Authentic Assessment Strategies: Assessing Learning that Empowers Your Students

SPEAKERS

Michael Strawser, Tierney King, Rebecca Zambrano, Eric Moore

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. This week's episode is sponsored by the Teaching Professor Conference. This year, join us in person in Atlanta to pursue your passion for teaching. How do you know that student learning is actually happening? Usually through assessment, right? But how can you assess students without just a quiz or paper? How do you empower them and motivate them to learn and want to learn? So that assessment becomes something that is both powerful for you as an instructor and to the student as a learner? In today's episode, we'll talk about authentic assignments and authentic assessment, specific active learning assessment strategies that you can use in your own class, and then how to use universal design for learning to help mold your assessments. To start, Michael Strawser will talk about holistic and transformative assessment in his Magna Online Seminar, Using Authentic Assessment to Assess Student Learning.

Michael Strawser 01:08

Focusing on student learning is really hopefully where our heartbeats, right? We want our students, once they're finished with our classes, to know that they learned something. We hope that they learned something, that's the goal. But it's a really interesting blend here that I want my students to be motivated. Part of how I can help them be motivated is to encourage them to know that deep learning will actually take place, right. But also, part of how I keep them motivated is that I want to make sure that I'm communicating to some extent an ROI, or return on investment, right. And especially for our traditional students right now. So those Generation Z students, they want to make sure that what they're doing will make a difference, not just to themselves, but to others. Right. And so it's holistic in that regard. It's not just what can it do for me, but what can it do for the world. So, in the past, when I talk about assessment, I usually focus on these two elements, holistic and transformative. And we'll talk about each of these in turn. Holistic goes back to those different kind of outcomes we're thinking about, right. So as I think about holistic assessment, I want to make sure that I'm looking at the whole person. We'll talk about that here in just a second. But cognition, affect, and behavior, right. We don't need to belabor this. But that's what it means when we say that we're thinking about it holistically, not just focusing on one particular element, but trying to get a range of all three of these elements at the same time, within an individual course. But ultimately, and I think this is part of why authentic assignments can be really helpful and help create authentic assessment, it's because we strive to educate the whole

person, that's what holistic assessment does. We want to see the student as holistic, not just a brain, not just as a heart, not just as a physical being that can do different things, right. But instead, all of those, kind of factor into our humanity. And that's really helpful, I think, for trying to think about assessment, because we're not just trying to focus on one particular element when we think about assessment as a whole, but instead, if we're thinking about assessment holistically, then we're trying to get at the whole person, right. Now, when I say assessment is transformative, what I mean is that it goes through a process where we eventually close the loop. Where we make changes based upon the findings that we see. And so I think a lot of times, part of why instructors get so frustrated with assessment protocol, I get frustrated with assessment, because I feel like a lot of times we kind of let it die before we get to the close the loop portion, right? We allow assessment to kind of filter down and kind of drag on and then the next thing you know, we have all of this data, we make recommendations, maybe, but then we may not implement the recommendations right. Transformative assessment says that we want to close the loop. We not only want to make recommendations on the date based on the data we've collected, but we also want to implement those changes, right, and those recommendations and then collect data again, on the changes that we've made.

Tierney King 04:10
In order to foster this type of authentic assessment, we must also create authentic assignments. These authentic assignments help instructors assess skills that students are learning and applying through real world scenarios.

Michael Strawser 04:24
So in my world, I'm a communication professor. And so I love classes that I can design where my students have an actual client. And a lot of times in my courses, I'll encourage students to work with nonprofits, because they have limited resources, right? But can they answer communication-centric or communication-specific problems? In real life context? That's our goal with authentic assignments, right? We want to replicate real world performances where appropriate. But again, part of what's helpful about this is really encouraging our students to fail well, and so within that replication mantra, there's also an understanding that I want to provide feedback. I want to provide mechanisms for my students to be able to improve and change and consult resources, right, so that they're not practicing bad habits. We don't want them to practice bad habits. So we want to replicate real world performances. But underneath this umbrella of allowing our students to fail successfully, right, and then finally, we want to involve performance measures and develop applicable skills. Meaning, we want to make sure that if we have an authentic assignment, we have created measures that allow us to assess the skills that our students are learning and applying throughout the process. That's really important, right? We want to make sure that if we have all of these different behaviors, that we have set up different ways that we can assess whether or not learning according to doing, and our students are actually doing something, accomplishing something can be can actually be measured, right, and that we've seen some change happen throughout our course, however long that may be.

Tierney King 06:03
As you create these authentic assignments, it's worthy to know that when you're assessing students, both traditional and authentic assessments can still work together. Strawser explains how it's not an either-or predicament.

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Michael Strawser 06:16

So a traditional assessment, we want students to select a response, right and an authentic assessment we want students to perform a task. Traditional is a little bit contrived. Authentic is real life. We, to be honest with you, we don't know what's going to happen. We think we know. And we hope we've done all of our homework ahead of time to be able to not be caught off guard or surprised. But we might get in and see some surprises and see some challenges and see some obstacles. Traditional assessment focuses on recall or recognition. Authentic assessment focuses on construction or application. Traditional assessment is teacher-structured, teacher-centered, right? Authentic assessment usually is more student-centered and student-structured. Traditional assessment focuses on indirect evidence of student learning, whereas authentic assessment will focus more on direct evidence of student learning. So how do we know that learning has been achieved with authentic assessment? We can see that very realistically, right? They can either do or not do. And it allows us to look at deliverables and performances and products a little bit differently, and I think with a little bit more value. So I would argue that as you think about your courses, it doesn't necessarily have to be that you pick one or the other, right? Authentic assessment and what would be deemed as, quote unquote, traditional assessment, are complementary, or at least they can be. I think you can encourage both of these mechanisms in your classes and still find value in each and that's wonderful.

Tierney King 07:46

So what specific assessment strategies can you use in your own course. In Rebecca Zambrano's Magna Online Seminar, On-the-fly Assessment Strategies for the Active Learning Classroom, she explains how curiosity can trigger students to remember more than expected, and how to implement word walls, focused listing techniques, and one-sentence summaries into your own course.

Rebecca Zambrano 08:09

Being asked to consider what we already know about a topic triggers curiosity. And this is a really important aspect of classroom assessment techniques. When we trigger curiosity, we begin to pay attention to a topic in a different way. We actually use a different part of our brain once curiosity has been triggered. So you might think of movie trailers. Movie trailers are designed, people spend millions of dollars on movie trailers, to pique our curiosity by bringing us just little quick snapshots of what is going to happen in that movie. And because our curiosity is piqued, we then are much more interested in seeing and watching that whole movie. When we do prior knowledge assessments with our students, we really are partially piquing that curiosity. A state of curiosity then stimulates the brain's wanting system. The mind becomes a sponge for new information because we now want that information. There's fascinating research on this topic of side effects of intense curiosity is that the brain actually begins to absorb other information that may not even have been central to the topic. So incidental or random information becomes absorbed and connected as well to the main topic when we are in a state of curiosity. The research that I mentioned has been done by Matthew Gruber from the UC Davis, and he says we should think of curiosity as a vortex. In the vortex, our curiosity increases our motivation to learn and to remember what we learn.

Tierney King 10:10

These next techniques not only foster curiosity from your students, but offer interactive assessment strategies that are easy to implement.

Rebecca Zambrano 10:19

Now we'll use another technique that you can take into almost any content area, tomorrow, if you wish. It's called a focused listing technique. This technique focuses our attention again. And it's really helpful right after you've shared some information with students, for example, in a lecture. It's very simple to remember this technique. All you do is ask students to write five things they remember about what I've shared so far. So when we do these brief pauses, and ask students to do things with whatever knowledge or skill we've just shared, we're again, focusing their attention and helping them remember what they've learned. One common, and very simple to implement strategy is a one-sentence summary. It's a formula really. And the formula is, I'm in the middle of a teaching experience, teaching and learning experience, and I want my students to focus in for a moment. So I stop and pause. And I ask them to answer a simple question. But they need to answer that question by using the formula: who does what, to whom, when, why, where and how? You can use something like a word wall that you're projecting onto a screen in a large lecture hall, and ask students to type in their one-sentence summary. You'll see all of those appearing at the front of the room. You can also use free apps like Mentimeter to do these types of things. And it allows you to not only keep yourself aware of how well they're following you, but it also allows you to lift their voices up. You can read aloud some of the best sentences, and students will often bring humor into this kind of activity as well. This is a very low prep strategy. So you can easily bring it in multiple times into the same classroom. And students may begin to do this on their own in their note-taking. The concept map or the mind map. It's basically a diagram that shows connections between major concepts and other ideas that students may connect to. This is a diagram that students create, we don't create it for them, although we can demonstrate it in front of our class ourselves. Creating a concept map on a topic so that we can teach them some helpful things to do with concept maps or mind maps. But really, it's they who are then asked to perhaps take notes on a topic as they're reading about it, and bring those notes in the form of a mind map to class. Many of my colleagues who have asked students to do mind mapping exercises with note-taking have had students come back to them and say, "This was so helpful for me, it makes my notes much more meaningful, much more visual. And now I've started to do this in my other classes as well." What can you do with this data? You can collect the mind maps, and it can help you see how students are making broad connections and synthesizing what they're learning in your class, which again, can help you with ideas for how to make the topics more interesting. The next time you teach, whether that's the next class period or the next semester.

Tierney King 14:24

As we're thinking about different assessments and how to make them more holistic and transformative, it's also important to touch on the concept of universal design for learning. On top of all of these elements, how do you use UDL to create effective educational assessments? And that's exactly what Eric Moore will talk about in this next clip.

Eric Moore 14:45

At its heart. Universal Design for Learning is about proactive, intentional design. To me, design always begins with a sense of purpose. As Yogi Berra once said, "If you don't know where you're going, you're

going to wind up someplace else." One way that I like to talk about this is through a story, the tale of the Parisian tailor. There was a woman who was living in Paris. And she went to this tailor who was very famous. And she told him that she needed a specific dress made. And she gave him the specifications, it needed to have a neck strap, a floor length train, floral embellishments on the hips, and sort of sparkly sequins to really help her stand out. And she said she needed it in two weeks time. And the tailor, you know, thought about this, and he took some notes and measurements and thought, yes, yes, I could do this in two weeks. "Come back in two weeks, and I will have it prepared for you." So the woman went away, and two weeks later, she returned and the tailor unveiled the dress and it was beautiful and everything. She asked for the neck strap, the floor length train the floral embellishments to sparkle. And the woman said, "No, no, this is all wrong." And the tailor was absolutely flabbergasted. "I did everything you asked me to do, every detail is exactly as you described, what could possibly be wrong?" And she said, "I can't wear lime green to my wedding." Without knowing the purpose for which he was designing the dress, none of the details mattered. I wonder if in education, we frequently fall into the same trap, where we go into thinking about what materials we're going to use or what methods we're going to use pedagogically. But we don't start by thinking about where are we going with all of this. The same is true of assessments. Your assessments are only as good as the purpose they serve. UDL universal design for learning starts with a central focus on our learners and the variability of our learners. We're not just talking about those who are labeled as being diverse, for example, students with disabilities or English language learners, obviously, those are very important, very real diversities. But what we are now learning from the neuroscience that underpins UDL is that the human mind is as unique as our fingerprints. There is significant, but predictable variability in every single student who walks into our classroom. And so when we are designing, we need to design as if our students are variable, instead of designing as if they're average and retrofitting. We have to make this practical. This is often where we start losing faculty, because they're thinking, I just don't have time to customize a lesson for, if I'm lucky, 15 to 20 students, and if I'm teaching a large lecture hall, 300 to 400 students. It's completely, unbelievably not possible for me to customize for this type of variability. And I think that's true. I don't think that as a faculty member we can customize learning experiences for our students. So it might be a relief for you to hear that that's not what UDL is about. This is not personalized learning. It is not instructors, personalizing learning experiences for the students. It's about instructors providing a flexible environment, so that learners may customize the experience for themselves. In other words, we want to have clear goals, but flexible means for how we get there. When it comes to assessments, for example, when I'm providing flexibility, I'm not first needing to learn about my students, and learning about the different needs and skills and backgrounds that they have. And then assign them to groups in which these students are doing this type of assessment. And these students are doing this type. And this student has a custom format. That's not what I'm doing. I'm recognizing that what my outcome is, is a content outcome. And so I'm not going to mix it up with skills. And I'm going to provide some flexibility for my students. And I'm going to coach them in their deciding how they're going to best demonstrate this outcome. And maybe I'll have one rubric, that no matter what choice you make, I'm going to be looking for these things. So make sure you show me those things in whatever option you choose. Now, the beauty of this is not only do my students have the capacity to really demonstrate their skill here, they're also developing really important additional skills, like reflectivity, metacognition, it's this self-strategic approach, executive functions, right? These types of things that we know, learners and professionals need to be successful in the 21st century. Now, whatever they happen to be learning, chemistry, history, literature, they're also learning to learn.

They're learning to express themselves and learning to reflect and learning to make decisions and learning to empower themselves. That's powerful.

Tierney King 20:01
Whether you're driving to work or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode Description.