Assessment for Quality Learning requires Quality Assessment

2008
Assessment Forum
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"Come! Let's ponder the wonders of art and music, science and history, philosophy and..."

"Sorry, Socrates, we don't have any time..."

"We've got to keep studying for the state exams!"
Assessment is diversely regarded as.....

- Marking, Correcting and Grading
- Credentialing
- Sorting the .... from the .......
- Directing learning
- Diagnosing learning
- Feedback on learning
- Feedback on teaching
- Opportunity for critical reflection
In reality…Assessment is…

- A *postscript* in teaching and curriculum design
- *An activity to Test* what is known
- *Pivotal* in learning
- A common practice *routine* and *ritual*
- *Time consuming*
- A negotiated *exchange* (product for grades)
- *High-stakes - high risk –high fallibility*
Assessment practice is surrounded by uncertainty (Allen 1998)

Academics design tasks, award grades and provide feedback that,
- They feel comfortable with,
- They believe the student will feel is fair,
- Can withstand robust scrutiny by colleagues.

They make decisions that lead to preferred and expected outcomes using their experience to predict the best and worst outcomes!
Assessment is the HE Triple Blindfolded High Jump!
Much assessment is grounded in:

- Implicit University and academic disciplinary traditions

- Tacit wisdom of experience (Schulman: 1989)
  Source of assessment “expertise” is its own practice. (Practice Making Practice; Britzman, 2003)

- Privacy and not open to scrutiny because of academic freedom

- Episodic routines and rituals
Assessment is high stakes for us all

- Students are defined by their grades
- Academic worth is often measured as capacity to grade
- Institutions depend on assessment outcomes to assure the quality of its programmes and graduates
- Professions and Society use them as code to recruit new staff.
Conservatism is evident in much of respected higher education assessment practice.

Longing for past glories
Efforts focus on inventing better mouse traps
Conservative responses to the challenges

Seek assessment processes that are:
Fixed, non-negotiable
Within known boundaries
Predictable
Safe
Examinations
measure
knowledge that
is known &
merely useful
instead of
really useful
“Good practice” in assessment underpins fairness

✓ Appropriate tasks that encourage learning

✓ Clear descriptions of grading criteria & grade related performance standards

✓ Timely feedback that linked to the assessment criteria

✓ Decision-making guided by posted criteria and standards when grading

(adapted from Carroll 2004)
Designing the Assessment Task

- **Efficiency**: Is the work of staff and students on the assessment task the best use of time and effort or just helping to spin out a grade?

- **Effectiveness**: Does the assessment process account for the diverse ways in which learning occurs and produce the best most enduring learning:
  - Assessment of learning? (postscript)
  - Assessment as learning? (pivot)

- **Educational integrity**: Is there curriculum alignment?

- **Equity**: Is success possible for all students?

- **Ethical practice**: Are students educated about academic integrity and does the design minimize opportunities for plagiarism, cheating collusion or academic fraud?
Assessment as Mapping Learning for the Curriculum?
Assessment is a Critical Activity

(A) It is a major driver in student learning

(B) Focus of quality assurance

- Teachers and students are concerned with (A)
- Governments, Institutions, Administrators are concerned with (B)
RMIT Agenda

- Identifying current assessment practices
- Selecting good assessment practices to promote as exemplars and up-scaled?
- Articulating assessment standards?
- How to assure quality learning experiences and outcomes through assessment policies and academic leadership practices?
- Benchmarking assessment policies and practices with other Australian Tertiary institutions?
- Developing measures to ensure sustained quality standards for assessment?
Policy Framework Domains

1. Logistical aspects of Assessment Policy (Systems/Structure)
2. Ideological/Philosophical features of Assessment Policy
3. Assessment **for** Learning Strategies
4. Grading practices and **Frames of Reference**
5. Management and Quality Assurance: (i.e. Implementation and Moderation)
1. Logistics of Assessment Policy

- What assumptions do you have about the role of your assessment policy sit (logistically) within the university?
- Is there one overarching policy or separate faculty specific policies? (If different policies in faculties/schools, are there contradictions or differences?)
- Where is the document located on the university website? (i.e. Embedded within teaching and learning policy or separate?)
- What *form* does policy take? (i.e. is it a set of detailed rules? Or more general education and value statements?)
2. Philosophical Ideological Features

- What assumptions about assessment underpin the policy? (what is being assessed, students or the students’ learning? Is assessment based on merit?)
- What are the stated aims & purposes of assessment? (e.g. enabling learning, measurement/credentialing, generating grades)
- What ideologies (values) are tacitly and explicitly apparent in the policies?
  - Is Assessment postscript or pivotal?
  - Assessment of learning or as learning?
- Are there contradictions between policy intentions and actual practice (implementation)?
3. Strategies for Supporting Learning

- Are there guidelines within policy about the design of assessment tasks?
- Are the learning purposes a central feature of assessment policies?
- Is there advice about formative function of assessment in support of learning? (Opportunities for practice, improvement & resubmission?)
- Are there guidelines on providing feedback on student progress?
- Are students required to account for the feedback given and take some remedial actions?
4. Grading & Frames of Reference

- What conceptual framework is used? (Norm, criterion, standards?)
- Are there stipulations regarding grading *distribution*? Why?
- Are there predetermined descriptions of the learning outcomes that define each grade level?
- Are criteria/descriptors at the ‘generic’ institutional level, or at discipline/subject level?
- Are there grading rules separate from the assessment policy?
- Is there a requirement that students be given predetermined assessment criteria/standards—relating to validity and assessment?
5. Management & Quality Assurance

- Implementation Procedures: how is policy disseminated to academics? Who manages this?
- Does the university provide specific guidelines to assist staff in achieving principles (i.e. staff development)
- How is policy implementation monitored?
- How is assessment design moderated for validity?
- How is interpretation & grading moderated for reliability?
- Is moderation informal or informal, external or internal?
- Are staff roles and responsibilities and articulated?
Commonly espoused values in policies

- Point of reference systems (norm, criterion & standards)
- Fairness and equity
- Transparency and clarity of performance expectations
- Fitness for purpose
- Alignment learning outcomes & assessment
- Timely feedback
- Student centred assessment practices
- Graduate attributes
- Whole of course assessment regimes
- Catering for students’ special needs
Uncommon Policy Inclusions

- Exploration of potential unintended negative consequences (Sydney, Southern Cross)
- Efficiency for students and staff (Sydney, UniSA, RMIT)
- Access to remediation (Sydney)
- Ethical relationship between assessor & student (QUT)
- Engage students’ reflective capabilities (Curtin)
- Opportunities for improvement for first year (QUT, SCU)
- Articulation of the difference between standards, criteria and norms as grade reference points (Griffith, SCU & Sydney)
- Identifying related educational polices (Flinders, SCU, RMIT, UniSA)
- Moderation policies (UniSA, SCU, RMIT)
- Policy implementation provision responsibilities (UniSA)
Examples of Exemplary Features

- Articulation of specific responsibilities (UQ & UniSA)
- Articulation of differences between standards, criteria and norm referencing (Griffith, Sydney, SCU).
- Requirement to indicate progress towards a learning goal (Griffith)
- Validation of academics “professional expertise’ in making judgements (Griffith, SCU, Sydney,)
- Provision of a staff manual with a ‘Code of Good Practice’ linked to on-line training & resources (UniSA, SCU).
- Moderation of both design & grading (UniSA, SCU)
Examples of Exemplary Features

- Identifying related educational policies (Flinders, SCU, UQ)
- Linking assessment tasks at whole of course level with overarching graduate attributes. (SCU, UniSA)
- Student assessment will be based entirely on merit (SCU, Monash, Flinders)
- University-wide grading system (Flinders, SCU, UQ, Adelaide)
- University-wide policy framework (UQ, SCU, UniSA)
Two core aspects of Assessment

1. Designing assessment *for* learning

5 Dimensions of assessment to consider (Rowntree, 1977)

- Why assess? For what *purposes*?
- What to assess? What *attributes or criteria*?
- How to assess? What *activities and tasks*?
- How to Interpret? What *frames of reference*?
- How to respond? (How to report, account for, certify & *provide feedback*)

2. Assessment, Interpretation, Grading and Feedback
Assessment Design

*Assessment theorists* argue for-

1. Alignment between desired learning outputs and tasks
2. Authentic tasks
3. Opportunities for practice with feedback
4. Development of students’ capacity for self-assessment
5. Opportunities for all students to be successful
6. Public moderation of tasks
Grading & Feedback Assessment theorists argue for:

1. Disclosure of performance interpretation
2. Clear communication of expected standards
3. Articulation of a grading plan (Frisbie & Waltman, 1992)
   - Meaning of grade symbols & how they fit with the institutional scheme
   - Clear consideration of what a failure means
   - Whether ‘borderline’ cases will be reviewed
   - Elements incorporated into the grade and weighting
   - Is there an overall grade distribution goal (absolute scale or relative scale?)
4. Public moderation of interpretation and grades
What confronts student transition to tertiary studies?

Students have passed many *measures* to gain entry.. *but* too many are struggling once there.

Students are surprised to find that coursework demands so much more of them than high school and sometimes TAFE.

Students expect to complete tasks…. *But..* find they are expected to think deeply, write extensively, evidence and document assertions, solve non-routine problems, apply concepts to novel contexts.

Students experience feedback on their products as cryptic & coded critique of their work.
Why assess?

- Assessment and feedback during the course of learning are the most effective way for students to learn what is expected of them and accountability in their work and personal lives. (Wormeli, 2006)
- This puts assessment at the heart of teaching and learning, making it the fulcrum or pivot.
- Institutions need it to maintain educational quality and assure the community of standards.
Problems with Assessment

For Student Learning
- Types of assessment used
- Frequency
- Feedback Quality
- Hidden curriculum & markers
- Emphasis on summative purposes

For Quality Assurance
- Grading is variable
- Plagiarism minimisation
- Standards
- Risk minimisation
- Moderation and objectivity
- Measurement functions
What is lacking?

In the past assessment policies largely have not adjusted to educational reforms. This is now changing.

New practices and learning paradigms are not embedded in institutional, faculty or department systems.

There is a lack of systemic assessment literacy development at all levels particularly among leaders.

Moderation systems that are resisted accepted and fail to be utilised constructively.
In summary: some principles underlying concerns emerged

- Assessment reform often ignores the policy domain
- Policy is largely formulated without the benefit of assessment scholarship (practice makes practice)
- Policy largely addresses issues of academic integrity and fairness and ignores learning
- If grades are currency in higher education the processes that produce them and the systems that use them require a high level of assessment literacy
How to interpret the learning?

- A grade is supposed to provide an accurate indicator of a student's mastery of learning standards,
- Not a reward, motivation or behavioural contract system.
- A grade is distorted by weaving in a student's personal behaviour, character, and work habits
- A grade cannot provide feedback, document progress or inform instructional decisions.
What have grades got to do with learning?

- Focus on standards *(learning attainment)*
  or
- Focus on activity completion & coverage *(accountability)*

*Refusing to accept late work, giving grades of zero, and refusing to allow students to redo their work may be intended as punishment for poor performance,*

Such practices will not teach students to be accountable or provide useful information about students' mastery of the material.
Frames of Reference?

- Norm referenced → Comparing
- Criterion Based → Coverage
- Standards Based → Attainment
- Ideographic → Development
The problem of articulating standards

A standard is established by consensus-based process that provides guidelines, rules and characteristics for the topic it is covering.

“I know a good one when I see one” is not a reasonable standard?
How can standards be described?

Alpinist Mountain
Standards five-star rating:
feedback on equipment
tested in the field

No Stars = Piece of junk.
One Star = Below average.
Two Stars = Average.
Three Stars = Above average.
Four Stars = Pretty dang good.
Five Stars = Nearly perfect.
The triple blindfolded high jump!

Guess!

I know a good one when I see one!
Academics Intuitive tacit standards fail to enhance learning.
Sometimes there is a need to consider lowering the standards!
Standards need to be adjusted for contextual demands!
But agreed standards are essential for planned progress to occur!
Standards need description!
Standards for Success
(David Conley)

Need to identify and state what students need to know and be able to do,
...what cognitive skills and subject area knowledge is required in order to succeed in major subject areas of English, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, second languages, and the arts.
Interpretation & grading is influenced by

**Non-student performance**
- Quality of other student’s work,
- Assessors’ personality
- Assessors’ experiences and beliefs
- Knowledge of students & classroom events

**Surface features,**
- Introductory paragraph,
- Presentation factors
Where are the criteria? Where are the standards?

- Criteria identify the domain or attribute (knowledge, skills or dispositions)

- Standards describe ‘how well’
A grounded rubric as a basis for standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Levels</th>
<th>Biggs</th>
<th>Perry</th>
<th>Qualities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Developing</td>
<td>Unistructural</td>
<td>Dualistic</td>
<td>Limited knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Functional</td>
<td>Multistructual</td>
<td>Multistructural</td>
<td>Knowledge no structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Proficient</td>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Relativistic Commitment</td>
<td>Analysis &amp; application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Advanced</td>
<td>Extended Abstract</td>
<td>Limited commitment</td>
<td>Metacognitive &amp; abstract</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Grading rubric standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes (CRITERIA)</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Cognitive attainment &amp; reasoning</th>
<th>Performance skills &amp; abilities</th>
<th>Professional dispositions, capacities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Developing</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Using</strong></td>
<td><strong>language</strong></td>
<td><strong>that performance</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Functional</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>describes</strong></td>
<td><strong>observed</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Proficient</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>using</strong></td>
<td><strong>concrete</strong></td>
<td><strong>terminology</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Advanced</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assessment literacy is needed to address..

Quality assurance policies and process
Alignment between intended learning outcomes and assessment tasks
Institution & society’s understanding of assessment and use of grades
Use of valid interpretation processes
Students’ awareness of the standards of performance expected of them
Equity and social justice
What is assessment literacy?

**Knowledge** of the vast & complex factors that constitute assessment

*Knowing the landscape of the field and explicit and implicit structures and strictures*

Awareness of their **inter-relatedness**

How individual decisions about one aspect impacts on all the other processes involved
Who requires it?

- Students
- Assessors
- Assessment managers and committees
- Policy makers
- Professional associations and accrediting bodies
- Governments
If assessment is well managed standards are assured?

What do WE as leaders need to do to insure that academic standards are maintained and advanced?
Institutional Climate

- No blame
- Developmental
- Experimental
- Collegial
- Stakeholder engagement
- Assessment literacy for assessors, administrators, students and community
To what extent do your current assessments encourage this?

Disciplinary expertise

Knowledge

Skills

Dispositions

Expert capabilities

Professional Behaviour
Without standards little progress can be made!