

PREPARING FACULTY MEMBERS IN THE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

Background

In the late 1990's, Oberlin College received from the National Science Foundation an Award for the Integration of Research and Education (AIRE) which supported faculty fellowships that enabled faculty to integrate research-like learning opportunities into their courses. A significant part of the AIRE Oberlin program was to develop ways to institutionalize mechanisms for evaluating those curricular innovations and developments, using a multi-faceted strategy:

- ♦ an assessment workshop to introduce faculty to the principles and practices of assessment
- ♦ a pre/post-questionnaire of students in AIRE-sponsored courses to assess the impact of such increased research-like learning experiences across the curriculum
- ♦ a survey of AIRE-sponsored faculty regarding the design and the impact of their AIRE innovations
- ♦ an experimental study on how research-like learning experiences compare to a lecture on affecting the quality of student learning.

We present here a description of the faculty assessment workshop.

Purpose for the Workshop

Faculty members developing new materials explore innovations that accomplish the educational goals set for the course, but many faculty do not realize that to achieve this accomplishment requires that course development and assessment must be intertwined. Indeed, faculty have varied levels of familiarity with, knowledge about, and motivation in regard to, assessment principles and practices. This means they are often reluctant to undertake such efforts, resistant to the additional work required.

Our intent was to inform faculty of the importance of assessment principles, to teach them basic techniques, and to help them develop specific tools relating to their own curricular innovations.

We also realized that assessment may be seen as a threat to faculty developing new approaches, when they are yet uncertain about the success of such innovations. Since many are only familiar with evaluation used to review faculty (summative), we wanted to demonstrate the benefits of assessment when it was embedded in the process of curriculum development and implementation (formative).

Goal for the Workshop

Our goals were to increase:

- ♦ faculty knowledge about assessment principles and resources
- ♦ their skill in using those resources
- ♦ their understanding of the value of assessment, as something practical and feasible

Janice Thornton

Associate Professor of
Neuroscience and Biology

Patricia deWinstanley

Associate Professor of Psychology
Oberlin College

PREPARING FACULTY MEMBERS IN THE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

- ♦ the likelihood that they would continue to integrate assessment into their classroom practice.

A key goal for the workshop was to foster communication within and across departments, by giving participants the opportunity to learn about the work of their colleagues in developing new approaches in the classes for which they were responsible. (We administered a pre- and post survey to participating faculty to evaluate our success in achieving those goals.)

Overview of the Workshop

Each participant was asked to bring to the workshop a description of goals for a course they were developing. In the morning, “what and why” of assessment sessions were held and following introductory remarks, faculty were assigned to small, cross-disciplinary groups, asked to describe their course goals to each other, and to identify three goals that were common to each.

Then the entire group discussed the shared goals, examining the commonalities, determining categories of goals such as knowledge, skills, attitude, and intentions. This dialogue led to further discussion about the differences between goals, objectives and activities, in the context of considering assessment. Introducing Bloom’s taxonomy of knowledge objectives, we then described how to formalize goals/objectives/activities.

With this as a background, faculty returned to small group discussions, this time with disciplinary colleagues, to reexamine the initial goals they had set for their course. As a group, they

chose one goal as a basis from which to develop specific objectives and activities that would serve to address that goal. The larger group reconvened to report on these discussions, the process and the product.

In the afternoon, we dealt more directly with “how-to” of assessment, beginning by describing various assessment tools— self-reflective, instructor-led, third-party, etc. Using some of their morning work, we crafted goals for a hypothetical “introduction to science” course, and assigned goals to different faculty groups, requesting that they develop tools with which to assess student progress toward achieving those goals. (Each group had two goals, and each goal had two groups working on it.) By mid-afternoon, we reconvened again as a large group, critiquing and comparing the tools that were suggested.

With this foundation, each faculty member returned to the specific objectives for the course they were working on, beginning to develop assessment tools. Although they worked individually, we paired faculty working on similar courses so they had someone with whom to confer. In the final session, we worked together through an analysis of the results of a course assessment, to understand how assessment can inform the work of the faculty member.

Final Comments

We believe that small steps such as these give faculty a basic understanding of assessment principles. They learn how useful information about the effectiveness of new approaches and ways to continually improve learning and

teaching within the classroom can emerge from effective assessment practices. Through activities like this workshop, they also gain a better sense of the goals for student learning set by faculty colleagues, and come to a better understanding of the commonality of goals for their students.