One question from faculty members teaching an online course for the first time is, “How do you do online exams?” The basis for this question lies in the notion that online assessment must follow the typical assessment methods of campus classes. But this is not necessarily true. In an online environment, as the role of the course instructor changes radically from being the deliverer of content to one of mentor to the students, the function of assessment, and its corresponding techniques, must also change.

Online assessment needs to be viewed as an interactive mentoring opportunity that can be employed in online courses. This perspective provides instructors with the opportunity to move beyond the rhetoric that assessment should be utilized as a teaching tool and not as an evaluation mechanism. To achieve this, assessment must now take on a new role. The assessment techniques employed in an online course should be based on desired learning outcomes. Then these can be used by the students to evaluate their own progress through the course materials while also providing the instructor with evidence of the effectiveness of the course materials or indications of content areas that need further enhancement and/or development.

These online assessment techniques should be used to assist in developing an overall assessment strategy for the online course. This assessment strategy aids in forming student assessment profiles, which offer the instructor a snapshot of student understanding. In order to provide an effective student assessment profile, the foundation for drafting this profile must first be constructed by building learning outcomes which are based on critical course content and applicable assessment methods for determining a student’s conceptual framework of these learning outcomes. How does an instructor and the student know that there is an understanding of the learning outcomes?

Learning outcomes should be measurable through an applicable assessment of that outcome and provide evidence of mastery of the learning outcome through student performance. When writing the learning outcomes for the course, consideration should be given to five areas of focus. First, critical course content should be determined. What must the student know in order to function in authentic situations? Second, discern what the students should know or accomplish based on the critical course content. Third, decide what evidence is acceptable as proof of knowledge or accomplishment of the learning outcome. Fourth, write these learning outcomes in such a way that they reflect the appropriate level of cognition. And lastly, determine what student performance will provide this evidence. The selected student performance will furnish the method of assessment for both course and modular critical content.

Assessment should assist the student in changing a behavior and provide guidance to further develop their conceptual framework for a particular area of content. In order to accomplish this goal, assessment should be a continuous process and should guide the student to mastery of the learning outcomes. An assessment strategy thus becomes the foundation for developing the instructional design of the online course. The overall assessment strategy includes four basic levels of development. Level one would be to deliver pre-assessment to understand an individual student’s conceptual framework of a learning outcome, which can provide guidance in the development of appropriate learning activities for continued learning growth. These activities are part of the learning strategy of an online course, which is the next level in developing an assessment strategy. The learning strategy would include the presentation of the critical content through interactive, instructional concepts and activities. Level three would be to incorporate short assessment opportunities that should punctuate a course to provide evidence of knowledge and understanding concepts and activities. Learning styles should be taken into consideration by providing a diverse array of assessment methods to reflect student
understanding of the learning outcomes. This provides the opportunity to fill in the gaps discovered during the pre-assessment. Opportunities for relearning and reassessment should be available to students. Finally, a post-assessment provides evaluation of the overall student performance and indicates ultimate mastery of the critical content and the ability to authentically incorporate the content into appropriate situations.

Assessment is not only the device through which the student gains feedback on their learning progress and identifies achievement through mastery, but it also provides feedback to the instructor regarding successful course content delivery methods and techniques. By monitoring the evolvement of the student assessment profile, instructors can redesign assessment methods and strategies to meet the needs of students and provide an accurate account of a student’s conceptual framework.

Online course delivery provides an organized and systematic approach to assessment. A variety of traditional testing methods are available through the use of digital exam building features. Assessment options are available in a medley of traditional formats with the options to pool questions and control the delivery of the material. These traditional methods should only be a small component of the overall assessment strategy for the online course. Keeping in mind that the learning outcome should be assessed using an applicable assessment technique, online delivery also provides an environment, which is conducive to incorporating a diverse array of assessment techniques. A wide range of instructional technology features and tools are available in the online setting to deliver assessment. This flexibility of delivery allows for a more student-centered approach to assessment and feedback.

As part of Northwest Missouri State University's effort to assist faculty in the development and enhancement of their online courses, the Center for Information Technology in Education has been working closely with faculty as they discuss and develop new perspectives as to how assessment may be conducted in an online environment. The Center has been working closely with faculty to integrate new assessment techniques and develop an overall assessment strategy for their online courses. Additionally methods for addressing the issues of academic dishonesty and conduct in an online course are being examined as faculty design and develop online assessment strategies. This presentation will provide participants with concrete, practical examples of a broad range of useful and diverse assessment techniques and strategies that may be employed across a variety of online course subject areas. These include reflective summaries, projects, papers, presentations, concept maps, peer evaluations, chat interviews, and a variety of other techniques.

References


Biographical Sketches

Darla Runyon is the Assistant Director and Curriculum Design Specialist for the Center for Information Technology in Education at Northwest Missouri State University. She received her Masters in Education from Colorado State University and a Bachelor of Science in Business Management and Secondary Business Education from Northwest Missouri State University. Darla assists faculty in the design, development, and delivery of instructional technology.

Address: CITE
Northwest Missouri State University
OL 246, 800 University Drive
Maryville, MO 64468

E-mail: drunyon@mail.nwmissouri.edu
URL: http://www.nwmissouri.edu
Phone: 660.562.1532
Dr. Roger Von Holzen is the director of the Center for Information Technology in Education at Northwest Missouri State University. Since completing his doctorate in instructional technology from Texas Tech University in 1993, Von Holzen has been extensively involved in the various technology initiatives undertaken by the university, leading to his appointment as the director of the campus’ faculty technology center in the spring of 1999.

Address: CITE
Northwest Missouri State University
OL 246, 800 University Drive
Maryville, MO 64468
E-mail: rvh@mail.nwmissouri.edu
URL: http://www.nwmissouri.edu
Phone: 660.562.1532
Fax: 660.562.1949