Assessment and Evaluation of Learning

Summary of virtual panel event held
on January 28th, 2022

Online learning has presented an opportunity for instructors at McMaster to consider more innovative and flexible methods of student assessment that aim to remove the barriers present in traditional modes of evaluation, reducing the need for special accomodations. Applying these lessons in and beyond the virtual classroom – all while keeping in mind concerns about ensuring academic integrity – can be transformative in creating an adaptable learning environment that promotes learning, creativity, and growth.

Panelists:

Stacey Ritz: Assisstant Dean, Bachelor of Health Sciences (Honours) Program, Faculty of Health Sciences

Marika Brown: PhD Candidate, English and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities

Abeer Siddiqui: Learning Support Librarian, School of Interdisciplinary Science, Faculty of Science

Panel Questions:

Why are you taking the time to find alternate ways to assess student learning? Why is this important to you to build into your students' learning experiences?

How have students influenced and responded to your use of alternate assessments?

What challenges have you encountered in trying to create innovative assessment strategies? How have you adapted to or overcome some of these challenges?

What role can your students, your peers, and others at the university play in contributing to or supporting a culture around creative and alternate means of assessing and grading students?

5 Key Takeaways from the panel

1. Assessment structures communicate the values of instructors and incentivize certain learning behaviours such as risk-taking, participation, collaboration, etc., and should therefore be chosen more consciously [15:57-16:20].

2. Innovation comes from sharing with and listening to colleagues, then tweaking ideas to fit to specific classroom contexts [29:04-29:26].

3. Alternative assessment methods for attendance and participation should be built-in to allow for flexibility and accessibility during the pandemic and beyond [41:07-42:00].

4. Be transparent with students when trying out a new assessment structure for the first time; welcome feedback and suggestions while the process is ongoing instead of at the end of the course [55:08-55:45].

5. When possible, allow for the creation of rubrics to be a collaborative process such that assessment criteria reflect the expectations and goals of both students and instructors [57:48-58:06].

Some key takeaways from each panelist

Stacey Ritz: Assisstant Dean, Bachelor of Health Sciences (Honours) Program, Faculty of Health Sciences
- Pass/Fail courses do not encourage students to do the bare minimum required to succeed. Instead, they are more willing to challenge themselves and take risks in their learning because they are not as worried about grades [13:11-15:26].
- The things students need to know to pass a test may not always be the same things they need to know to succeed in their desired career path – practices of assessment should align with the goals of the program and the goals of students [19:06-19:52].
- An example of incentivizing students to engage with the readings is introducing "response notes": short, informal, leniently-marked reflections where students question and comment on the assigned texts [22:20-24:44].
- Students complete a short assignment benchmarking their understanding of the course content on the first day of class, then reflect on the evolution of their learning for the final paper. This assessment structure allows students to define their learning and their progress on their own terms [25:04-26:29].
- Reflection-heavy assessment structures can be more helpful than course evaluations in informing instructors about what works and what doesn't [27:00-27:30].

Marika Brown: PhD Candidate, English and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities
- Extensive feedback is an invaluable tool in supporting student progress; it is important to bridge the disconnect between feedback and grades [34:19-34:42].
- Contract/labour-based grading (adapted from Asao Inoue): assessing students on the amount of work they put into the course instead of strictly upon the quality of their work. Students receive a pre-determined baseline grade for completing the minimum requirement of attending lectures and tutorials and submitting mandatory assignments (which are graded using a checklist intead of a rubric). Remaining percentage points can then be achieved by completing supplementary assignments [34:59-36:50].
- Removing numbered grades disbands power hierarchies, allowing students to consider instructors as partners in their learning instead of all-knowing experts; feedback becomes a conversation instead of a prescription, and students are more comfortable bringing their own knowledge into discussions [39:43-40:10].

Abeer Siddiqui: Learning Support Librarian, School of Interdisciplinary Science, Faculty of Science
- Valuing process over product by implementing low-stakes formative assessments; asking students to submit a small portion of the final project every other week, so that explicit feedback can be provided at each checkpoint by an instructor or peer [50:07-50:41].
- A re-grading policy in which students can boost their original grade by demonstrating to the instructor that they incorporated the feedback they received [50:42-50:57].
- Individualized rubrics: students propose their own assessment criteria that aligns with the goals of their final deliverable, making grading a collaborative process [51:01-51:31].
- Check-in groups: weekly meetings of 4-5 students working on individual projects in which they share their progress and exchange feedback . Encourages community-building and collaboration in the online classroom [52:25-53:15].

Referenced Resources:

Labor-Based Grading Contracts by Asao B. Inoue (Free Ebook)

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