

Frequently Asked Questions About Embedded Assessment in Core Curriculum Courses

What is embedded assessment?

Embedded assessment is a process whereby a faculty member consciously, explicitly and systematically monitors whether or not students are meeting the core curriculum goals in a core curriculum course. Assessment items are incorporated into existing evaluative instruments (e.g., exams, quizzes, short papers) already being administered in a course.

Why should a faculty member incorporate embedded assessment into his or her course?

Embedded assessment allows a faculty member teaching a core curriculum course to determine whether or not students are fulfilling the core curriculum goals relevant to that course. In many cases, this knowledge will enable a faculty member to confirm that his or her pedagogical approach is effective in giving students the opportunity to meet core curriculum goals. When data indicate that students are not meeting core curriculum goals, a faculty member may want to reflect on how he or she might alter pedagogical approaches to provide more opportunity for students to master core curriculum goals.

Can't measures of whether or not students are meeting core curriculum goals be administered separately from the evaluations (e.g., exams) regularly administered in a course?

Yes, such measures can certainly be administered separately. The virtue of embedded assessment is that it allows a faculty member to measure whether or not students are meeting core curriculum goals without substantially increasing class time devoted to evaluation. Since items measuring mastery of core curriculum goals are incorporated into existing evaluation instruments, little or no additional class time will need to be devoted to administering evaluations.

How can faculty members incorporate embedded assessment into their core curriculum courses?

Indicators of whether or not students are mastering core curriculum goals are added to evaluative instruments already being employed. Among the many types of indicators are (1) multiple choice questions, (2) short answer questions, (3) essay questions, (4) short or long papers, and (5) oral presentations. Indeed, measures of core curriculum goals can be incorporated into any type of evaluative instrument.

Is it necessary to dramatically alter evaluative instruments currently being used in order to measure whether or not students are meeting core curriculum goals?

No, a major benefit of embedded assessment is that this evaluative process does not impose a burden on faculty members. By adding a handful of questions to multiple-choice tests, by including one additional short answer question on each exam, or by making minor modifications to other assignments, it will be possible to gather sufficient data to measure whether or not students are mastering core curriculum goals.

Do I need to embed measures of whether or not students are meeting core curriculum into all the evaluative instruments currently being used in my course?

No, a good indication of whether or not students are meeting core curriculum goals can be obtained by embedding measures in two or three instruments. In fact, if a faculty member does not want to be alerted to potential problems with student learning until the end of the course, it is possible to wait until a final exam or final assignment to embed items. Presumably faculty choosing to wait until the end of the semester to evaluate students' mastery of core goals will use their analysis of imbedded items as they reflect on how to teach their course in the future. One would hope, however, that most faculty members would embed items into several evaluation instruments throughout the course of the semester. Such an approach allows a faculty member to modify pedagogical approaches over the course of the semester if students are not mastering core goals. In addition, early feedback to students enables them to alter study habits if they have not performed well on the embedded items.

Aren't faculty members already measuring whether or not students are mastering core curriculum goals?

No doubt some faculty members are measuring students' success in meeting core curriculum goals. But the more common practice is for evaluative instruments to measure whether or not students have mastered discipline specific material. When evaluative materials do include some items that relate to core curriculum goals, it is uncommon for a faculty member to analyze these items separately. Consequently, a faculty member often does not know whether or not a student is mastering core curriculum goals.

Aren't there some courses whose content is so closely tied to core curriculum goals that all the evaluative materials currently employed provide good measures of whether or not students are meeting core goals?

Some courses are more core friendly than other courses. But even in courses that supply a heavy dose of material related to core goals, it is not always the case that evaluative instruments explicitly measure core curriculum goals. For example, questions on the multiple choice questions administered to students in at least some PHIL201 sections do not reveal whether or not students are meeting one of the core curriculum goals of this course: an understanding of ethical and moral obligations to others. Instead, exam questions tend to focus on particular philosophical theories or definitions of concepts.

Isn't it impossible to measure core curriculum goals?

The Council expects that each core curriculum course will have one or more objectives (specific skills, knowledge or beliefs that students are expected to master) for each of the course's core curriculum goals. Indeed, every academic year some departments are asked to supply documentation that selected core curriculum courses have measurable objectives tied to core curriculum goals. Departments are also required to submit documentation demonstrating that evaluative instruments used in the aforementioned courses include measures of whether or not students are meeting core objectives. In the 2003-04 academic year, measurable objectives and sample assessment items (e.g., test items) were submitted for every course under review. To be sure, most of the objectives for core curriculum courses emerged only when it becomes known that a course would be under review. Never-the-less, it was possible for departments to list measurable objectives for every course.

Of course some core objectives are easier to measure than others. Proficiency in algebraic skills can be straightforwardly measured with a paper and pencil test. In regard to some other objectives, however, measurement may need to be indirect. For example, it may not be feasible to directly observe whether or not students recognize their responsibility to the common good (a core goal included in Category B1). Instead, it may be necessary to ask students how they believe they should respond to selected societal problems.

How can I find out more information about embedded assessment?

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