

POD —IDEA Center Notes

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IDEA Item #12: “Giving tests and projects that cover the most important points of the course”

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Background

While it seems intuitive and essential to give tests and projects that cover the most important points of the course, it is often the case that teacher-made tests and other assigned work miss the mark. There may be two basic reasons for this: 1) technical measurement errors and/or 2) lack of communication. With respect to measurement issues, the first criterion is face validity. Do the tests and projects assess clearly defined course objectives and do they ask students to display knowledge, skills, or attitudes that are connected to what was taught? The next important question is related to construct validity, the issue of whether the tests actually require students to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they are supposed to be learning. For example, testing critical thinking with exams that only require simple recall would be an error because critical thinking requires more than recall. With respect to communication issues, a low rating on this item might indicate a basic misunderstanding about the purpose and structure of tests and projects, about the course, and, more broadly, about teaching and learning themselves. The phrase “cover the most important points” may be interpreted differently by teacher and students. The solution lies in a dialogue with your students about two things: first what are the most important “points,” or more broadly, the most important intellectual and personal development, toward which the course aims; and second, what role should be played by tests and projects? Some research (1) suggests that ratings will improve noticeably if students have a deeper understanding of the value and importance of the work they are asked to do. If students see tests as learning tools rather than threats, they will see more value in both the tests and the course.

Item 12 correlates strongly with Item 3 (scheduling course work that lets students keep up), Item 4

(demonstrating the importance of the subject matter), Item 6 (making clear how course topics fit together), and Item 10 (explaining course material clearly). As well, Item 12 correlates with IDEA items 21-24: objectives at many levels of Bloom’s taxonomy (2). These relationships reinforce the importance of organization, clarity, and matching instruction with course objectives and assessment strategies.

Helpful Hints

First, articulate, in the words of the “best college teachers” whom Ken Bain (3) studied, “What kind of intellectual and personal development do I want my students to enjoy in this class, and what evidence might I collect about the nature and progress of their development?” (p. 153). To link goals to possible tests and projects, you might use this format: “The goal of this course is for students to be able to....” List the 1-5 most important goals. Examples from different disciplines: “write an argument that states a position on a debatable point, support the point with appropriate evidence, and answer counter-arguments” or “apply economic principles to real-life situations” or “follow the ethical principles of the field in conducting animal research.” Mentkowski (4) presents a rich and useful scheme of student learning and development. Fink (5) and Walvoord and Anderson (6) discuss how to establish learning goals for a course. These goals should appear at the opening of your syllabus in language that invites students to learn, not merely comply with regulations.

Second, work out for yourself, and state clearly in your syllabus, how tests and projects will function for both learning and assessment. For Bain’s (3) outstanding teachers, tests and projects helped students to achieve the course learning goals and to apply standards for good work in the discipline (p.

160). Fink (5) and Walvoord and Anderson (6) show how to structure projects and tests, as well as class, lab or clinic, and reading assignments, to create the flow of the learning process. To illustrate this process for your students, try including, early in the syllabus, a bulleted list, or even a flow chart, showing how each aspect – reading, class, homework, tests, projects – helps achieve the learning goals. Specifically link this explanation to the word “points,” clarifying that learning does not consist merely of memorizing “points” narrowly defined, but rather of developing deep knowledge, skills, and habits of mind.

Having stated these aspects in the syllabus, you must now help students internalize them. Go over these syllabus statements with your students at the beginning of the course, and refer back to them again and again throughout the term. Don’t just tell students what you intend; ask them for their own statements. For example, on the first or second class day, ask them to write anonymously for 3-4 minutes in class what they expect to learn in the course and why they took it. Read these at home and report to students during the next class hour what they said, and how their goals can or cannot be fulfilled within the course. Then, a few weeks into the course, ask them to write anonymously for a few minutes in class, what they believe are the most important learning goals of the class, how the course readings, class activities, labs or clinics, tests, and projects have helped them so far, and what changes they would recommend. The next class period (or in an e-mail to the class), summarize what they have said and indicate what you will do in response. It’s not necessary to follow all of your students’ recommendations, but you should at least acknowledge their ideas and explain why you can or cannot do what they suggest. On assignment sheets and at the beginning of exams, you can again re-iterate the learning goals of the course and explain how the assignment or exam will address them. Some faculty require students to write a one-paragraph “foreword” to major exams and projects, in which the student explains why he or she believes the faculty member assigned this exam or project, and what the student has learned from it. To ensure the smooth functioning of your assessment, you might give an early “dry run” test or project that counts little or that can be revised for a new grade, so that students can experience and reflect on the assessment process early in the course, without a huge penalty for mistakes and misconceptions. After this early test or project, ask students to write anonymously about how the experience contributed to their learning. Again summarize their answers and give your own response. In short, the IDEA question addresses

fundamental understandings about learning, tests, and projects—understandings that must be carefully fostered by continuing dialogue.

Assessment Issues

First, list the most important points of the course. Next review your tests by comparing them to the list, the course objectives, and the content covered. Next, ask a colleague to do the same. This simple matching does not require a lot of time. Next, consider the two validity issues noted above. Is there a direct match between the content and the tests, and do the tests ask for performance that accurately reflects the objectives? Seeking student input is also important. In fact, some assessments can be created with students as partners. As noted above, asking students what they think would be the best way to demonstrate their learning is helpful in a direct sense, but it requires that students understand what learning is intended. Knowing that may be just as important as the tests themselves.

References and Resources

- (1) Franklin, J., & Theall, M. (1995). The relationship of disciplinary differences and the value of class preparation time to student ratings of instruction. In N. Hativa & M. Marincovich, (Eds.) "Disciplinary differences in teaching and learning: Implications for practice." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 64. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- (2) Bloom, B. S., Englehart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H., & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives. The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*. New York: David McKay.
- (3) Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- (4) Mentkowski, M. & Associates (2000). *Learning that lasts: Integrating learning, development, and performance in college and beyond*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- (5) Fink, L. D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- (6) Walvoord, B.E., & Anderson, V. A. (2004). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

IDEA Paper No. 16: [Improving Multiple-Choice Tests](#), Clegg and Cashin

IDEA Paper No. 17: [Improving Essay Tests](#), Cashin

IDEA Paper No. 18: [Matching Instructional Objectives, Subject Matter, Tests, and Score Interpretations](#), Hanna and Cashin

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