

Direct Sources of Evidence for Assessing Student Learning

“Direct evidence of student learning is tangible, visible, self-explanatory, and compelling evidence of exactly what students have and have not learned.”ⁱ It may help to think about direct evidence as being nearly impervious to challenge, even from a skeptic. Course grades, for example, might be inflated, or vary from instructor to instructor. Each assessment initiative should utilize at least one source of direct evidence, examples of which follow.

Ratings of student skills by their field experience supervisors:

For example, a descriptive rubric might be provided that explicitly documents faculty and staff standards for student performance.ⁱⁱ This process helps all stakeholders, including students, faculty, supervisors, and accreditors to understand just what “outstanding” or “inadequate” ratings mean.ⁱⁱⁱ This process may be time-consuming, and it takes a good deal of work to clearly articulate the standards. This is a good process to use for critical learning goals or capstone experiences.

Information in this resource is drawn from Chapters 1, 2, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 of *Assessing Student Learning*, 2nd edition, authored by Linda Suskie, former Vice President of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Scores and pass rates on appropriate licensure or certification exams such as the Praxis or NCLEX, or other published tests that assess key learning outcomes: Such exams would be used only when your learning goals match those covered by the instrument or if required by an outside accrediting body. Many of these standardized tests come with a price tag, and have very specific requirements about the conditions under which they should be administered.^{iv}

Capstone experiences: Included in this category might be research projects, presentations, theses, dissertations, oral presentations, exhibitions, and performances. These experiences should be assessed using rubrics, which are terrific tools not only for assessment but also for supporting the students in understanding the expected learning goals.^v

Written work, performances, and presentations: Scored using a rubric, such student activity can provide a very clear picture of how well they have mastered learning outcomes.^{vi}

Portfolios of student work: Portfolios should have a clear educational purpose as well as an assessment purpose. Because they include student reflection and take a good deal of time to plan and review, the use of portfolios calls for careful planning and gradual implementation. Portfolios should be assessed using evaluation criteria developed by faculty and staff, often in the form of a scoring guide or rubric.^{vii}

Relevant course and lab projects: Student understanding of key learning goals is often evidenced in critical course or laboratory projects. The assessment should be scored with a rubric detailing the specific expectations related to the desired learning outcome.

Scores on embedded test or quiz questions: This evidence allows faculty to study student performance on a specific learning goal that may represent a subset of a larger test.

Scores on locally designed multiple-choice or essay tests: Ideal for this approach would be final examinations in key courses, qualifying examinations, and comprehensive examinations. The assessment should involve more than a grade which identifies the percentage correct; the tests should be accompanied by *test blueprints* describing what the test assesses. Test blueprints are outlines of the learning goals covered by the test, and they help ensure that the test focuses on the goals that faculty members consider to be the most important.^{viii}

Score gains: Often described as “value added,” these assessments study the difference between entrance and exit performance. This kind of assessment has its limitations; it may not provide the reassurance that the student has reached necessary standards. It is also often difficult to motivate students to perform their best on entry testing.^{ix}

Observations of student behavior such as group discussion: When these observations are conducted systematically and with careful note-taking, they can be particularly helpful in assessing general education core curricula.^x

Summaries and assessments of electronic class discussion threads: Again, this source of evidence is especially suitable for assessing general education, and can study responsiveness, cohesiveness, ability to make connections, and deeper thinking that can emerge in a discussion forum.^{xi}

Feedback from classroom response systems (clickers): These devices give the student opportunity to provide immediate feedback right in the classroom, providing the instructor with timely pictures of student understanding.^{xii}

Feedback from computer-simulated tasks: Software with more sophisticated capability is now available for a number of disciplines which can not only provide diagnostic feedback, but also provide information about student ability to respond to simulations, scenarios, and more complex problem-solving.^{xiii}

Student reflections on their values, attitudes, and beliefs: It is often difficult to assess traits that are not as easily defined or observed. Assessment is often less precise, and difficult to attribute as due to any prescribed curriculum. If attitudinal goals are a stated program outcome, however, it is important to conduct assessment. Students can be asked to reflect upon what, how, and why they have learned. They can be asked to reflect upon their sense of self, their growth and development, their experiences, and their satisfaction. It is critical that structured, consistent, and systematic strategies for such assessment be carefully developed and applied.^{xiv}

ⁱ Suskie, p. 20

ⁱⁱ Suskie, pp. 21, 142

ⁱⁱⁱ Suskie, P. 143

^{iv} Suskie, pp. 21, 215, 226

^v Suskie, pp. 21, 137

^{vi} Suskie, pp. 21, 137

^{vii} Suskie, pp. 21, 202, 203

^{viii} Suskie, pp. 21, 165, 167

^{ix} Suskie, pp. 21, 239 - 242

^x Suskie, p. 21

^{xi} Suskie, p. 21

^{xii} Suskie, p. 21

^{xiii} Suskie, p. 21

^{xiv} Suskie, p. 21, 183, 185