

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 22, Number 8, 2010-11

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network
in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org).

Teaching Assessment by Modeling Different Assessment Techniques

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Getting feedback early and often helps us gauge what students are learning well or less well, what they are taking away from the class, and what changes we may want to make. Assessment techniques can be used before, during, and after a class to get this feedback.

One of the goals of the Future Faculty Teacher Training Series offered through the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning is to model various instructional techniques that the participants may decide to use in their own classes. We include some type of assessment for each part of the series in addition to an overall evaluation. In this essay, I will share the assessments we use and the goals for each. Our sense is that this type of modeling communicates more completely, effectively, and persuasively the value of these assessment strategies.

Pre-class survey and online assignments

After graduate students and postdocs have registered for the series, they are asked to complete a questionnaire. The purpose of this pre-workshop survey is to determine their expectations for the series and to assess their knowledge in areas of teaching and learning, ranging from “no understanding (‘not really sure what this means’)” to “thorough understanding (‘ready and able to apply to my teaching as appropriate’)” of concepts such as backwards course design, principles of learning, and collaborative learning techniques. We use this information to adjust our lesson plans according to what they already know. On the first day we share our assessments of the aggregated responses and when we will address these concepts during the series. We clarify our goals for the series, indicate how the series will meet some of

their expectations, and explain why often it will not meet all and offer suggestions for other ways to meet those.

The final survey question - *“Is there anything that you feel may hinder your success in this series or anything you want to tell us before the series starts?”* - is one we hope each participant might also use in his/her own pre-course surveys. A student group who is committed to seeking accessibility accommodations recommended this question to Dartmouth faculty. For our series, common concerns typically include: the worry about providing adequate time for completion of all assignments, ESL-related communication concerns or discomfort with public speaking.

We employ ‘Just in Time Teaching’ by asking participants to respond to prompts about the readings before they come to class (Novak, et al 1999). This encourages the graduate students, who are taking the series voluntarily, to engage with the readings and think about them in ways they might not if they were not asked to respond before class. Their responses give us insight into their thoughts about the reading, additional information useful for assigning them to groups for collaborative work, and ways to encourage some of the quieter students to talk by asking them about what they wrote.

In-Class Assessments

In addition to the online assessments, we use a variety of classroom assessment techniques (CATs) either during a session or at the end of a session to check in with the participants (Angelo & Cross, 1993). While we use these assessments so that we can continue to improve the training series itself, we also want to model for participants a variety of techniques they may want to use in their own teaching.

We use **clickers** to promote student engagement by collecting responses to opinion polls or to have them guess the results of an experiment about how people learn (Hodges, 2009). Sometimes the goals for the clicker questions are to have them reflect on the reading and other assignments and to start a discussion. We also use clickers for opinion polls about instructional methods used in class and to determine if the participants think they might use a particular method in their own teaching. The poll is either used to start or conclude brainstorming about specific applications of the method to teaching in their disciplines. Similar to the opinion poll on instructional methods, when we focus specifically on collaborative learning techniques, we ask the group to generate a **pro & con grid**.

A commonly used CAT is the **minute paper**. In order to suggest that they use it for regular classroom assessments, we use it multiple times in the series of workshops. The first day we use it in a rather standard form. We ask participants to tell us anonymously what they thought was most important, what they liked best, and what they liked least and/or are still confused about. We provide a visual representation of the responses in the next session by making a word cloud using Wordle.net. This helps the instructors and participants see the commonalities - which there is overlap in what some like best and some like least. We also use 'snowball fights' as another way to share the responses to a minute paper. The participants crumple the paper they wrote their responses on and throw them around the room. After everyone has made a few tosses, we ask them to read the response closest to them, and not to acknowledge if they happened to get their own paper back. This is one of the few times they hear word for word what the other participants said in their feedback. It is also a way to lighten the mood after what is sometimes a somewhat heavy discussion of critical moments for students and stereotype threat. Finally, we also use minute papers to get feedback on how we as instructors can improve a specific session. This prompts our participants to reflect on how the session was taught - not only what they think worked well or not, but also how they think we could make it better.

A variation of the minute paper that we use to find out what they thought was most important from a session is a **concept map**. While it is generally considered important to give a well-constructed prompt for a concept map, or at least suggest a word or phrase as a starting point, we have found that we learn more when we keep the instructions vague. We ask participants to reflect on that day's session and draw a concept map of the key ideas. They have the option to work in pairs or small groups if they prefer that to working individually. Although we do not ask them all to identify their work, we do ask for volunteers to share their concept maps with the entire group before leaving the session. When a couple people are willing to do this, we see the various ways people decide to organize their thoughts and if the main components are goals or content or methods and how they make the connections between all these ideas.

Participants also do a short essay focusing on whether the readings and session on critical moments and stereotype threat will impact their teaching and if so, how. This is one of the few feedback pieces we ask them to put

their name on so we can return them after reading their responses. Our hope is that these short essays will be useful to them in the future when writing a teaching statement and planning to teach.

Putting ideas into practice

Since our goals for using frequent and varied assessment are both to get feedback on the series and to give participants ideas of ways to assess their own classes, the most rewarding feedback we get is when a graduate student or postdoc tells us they are using and learning from some of the assessment techniques they were exposed to in our workshops.

References

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