What do I need to consider when I assess student learning?

At a few key points in the semester our students submit projects, papers, reports, or exams. As we review and grade their work, our reactions can range from pleasant surprise to concern and confusion. All too often, we are confronted with unexpected and uneven student work, some of which falls well below our hopes for our students’ learning. When our students’ work is disappointing, the best response is to look carefully at our own assessment practices and ask ourselves how we have approached assessment. One typical approach is to pick or create assignments and assessments because we think that our students will find them fun, challenging, or realistic. Sometimes assessments are inherited from a previous instructor. And sometimes we simply use tests or papers because they’ve worked well enough in the past. But these approaches to choosing assessments are not what the research suggests and may be the reason that our students struggle.

What does research say about the best ways to approach assessment?

Principles of productive assessment design

- Assessment design is productive when we shift away from the notion of assessment of learning to assessment for learning.
- Assessments in a course must be developed together to ensure that they work together to move students to the learning that is articulated in course goals.
- Assessments should be described in a transparent way to clarify to students (and to the instructor!) the purpose of the assessment, what knowledge and skills will be drawn on to complete the assessment, and what successful attempts look like.

Putting these principles into action

When we think about “assessment for learning” rather than assessment of learning, we ask new questions: “What assessments will help my students learn?” and “How can I help students see the learning value of my assessments so that they engage as fully as possible with that learning experience?” When we don’t ask these questions, assignments and assessments may be creative or interesting, but they may not help students learn and they may result in student confusion and frustration. A carefully crafted assessment plan and transparent assessment descriptions help us answer both these questions.

- An assessment plan allows us to consider what assignments will work together, iteratively, to help students attempt and practice the learning that our course objectives have targeted. A good assessment plan has two key qualities. First, the assessments should create a coherent experience for students. Often a course is studded with assessments that were not designed to work together or that require our students to do very different kinds of work. When students are confronted with three or four different kinds of assessments, they don’t see how each assignment builds across the course and their response is a mixture of fear and resentment. Students often struggle in this situation and see assessments as hoops to jump through rather than meaningful learning experiences. When assessments allow students to attempt and reattempt similar or related skills, they put effort and energy into these assignments and can build skills across the course. The second quality of a good assessment plan is that each
assessment aligns with our goals for student learning. This may seem simplistic or obvious, but it is not unusual for instructors to design assessments that, while meaningful or engaging, have little to do with the course goals for student learning. Your assessment plan is more likely to have these qualities when you sketch out all your assessments at one time and look for alignment between assessments and your course goals.

- **A transparent assessment** is a rich description of an assignment that makes explicit to students the purpose of the work you are asking them to do, the steps to success, and ways they can evaluate their work. You might worry that providing this kind of detailed description will make the work too easy for students because they won't be trying to figure out how to complete the assessment. Alternately, you might worry that student creativity will be suppressed when you detail the kind of work you are looking for in an assignment. In fact, students do their best work and work hardest when they are not struggling to guess why they are doing an assignment, what that assignment entails, how to proceed, and what successful work on the assignment might look like. When you take the time to fully articulate both the why and the how of an assignment, you can also start to see more clearly if the assignment should be part of your assessment plan. And you can start to see the skills students will need to develop to be successful on the assignment. This can help you plan activities and homework assignments, meaning that a transparent assessment will motivate and support your students and will also support your own teaching!

**Examples of productive assessment practices**

An example of an assessment plan from the course syllabus of a Human Development course

Our course is organized around four learning sequences that map onto four developmental stages: infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. In each sequence, we will use the research and theory on physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development to analyze real problems and situations. At the end of each course sequence we will work on a case study that allows you to apply the work we've been doing to a complex case that can be approached in many ways. After a case study discussion, you will write your own case study analysis of this case in a five-page paper. These four case study analysis papers are weighted differently, with each subsequent paper being worth more weight than the one before it. I do this because I know you will be developing your analytic and your writing skills across the semester. I will also have you use the feedback you get from me to make a plan to improve the next case study analysis paper. Throughout the learning sequence leading up to the paper we will be doing activities and homework that will help you learn to apply course material to realistic situations: this way you will build the skills that you need to write a good case study analysis paper. These papers are aligned with course goals 2, 3, and 5 which have to do with analysis of real world situations using principles of human development, application of these principles to creating solutions for real problems, and articulating your thinking in writing.
Elements of a transparent assessment description with examples from a Human Development course

Below you will find the five key elements of an assignment description that effectively guide students into and through the work of an assignment. After each element is explained, you will find an example (from a Human Development class) where appropriate.

Element 1. Purpose
Students don’t always see the value of the assignments we give them. When students see the intrinsic value and purpose of an assignment, they approach the work thoughtfully rather than doing the work superficially as a hoop to jump through. This means we need to explain to students how the assignment will help them learn in our class, will help them be more developed college students, and will help them in their life outside of the university. When we, as instructors, ask ourselves how the assignment is connected to the work of the discipline and to learning in a broader way, it also helps us make explicit the kind of thinking and work that the assignment requires.

Example of Purpose section
This assignment asks you to draft an analysis of a case study of a child using two key frameworks in the field of human development. One of the goals of our course is not just to learn about theories in the discipline of human development but to use them to support the development of children. And whether you go on to work with children or just to live as a caring adult in a world full of children, this assignment gives you an opportunity to practice observing, analyzing, and responding to a real situation in which you can play a crucial role in a child’s life. This careful and thoughtful work will also help you hone your critical thinking skills, which will contribute to your overall success at the university and in life.

Element 2. Skills and Knowledge
Students don’t automatically see the connection between the preparatory work they have been doing in a course and the assignment that is meant to draw on that work. Make it clear to students what skills they have begun to learn in class that they will continue to develop through the assignment. Terms from Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Complexity (Anderson, et al., 2014) can help you articulate those skills in a clear way to students. Also point students clearly to the content they will be drawing on to complete the assignment: these would be specific concepts, frameworks, or models that they will use. Refer students to the specific activities they’ve done and feedback they’ve received that they will draw on to be successful on the assignment. Students will be able to gather together previous work and thinking and apply it to the assignment when you help them make these connections.

Example of Skills and Knowledge section
As you do this assignment, you will apply the theories we’ve been studying in the last 4 weeks. These theories are family system theories, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, and Tatum’s theories of identity development. In class you have been practicing applying these theories to scenarios. You’ve used the theories to analyze scenarios to identify problems and propose solutions. In this assignment you will analyze a longer and more complex case study of a child and her family. You will draw on the skills you are developing to analyze real life situations using these different theories. You will also be
practicing how to use two theories together to analyze a case. It will be helpful to you to review the feedback I’ve given you on your “Scenario Reaction” writing: you can use that feedback to think about how to improve your analytic work for this assignment.

Element 3. Steps for Success

Much of what we do as experts is work we do automatically. We don’t always realize that the work we do and the work we ask students to do involves preparatory steps, action steps, and metacognitive steps. Make these steps explicit to students so that they can make a successful attempt at the thinking and the work you want them to practice and demonstrate. Specify mistakes that they should avoid. Rather than spoon feeding them, you are creating an even more rigorous and realistic assignment when you describe fully the steps required for success. And students will be more enthusiastic and productive when they know what the assignment actually entails.

Example of Steps for Success section

Preparatory steps:
1. Read this assignment description carefully and note where you have questions so that I can answer them in class to help everyone understand the assignment fully.
2. Reread your writing about family system theories, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, and Tatum’s theories of identity development and note where you drew connections between those theories and where you showed differences between the theories.
3. Reread my comments on your “Scenario Reactions” writings and note for yourself my suggestions for ways to improve your analyses. Choose one suggestion and commit to using that in this assignment.
4. Read the case study “Keisha” at least twice. The first time, read for the gist: learn who the “characters” are and to get a sense of the events and timeline. The second time, read analytically, identifying what you think are the key problems in the case and then considering how the theories listed above can help you more fully analyze those problems. Make notes to record these new ideas.

Action steps:
Focus and deepen your analysis by creating a two-part paper.
1. The first part is your analysis of the case. In this part, you will identify what you consider to be the major problems faced by the child or family featured in the case and then analyze those problems using human development theories. Analysis here means using a theory to see more of the problem, to see particular factors of the problem, or to connect the problem to other contexts and issues. You’ll need to fully explain those theories as you use them to pick apart and more fully conceptualize those problems. Do not cite lectures or PowerPoint presentations: demonstrate your understanding of the course readings. Use at least three details from the case as evidence that the theories you identify in your analysis are actually at work here. So, for example, let us say that you feel a central problem in the case is that the child in the case is struggling to play productively with peers because she has different cultural concepts about play. You might decide that a specific theory about cultural psychology can help us understand that struggle. Be sure you fully explain your understanding of that theory and then
apply it to the case. Then you might use two short excerpts from the case to show how the child in the case does or does not do things that the theory predicts or suggests. Do not spend lots of time in this section retelling the case. Your job here is to show how events in the case can be more fully understood using development theories.

2. In the second part of your paper, you will suggest one or more solutions to the problems you have identified in the case. These solutions should stem from your analysis of the problems and should also be shaped by your understanding of the theories you are using. Use three well-chosen pieces of evidence from the case to support your claim that these solutions will support the child in the case. Also in this second part, don’t just talk generally about your solution: propose a detailed, concrete plan for action. The key here is detail: could a parent, teacher, or social worker follow your plan and would all her questions be answered if she read your case study analysis? Again, your plan should be fully grounded in the theories you are using in your analysis. In this section, you will also discuss what the possible consequences of your solution/s might be: I want to hear both the things you hope to have happen and the things that might not work so well.

✓ It may help you if you write to an adult in the case. This will help you remember to be analytic and structured in your writing. This fictitious reader will need you to spell out the problems and the solutions in a well-organized way. She needs you to explain what is happening in the case using theories of human development in a clear way, and in such a way that she can really see how developmental principles are at work in this case. Your evidence should help her think (for example) “Oh yes I do see how cultural mismatch really is going on here!” If you think that this will help your writing, why not start out your paper this way, by addressing the adult who you’d like to read your analysis. Your writing will still be formal, but you will be focused on explaining what you understand in clear and detailed language.

Element 4. Criteria for Success

Assignment descriptions should articulate for students (and for ourselves) the necessary parts of an assignment and the levels of performance or achievement that they should aim for with each of these parts. Including a grading rubric as part of your assignment helps you think fully about what you are asking students to demonstrate in an assignment and they can be used by students to monitor their work. Designing rubrics takes significant time and energy, but it is a worthwhile investment because it helps clarify the assignment for you and your students. While it can be tempting to simply borrow rubrics from other sources, this is not a good idea because a rubric from another assignment won’t align with the assignment you have in mind.

Element 5. Submission details

It’s easy for students to spend too much time focusing on formatting and submission worries rather than using their energy to do the meaningful thinking an assignment requires, so be sure to contain that information for them at the very end of your assignment description. Explain the following kinds of details to students: the style guidelines they should follow; font size; margins; file type; submission dates for drafts, feedback, final drafts; and where and how to submit their work (class, Blackboard, or other platform). Be specific and detailed regardless of the kind of assignment you are giving students (papers, presentations, videos,
artwork, etc.). Having all these logistical questions answered will make them feel comfortable and help them focus on the thinking they need to do, not its packaging.

**Example of Submission Details section**
Your case study paper should be 5 pages in length. Use APA format, double-space your type, and use twelve point font. APA style is used by scholars who work in psychology, education, and other social science fields. You should use it when you cite others’ words or work in your writing. Details about APA style can be found on the form “Writing in APA Style” on Blackboard under “Course Documents.” Type up your references in a bibliography at the end of your case study paper. Your assignment should be in Word (.docx) or rich text format (.rtf). Submit your work through the assignment link in Blackboard on October 15 by 11:59 pm.

**Resources about assessing student learning**

If you’d like support as you create an assessment plan and as you detail your assessments and communicate them, please feel free to request a consultation.