

Speaking of

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Getting More “Teaching” out of “Testing and “Grading”

Testing and grading can sometimes feel like necessary evils of teaching—far removed from the loftier goals of higher education—and a source of potential conflict with students. It doesn't help that many students see grades as evaluations of their intelligence, abilities, and potential, and not as a context-specific measure of how well they have met the specific learning goals of a course. Students often forget that receiving a positive evaluation is not, in fact, the central goal of a class. Common approaches to assessment—especially those that provide only a number or letter grade—can reinforce these student perceptions.

Assessment can actually be one of your greatest teaching tools and a way to connect with your students, but this requires rethinking the role of assessment in your course. This newsletter presents a model of “educative assessment,” informed by the work of Wiggins (1998) and described by Fink in *Creating Significant Learning Experiences* (2003, p. 82). This model focuses on how you can move beyond assessment for the sole purpose of assigning a grade and use it, coupled with feedback, to encourage meaningful learning.

Base Assessment on Meaningful Learning Goals

Meaningful learning goals are the foundation for every aspect of your course. Learning goals answer the question, “What am I preparing students to do, in the real world or as scholars in my field?” Once you have identified your learning goals, the next question is, “How can I create opportunities for students to prepare for, practice, and demonstrate this learning?” The answer will guide your choice of assessment strategies, as well as the material and classroom activities that students will need to achieve the learning goals.

Fink calls this approach “forward-looking assessment,” meaning that your focus is on how students will use course material in meaningful ways, not on how much material you can cover, and how well students remember what was covered in the course. Assignments and exams with a backward-looking focus answer questions such as, “Did the student attend lecture?” and “Did the student read the textbook?” These questions typically arise by looking over your lecture notes and texts and thinking,

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Stanford Classroom Strategies



Rod Searcey

The William H. Bonsall Professor in History, Nancy Kollmann, integrates a range of writing assignments into all of her courses as a way to help students “think historically,” as she recently explained in “Teaching through Writing in Humanities Courses,” a presentation in CTL's “Award-Winning Teachers on Teaching” series.

“Students learn best when they are engaged and nothing jump-starts that process of engagement better

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than having to write about something. But writing well—meaning mastering a topic, clarifying the argument, and defending your position—doesn't often come on the first try. It takes many stages of writing and many types of engagement—outlines, drafts, conversations—and hard, hard thinking.”

In addition to midterms, finals, and regular reading logs, Professor Kollmann also has students write a book review of an historical monograph. Not only is a book review a project that works well in the quarter system because of its well-defined scope, she noted, but it also “seems to encapsulate what historians do in their discipline. That is, as historians, they assess each others' arguments and comment on them. That's the habit of mind that I want undergraduate students, let alone graduate students, to develop.”

VHS and DVD copies of Professor Kollmann's presentation are available at the CTL library and online at <http://ctl.stanford.edu/AWT>. For more information, please contact TeachingCenter@stanford.edu, or call 723-1326.

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“Which parts of this should I test students on?” Backward-looking assessments include those that ask students to recall or recognize information or to solve problems that are nearly identical to those presented in class. In contrast, forward-looking assessment starts from the question,

What do I want students to be able to do with the knowledge acquired in this class?

“What do I want students to be able to do with the knowledge acquired in this class?” Exam questions, paper topics, and projects should require students to demonstrate their ability to use knowledge in the ways in which scholars or professionals do.

Compare the following two assessment strategies for a course in art history. The instructor wants to assess how well students have achieved the learning goal of understanding how politics can influence popular aesthetics. A backward-looking assessment might ask students to identify the political influences on specific artists or architects, as discussed in lecture or the text. A forward-looking assessment might present students with several unfamiliar works of art or artifacts from before and after an important political transition. This assessment asks students to discuss what they observe and relate their observations to examples covered in class. This assessment draws on the same material but assesses whether students are able to apply the material in a novel scholarly way.

This kind of forward-looking approach assesses whether students can transfer information and experiences from the class to the meaningful learning goals of your course. Exams and assignments with a forward-looking focus also make the learning goals of the course clear to students, which can broaden a student's narrow focus on grade achievement.

Create Criteria and Standards for Every Assessment

When you begin to design assessments that go beyond recall and basic problem solving, evaluating students' learning becomes more challenging. How would a student's work demonstrate meaningful learning? According to Fink's model of educative assessment, the solution is to be clear about the criteria and standards of successful learning for every learning goal. Criteria describe the elements of the student's work that will be evaluated, and standards describe what successful learning “looks like” for each criterion. For example, consider an assessment that asks students to develop a campaign for health promotion. One criterion of success at this task could be the effectiveness of the main campaign message. The instructor would then identify what makes a campaign message effective and might include standards such as

(a) the message takes into account the target audience

(b) the language of the message is carefully chosen and persuasive, and

(c) the message effectively appeals to either rational or emotional responses.

On the basis of these standards the instructor has a way to evaluate a student's demonstrated learning. Criteria and standards do more than provide a metric for assigning grades. These standards also give the instructor a clear outline for what students need to learn in class and give students a clear framework for approaching the project. Criteria and standards can help students direct their efforts to meaningful learning, by highlighting what is most important. For this reason, it is helpful to give students in advance a copy of the standards and criteria you will use to assess their learning. Explain your reasoning for the criteria and share examples of strong work that meets your standards.

Include Peer- and Self-Assessment

An important part of educative feedback is helping students understand the process of assessment. Grades should not be mysterious, and students should be able to determine for themselves when they are truly doing their best work. Teaching students to assess their own work helps them better understand the skills that are valued in a particular field and develop the general life skill of being able to look honestly at and improve their own work.

Fink recommends having students assess other students' work before assessing their own work. The process of peer-assessment gives students experience interpreting criteria and standards and developing a

standard of comparison for their work. Peer review can be an eye-opening experience for students who have never been on the receiving end of a last-minute effort or a truly top-rate performance.

To include peer and self-assessment in your course:

- Teach peer review as an important process in your field and have students peer—review each other's work according to the standards of your field.
- In class, have students develop solutions to a problem and share their solutions in a small group or with the whole class. Discuss the solutions using pre-established criteria and standards, or use the discussion to develop criteria and standards.
- Allow students to come up with the set of criteria and standards for an assignment by having them review and assess one another's work, or examples from previous classes. Then invite them to use those criteria and standards to revise their own work.

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- If you give students a list of criteria and standards for an assignment, ask them to evaluate their work using that list and to turn in their self-assessments with the assignment.

Provide Educative Feedback

Grades are essentially a ranking system, and most students experience receiving a grade as reward or punishment for their performance. Educative feedback serves a different goal entirely: It is provided for the sake of learning and encouragement, not for the sake of rating a student's performance. Students who receive feedback on non-graded as well as graded performances come to see the process, not as a justification for a grade, but as an attempt to help them learn. Such feedback should lead students to improve their performance and balance constructive criticism with positive comments.

To meet these goals, feedback should be

- frequent, to reinforce recent learning and to give students a chance to change study habits or seek help;
- delivered as close in time to the learning experience and performance as possible, not handed back weeks later without discussion;
- discriminating, by being clear about

how well the student has met criteria and standards and how they might improve; and

- given with respect and encourage-

ment, including opportunities for students to respond to feedback. To provide educative feedback in your course:

- Give students a problem to solve or question to answer in class. Provide immediate feedback through class discussion.
- Give students practice exams, with answers and explanations available.
- Require students to submit outlines for papers, or proposals for projects, and provide them with guidance and direction.

- Provide detailed and constructive feedback on papers and require students to revise them based on your feedback.

- Schedule meetings with students to discuss their learning goals for the course and to review their performance on tests or assignments.

- Ask students to assess their own work and respond to your comments during feedback discussions. ♦

—Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

Bibliography

Fink, L. Dee. *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

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