What is Assessment? – Presentation 1

Definition of Assessment

The focus of this module is assessment. I think it’s a good idea to have a working definition of what assessment means in the context of designing and teaching an online university course before getting too far along in our discussion.

At its core, assessment is measurement. Assessment exists in many different forms. You can assess, or measure, just about anything. What we’re concerned with is measuring learning which is a massive challenge. Learning has no height, width, mass, electrical charge or physical presence.... And yet measuring it successfully is critical, not only to the success of our courses but to the success of our students beyond the classroom.

Why assess? Assessments generate proof, or evidence that our students are learning what we intend for them to learn; as well as we believe they need to learn it.

In order to discuss the topic, we need to establish a foundation for our references. To do that, we will discuss the different types of assessments, on both a macro and micro level, and how these types of evaluations can benefit your students.

One of the most common questions faculty ask when they begin developing their online courses is;

“How do you do online exams?”

When you start to think about how you’re going to evaluate your students in your online classroom, it is important to understand that the best method of assessing students online may not be the same as what worked for you face-to-face.

That is not to say what worked face-to-face won’t work online.

You goal is to craft an assessment strategy appropriate for;

1. The learners. Each student or group of students has unique characteristics. Good assessments are constructed based on what works for the students who will be assessed.
2. The assessment needs to be appropriate to the material or subject being taught. Some content is best assessed in one way, other content is best assessed in other ways. You would probably not assess student’s ability to write algorithms using an essay exam. Assessment is a critical aspect of teaching and learning so it makes sense to customize the assessments to the material.
3. Just as important as matching the assessment to the student is matching the assessment to the teacher. Why? If you as an instructor do not have the skills, training, experience, or inclination to use a particular assessment it is unlikely you will be effective putting that method to use. An instructor who does not believe in graded discussions, for example, is unlikely to craft good questions, moderate effectively, or develop well-aligned rubrics for evaluating student participation in the discussions. Conversely, if you have experience writing white papers, have used them in influencing decision making yourself, and have seen first hand the value of that kind of document can have on policy, it is logical to conclude you will be effective in using that kind of project-based assignment in your course.

4. Finally, it is important to match the assessment with the delivery method. Discussion is an effective online assessment but is problematic face-to-face. Conversely, objective exams can be effective face to face, but have much less value online.

The real secret to creating an effective assessment strategy is customization; your strategy might include some elements you use face to face. It might include none of the activities you use currently. The key isn’t how alike or how different your assessment strategy is from what you are currently using; the key is to design one that helps you ensure that you are evaluating student’s achievement of the course objectives you defined for them.

**The Difference between Learning Activities and Assessments**

In the previous module, we discussed learning activities and how they are like and how they differ from assessments. While there is some overlap between learning activities and assessments (it is possible for the same activity to function as both a learning activity and an assessment), but in this module, we are going to focus on assessments. To determine whether your planned activity falls into the activity or assessment category, you can ask two questions;

1. **Is it graded?** If an activity is graded it is an assessment. It might also be an activity, but if you are assigning a grade to a task or activity, it is, by definition, an assessment.

2. **Is the focus on participation and do students have the freedom to take risks without penalty?** If the answer is ‘yes’ then you have created a learning activity. If the answer is no, then the activity fall squarely into the assessment category.

When designing your course you have to account for how students view these two related but cognitively different mechanisms for learning. In order to measure learning, we must assess, but students learn more from activities than they do from assessments.
Module 6 – Part 1: Introduction to Assessment

This is because when they are working for a grade, students tend to place more weight on the assessment, not the learning. However, when the incentive of a grade is removed, students often ignore the activity in favor of the graded assessments. It is, therefore, critical to strike a balance so your course offers the best possible opportunities for student learning and your assessment strategy gives you the best possible picture of what your students have learned.

When using graded learning activities it is best to approach them as formative assessments, with students having opportunities to revise their work and improve scores. If this is not the case, students tend to focus on their grades rather than learning.

Now that we have established a working definition of assessment; what it is and what it isn’t, we are equipped for a more detailed discussion of how to assess your students online.