

Chapter VIII

Online Assessment in Higher Education: Strategies to Systematically Evaluate Student Learning

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Abstract

This chapter acknowledges the challenges surrounding assessment techniques in online education at the higher education level. It asks specifically, “How do we know our online students are learning?” To get closer to answering this question with confidence, various strategies ranging from participation techniques to online group work, peer and self-assessment, and journals and portfolios are described. The role of online mentoring as a supplementary strategy is also introduced. The chapter concludes with a survey of advantages and disadvantages of the various strategies.

Introduction: What Are Our Students Learning?

How do we know our students are learning? That is one of the most challenging questions facing educators in all levels of formal schooling, from elementary to higher education to training; assessing what learning is taking place proves to be a demanding task for all involved. On a continuum, we have such mechanisms as standardized tests on one extreme to looking at our students' faces on the other to ascertain whether "learning" is occurring. Over the years, various types of assessment models have been developed, each purporting to measure learning "better" and more authentically than its predecessor and, yet, whether we can still affirmatively answer that age-old question, "Are my students learning" remains elusive. Schunk is correct in noting, "assessing learning is difficult because we do not observe it directly but rather we observe its products or outcomes" (2000, p. 7). That is, learning itself is not quantifiable or tangible — we see test scores, read papers, and observe discussions, all of which supposedly gauge *something* happening between student and content. What that *something may be* is debatable. When we add to this ambiguity the complexities of online education, we have many issues and challenges to consider vis-à-vis student learning.

In higher education today, for a variety of reasons, distance education in the form of online or Web-based delivery has taken root as a popular, cost-effective, and pedagogically sound process of teaching and learning. Numerous studies over the years have sought to affirm that distance education is equally as effective (why not better?) as face-to face learning. Many studies have oftentimes concluded with the "no significant difference" phenomena, suggesting that there is no difference in the learning outcomes that occur in a distance environment versus on-site. That may be so, and our students may be "learning" all the same, but regardless of environment, a good educator will want to know *what* his or her students are learning and *how* do they process the information and learning objects from a course into *knowledge*. The good educator will want to know "what works" and why? Moreover, the good online educator will want to know how to best use the online environment to promote student learning and how to adapt old strategies and adopt new strategies to foster online learning. To get at the root of these questions, we must assess assessment strategies themselves in online environments. Are we looking at the right things to assess our students in online coursework? Are we as instructors asking the right questions? Are we engaging our students in the right activities?

This chapter will look at strategies to employ in assessing students in higher education level, Web-based coursework, though this author believes some of these apply to higher-level secondary schooling, as well. Some of these strate-

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