Incorporating New Assessment Strategies

Introduction

Assessment and anxiety often come hand in hand for both instructors and students. On the one hand, professional instructors are required to designate a grade or pass/fail to each student while at the same time hoping to teach the course material most effectively as possible. And in the other, students are desire to obtain certain grades or pass/fail status to obtain a degree while at the same time hoping to learn something useful to their lives. Not all knowledge is practical, but a mind put to good use is.

The obvious question, then, that both groups may ask is:

- How can I measure my success? (I don't want to know if I met the criteria, I want to know how well)

And to it there is an obvious answer:

- Incorporate measurable items into your teaching/learning. (To define such an item you need to know what your specific goal is, i.e. learning objectives)

The following summary is based in part on discussions with Jean Florman, the director of the University of Iowa's Center for Teaching.

Strategies That Work*

To begin assessment there needs to be an identifiable goal so that the preparation of a strategy is likely to produce a useful outcome, otherwise the efforts are wasted. Assessment is usually external (of students, by professor, for department), meaning that considering the audience is also a critical factor for success. *Below are listed some strategies that can be followed, but have not been rigorously tested by the author.

Instructors

Out of necessity, an underlying goal for many instructors is improved efficiency. Time constraints can limit the amount of investment available for teaching. In addition, students have a set of time constraints of their own implying that a formal agreement (syllabus) between the two groups is required. The terms of assessment often appear on these documents and are based on previous experience or personal judgment. However, a unique way to break this static structure is through the use of templates and modularity in an online syllabus. Posting the syllabus on an editable page allows new elements to be incorporated, existing elements to be rearranged, and percentages to be modified as new information becomes available. The online format also has the additional benefit that it is easily dispensed to the entire class.

Templates set the framework for how activities, assignments, and exams are perceived by the students to fit into the course. They provide a familiar format for repeating activities that can be evaluated in a consistent manner, the necessary guidelines for how an assignment will be read, and what content is selected on an exam by the instructor as representative of the course. Moreover, templates are a working document that facilitates the creation of new material at any stage of the class.

Modularity can be incorporated into course by moving templates in and out of the syllabus sequence as students are periodically evaluated or by breaking templates up into multiple parts. Having a consistent form of self-assessment aimed at the students or the instructor allows course progress to be more easily identified. In some cases, an activity or assignment will not pan out as planned. Therefore, it is useful to have sections that can be added or subtracted given the available time or student interest. Are they limited by a particular concept? Do they want to expand upon the work?

Many instructors also have self-assessment already in place to judge their own course quality. Organizing that aspect of the course into a general framework will assist in bringing focus to problem areas and successful methods. For example, in retrospect on might consider how they taught some topic before to how they are teaching it now. Why were any changes made? Were these changes based on any principles that can be shared with other faculty? Consider as a general workflow, the following: theme to teach -> student outcome -> information on quality. The arrows represent specific strategies (similar to learning objectives) that link together, and finally bring back to the beginning, the elements in an assessment loop.

Students

Students that attend class are most likely willing to learn what ever material is presented to them as long as they have useful references as a backup (textbook, notes, online resources, etc.). However, once an assignment or exam is thrown at them, grades suddenly become the first thing on their mind. How much material can I remember/include/answer to achieve the most amount of points. This is because the assignment or exam will get graded and returned to them with a number on it. What recognition does the student then have for the material he/she was unable to learn? Unlucky question? Unlucky type of question? Unlucky type of question content?

A solution past this breakdown of communication is to incorporate visible learning objectives as part of the course material. If it is clearly identified what process the students must learn, then the energies of both the student in preparing and the instructor in assessing can be greatly reduced or at least more efficiently directed. For example, learning objectives can be arranged according to Bloom's Taxonomy for increasing level of understanding. Questions may be assigned to probe those objectives, whose type (multiple choice, short answer, extended response) is determined from the complexity of the task (define, discuss, apply, analyze, argue, write, etc.). Learning objectives can also be tailored to the students, such as refocusing on problem areas or incorporating different learning styles represented by the VARK scheme (visual, auditory, reading, kinesthetic).
Both of these strategies can be supplemented effectively alongside continuous assessment (more than homework, exams, and final). An instructor can include items that are not graded such as a 1-minute paper describing a particular topic or reflecting on team dynamics if small groups are employed to complete in-class activities. Multiple quizzes before and after a design element (lecture, activity, or multimedia) can also be incorporated as an available metric. The former style will contribute actual student responses from which select quotations can be drawn, while the latter will contribute quantifiable information that can be analyzed in progress or at the completion of the course. As a final note, perhaps the most important item of an assessment strategy will be the final course evaluation. This is, however, standardized according to University policy, so a personal draft given to the students before may be able to bring to attention specific elements most relevant to the course and most likely to be improved upon.

Example Assignment

This concept was proposed by Jean and can be very useful in a course to which students are drawn by personal interest in the topic and not by a distribution requirement.

- Ask the students on the first day of class to submit 4 questions that they would like to have answered by the end of the semester
- A selection of these questions can be collated as a pre-test to build further interest in the subject
- Creating a final version of the test given at the end of the semester can demonstrate what/how much the students have learned

Project Review

When beginning a collaborative project that is also new, the group involved will want to carefully consider what information they would like to collect as the project is carried out. Several periods of recap throughout the duration of the project will also be necessary to shift gears from one area of focus to another. Questions to bring up:

- How was the team forged?
- What faculty work together?
- What are the necessary administrative components?
- Were these carried out effectively?
- Can responsibilities be redistributed?
- Was the project sustainable?
- Who gets credit for what?

Obviously the above bulleted list is only a suggestion of the many possibilities that can be part of a project portfolio. However, they do require a big investment, so getting an early start with a working document is crucial. Such a document can exist in a wiki-space so that all of the collaborators can contribute many different types of information, leaving comments and responding to each other's work. The final version can then reflect a synthesized report.