

The Insight

Careful and systematic collection, analysis, and then using the data collected from assessment to inform our instructional practices provides an opportunity for realizing the full benefits of assessment practices.

Implications

By carefully considering the types of assessment activities we choose, the careful and sustained attention we give to the results, and the support and guidance we give students to enable them to successfully use the results themselves, we can advance student learning, inform teaching practices, improve program curriculum, and prepare students to meet the challenges of a changing workplace.

“Nothing we do to, or for our students is more important than our assessment of their work and the feedback we give them on it. The results of our assessment influence students for the rest of their lives...” – Race, Brown, and Smith (2005)

The Importance of Assessment for Student Learning

As educators, our primary role is to teach and facilitate students' learning. It sounds simple and straight-forward: I teach; students learn. But we know that is not as easy as it sounds. While teaching and learning go hand-in-hand, and there is a lot to say about both, I am going to focus here on the learning part.

There are big and important questions we routinely find ourselves asking about students' learning: *Do we know if students are learning what we teach then? How do we know if learning is taking place in our classrooms or program?* The answers lie in a carefully designed assessment.

Assessment is defined as any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence to describe program, course, departmental, or institutional effectiveness (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996). As educators, many of us have performed one form of assessment or another. For example, if you have ever given a quiz or end-of-year exam, you are already performing assessment. What is less common, however, is carefully and systematically collecting, analyzing, and then using the data collected from assessment to inform our instructional practices. Many of us do not do this because we do not realize its importance. This becomes a missed opportunity for realizing the full benefits of assessment practices

This article presents four reasons why assessment is important for enhancing student learning and makes a case for why we should rethink the role of assessment in our courses and programs.

1. Assessment provides feedback to students.

Assessment for learning, if done well, involves frequent and immediate feedback to students and allows them to interact with the instructor in ways that significantly increase learning. Studies have shown that providing feedback when students are still thinking about the information is very important (Opitz et al, 2011). In my own classroom, I have noticed a progressive richness and detailed response to application and discussion questions as the semester progresses. The students have credited the positive progression to the frequent feedback they receive from me and their peers.

2. Assessment encourages self-evaluation (reflection) by students.

Feedback from an assessment activity provides students the opportunity to keep track of their learning and to recognize where they need improvement. For students to realize the opportunities and to effectively use the feedback for improvements, I believe we as faculty need to provide specific and supportive guidance to students. Knowing how to learn from past performance is both a skill and a way of thinking or disposition. We can model both and help students develop these habits. With these habits, students can use the results to know how they are doing in the classroom. Online quizzes on concepts discussed in lecture, clicker quizzes, and reflection questions that receive immediate feedback upon completion are examples of assessments with frequent and immediate feedback, which have been demonstrated to encourage meaningful learning.

3. Assessment helps instructors identify areas of confusion for students.

Assessment results highlight where and how students are struggling individually and collectively. The results provide insights into key questions such as: *Are students confused about what they are learning or should be learning? Does everybody have the same problem, or is it only certain students in the class who are confused about a particular topic or concept? Do I as an instructor need to rethink the way I provide information?* Assessment data inform us (the instructors), on when to revise course content, teaching methodology, or learning activities. The data also help instructors to decide when and how we might use new teaching tools to help students to interact with the content in more meaningful, engaging, and effective ways.

4. Assessment provides opportunities for students to make connections between classroom knowledge and real-life.

Thoughtful assessment activities can provide students an opportunity to transfer the knowledge and skills they are developing in the classroom to scenarios that mirror the realities of life, careers, and work. For example, in a medical parasitology class that I taught, I used role play inspired by my own professional experience to creatively transfer knowledge outside the classroom. Students were asked to imagine that they were working for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and their boss asked them to prepare an informational brochure on a parasite including its life cycle, infective stage, symptoms of infection, prevention, and treatment. Students not only had to review and summarize what they had been taught but also had to think about how they would present this information in the real world. The brochure, then, is a type of assessment that provides me the opportunity to assess how students are able to apply their acquired knowledge to contexts beyond the classroom walls.

As these four reasons (hopefully) illustrate, assessment activities can and should serve multiple purposes, from advancing student learning, informing teaching practices, and improving program curriculum to preparing students to meet the challenges of a changing workplace. By carefully considering the types of assessment activities we choose, the careful and sustained attention we give to the results, and the support and guidance we give students to enable them to successfully use the results themselves, we can influence the lasting value the assessment activities bring to students.

References:

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- Race, P., Brown, S., & Smith, B. D. (2005). *500 tips on assessment*. Psychology Press.
- Upcraft, M. L., & Schuh, J. H. (1996). *Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series*. Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 350 Sansome St., San Francisco, CA 94104.