



CETL TIPS: Alternatives to Tests: Methods of Assessment

Last month, we provided tips about designing tests. Of course, there are many options for assessing student performance in the classroom. This month we offer two alternatives: reaction papers and in-class group projects.

Reaction Papers

[The following information about reaction papers comes from a report by Al McLeod, *In Lieu of Tests*, from the National Teaching and Learning Forum, vol. 4:4, 1995. This reports his analysis on the use of reaction papers from 65 courses and 2,300 students.]

- The purpose of reaction papers is for students to summarize the main points in a class session and/or text *and* critically evaluate the ideas. These are most effective when done weekly, and are well suited for mapping student improvement.
- One approach to a reaction paper would be to have students summarize the 3-4 main points of an article or class session, and then reflect on the summary. In such a model, the summary might be worth 30% and the reflection 70%.
- Pros—91% of McLeod's students reported that using reaction papers for assessment helped them:
 - learn more than when tested
 - retain more information for longer
 - improve their writing skills
 - sharpen their critical thinking
 - experience less stress
 - enjoy the material more
 - cooperate better with peers.

In addition, since the papers are graded weekly, students are able to get back on track quickly if they first complete the assignment incorrectly.

- Cons—presented with the reaction paper model, students may:
 - find the transition from a test only assessment model to being assessed on reaction papers a bit confusing
 - have difficulty reading handwritten comments and/or papers
 - be tempted to copy other students' papers
- For a twist—McLeod has students grade each others' papers during the semester and reviews all of the papers at the end of the semester. Having students grade increases student autonomy, and he has only had to change student grades about 5% of the time. This does lead to a lot of grading at the end of the semester though, when the instructor is faced with reviewing the grades of a semester's worth of papers.

In-Class Group Projects

- The purpose of group activities is to give students a chance to work with the material by solving problems, generating concrete examples of abstract theories, and answering each others' questions.
- Pros—by participating in group activities, students:
 - learn to apply theories and concepts in meaningful ways
 - foster cooperation among peers
 - actively engage in their education
 - sharpen critical thinking and problem solving skills
- Cons—some downsides to group activities include:
 - ineffectiveness if activities are not well planned
 - possibility of student absences disrupting group performance
 - difficulty of assessing each student's participation in the group

- One more thing—if you are using group activities to assess student learning, you will likely have to assess after each activity by either having a group or individual portion of written work.
- Group performance evaluation—one effective way to assess group performance is by having students evaluate their group members, themselves, and your evaluation. For an example of a group performance evaluation, please email cetl@clarku.edu (<mailto:cetl@clarku.edu>).

Please check back for more alternatives when we have the Learn Through Inquiry section of this website posted.

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