

Assessing Student Learning

We typically assess student learning in terms of their grades on quizzes, tests, and papers. But this kind of assessment comes too late—it give us no chance to adjust our teaching in order to improve students' content mastery or skills.

An alternative approach emphasizes how assessment can help us improve our teaching.

The Principles of Learning Assessment

Principle 1: Assessment should be linked to our learning objectives.

To properly assess student learning, you need to know what you want your class to accomplish: The content you wish to convey and the skills you want to nurture.

Principle 2: Assessment requires an instructor to be highly specific about what outcomes to assess.

You need to spell out objectives that are clear and precise, and not vague or allusive.

Principle 3: The objectives need to be student-focused rather than instructor-focused.

Focus on the learning resulting from an activity rather than on the activity that you assign.

Principle 4: The learning outcomes need to be measurable.

“Real-Time” Assessment

If we are serious about enhancing student learning, we want to know what content and skills students have mastered and which they are struggling with.

Here are some ways your can assess student learning in “real time” so that you can adjust your teaching to student needs:

1. Observation

You can learn a lot just by watching students at work. Break them into small groups and give them a problem and see how they grapple with it.

2. Think Aloud

Give students a problem and have them articulate what they are thinking as they attempt to solve it.

3. Diagnostics

A “one minute” paper or a problem or a quiz can offer an efficient way to diagnose student strengths and deficiencies. But also



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Steven Mintz
smintz@columbia.edu
212-854-1066

consider more creative alternatives:

- In a humanities class, you might ask the students to convert the text into a screenplay or to construct a “FaceBook”
- You might also ask students to serve as “apprentice scholars” w

4. A Survey

A survey allows students to speak for themselves and assess their own areas of competence and deficiency.

Papers and Tests as Learning Opportunities

The main purpose of assessment is summative: To grade students’ performance. But instead of simply thinking of our assignments as evaluative, we might also think of ways that they can promote student learning.

The key is to specify our learning objectives and share our grading criteria—by providing students with sample papers or essay answers and with a grading rubric, the standards that we use in evaluating their work.