Assessment Tasks to Promote Learning
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INTRODUCTION

Planning Your Assessment Tasks to Align With Your Learning Outcomes and Teaching Strategies

There are many factors to bear in mind when planning your assessment tasks. While there are numerous logistical and practical issues to consider, it is best to begin with thinking about the kinds of learning that you want students to develop and try to get congruence between these goals and the assessment tasks. It is not a matter of completing the outcomes and then deciding on the assessment and teaching approaches, because the design process is most usefully conceptualized as a cyclical rather than a linear process. As you write and refine the learning outcomes, you need to be thinking simultaneously about the implications for assessment tasks and for your teaching content and strategies.

Furthermore, you need to ask yourself periodically whether all of these aspects of your practice reflect your fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning. Student learning is likely to be much better, if we demonstrate consistent expectations across all the arenas of teaching and learning. In aiming for this correspondence, we need to be thinking beyond content, and incorporate the development of particular ways of thinking and inquiring in all aspects of teaching and assessment. As you plan your assessment tasks, always try to keep general good course design principles, basic assessment principles and your teaching and learning beliefs to the fore.

For the University guidelines to good practice and assessment procedures, please refer to the Staff Assessment Handbook www.waikato.ac.nz/tdu/pdf/staffassess2011.pdf
The following general points need to be borne in mind when trying to align outcomes and assessment tasks.

- Be sure that the assessment task genuinely corresponds to the learning outcome(s). Too much focus on content can easily disguise a mismatch between outcomes and an assessment task (for example, your outcome may be about students learning to apply principles to a scenario, and your assessment may be an essay simply asking students to discuss the principles).

- Include formative as well as summative assessment tasks so that students have a chance to practise the learning required.

- Use teaching approaches that encourage the thinking and skills identified in the learning outcomes and required in the assessment tasks. For example, a common discordance occurs when teachers adopt a transmission approach to the
subject and then the assessment requires the students to engage in critical thinking in relation to the content. Instead the teaching should model and invite students to practise the critical thinking skills that the assessment task requires.

- You do not need to assess all learning outcomes. When deciding on assessment tasks, you may return to the learning outcomes and try to prioritise them. It sometimes helps to ask yourself what the absolute minimum is that you would expect students to learn from the course - what are the absolutely non-negotiable elements in your learning outcomes? These are the ones that need to be incorporated in your assessment tasks.

- One assessment task can incorporate a number of learning outcomes.

**DESIGNING ASSESSMENT TASKS – WHAT ELSE SHOULD I CONSIDER?**

Once you have a broad idea about the kinds of assessment tasks that you want to include and you feel that they are closely aligned with your outcomes and teaching approaches, you will need to think about a number of other issues and perspectives and usually people tend to find that they then need to make adaptations and refinements.

Here are some points to consider:

- **What do my colleagues think about my assessment plans?**
  It is often helpful to test out one’s assessment tasks on colleagues before making final decisions. Sometimes academics plan so privately that they lose sight of others’ perspectives. Colleagues can be invited to explain their understanding of the requirements of a task and may spot ambiguities or confusions in the task explanations. Colleagues may also be able to see logistical hiccups that you have not taken into account. They may also be in a position to provide you with their knowledge about the students’ previous experience and expectations of assessment and comment on the level appropriateness of a task.

- **What is the level of the class?**
  It is sometimes baffling to see the enormous range in terms of the complexity of assessment tasks within and across the disciplines at particular academic levels. This inconsistency can unfairly penalize or reward students taking particular subjects. Ideally, we should have done considerable thinking about level appropriateness when designing the learning outcomes for the course and working out the level of the assessment tasks should flow from these (see University of Waikato guidelines for a general idea of learning outcomes for each level). Also think about the goals of the programme or qualification as a whole and where your course fits into the development of these goals. For example, if the development of research skills is a core goal of the programme...
or qualification and a key learning outcome for your paper, you will need to see what research skills have already been introduced. If it is a first year paper, then your research expectations in assessments should be very limited and aimed primarily at introducing the students to the different skills they need to acquire to conduct university research, such as reading a journal article or using a database.

Correspondingly, it is unrealistic to ask first year students to read numerous journal articles when they are just being introduced to them and learning to manage the demands of academic reading.

**How do I decide on the weighting of different assessment tasks?**

This is another difficult aspect of assessment design and there is no absolute answer. Things to consider include:

- Prescribed exam: internal weighting ratios
- Level of complexity of the task
- Time the task is likely to take
- Availability of resources
- Dependence on other variables, for example in group work
- Timing of the assessment task in the paper: A heavy weighting should not be given to a task that is set near the beginning of the course as students are still getting used to the language, context and ways of thinking in a course. Likewise, all the marks should not be given to an assessment at the end of a course as students do not have the opportunity to learn from previous assessments and build on feedback and feedforward.
- Importance of the area as signaled by the emphasis of the teaching and the learning outcomes.
- No single assessment should be so heavily weighted that if students do not perform well, their entire chance of succeeding in the paper is jeopardized.

**What are the time and workload constraints for students and teacher?**

Internal assessments for students seem to flood in at certain times of the year. One way to spread the assessment load for students is to break tasks into smaller components that are well set through the semester and provide support and feedback as students gradually pull the elements into a bigger project (for example, a research task can be divided into an research questions, annotated bibliography, literature review and draft).
Student workload is a place for realism! Often the same goal can be achieved through a short piece of work as a long one, and many course readings are not especially relevant. Don’t require readings just for the sake of it. Teachers also need to consider the total assessment workload for the paper.

Teachers also need to consider their own workload and whether the coaching, support and planning for a particular assessment are warranted by the quality of the learning benefits.

Be realistic here. Many ambitious outcomes flounder because the teacher is unable to provide the appropriate feedback and support. Be creative here and consider other ways in which students can get feedback, such as from their peers.

Is there opportunity to include coaching in and practice on unfamiliar assessment tasks?

Teachers are sometimes disappointed when they initially introduce an unfamiliar assessment task and students do not perform well on it even when the task seems to be imaginative and interesting. Frequently, the problem is that teachers do not explicitly coach students for the assessment task and scaffold them through it. Coaching and practice is a very important part of an assessment regime and an assessment should not be introduced unless these things can be built into the students’ classroom experiences. Part of the problem is our tendency to see assessment as correctional rather than instructional.

While the need to coach students and provide opportunities to practice is particularly important in the case of highly innovative assessments, we also need to remember that many tasks we may take for granted (like reading an academic journal article, or critiquing a piece of writing) are not automatically a part of a student’s repertoire.

In a paper that has an exam, teaching and internal assessment tasks should prepare students for the types of assessment included in the exam.

Can I provide teaching and learning approaches that are consistent with my assessments (and outcomes)?

It is always important to see planned assessment as part of the integrated learning experience of the students. If the assessment is an isolated add-on element the experience is unlikely to be satisfactory for both teacher and students. If you are considering introducing a particular
kind of assessment you need to be sure that it is supported by the nature of your classroom environment, the kind of relationship that you develop with your students, and the way you engage with knowledge and ideas. For example, if you do not allow questioning during the lecture period, it is unfair to expect students to slip into a questioning mode in a piece of assessment. Similarly, if you display a superior classroom manner, it is unlikely that students will be open and trusting when you invite them to offer their personal reflections in an assessment task.

Are there enough appropriate resources for the students to use to complete their assessments properly?
One important basic is to ensure the ready availability of books, journal articles and on-line resources. In addition, the teacher needs to ensure that support staff members are available to help the students, talk through assessment-related questions and help with materials.

Are there people to help with the tutoring and the marking?

What is the likely composition of the student body?
This is difficult to know beforehand, although there are often discernible patterns for different papers.
Do my assessment tasks accommodate the possibility for student diversity in terms of age, experience, culture and prior learning?

- Use a range of assessment tasks to accommodate the needs of different students.
- Broaden tasks to allow for different cultural references, interests and examples.
- Include tasks that require informal writing modes (Ryan, 2000).

Are there any requirements set by professional bodies or expectations of external stakeholders?
This question is particularly relevant in areas such as Law, Education and Accounting.

Are the assessment tasks consistent with any vocational outcomes that the course may have?

Does my assessment regime promote a focus on process as well as on product?

Do I offer enough range across my assessment tasks?
Traditionally, university teachers tended to rely on a narrow range of assessment methods such as exams, tests and essays or on methods that seemed easily measurable, such as multi-choice questions. However, these forms of assessment may not be appropriate for teaching and evaluating a wide range of competencies, nor do they give students a selection of modes for representing their learning. Increasingly, lecturers are employing a wider range of assessment methods. This change is driven by a variety of factors. There is growing recognition of the need for assessment methods to recognize the interdependence of assessment and learning, the diversity of the student body and the importance of process skills and formative assessment. The wider range of assessment methods also reflects changes in thinking about the benefits and goals of university education.

Further Considerations
- Do my assessment tasks encourage the development of sustainable attributes?
- Are my assessment tasks relevant and do they connect with the students’ experience?

There is growing recognition of the need for assessment methods to recognise the interdependence of assessment and learning, the diversity of the student body and the importance of process skills and formative assessment.
The following list provides a sample of some assessment tasks with suggestions about appropriate use, strengths, limitations and some tips. More examples are available in the resources noted in the list of references.

1.0 Essays

1.1 Learning Outcomes:
Essay writing tasks can support the development of the following learning outcomes:

1.1.1 Learning academic writing including formulating argument, presenting evidence, integrating material from sources and referencing appropriately

1.1.2 Synthesizing and evaluating theoretical ideas and concepts

1.1.3 Research process skills

1.1.4 Learning academic and discipline specific writing conventions

1.1.5 Learning skills of drafting, editing and revising

1.2 Strengths:
Essays can develop the ability to write in an organized mode, structure arguments and learn academic/discipline conventions. The essay is a flexible tool that can be used for a wide range of theoretical, conceptual and analytical discussions.

1.3 Limitations:
Marking consistency can be difficult. The essay format privileges students with strengths in writing. The essay does not necessarily promote the application of ideas or problem-solving and may have little bearing on the skills required for future employment.

1.4 Tips

1.4.1 Write precise, explicit instructions

1.4.2 Have clear, transparent criteria. Involve the students in discussion of the criteria

1.4.3 Invite classroom discussion around essay topics and essay process

1.4.4 Provide the students with opportunities to learn subject specific requirements and criteria

1.4.5 Break essays up into smaller tasks and provide formative feedback

1.4.6 Include opportunities for editing and revision

1.4.7 Use a range of formal and informal writing tasks to complement essay writing

1.4.8 Try incorporating peer feedback
2.0 Examinations:

2.1 closed book, fixed time period -

2.1.1 Learning outcomes:

This type of examination can be used to evaluate the following:

Knowledge, comprehension, analysis, application, problem solving and overview (depending on exam format).

2.1.2 Strengths:

These examinations can give evidence of students’ unaided work and show how students have integrated the different parts of course learning.

2.1.3 Limitations:

Examinations of this nature can emphasise working at speed, rote learning, knowledge recall and skill in exam techniques. They can also encourage surface learning. For some students these examinations promote extreme anxiety. This form of assessment is purely summative and students do not receive any feedback on the quality of the learning that they demonstrated.

2.1.4 Tips:

Exams should be designed to minimize focus on content recall and speed. Students need practice and training in the skills and approaches that will be tested in the exams.

2.2 closed book, prepared answers -

2.2.1 Learning outcomes:

This type of examination can be used to evaluate the following:

Integration, synthesis, analysis, application and the ability to draw on a range of sources.

2.2.2 Strengths:

This type of examination can be used to encourage integration of ideas from a wider range of sources. The opportunity to prepare beforehand helps to reduce student anxiety.

2.2.3 Limitations:

Students may still depend on memorization. The product may not necessarily be students’ unaided work.
2.3 open book, fixed time period -

2.3.1 Learning outcomes:
This type of examination helps to develop the following skills:

Retrieval, synthesis, integration of ideas

2.3.2 Strengths:
The availability of resources can reduce anxiety and there is reduced focus on memorisation. This kind of examination provides evidence of students’ unaided work.

2.3.3 Limitations:
The fixed time frame can limit the usefulness of having the material available. Students may waste time looking through inappropriate materials.

2.3.4 Tips:
Students need practice on this type of test, in particular in maximising the opportunities afforded by having the materials available. A range of assessment methods should always be used to complement examinations.

3.0 Group Work

3.1 Learning outcomes:
Student group work can help to develop a number of important competencies. These include: Collaborative learning, interpersonal communication, feedback and facilitation skills, problem-solving, critical evaluation, and preparation for the workplace.

3.2 Strengths:
Students can make use of complementary skills, deepen understanding through interaction and discussion, deal with a range of perspectives and thereby enhance critical thinking skills. Students can develop team skills and learn to work with a range of people - important workplace preparation. Some people may prefer working in a collaborative way as opposed to an individual competitive approach.

3.3 Limitations:
It may be difficult to ensure that individual students contribute equally to the group project. Group conflict may undermine group effectiveness and there can be difficulties in teams made up of students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Some students may find group work difficult.

3.4 Tips:
3.4.1 Students need careful preparation for and preliminary practice in group work.
3.4.2 The group task should be broken into sections and tasks clearly apportioned.
3.4.3 Encourage students to reflect on group learning processes.
3.4.4 One strategy is to require some individual tasks before the students start working as a group.

3.4.5 There needs to be a strategy to ensure individual accountability such as a reflective journal or individual report.

3.4.6 Students need to be informed about a well-defined process for dealing with conflict.

3.4.7 Marks should be awarded for process steps as well as for the final product.

3.4.8 Allow some class time for group work and converse with the groups as they work.

4.0 Learning Journals

4.1 Learning outcomes:
Journal reflections can help students to integrate course learning, apply theoretical ideas to practical contexts, undertake workplace reflections, develop reflective skills, develop reflective, writing and analytical skills. An ongoing requirement for students to record their responses to course learning can help to promote personal engagement with course learning.

4.2 Strengths:
Journal writing encourages an ongoing personal connection with learning. Less formal writing approach can promote creative and lateral thinking around course content. The opportunity to reflect can help students to evaluate their own learning, link theory and practice and integrate different kind of knowledge. The journal is a good way to promote dialogue between students and lecturers.

4.3 Limitations:
Many students find reflection difficult and struggle to go beyond narration and description. Journals can be difficult to assess.

4.4 Tips:
4.4.1 Students need to be given very clear instructions and guidelines for journal writing.

4.4.2 Students will benefit from seeing samples of reflective writing.

4.4.3 Use prompt questions to guide the students’ reflections.

4.4.4 Provide in-class practice in and coaching of journal writing.

4.4.5 Find a way of seeing the journals regularly and giving feedback and feedforward.

4.4.6 It is possible to award a percentage for completing the journal and then grade a summary account of the journal entries.

For a more detailed guide to implementing successful group work, refer to the TDU booklet “Assessment Matters”.
5.0 Oral Presentations

5.1 Learning outcomes:
Oral presentations help students to learn to organise an argument using supporting evidence, select relevant material, engage critically with ideas and enhance personal mastery of course learning. Oral presentations promote the development of communication, facilitation and persuasion skills.

5.2 Strengths:
Talking about a subject encourages personal ownership of ideas, helps to develop understanding and confidence. Students can receive prompt feedback from teachers and peers and the opportunities for plagiarism are restricted.

5.3 Limitations:
Oral presentations can be difficult for students who do not have English as a first language. If presentations are poor, the rest of the class loses interest in the lesson.

5.4 Tips:
5.4.1 Students need training in presentation skills.
5.4.2 Provide guidelines, support and practice opportunities (with formative feedback.)
5.4.3 Keep presentations short.
5.4.4 It can help to make the presentations question-focussed.
5.4.5 Have clear assessment criteria preferably developed in discussion with the class.
5.4.6 Experiment with using peer feedback.
5.4.7 Devise strategies to involve the rest of the class such as the requirement to prepare a question related to each presentation topic.

6.0 Case Studies

6.1 Learning outcomes:
Case studies give students the opportunity to apply theoretical ideas to practical contexts and learn case analysis skills and processes.

6.2 Strengths:
Good case studies enable students to see relevance of academic ideas and help to foster student engagement. Case studies can prompt students to use ideas creatively and think laterally. Case studies link theory to practice and correspondingly help to prepare students for employment. It is relatively easy to work out criteria and marking can be reasonably reliable.

6.3 Limitations:
It can be difficult to create original and challenging cases. Complex and authentic cases and appropriate criteria can be hard to construct.
6.4 Tips:
6.4.1 Students need guidance and plenty of practice in analyzing cases.
6.4.2 Try to construct cases set in a range of cultural contexts.
6.4.3 Provide students with feedback and support.

7.0 Participation Marks
7.1 Learning outcomes:
Participation marks can be an incentive to encourage personal engagement with course learning, and be a way of helping to develop students' ability to communicate and discuss course ideas.

7.2 Strengths:
Awarding participation marks can improve the levels of participation in the class. Wider participation and greater student engagement can provide immediate feedback to teachers and students about the quality of student learning.

7.3 Limitations:
Student participation in class can be very difficult to evaluate and is often subjective. Some students may not say much and yet still be very active participants. This is extremely difficult to measure.

7.4 Tips:
7.4.1 Have very well-defined criteria.
7.4.2 It is a good idea to discuss and negotiate the criteria with the class.
7.4.3 You may want to require a complementary written component.
7.4.4 Include a self or peer assessed component to encourage deeper reflection about what constitutes quality participation

8.0 Practicum
8.1 Learning outcomes:
The practicum is an important assessment to demonstrate skills or competencies that will be
needed in real life situations, such as practice teaching, interviewing of a client, or conducting a laboratory experiment.

8.2 Strengths:
A practicum closely approximates to the context in which the skill will have to be performed.

8.3 Limitations:
In some disciplines it can be difficult to create an authentic context. If levels of competency are not well defined, performance can be hard to measure.

8.4 Tips:
8.4.1 Allow a number of opportunities for students to practise the skill and provide formative feedback.
8.4.2 Provide precise criteria that clearly identify behaviours required as well as different levels of performance.

9.0 Portfolios
In a portfolio, students select the items of work that they wish to include to represent the learning that has occurred for them in a particular course. Students are usually asked to demonstrate how the items they have selected connect with course learning outcomes.

9.1 Learning outcomes:
Portfolios can promote reflection, self-evaluation, and ongoing personal engagement with course learning. Portfolios can be used to develop creative and practical skills.

9.2 Strengths:
The portfolio enables students to represent their learning in a range of ways and to take responsibility for their learning progress. They can encourage creativity, learner autonomy and lateral thinking. Portfolios may also be used subsequently in employment applications.

9.3 Limitations:
Portfolios may be very time-consuming for students and the genre will be unfamiliar and difficult for some students. There can be a tension between the summative and developmental dimensions of portfolio assessments.

9.4 Tips:
9.4.1 Set some clear boundaries for students.
9.4.2 Limit each entry length.
9.4.3 Each item needs to meet a different learning outcome.
9.4.4 Limit number of entries
9.4.5 Include compulsory component(s)
9.4.6 Provide samples of possible entries
9.4.7 Clearly indicate grading standards
(Adapted from Biggs, 2003).

**10.0 Written Preparation Exercises**

10.1 Learning outcomes:
Some form of written preparation for classes can promote active, focused and critical reading of materials. The regular writing in relation to course readings and ideas can enhance writing development and understanding as well as improve class participation.

10.2 Strengths:
Written preparation tasks can encourage reading and develop academic reading and writing skills. Regular written exercises provide students with the opportunity to practise course requirements. Students and teachers get regular feedback on learning progress and active participation encouraged. The written work can provide an additional way of evaluating student participation.

10.3 Limitations:
Regular written tasks may mean a high workload for the teacher. Students may undertake them mechanically.

10.4 Tips:
10.41 Use a range of well-focussed short tasks.
10.42 Provide a percentage for satisfactory completion of all tasks, or allow students to select a certain number (say 5 out of 8) to be graded.

**11.0 Tests**

11.1 Learning outcomes:
Learning outcomes can quickly gauge student understanding of core knowledge and concepts can be used diagnostically or at the end of a unit.

11.2 Strengths:
11.2.1 Evidence of students' unaided work.
11.2.2 Teachers and students can get prompt feedback on learning process.
12.0 Online Assessment

eLearning: Online Assessment

There are many online tools available that allow the lecturer and the student to check how learning is progressing. Below is a list of some that lecturers may consider using. Some will provide students with immediate feedback on how well they did, while some will require lecturers to mark and supply feedback. Others may not be assessed directly; however, students can use these to collect evidence to inform work that is being assessed.

Assignment submission – Moodle and other learning management systems have tools which allow students to upload assignments. These assignments are written offline and then students log into Moodle and upload their file. This is a mechanism to allow the electronic delivery of files to the lecturer.

Quiz – This assessment can consist of a variety of question types, e.g. multiple choice, multiple answer, short answer. These will be automatically marked by the program and students may get immediate feedback. Quizzes are often used to enable students to check the progress of their learning.

Online text – A short answer question – perhaps 1 or 2 paragraphs that students write and submit online which lecturers mark and provide feedback.

Reflective journals – Online spaces where students can keep reflections about their learning, akin to a private diary. Lecturers may assess these directly or students may be asked to write a summary or report using reflections as evidence or examples within the summary.

ePortfolio – A space where students can collect a range of files and reflections to support their learning. These can be assessed in different ways and lecturers will need to give students clear guidance, instructions and criteria. Often ePortfolio are assessed in similar ways to reflective journals.

Forum – Also known as discussion boards. These may or may not be assessed. Assessment may be on the quality of individual posts, students' overall contribution or their engagement with the discussion taking place. Lecturers should provide clear instructions and guidance about their expectations.

Lesson – A lesson is a collection of materials that can often have some assessment built it. Typically, students will work through some material or activity and then be tested on their understanding. The tests will normally consist of multiple choice questions or short answer questions.

Glossary – A glossary is a collection of words with associated definitions. Students will normally be asked to create definitions which may consist of text and/or web links and journal references.

Website – Students may be asked to develop some web pages as part of project-based work. They will normally be given access to the tools to do this. Assessment may be on the content that they create, on the design and students' availability to convey their message or a combination of both. Lecturers should clarify their expectations and write clear task guidelines and well-developed marking criteria.

REFERENCES


Make a space at your place for teaching.