

# Authentic Assessment

## Direct Observation



### DEFINITION

The use of direct observation as an assessment evaluates students' abilities through observing their performance. Generally speaking, the assessors observe the student for a given period of time and make notes to help with grading and providing feedback. Interviews or oral presentations may also be used to complement and supplement the direct observations as well. In experiential learning, direct observations not only assess students' performance, but also evaluate their holistic competencies (e.g., critical thinking, leadership skills, resilience) development.

The structure and form of direct observation assessments can vary among disciplines. For example, the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) is a form of of this approach that is typically used in health sciences.

### HOW DOES IT WORK?

To design a direct observation assessment, teachers take the following steps:

1. Inform students about the objectives of the direct observation assessment.
2. Provide students with details of the direct observation assessment (e.g., what they should do during the observation, where the observation will take place, how students be observed and assessed).
3. Build the assessment criteria for the direct observation assessment.
4. Create a structured marking sheet for assessors (i.e., observers) and allow them adequate time to become familiar with the assessment criteria in advance.
5. Provide feedback to students on the outcomes of the direct observation.



## BENEFITS & CHALLENGES

### Benefits

- Direct observations provide a valuable way to assess students' practical skills as well as holistic competencies.
- Direct observations do not allow any room for plagiarism or false reports, which can help address concerns about reliance on or undisclosed use of Generative AI.

### Challenges

- Some may argue that direct observations are not adequate enough as a full stand-alone assessment. It may need to be complemented by other assessment approaches.
- Direct observations are time-consuming in terms of the time needed for both preparation and assessment. It can be expensive and resource-heavy as well.
- In direct observations, students being observed may be unwittingly influenced by the observer and their presence. This may affect and even alter students' performance.
- Direct observations are subjective in nature.

## CASE SAMPLE

### Direct observation assessment of procedural skills at the College of Pharmacy at the University of Texas

#### Design of the assessment:

As part of a fourth-year advanced pharmacy practice experience (APPE) curriculum at the College of Pharmacy, University of Texas, a direct observation of procedural skills (DOPS) exercise was conducted.

Students completed a required ambulatory care rotation supervised by a team of preceptors. As part of the DOPS task, each student selected one patient to complete a medication-focused assessment for; there were additional criteria provided for the selection of the chosen patient.

After conducting the patient workup (a diagnostic examination), students presented their patient's case to a preceptor, and then also interviewed that patient.

#### How are students assessed?

Preceptors were given instructions on how to use the provided DOPS scoring rubric at the start of the rotation. The rubric was used for both students' presentations on their patient case, and the students' patient interviews.

The areas of the DOPS rubric included: (1) communication skills, (2) professionalism, and (3) appropriate recommendations. These areas were reflected in a checklist of 12 items for evaluating students' performance. The items were rated on a 1 ('does not know', where the student lacked knowledge of how to perform the task) to 5 ('know', where the student was able to independently complete the task). Alongside providing the complete checklist to students, there was also space for the preceptor to offer feedback regarding strengths and areas for future improvement.

#### Reference

Linedecker, S. J., Barner, J., Ridings-Myhra, J., Garza, A., Lopez, D., & McIntyre, W. (2017). Development of a direct observation of procedural skills rubric for fourth-year pharmacy students in ambulatory care rotations. *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*, 74(Supplement 1), S17-S23.

## TIPS FOR DESIGNING

- Determine if the purpose of the direct observation assessment is summative or formative.
- When designing a marking sheet for the assessors and observers, providing clear rating scales and/or performance descriptors can enhance efficiency in the assessment process, compared to using open-ended items.