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Course Assessment in Problem-Based Learning Courses Using Formative, Qualitative Measures

Larkin A. Powell[1]

Active learning methods such as problem-based learning provide means to focus learning experiences on course objectives. Using course assessment, instructors improve their ability to provide opportunities for students to become more effective learners. At the conclusion of a course, instructors must determine if students met the learning objectives for the course. Did students increase their knowledge base and skill level because of their learning experiences in the course? Students in a course arrive with a myriad of abilities, skills, and prior experiences, providing opportunities for student-teaching, but causing problems for course assessment. I will provide an example from my Wildlife Management Techniques course in which students participated in a pre-course/post-course writing exercise. On the first day of class, students were given 3 documents: (1) a short reading from Aldo Leopold's Sand County Almanac, (2) a photograph of very successful Nebraska waterfowl hunters from 1930, and (3) a recent wetland habitat management memo from our state wildlife agency. I asked the students to reflect on what they saw, what they thought about the document based on their previous knowledge, what kind of information they could learn from the document, what the students didn't know about the document, what the document revealed about the time in which it was written, and what knowledge and skills the students are bringing to the course that help make sense of these documents. I also asked the students to define how they would proceed with detailed research for one of the documents using the Internet. First, the students had an avenue to provide me with information about their prior experiences—some of which were extensive. I was also able to assess learning in the course, as I asked the students to complete the same exercise on the last day of class. I will provide examples from additional courses, and we will discuss ways that this method could be implemented in your course.

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