

Creative Assessment

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Occasionally standard forms of assessment are the perfect tool for measuring what our students have learned, but too often they aren't. This article seeks to examine some of the ways that standard assessments are lacking and also offer suggestions for altering teaching methods and re-designing assessments to help our students meet the goals we really want them to meet.

Disconnected from the real world

What do you really want your students to get out of your class, appreciation of poetry or of the complexity of human society? Do you want them to be able to evaluate historical documents, the validity of research, or the appropriateness of various teaching methods? Do you want them to develop skills in speaking, listening, management, leadership or problem solving? True/false, multiple choice, short answer and essay tests do not generally measure appreciation, ability to evaluate, or skills other than writing. These standard types of tests are really only useful for determining what facts our students have retained.

Yet most of the time, we want our students to be able to do something in the real world with what we teach them in our classes. We want them to be able to do history, appreciate literature, adapt math for real world use, and so on. As a teacher of education, I want my students to be able to teach, appreciate diversity, recognize learning disabilities, and do all the other things that professional teachers are supposed to be able to do. So why do we continue to test little more than the ability to recall discrete facts? Invite back a few students who did well on a multiple choice test you gave a year ago to retake the test. I believe that you will find that they do not do terribly well. Why do we spend so much time teaching students facts that they will quickly forget rather than focusing on increasing students' ability to learn how to obtain and use knowledge in a given field?

Furthermore, the brain learns best when it "does," rather than when it merely soaks up information like a sponge (Pally, 1997). Hence we would be wise both to teach and to assess in ways that allow students to make their own meaning of ideas and skills.

Inaccurate

Even if you really do want to test your student's knowledge of discrete facts, standard assessments do not necessarily do this well. Many students suffer from test anxiety. When a student experiences such anxiety, the brain increases production key neurotransmitters which results in a decreased ability to recall information (Koob, Cole, Swerdlow, and leMoal, 1990). Hence there are many students who honestly do know the material

but are unable to prove that in a situation that they feel is threatening. Other students "over-think" when taking tests. They know the right answer, but they contemplate the possibilities at such great length that they talk themselves into the plausibility of the incorrect answers. And, of course, there are some students who do not know the material, but because they are accomplished at making educated guesses, they can still perform remarkably well.

Test scores may also be inaccurate because students were unaware of what the test would be like. I don't know about you, but I would study very differently for a fill-in-the-blank or matching test than I would for a true/false or multiple choice test. But too often our students don't know what to expect. Unless students have seen sample test questions from your tests, they may unwittingly study improperly.

Not aligned with instruction

Few instructors recognize how difficult it is to train the human mind to transfer information learned in one setting to another setting. One of my favorite examples is a study done with very bright fourth graders. They were taught a unit in roman numerals and they all became proficient at reading such numbers. But when they were asked to translate Arabic numerals into Roman numerals, they were at a loss. Because they had not explicitly been taught this ability, they could not do it. Had the instructor tested these students on their ability to go from Arabic to Roman, that would have been a case of poor content alignment. The content would have been taught in one way and assessed in another, and study after study suggests that is asking for trouble.

Another common example is asking students to discuss a topic for several weeks and then assess them by asking them to write about it. Students who were able to discuss the subject intelligently may become confused when asked to write about it. Does this mean that they do not understand the topic? No, they merely haven't had enough practice in writing about it to be able to do so comfortably at that time. And how often do we discuss discrete aspects of a subject in class and then ask students to synthesize that information when we haven't practiced synthesis?

Another problem with standard assessments is that they do not allow much room for improvement. Because we often give tests at the end of a unit, we discover too late that some of the students did not understand the material at all. Assessment, ideally, should enhance learning, not merely test it.

The Characteristics Great Assessments Related to the real world

First, we need to create assessments that test what we really want students to learn. I want my students to be able to teach well, so I need to watch them teach. But what if you are a history professor? What is it that historians do? How can we teach our students to do that? What is the product of the work of historians? By what criterion is the work of real historians evaluated? How can I mimic that kind of product production and evaluation in the classroom? According to brain researcher Renate Caine (1997), "students learn best if they are immersed in complex experiences and are given the opportunity to actively process what they have learned. The best learning happens when necessary facts and skills are embedded in experiences that relate to real life, when there's a big picture somehow" (18).

Accurate

Insist that students demonstrate their understanding in ways that are not easily faked. Ask yourself the question, what would prove to me that every student genuinely understands? Perhaps you could even think of several possibilities from which students could choose. If students have the chance to choose the assessment that is most comfortable for them, then they are less likely to suffer the effects of excess production of x in the brain.

Make criteria clear

We can hardly expect our students to live up to our expectations when they have no idea what our expectations are or do not understand what a quality example of work looks like in our opinion. Lists of all the qualities an instructor expects to see can be provided to students in the form of rubrics or checklists. Samples of quality work are also important for students to see.

McTighe (1997), who has studied the effects of providing students with clear grading rubrics, states, "When students have opportunities to examine their work in light of known criteria and performance standards, they begin to shift their orientation from 'what did I get' to 'now I know what I need to improve.'"

Use formative assessments

Rather than waiting until the end of a unit to test student understanding, provide students with ample opportunities for un-graded "formative" assessments that give them feedback at a point where it is still useful to them. These assessments should be in the same format as the final, graded assessment. This also solves the problem of content misalignment because you are embedding assessments that look like the final assessment into your instruction.

Feedback

You may see a loop forming: Choose the method of assessment before you even begin teaching. Make sure that it is authentic, that it requires the student to apply knowledge in the same sort of way that a professional in the field might. Provide students with criteria and examples from the beginning. Teach in a manner that is aligned with what you want students to be able to do in the end. Explicitly teach the strategies that will be required on the final assessment and provide students with un-graded practice assessments that mimic the final assessment. The final steps are all about feedback. A grade does little to improve student performance. Give students concrete ideas for improvement and full explanations for where and why they missed the mark. Require students to reflect on their work and make concrete plans for improvement. Finally, ask for their suggestions on how you could improve the assessment and your methods of teaching. Your students shouldn't have to wait until it's too late to make changes, and neither should you.