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ABSTRACT

The background and purpose of course assessment are examined. The paper includes suggestions for classroom instructors in setting up formative assessment plans based on qualitative research. Focus is on the interview technique. It is discussed as a practical source for evaluating what actually takes place during a course, including the appraisal of the course itself, instructional procedures, and content. Steps for conducting student interviews are intended to promote student involvement and to aid instructors in determining ability levels and course focus. In the drive toward academic excellence, formative assessment assists students and instructors in reaching the goal of successful learning in the classroom. There is a 24-item list of references. (SLD)

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## Understanding Assessment: Guidelines for Utilizing a Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

This article examines the background and purpose of course assessment. Included are suggestions for classroom instructors in setting up formative assessment plans based on qualitative research. Primarily, the interview technique is discussed as a practical source of evaluating what actually takes place during a course, including the appraisal of the course itself, instructional procedures and content. Steps for conducting student interviews are intended to promote student involvement and to aid instructors in determining ability levels and course focus.

## Understanding Assessment: Guidelines for Utilizing a Qualitative Approach

### Introduction

Since 1987 assessment has become a regularly-used term in education. Increasing numbers of public institutions at all educational levels are currently under mandate from state legislatures to develop assessment programs (Davis, 1989). At this date, forty states have implemented some type of assessment policy. Assessment activity has been reported at more than 80 percent of the colleges in the nation (Rossman & El-Khawas, 1987). Also, the institutional accreditation process is now requesting assessment of student achievement. Moreover, assessment has become the key word to understanding student achievement and the programs that meet student needs. The task of college institutions has changed from a status of selective requirements to one of identifying and sorting out the talents of a great number of students who choose to further their education.

For many years, the field of education has been involved in attempts to assess itself. Pre- and post-testing measurements have long been utilized (White, 1989), but dissatisfaction with the results on the college level has called for newer methodologies (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). For example, previous assessment studies at several university writing programs yielded few striking results in spite of carefully conceived quantitative research designs. Researchers identified weaknesses in the objective measurements used for assessing writing instruction at the University of Northern Iowa, the University of California/San Diego, Miami University, and the University of Texas. Also, they concluded that strategies for the assessment of college writing programs must be based on more than pre-test

and post-test writing samples and should utilize a variety of methods and procedures. (Witte & Faigley, 38)

A more definitive approach to the subject has emerged recently, initially expressed as rather modest exploratory efforts at two-year colleges. Today, in the face of intensified responsibilities and a need for new directions in higher education, assessment at the classroom level is rapidly assuming stature as a national movement which may, in time, deserve to be called "revolutionary."

One of the most profound changes in recent years is the shift from the traditional quantitative assessment techniques (pre- and post-tests) to a qualitative approach to gathering data for improvement in programs or courses (Goetz & LeCompte, 1989). The qualitative technique utilizes students as the primary information source. The qualitative approach to assessment offers a practical and more productive source of evaluating what actually takes place during a course, including the appraisal of the course itself, and instructional procedures and content (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**What is the purpose of assessment, and what is the activity supposed to accomplish?**

No formal definition of assessment has found general agreement, but while flexibility and innovative experiment dominate the field, a body of philosophy has come into focus. The purpose, in general terms, is to effect improvement in classroom instruction and to evaluate student performance or the degree of students' optimal attainment commensurate with native ability. Educational assessment, in short, is the act of acquiring and analyzing information about

students for the purpose of planning and presenting instruction (Chandler, 1987; Popham, 1988).

In the past, education has become dependent on summative assessment which has become the leader in providing formal, global assessment before and after, or simply at the completion of a program of study (Scriven, 1981). Historically, summative assessment grew out of the need for determining the worth of federally-funded grants to public education. Usually judgments are considered accurate because they are offered by external sources, viewed as providing validity and relevance to the process (Baird, 1988). Finally, summative assessment provides overall judgments about a course or program for audiences such as administrators, government officials, accrediting bodies, and the general public. Focusing on techniques in pedagogy and instructional content, summative assessment proponents find bases on which to structure subsequent courses or programs.

More recently, however, educators have come to pay special attention to formative assessment techniques which promote more immediate feedback and, thus, produce rapid change. The purpose is clear; formative assessment creates ideas about the improvement or development of activities, programs, or people while the course or program is in progress (Popham, 1988). Moreover, this type of assessment allows for specific, detailed improvements made by an internal decision-maker within the program or department, namely the class instructor. Assessment techniques are informal, for the most part, and emphasize suggestions that may be utilized immediately for improvement.

The activity of formative assessment is meant to promote more effective teaching. This current trend in assessment is described as learner-centered, teacher-directed, and action-oriented, with particular emphasis on qualitative research methods utilized in the process (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Component

activities are firmly based on recognition that every formal learning unit (instructor and student) comprises a unique dynamic organism in which a multiplicity of intellectual and emotional interactions are generated. In each case, the collective character of the unit is distinctive, and the intellectual-emotional persona determines the measure of potential achievement. To understand and properly evaluate the course or program and thereby lead the class, the instructor looks beyond the attributes of individual intelligence and the capacity for application of effort, traditionally regarded as the cardinal prerequisites for learning.

In formative assessment, efforts extend far beyond the student's ability on a written test before and after a course of instruction. Past studies clarify the need for assessing the effects of the students' cultural and community backgrounds, in addition to their past educational experiences (Heath, 1983; Hollandsworth, 1988). One of the basic tenets of formative assessment is to examine the effectiveness of instruction, taking into account the diversity of factors comprising the totality of the learning unit. Another primary factor of formative assessment is to gauge the performance of the student so that individual guidance can be provided.

In the past, too much of educational assessment was based on prediction (Tyler, 1975). Educators customarily analyzed what proportion of students with a particular pattern of test scores would be successful, and course or program content was developed accordingly. With the influx of students whose abilities and test scores vary, this era of assessment is virtually over. Today, students' continuing development must be considered in light of their needs prior to and during the course or program.

**How can instructors set up their own formative assessment plans based on qualitative research?**

Structuring a plan for assessment begins with classroom instructors focusing on three main points: 1) Having contact with students; 2) Encouraging active learning; and, 3) Providing prompt feedback. The best place to start and end is with the students (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

At the beginning of the course or program of study, instructors should:

- Spell out the goals of the course.
- Help students understand the ability levels they should be ready to demonstrate prior to and as a result of the course experience.
- Explain course objectives and evaluation procedures, relating particular course materials and assignments to the objectives.

In formative course assessment, instructors stop frequently to determine students' abilities in working toward the final goal. Whenever possible, instructors need to identify the assessment technique and comment, in detail, on how the course work will be evaluated. For example, simple, direct assessment techniques that require a one- or two-sentence response, oral or written, are helpful in assessing students' performance during the course.



**What is the most effective way to gather data in qualitative research?**

One of the best techniques to use in the assessment process is the interview (Patton, 1987; Spradley, 1979). The assessment movement has used several naturalistic methods of inquiry. Among them the interview technique provides an understanding of what students learn and under what conditions they learn (Hutchings, 1988).

Suggestions for conducting student interviews include a small-group format first, followed by a case study approach (Ewell, 1985; Mentkowski, 1988). In addition, Hollandsworth (1990) provides suggestions for conducting interviews for research purposes:

- Start small. Select no more than six students, attempting to obtain representative samples (gender; ethnic groups; age; willingness to participate).
- Explain the procedure to the group. Plan for small group and individual sessions.
- Begin as soon as the semester starts, using class time for interviews by setting aside 10-15 minutes for research purposes.
- Place responsibility on students to explain what, if anything, they already know about the subject; what experiences they have had related to the course work; what they hope to gain from the course, information geared at finding out the academic level of students.
- Keep a journal of interview accounts, using a tape recorder to insure accuracy.
- While interviewing, be a participant observer by becoming involved in the group discussions as well as the one-on-one situations.

- Work as a team with other members of the department. Depend on their good will for suggestions and, within departments, contact students' previous instructors as well as students' high school instructors.

In the actual interview, in-depth knowledge of students' interests and prior performances will aid in the assessment process. Different kinds of questions may be used in the individual and group interviews. Methodology depends on the instructor's skills as a communicator/interviewer, the nature of the course taught, and the amount of time instructors wish to spend on assessment. Generally, finding out what students know can be gained from asking the focal question of Cross and Angelo (1988), "How can the instructor improve student learning?" In a study of program assessment at the University of South Carolina-Coastal Carolina College, Hollandsworth (1990) frames five steps that provide guidance for researchers.

### **Steps in Formative Assessment**

1. Initially, talk with students about their likes, dislikes, hobbies.
2. Talk with students about the course and ask questions about subject matter and course content.
3. Explain course requirements and ask students about any past experiences they may have related to the subject. Remember to ask the same basic questions of all participants in order to record responses more easily.
4. Break down major concepts of the course to determine students' knowledge and/or mastery. This method of analysis is derived from scientist Robert Gagne's concept of questioning: "What must students have previously

understood before they can understand the ideas which the instructor wants to present now?"

5. Develop a flow chart or a learning hierarchy of students' learning needs for the course.

### **Conclusion**

Assessment is the responsibility of all instructors. Information gained from the assessment process is vital to the learning process (Alkin, Daillak & White, 1979; Braskamp & Brown, 1980; Patton, 1986). Promoting the involvement of students, providing avenues for discussion of students' needs, and determining the level of students' knowledge aid in constructing a solid base for learning and assessment in higher education. In the drive toward academic excellence, formative assessment assists students and instructors in reaching the goal of successful learning in the classroom.

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