

Assessing Student Learning...

Over the Course of the Semester

Systematic Progression of Assignments

Systematic progression of assignments refers to a group of assignments that has been scheduled throughout the semester to track student progress on specific learning objectives as they occur. These often (or may) focus on one particular learning objective the instructor is particularly interested in studying. Each assignment is connected both to the one before and to the one after to maintain a formal record of student progress.

Ways to develop this record include:

- breaking down a large term project into individual components spread out over the course of the semester, evaluated separately, and then evaluated as a final product
- weekly quizzes and lab reports
- an essay question on each exam that is directly related to a specific course objective

When using systematic progression of assignments to assess student learning, your most important task is to maintain clear and consistent records of results. The extent to which these results identify overall student learning or student learning on specific objectives that have been identified on the course syllabus depends on the method of tracking that you use. By using the same scoring rubric throughout the semester, you can track individual student progress on specific key traits over time.

A faculty member teaching a junior-level accounting course decided to study the extent to which her students were able to report on the results of their in-class auditing assignments. She put together a series of assignments as follows to track expected skills and knowledge.

Assignment	Why Use?	Assess What?
One-paragraph audit report (first four weeks of the semester)	Begin to expose students to techniques on writing clear and easy to understand accounting documents.	Basic understanding of accounting practice and general technical writing skills.
One-page audit report (at week 6 and week 8)	Help students learn to expand on introductory exposure to writing audit reports.	Moderate understanding of accounting practice and ability to explain the results of this practice to layperson. Technical writing skills.
Two-page audit report with charts and tables (week 10)	Offer students the opportunity to create more formal, explanatory report in greater detail and help them learn to provide examples from accounting and use effective graphs and charts.	Solid understanding of accounting practice and increased ability to translate results in a format that will be easily accessed by the reader.
Formal oral presentation with audio-visual aids and written 5-7 page report with charts and tables.	Present a real-life scenario that asks students to prepare and present results of accounting practice, as might be required in the corporate world.	In-depth understanding of accounting practice. Strong oral and written presentation skills. Ability to translate classroom theory into a hypothetical situation.
Two essay exams, one at mid-term and one at the end of the semester.	Ask students to write short essay questions related to course concepts and lectures.	Evaluate particular broad course concepts that are interconnected through each class discussion and each assignment outlined earlier in this table.

Primary Trait Analysis

Primary Trait Analysis (PTA), described elsewhere, can also be used to assess student learning over the course of the semester. Primary Trait Analysis links specific goals or objectives to varying levels of achievement (e.g., excellent, good, fair, poor). To use PTA over the course of the semester, track individual components, or primary traits, across several assignments. PTA is particularly useful for long-term tracking of results as the scores from the PTA rubrics are easily quantifiable and can provide clear data on student progress across key traits for course assignments.

Pre/Post-Test Survey

Pre- and post-test surveys are another way to assess student learning from the start of the course until the end. A *pre-test survey* can be used at the beginning of the semester to capture the extent of student knowledge and understanding about key course concepts they will study that semester. It can also be used to measure students attitudes and values relevant to course concepts and predictive of their response and position on course materials. Using a follow-up *post test* (either the same as the pretest, or somewhat different) at the end of the semester and comparing results from the two can be an effective way to demonstrate student achievement over time.

Noteworthy: Pre/post-test surveys are similar to the misconception/preconception task discussed elsewhere, but look for general knowledge and background rather than inaccurate or judgmental ideas.

Portfolio Analysis

Portfolio analysis is becoming an increasingly popular method of assessment, both at the classroom and the program level. Portfolio analysis looks at student work during a period of time and evaluates the extent of learning based on the progression of the work from the first assignment until the last. At the classroom level, this might include a series of writing assignments of increasing difficulty or all work that the student has produced for a particular course. At the program level, the portfolio might include all key pieces of work that the student has completed for the major.

The advantages of the portfolio as a method of longer-term assessment include:

- A visual representation of student learning from beginning to end
- A concrete way to track and document student progress over a period of time
- A hard copy record of tasks and output for the student to retain for future reference and use
- A systematic progression of tasks that can be linked to course goals and objectives and interpreted in the context of whether each was accomplished
- An opportunity for students to reflect on their own progress as they review their portfolio

A key piece in portfolio work is getting students to analyze and reflect on their portfolio – what can they see that they’ve learned, what doesn’t it tell them about what they’ve learned, and how can they document the progression of their ideas and work from the beginning of the semester until the end.

As one student wrote in a final paper that asked her to reflect back on a series of six essays written over the semester:

One of the most valuable aspects of this course, for me, has been the opportunity to look back on the work that I have completed. Through these papers, I can see how my ideas have changed, how my writing has improved and how my understanding of course material is reflected more in the last two papers than in the first...

Portfolio work offers not only an opportunity for the instructor to see the progression of students’ performance over time, but can also help the student see the value of reflecting back on her own work.