



A New Approach to Student Assessment and Course Evaluation

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Faculty regularly utilize various forms of assessment to check on their student's progress, but few instructors make explicit to students how these chosen forms fulfill course goals and objectives. In October, the Sheridan Center held a faculty seminar in which participants discussed a new approach to course evaluation and student assessment. This new approach uses the course syllabus to link course goals and objectives directly with assessment methods, and thereby improves the quality and utility of student evaluations of the course. It also allows students to reflect on their own learning styles, and in turn facilitates meaningful course revision.

Before proceeding to a discussion of this new approach, it may be useful to define the terms: *course goals*, *course objectives*, *student assessment*, and *course evaluation*. In the Sheridan Center handbook, *Constructing a Syllabus*, Michael J.V. Woolcock explains *course goals* as "broad statements identifying the general educational outcomes you want a graduate of your course to be able to display". Woolcock defines *course objectives* as "the concrete measures by which these [i.e., the course goals] will be realized. *Student assessment* refers to the ways in which faculty determine the extent to which students have achieved the stated course goals and objectives. It often takes the form of an oral interview, lab report, paper, or in-class exam. *Course evaluations* traditionally involve the feedback students provide regarding the instructor and specific aspects of the course.

Specifically, this new approach to student assessment and course evaluation entails using the course syllabus to clearly align and explicitly link course objectives and student assessment. Excerpts from two sample syllabi, one from a language course and one from engineering, are provided on the Teaching Tips page in this issue of the *Teaching Exchange* to illustrate this concept. Like all syllabi, these samples list the various forms of student assessment utilized in the courses. However, they also clearly explain how these chosen forms will enable students to achieve the course objectives. This explicitness is helpful, since students do not always understand the rationale behind various forms of assessment and hence may not necessarily realize the value of any particular assignment.

This new approach to student assessment and course evaluation also involves utilizing evaluations to explore the effectiveness of chosen forms of assessment in the fulfillment of course goals and objectives. At the end of the semester, one could easily create an evaluation form that explores how well the forms of assessment enabled students to achieve the course goals and objectives. Such an evaluation would include the course goals and objectives at the top of the form. It would then list the specific kinds of assessment utilized and, for each of these forms, ask students (1) to state whether they found that this particular form of assessment helped them achieve the course goals and objectives, and (2) to explain why or why not. The evaluation would also ask students to suggest changes that would improve their learning in this course. This kind of evaluation encourages students to reflect on their learning styles and also provides instructors with useful feedback for future course revision.

On the reverse side of the [Teaching Tips page](#) is a table that you can use to chart the correlation between your course objectives and your chosen forms of student assessment. To help you with this process, a course objective and the corresponding forms of student assessment from each of the sample syllabi are included in the first two rows of the table. You may wish to complete this table, drawing on the objectives and forms of student assessment from one of your courses. Due to the success of October's Faculty Seminar, the Sheridan Center will organize a series of follow-up discussions during the coming year. We hope to see you at one of them!