Guide to Alternative and Authentic Assessment

Incorporating a mix of traditional, alternative, and authentic assessments can give educators a more comprehensive view of student learning and ensure learners are equipped with a broad range of skills and knowledge.

Alternative and authentic assessment prioritizes real-world application and offers deeper insights into students' learning processes and understanding.

Alternative Assessment:

Alternative assessment refers to non-traditional methods of assessing student performance, which are used as an alternative to conventional paper-and-pencil tests, and the mid-term/ or end of term essay.

Purpose: The goal of alternative assessment is to get a comprehensive picture of a student's abilities, rather than just assessing specific content knowledge. It seeks to evaluate the process of learning as much as the final product.

Benefits:

- Can cater to different learning preferences.
- Can provide a more holistic understanding of a student's strengths and areas of improvement.
- Encourages reflection and metacognition.

Examples: Portfolios, journals, peer evaluation, self-assessment, poster or project presentations, performances.

Authentic Assessment:

Authentic assessment evaluates students' abilities in to apply their learning in 'real-world' contexts. Learners demonstrate their understanding and skills in ways that are practical and applicable to real-life situations.

Purpose: To evaluate how students apply their knowledge and skills in practical, meaningful situations.

Benefits:

- Reflects actual knowledge and skills that will be useful beyond the classroom.
- Engages students by making their work relevant to real-world situations.

Often integrates multiple skills or areas of knowledge simultaneously, reflecting real-world complexity.

Examples: Simulations, role playing, real-world problem solving, case studies, research projects, and presentations.

Strategies for developing Authentic and alternative assessments can sometimes be more time-consuming for educators to design and evaluate, and there may be concerns about consistency and objectivity. Clear rubrics and criteria, these concerns can be addressed.

Whether you're teaching in-class or online, assessments can be divided into two main types: (1) formative assessment, and (2) summative assessment.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment helps learners learn something new, practice what they are learning, or self-check their knowledge. In other words, this kind of assessment can be called assessment for learning. This assessment is usually not graded or is graded as a complete/incomplete.

The goal of formative assessment is to monitor learning to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by learners to improve their learning. Feedback is most effective when provided at the right time. For example, it is a good idea to present at least one formative assessment for learners to complete prior to assessing them for marks. Formative feedback should indicate to the learner where they are in relation to the learning objectives and how they can improve. More specifically, formative assessments:

- help learners identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas for improvement
- help faculty recognize where learners are struggling and address problems immediately.

Examples of formative assessments include asking students to:

- draw a concept map in class to represent understanding of a topic.
- submit one or two sentences identifying the main point of a lesson.
- turn in a draft of work for early feedback.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment is what we usually think about when we think about assessment: assignments or tests that are evaluated by the instructor and used to determine a student's grade. In other words, this kind of assessment can be called assessment of learning. This assessment is always graded because the goal of summative assessment is to evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional unit by comparing it against some standard or benchmark. Summative assessments are often high stakes, which means that they have a high point value.

Examples of summative assessments include:

- a midterm exam
- a final project
- an end of term paper
- a final presentation

Information from summative assessments can be used formatively when students or faculty use it to guide their efforts and activities in subsequent courses.

Assessment Versus Grading

The goal of assessment is to improve student learning. Although grading can play a role in assessment, assessment also involves many ungraded measures of student learning. In fact, some educators practice ungrading, which allows other forms of feedback to be provided for learners. Assessment goes beyond grading by systematically examining patterns of student learning across courses and programs and using this information to improve educational practices.

References

Lovett, M.C., et al. How Learning Works: 8 Research Based Principles for Smart Teaching, 2023