



Taking the Mystery Out of Learning

Zala Fashant

As a university professor, I had students ask me, “Am I doing good job?” Even though my graduate and undergraduate students received weekly grades, they wanted to know more about their progress. I often reflected on my years of teaching elementary students where I heard the same question. What amazed me is that students hadn’t gained the ability to assess themselves and their own progress throughout their education. As faculty and course designers, how do we take the mystery out of learning?

What causes students to wonder if they are performing well?

1. Courses are designed from the faculty perspective and not from the student-centered novice perspective.
2. Students are not always taught or provided opportunities to self-assess.
3. Many of the things we teach them is new to them. They don’t have ways to connect the information in their portfolio of knowledge
4. Courses aren’t always designed to provide guidance using data as to indicate if they are performing at the level they desire.
5. Often times you teach students for one course only, and by the end of that course some of the students have cracked the code on what to do and how to perform well in your course. The next semester, they are busy trying to do the same with a whole new set of faculty and courses. Students must make new adaptations every semester when they get a new batch of instructors. They don’t have enough time to focus on the strategies they are learning, and often feel like they are starting over each term.

How do you shift the paradigm?

Change is difficult. New is difficult. Starting with these premises in mind, you need to use this perspective to start designing your teaching. Many faculty design a course as the expert. You know the information well and you most likely learned it successful. So, where this seems rather straight forward to you, it will not be as easy for your students. **Student-centered designing** helps you consider what is needed for students to succeed in your course. This requires you to bridge the gap between thinking like a novice and thinking like an expert as you guide them to master the outcomes for your course, making them a course expert. Many faculty gain this perspective after teaching a course over several semesters. This is especially troubling if you only offer the course once a year.

Using a designing for novices approach is critical to shorten the gap of your own learning about designing and teaching a quality course, so that students who take your course during the first few semesters you teach the course will be successful. Students deserve top quality as they aren’t getting a discount for your course as you are learning to provide the best. Whether you a full-time veteran or newly hired adjunct, students have the right to learn in a top-rated course.



Teaching students to **assess their own performance** is key. Students often *get* grades from faculty. They don't always understand how they earned the grade they got. They may not see how their effort affects the grade. When it comes to assessment, students have experienced turning in work and getting a grade for it. Having them be active in the assessment of their own work is critical to getting them to learn to assess their own performance. One way to provide this ability for students is to have them use rubrics to assess their own work. In having students analyze the rubric at the beginning of an assignment and then assess their work upon completion provides a deeper experience which helps them see where they have met the high standards and where they could improve. Through consultation with faculty, they learn to determine the direction of the assignment or assessment. During their work on the assignment, students can gain much from assessing their projects with their peers. This is what we want students to do eventually in the workplace. This also helps students to reduce their reliance on you to answer the question, "Am I doing a good job?"

Your course is filled with new content. Students need to **link the new learning** from your course, to prior experiences. Think of having a stack of papers on your desk (or a computer desktop full of documents). You can't keep them sitting there. They need to get filed. New content keeps stacking up and you need to develop file folders to put the documents into. Your course design needs to provide ways for students to link the new content to concepts they already know. Asking them to share their prior knowledge and experience into discussions, assignments and assessments will help them integrate the content. Moving from learning Foundational Knowledge to applying it and integrating it deepens the learning for students. Taking it a step further by getting students to determine the way the content will affect their approach to the human dimension and value it provides them will help them learn how to learn.

Your course needs to **provide continuous ways to assess** the learning and show students how they are progressing. Each week or each unit needs a variety of assignments and assessments which provide feedback about progress. A score or a grade alone does little to help students understand how they are growing. As students learn in different ways, offering several ways using lower stakes to assess their progress helps you to assess their mastery from a broader view. Did you ever take a course that had only a mid-term and a final exam? This kind of assessment *gives* a grade at the end of the course. I took an economics course that had three unit multiple choice exams and a final. The final was made up the questions from the unit tests. I remember what the correct answers were from the unit tests so I essentially "aced" the final. What did this grading system measure? It measured by ability to memorize the correct answers and take the final exam well. I did well in the course, but needless to say, I didn't become an economist.

In looking back at this, I have to admit that this was a pretty easy way for a faculty member to teach. This person lectured and gave easy-to-grade tests. What I learned is that I was getting a B going into the final, but not how I was growing in economic knowledge. Acing the final, brought me up to an A, so where this looked great on my transcript and GPA, it fell short on delivering significant learning. I also have to admit that at the end of the semester, I knew nothing about this faculty member and he knew nothing about me. Today, that feels like a wasted opportunity.

As a band director, I had the **opportunity to know students** for several years. We developed a relationship. I got to know much more about my students. As a dean, I saw how students built



that same relationship with career and technical education faculty. They spent up to 2 years together. In my own experience in a university's music and education department, I had the opportunity to work with faculty for a few years. This helped my learning tremendously. Many faculty only have a one-and-done experience with students. This is why it is critical to design your course so that you build a community learning relationship with your students from Day 1 of the course. Developing video introductions within the course shell, providing discussion areas for students to learn content and from one another, offering team-based assignments in class and online, and interactive feedback sessions will help you do this.

As faculty we should strive to **eliminate the mystery of learning**. Learning experiences need to be designed to be intentional. Students deserve more than *learning-left-to-chance*. Accrediting organizations have very specific outcomes for programs, departments, and institutions. By reading the book, *Designing Effective Teaching and Significant Learning*, faculty can learn more about the ways to develop quality courses and improve their practice.