

How Do We Know They Know? Student Assessment Online

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Assessment Basics

Assessment of student performance in an online course can be challenging. Explaining to students about how the assessment was conducted can be even more challenging. In order to effectively assess student performance in online courses, the instructor needs to understand basic principles of student assessment. Angelo and Cross (1993) believed that in order for assessment to be effective, it must be embedded in and aligned with the design of the course. They noted a number of characteristics of effective classroom assessment: It is learner-centered, teacher-directed, mutually beneficial, formative, context-specific, ongoing, and firmly rooted in good practice. Although they are discussing assessment techniques for the face-to-face classroom, these same principles can be effectively applied to the online classroom.

The following are some principles that should guide student assessment in an online course:

- Design learner-centered assessments that include self reflection
- Design and include grading rubrics for the assessment of contributions to the discussion as for assignments, projects, and the collaboration itself
- Include collaborative assessments through public posting of papers along with comments from student to student
- Encourage students to develop skills in providing feedback by providing guidelines to good feedback and by modeling what is expected
- Use assessment techniques that fit the context and align with learning objectives
- Design assessments that are clear, easy to understand, and that are likely to work in the online environment
- Ask for and incorporate student input into how assessment should be conducted (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, pp.101-102)

When working collaboratively online, all of these principles become critically important. Students need a roadmap not only to guide the activity, but also in knowing how that activity will be assessed and evaluated. Morgan and O'Reilly (1999) offered six key qualities for assessment of online students. They are: a clear rationale and consistent pedagogical approach; explicit values, aims, criteria, and standards; authentic and holistic tasks; a facilitative degree of structure; sufficient and timely formative assessment; and awareness of the learning context and perceptions. According to Morgan and O'Reilly, not only should the assessments and assessment criteria be clear and easy to understand, they should align with the instructional approaches used in the course, the context in which the course occurs, and the competencies to be assessed. In addition, assessments should be formative – meaning that they occur throughout the course and inform practice – and summative – meaning that they occur at the end of the course and assess cumulative learning from the course.

Learner-Centered Assessment Including Self-Assessment

Given that a well-designed online course should be learner focused and centered, it follows that student assessment within that course should be the same. The reflective process that should be included in an online course provides the basis for learner-centered assessment. Students should be given credit for self-reflection and it should be incorporated into the design and expectations for the online course. Each collaborative activity should contain a reflective component. At the very least, students should be asked to reflect on their participation in the activity and their contributions to the group. In addition, asking students to reflect on the process helps not only to allow them to evaluate the activity, but also gives the instructor very important formative and summative information that can be incorporated into future iterations of the assignment.

Another form of learner-centered assessment that is useful in collaborative work is the creation of a portfolio. Although the products of collaborative activities are often team products, creating a portfolio which includes both the individual contributions of the student along with the final product is a good way for the instructor to assess how much work the individual student did as well as providing an opportunity for the student to showcase his or her work in light of the larger project. The creation of a portfolio that includes both individual and collaborative projects can also serve as an incentive for participation if learners understand that they will be assessed as individuals as well as a member of a team. In addition, a portfolio is useful for students as they move out of the academic arena in search of a job. The portfolio can be shown to perspective employers to demonstrate what the students are capable of producing on their own as well as when they are part of a team.

Rubrics and Expectations

Conrad and Donaldson (2004) described a rubric as a tool that “defines the performance levels for each gradable activity element” (p.26). As such, rubrics provide students with a concrete way of evaluating their own performance as well as the performance of the members of their team. Having a well-developed rubric assists the instructor with the “how am I doing?” questions that often emerge in an online course. Both the instructor and the student can evaluate performance by using the rubric and then comparing results. If rubrics are linked to course expectations and students are directed to use the rubric for self-assessment as well as assessment of their peers, they will end the course with a clear picture of their performance. This not only provides a realistic picture of how a student interacted with course material and their peers, it also reduces the possibilities of grade inflation, dissatisfaction, and grade appeals through provision of evaluative material that is more objective and quantifiable. Performance in collaborative work is frequently seen as hazy and difficult to measure. The use of a rubric for self-assessment and assessment of peers takes the guesswork out of this process. Designing rubrics for collaborative work does not have to be complicated. The rubrics should include performance measures for individual as well as group or team work.

Collaborative Assessment

A simple rule to remember when assessing collaborative work is that collaborative activities are best assessed collaboratively. Although Angelo and Cross (1993) noted that assessment should be instructor-directed, putting the responsibility for assessing collaborative activity wholly on the instructor’s shoulders omits an important component of assessment, that of peer or team assessment. The instructor should certainly retain the determination about what to assess, how to assess it, and how to respond to any evaluation material gathered through the reflective material submitted by students. It is, after all, the instructor’s responsibility to record a final grade for the course and to follow up with those who are not performing. However, the information gathered through collaborative assessment should not be given less emphasis than the information gathered through direct observation or evaluation by the instructor.

Often, students have far more information about the workings of a small group than does the instructor. If encouraged and guided, students will share that information so that appropriate grading can occur. As mentioned in the previous chapter, however, instructors need to guard against possible scapegoating in grading, wherein students grade a peer far lower than deserved due to interpersonal difficulties in the group. Consequently, the instructor needs to retain “veto power” in grading. Information about assessment and evaluation should be built into the course guidelines and expectations and communicated to students at the beginning of the course so as to prepare students for their responsibilities in providing constructive feedback and fair assessment of their peers. Providing guidelines for feedback can be a help to students as they take on this role.

Assessment That Aligns With Context and Learning Objectives

Morgan and O'Reilly (1999) noted that if an online course is designed with clear guidelines and objectives, tasks and assignments that are relevant not only to the subject matter, but to students lives as well, and students understand what is expected of them, assessment will be in alignment with the course as a whole and will not be seen as a separate and cumbersome task. Keeping this principle in mind also promotes the use of assessments that move beyond tests and quizzes. Although tests and quizzes are useful in assessing some aspects of collaborative work, they should not be the main means of assessment. For example, in a mathematics class, the instructor may set up collaborative homework forums and group problem-solving activities, but may still use tests and quizzes to assess individual acquisition of skills. This grouping of assessment activities would be in alignment with course objectives, the subject matter being studied, and the need to determine competency or skill acquisition.

However, many online instructors have noted the difficulty of using tests and quizzes as effective assessments of student learning. Many feel that more authentic assessments, such as projects, papers that apply the course content to real-life situations (such as a simulated accounting problem applied to a real company), and artifacts that integrate course concepts (such as the production of databases, web pages, or storyboards) are more effective means by which to assess student learning online. Therefore, the use of self-reflections, peer assessments, and rubrics align more closely with the objectives of an online course and will flow more easily into and with course content. Remember our simple rule—collaborative activity is best assessed by collaborative means.

Assessments That Are Clear and Easy to Understand

One of the keys to good assessment of collaborative work online is that it be clear, easy to understand, and easy to carry out. For many students, the use of a rubric is daunting. However, if that rubric is constructed with clear, simple language that objectively describes the competencies to be achieved, students should have no difficulty using it to self-assess and to assess their peers. Likewise, the use of clearly constructed questions when discussing self-assessment, can guide students in their thinking and reflection, supporting them to meaningfully engage in assessment.

Assessments can be simple and easy to administer. If asking students to write out reflections in the form of a paper or narrative responses to instructor questions seems cumbersome, a simple checklist or survey can be developed and used that gathers information from students and encourages them to think about their work. One questionnaire (such as Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire) can be developed and used throughout the course to assess all student work in a consistent manner.

Assessments Designed With Student Input

Learner focused assessment means inviting the learners to participate in the ways in which assessment is constructed. This applies as much to exams as to other means of student assessment in a course. One collaborative activity that some instructors have used for the purpose of test construction is to have students submit several test questions to the instructor as an assignment. The instructor then chooses questions from this student-generated test bank for quizzes or exams. Another means by which to involve students in designing assessments is to allow a team or small group to determine what they will submit to the instructor to demonstrate team competence at the close of a collaborative activity. In the case of a presentation to the larger group, for example, the students can be left to determine not only what they will present and how they will present it, but the “deliverable” that accompanies that presentation as well. Allowing the students the flexibility to produce a presentation, a Web page, a joint paper, a handbook, a brochure, or some other artifact that represents their collaborative learning allows them, as Angelo and Cross (1993) contended, to increase their grasp of course concepts. It is also an important aspect in building an effective learning community.

The Empowered Learner

The more we engage our students in a process of ongoing assessment of their own performance, the more meaningful the online course will be to them. The more we engage them in working with one another both in collaborative activity and in collaborative assessment, the more likely they are to engage in a learning community that will sustain them beyond the end of the course. The more meaningful the course, the more likely it is that they will develop into empowered and lifelong learners. Such is the ultimate goal of a constructivist, online classroom which relies on collaboration to make meaning-making and knowledge-acquisition happen and such is the ultimate value of building a strong online learning community.

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Biographical Sketches

Rena Palloff and **Keith Pratt** are the managing partners of Crossroads Consulting Group. Rena and Keith are program directors and faculty in the Teaching in the Virtual Classroom program at Fielding Graduate University. They are the authors of the 1999 Frandson Award winning book, *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), *The Virtual Student* (Jossey-Bass, 2003), and *Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community* (Jossey-Bass, 2005). The books are comprehensive guides to the development of an online environment that helps promote successful

learning outcomes while fostering collaboration and building a sense of community among the learners. Drs. Palloff and Pratt have been presenting this work across the United States and internationally since 1994 as well as consulting to academic institutions regarding the development of effective distance learning programs. They have presented at the Distance Learning Conference annually since 1999.

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