Offered varied ways for students to demonstrate their learning and knowledge

"How do my students approach learning?" "How do I know that they have learned?"

For many instructors, the answers to these questions seem simple. Instructors may assume, for example, that students should learn and study as they once did to be successful. Or they may assume that all students learn in essentially the same fashion and, as such, all students should be asked to demonstrate their learning and knowledge in uniform ways. However, such assumptions do not recognize that students enter our classrooms and learning environments with a diverse range of prior experiences, knowledge, skills, and beliefs, all which frame how they approach learning, studying, and thinking. Such assumptions may also reinforce dominant narratives about how learning *should* be expressed and assessed, which, in turn, may reinforce activities and assessments that tend to benefit or privilege certain students over others. An inclusive learning environment will offer students varied opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in ways that are aligned with their strengths and that resonate with their experiences and backgrounds.

ASSET-BASED PEDAGOGY

One productive approach is for instructors to utilize asset-based pedagogy, which centers the views that a student's culture is a strength and that disparities in achievement do not arise from deficiencies in that culture. Asset-based approaches to learning and teaching build on constructivist notions of learning by asking students to apply prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs to new contexts in ways that specifically validate cultural knowledge.[26] Asset-based pedagogy also recognizes and honors different approaches to *doing*, recognizing that there may be many different ways to address issues, answer questions, and solve problems.[27] Using this approach can be a means to elicit positive learning outcomes and mitigate stereotype threat (when the existence of a negative stereotype about a group with which one identifies can result in negative performance) and impostor syndrome (the feeling of not being competent enough or of not belonging). As Johnson recommends, inclusive instructors "emphasize that differences in assets among students inherently provide different pathways to success, and that they should, therefore, expect that members of the class will achieve success in different ways."[28] Instructors can implement this approach, for example, by offering students a variety of ways to demonstrate their mastery of content, such as completing a written assignment, a creative work, or a class presentation.

MOTIVATION TO LEARN

Asset-based pedagogy can promote motivation to learn. Essentially, students are motivated to learn when they possess a sense of autonomy or control over the outcome of a given task, a sense of competence that they can complete or manage the task, a sense of relevance to the context of the task, and a sense of relatedness to the people associated with the task.[29] Providing clear expectations (*Principle 2*) and offering varied means of demonstrating knowledge are essential building blocks for learning motivation.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

1. **Help students reflect on what they bring to a task.** Instructors might ask students to list the knowledge, skills, and experiences they bring to a given task, topic, or conversation. Prompt them to think beyond specific academic knowledge, probing what they bring in different areas, such as communication, teamwork, technical skills, organization, and creativity.

2. **Provide students with autonomy and choice.** Instructors can find ways to help students take ownership of their own learning by sharing what they know (asset-based perspective) rather than focusing on what they *do not* know (deficit-based perspective). For example, students could answer two out of three essay questions on an exam, select their own topic for a research paper, or drop the lowest grade on a set of quizzes. Students might lead a class discussion individually or in pairs, determine their own timelines for a project, or decide how different assessments are weighted.

3. **Offer students ways to develop competence and self-efficacy.** Students can be encouraged to break large tasks into smaller, more manageable tasks. Instructors can offer smaller but more frequent low stakes assessments that count for lower percentages of the final grade, so that students can develop and reinforce their skills; provide opportunities for immediate feedback and self-reflection; and find ways for students to immediately apply (analyze, synthesize, evaluate) ideas and concepts.

4. **Offer alternative assessments that allow students to relate more clearly to the context.** Rather than relying on traditional assessments (e.g., individual, timed exams; five-page essays), instructors might consider alternative assessments that encourage students to make personal connections to the material or their peers. Consider, for example, requiring reflective short writing in which students apply concepts or theories to their lives in addition to a traditional research paper or authentic tasks associated with the field (e.g., policy memo, team project). Student assignments might also be directed toward a variety of audiences rather than solely the instructor (e.g., blogs, websites, public performances, presentations to external clients or judges). Northwestern instructors can learn more about equitable assessment and alternative strategies for grading through the open educational resource on **reimagining assessment**.

5. **Provide multiple opportunities and choices for informal expression.** Instructors can offer varied opportunities for informal expression, such as class discussions, laboratories, or study sections and online discussion boards, annotated readings, or project team meetings. Instructors can also offer multiple means for engagement: student to student, teaching assistant to student, and instructor to student.

6. **Ensure that the varied means of expression are accessible and equitably affirmed and highlighted.** By bringing forward both written and oral points made by students, whether in class or asynchronously online, instructors affirm the varied means of expression and the students who chose them. Highlighting a wide range validates their use and encourages students to further explore different means of demonstrating their learning.

EXAMPLE

An instructor in a large lecture class recognizes that students have diverse ways of communicating their knowledge and skills. At the beginning of the term, he asks students to select from a list of three topics that most interest them, then groups students into project teams based on their interests. Students reflect individually on their strengths in a variety of relevant areas (communications, teamwork, technical skills, problem solving) and then share their strengths with their teams. Each team chooses whether it will produce a podcast, interactive website, or video for a target audience in Evanston or Chicago, with an accompanying written report. Clear instructions with equivalent criterion-based rubrics accompany each assessment. Members of each team work together to break down tasks and identify internal due dates, providing one another with feedback on drafts. In addition, the students are required to meet with the instructor or teaching assistant during office hours to discuss the selected submission format and group roles. Students also write their own individual critical reflections on their experiences, detailing how they improved.

FURTHER READING

Ferdinand, L. "Strengths-based strategies for neurodiverse students." *Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching Guide.* Northwestern University. © 2024. Licensed under **Creative Commons** Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International.

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Montenegro, E., & Jankowski, J. (2017). "Equity and assessment: Moving toward culturally responsive assessment." *National Institute for Learning Outcomes and Assessment.* Occasional Paper #29.