

Reevaluating Evaluation

An interview with Anupma Prakash, Geophysical Institute, University of Alaska Fairbanks, AK by Gina Maranto

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How and why has your thinking about assessing your students changed over time?

When I got the ESSE grant, it was the first time in my career that I worked with someone external who talked with me about the concept of evaluation and assessment. We had a formal evaluator for the ESSE program, Doug, a scientist who had gone into the education field. We could talk the same language about science but at the same time, he had the education background. Our conversations led to some of the most tremendous learning I have experienced.

I had no background in evaluation and assessment and could barely define the differences between them. I always had always posed questions like, “What do you want from the course?” and asked about students’ backgrounds, but my approach was quite general. I told students I would grade them on the basis of tests and projects with 20% for this and 40% for that. That was all the students knew about how they would be evaluated.

Working with the education evaluator I realized that such guidelines don’t give the students a clear picture of how they will be assessed. They understand the breakdown of the grade but not what they need to do to get a certain grade. I had expectations in my *mind* in terms but hadn’t clearly communicated those to the students.

Working with the evaluator, I learned a process of communicating my thoughts to the students - probably the best thing that I learned from this.

I gained the student perspective on assessment from a mid-term focus group discussion. With pre-course surveys, everyone is new, and it is a new semester, and students write about things enthusiastically. And the post-test always comes at the same time as students are commenting on all their courses; they get bored writing down their opinions and so they write anything--except for the responsible students. But at mid-term, if there are problems in the course, the students sense it. They express their concerns, and I actually value their



opinions and make formative corrections, which is most rewarding to the students. When we had a course with a mid-term focus group, the students voiced their concerns to the outside evaluator, which made it easier for them; I had to go out of the classroom. My students often open up with me, but they open up even more with a third party. Even though I had the impression that there weren't major problems, there were things that were not surfacing. Our focus group was held on a Wednesday during lab, and the evaluator communicated the results to me right away. On Friday I addressed the students' concerns in a lecture. I could see the satisfaction on the students' faces. The mid-term focus group benefits the students who are taking the course. If you can take care of concerns as they arise during the semester, it is great.

I had never used a rubric before, either. I used to evaluate my students without this structure, intuitively. But then I developed rubrics. Recently I did a little exercise and graded students intuitively again and then referred to the rubrics and saw that I was fairly close to my instincts. But I am more comfortable about defending my grades using rubrics, and the process is much more transparent for the students.

I think one more thing came of my work with an evaluator: I now think that using a variety of assessment tools for courses with different needs and objectives is a good practice. Some students can express themselves in words but would not like to write the same thing down on paper. Others cannot speak in public but can write down what they think. So we address their needs more effectively by using different tools for different forms of expression.

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