

Testing Alternatives

What is a realistic way to evaluate students' knowledge of a subject? One way is traditional testing—having students sit in a classroom and answer questions without looking at their study materials. What if there was a better way?

Standardized testing may not be the best way to measure student learning. This type of testing is normally used to advise decision makers about learning on a group level. Studies show, however, that individual assessment using alternative means is a more successful way to measure learning. Varied forms of testing, such as take-home essays, projects, and classroom discussions, may be a better reflection of the knowledge that students have gained.

Many teachers believe that the best way to find out if students have learned a subject thoroughly is to let them go home, look at their materials, and write comprehensive essays. These educators believe that writing essays helps students to synthesize the material they have learned during the course, and shows the teacher that they have the ability to take many facts and turn them into a cohesive whole.

There are many characteristics of essay writing that educators think are beneficial for students. Creating a comprehensive essay from a semester's worth of study exploits higher-level problem-solving skills, encourages deeper reflection, and has more real-world relevance than memorizing facts and reproducing them in a classroom test.

A similar way to assess student learning is a take-home project. Projects can show a teacher how students can work in a group, plan and execute an idea from start to finish, and integrate knowledge from a whole term. Looking at how students behave in leadership roles, or as team members, is valuable to evaluate how they will perform in a job.

Many teachers judge how well students are learning by holding class discussions. Students are evaluated on their ability to raise intelligent questions and debate the material thoroughly with their fellow classmates. In this way, students are required to build on each other's knowledge and talk about subjects in much more detail than is ordinarily asked for on a traditional classroom test.

Educators who promote alternative testing believe that they have new and better ways to evaluate student performance. Realistic evaluation is important for teachers who want to know how well their instruction is working. After all, the purpose of assessment is to make sure that students are truly learning.