly state learning outcomes that address these values. Ethics and integrity may seem as difficult to measure as creativity or passion, yet there are clearly cognitive and behavioral components to these learning outcomes that can be assessed.

While there are limits in the analogy between craft guild and the academy, and even more limits on the analogy between a master craftsman and a master’s degree graduate, there are certainly some core understandings that all share. The challenge of measuring learning at the mastery level is in assessing learning outcomes at an elevated level that are not readily quantifiable or even subject to concrete description. Equally challenging when working with students at an advanced level is the complexity of knowing what to change in the teaching pedagogy and learning activities that will improve that student learning. Finally, master’s degree programs are challenged by the necessity of recognizing that not all apprentices will become masters no matter how strong the teaching might be.

One way to meet these challenges is for master’s degree program faculty to share their assessment efforts with one another. With this in mind, a FACET meeting will be held on Wednesday, April 16th at 3:30 in the FACET offices. Bring your ideas, measures, rubrics, and questions as we work toward mastering assessment of the master’s programs at UMKC.

References: