ASSESSING COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND NEW TEACHING PRACTICES

Assessing the success of a new course, assignment, or teaching strategy can provide valuable information for your own teaching development and for formal evaluation of your teaching. The information you collect through these assessment exercises can be included in a teaching dossier, shared with others interested in teaching in your field or institution, or used to contextualize other forms of teaching evaluations (such as student course evaluations) as part of a formal review of your teaching.

The information below provides some general tips on planning assessment measures; the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation can help you develop an assessment plan specific to your needs.

Planning your assessment

In planning any assessment exercise, take some time to specify:

The learning activity you will be assessing (e.g. a particular assignment, a class activity, an entire course).
The desired outcomes of that learning activity: how will you know it was successful?
For more information on identifying learning outcomes, please see the OTA faculty guide, Developing Learning Outcomes. You may also wish to take some time to note your motivation for implementing a new learning activity and the planning process through which you developed the activity, particularly if you plan to describe this activity and its assessment in your teaching dossier or as part of a teaching review.

Evaluation goals and benefits

You can use the results of your evaluation to:

Receive overall and diagnostic feedback about your teaching and about the effectiveness of new teaching activities.
Collect documentation about your teaching for your teaching dossier or for formal teaching evaluation (for example, for tenure or promotion).
Monitor your own teaching activities in the context of departmental, divisional, or institutional program goals or learning outcomes.
Options for collecting information
the particular group of students being assessed. The information you receive could be quite useful – but should generally be analyzed in a flexible and qualitative framework.

**Other means of assessing a learning activity:**

Peer evaluation of teaching: invite a colleague to observe and provide feedback on the activity being assessed (CTSI can also provide feedback based on an in-class observation).
Survey or discuss student performance with instructors in subsequent courses.
Identify benchmarks or outcomes for student performance or learning, and monitor their ability to meet these expectations (see Diamond, 1998).

**Considerations in educational assessment**

The evaluation of teaching is a notoriously difficult effort because we know of very few ways to assess student learning directly. We rely instead on proxies: the assessment of teaching behaviours we know to be correlated with improved student learning; the evaluation of student academic performance (which will be influenced by the assessment instruments used and the way in which the material was taught); or student self-evaluation. Each of these proxies is itself difficult to assess reliably. In developing assessment measures for teaching, it may be difficult to identify what should, and can, in fact be assessed. Instructors can mitigate these challenges by identifying clear assessment goals and learning outcomes.

Furthermore, the evaluation of teaching is difficult because of the inability or undesirability of creating controlled experiments or assessment measures. Any teaching activity has a substantial number of external influences, from previous academic preparation of the students to group dynamics to gender bias to class size. As such, attempting to compare groups of students – or even to compare the same group at different times – will inevitably introduce a number of variables to the assessment exercise. It is also frequently undesirable to create “control groups” because of the potentially negative effect participation in such a group may have on those students. Instructors must teach the way they believe to be most beneficial to students at that time, and to withhold a teaching strategy or activity from a group of students is not desirable. Whenever possible, the process of educational assessment should not affect any student’s actual learning or classroom experience.

**Further resources on teaching, course, and program assessment Websites:**


Books and articles:


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