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Expert Insights: What are Some Important Considerations for the Quality, Types, and Sequence of Assessments?

Ken O'Connor, MEd; Author and Consultant; Assess for Success Consulting, Inc [00:00:15] Quality assessment, I believe, has three basic components: that we have clear learning goals, clear targets, both the what and the how well; that we're clear about the purpose of each assessment; and the third condition of accurate assessment is that we have sound design. And so there are basically three components: clear learning goals, clear purpose, sound design. Now, that's a bit of an oversimplification because sound design has four components to it. First of all, that we use the right method of assessment, that we have what is sometimes called target–method match. So for example, if we're assessing knowledge recall, selected response is fine because it's effective and it's efficient. But if we're assessing skills or the application of knowledge, we have to use performance assessment. So we must have target–method match. The second condition of sound design is that our assessments are well-written, that they're clear, they're unambiguous, and for selected response, that they meet technical requirements. The third condition of sound design is that we sample appropriately. The fourth aspect of sound design is that we avoid bias, that we don't have things automatically, in a sense, distort student achievement. So there can be problems with the student if we're doing an assessment and they're physically unwell, they're mentally upset, they have high test anxiety, for example. We will not get an accurate picture. The second aspect of avoiding bias is the setting of the assessment: heat, noise, comfort. And generally we control that well. But if there are problems, we need to make appropriate adjustments. And the third aspect of avoiding bias is issues with the assessment itself, the other design issues. But one that I think is often a really significant one is the issue of insufficient time. And I'm thinking now of formal assessments, tests, and exams. And if we say, "You've got 2 hours to do this," and a student only does 70% of it, and we score it as if they did the whole thing, we have— we're distorting their achievement. And so I think what we should be doing is rather than providing fixed time, we should provide flex time. And the rule of thumb that's been suggested that works is a third of the base time. So if it's a 2-hour exam, there would then be 40 minutes, a third of that time, that's available to all students. It's not an accommodation. It is simply the recognition of student difference. So I suppose we could say it's actually about equity. Faculty can ensure their assessments are high quality by using checklists of those conditions. And I think also by at times working collaboratively, sharing their assessments with others that have similar expertise, and asking them to maybe use a checklist or discuss whether it's a quality assessment. If we're really concerned about the quality of our assessments, it's a really good idea to have another mind on it. Good sampling involves variety. I think very often in high school and in undergrad, we put way too much emphasis on written assessments, on tests, because we have students who actually know and understand well that isn't their best way for them to show us what they know. And we have two other perfectly legitimate ways of evaluating what students know and understand. We have observation and we have conversation. So we can have products which we've tended to, I would suggest, overrely on. But we can observe students performing and we can converse with students. And they're all perfectly legitimate. And it ideally, as much as possible, we should be using all three of those methods because we can then triangulate our evidence and be confident of the judgments that we're making. When we use a standards base, we should be going back to standards that we've taught previously because we want to make sure that students have maintained their understanding, that it wasn't just a one-shot deal. And I think a really good example of this— I'm a sports fanatic, so I use sports examples. If you go to any high-level sport—NBA, Major League Baseball—and you arrive early, the best players in the world are practicing the basic skills. They're spiraling. And in a sense, that's what we should be doing in learning situations in classrooms, just because we did it once, and at that point the student showed they know and understand, doesn't mean they know and understand. We've got to make sure that we've got depth of understanding. So that requires reteaching, sometimes relearning, and reassessment. But it doesn't have to be a formal reassessment of this assessment. It can be subsequent assessments in our assessment plan.