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Assessment for Learning

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The changing nature of assessment

Assessment is probably the most important thing we can do to help our students learn. We may not like it, but students can and do ignore our teaching; however, if they want to get a qualification, they have to participate in the assessment processes we design and implement. For that reason I believe it is worth thinking through, individually and collectively, what we currently do and exploring how we can do our best to ensure that our assessment practices help rather than hinder learning. In this paper I will explore these issues, play with a negative exercise about what we can do to hinder learning and conclude with some pointers towards integrating learning and assessment.

Internationally, assessment is changing as the nature of teaching and learning in post-compulsory education changes. The student population in many countries is becoming diverse, with increasing numbers of part-time students, mature students and students coming from non-traditional backgrounds, particularly in the UK, where there is a political imperative to widen participation to students from socio-economic groups who previously had little or no access to higher education. A diverse population of learners necessitates a change in practice in post-compulsory education, with less focus on didactic tutor-led approaches and more concentration on the learning outcomes that students can hope to achieve (Miller *et al.*, 1998; Rust, 2002).

Fit-for-purpose assessment

I have long argued that assessment needs to be 'fit-for-purpose'; that is, it should enable evaluation of the extent to which learners have learned and the extent to which they can demonstrate that learning (Brown & Smith, 1997). We need to consider not just *what* we are assessing and *how* we are doing it (particularly which methods and approaches), but also *why* — our rationale for assessing on

any particular occasion and in any context. Our different reasons (to motivate students, to encourage activity, to provide guidance and feedback for remediation, grading and selection) will impact on our choice of assessment instruments, which may include the wide diversity of under-used methods which are suitable in different contexts. Rather than continuing to over-use unseen time-constrained exams, essays and reports, for example, we can consider using portfolios, in-tray exercises, posters, annotated bibliographies, reflective commentaries, critical incident accounts, reviews, role-plays, case studies and many of the other available means of assessment that are widely used in higher education institutions in the UK and internationally (Brown & Knight, 1994).

We also need to think about the agents *who* undertake the task. For example, if we want to assess group work, using intra-peer group assessment seems sensible in order to access group process, whereas if we want to assess employability, involving placement supervisors or clients would give us a better understanding of how students engage in a working environment than a hastily scribbled post-hoc work placement report could do. In some cases only the tutor will do, but these occasions I believe are fewer than is often posited.

We also need to consider *when* is the best time to assess (not, I would suggest, all at the very end of a learning programme if we want students to have a chance to learn from early errors). Is it possible to give students a choice about when they are ready to be assessed? How far can we (or should we) allow multiple attempts at assessment over a period of time? Why is UK higher education so wedded to a model of assessment that means that an Honours degree can normally only be undertaken over three years? Why not much longer? Or shorter?

To ensure that assessment is part of the learning process, I would argue that it should be learner-centred assessment and should reflect a learner-centred curriculum. Assessment methods and approaches need to be focused on *evidence of achievement* rather than the ability to regurgitate information. Inevitably this means a lesser concentration on traditional written assessments, particularly time-constrained unseen exams, and a greater emphasis on assessment instruments that measure not just recall of facts, but also the students' abilities to use the material they have learned in live situations. To be *valid*, the assessment needs to focus as well on what is intended to be learned. If we want our students to demonstrate employability when they graduate, our assessments need to be designed to be *practice-orientated,* whether in terms of the practice

of being a researcher or applications to professional contexts such as being an artist, an accountant, a health practitioner or a quantity surveyor. Rather than assessing a learner's ability to write about good practice, an effective assessment strategy would seek to measure how the student can put into practice the learning achieved. The methods used need to be *authentic,* that is, assessing what they claim to assess, not just what is easy to assess.

Any assessment strategy needs to be *efficient* in terms of staff time, cost-effective for the organizations concerned and should ensure that learners find the tasks they are set manageable, relevant and developmental. We cannot simply expect our students or ourselves to just keep working harder and harder; where possible we must make best use of the available technologies to make assessment more efficient (Brown *et al*., 1994). The assessment tasks need to be *integral* to the learning process, rather than a subsequent bolt-on and, to ensure this, tutors should be able to concentrate equally strongly on giving feedback and on making evaluative decisions about performance. Timing of assessment is also a key issue, since the responses given to assessed work need to allow opportunities for amendment and remediation of errors.

To enable a synthesis of learning achieved, asking students to write a reflective account can be very helpful. This provides an opportunity for students to review their experiences of the programme of learning as a whole, describe how they have developed over the period of study, reflect upon the literature that has influenced and guided their practice, and indicate how they plan to develop their work and themselves into the future.

Current literature on assessment argues strongly that the process should be a *transparent* one, with criteria that are explicit and clear to all concerned (assessors, those being assessed and moderators reviewing the process) from the outset. Assessment can become *valid* when the assessors use evidence of achievement, clearly matched against the criteria (Brown & Glasner, 1999; Gibbs & Rowntree, 1999; Thorpe, 2000).

Any assessment strategy that aims to be *inclusive* should deploy a variety of methods for assessment (for example written assignments, presentations, reflective accounts and so on), so that the same students are not always disadvantaged. All participants need to be provided with *equivalent opportunities* to demonstrate their abilities and maximize their potential.

It is imperative to clarify tutors' and students' expectations at the time of giving the assessment brief to the students. This means that the assessment criteria need to be clear, explicit, framed in language that is meaningful to staff and students and available well in advance of the commencement of activities that will subsequently be assessed.

The programme of assessment chosen needs to be *reliable*, so that different assessors derive the same grade for similar work (inter-assessor reliability) and individual assessors mark reliably to a defined standard (intra-assessor reliability). This can only be assured when the criteria are clearly understood by all who undertake assessment.

Creative subjects like music and art often provide particular challenges when it comes to assessment. Where possible, it may be helpful to involve students in establishing or negotiating the criteria for assessment, so that they fully understand what is expected of them. The degree of subjectivity involved in evaluating artefacts and productions needs to be recognized and articulated, so that everyone concerned understands the rules of the game. Assessors need to be sure that where students are involved in assessed work of widely divergent types, they can be assured of the equivalence rather than the identicality of the assessment experience. For example, students involved in group activities (such as drama and dance productions, or the production of installations) will necessarily take different roles, so assessment criteria must be designed to ensure that all students have an equal chance of achieving high grades.

Feedback

This for me is the principal area in which we can influence the extent to which our assessment practices are developmental, rather than solely judgmental. If assessment is to be integral to learning, feedback must be at the heart of the process. Even though it is time-consuming, I would argue that significant energy must be devoted to helping students to understand not only where they have gone wrong, but also what they need to do to improve. They also need feedback when they have done well, to help them understand what is good about their work and how they can build on it and develop further. No one can pretend this is an easy task. Summative feedback, which enables judgements to be made for progression and completion, needs quite clearly and overtly to relate to the assessment criteria and to be strongly aligned to the curriculum objectives.

Formative feedback is crucial. It needs to be detailed, comprehensive, meaningful to the individual, fair, challenging and supportive, which is a tough task for busy academics. We must consider using the whole range of means available to us to make this possible, including computer-aided assessment and strategies for giving feedback efficiently such as assignment return sheets, assignment reports, in-class collective feedback and other means (Brown *et al.*, 1994).

We can also use self-assessment, peer-assessment and group assessment, none of which should be regarded as a 'quick fix', because they take considerable briefing, training and rehearsal if they are to be effective, but can, when properly managed, save some staff time and they are extremely valuable in helping students interpret criteria. As these methods also encourage students' metacognition (that is, a means of learning about their own learning), they are also very effective in encouraging deep rather than surface learning.

How to use assessment to prevent learning!

These tongue-in-cheek tips are designed to make you think about some of the behaviours that can actually get in the way of students' learning. They could be shown to students, who could be asked why the advice presented here is seriously misguided; such a discussion might help students better understand what is really expected of them in assessment.

- **Keep students in the dark about the rules of the game**. Brighter students will intuitively understand the criteria and naturally excel. You will thereby get a good range of marks, from the truly appalling to the really outstanding. This will make your external examiner happy.
- **Do all the assessment at the end of the learning programme**. You can't assess students until you have taught them everything, so all the assessment needs to take place at the very end of the process. If they then fail, it just shows that they weren't very good.
- **Make sure you know the identity of the student who has done each piece of work**. Then you can check whether the standard is what you would expect of that student. You can then correct marks if you think that a poor student has over-performed or a strong student has not done themselves justice. You can normally tell early on what kind of a degree a student will get and expectations are rarely proved wrong.

- **To be fair to all students, give each an identical test**. If they have problems with it because of so-called 'special needs', that's their problem.
- **For coursework assessments, stick firmly to your deadlines**, regardless of the plausible excuses students come up with. The real world works on deadlines. If you show any flexibility, students will just take advantage of you.
- **Don't be soft on any students who claim that they don't do well in exams**. Even if their coursework marks are good, remind them that they have to get their act together for exams, or else they shouldn't be in higher education in the first place.
- **Don't indicate how many marks go with each of the parts of your questions**. This just causes trouble when you mark the scripts, and stops you being fair to the students who have worked out what was important in their answers. The really good students will know where the marks lie.
- **Don't give students any written feedback**. They will only argue with you about the marks you have given them and ask you to justify how the comments link to the scores you have awarded. You can't be expected to do that. In fact it is probably safest just to give them the mark and never give them back the original work.
- **Always plan at least some questions on material that you haven't covered with the class**. This sorts out those students who read around the subject and those who don't. But don't actually tell them that this is what you're planning to do, or the strategic students may read more extensively.
- **Only look at student scripts once**. Mark them as soon as you see them and never attempt to revisit earlier scripts because you might be tempted to change marks once you have seen other students' work. Rely on your innate ability to make fair and accurate judgments.
- **When designing assessments, trust your first instincts**. Don't show your draft assignments to other staff, who may interfere by making comments about the type of questions, wording, balance and coverage of the material.

- **Stick to tried and tested methods like unseen exams**. Any fancy innovative methods will be just too much hard work for you and won't test what you really want to find out, i.e. whether students can remember the facts.
- **When you set coursework essays, don't set a word limit**. The good students will naturally have a lot to say, and will deserve good marks. You can usually tell at once from the length of an essay how much thought has gone into it.
- **Don't make your questions too straightforward**. You want to be able to see who can make sense of the questions, and give these students the higher marks. Students who can't make sense of a question are demonstrating their ignorance, and don't deserve high marks.
- **When you know that some particular bit is really important, hit it in several different questions in parallel**, so that there is no escape for those students who have not mastered that bit.
- **Don't get into discussions with a class about how they will be assessed**. Just remind them that they're here to learn, and you're here to teach them, and then they've got to prove to you what they've learned.
- **Don't be tempted to include self-assessment elements**. Students would simply give themselves over-high marks or grades, and would probably feel that it wasn't their job to assess their work.
- **Don't get students peer-assessing each other's work**. They would learn too much from each other's mistakes, and you want to be able to see who makes which mistakes for yourself.
- **If you design a question paper that really works well, use it year on year**. You can save yourself a lot of work by using the same questions again and again. There is no need to worry about students from previous years talking to the next cohort of students as they all tend to lead quite separate lives.

Some conclusions

The ways we assess our students can really make a difference to how students learn. There are multiple and complex problems to resolve and solutions are not easy to find (or the brightest minds in the world would have done so already), permanent (as we have to deal with an ever-changing environment), or universal (assessment is an area where context is of paramount importance; what works well in a medical environment probably doesn't work equally well in a poetry workshop, although there might be some interesting cross-overs). So we are left with the need for professional higher education practitioners to take the lead in ensuring that we do not allow the process to slip out of our hands. We cannot let bureaucratic regulations (whether from within our institutions or nationally) to skew our effective assessment processes. If we find our systems do not allow us to implement a really valuable assessment innovation, for example, then we must find ways to change the system. We need to ensure that decisions about assessment strategies are based on the best available evidence-based research on assessment, rather than on custom and practice or what is easy to do.

So we need to keep abreast of new developments, evaluate tried and tested ones and experiment with our own initiatives, preferably within a supportive learning community of fellow practitioners. Inevitably, I would therefore argue that we in the UK need to participate in our subject communities, through the Higher Education Academy (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/).

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