

## TLA Brief #17: A Learning-Centered Approach to Course Design and Assessment

When I began my career as a faculty instructor, I was faced with the issue of designing a course for the first time. The approach I took was a common one - I developed a list of topics that I felt I needed to cover in the course. However, when I started to develop new programs in exercise science and athletic training at other institutions, I settled on a different approach. Instead of concentrating on topic coverage, I tried to design my courses around what I thought my students needed to learn. My first approach to course design is commonly referred to as a content-centered approach, whereas my second approach is referred to as a learning-centered approach.

In an IDEA paper published by Kansas State (see link below), Dr. L. Dee Fink, Director of Instructional Development at the University of Oklahoma, describes a model of integrated course design that uses a learning-centered approach to designing courses that you may find useful. The model consists of four components: situational factors, learning goals, feedback and assessment, and teaching/learning activities. Central to this model is that all of the components must support and reinforce each other. I think that this highlights an important question that we must keep in mind as we continue to develop and mature our assessment approaches - how do our assessment methods support and reinforce our learning goals and our teaching/learning activities?

Dr. Fink believes that assessment in a learning-centered course must go beyond two mid-terms and a final exam. He describes four assessment approaches that he believes improves student learning: forward-looking assessment, criteria and standards, self assessment, and "FIDeLity" feedback.

Forward-looking assessment is based on the question, "In what kind of situation do I expect students to need, or be able to use, what they have learned in this course?" A more familiar term for forward-looking assessment is "authentic assessment". This is not to say that assessment approaches that concentrate on whether students have retained the material they studied have no role in assessment. Instead, I think we need to be mindful about when one approach may be more appropriate than the other. Forward-looking assessment is usually more appropriate when we want to assess higher-order cognitive abilities and as an active learning technique.

As I discussed in an email message to faculty members last year, criteria and standards are important components of educating our students about our expectations. They are used to educate students about the traits or characteristics of high quality work. It is one way we can use to delineate and communicate our high expectations for student learning. Rubrics are one method of clearly defining our criteria and standards for students.

We talked about the importance of providing our students with opportunities to engage in self-assessment during the last faculty meeting. Through self-assessment activities, students learn to assess their own performance and learning needs. I consider this an important lifelong learning skill. Finally, "FIDeLity" feedback is a

mnemonic for remembering the four characteristics of feedback that Dr. Fink believes enhances student learning: Frequent, Immediate, Discriminating, and Loving.

While his book, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*, contains a full description of how to use Dr. Fink's model for course design, the abbreviated description in the IDEA paper does provide a good background in this approach. I recommend it as a starting point to anyone interested in course design.

Link to Dr. Fink's paper: [http://www.idea.ksu.edu/papers/Idea\\_Paper\\_42.pdf](http://www.idea.ksu.edu/papers/Idea_Paper_42.pdf)

Interested in learning more about instructional design, teaching techniques and or student learning? The following resources are available in the OAIR Office:

Understanding by Design

Designing Effective Instruction

Teaching at its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors

Tools for Teaching

Teaching Tips

Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher

Better Teaching, More Learning

Student Motivation, Cognition and Learning

Learning and Motivation in the Postsecondary Classroom

Previous TLA Briefs can be found at:

<http://www.morningside.edu/academics/research/assessment/handbook.htm>