

Unit 4: Assessment

Assessment is a critical part of any course—face-to-face or blended—and one that instructors are often interested in learning more about and improving. The goal of this workshop unit is dedicated to assessment practices within the blended course, more specifically to assist participants in constructing meaningful assessments and reviewing their existing assessment strategies. While many assessment principles are the same in any environment, some special considerations do exist in the blended mode.

Learning Objectives

- To understand the role of assessment in student success
- To explore new approaches to assessment that are frequent and situated in the online and face-to-face environment
- To ensure that learning objectives are aligned and supported by assessment strategies

Assessment for Blended Courses

As in other parts of this workshop, it is useful to begin this segment with a short poll (consider using <http://www.poll daddy.com> or <http://www.polleverywhere.com>) to determine what experience, background, and assessment practices participants have used.

Suggested Poll

Select the two most common assessments you've used:

- Multiple-choice tests
- Written exams
- Problem-based projects
- Research papers
- Case studies
- Short answer
- Large projects
- Essay questions

Use of a poll or other survey instrument will serve to increase the facilitator's awareness of participants' use of assessments and help them understand how diverse those assessments have been. Select and arrange the content below as needed, depending on the outcome of the poll. As an introduction, it might be useful to remind participants of a typical instructional cycle (McGee 2009):

- Instructor delivers content (via demonstration or introduction of content)
- Learners interact with content, other students, instructor (examples)

ELI Discovery Tools are practical resources designed to support the development and implementation of teaching, learning, and technology projects or processes on campus. This unit is part of the **EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative Discovery Tool: Blended Learning Workshop Guide**. Each unit can be used as a stand-alone activity, or all units can be combined for a multiday learning event. The units typically include articles, discussion exercises, and questionnaires. You are welcome to add your own material or modify what you find. The complete Blended Learning tool set is available at www.educause.edu/BlendedLearning. Access to this discovery tool is restricted to ELI members for six months following its publication date of November 2009.

- Learners apply or practice content (consider using rubrics)
- Learners receive feedback on their application (consider using rubrics)
- Learners participate in additional interaction with content as needed (assessment)

This exercise may serve to illustrate to participants where assessment and assessment practices might fit within a larger course context. By this time in the workshop, participants may have already begun to break down their course into objectives, and it will be useful to point out that this cycle could easily fit into each course objective or module. This is especially important because students in blended courses benefit greatly from frequent practice and feedback.

Activity

Brainstorm, in teams or individually, about what could be or needs to be assessed. Possible answers might include

- course goals;
- module objectives;
- activity objectives;
- content knowledge—declarative, intellectual skills (concept, principle, procedure, problem solving);
- thinking skills;
- inter/intrapersonal skills—collaboration, cooperation;
- technology literacy/proficiency skills;
- interaction skills;
- process skills; or
- team skills.

Encourage participants to consider incrementally assessing any of the aforementioned, as opposed to waiting until the end of a course section or until a deliverable is submitted.

Many instructors will elect not to modify any of their assessment strategies and are not likely to conduct any online assessment, especially when they are new to teaching in a blended mode. Some will be particularly concerned with academic integrity issues (see Unit 5 for ideas on how to address this). Depending on how regularly students are assessed, how diverse the assessment methodologies and tools, and the point values associated with assessment, this may or may not be a concern. Consider sharing the following assessment principles to begin a discussion on assessment redesign (adapted from <http://www.sjc.cc.nm.us/pages/2852.asp>):

- Match learning objectives with assessments
- Take precautions to limit the possibility of cheating
- Communicate assessment tasks clearly
- Use formative assessment to promote deeper learning; consider alternative forms of assessment such as portfolios
- Use self-assessments to improve learning and self-awareness
- Have students conduct peer-assessments (may be particularly effective when used in conjunction with group work)

It is important to point out to participants that frequent assessment is closely connected to student success in the blended model and directly addresses student accountability (see Unit 2). In face-to-face courses, instructors may have assessed students once in the middle and then again at the end of the course. Blended courses may meet in a variety of ways, such as once a week face-to-face and once online; face-to-face in the beginning of the course and then online in the second half; or online for classes and face-to-face for labs. Students, especially those new to the blended format, may have a tendency to feel disconnected from the course in the absence of face-to-face meetings and thus fall behind and stop participating. For this reason, it's important to build in as many assessments or checkpoints into the course as possible. Assessments and their associated point values may vary between high-stakes/high-points and low-stakes/no-points.

When reviewing assessments and strategies, participants should refer to their stated learning objectives. The degree of specificity and clarity of those objectives will serve as a good test as participants try to “derive” assessments from them. In other words, if objectives are poorly written, assessments will be difficult to construct. Clear objectives are also useful in selecting learning technologies to assist in meeting them and to make course and work expectations clear to students. Note that some participants may have objectives prescribed for them by the institution. In that case, encourage them to drill down to the next level of objective and begin work there.

Examples (adapted from Michigan State University, http://vudat.msu.edu/assess_objectives/):

Incongruent Objectives/Assessments

- Objective is to “design a research study related to a professional field,” but the assessment is a short-answer test.
- Objective is to “understand particular statistical methods for various types of research,” but the assessment is to write an essay.

Congruent Objectives/Assessments

- Objective is to demonstrate critical thinking skills and the assessment is a problem analysis.
- Objective is to test vocabulary knowledge, and the assessment is multiple-choice test.
- Objective is to assess writing skills, and the assessment is to write a composition.

These are just a few examples, but consider looking for others in participants' disciplines.

In reviewing course objectives, ask:

- Is the objective to develop skills, knowledge, or abilities?
- Are the objectives measurable? Do they demonstrate (authentic) something or reflect on knowledge/experience?
- What do they say about student learning outcomes?
- What is the goal of assessment—that is, what do you want the student to be able to do or demonstrate they can do? Consider using verbs to describe this and spend some time sharing these with students.

If participants determine that they will need to refine or clarify their objectives, suggest that they consider the following:

- Who is the audience (the learners)? Identify who will be doing the performance (not the instructor) of the behavior.

- What is the behavior (performance)? Make sure it is something that can be seen or heard.
- What are the conditions under which the learners must demonstrate their mastery of the objective? What will the learners be allowed and not allowed to use in demonstrating?
- What is the degree (how well the behavior must be done)? Common degrees include speed, accuracy, and quality.

Activities

- Divide participants into groups and ask them to rewrite objectives so that they are more functional.
- Collect objectives (without identifying information) from participants and ask the group or teams to assist in rewriting them or developing an assessment that would accurately measure the objective.

This workshop unit presents an opportunity to consider other best practices in assessment-related items.

Grading and Evaluation

Do participants clearly state their grading policy in their course materials? Is the policy clear enough that students can compute their grade easily and at any time during the course? How soon after students complete a graded course component will their grades be posted and where? Will students be able to easily understand the way their work will be or has been evaluated?

Practice

Will students be able to pre-evaluate their work with the use of a rubric? Will there be any peer evaluation of work prior to submission? How much practice on assessments will be available, especially for those high-stakes/high-point-value assessments?

Feedback and Instruments

How much feedback is available, and how soon will that feedback be offered? What form will the feedback take (written, points, final grade)? Finally, what instruments will be used to assess? Will those instruments require students to use technology? Will those technologies be familiar to them, or will students need to learn how to use the technology effectively prior to completing the assessment? Will any practice time be offered to students so that they can become comfortable with using the tool prior to the assessment?

A good assessment practice to follow has to do with information that learners should have about the assessment. For instance, learners should:

- Know that an assessment is coming (unless they are intentionally unannounced)
- Have some information on how to help plan for the assessment
- Know what happens after the assessment
- Have an understanding of how to prepare for an assessment
- Have an idea of what participating in the assessment will look like
- Be able to have some practice with the assessment, perhaps via self-assessment

Self-Assessments

Some participants may have some experience administering classroom self-assessment techniques, otherwise known as CATs. Self-assessments, whether online or face-to-face, can increase accountability, engage students, start discussions, serve as early alert mechanisms, or provide practice on course concepts. They can be offered via the web or course management system, and they can take place before or after an instructional unit or module, provide reflection on learning for students, or offer feedback on course design and technology. It's often a good idea to plan for a few CATs around course design and selected course technologies, especially the first two or three times an instructor is teaching in a blended mode. This can serve as a very useful feedback mechanism and a way for instructors to gauge the amount of work they are assigning along with the blended student experience.

CATs should be learner-centered, teacher-prompted, mutually beneficial, formative, fast to administer and interpret, nonthreatening, and ongoing, and they should serve to foster trust between students and instructor. When developing a CAT or adapting one for your use, consider customizing it to your specific needs and learning environment and make sure that it is consistent with your instructional philosophy. The first time that one is being used, make sure that the CAT is tested to determine its effectiveness and allow extra time to carry out and respond to the assessment. Let students know what you learn from their feedback and how you and they can use that information to improve learning.

The following suggested questions may be easily administered via a classroom assessment technique:

- What is the most useful thing you learned in this assignment, unit, or module?
- What suggestions would you give other students on ways to get the most out of this assignment, unit, or module?
- In what area did you learn or understand the most? The least?
- List three ways you think you have developed or grown as a result of this assignment, unit, or module.
- What did you learn about writing, research, or any other skill from this assignment, unit, or module?
- What problems did you encounter in this assignment, project, unit, or tool that was used?
- What unit or module of this course was your best work and why?

Once assessments are complete and in place, it might be useful for participants to check, perhaps in teams or pairs, to determine whether assessments are:

- Closely aligned with learning objectives
- Supported by resources and course materials available to students
- Conducted by appropriate technologies
- Preceded by sufficient content, instructor, and other learner interaction

Activity

To engage participants in considering the implementation of CATs in their blended course, ask them to review the provided CAT resources below and also to search for some examples on the web. Then, ask them to pick one and identify the goal for the CAT. Have them share with the group why this CAT is helpful or necessary in a particular area of the course and how and when

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students will receive feedback on the CAT. Emphasize that student feedback is a critical component of the CAT process.

Learning Technologies and Assessment Tools

A good follow-up to this workshop unit is to schedule some time for participants to review some of the assessment features of their course management system. This is often an untapped resource for many. Another idea is to encourage participants to explore the assessment tools and resources available to them via their textbook publisher. Publishers, sometimes via a coursepack, have entire libraries of quick self-assessments with corresponding content and resources that can be easily used with students.

Assessment Resources

- <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/assess-2.htm>
- <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/assess.htm>
- <http://www.ntlf.com/html/sf/vc75.htm>
- http://technologysource.org/article/classroom_assessment_techniques_in_asynchronous_learning_networks/
- <http://www4.nau.edu/assessment/main/research/webtools.htm>