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10 Assessment Design Tips for Increasing Online Student Retention, Satisfaction and Learning

HOW MUCH TIME do we put into the design of the assessment plans in our online courses? Is most of that time focused upon summative graded assignments that factor into the course grade? Or, do they also include opportunity for practice and informal feedback?

I've taken, taught, or designed more than a hundred online courses over the years, and I can appreciate many online course designs and approaches. With that said, I confess that I have an increasingly difficult time with online courses that limit assessment plans to a few papers, projects, quizzes, and tests. In an age of educational innovation and online learning, perhaps it is time to further explore enhancements to traditional notions of grading. With that in mind, here is an article on my ten suggestions for enhancing or improving the assessment design in your online courses. There is no expectation that you use or even agree with all of the suggestions. Rather, consider them ideas to help jump-start your thinking about designing or re-imagining the assessment plan in your online courses.

1. Focus on Formative Assessment

– Formative feedback is the annual checkup at the doctor. Summative feedback is the autopsy. The former gives one feedback that can be used to improve the patient's well-being or the learner's progress toward meeting the course goals. The latter doesn't do much for the person being assessed. With that in mind, why not put most of our energy into designing high-quality formative feedback plans in our online courses? This is the feedback that helps learners discover how they are progressing toward one or more goals. It need not be high-stakes, graded, or made to influence the overall grade in the course (which would make it part of the summative assessment plan). Formative feedback can include self-assessments, peer-assessments, informal instructor feedback, computer-generated feedback,

or feedback from mentors and people outside of the course. It allows students to use the feedback to improve and refine their work, rather than simply accumulate points that count toward an overall grade or certificate.

2. Make the Assessments Authentic

– Learners thrive on experiences that relate to real world needs and contexts. Powerful learning occurs when participants see themselves as taking the course to connect with others and to learn something of value. "Of value" usually means something that they can use in work, avocations, or some other part of life beyond school. With this in mind, design assessments where learners actually build, create, or design something that they can use in other aspects of their lives. If they can't use it, make it authentic enough that they can easily transfer the tasks completed in the assessment to a similar task outside of the classroom. This usually means setting aside or minimizing the use of things like true and false or multiple choice quizzes and tests. Performance on such assessments does not transfer to post-course life nearly as well as authentic assessments.

3. Beware of Using a Grading System to Punish

– If you are going to use a grading system, make it a measure of what students have or have not learned. This is lost if you start removing points for late work and penalizing for behaviors that you want to discourage. It may work to do these things, but it turns your grading system into something other than a measure of student learning. If you want a system to track or encourage certain behaviors, then build a second and separate system for that, maybe a special badging system that publicly recognizes certain contributions.

4. Consider Using an Alternative to the Traditional Letter Grade System – Those of us in a traditional school system often need to use letter grades (unless there is adequate support for alternatives).

However, we might be able to use a second and parallel system as well. Why not consider a digital badging system with clear criteria, a series of rubrics related to specific concepts that are important, or even a mini standards-based report card that gives more granular and helpful feedback than a single letter grade for the class? Or, depending upon the size of the class, what about trying out a narrative assessment plan where instructors and peers provide rich feedback in paragraph form, using a checklist? In the case of peer feedback, remember that this requires guidance from the instructor. Students will likely need help learning to give good narrative feedback to one another.

5. Design for a Pick-and-Choose Mindset

– Many students treat courses as more of a buffet than a pre-served meal. They do not complete every single thing that is suggested or required. They figure out what they need to do to accomplish their goals, whether it is the goal to learn certain things or the goal of earning a specific grade. What if we designed the course with more of the buffet mindset?

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ASSESSMENT

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People will pick and choose what they want to do and what they want to avoid. Of course, there will still be certain required elements, but leaving room for choice allows students to self-direct more of their learning, which can help enhance student motivation. This buffet approach can work for assessment as well. If your goal is to measure what students have learned, why not give them different options from which to choose? If they could demonstrate their learning in any number of ways, why not leave room for that?

6. Revisit Your Assessment Vocabulary

- Instead of terms like quizzes, tests, and assignments; consider adding some fun and interest to the course by using a different vocabulary. It might be something that is more authentic to out-of-school life. It might be some action words or metaphor-driven concepts that draw interest and curiosity (challenges, missions, mind mirrors, action plans, etc.). You get the idea. You might want to choose a vocabulary that relates to the use of the course content in a real-world setting. If it is a marketing course, for example, use terms like contract, deadline, and pitch. Be creative and have some fun with it.

7. Don't Let the System Design Your Course

- Many online courses are in learning management systems that lead you toward first thinking about more traditional approaches to assessment. Don't let the system drive your course assessment design. Instead, consider sketching your entire plan outside of the learning management system. Plan it in a word processor, your favorite mind mapping tool, or even sketch it out in your idea notebook. Whatever you do, do not design it in the system before you get a chance to create your ideal blueprint. This will be more challenging at first, but it will allow you to be more creative and to pursue your true vision for the course. You can always revise the design if you have to fit it in a certain learning management system. Or, you might be able to run parts of the course beyond the system so that you can bring your course vision to life. This approach will also give you a chance to create some wonderfully interesting, valuable, and outside-the-box approaches to assessment.

8. Reconsider the Teacher / Student Dichotomy

- I continue to be grateful to Howard Rheingold for introducing me to the term "co-learner" as a way to refer

to myself in a course. Again, we are in a new learning environment and this gives us a chance to play, experiment, and try out new roles. This will directly impact the way we think about and approach assessment in our courses, giving us a new and fresh perspectives on assessment as a tool for learning and not just a system to rate and grade people.

9. Strive for a Design That Promotes a Culture of Learning, not Earning

- Are students studying and performing with the goal of earning a specific grade? This is a sure sign that your course has a culture of earning. On the other hand, do you see students choosing to go above and beyond the requirement of a given assignment simply because they are interested in the topic? That is a promising sign that a culture of learning exists. How do you promote a culture of learning? Here is one way. As you design the course, aim for cultivating a community of purpose. This comes in part from how you write, talk about and represent the course. A community of purpose is a community of practice that is purpose-driven. It is driven by "why" questions. It recognizes that there is nothing more motivating than a deep, strong sense of purpose. Don't be afraid to talk about that purpose of the course often and in varied ways. That will help learners think about the course as something more than a course, as a purpose-driven community. As a result, it doesn't become about earning a certificate, grade, or other accolade. It becomes about pursuing that purpose. Make it your personal mission to help each learner discover, remember, and reflect upon why this course is meaningful and purposeful, and you will make huge strides toward a culture of learning.

10. Leave Room for Student-Initiated Feedback Loops and Assessment Plans

- Invite, encourage, and create

spaces for students to self-organize. This may include self-organized ways to get feedback on their progress like blogging and getting comments from others. Encourage learners to post their work, get peer feedback, refine it, and then submit it for a graded review from the instructor. These informal peer interactions also model the type of collaborative practice that we want to see them apply in life outside of school. After all, our end goal is that students will be able to self-assess their own progress as they continue to learn well beyond completion of a single course or degree. If that is the case, start encouraging them to take some ownership in the design and use of feedback right now.

Online learning is less than 30 years old. As a result, it still remains a new frontier in teaching and learning. Why not give yourself permission to experiment and be playful in your design. While much design attention goes toward choosing or creating content and lessons, the assessment part of the plan can be easily overlooked. Toward that end, I offer these ten suggestions to help jump-start your assessment design thinking.

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[<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/10-assessment-design-tips-increasing-retention-satisfaction-student-learning-online-courses/> and [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/10-assessment-design-tips-increasing-online-student-retention-satisfaction-learning-part-2/>] February 26, 2014.

BOOK

What Our Stories Teach Us: A Guide to Critical Reflection for College Faculty



This book encourages and enables faculty to deeply examine their teaching experiences, stories, and choices so real insight results. The author invites faculty to recall stories from their own biographies, demonstrates how to view these stories as critical incidents instead of mere reminiscences, and introduces an approach faculty can undertake to analyze then interpret these stories for the benefit of professional growth in teaching.

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