

A Competency Approach to Assessing Student Learning

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Below, I outline a competency approach to assessing student learning. The approach assumes that students possess varying levels of skill and knowledge and learn at varying rates. It further assumes that an instructor's main task is to facilitate student achievement of course learning objectives.

1. Early in the semester, I assess student competency (pre-test) in skills and knowledge related to student learning objectives. I evaluate the students' efforts based on a grading rubric that identifies essential traits and criteria for performance. I explain to students that if they achieve 75% on any of the competencies, then they may opt to forgo the classes and evaluations in the course related to those learning objectives. I propose that students who can demonstrate competency of a learning objective in a course should not be compelled to receive such instruction and evaluation. I've found that this approach motivates students to take seriously the competency assessment (pre-test).
2. I scan copies of the student responses and my completed feedback sheets (which are tied directly to the grading rubrics) before I return them to the students, and I save both on a CD as PDF files. I also videotape students listening to a partner in response to a message and save the tape. Note that I do not return the competency questions or messages for the listening exercise to the students. I then aggregate the results of the students' efforts. The results allow me to determine students' knowledge and skill level and to adjust my instruction based on that data. I share the aggregated results with the students when the class begins to address the related learning objective.
3. At the end of the class section on a particular learning objective, I administer the same "test" provided earlier in the semester. I view this second effort as a post-test. I explain that since I am most interested that they achieve course learning objectives at the highest possible levels, I will allow them to repeat the "test" as many times as they would like until they achieve a perfect score. If the student opts to take the post-test again, then I will give him or her the same task, but with new content. For example, if a student decides to repeat the listening competency, then the student will hear a new message and must provide an appropriate response (verbal and nonverbal) based on the message.
4. I scan copies of the student work and my completed feedback sheets for all post-test attempts. I also keep a copy of the videotape with the students' post-test listening efforts. I then aggregate the results for the final post-test efforts, compare the difference between the pre/post scores for each learning outcome, and identify the change in scores. I view the post-tests as direct evidence of student learning and the change between pre/post tests as the "value added" in the course for that competency. One may use the results to inform one's instruction and to improve student learning in the future. Further, one may opt to use the results as evidence of success in teaching and student learning in annual reports.