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Improving Student Engagement and Participation through Student-created Assessments

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Abstract

Typically, student assessments of learning based on course objectives are a standard part of teaching and learning in higher education. In most cases, course assessments are predetermined and prepared by faculty long before a class is offered and are the same for all students once a class begins. One practice that is not common in higher education is allowing students to determine for themselves how their assessments of course content are designed and reviewed. This chapter presents a case for student personalization

of assessments and a system for how this can be done to improve student engagement and learning in the higher education classroom.

Support for Student-created Assessments

Many research studies support the idea that increasing student engagement improves learning in higher education (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2003; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Studies of international populations (Wawrzynski, Heck, & Remley, 2012) and those studying students with disabilities (Nichols & Quaye, 2009) find similar results. In short, the more engaged students are in their own higher education experiences, the more learning is likely to occur.

Allowing students to have a say in how their learning will be assessed has two clear benefits. One benefit of having students participate in the creation of their own assessments is that it enables them to create assessment experiences that are in line with their own learning preferences. Another benefit is that it allows students to demonstrate knowledge in ways that can showcase their individual strengths. Both of these activities integrate student voice more into the teaching and learning process, increase student engagement, and, in the process, improve student learning. What follows is a strategy that can be used to make this happen.

A Process for Implementing Student-created Assessments

A process for utilizing student-created assessments in higher education classes is suggested with the following thoughts in mind.

Be open-minded. According to Svinigki and McKeachie (2013), “What is important is learning, not teaching. Teaching effectiveness depends not just on what the teacher does, but on what the student does” (p. 5). This is a call for teachers to have an open mind. Too many instructors seem locked into specific systems, either those imposed by learning organizations or those of their own making. Consider instead the notion of challenging the process proposed by Kouzes and Posner (2012). Be willing to test this out; see personally if this helps students learn more.

Start small. For management reasons, it is recommended that students are given the opportunity to create their own assessment for only one section of a course and that all students create their own assessment from the same section of the course. This may seem contrary to the guidance provided in item one above. While it is suggested that one be willing to challenge the process, practitioners may want to stay within accepted norms for the majority of their work. Gradual change is typically received more easily than big changes all at the same time.

The following procedure is recommended for using student-created assessments.

Introduce the idea early. At the start of the course, introduce all proposed class assessments, including the assessment which has been set apart as the student-created assessment. At this earliest point in the course have students consider how they may want to demonstrate their knowledge in the content area to be covered later in the course.

Students propose idea. Later in the course, have students determine the specific method that they will use to demonstrate their knowledge and have them submit their proposed assessment plan. Consider the following to help students develop their assessment ideas: (a) Ensure that students understand the role of assessments in learning is to demonstrate their mastery of course content; (b) Remind students what the objectives are for the section of the course wherein they will create their own assessment; and (c) Explain how their goal is to create an assessment product that will demonstrate their mastery of the section objectives.

Students create grading rubric. Have students create a grading rubric for the assessment product they have in mind to create. Have students follow the grade rubric pattern presented in the course syllabus. Model rubrics should have the following recommended elements which can vary based on appropriateness for course and instructor preference:

- (a) Creation of assessment product should take X number of hours (determined by instructor and announced to students).
- (b) Four-to-five specific rubric criteria.

- (c) Four levels of accomplishment for each rubric criteria (from no performance in given rubric element to exemplary performance in rubric element).
- (d) Specific, measurable descriptions for each rubric element at each level of accomplishment.
- (e) A specific number of total points for the assessment that is the same for all learners. The instructor informs students of the total number of points the rubric is to have. Students determine how this total number of points is to be divided up within the rubric they create.
- (f) Students submit their proposed assessment idea and associated rubric for instructor review. The instructor reviews and returns proposals to students with comments for improvements if appropriate.
- (g) Provide a set assessment for students who would rather be told what to do than exercise a creative side.

It is true that this strategy will necessitate extra steps in the educational process. Educators should be ready for this. This extra effort will increase personalization of the educational experience which, based on research already presented, will lead to more learning for students.

Applications of Student-created Assessments in the Classroom

Consider the following possibility for assessments submitted by students:

Course: Biology

Content Area: Krebs's Cycle

Learning Objective: Demonstrate understanding of the eight steps in the Krebs's Cycle process.

Prompt for Student-created Assessment: Provide a work product that displays your understanding of the Krebs's Cycle.

Proposals Received:

- Create a 10-minute video describing the Krebs's Cycle process.

- Be the interviewee in an interview about the Krebs's Cycle process (video or audio recording),
- Create a 2 x 3 foot poster that describes the Krebs's Cycle process which is suitable for long-term display in the classroom.
- Give a 10- to 15-minute presentation of the Krebs's Cycle to the class.

Here is another example of what students may do with a given assessment prompt:

Course: Literature

Content Area: The works of Edgar Allan Poe

Learning Objective: Analyze the themes of Poe's work for relevance in today's world.

Prompt for Student-created Assessment: Provide evidence that you know and can relate to others through a) the major themes of Poe's work and b) how his themes are relevant to people today.

Proposals Received:

- Create a narrated PowerPoint presentation that presents the themes of Poe's work and analyzes the themes of his work for relevance in today's world.
- Paint the wood fence along 24th and 25th on Vine Street with information about Poe's works and how they connect with today's society (The fence is mine so it's okay.).
- Give a 15- to 20-minute dramatization with fellow classmates during the student union sponsored brown-bag sessions on the topic of Poe's themes and the meanings we can get from them today.

Here is one more example of what students may do with a given assessment prompt:

Course: Marketing

Content Area: Identifying Target Market Population

Learning Objective: Analyze strategies for identifying and narrowing target market populations.

Prompt for Student-created Assessment: Provide evidence of your understanding of strategies for identifying and narrowing target market populations.

Proposals Received:

- Present a proposal to a company that describes how my firm would use multiple methods to help them define, refine, and connect with their most appropriate markets.
- Write a white paper that addresses a company that has been identified in the news as losing market share and provide an analysis of where and how they can find new market populations
- Present a 15-minute presentation to the class about how various social media can use forums to identify different target market populations for businesses.

Conclusion

The more learners are involved in determining how they will approach their own learning, the more engaged and productive their learning experience will be. Instructors who take advantage of this to increase student engagement and voice in their classes are likely to be surprised and impressed with the creativity students will demonstrate. This added creativity will widen the perspective of all students and even instructors to create more gratifying, memorable educational experiences for all involved.

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