POCR: Subsection "C"

Unit-Level Objectives

This portion of the OEI Rubric deals with assessment and feedback, looking closely at the alignment of objectives and assessments, the clarity of instructions for completing activities, and evidence of timely and regular feedback.

Though looking at assessments in other disciplines might be difficult, we'll use the rubric to explore how assessment can be used as a learning tool to help students assess their own progress, and how it can be used to help instructors make their online courses even stronger.

C1: Authenticity

This item speaks to the design of assessments that allow students to apply learning in ways that mirror authentic work in the field. Authentic or "real-world" assessments are one way to not only encourage transfer of the knowledge--the knowledge is practiced and tested in ways it will be used--but also a way to lessen the effects of the assessment design on the outcomes. Authentic assessments focus on the desired outcomes, allowing students to demonstrate learning by applying what they have learned to problems or scenarios appropriate to the discipline.

Measuring authenticity, however, can be difficult. A discipline may privilege certain methods of measuring student learning, so as we review other disciplines we need to be cognizant of our own disciplinary bias. When you review, check large assignments, projects, midterms, and finals to gauge whether they provide ways for students to *demonstrate* learning outcomes.

Exemplary courses take extra steps to mimic authentic environments, allowing students to practice applications of their learning in ways that prepare them for careers in the field of study.

C2: Validity

Validity goes hand-in-hand with authenticity. Valid assessments align with the course and unit objectives, ensuring that students are tested on the knowledge and skills outlined in those objectives. This may be difficult to ascertain in some courses, but remember, if you are having trouble seeing the alignment, a student might as well. Does it seem as if students are asked to do tasks or produce work that is not related to the objectives?

To be valid, an assessment has to measure what it says it is trying to measure. So, for instance, a test that seeks to measure fitness by only timing how fast someone can sprint does not have face validity, as there are many more factors to fitness than running speed. Testing for validity can be especially difficult in education because knowledge is not discrete. For instance, a strong writer might do better on an assessment that requires an essay, even though her knowledge of the subject is not any greater than another student who prefers speaking to writing. The design of our assessments, then, draws on other skills we possess.

Exemplary courses **explicitly** connect the assessment to the learning objective(s). When looking for evidence of exemplary course design for C2, you may have to look in the syllabus, assignments, and rubrics.

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C3: Variety

In addition to authentic and valid assessments, quality courses include a variety of assessments that allow students to gauge their performance over time. Aligned courses balance formative assessments, which provide feedback and include opportunity for growth and revision, with summative assessment. Multiple types of assessments also support higher order thinking, as different assessments require different skill sets. Exemplary courses will offer more variety for assessment of learners.

While it may be easiest, especially in an online environment, to simply draw from a test bank, exemplary courses move beyond relying on one modality for assessment, measuring learning with a variety of assessments tools so students with differing strengths have equal opportunities to be successful. And, there is an added bonus to using a variety of tools, as data from multiple, varied assessments help instructors evaluate the impact of the assessment tools on the results, providing valuable feedback to the instructor that will help them refine their course in future iterations.

C4: Frequency

Why is frequent assessment important? Assessments throughout a course provide feedback to students that allows them to assess their learning. Students can use this to modify their learning, increase studying, or even drop the course. If the assessments or feedback come too late in the course, the student has less opportunity to modify their learning. In exemplary courses, the assessments are frequent and regular, allowing students to use feedback to modify their learning. When assessing the course for frequency, start by looking for low-risk assessments early in the course, such as discussions, quizzes, or smaller assignments.

> No matter how well-designed, authentic, valid, or frequent our assessments are, if we don't have terrific instructions and rubrics or scoring guides to help our students understand our expectations, we're going to be sunk. The next two items in Section C focus on these two important aspects of designing assessments: creating rubrics or scoring guides and providing excellent instructions.

C5: Rubrics/Scoring Guides

Well-designed courses include rubrics and/or scoring guides to help set expectations, provide timely feedback, and provide guidance for improvement. A well-developed rubric or scoring guide articulates exactly what the instructor is looking for and lets students know how items will be graded. In addition, a well-designed rubric can help students ascertain where they need to put their energy to improve their learning or performance.

Exemplary courses include both well-designed rubrics and model work to illustrate outcomes to students. Perhaps most importantly, all rubrics are not created equally. If a rubric is included in an assignment, check to ensure the rubric is aligned to the assignment instructions.

Note: When looking for rubrics, remember that Discussion rubrics can be viewed by clicking the Options icon (3 vertical dots) in the upper-right corner of each discussion.

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C6: Instructions

Well-written instructions are essential to student success. They should both explain the assessment and provide step-by-step instructions for successfully completing and submitting the assignment. Exemplary courses provide exceptional details to ensure student success.

When reviewing a course, check instructions in multiple areas (assignments, discussions, and activities, for instance).

> The final two elements in Section C underscore the importance of formative feedback and self-assessment. Many students excel when given opportunities to learn from their mistakes. For instance, some discussion forums offer students an opportunity to compare their performance to their peers, but the students may need explicit instructions to do so.

C7: Feedback

Frequent, low-level assessments with formative feedback help students gauge their learning and adjust their studying to support their goals. Instructors might provide feedback regularly, but is this explicitly explained to students? Also, if the feedback is not timely, students may receive it after they have moved on to the next project or figured out their errors on their own. Aligned courses provide a clear plan, articulated to the student, that explains how timely, meaningful feedback will be provided. Exemplary courses add to this plan by explaining how to access this feedback in the course and how students should use feedback to guide improvements.

As reviewers, we should be paying attention to the activities throughout a course that provide opportunities for immediate or timely feedback, but we also should be looking for places where instructors explain their plan to students--like the syllabus and/or orientation module. Can you think of other places we can look for this type of feedback planning in a course?

C8: Self-Assessment

The final stop in Section C is self-assessment. Simply put, students learn more when they are asked to reflect on their performance and make plans for improvement. This is especially helpful when they receive feedback and guidance on their self-assessment. Instructors can use strategic opportunities for self-assessment to boost students meta-cognition, and they can provide expert feedback to help students improve. Self-assessment options might include written reflection after a major assignment, muddiest point assignments, and practice quizzes. Exemplary courses routinely provide this level of self-assessment, incorporating encouragement and suggestions to help students improve.