Effective Online Assessment Strategies for Today's Colleges & Universities

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Pre-Discussion Paper

Introduction

It is important for teachers to have a clear vision of their roles and responsibilities to provide the best teaching strategies for their students. The instructor’s role is a dynamic one that requires having individuals who are able to create a virtual climate that encourages meaningful individual and collaborative learning. Assessment is an important element in the teaching and learning process that challenges instructors to consider evaluation techniques that meet the learning needs of today’s adult learners.

Importance of Assessment

A holistic view will consider evaluation a vital part of the entire teaching and learning process. Adult learning should be evaluated to help individuals learn of their strengths and academic deficiencies that can be corrected during and after a course or seminar. The student should be given information on the quality of their work to have an accurate view of their learning. Additionally, the student should be given specific suggestions on how to improve their academic performance. Distance education studies reveal concerns that online instructors vary in the quality of their academic feedback to students. Instructors who fail to provide relevant and timely feedback are undermining the teaching and learning process. Students consider teacher assessment procedures as a relational prompt that transcends receiving grades on assignments. The absence of consistent teacher feedback creates doubt in the students’ minds about their academic abilities while their classes seem more impersonal (Muirhead, 2002).

The process of assessment involves gathering information from a variety of sources to cultivate a rich and meaningful understanding of student learning. A primary aim of assessment is provide the necessary information to improve future educational experiences. Yet, it is vital that the assessment data be accurate and relevant to effectively make informed decisions about the curriculum. It requires taking the time to ask relevant questions that help evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching strategies and curriculum plans (Huba & Freed, 2000).

Vella, Berardinelli & Burrow (1998) relate that an important purpose of evaluation is “to determine if all of the learners developed important knowledge, skills, and attitudes as a result of the program (p.16).” This highlights that the evaluation of adult learning has a variety of instructional purposes and impacts various stakeholders who are interested in the educational process. Appropriate assessment instruments can offer valuable information to teachers, students and administrators. Ultimately, evaluation is important to the educational process because it provides feedback on whether the course and learning objectives have been achieved to satisfactory level.

Student-Centered Assessment Philosophy

McClellan’s (2001) research study involving 130 third year undergraduate students reveals that often students viewed assessment as mainly a teacher oriented activity. Approximately 80% of the students viewed teacher evaluations as having limited value because they were not able to participate in the assessment process. The study highlighted the fact that even detailed teacher feedback on assignments did not replace the need for students to take personal ownership of their learning. The teacher dominated assessment model places emphasis on measuring achievement but discounts the need for students to play an active role in the evaluation process. It can create uncertainty among students who are always wondering about whether their school work has met the standards. This is a significant educational problem because it has a negative impact on the school setting.
“Further, if students believe the criteria to be implicit, then they may see assessment as some sort of lottery in which they experience inequable treatment from idiosyncratic staff (Maclellan 2001, p. 316).”

A relevant approach to assessing adult learners supports a student centered educational philosophy. The focus involves helping individuals become more self-directed in their learning plans and activities. This is a situational goal that requires assessment procedures that acknowledges their needs, gifts and talents. Teachers must recognize that adults are autonomous learners who have varying degrees of independence in their study habits and desire relevance in the evaluation of their assignments (Caffarella, 1993).

The student-centered model of learning encourages teachers to view their students as academic partners who work together to produce relevant and meaningful learning experiences. It requires professors who are willing to change their standard teaching methods. Boud (1995) related “they will need to become researchers of student perceptions, designers of multifaceted assessment strategies, managers of assessment processes and consultants assisting students in the interpretation of rich information about their learning” (p. 42).

Huba & Freed (2000, p. 33) have noted eight features that are considered the hallmark of learner-centered teaching:

- Learners are actively involved and receive feedback.
- Learners apply knowledge to enduring and emerging issues and problems.
- Learners integrate discipline-based knowledge and general skills.
- Learners understand the characteristics of excellent work.
- Learners become increasingly sophisticated learners and knowers.
- Professors coach and facilitate, intertwining teaching and assessing.
- Professors reveal they are learners, too.
- Learning is interpersonal, and all learners—students and professors—are respected and valued.

Assessment philosophy and practices must affirm that adult learners do vary in their needs due to such factors as having different cognitive experiences and educational backgrounds. Therefore, it is important that learning should be more individualized and offer significant connections to their personal and professional lives. Assessment procedures need to foster a meaningful bridge between academic knowledge, skills and experiences of the classroom to the student’s daily job. Teachers are challenged to create evaluations that reflect respect for adult learners’ experiences while promoting growth (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind & Tinker, 2000).

A major concern among academic officials has often focused on the quality of educational experiences within an online class. Carnevale (2000) relates that research studies indicate that the essential features of a good course include “interaction between instructors and students, a student-centered approach and built-in opportunities for students to learn on their own” (p. A46). Creating and sustaining a quality online degree program is a challenging venture. There are a variety of factors that can have either a positive or negative impact on the online educational setting. These factors are (Cooper, 2000):

- the level of expertise of the online faculty (technical & online experience);
- the degree of administrative financial support;
- the technological infrastructure of the school;
- student support system to handle academic and computer related issues;
- the depth and quality of faculty training and professional development programs.

Additionally, the assessment process can be influenced by instructional design issues. Course developers are challenged to make a host of decisions that can have an impact on the assessment process. Lockee, Moore & Burton (2002) observe that “even an instructionally sound, online course can fail to produce learning outcomes if students encounter a poorly designed Web site (p. 22).

**Alternative Assessments**

The advent of alternative assessments has come as the result of various educators who have been frustrated with the limitations of the conventional evaluation methods (Sanders, 2001). It is interesting that more traditional educators are using alternative assessment methods. There are two major differences between the traditional educator and those who use alternative assessment. The first is that the traditional educator is more dependent upon on fewer assignments to evaluate student performance. The traditional teachers will stress tests and term papers as their main resources for assessing student work. In contrast, teachers who use alternative assessment
procedures will use a variety of assignments that might include portfolios, Power Point presentations, book reviews and interviews of study participants (Travis, 1996).

Alternative assessment methods are promoted as a way to encourage authentic learning. Students are given a diversity of learning opportunities to display critical thinking skills, greater depth of knowledge, connect learning to their daily lives, develop a deeper dialog over the course material and foster both individual and group oriented learning activities. Alternative assessments offer teachers new perspectives on student learning such as insights to their individual learning styles. Yet, teachers have reported that alternative evaluation methods require large amounts of time to develop and integrate into the curriculum. It is wise to create a plan that alleviates the grading of student work by limiting the number and size of projects (Robinson, 1995).

Alternative assessment projects can encourage reflective thinking and self-directed learning activities involving the personal construction of knowledge. Students are taught to be knowledge creator’s not just receivers of information. Teachers can promote higher order thinking skills by having evaluation procedures that allow students to vary their responses to questions (Davies, 1999). It is important that teachers communicate their evaluation criteria to their students to eliminate confusion over project expectations. It is essential that teachers provide clear criteria that supports high academic standards and brings consistency to the grading process. For instance, history teachers will need to create a rubric that will assess student knowledge and skills within that academic discipline (Drake, 2001).

**Grading Rubric**

The grading rubric represents an affirmation of learner-centered education. It is a public statement that strives to establish a greater level of trust between the teacher and student. It rejects the notion that grading is a special secret activity that only some of the learners can understand the instructor’s actual grading procedures. Secondly, it is designed to establish a set of instructional expectations and standards for the course. A rubric provides an instrument for student feedback that promotes assessment of learning. A good rubric will reveal valuable data on how the student’s work compares to the course standards. Rubrics are significant because of their capacity to clearly reveal vital information to students that enable them to improve their knowledge and skill levels (Huba & Freed 2000).

Rubrics have the potential to be excellent assessment tools because they offer students a vision of what the teacher is seeking to accomplish in the class and why it is important. A rubric can indicate whether students will be expected to explore knowledge beyond the assigned textbooks. Students need to know the skills and knowledge expertise that are expected within a course. Therefore, students want to have an accurate understanding what is considered good performance. Teachers can use a rubric to demonstrate how a particular set of skills and knowledge will compare with class objectives, educated individuals and even within a professional field or academic discipline. Students appreciate that the information they are learning are truly valued in their field of work and not just a preference of an individual teacher. In fact, some teachers will invite students to provide their thoughts on a rubric before it is finalized to insure that the rubric is relevant to their students (Huba & Freed, 2000).

The use of rubrics is one way to help promote effective evaluation procedures that reduces subjective grading procedures and offer student relevant information on their academic performance. Huba & Freed (2000) have outlined five key elements for creating a rubric:

1. **levels of mastery**- achievement are described according to terms such as excellent, good, needs improvement and unacceptable.
2. **dimensions of quality**- assessment can address a variety of intellectual or knowledge competencies that target a specific academic discipline or involve multiple disciplines.
3. **organizational groupings**- students are assessed for multidimensional skills such as teamwork that involves problem solving techniques and various aspects of group dynamics.
4. **commentaries**- this element of the rubric provides a detailed description of the defining features that should be found in the work. The instructor creates the categories for what is considered as being excellent, sophisticated or exemplary.
5. **descriptions of consequences**-this is a unique rubric feature that offers students insight into various lessons of their work in a real life setting (i.e. professionalism).

The five rubric elements offer trainers and educators rich categories to develop their evaluation procedures to fit the learning needs of their student population.
Alternative Assessment Method: Journal Writing

Reflective journals are an excellent way to evaluate student learning. Journal writing can be an effective way to gather insights into student attitudes and a practical format to enhance student-teacher communication (Robinson, 1995). The journal writing assignments can be structured to address the primary course learning objectives. At the University of Phoenix, online doctoral students integrate journal writing in their Doctor of Management degree program. The students can use their journals to meet a variety of learning needs such as reflecting on research studies that are important to their dissertation. Muirhead (2001) shares seven major advantages to journal writing:

- Provides an aid to our memory - researchers and writers have learned the value of recording their ideas for future use.
- Provide a basis for creating new perspectives - it creates a framework to explore relationships and arguments between ideas.
- Enhances critical thinking skills - learning to analyze the underlying assumptions of our actions and those of others is a very liberating process.
- Provides psychological/emotional advantages - it enables individuals to work through difficult work or personal situations that can promote healing and growth.
- Offers opportunities to increase empathy for others - individuals can address social issues and enhance their understanding of our society and world.
- Provides a way to practical way to understand books/articles - writing creates a format to regularly examine reading materials and improve our ability to comprehend and recall knowledge.
- Provides support for self-directed learning activities - journal writing requires personal discipline and establishing individual learning goals to complete journaling assignments.

Teachers can use journal writing in a variety of academic disciplines as a creative way to enrich their instructional activities. It is essential that teachers provide timely and constructive feedback to help students have the time to make the necessary changes in their work before turning in their next assignment.

Conclusion

The student-centered learning model challenges teachers to carefully use descriptive language in their written and verbal comments to their students. Teachers must develop dialogues with their students that foster personal and professional growth. Obviously, the language of assessment must be caring and honest while providing constructive feedback that helps the learner have a clear picture of their academic work.

Critics of alternative assessments raise legitimate concerns about excessive administrative time to prepare and grade assignments. Yet, alternative assessments offer teachers unique opportunities to create relevant work that promotes academic achievement and individualizes the educational process. It is important to help new and veteran teachers become more familiar with alternative assessments through classes, workshops and other professional development activities (Liebers, 1999).

Discussion Questions

1. What steps can distance education schools take to prevent grade inflation?
2. What are the benefits and limitations of student feedback on teacher effectiveness during the online course?
3. What are the advantages of having a standards-based assessment paradigm?
4. What types of research projects would help to improve the quality of today’s online assessment practices?

References


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**Post-Discussion Summary**

The discussion involving online assessment began with a focus on the need to provide appropriate feedback to students. Online teachers struggle with providing enough feedback to meet student learning expectations. Anita Pincas observed that “despite the rich range of experiences and collaboration that we expose them to, and from which they definitely learn, some still comment that they would have liked more feedback than we give them. Thus, I conclude for the moment that it is a bottomless pit. The more we do, the more will be asked of us.”

Anita Pincas felt that peer assessment and peer support was a practical way to improve the entire evaluation process. Today’s tight economic climate has fostered an era of limited financial resources and schools can not afford to hire additional online instructional staff. Therefore, schools must creatively find ways to better use their available resources. Martyn Wild stressed the need for distance educators to establish assessment boundaries, “the answer, or at least one of them, is not necessarily more resources, but to put more 'boundaries' around the
The discussion participants affirmed the need to make assessment a central part of the teaching and learning process. Teachers will admit that assessment can be one of their more difficult teaching duties due to heavy workloads. Anne-Marie Armstrong emphasized that both students and teachers must adjust their assessment perspectives to make it become an integral part of online education. Appropriate assessment procedures offer opportunities to discern what students have and have not learned during a class. Muhammad Betz noted that students have their own unique set of course expectations “many students are taking courses in order to get diplomas and credentials, and while such students are interested in learning, the interest is secondary to achievement. There are assessment limitations deriving from this student variable as well.”

Today’s teachers should develop instructional plans that offer assessment procedures that support both high academic standards and have a degree of openness. The two concepts acknowledge the importance of having a multidimensional view of assessment that strives to evaluate a diversity of learning objectives. A comprehensive assessment philosophy will address vital issues such as the role of peer assessment in undergraduate and graduate online education. Morgan & O’Reilly (1999) offer six key qualities that should be reflected in distance education assessment:

1. A clear rationale and consistent pedagogical approach.
2. Explicit values, aims, criteria and standards
3. Authentic and holistic tasks
4. A facilitative degree of structure
5. Sufficient and timely formative assessment
6. Awareness of the learning context and perceptions (pp. 30-32).

Distance educators who want to enhance the teaching and learning process realize that fostering critical thinking skills will require extra work to effectively communicate complex ideas to their students. Bullen’s research (1998) reveals that a student’s ability to demonstrate critical thinking skills in online dialog is influenced by four major factors:

1. Cognitive maturity
2. Teaching style of instructor
3. Student’s prior learning experiences
4. Degree of understanding the critical thinking process

The short list of factors highlights that students will vary in their understanding and reflective abilities. Therefore, teachers will need to develop a set of strategies that will help them to meet a diversity of student needs. It is wise to read through critical thinking literature to formulate a personal philosophy and create appropriate assessment instruments.

As a veteran online educator, one of my greatest challenges is assessing critical thinking skills. Carolee & Chalupa (1994) state that “regardless of the way in which critical thinking is evaluated, the assessment must be sensitive enough to identify changes that have occurred in students’ thinking skills (paragraph 13).” The authors discuss the use of commercial tests and teacher-made evaluation instruments and offer advice on multiple-choice tests, checklists and open-ended questions.

Assessment literature stresses that teachers must establish criteria for evaluation and students need to have a good understanding of the critical thinking process. The following chart provides an informative list of essential critical thinking skills.

- Essential Critical Thinking Skills (Woolfolk 1990, p. 278)
- Defining and Clarifying the Problem
- Identify central issues or problems.
- Compare similarities and differences.
- Determine which information is relevant.
- Formulate appropriate questions.
- Judge Information Related to the Problem
- Distinguish between fact, opinion and reasoned judgment.
- Check consistency.
- Identify unstated assumptions.
- Recognize stereotypes and clichés.
- Recognize bias, emotional factors, propaganda and semantic slanting.
- Recognize different value systems and ideologies.
- Solving Problems/Drawing Conclusions
- Recognize the adequacy of data.
- Predict probable consequences.

**Conclusion**

The discussion participants were concerned about providing the best feedback to their students. They felt that instructors must explore assessment strategies that enabled them to offer timely and relevant feedback. Mark Nichols noted “feedback is certainly a vital educational tool in its own right, not least because it is personalized and usually fully customized. It also has the student’s complete attention - which is surely reason enough for maximizing it!” Yes, teacher assessment will often capture the student’s attention. Hopefully, it will foster student academic achievement and a life-long love for learning.

**References**


