



Meaningful Course Revision: Enhancing Academic Engagement Using Student Learning Data

Catherine M. Wehlburg; Anker Publishing, 2006.
Reviewed by Francine S. Glazer, Kean University

This book introduces assessment strategies to faculty who want to use meaningful data about student learning to revise their courses. Wehlburg's conversational style makes what might be an intimidating subject very approachable. Her enthusiasm for her subject shines through as she guides the reader through the steps necessary to develop assessment strategies, gather data, and use those data to revise a course.

Wehlburg begins by defining learning outcomes and posing questions fundamental to the assessment process. Throughout, she stresses the importance of revising courses based on assessment data, in order to create courses that deeply engage students. She repeatedly emphasizes the advantages of 'multitasking' a learning activity - that is, using class activities not only to assess the students' progress in the course, but also to evaluate the degree to which they meet the course's learning objectives.

The reader is encouraged to start with assessments already in use in a course before creating new assessments. Several assessments are provided that range from low investment/high payoff to high investment/high payoff. Some of the more straightforward strategies are described clearly enough to enable a faculty member to implement them easily. Other, more complex strategies are described succinctly with references to more comprehensive sources for those interested in pursuing them.

The third chapter starts with a discussion of faculty and student preconceptions about how a college course should be structured. Wehlburg explains how and why our teaching is not only influenced but often limited by our own experiences as students. The chapter then describes various innovative teaching methods that can be used as alternatives to the lecture-test-lecture-test cycle that is so often the default for new faculty who have had little or no preparation for teaching at the college level. Inexperienced faculty may need more assistance in envisioning how to transform their teaching, and will undoubtedly benefit from using this book in consultation with a faculty developer.

In the next chapter, Wehlburg stresses that we must first understand how students learn in order to best determine how we can support that learning. She discusses in depth the concept of 'engaged students' and how to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from one course into another. Active learning and the appropriate uses of rubrics are included as ways to enhance student learning in a particular assignment.

In order to generate useful data for course revision, it is essential to embed assessment activities into the course. The next chapter starts with a discussion of how to adapt existing activities for use in assessing student learning. After outlining the teaching goals for the course, the reader is asked to evaluate current teaching and in-class activities in light of those goals. Mapping class activities against teaching goals can help to identify goals that are already served by existing activities, as well as goals that might benefit from the addition of new activities. A thorough discussion follows of various instructional activities and how they can be used for assessment purposes, as well as guiding questions to consider when deciding on whether or not to incorporate a new activity into a course. The discussion of embedding assessment moves smoothly into a larger discussion of planning the course, starting with student learning outcomes that derive from the course activities and from other data sources such as program review or other departmental assessments, and moving from there to teaching and learning activities, and various grading policies and practices.

A book about course revision via assessment would be incomplete without a discussion of “closing the loop.” Wehlburg provides examples of several methods used by different faculty to track and later incorporate their observations into their courses. She then skillfully guides the reader through a series of ways to collect and use assessment information - first informally through information gathered in class or from assignments, and also formally through embedded assessment activities.

The last two chapters of the book focus on the ‘big picture’ - using assessment at the departmental and institutional levels. The author extends the principles of assessment to include writing a departmental mission statement and developing departmental learning outcomes and where in the curriculum specific outcomes should be met. Sharing those learning outcomes with the students is a way to engage them more fully in their major program. Wehlburg then describes various methods a department can use to assess whether their students are meeting specific objectives, and how to use those data to make departmental curricular decisions. Assessment can serve as a valuable tool to increase communication and collaboration among faculty on matters of teaching and curriculum.

Creating an institutional culture of assessment could easily be a book in its own right. Wehlburg introduces the topic, including benefits and possible obstacles to transforming the campus culture along with a list of characteristics of an institutional culture of assessment, and provides numerous references for readers who want to explore the topic in more depth. To this end, I would have liked to have seen a more extensive discussion of the obstacles involved in departmental and higher level assessment innovations. Specifically, it would be helpful to have responses to typical objections raised by faculty members. For example, resistant faculty might object to embedding these departmental assessments in their courses as a “violation of academic freedom,” and untenured faculty may have legitimate concerns that the assessment data might be used outside of the standard retention/tenure process to evaluate their teaching to their detriment.

As Wehlburg notes, faculty often revise their courses based on ambiguous reasons such as

intuition or student comments on course evaluations. This book describes how to use multiple and direct methods to measure student learning, and how to use the resulting data to make informed decisions about how to restructure a course. It is a valuable resource for faculty members who want to create an environment where their students are engaged learners.



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