

# The National Teaching & Learning FORUM

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## CONTENTS

- **EDITOR'S NOTE**, p. 3.
- **Triple Play**, by Charlie Sweet, Hal Blythe, and Bill Phillips, Eastern Kentucky University, p. 1. From Tinkers to Evers to Chance makes sense to baseball historians, and formative, on-the-spot assessment will make sense to faculty.
- **EVALUATION: A Final Examination on Grading**, by John Immerwahr, Villanova University, p. 4. The hard questions about grading never get easier, but they have to be asked again and again.
- **RESEARCH WATCH: Teaching as Expert Making**, by Leah Savion, Indiana University, p. 6. The path from novice to expert can leave students feeling as lost as Hansel and Gretel. The bread crumbs offered in this overview of the psychological concepts involved can help faculty lead students where they need to go.
- **TECHPED: Can Online Education Save Higher Ed From the Recession?** by Michael L. Rodgers, Southeast Missouri State University, p. 9. Panaceas seldom come without side-effects. What are the unasked questions about online learning and can it really save us from the recession?
- **AD REM . . . : The Power of "I believe,"** by Marilla Svinicki, University of Texas-Austin, p. 12. Changing students' minds is difficult surgery when you can't see where the beliefs are hiding.

## Triple Play

*Charlie Sweet, Hal Blythe, and Bill Phillips  
Eastern Kentucky University*

In baseball a triple play is rare, awesome to behold because of its high degree of difficulty, and usually game-changing. In the classroom a triple play such as we are going to suggest need not be rare, is easy to execute, provides game-changing assessment, and develops critical thinking skills as well as deep learning.

The Assessment Wars are over, happily, as instructors have learned the value of both summative and formative assessment. Summative assessment, usually employed at the end of the semester, provides a snapshot of learner progress but is often threatening to the learner, is teacher driven, and is rarely used to improve a specific lesson. In contrast, formative assessment provides immediate instructional feedback in a nonthreatening way that involves student self-regulation and promotes learner attainment.

Bloom (1968) includes formative assessment as an integral part of his work. Students learn best through active learning, which involves questioning, interacting with peers, and discussing concepts with the instructor. Among the difficulties with active learning are maintaining instructional control, keeping student discussions on task, and developing higher-order critical thinking skills. By providing the mechanism for immediate feedback from students, formative assessment allows instructors to change their lessons during class to meet the needs of the students. Thus, an instructor can immediately determine if

what was taught was caught. After all, as McKeachie notes in *Teaching Tips* (2006), "The primary purpose of assessment is to provide feedback to students and teacher so that learning can be facilitated" (85), and as Suskie (2004) adds, students learn deeper when, among other things, "they receive prompt feedback on their work" (11).

While books and articles proliferate on what Angelo and Cross (1993) have called classroom



assessment, we'd like to suggest a trio of short and simple techniques that can be used at the beginning, middle, and end of a classroom session to promote deeper student learning while helping you understand what your students took and did not take from your instruction. Importantly, our formative assessment triple play provides the added value of immediate evaluative response.

## The All-Knowing, All-S-E-E-ing Eye

In *Learning To Think Things Through* (2009), Nosich offers the **S-E-E-I** (sometimes called the SEE-ing I) strategy for clarifying what he calls "fundamental and powerful concepts" (40). Most instructors introduce major concepts at the beginning of class; in fact, learning these ideas is actually part of that day's class objectives. For instance, let's suppose in your Intro to Literature class, during your discussion of first-person narrators you bring up the new idea of the unreliable narrator. Instead of watching student body language or even calling on selected students, you could assess your class's comprehension individually and collectively by asking them to follow this four-step process and write out some information:

**State the term**—i.e., in one sentence define what you think the fundamental and powerful concept of unreliable means.

**Elaborate on it**—i.e., paraphrase the definition of the concept in your own words vs. what the instructor said/Power-Pointed, and take longer than a single sentence.

**Exemplify**—i.e., provide an example that the instructor did not use, and don't employ the story

read for that day (as it was probably assigned as exemplification).

**Illustrate it**—i.e., try to use a picture, a diagram, a simile, analogy, or a concept map (34).

At this point, don't just collect the information, for while you will know what your students knew when you check it over, that's usually after class and too late to make adjustments. On the other hand, if you ask a few students to read what they wrote, or even momentarily group them and ask each group to select the strongest and weakest responses along with reasons and report out, then you achieve immediate feedback, both from their peers and from you. Later on, you can evaluate all the responses.

## CLIMB Every Mountain (or Pyramid)

Utilizing a mid-class assessment instrument can also be effective.

Two theories undergird one such possible tool. Ken Bain, author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*

(2004), has found that student learning occurs optimally when new knowledge—e.g., what you presented in the first part of a class session—is added to old knowledge (taken from earlier sessions)

about which the student cares. In 2001 Anderson et al. revised Bloom's Taxonomy so that Creating (which had been called Synthesis) was placed at the top of the pyramid as the highest of higher-order critical thinking skills (i.e., applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating).

C.L.I.M.B. is a five-step assessment process that encourages analysis and synthesis. Ask your students to:

Choose a concept from the first half of the class session.

Don't just collect the information. After class it's usually too late to make adjustments.

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## Editor's Note:

Those three boys down in my home state, Kentucky, have been doing a lot of down and dirty thinking about thinking tools for effective teaching. We heard from **Charlie Sweet, Hal Blythe, and Bill Phillips** on connecting with students earlier in the *Forum* (18/5). This time, "Triple Play" presents three procedural techniques nicely reduced to related mnemonics for making the most of class time by embedding three different approaches to assessing students' learning right there in the class that day. The fruits of such exercises doubtless will give faculty who try them important information on what's working with their students and what is not, but a point the authors don't emphasize is that the exercises will also compel students to become conscious of where they stand in their own learning *as learning* rather than as a response to how they felt about the class that day.

The piece in this issue that may unsettle faculty comes from **John Immerwahr**, also a recent voice in these pages (see his article on good teaching and the seven principles St. Augustine recommended, 18/4). What may unsettle readers comes from the questions he poses, hard questions about fairness and grading. Surely grading has to be the most onerous part of teaching, and there seem to me no easy answers to the questions John asks. Perhaps "the answer" to them in terms of the practice of teaching lies in continuing to ask them with thoughtful sincerity, struggling for, if not answers, at least actions that seem contextually correct.

Every faculty member knows the challenge of teaching as an overwhelming one, at least occasionally. Why is that? Because the business of meeting students where they are in their beliefs, their development, their values, their aspirations, and leading them to places perhaps rather different from what they'd imagined is not like programming a computer or moving through a check list. It's helping students move from novice to expert. Understanding the dimensions of this involves juggling quite a number of concepts. **Leah Savion** does a good job of outlining these in a piece that deserves several readings. Though it may look like a check list, the piece is rather an outline for thinking about one's teaching.

One of the dangers faculty face (or so it's said) is living too much inside our heads. Though we might like to focus on our students and our subject, more and more often we are called to look up and consider the larger environment. Changes there influence teaching matter and who better to help think them through than faculty? **Mike Rodger's** TECHPED looks at the shadow of online teaching now falling over higher education—or the phoenix rising from within it, depending on your point of view. Mike raises a number of unsettling questions about this new mode of reaching students that must command our attention as committed teachers.

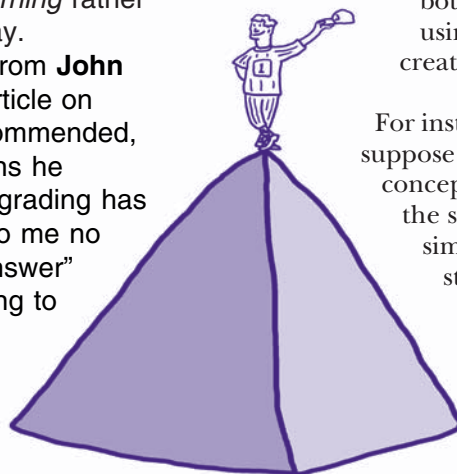
Finally, **Marilla Svinicki** reminds us just how important student beliefs are in terms of their ability to learn from us and our ability to teach them. Marilla repeats a phrase—"hot cognition"—from an article by Paul Pitrich, et al., a phrase that catches the challenge of coping with misconceptions and mistaken prior knowledge right by the nape of the neck. Such beliefs can't be coldly laid down, because they're mixed up with students' sense of self, confidence in self, and so on. So changing them seems not just disorienting, but threatening. Perhaps, not to be too saccharine about it, the firmest belief faculty must not lose sight of in all this is the belief that they can make a positive difference and forge a meaningful meeting of minds with students. Without that, why bother? —James Rhem

List its similarities to those of a concept you found particularly interesting in a previous class session.

Identify differences between the two concepts.

Make up an example of each concept—i.e., do not use examples from your reading or class discussion, but create them from scratch.

Build a paragraph in which you demonstrate your understanding of both concepts by using your created examples.



For instance, let's suppose the new concept chosen by the student is simile. The student might link the simile to metaphor, a concept introduced earlier in the semester. A

list identifying similarities and differences might point out that both concepts are figures of speech relating two seemingly different things (usually called a tenor and a vehicle), but whereas the metaphor is an identification (e.g., the student might make up "my love's eyes are twin halogen headlights")—students say the darnedest things—a simile is a comparison usually using "like" or "as" (e.g., the student might make up, "my love's eyes are like flashing LED Christmas lights"). To build a paragraph using these examples to demonstrate understanding, an enterprising student might create a poem, a song lyric, or even a thirty-second commercial.

## Here's a Good IDEA

While early and mid-class assessments allow for immediate feedback and changing instruction on the fly, I.D.E.A. assessment works best at the end of class. Hence, it helps students evaluate the degree to which they have learned some-

thing, and it helps instructors determine the focal point of future classes, whether it's time to introduce new concepts or spend some more time with those recently presented.

Stop class about ten minutes before the bell and have students compose along this four-step process:

Identify one important concept learned today.

Describe or define why you think this concept is important.

Elaborate what questions the new concept brings to mind (as instructor, emphasize these questions don't have to be answered immediately).

Apply the concept to some area in your life.

## Before We Go

No, we weren't always true believers in assessment, but we found the more we tried these strategies, the more involved our students became in the classroom, the more they learned, and the more proficient with higher-order thinking skills, especially self-monitoring, they became. Just as there is no one way to turn a triple play, you might employ any one of these strategies or any combination at any time in the given session (and you can choose to grade the products or simply use them to monitor learning). Regardless of what you choose, as in baseball, the triple play will improve your game and that of your students. |||

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