Tired of giving the same old papers and exams? Considering creative ways of assessing student learning

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High-stakes Assignments

**EXAMPLES OF HIGH-STAKES ASSIGNMENTS**

Beginning with sample course learning goals, the following chart can help you identify an effective high-stakes classroom assessment or appropriate types of questions.

*If you want to assess students’...*  
*then assign or give*

**Ability to define key course terminology and/or recall factual information**
- **Writing assignments** that require appropriate use of disciplinary or course terminology
- Fill in the blank questions
- Matching questions
- **Multiple choice questions**
- Short answer definitions/identifications / labeling

**Synthesis of key course concepts**
- **Case studies**
- Debates
- **Essay exams**
- Final projects
- **Multiple choice questions**
- Presentations
- Portfolios
- Research project
- **Simulations/role play**

**High-stakes** = assessment of “final product”  
*encourages synthesis across an entire course/discipline*  
*creation of discipline-specific products*  
*summative (how well have key course concepts & skills been learned?)*

*If you want to assess students’...*  
*then assign or give*

**Performance, or meta-cognitive skills**
- Debates
- Observe a performance
- Presentations
- **Simulations/role play**

**Ability to transfer knowledge or skills and apply them to new situations**
- **Case studies**
- Debates
- **Simulations/role play**

**Creation of new knowledge**
- Creative projects, e.g., original videos, artwork, or websites
- Presentations
- Research projects
- Thesis or dissertation
- Original literary written assignments

From DePaul University “Teaching Commons”
Low-stakes Assignments

Low-stakes = gives the student a chance “to try”
*short in length, easy to achieve, low in points
*application of only 1 skill or competency early on
*formative feedback (learning along the way)

EXAMPLES OF LOW-STAKES ASSIGNMENTS

• When assigning students a writing or research project, break down the elements of the project and use one or more as a low-stakes assignment. Require students to submit their works-in-progress so that they can receive early written feedback and a small grade, which could consist simply of a check or check-minus. Any one (or more) of the following elements could be collected and used as a low-stakes assignment:
  • Prospectus or proposal
  • Abstract
  • Thesis statement
  • Outline
  • Annotated bibliography
  • Specific sections of the final project (e.g., introduction, methods, lit. review)
  • Early-stage drafts of a paper

• Midway through a writing project, have students bring a full or partial draft of their paper to class and then exchange feedback with a peer. Although the assignment is made by students rather than the instructor, students still receive valuable feedback that they can use to revise their work. Try providing students with a rubric to help them give their peers targeted, assignment-specific feedback. Also, consider inviting Writing Center tutors to your class to model how peer review can be conducted effectively.

• In a course where students are required to do weekly readings, assign a reading journal. Entries might require students to summarize and respond to the source, or to answer a set of questions provided by the instructor. Students can submit their journal entries through D2L, by handing in hard copies every other week, or by posting them on a course blog.

• In a course where students learn new computational or mathematical concepts, have a problem posted on the board or screen at the start of each class. Students can work individually, in pairs, or in small groups to find the solution. Spend the first five or ten minutes of class going over the problem as a big group.

• For a course where exams are the primary means of summative assessment, give students a quiz at the end of each week with questions based on content covered up to that point. Although the quiz might not count for credit (or might only count for a very small portion of the final grade), it will give students an idea of what they already learned and which concepts they need to spend more time with. Quizzes can be paper-based, conducted in-class using iClickers, or posted online in D2L.

• Consider having students keep a regular journal where they can engage with and apply course concepts. For example, in an Introduction to Political Science course, ask students to read the politics section of the New York Times and keep a weekly concept-application journal. For each entry, students should select one article that they read, summarize it, and show how the article demonstrates a theoretical concept discussed that week in class. Review students’ journals every other week or so and give each entry a grade out of ten points.
Low-Stakes Assignments (cont’d)

Low-stakes = gives the student a chance “to try”
*short in length, easy to achieve, low in points
*application of only 1 skill or competency early on
*formative feedback (learning along the way)

From DePaul University “Teaching Commons”
### Other High- vs Low-Stakes Ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low-Stakes</th>
<th>High-Stakes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer-review</td>
<td>Literature review or term paper</td>
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<td>Minute papers or writing prompts</td>
<td>Multiple choice, short-answer, or essay exams</td>
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<td>Creating own exam questions or rubrics</td>
<td>Lab exams</td>
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<td>Role-playing</td>
<td>Oral presentations or performances</td>
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<td>Think-Pair-Share</td>
<td>Formal debates</td>
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<td>Pre- or Practice Tests</td>
<td>Video presentation</td>
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<td>Online forum discussion</td>
<td>Portfolio</td>
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<td>True/False “Common Sense Inventory”</td>
<td>Building a model or a case study</td>
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<tr>
<td>Producing a short video or audio</td>
<td>Creating a webpage</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Student Choice” (present findings in own way)</td>
<td>Creating an iMovie trailer</td>
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Self-Reflection

1. What do I want my students to learn, know, or do?
2. Do I want to promote learning (low-stakes, formative) or see if learning occurred (high-stakes, summative)?
3. What ways can they demonstrate their knowledge or skill? What type of activity best reflects how this knowledge/skill is demonstrated “in the real world”? 