

How Authentic Assessment Can Enhance Your Teaching Effectiveness During the COVID-19 Health Crisis

Justin E. Rose

As colleges and universities across the nation (and the world) raced to pivot to remote delivery of curriculum and instruction last spring, there were bound to be things in our otherwise sacrosanct academic routines that would fall off the radar or through the cracks entirely. This is an understandable reality given the need to hyperfocus on the priorities of continuing to provide a high-quality postsecondary education, removing as many barriers to student success as possible in a safe and feasible fashion, and ensuring the sustenance of institutional operations. As is often the case, even in less perilous times, one of the practices quickly marginalized in moments of high stress or scarcity is authentic assessment of student learning, both at the course and programmatic level. This marginalization (and for some professional faculty or administrators, total erasure) happens for a variety of reasons, but the most common rationales are generally well known. Assessment is considered by many to be a compliance-driven exercise with little value for students or faculty. Others believe that assessment has some value but is typically another cumbersome layer of labor on top of an already disproportionate workload.

Despite these excuses for dismissing assessment, and beyond the highly specialized language that gets associated with the practice, assessment is essentially three things. If those three things happen in sequence, they can improve teaching and learning. If they happen in sequence with intentionality in the company of colleagues, research demonstrates that they lead to significant gains in student success. The three things that comprise assessment are:

1. Determining what students should learn.
2. Collecting evidence about the degree to which they learned those things.
3. Engaging in consistent discourse in a community of experts about what the evidence means and how to use it to improve teaching and learning.

That's it. That is assessment. At its core, the entire aim of the thing that higher education professionals call learning outcomes assessment is about inquiry, evidence, and critical thinking with a bias toward action. There are an abundance of scientific trappings, industrial lexica, and commercialized solutions throughout the academy, circling the bureaucratic hives of

administration, and emerging from the marketplace that claim to be about the business of assessment. But these are mere distractions from the central project of good outcomes assessment if they do not ultimately help you accomplish the three things outlined above. So, how can you improve the effectiveness of your teaching with authentic outcomes assessment during this public health crisis, given the radical shift in your pedagogical environment, the likely distracted and stressed cognitive state of your learners, and your disconnection from the normal flow of resources and support services at your institution?

While there is virtually no limit to the number of available strategies and models of sound student learning assessment, in the very limited time you have to pivot to remote instruction, you can depend on the following approaches to outcomes assessment to bolster your teaching effectiveness and the successful achievement of learning objectives in your classroom and programs:

1. Inventory your course's learning outcomes (sometimes called ILOs or SLOs) to recalibrate your planned teaching activities back toward the goals that represent the most significant distillation of student success in your course. In class sessions that are not scheduled during moments of peculiar crisis, there is ample time to deliver lectures, engage in discussion, and assign work that is tangential to the immediate aims of the course or program. But these are not those times, and you need to laser focus on the instructional content that aligns directly with your stated outcomes if you hope to see students accomplish them successfully. Everything you do should align with those outcomes. This exercise is sometimes referred to as curriculum mapping.
2. Make a plan to capture at least one relevant datum in each class meeting about what students are learning and the degree to which they can successfully demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions described in your course or program's learning outcomes. This does not have to be as complex as an IRB-approved double-blind empirical study, but it should involve planning to collect information from the class session, either quantitatively or qualitatively, about student learning with regard to your stated outcomes. This might look like getting student feedback on a learning exercise, assessing student knowledge in real-time, or asking students to demonstrate skills or competencies you taught them in the class session.
3. Take a few minutes or a couple of hours (depending on how much time you have at your disposal) after the class session to review the data you collected. Ask yourself if the data points to successful achievement of student learning. If so, to what degree? Could it have been achieved at a higher level? If students did not meet your expectations, what could be done in another class session to make improvements? Send a quick email with the data and your thoughts to a receptive colleague or engaged department

leader. Collaboration enhances assessment every time. Document or summarize that conversation and your plans going forward.

The truth is that you are likely already engaged in assessment to some degree, even if it does not look exactly like you think your administration thinks it should. If you can do those three things, you will find yourself engaged in an iterative process of improvement of teaching and learning aimed at student success that those of us in the profession call outcomes assessment. You will also develop a framework for operationalizing the delivery of crucial learning experiences in a challenging new environment in a relatively short period of time, while sustaining the most essential components of your curriculum. If you are identifying learning goals, capturing evidence, and finding ways to improve, you have laid the foundation for authentic assessment of student learning in your classroom, and you are ready to make the most out of learning in any circumstance.

Justin E. Rose is the senior director of institutional effectiveness and digital learning at Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida.