

Are students learning for the test? A three-stage process to enhance assessment as a learning tool

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Can we extend the learning process from being something that occurs exclusively before an assessment, to instead also include the assessment and a post-assessment extension?

Learners often enter a “binge and purge” cycle of learning that is capped with an assessment. Rather than learning ending at the test, this innovation describes a three-stage process implemented in an immunology course with the aim to continue the learning process during and after the assessment. The three stages of the process were designed to engage the students individually and collaboratively. The first stage was comprised of “thought maps”, where the students hand wrote or hand drew important concepts from the current material. In addition to receiving credit for completing the thought map, students were able to bring their map as a reference to the assessment of the course content it represented. The assessment itself formed the second stage of the learning process. It was designed as a conceptual, case-based assessment, largely comprised of short answer questions followed by short essay questions asking students to explain their reasoning for their short answer responses. These types of questions required students to draw on the conceptual knowledge they had built and consolidated through the process of developing their thought maps. The third stage of the learning process was the opportunity for students to engage in a supplemental group retake of the assessment immediately following the assessment, to allow for revisiting the content with significant peer teaching.

Student feedback revealed that these three components had a positive impact on their learning in the immunology course. Further, some students offered feedback on ways they had used the thought maps in other courses and made suggestions for how the three assessment components could be enhanced to benefit students in subsequent cohorts. This suggests that not only did the innovation extend the learning process during the immunology course as intended, but also may have positive impacts beyond what were hoped.