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What's the Difference?

Many of us have been in the teaching profession long enough to have heard spirited debates about what constitutes student learning and how we might assess that accurately. What we sometimes don't realize is that assessment is not the only way of determining student learning. In fact, the word "assessment" is often misunderstood by a vast majority of faculty who use the word to describe any aspect of student learning outcomes.

In reality, says Jeff Platt of North Iowa Community College * "There are three aspects of determining student learning: measurement, assessment, and evaluation. Measurement is the process of gathering information and expressing it in numerical terms (e.g., questionnaires, surveys, inventories). Assessment is the interpretation of measurement in order to make a decision. Evaluation is the process of making a value judgment." For example, assessment tells you a student is able to grasp certain biological concepts that are considered average knowledge for a freshman university student. Whereas evaluation tells you that this outcome is not necessarily good for a group of college third-year students majoring in biology.

I hope this tip helps clarify some of the misconceptions about the role of assessment in student learning.

*(The following explanation was adapted from a discussion by Jeff Platt Psychology Instructor North Iowa Area Community College)

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