

Defining Assessment

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What is assessment?

Assessment is used to understand the state or condition of learning. An instructor assesses learning through both observation and measurement in an attempt to better understand students' learning in a course. This includes collecting evidence, both graded and non-graded, about a students' progression in the course. We use the term "assessment" throughout this resource to represent both graded and non-graded activities. Some examples of assessments in a course could include: discussion observations, exams, papers, reflection questions, in-class student responses, etc.

What is evaluation?

Evaluation is used to judge the learning that has occurred. This judgement can be made by comparing a product, meant to show learning, to either other similar products or a standard. For example, an instructor is evaluating learning when they grade a paper. This paper may be graded in comparison to other papers produced for that course (similar products) and/or a rubric made to grade the paper (a standard).

An assessment may also be an evaluation, if an instructor poses a multiple choice question in class, the student (and instructor) are able to both assess and evaluate the understanding of the concept. The assessment is how well the student has learned the concept, and the evaluation is whether a student is correct. In fact, an evaluation is generally an assessment, since it not only passes judgement but also gives an understanding of the learning. However, an assessment is not always an evaluation since the act of assessing does not always require a judgement. For example, if you pose a discussion question in class and observe your students' responses, you are not always making a judgement about whether or not they understand, but you are collecting evidence about how their learning is progressing.

Why do we assess our students?

Assessment is integral to learning. Effective assessment can determine the degree to which students have met the intended learning outcomes for a course or program. Assessment also directs both the students' and instructors' attention to what is important (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). It has also been claimed that it is only when faced with assessments that students truly engage with the course material (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Assessment provides evidence of what has been learned for instructors as well as for students. In higher education, we assess our students to integrate them into the learning process and provide evidence of their understanding.

Formative and Summative Assessments

Assessment is used to provide evidence of learned concepts, but this evidence can be collected and shared in many ways. For many of us, we may see assessment in the form of a graded assignment, test, presentation, etc. Yet, assessment does not always mean students are evaluated; a judgement on performance is not required. When assessment is used in this manner, it is called formative assessment.

Formative Assessment is any task or activity that produces feedback for students about their learning in a course. It typically does not contribute to the grade in a course (Irons, 2008). This is often referred to as 'assessment for learning'. The focus of formative assessment is on student learning. These activities provide students a chance to check their understanding of concepts, reflect on these understandings, and identify areas they may need to clarify in the course.

Feedback is a key component to formative assessment. Students can use feedback to improve their learning through reflection. This feedback can include written or verbal comments, practice quiz or question scores, comparison of exemplars¹ to self-work, etc. Feedback does not need to be the sole responsibility of the instructor; using peer-feedback can be a powerful tool in the classroom. Peer feedback can occur through classroom discussion, directed peer-review of assignments, or even a class-written summary. Feedback does not need to be complicated, nor does it need to be time consuming, it simply needs to provide students information on how they are doing and where they might improve.

¹ An exemplar is a piece of work that has been graded or commented on by an instructor. This showcases to students what is "good work" versus "bad work". Exemplars can be used to highlight common mistakes, show examples of creativity, engage students with the assignment rubrics, and more.

Summative assessment is any task or activity that results in a mark or grade which is used as judgement on student performance (Irons, 2008). This is often referred to as 'assessment of learning'. The focus of summative assessment is judgement on student performance in such a way that this can be recorded and presented for others, often as a grade. These activities provide a snapshot of students' understanding at the time of the assessment.

Summative assessment is important to the higher education classroom. Higher education uses grades to communicate how well a student understands the concepts (and/or learning outcomes) covered by a given class. This information is used by students for scholarships, graduate school applications, and even some job applications. Hence, grades produced by summative assessment have become a type of 'currency' in higher education. Due to this many students are anxious and conscientious about their grades, this is why summative assessment is often referred to as 'high stakes' assessment.

Some Examples of Summative and Formative Assessment

Formative	Summative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-class discussions • 1 on 1 conversations with students • Peer-generated concept maps • Exit tickets written at the end of class • Spotlight check in of their understandings • Peer-review of assignments • In Class Quiz (not contributing to the overall course grade) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Midterm or Final Exam The following are examples provided they contribute to the overall course grade: • Online or In-Class Quiz • Paper • In-Class Debate • Final Recital or Performance

It is advisable both formative and summative assessments are included in any course. Formative assessments can be used to provide students an idea of how well they are understanding the course learning outcomes throughout the course. Formative assessments provide students with low-stakes opportunities to practice before undertaking their summative assessment. With this in mind, it is important to support your summative assessments with appropriate formative assessments to best prepare your students. For example, if students write multiple choice exams for the bulk of their course-grade, it would be advised that practice multiple-choice questions be included in-class or online. If the course culminates in a final essay where students are to argument their ideas, in-class discussions focused on evidentiary support may be preferable to the in-class practice quiz. How you use formative assessment is up to you, but, if used properly it can greatly benefit both the student and instructor in any course.