

Resource Guide

Assessment in Diverse Classrooms

Crucial in all courses, assessment (discerning how much and how well students are learning the knowledge and skills you aim to teach) merits particular considerations in diverse classrooms. The principles offered below are good for all courses but particularly helpful when you have students from a range of different backgrounds and skill levels.

Note: The [Resource Guide on Creating Inclusive Course Assignments \[LINK\]](#) offers a nice complement to this guide.

- **Include diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments.** Different types of assessments serve different functions. *Diagnostic* assessments typically come at the beginning of a term or a unit; they provide informal opportunities for you to learn the current skill levels of your students so that you may adjust instruction accordingly. *Formative* assessments promote practice and create opportunities for you to give feedback to students in order to guide their learning. Like diagnostic assessments, formative assessments provide you with information that can inform instruction. These may be written, oral, and/or in-class activities. *Summative* assessments provide opportunities for formal evaluation, typically for the purposes of a grade. While these types of assessment may overlap, understanding their separate purposes can help to ensure you're assessing in a variety of ways.
- **Balance low-stakes and high-stakes assessments.** Low-stakes assessments are more informal, formative, often in-class activities and not graded (or graded with very low point-values). They provide opportunities for students to practice and/or receive feedback, which promote learning. High-stakes assessments are more formal, typically with grades that represent a significant portion of the final course grade. All students benefit from a mix of low-stakes and high-stakes assessments. In courses with students from a range of abilities, backgrounds, English language proficiency levels, and other differences, low-stakes assessments create frequent opportunities to practice (and sometimes fail) without the risk of significant negative impact to the final grade.
- **Make sure you are assessing the learning you are aiming for.** In some ways, this seems counterintuitive – what would you be assessing if not the learning you're aiming for? But the reality is that assessments can sometimes be more focused on underlying skills and knowledge rather than the specific knowledge we've developed a task or assignment to assess. For example, students who are English Language Learners may struggle to understand exam questions, not because of the concepts or principles being tested but because of non-concept-specific English words or phrases. Or students who are introverts may prepare presentations that successfully demonstrate the intended learning for a project but display less confident public speaking skills. Being clear about

the specific learning you are aiming to see displayed will help you to better identify aspects of your assessments that you may be able to adjust. For instance, English Language Learners might be encouraged to ask you / proctors questions about common English words during exams. Or, grading criteria for presentations might privilege the conceptual learning you want to see displayed over public speaking skills. (Of course, such adjustments don't work for every course. If the presentation is in a public speaking course, the specific learning you hope to see demonstrated includes presentation skills.)

- **Provide descriptive, forward-looking feedback.** Feedback is critical for learning, no matter the make-up of your class. But in diverse classes, it is especially important for students to have a clear sense of how they are progressing in a course and what they could do to improve their learning. Usable, meaningful feedback need not be labor intensive. Indeed, research shows that providing too much feedback (for instance, on written work) can be overwhelming and inhibit learning. Even a few key observations that describe what is and is not working in an assessment can help students better self-assess. Concrete strategies for improvement also can help to ensure all students have the information they need to be successful.
- **Consider assessment activities as learning activities.** It is tempting to think of assessment activities as opportunities for grading, but it is important to see those tasks also as opportunities for *learning*. Writing a paper, taking an exam, preparing a presentation, working problem sets – all of these activities can serve both learning and grading goals. Particularly in classes with students at different skill levels, practice performing specific tasks can advance learning, not just give you information about whether a student is learning.

Resources

Angelo, T. A. and Cross, P.K. (1993). Classroom Assessment Techniques. (2nd edition).

Barkley, E. and Major, C.J. (2016). Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty.

Nilson, Linda B. (2010). Assessing Learning Outcomes (part 6). Teaching at Its Best (3rd edition).

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center at ctl@slu.edu.