

The Insight

It is useful to have a specific list of questions to ask oneself upon the completion of a course.

Implications

Use of such a checklist reveals how to best use assessment for course improvement, and suggests how one might refine their assessment techniques to get better data.

“For teachers to be able to develop new approaches to formative assessment, they must investigate their own classroom practices.”

-- Harry Torrance & John Pryor

“Closing the loop” Part I: the true purpose of assessment

It is crucial to understand that **why** we perform assessment should inform **how** we assess—the true importance of meaningful assessment is to guide effective changes in the courses we teach. In Chapter 6 of their book *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*¹, Elizabeth Barkley and Claire Howell Major discuss specific ways in which courses may be adjusted in response to assessment data. They suggest that instructors ask themselves a series of questions, six of which are listed below. My comments (in italics below) illustrate some of the questions I often ask myself, that fall under the broader questions Barkley and Major suggest:

1. Do you need to adjust your goals for student performance?
Are my students succeeding based on my definition of success? If so, then maybe it's time to aim for more. If students struggle with a particular concept that isn't that crucial, then maybe I should omit or de-emphasize that concept.
2. Would it help to modify your learning objectives and/or outcomes?
Are my outcomes actually being measured by the data I collect? If not, then maybe I need to change my outcomes to reflect what I'm actually measuring.
3. Would it be worthwhile to experiment with a new assessment technique?
*Would clicker questions help? What about surveys? Should my assigned homework include more applied problems? Less applied problems? How about group work? Can I incorporate a game into a class? What about entry and/or exit tickets?
If the assessment data I collect (whether it be numerical data or more qualitative observations) doesn't suggest ways I can improve my class, then I'm probably not collecting the right data.*
4. Could changes in preparatory materials help?
Should I create or adjust handouts or lecture notes I provide to students? If I'm providing them with text-heavy materials, should I try to use more pictures? How much should I tell students about how their work will be graded? Can I simplify materials I give to students?
5. Might you introduce an activity in a more engaging way?
Is there a joke or story I can tell that relates to the course material? What about a group activity? Is the order in which I present material conducive to generating student interest in the material?
6. Would it help to change any of the steps in an activity?
Is each assignment appropriately scaffolded? Does it contain language that misleads students? Is it clear to the students what they should learn from an activity?

Barkley and Major call the adjustments one makes to a course in response to questions like these “closing the loop”. In my next *Learning InSights* article, I will discuss examples of how I “close the loop” in the mathematics classes I teach at Ferris, and the impact of changes I have made to my courses on student learning.

¹ Barkley and Major, pp. 67-70.