Episode 11: Assessing Online Student Learning: How You Can Gauge Activities and Writing Through Online Assessment

SPEAKERS

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Tierney King 00:02

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. I'm your host Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. This week's episode is sponsored by the Teaching Professor Virtual Conference. Join us on-demand from June 7 through September 30, where you can enjoy sessions, plenaries, and networking at anytime, anywhere. The past year a lot of instructors worried that their online teaching presence might miss the in-person cues they picked up on with students in the classroom. From this questions emerged like: How do you assess your students online? How do you make sure they're learning the content? How do you gauge student learning through online activities? You're already busy planning and executing each online activity, but how do you know if your activities and assignments are working? Well, that's what we're here to discuss today. To start, Jeremy Caplan will provide ideas on how you can implement checkpoints into your online teaching to assess students in his 20-Minute Mentor, How Can I Gauge Online Learning Through Engaging Activities and Assignments?

Jeremy Caplan 01:13

When we're teaching online, we don't have the same opportunity to get nonverbal signals from students or to have those informal in-the-hallway conversations with students to check how they're doing and see how much they're understanding in our class. And that's all the more reason why we have to incorporate periodic and consistent checks for understanding in our online teaching. Checks for understanding and gauging online understanding is particularly helpful in two ways. One, it actually helps students improve their retention and their learning. A lot of research shows that retrieval practice and practice questions often help students retain information and ideas in online courses. And it also helps us get information about what we need to do to adjust our explanations, or our assessments. Our assignments are exercises to make sure students are understanding - we want to do this kind of assessment on a regular basis. In each class there should be some moment at which we stop and check for understanding in one of multiple ways, which I'll talk about. And then periodically as the course progresses, we need to check before we move on to new material that the material we've covered thus far is understood by the students so that they have the foundational understanding to move on to more advanced concepts. First, you can have students work in their own Google Doc or Microsoft Word doc, and independently jot down some ideas, jot down their own summary, before then pasting in a key section of that into your online meeting software tool into the chat section. And you can ask everyone to wait until you set a particular moment and then submit all together. And that has the advantage of no one being influenced by what everyone else has been typing, but everyone having the

benefit in the online class session of seeing the summaries that other people have created. And you can then comment on some differences you notice or ask students to observe differences that they notice. This is a great way to get students thinking about what they've learned to assess whether they've summarized the material in a way that shows their understanding, and to get them to look at each other's work and learn from one another. So it has multiple benefits, you can ask students to summarize material in other ways as well. For example, you could have students create a collective Google slide deck, and each student could be responsible for creating one of the slides focused on a particular topic. You could also have students use another kind of online collaborative tool like Notion or Coda to build a document together online, each responsible for a section of the document. In addition to having students summarize material, you can ask them to answer a question that reveals whether or not they really understand what it is that you've been talking about. So let's say for example, you're teaching a music history course. And you've been discussing the influence of Beethoven on Brahms. And you may ask a question, something along the lines of simply, What are some examples of ways in which Beethoven influenced Brahms? Or to what extent do you think Brahms was influenced by composers before him? And inviting students to volunteer to participate in that discussion or asking them to work in breakout rooms online, in your online meeting software, to discuss that and then come back together and provide their summary answer. Give students a chance to convey that they have, in fact, grasped some of the concepts that you've been talking about, or to come back and say, you know, we're really not sure. Can you explain that again, or we really don't know, at which point you can decide that you can go over some of that material again, or maybe present it in a slightly different way.

Tierney King 04:41
In addition to these checkpoints, you could also use student-created videos to assess your students. In Ollie Dreon's 20-Minute Mentor, How Can I Assess Students in My Online Class Through Student-created Videos? he walks us through how you can implement student videos in your own classes to construct meaning and confirm student learning.

Ollie Dreon 05:02
For most instructors, they focus on the teaching presence. This is the design, the facilitation, and the organization of the content in their classes. They focus on how we can provide the content for students so they can access it and learn. But the other two elements are really important to how do we provide that cognitive presence? How do we make sure that they're able to construct meaning and confirm their understanding with the social presence? With the social presence this is the interaction between students and other students, and between us and students. So, student-created videos gives us some really great opportunities for that. Willmot, Bramhall, and Radley found that student-created videos can increase student motivation. They can foster a more learner autonomy. And they can enhance the classroom community. Talbert found that videos can help to make student's learning visible. And that's really powerful for us in online classes. Because with text-based assignments, it's really hard for us to read something and to see what the students are really thinking - the reader makes meaning in the text. And I think that by hearing students voices and seeing their faces, we have a better idea of of hearing those nuances and those tones and their voices. So I think student-created video recreates some opportunities for us. So you may be wondering, where do I even start with assigning student-created videos? Well, I would think that you can almost convert any written paper to a student-created video. Instead of assigning a paper at the end of the semester, think about converting that to a video where

students, instead of writing their comments, they focus on sharing those comments in video form. If you offer presentations, or assign presentations in your face-to-face class, that's easily something that you can do in your online class and have your students record those by talking to their laptop using the cameras that are built in. Demonstrations. Any demonstration that you do, any demonstration that you would have a student do, whether it's like a problem solving set, or you know, demonstrating some process, those are all things that students can very easily record with their laptop or their mobile phone. Student reflections. Student reflections are another really great way to incorporate student-created videos, the students reflect on some content or some concepts as you've discussed, they can share those reflections in video form, and you get to see naturally how students make sense of that content. And lastly, reading responses. With reading responses, if you've assigned a chapter or you signed some very difficult readings, you can have students talk about that and say, these are some concepts that I have. And these are some areas that I'm still struggling with.

Tierney King 07:25
Many of the assessments instructors implement includes some format of writing, whether students are writing online responses, papers, or crafting a script to record through video. So how can you make these writing assignments more effective for your students and for you, as an instructor? How can you give them the tools they need so their writing can be used as an effective means of assessment? In Deidre Price's Magna Online Seminar, Effective Writing Assessment in the Online Classroom, she explains how to give feedback to online students to help accelerate their progress, and how this will help give better insight when assessing students online.

Deidre Price 08:03
My goal, really, for members of any discipline is to share some ideas about how to focus on writing within your courses as more of a matter of process as opposed to product. Because at the end of the day, our students aren't really going to take those products from our courses and necessarily use them time and time again. But they certainly will use the skills that they use when they develop that product as they go out and do other work in their respective fields and in additional academic programs. And what we're going to talk about today would be things that have kind of this twofold benefit. Ways of teaching and assessing writing and an online class that benefits students because it allows them to slow down the process and really focus on the individual steps so that they can get to a better product. But we also want to talk about how writing instruction and writing assessment can be more effective for the instructor as well. What can they do to manage their workload? And what can they do to manage their online classrooms effectively when they do have heightened work that's coming in, or increased work that's coming in at various points of the writing process? So what I found when I'm working with instructors who are teaching online is that a lot of them de-emphasize the process when they're teaching a course online, they tend to assign a major project or a final paper, and they're focused on where the student needs to ultimately get. But they don't oftentimes spend a whole lot of time breaking that process down in the same way that they would in a face-to-face class. All right, so online classroom tools that emphasize process, this is a big question that I get. What concrete tools can we use to try to emphasize process? And these again, are used with the tools that I'm using in D2L, so you may have different tools at your disposal. But chat is something that I allow to be live and active in my classes, but I tend to use Google Hangouts more often with my students. I also have access to WebEx, I use Skype, sometimes Blackboard Collaborate. So depending on what your institution provides, you

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may find something a little more effective than just a plain chat with just text conversations. But I will often schedule time for students to work together to try, especially during the invention process, they're coming up with ideas and trying to brainstorm thesis statements, and so even at the very beginning of the writing process, they may be working alongside one another. And that's very helpful. So for the Dropbox, a lot of us think about the Dropbox as being the place for final drafts only. But if you have something like release conditions within your online classroom where a student can complete one part of the assignment and by submitting something, even if it's not graded with 100, if they submitted something, it gives them access to the next step of the writing process. If you wanted to have more control over whether or not the students are actually going through and completing each step of the writing process, then you can use the Dropbox as one of those checkpoints. You can have them turn in a thesis statement or turn in an outline or turn in three quotations or something. And then you can have it set where it will allow them to see the next part of the writing process. OK, the News feature, this is what I used to nudge along the students, to encourage them to stay on track and to stay with the pacing of the class. Perhaps you're not quite in the same situation. Maybe you have a completely self-paced course. But I do pace my students on a week to week basis. And so for one of my classes, they start and end on Mondays. Another class starts and ends on Wednesdays and another on Fridays. So it helps me to stay on track as well. But that consistency is helpful to them. Then we're all doing the same thing at the same time. And we can kind of make that collaborative work a little more valuable since we're all the same point in the writing process. And then for quizzes, I use self-assessments through quizzes. The example I gave you in the supplemental material, that's really more of like one that you would fill out in class by hand. But you could certainly put that into a quiz item. And you don't want to have it like a typical quiz where a yes would be 100% and no would be 0%. What I do for that is I allow full credit for any response. So the question is, did you meet the minimum word count requirement for this assignment? If it said, yes, the feedback would be 100%, and it would say, great job, I'm glad you did it or whatever you want to say after that. And then if they said, no, because they're doing this self-assessment right before they turn in the final draft of their paper—if they said, no, it would still get them 100% for that quiz item. So I'm not deducting anything at that point, but %100 for the quiz item. And then the feedback might say, as a reminder, the assignment required a thousand words. If you have not met that word requirement, remember that you have the ability to add more words to your assignment prior to submitting your final draft later today or this week. Here are some ideas for how to beat writer's block or go ahead and give them a link to some resources.That way that self assessment is a way for them to go through and see things that they could potentially be deducted for. And to remedy those problems prior to submitting the final draft. I have found this to be an immense time saver. And I know that it takes time to create the self assessment that by allowing the students to see those guidelines one last time it actually click that button of Yes, I've done this or no I have not. And giving them some last minute just in time support, it really does improve the final products that they turn in and has been really helpful for me. Also in the quizzes, you can provide feedback that is video or audio base for us, at least with D2L. The same with other LMS is that what you can do is actually have a video of yourself as the feedback telling them what they can do to fix the problem or congratulating them and saying, "Great glad you met your minimum word count requirements." And then you could use that same clip or that same feedback in multiple shelves. So again, a little more work on the front-end, and it creates a more personalized, individualized dynamic interaction with students for feedback on these writing assessments. And I think that if we put some more effort in on the front end, to thoughtfully develop our assessments in such a way that they focus on process, not product. It does encourage the students to

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have this more thoughtful pace and more thoughtful mode of participation when they're producing their final work.

Tierney King 13:49
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