

Ph. M. Weishaar,
Ph.D., Assistant Professor
(Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville)

REFLECTIONS ON STUDENT LEARNING
BY A NEW PROFESSOR

Ф. М. Вейшаар,
асистент, професор,
університет південного Іллінайсу, Едвардсвіль, США

ВИВЧЕННЯ РЕАКЦІЇ СТУДЕНТІВ
НА НОВІ ПІДХОДИ У ВИКЛАДАННІ

Метод оцінювання «Складні питання» спонукає студентів ставити анонімні питання щодо найбільш складних моментів занять. Метою викладача є використання цієї інформації для поліпшення процесу викладання матеріалу. Анонімність спонукає студентів до більш чесних відгуків. Вони дають можливість переконатися, що заняття такі є корисними. Особливо це стосується студентів, які мають вади здоров’я.

Introduction
After working as a teacher and school administrator for over thirty years in the United States, I took a position at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (U.S.) in the Department of Special Education and Communication Disorders as assistant professor.

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville is located in the Midwest United States, close to the city of St. Louis, Missouri. It is a metropolitan university on a campus of approximately 2,660 acres with about 13,500 students. The student to faculty ratio is sixteen to one. The university is
young and just celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2007. One important value for the university is «excellence». This means that there is high quality student learning and continuous improvement and innovation. Two long term goals of the university include promoting «engaged students and capable graduates» and «innovative high quality programs.»

As a new professor I was anxious to assure that I was effective in teaching students in my classes and, more importantly, that they were learning. Because I wanted to be an effective university professor, I began to investigate how to increase student learning and how to become an effective professor.

**Background on Reform and Assessment of Outcomes**

Since the 1980’s, public schools in the United States have been engaged in reform as an effort to improve outcomes for all students. This reform focused on what students should know and be able to do as a result of their learning. Prior to the 1980’s, quality education was measured by the types and amounts of resources placed into the school system. The reform movement began to focus on the university in the early 2000’s. In 2006, the United Stated Department of Education wrote a report, titled, «A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education» (2). In part, the report suggested that student learning and accountability should be the focus in higher education.

Assessment of student learning becomes central to assuring that students are learning in the classroom. Many university instructors unconsciously engage is assessing what students are learning as a result of the professor’s teaching. Some common assessment techniques include observation of students and analysis of student written work. Effective classroom assessment is aligned with student learning. Consideration of assessment results should result in instructional changes to meet student needs. For example, if the professor analyzes errors on a written test and finds that most students make an error on one question, the professor would assume that students do not understand the concept that was the basis for the test question. The professor, then, would re-teach and review this concept. In this case, assessment, i.e., the test question, leads the professor to change or alter instruction, i.e., reviewing the concept. There are many different assessment techniques used in the university classroom (1). What follows is one assessment technique, «Confusing Issues»,(3) that I incorporated into my teaching and how I used the technique to improve student learning.
My Story

I remember my first class of twenty-five university undergraduate students, some of whom had disabilities. The students ranged in age from nineteen years old to about fifty years old. I remember thinking as I walked into my first class that it would be easy to teach university students, who wanted to learn. I quickly learned how difficult it was to teach and assure that students learned the topic. To assess learning, I used a simple assessment technique called «Confusing Issues». I presented a lesson to my first class using my lecture style of teaching. During the class, I periodically asked students if there were questions about the material being taught. Very few questions were posed. Toward the end of class, I told students that I wanted to understand if the lecture was clear. I then asked students to anonymously write on a piece of paper the most confusing part of the lesson and the clearest part of the lesson. Students gave the papers to me at the end of class. Later, I reviewed what students wrote on their papers and was very surprised to learn that most of the topics discussed during class were confusing to students and only a few items were clear! It appeared that they did not understand the point of the lecture and were confused by the contents of the topic. The students with disabilities were equally confused. Because of this feedback, I decided that for the next class I would change the method used to present the lesson.

During the next class, I provided an overview of what we were going to learn for the day as an outline on the board and involved students in small group work periodically throughout the lesson. During group work, I divided the class into small groups of four or five students. Students with disabilities were assigned to work with students who did not have disabilities. The small groups discussed a question, formulated answers, and presented them to the class. Working in small groups actively engaged my students in the topic.

After making these simple changes, there were noticeable changes. At the end of the second class, I again assessed students using «Confusing Issues». Each student wrote on paper the most confusing issues and most clear issues and hand them to me. Students indicated that they liked working in groups and felt that they learned more from the experiences of others in the small group discussion than they could have learned from me lecturing. Many students stated that they clearly understood the content of the topic. I continued to use this assessment tool, «Confusing Issues», for several classes. Eventually, the students told me that everything they
learned was clear. They stated in writing that they understood what my expectations were, how I would assess their knowledge, how the class activities were organized, how to complete assignments, and the content of each lesson. Each time I used this assessment, I summarized their comments. I then made sure that during the next class I would first clarify the areas that were confusing. After using this assessment several times, I was pleased to see that all of the issues that were confusing the previous week were listed as being clearly understood the following week.

**How to Use «Confusing Issues»**

To use this assessment in your university class, these steps should be followed.

- At the end of the class period, ask students to list on a piece of paper the issues in class that were confusing. Then ask them to list the issues that were very clear. Make sure they know that you do not want them to write their names on the paper.
- Ask students to hand the papers to you.
- After class, read the papers and make a list of the «most confusing issues» and another list of the «clear issues».
- Review the lists and think about how your teaching affected the issues, especially the «most confusing issues». Think about how you could adjust or change your teaching or lecture to address these issues.
- At the beginning of the next class, review the issues listed as most confusing and most clear during the previous class. Address the confusing issues by re-teaching the content and check to make sure the students understand the concepts. This re-teaching could include the following ideas.

  ➢ Teach the class with an organizational structure in mind that will help to eliminate confusion. Examples include: using a graphic organizer or outline to preview what you will be teaching, explain the objectives that you hope to accomplish during the lesson, ask students what they already know about the topic, present the lesson, provide practice with your guidance, and allow for independent student practice relative to the topic of the day.
- At the end of the class, again ask students to list on a piece of paper the issues in class that were confusing and those issues that were clear.
- Again, collect the papers, review them, think about changes in your teaching to address these issues, and carry out the teaching change.
- Repeat these assessments for four weeks or until few confusing issues are apparent and most issues are clear.
This assessment technique, «Confusing Issues», involves asking students for anonymous feedback on the clearest and most confusing issues presented during class. The objective is for the instructor to use this information to improve teaching and instruction. By allowing anonymity, students are more likely to give honest feedback. I have found the feedback from the students very helpful in assuring that I am making myself clear and assuring that students are benefiting from my classes, especially students who have disabilities or mental health issues.

References