Growth Based Student Assessment in Technology Education

David Jackson
Associate Professor
Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota
United States
djackson@smumn.edu

Abstract: With the diverse levels of technology experiences of students entering a beginning teacher education technology class poses some unique challenges in how a teacher both teaches and assesses. This past fall I altered a significant portion of the course to differentiate the curriculum, thereby allowing the top students to extend their learning while not having other students feel rushed to meet the expectations of mastery. To facilitate the spirit of learning for personal growth I also altered the assessment of the course to grading on what was learned by the students not what was known. The student survey results indicated very positive perspectives about the use of this strategy. Only one of thirty-nine students indicated a negative perspective with this approach.

Introduction

Too often, assessment drives curriculum. In an effort to place the emphasis on learning versus assessment in my entry-level computer education classes, I altered my approach to grading. During the fall 2003 semester I implemented a grading structure that placed a heavier emphasis on using assessment to support individual learning. The value of implementing this form of grading was seen both in the quality of student work at the top end as it allowed me to differentiate the class. This approach to grading was seen by students as a fair and just way to assess in an education technology class.

Course Context

This study was implemented in a one-credit graduate level educational technology class. The content taught in the class consisted of using technology to enhance communications, technology as a resource tool, and using technology to enhance student learning. There were thirty-nine students with a wide range of ages and experiences with technology.

The assignments given in the class were two-tiered. First, they had to demonstrate mastery of the standards dealing with the lesson. Second, students were given the opportunity to self-direct their learning in areas that were outside of their comfort zone. The strength in this approach is that students felt that they would not be held accountable for failure once they achieved mastery. They would rather be held accountable for demonstrating growth through their engagement in expanding their capacity to work with technology as educators.

Findings

The students revealed their thoughts through a survey given at the end of the course. All students were anonymously surveyed and encouraged to provide written comments regarding their thoughts on grading based on personal growth. Thirty-eight of thirty-nine students reported that they felt this form of grading was very fair. Thirty of the thirty-nine of the learners responded that this approach allowed them to focus more on learning than on the grade. When learners responded to the question “Did this approach to assessment create frustration because of the lack of end product requirement?” thirty-four of the students responded no with the remaining five students responding to some degree.

Students who entered the class with a high level of comfort with technology felt almost identical to those students who had a slight level of discomfort. Perhaps, not surprising were the responses from learners that started class with a high level of discomfort with technology. They reported the greatest satisfaction with this approach to assessment. Beyond the statements of relief, one statement that I believe
captures the students’ feelings was “I was able to focus on what I was learning instead of worrying about everyone else.

Conclusions

The use of a growth based assessment model for grading purposes really provide to be positive in the context of teaching a highly diverse set of adult learners. Learners felt strongly that this approach to assessment allowed them to explore new technologies without having to worry about the end product requirement. Beginning learner felt even a stronger sense of comfort working under this model. As one learner responded, “Once again I feel that it allowed for more exploration, which is how I believe this course should be set-up.