The Challenges of Evaluating Student Learning

Assessment is one of the most controversial issues in higher education today. […] Few topics create such divided opinion and raise such passions as assessment and yet, in higher education, we still seem relatively bad at it. (Norton, 2009, p.132)

In essence, there are two questions at the center of Assessment & Evaluation:
1. Where do you want students to be at the end of the course?
2. How will you know if they get there?

Principles of Assessment

The principles below are offered as a starting point for designing assessment strategies.

- Assessment should align with the learning outcomes and the teaching/learning methods used (Biggs, 2003a; Biggs, 2003b).
- What and how students learn depends to a major extent on how they think they will be assessed (Biggs, 1999).
- Give students clear and easy to understand details of the assessment criteria used (McMahon & O’Riordan 2006).
- Be aware of assessment and learning outcomes of other modules (Blackwell & Williamson, 1999).
- Allow students choices and preferences in their learning (Elton, 1988).
- Use a number of shorter assessments, with a mixture of formative (feedback) and summative assessments, particularly in the first semester to ease students into the higher education learning experience.
- Offer students a mix of learning experiences that take into account both the cognitive process level and the type of knowledge required by the learning outcome (Blumberg, 2009).
- Don’t over-assess (Blackwell & Williamson, 1999; Association of Law Teachers, 1996).
- Don’t cluster student assessments too close together (Blackwell & Williamson, 1999).

Adapted from:

Ten Guiding Principles – Assessing & Teaching for Learning
UCD Dublin: http://www.ucdoer.ie/index.php/Main_Page

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Three Types of Assessment to Consider

1. Diagnostic Evaluation
   - Used to assess prior knowledge, skills, preconceptions.
   - Locates the starting point of a lesson...to determine the presence or absence of prescribed abilities (Legendre, 1993, p. 582).

2. Formative Evaluation
   - Used to monitor learning and provide feedback.
   - Occurs during a learning activity to help learners progress using all possible remediation and feedback strategies (Bélair, 1995, p. 28).

3. Summative Evaluation
   - Used to determine a pass or fail decision, grades.
   - Reviews or summarizes learning and serves as a formal and administrative evaluation strategy (Bélair, 1995, p. 30).

Choosing an Assessment Strategy

According to Prégent (1990), different factors influence which strategies are chosen for a given learning outcome:
1. The taxonomic level of the learning outcomes to evaluate
2. The number of students
3. The number of hours needed to prepare assessment tools
4. The number of hours needed for marking
5. The availability of graders

References

