

The Insight

An operational verb refers to “student actions that can be directly observed in external contexts and subject to judgment”.

Implications

Verbs like “recall”, “recognize” “develop” “value” and “relate” are not operational and cannot be measured directly. Focus on actions that can be directly observed and measured.

“Assignments are instructions, not outcomes in themselves”

MORE FROM THE ASSESSMENT INSTITUTE

This article continues my experiences at the IUPUI Assessment Institute last October in Indianapolis, presenting some of the insights I obtained from individual sessions that focused on evaluating student learning in the classroom. These presentations were very nuts-and-bolts, which was especially helpful to me as a faculty member sometimes struggling to construct meaningful assignments and then craft pithy statements that accurately capture what I want to ensure my students learn.

One session in particular focused on writing learning outcome statements, with concrete examples and guidelines. The presenters discussed the distinction between operational and active verbs; principally that an operational verb refers to “student actions that can be directly observed in external contexts and subject to judgment” (Adelman, 2015). So, if we use “recall” as an outcome it refers to an internal cognitive activity that cannot be measured directly until that memory is performed in another activity. That additional activity becomes the basis of an assignment asking students to demonstrate their recall of a particular concept. Another important takeaway from this session was that assignments are instructions, not outcomes in themselves; the outcome should lead to the assignment.

A continuing thread from the previous sessions was faculty collaboration. The presenters shared how they crossed discipline boundaries and reached out to faculty in other departments on a regular basis to generate much improved assignments and measures. As faculty we sometimes feel that we are alone in our efforts to draft an evaluation instrument or learning outcome, and may be uncertain as to appropriate wording for a particular assignment. We have much to learn from and offer to our colleagues, both within departments but across disciplines as well. Let’s leverage that collective knowledge and varied perspectives to inform our practice of evaluating student learning

A forthcoming article will discuss a session in which a faculty member described how he constructed an assessment resource for his colleagues. His primary goal was usefulness, but “quick and cheap” as well. Until next time!