

Mediated Learning

A Newsletter by and for the Instructors of The University of Montana



Assessment: A Key Element of Teaching Excellence

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Professor Mark Cracolice

Professor, will that be on the test?

How many times have we heard that question after the classroom discussion of an interesting application not directly related to the more fundamental objective at hand? Although we may wish for classrooms full of students who want to know everything about our subject and then some, reality dictates otherwise. Certainly, as a student with a finite amount of time, this is a very pragmatic question. Thus our assessment techniques dictate what, in essence, becomes the true learning objectives in our courses. To a significant extent, assessment dictates what students learn. How, then, can we design exams, assignments, projects, and the like that maximize student learning and allow us to practice what we preach?

Learning Objectives: A First Step

The beginning step of any curriculum design is the beginning step for the development of assessment instruments. Instructors must make decisions about what they want students to learn as a result of participating in the course. Objectives should include both subject matter content and the thinking skills associated with the discipline. (We will examine the fallacy of the “we only have time to teach *either* content *or* thinking skills” argument in a future article.) These objectives clarify for the student the assessment expectations of the course. Equally important, objectives provide an outline for the instructor that list what should be assessed.

Research on Frequency of Assessment

Perhaps the most straightforward finding in educational research with respect to assessment is that the frequency of assessment is positively correlated with persistently high levels of out-of-class preparation. In other words, the more tests you give, the more students will study. Additionally, they will study more persistently over time. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the more frequently you administer assessments, the higher the cost. Assessment requires your time, your teaching assistants’ time, your graders’ time, and so on. Instructors must therefore balance the cost of assessment versus the benefits to their students. Nonetheless, we must avoid using the excuse of the cost of assessment to justify infrequent exams, and we must look for methods of improving the efficiency related to the cost of doing what is best for promoting learning.

Using Exam Questions to Encourage the Development of Thinking Skills

Most college instructors are well grounded in writing exam items to test content knowledge. We therefore focus here on writing items to encourage the development of thinking skills. Examples of this type of exam items include anything that can encourage self-regulation, the process of constructing new knowledge (content and procedural) through comparison of what one thinks now with new information

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Teaching Profile: School of Business Administration

*Brian Ehlert
Junior, Chemistry*



Gallagher Business Building

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Services 2001
Graduate Survey,
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Established in 1918, The University of Montana School of Business Administration (SOBA) has grown to be the largest professional school on campus. SOBA enrolls about 1600 undergraduates a year, and graduates approximately 365 of those undergraduates each spring. Since 1949, SOBA has been accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). This accreditation means that the curriculum is comparable to other accredited schools of business across the nation. SOBA is also the home of the only World Trade Center, out of 320 worldwide, located on a college campus.

The School of Business Administration offers students a variety of options within business. Students have a choice of going into such areas as accounting, financial management, information systems, management, and marketing, the most popular being management and marketing. As a business major, one can expect to complete their bachelor's degree in four years, assuming they take 15 credit hours each semester. During these four years, students will complete courses in international business, business law, various financial and management courses, economics, public speaking, as well as computer modeling and math. Depending on their option they will then move into their area of interest to complete more upper division courses specific to their option.

The School of Business Administration also offers a variety of student groups. Advertising Competition Club (which is also offered as a class), American Indian Business Leaders, Beta Alpha Psi (Accounting Club), Finance Club, Montana Information Systems Association, and International Students Association are some examples. In these groups, students work on anything from improving their content knowledge to designing commercials for competitions. A few weeks ago the Advertising Competition Team placed third out of ten teams competing in a competition held in Bend, Oregon. The

team won the national championship in the early 90's with the catchy slogan, “VISA, it's everywhere you want to be,” which is still used by VISA today.

A graduate with a degree in business has many employment options. Students from UM have found jobs with companies such as Accenture, Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard, and Touch America, as well as local, regional, and national accounting firms. Many graduates stay here in Missoula working for the US Forest Service, The University of Montana, St. Patrick Hospital, or Missoula Public Schools.

According to the Office of Career Services 2001 Graduate Survey, about 44% of SOBA graduates that responded currently work full time within their major. About 19% work full time outside of their major, and only 8% are unemployed. The salaries reported illustrated a wide range, but on average an individual with an undergraduate degree in business will receive around \$30,264 per year. With a graduate degree, such as a Masters of Business Administration (MBA), the average annual salary increases to \$44,031. It is estimated that about 50% of all students across all disciplines here at UM remain in Montana after graduating. It is suspected that a similar trend is present in SOBA.

Students like The University of Montana's School of Business Administration because of the professors. They say that the professors are great. They are very knowledgeable, and are willing to answer any questions. They also keep convenient office hours so that students can contact them easily. The typical class size of 20 to 30 students is also an appealing characteristic of SOBA. In some of their upper division courses, students will find more and more hands-on activities. One interesting course that is new this semester is Entertainment Management 495. In this course juniors and seniors learn how to manage anything from artists to film production. They

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SOBA

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will learn how to develop, present, and sustain an artist's career. As a requirement for the course the students will have to produce one major show at the end of the semester. This course gives students hands-on experience in the field of entertainment.

It is clear that SOBA offers a variety of opportunities to students interested in accounting, finance, management, starting their own business, and much more. They have demonstrated their abilities to adapt to the ever changing student needs with the addition of courses such as Entertainment Management 495. The dedication and passion of the

professors are what carry students on to become successful members of the business world. As a result of these successful students, SOBA has received many generous contributions from companies such as Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard. Along with giving students the opportunity to work in state of the art computer labs, students also have many opportunities to obtain real-life, hands-on experiences through a variety of internships offered through the Center for Work-Based Learning. Therefore, it can be said without a doubt that in the 85 years that the SOBA has been part of UM, they have continually adapted to meet the needs of their students.

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Assessment

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provided on the exam. Here are some general frameworks that can be used to write test items that encourage the development of thinking skills:

- 1) Give a brief set of facts, information, or data. Ask students to develop two alternative hypotheses based on the data. Ask them how they would test their hypotheses.
- 2) Give a description of a current political, social, economic, ecological, etc. issue or problem that has no absolute answer. Ask students to propose a solution and defend their position.
- 3) Give statements that are partially true and partially false. Ask students to identify and defend the parts that are true and refute the parts that are false.

If you haven't written this type of exam item before, I encourage you to start slowly. Try one, worth a small number of points, on an exam next semester. You must also include similar homework assignments in your curriculum so that students can learn to develop their skills and have an opportunity to engage in discussions that help them to learn

how to develop effective and thoughtful arguments. You will probably initially find a low success rate as you change your examination style, but as you adjust your curriculum to support student efforts to learn how to analyze such questions, the success rate will improve. As with any other type of skill, initial attempts to perform are often awkward, but with support from coaches or teachers, the ability to use the skill improves with guided practice.

Conclusions

The initial point that assessment drives learning is something that is well understood by our students. If all of our exam questions can be answered with memorization, our curriculum is trivialized to nothing but a game of short-term memorization, which is then rewarded and reinforced by success on our assessment instruments. If our goal is to teach content *and* facilitate the development of the thinking skills associated with our discipline, we must write exam items that clearly relay the message that learning these skills is a component of the course objectives. That message is delivered by developing assessment instruments that examine both content knowledge and thinking skills.

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The Center for Teaching Excellence at The University of Montana was established in July, 1999 when it received approval from the Board of Regents. The Center is administered out of Academic Affairs.

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