

Learning from Students' Work

"When you see a whole thing, it seems that it's always beautiful. Planets, lives...But up close the world's all dirt and rocks. And day to day, life's a hard job, you get tired, you lose the pattern." --Ursula K. Le Guin

Speaking poetically, Le Guin makes a point common to many discussions of self-assessment of teaching: pattern is all. Let's look at a few ways to reflect on the patterns in our own teaching.

Start with the positive

- Analyze a graded set of work. For a final project or paper, in what rubric area do most students shine? On the exam, is there a topic where students generally did well?
- Does the same pattern of strengths appear in other assignments? Patterns that appear across various assessments are typically most useful.
- Can something be borrowed from this bright spot and applied elsewhere: a specific teaching strategy, an accessible reading, effective feedback?

Consider one weaker area

- Again begin with student work, looking for a topic where students performed less well than hoped. Consider whether that weakness also appeared in some other assignments.
- In the negative area, look for changeable things. While we can rarely make a tricky concept easy, it may be possible to spend more time on it, or add a low-stakes assessment, or improve our feedback.
- When making either positive or negative changes, moderation often works best. Instead of trying to remake a course, consider changing just one or two important things, but working persistently at it.

Ignore the outliers

- During the semester, students all long the spectrum deserve out careful attention.
- But at the semester's end, we learn most by considering what was true for most students.
- Many faculty members concentrate on what Buskit and his co-authors in the article below call "the lone voice of doom." It's tempting to obsess about the failing student who hated everything from our textbook to the room temperature, but keeping the big picture in mind reveals more.

As the semester closes, it might be helpful to keep this paraphrase of Le Guin in mind: teaching is hard, we get tired, but it's smart to find some patterns.

Want to read a broader treatment of self-assessment of teaching?

“Evaluating and Improving Your Teaching” by W. Buskit, J. Keely & J. Irons. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/evaluating-and-improving-your-teaching>