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Teaching is tough. As faculty, we are presented with the challenge of transforming uninformed students into educated scholars in the span of a few hours per week for 16 weeks. Many of us are seasoned educators with many semesters of course evaluations filling volumes in our PPC file. We have the sense that our students have learned and that we are effective in making that happen. These assumptions may be true, but how do we know? How often do we stop and ask the following questions:

- How do I know my students are learning?
- What am doing I that helps them learn?
- What prevents them from learning?
- What can I do to facilitate further learning?

Learning, by and large, happens within the courses lead by faculty. Departments may reflect on these questions each year as part of the annual assessment reports, but these responses tend to err on the side of ambiguity rather than direct, detailed, data-driven assessments. As such, I think that we, as individual faculty, need to ask these questions more regularly than during the preparation of our tenure and promotion materials. We probably should be asking these questions each time we offer a course.

I hope there are a few readers still with me. I know we are busy. We do a lot for our students in each of our courses; we do a lot for our departments, our colleges, and the university. This all has been amplified over the previous 18 months with the turmoil COVID has caused in our classrooms and in our lives. I am with you. am not proposing we do a full review and

Assessing the Impact of a Teaching Practice

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overhaul of each course each time we teach it. Instead, I am proposing that we systematically assess our teaching practices by choosing one practice per class each year. Maybe that still seems like a lot. I don't think it has to be.

I will outline how you can assess the impact of a teaching practice in simple ways so that we can answer those basic questions mentioned above. This systematic assessment will allow us to continually improve our craft to the benefit of our students and ultimately to our own benefit.

Simple Steps for Assessment

1. Pick your practice. This is the simplest of the steps. Of all the lectures, activities, readings, jokes (hey, why not), etc. that use as part of your teaching practice, choose just one as the focus of the assessment.

2. Know your goal. With the practice selected, identify a goal for incorporating it into your class. What should students get out of the experience? How will they demonstrate their learning? If you have used backward course design, the connection between practices and student learning outcomes may already be clear. If you are unsure why you are doing something, you may want to consider eliminating it all together. Specificity is your friend with this step. The clearer you can be about the outcome, the easier it will be for you to assess the impact of the practice.

3. Collect the data. I want to present this step at different levels of analysis:

Baseline: Perhaps you just want to get a feel for how students are doing on a specific SLO following a particular lecture or activity. As such, you look at questions on an exam or response to a writing prompt that reflects students' mastery of the learning goal. There can be other factors from the course that may influence student mastery of that goal, however, so this may not give you a clear picture of the efficacy of the specific practice.

Cohorts: If we want to know if one teaching practice makes a difference in the mastering of a SLO, we can vary how/when we use the practice across semesters. This approach is most like what we do in practice. That is, we may change an assignment for the next semester in an attempt to improve learning outcomes. What we may not do, however, is keep the data from previous semesters at hand for the full comparison. Systematically comparing data from multiple semesters allows us to generalize our practices and replicate the practice in other scenarios.

Experiment: If you are keen on parsing things out, you may consider an experiment. This requires a control group or a group of students who don't experience the teaching practice in question. The more "active" the control group, the better able you are to claim that your teaching practice had the impact you're witnessing. By "active", I mean that the students who aren't getting the teaching practice are getting most of the rest of the experience, just not the key pedagogical aspect. For example, you could be testing the impact of connecting a writing assignment to their everyday life on students' abilities to correctly apply theories to situations. The active control group could just write descriptions of the theories and situations presented in class and readings, while other students write about situations the theories are applicable in their everyday life.

4. Make the comparison. Data are lovely little bits of recorded experience, but they don't offer us much without interpretation. You'll want to compare what you have to what you expect to find. The proper way to perform that comparison can vary depending on your goals and the type of data you have. You are the chief

executive of your course so you can set the rules and decide the criteria. If you are collecting baseline data, you might check the scores on an assignment and determine if they are in the range that you expect for mastery. If you are comparing cohorts, you can check if there is an improvement in scores. If you are performing the experiment, does the experimental (full practice exposure) group perform better than the control group? Those who are statistically inclined may choose the model appropriate to their data to judge the reliability of those results for future semesters.

5. Connect the loop. Knowledge is only powerful when it drives action. If you have garnered enough from your assessment to know what to tweak, take what you've learned and update your teaching practice. If you have just learned that the practice is not as effective as you thought, seek out some best practices to guide your changes.

6. Lather, Rinse, Repeat. This process of assessment and feedback is iterative. The content of our courses changes. The best practices for teaching change. We change. Our students change. With all these variables at play, it is likely that what has worked in the past may not work well now. Check-in on your practices like you perform regular car maintenance. The 30 minutes for an oil change can save you hours of waiting for a tow truck! Translation: using an effective teaching practice may take time to establish but it will save you time and frustration later in helping students learn the content (not to mention the corrections offered during grading)!

Assessment can feel onerous and what we learn can be uncomfortable if it is a new experience, but those feelings indicate the potential for growth. We can only improve when we have the knowledge of what needs to be improved. You are not alone on this journey, though. Your colleagues at the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning are here to work with you. We can help you find best practices to implement, to develop an assessment plan, and to help you share your successes with others through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Email me (jweaver@svsu.edu) or the CETL office (cetl@svsu.edu) to get started.