

Classroom Assessment and Course-Embedded Assessment - What's the Difference?

It can be confusing when discussing different types of assessments that may take place at the course level. Faculty may hear the terms, "classroom assessment" and "course-embedded assessment", and not realize that there is a difference between the two.

Course-embedded Assessment

Course grading, the assignment of an overall grade to each student for inclusion on a transcript, is the assessment activity most familiar to faculty members. While it is true that course grades are not acceptable as the only type of data used in an assessment process, there is a way to use the examples of student performance on which the course grade is based. This is often referred to as course-embedded assessment.

Course-embedded assessment is the term used when general education committees or departments collect assessment information for program or institutional activities within the classroom. It commonly involves a process by which reviewers take a second look at materials generated by students in a course to see what evidence it reveals that students have met specified student learning outcomes. It may also involve the design of new exam questions and/or assignments for the explicit purpose of providing group level information on the achievement of student learning outcomes associated with an academic major or the general education program. In using this approach, it is important that faculty understand that the intent is not to second-guess the assignment of grades, but only to focus on the assessment of student learning outcomes.

Common examples of the course-embedded assessment approaches include capstone courses and portfolios. Capstone courses are often designed specifically to provide information for program and institutional assessment activities by including an exam, paper or project that provide a rich source of information for the assessment of a number of student learning outcomes. Portfolios are a collection of artifacts produced by the student throughout a specified time span. When used as a method for assessing student-learning outcomes for an academic major, the artifacts are typically created throughout the student's course of study, even though the final review of the portfolio occurs during the senior year.

The assessment activities that will take place in distribution and flag courses are another example of course-embedded assessment. While the CPC is responsible for overseeing this process, faculty members teaching distribution and flag courses are responsible for ensuring that the relevant student learning outcomes are being assessed and for reporting the information to CPC. More information about how this process will work will be provided in a series of meetings to be held this spring.

Classroom Assessment

Okay, if course-embedded assessment is the recycling of student work, what is classroom assessment? As commonly used in the assessment field, classroom assessment refers to the use of a variety of techniques (classroom assessment techniques or CATs) to provide information for instructional improvement and for monitoring student learning within a course. According to Angelo & Cross, classroom assessment techniques “help individual college teachers to obtain useful feedback on what, how much, and how well their students are learning. Faculty can then use this information to refocus their teaching to help students make their learning more efficient and effective.” The intent is to provide the instructor of the course with a quick way of assessing how students are doing with the material in order to adjust instruction.

The information gathered by classroom assessment techniques, while useful to the instructor teaching the class, rarely lend themselves to providing information that can be used for the assessment of program or institutional level student learning outcomes. That is the main difference between course-embedded assessment and classroom assessment. Course-embedded assessment is intended to provide information for the assessment of student learning outcomes at the program or general education level, while classroom assessment is intended to provide information that is primarily only useful to the instructor intent on improving his/her course. Another difference is that the student product from the use of a classroom assessment technique is not graded by the instructor, as the intent is only to provide information for the improvement of the learning experience.

The most common example of a classroom assessment technique is the Muddiest Point. During the final five minutes of a predetermined class session, an instructor asks students to take out a half piece of paper and anonymously write down a quick response to one question: “What was the muddiest (least clear) point in the _____?” The subject of the question could be a lecture, discussion, reading, homework assignment, etc. The instructors collect the responses, review them and then decide whether any changes need to be made for the next class session.

If classroom assessment is not useful for assessing program or general education student learning outcomes, why should faculty use it? Personally, I have found these techniques very useful as a way of monitoring how students were doing and identifying areas to revisit or focus on. Anonymous and ungraded, students are usually more willing to reveal problems they may be having with the course. Most students are appreciative of the instructor’s efforts to use classroom assessment techniques to gather their feedback and use it to make changes that help them learn. I consider the use of classroom assessment techniques by faculty members as tangible evidence of their commitment to improving their teaching and their students’ learning. Several copies of *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for*

College Teachers are available for checkout from the Office of Assessment and Institutional Research.