Promoting student success through active involvement in assessment

One of the goals of assessment is to increase student motivation by highlighting the areas where they have succeeded and enabling them to notice the areas for improvement (Wiggins 1998). In my years of college teaching practice, I have strived to employ fair, authentic assessment, i.e., assessment that promotes engagement with "worthy problems or questions of importance, in which students must use knowledge to fashion performances effectively and creatively" (Wiggins 1993, 229), such as portfolios, journal writing, and cooperative learning groups (Sanders 2001). I also conduct ongoing formative, informal assessment that helps me modify teaching and improve student performance by monitoring students, recording my observations and referring to them as I plan future lectures. Finally, I integrate self-assessment practices such as peer-review and written self-reflections, which allow students to monitor their own progress and attainment of course objectives.

Nevertheless, I felt that learning outcomes in my classes could be further improved if my students assumed a shared responsibility for assessment (Bachman 2010). Active engagement in assessment promotes deeper reflection on learning processes and more meaningful interaction with the course material. Thus, I have sought other methods, which eventually lead me employ a technique my students and I call *Test Yourself*. It consists of the following steps:

1. Teacher-generated *Test Yourself* items
2. Guided practice
3. Student-generated questions shared via a class blog
4. Review sessions before final assessment

To introduce the concept, I present a short list of sample *Test Yourself* questions at a conclusion of each session. For assessment to be authentic, these are directly linked to learning goals and class activities. The types of questions include factual (e.g., *Define X*, *List Y*), conceptual (e.g., *Explain why X*, *What are the main reasons for Y?*) and provocative (i.e., questions related to problem solving, decision making and constructing individual meaning) (Erickson, 2007), and they can be combined with increasing cognitive demands (Bloom et al., 1956). I model how to answer a few questions to scaffold the skills needed for self-assessment and to foster good study habits. I also discuss these different types of questions with the class providing several examples of each.

To learn how to write questions themselves, students participate in guided active assessment sessions in which we brainstorm sample *Test Yourself* items and discuss what a good question is. To practice writing their own assessment items, students work in small groups, pairs or individually. They are encouraged to refer to the learning goals and allowed to use any question format they want (e.g., open-ended, multiple choice). The following step-by-step instructions can be used during this stage:

1. Write three questions about the content of today's class that increase in the level of difficulty – choose from the following question repositories (Bloom et al., 1956; Erickson, 2007):
   a. #1 – factual – e.g., list, define, name, explain, identify, etc.
   b. #2 – conceptual – e.g., demonstrate, criticize, explain, compare, solve, analyze, etc.

      c. #3 – provocative – e.g., plan, design, assess, evaluate, justify, etc.
2. You can write Yes/No questions, open-ended questions, True/False statements or multiple choice questions, etc.
3. Exchange your questions with another group and answer each other's questions.
4. Reflection/Share with the class: Which questions were difficult to answer? Why?

To ensure that students engage in an on-going review, I make posting *Test Yourself* items on a class blog and responding to the questions posted by their classmates mandatory. Similar to the guided practice in class, the students are given instructions regarding the number and types of the questions. I monitor the blog activity and respond to the posts to clarify any problems that may arise and to ensure high standards. In my responses, I focus on the content of both the questions and the answers.

Finally, we use *Test Yourself* items for the final course review. Because students have written these questions throughout the semester, they are not overwhelmed with the amount of the review material and spend their time addressing the gaps. In addition, since students have shared their questions on line, the *Test yourself* repository is easily tracked and accessible. I have found that this practice helps students reflect on what they have learned, and it seems to lead to better retention of the course material.

Inviting students to actively participate in assessment is a success-oriented practice with several benefits. My students now play a central role in the learning process as they are involved in assessing their own attainment of course objectives. Their motivation and a sense of responsibility for learning have increased. Finally, involving my students in assessment has helped me create a sense of mutual trust in the classroom as my students and I feel we are on the same team.

References

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