

Module 1A: Foundations for Assessing Student Learning

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Welcome to our first module. This module is called Foundations for Assessing Student Learning. And I'm going to share with you the goals of this entire module before we get into the submodules that comprise the entire module.

The first goal of this module is for you to connect assessment concepts and theories to your teaching context. Then we're going to help you to describe and explain assessment categories and types and then identify the categories and types of assessments that you use in your teaching.

So moving on to module 1a, which is simply an overview of basic concepts-- and, again, I hope that I'm affirming something you probably already know. So the first question is, why do we assess student learning to begin with? Well, we have to obtain evidence of student progress. This is important for us as professors to know where our students start and where our students end and how they're getting to the destination we want them to reach at the end of a course or a program.

Also, we use this learning to guide our instruction and our choice of pedagogical strategies because if things aren't quite working, if students are demonstrating to us they're not learning what we need them to learn, then we need to think about how we're delivering our instruction and modify and improve that based on that information. Finally, we also want to determine the effectiveness of our own teaching. In other words, are we getting our points across? And the student learning data that we obtain is going to be the way that we can do that.

So what's the purpose of assessment in the higher education academic program? Well, we really need to assess individual progress. And this is challenging in large classes, I know, but we need to build skilled, knowledgeable, creative, and thoughtful individuals through our work. And that's the purpose of our assessment process in higher education so that we know the degree to which our students are achieving what we expect them to know and be able to do.

So let's talk about some basic assessment concepts that I refer to as being separate but really related. We sometimes use these words incorrectly interchangeably. So let's make sure we understand the distinctions.

Assessment itself generally just refers to the process of gathering information about where a student has been, where they are now, or where they should be relevant to our academic expectations. Sometimes we give diagnostic assessments. Sometimes we give

midterms. We give finals. We're always gathering information about what our students know and are able to do. And the process of doing that and gathering that information is what I refer to as assessment in the general term.

Measurement, on the other hand, though, is the use of a systematic methodology to observe behaviors in order to represent the magnitude of performance or achievement, task completion, or concept attainment. So when we're measuring something, we're not just gathering the information. We're actually using some kind of a tool, usually a rubric or a scale or a point system of some kind, to determine the degree to which our students have actually achieved and demonstrated what it is we want them to know.

And finally, evaluation. This is when we get to grading time in our work. Almost always, evaluation involves the comparison of assessment information in relation to a standard or a pre-established set of criteria. And that standard or predetermined set of criteria is something you probably have in your syllabus or course objectives or some type of expectation you've clearly identified.

And you're going to determine the extent to which that standard or criteria has been met based on all of the assessment information you've gathered and the measurements that you've made of those assessments that you've delivered. And we often do that in grading processes by carefully combining and collating information about assessment into a single mark that we can then give a student to give them an idea of the degree to which we think they have achieved what we need them to know.

Teaching and learning. We often think that teaching and learning-- if we taught it, our students have learned it. Well, you can't make that assumption because how do you know that students have actually learned what it is you want them to know? So what do you expect your students to know and be able to do at the end of your course? My first fundamental question for you.

The second one is, how do you know if your students have learned this? Well, I'm going to ask you to pause to think right now. And in the sheet that you've been provided as part of this module, you're going to describe at least three ways that you know your students have learned what you planned for them to learn. And when you answer that question, go on to module PowerPoint 1b.