THE PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will be expected to be able to:

- recognize the multiple purposes of assessment
- examine the issues and tensions associated with the multiple purposes of assessment in higher education
- critique the assumptions of traditional higher education assessment practices
- articulate key principles for implementing assessment to enhance learning

INTRODUCTION

THE CENTRALITY OF ASSESSMENT IN THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE

When we consider the topic of assessment, there are some key generic factors that should inform our assessment decisions and practices:

- Assessment is the most significant determinant of students’ learning (Ramsden, 2003; Gibbs, 2006)
- Assessment needs to be aligned with the learning outcomes of a specific course (Biggs & Tan, 2011)
- Approaches should support our beliefs about the purposes and values of higher education (Barnett, 2007)
- Assessment approaches should complement course learning approaches
- Assessment should have value for the long term (Boud & Falchikov, 2007)
- Assessment has multiple purposes that need to be acknowledged and managed
- Assessment has high stakes value for all stakeholders
- Students need to develop tools to engage appropriately in assessment- that is develop ‘assessment literacy’ (Smith et al, 2013)
- There is a long tradition of articulated and implicit beliefs and practices about assessment that may be detrimental to student learning and these views need to be acknowledged and critiqued (Bryan & Clegg, 2006; Boud & Falchikov, 2007)

Assessment has a number of different purposes for all those involved in the process.

These include:

- Measurement of learning and achievement
- Institutional promotion and marketing
- Diagnosis of learning
- Feedback and feed forward for learners
- Feedback for teachers
- Certification of learning
• Development of learning outcomes for a course and programme
• Development of knowledge, skills and dispositions for the long term, including judgment

**TASK**

Consider the assessment approaches in one of the courses that you teach or have been a student in and suggest which purposes appear to be emphasised?

There are also numerous stakeholders who have an interest in assessment. These include:

• Students
• Teachers
• Departments
• Tertiary institutions
• Employers
• Governments

**TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT BELIEFS AND APPROACHES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Traditionally, assessment in higher education has been based on a number of assumptions and practices. Many of these underlying assumptions and conventions have been deeply embedded in academic institutions and not subjected to critical scrutiny. Additionally, many longstanding assessment practices are adopted because they seem to be easy to measure.

Some of these longstanding assumptions, norms and practices are as follows:

• Assessment matters should be under the control of the lecturer
• Students should have no prior knowledge of what is going to be in the assessment
• Students need to work out the requirements of an assessment task and assessments should not be discussed in the classroom
• Good assessment “sorts out the sheep from the goats”
• Students cannot make judgements about the quality of their assessment work
• Assessment is primarily to do with measurement of performance
• Unseen exams assessments are the only real measure of an individual student’s ability
• Collaborative assessment is not a real test of ability
• A good assessment tool will lead to an even spread of marks
• It is impossible to obtain a perfect score in assessment

**TASK**

In pairs, evaluate these views and suggest their potential implications for students’ learning.
ALIGNMENT OF ASSESSMENT WITH COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

The research-based recognition that assessment is the primary driver of student learning and approaches means that it is essential that there is as good a match as possible between the assessment tasks and the learning that it is hoped that the students will develop (as stated in the learning outcomes). The determining influence of assessment is so powerful that poorly-considered assessment tasks can lead to learning that may be directly opposite to intended learning or undermine the learning outcomes. While educators may bemoan the students’ focus on assessment, it is possible to use this reality to achieve the learning goals that we desire. For these reasons, assessments need to be considered in conjunction with the learning outcomes and the course design process rather than as something added on at the end of the process. In the planning of a course there needs to be a process of moving backwards and forwards between possible outcomes and potential assessments to ensure the best match possible between them.

Helpful questions include:

- Is there an assessment to match this outcome in terms of content as well as learning competencies?
- Is it possible to evaluate the attributes that I have indicated in a particular learning outcome?
- How does this assessment align with programme outcomes?
- How does this outcome and assessment align with other courses at the same level in the programme?
- How does this outcome and assessment align with expectations of students at this academic level?
- How does this outcome and assessment align with the requirements of future work contexts?
- How does this outcome and assessment align with the modes of inquiry that students are required to develop in the discipline?
- How does this assessment align with my beliefs about the role of higher education in preparing learners for participation in society?

Considering outcomes and assessment concurrently helps the educator to refine and enhance both aspects of a course and also to retain the bigger picture such as the long-term possibilities offered by particular learning outcomes and assessment tasks.

(Please see the TDU booklet on course Design for specific guidelines for writing learning outcomes).
ALIGNING ASSESSMENT WITH CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING PRINCIPLES

Many academics are experimenting with different ways of teaching and learning both in the classroom and online that are designed to encourage the learner to be a more active partner in the learning process in line with constructivist theory. However, it seems to be far more problematic to apply these principles to assessment which typically lags well behind teaching in terms of dialogue and learning partnerships. A constructivist model of assessment is important for learner development in the short and the long term. There are very powerful conceptual and practical challenges that create barriers to constructivism in assessment; some of these are due to the inherited assumptions and conventions that we hold about assessment as well as the multiple purposes of assessment.

There is a significant discourse in the scholarship that supports an approach to assessment that aligns better with constructivist learning principles. Some of the arguments are summarized here.

The work of Boud (1995) informs our understanding of how traditional assessment practices can impair independent learning and the quality of learners’ long term participation in work and the community. Boud (1995) argues that traditional assessments do not teach students to judge the quality of their own work. Boud’s position corresponds to Carl Rogers’ dictum that the best learning occurs when judgements by the teacher are minimised and judgements by students are maximised (1969). Likewise, Boud and Falchikov (2007) note that the traditional unilateral model of assessment denies learners involvement in the determining component of their learning.

The implications extend beyond the academic domain. If, as many argue, the role of universities is to prepare critical, informed citizens (Barnett, 2007) who are capable of making autonomous, mature and discerning judgements and decisions (Heron, 1988; Baxter Magolda, 2009), the entire teaching, learning and assessment process needs to prepare learners for this role. While significant changes in higher education, including technology, have opened many new pathways for active learner partnership in the teaching and learning processes, assessment thinking and behaviours have lagged behind these trends (Crisp, 2007). Many academics embrace the ideas of dialogue and partnership enthusiastically in the classroom but fail to apply the same principles to assessment thinking and practices. The slow pace of change around assessment is especially detrimental, as it is the assessment regime that, more than anything else, determines what students actually learn, and how they go about their learning (Ramsden, 2003; Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Gibbs, 2006). The quality of the assessment regime means that the learning process can range from a ritualised and mechanistic passage through a series of defined stages to a “searching, challenging, agonising struggle for meaning and growth” (Boud 1995, p.5) that will be valuable long after particular assessments have been complete (Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

The literature over the past decade reflects a focus on the relationship between assessment and learning, both in the widely recognised idea of alignment (Biggs 2003), and in the assessment FOR learning movement (Carless, 2007; Rust, 2007). Ideas of dialogue, transparency and formative learning through assessment are also evidenced in the literature on feedback and feed-forward (for example, Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and in the notion of “assessment literacy” so that students are better equipped for an active partnership in the assessment process (Smith, Worsfold, Davies, Fisher, & McPhail, 2013). There is strong evidence of a “counter discourse” to traditional assessment thinking (Boud & Falchikov, 2007) but it is suggested that practices have not kept pace with these “counter discourses”.

4 Principles of Assessment
CONSIDER:

It is about grading and about learning; it about standards and also invokes comparison between individuals; it communicates hidden and explicit messages; it is both a technical matter and one that impacts on students’ emotional lives. Assessment needs to be principled yet also practical. It must be justifiable to lecturers themselves, students and management” (Carless, 2009).

“The fundamental problem of the dominant discourse of assessment is that it constructs learners as passive subjects” (Boud, 2007, p.17)

“when we look at the content and approaches used in the dominant practices in higher education, we find that they are often focused on students demonstrating current knowledge, generating material for grading and getting (often inadequate) feedback from teachers. Commonly, assessment focuses little on the processes of learning and on how students will learn after the point of assessment” (Boud & Falchikov, 2007).

In thinking about our own assessment practices, there are some useful principles that can act as a framework for evaluating the extent to which they align well with learning outcomes and broader goals as well as constructivist principles.

GUIDELINES FOR ASSESSMENT THAT ALIGNS WITH LEARNING GOALS AND CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING THEORY

- Learners should be involved in dialogue about the assessment at all stages of the assessment process
- There needs to deliberate efforts to ensure shared understanding of assessment tasks, criteria and feedback
- Assessment should be designed so as to encourage learners’ capacity to evaluate their own performance
- Learners need to be invited to examine and develop their views on and beliefs about assessment
- There should be ongoing dialogue about the role of the assessment in the course learning process
- There should be opportunities in assessment processes for coaching in and practice of core skills and expectations
- Feedback needs to guide and support future learning (Carless, 2009)
- There should be opportunities for students to demonstrate how they have responded to feedback
- Learners should be given practice in and invited into dialogue about assessment expectations, conventions and criteria (that is, develop assessment literacy to empower them to be genuine partners in the assessment process).
- All aspects of course teaching and learning should explicitly include co-construction of learning
- Assessment must be aligned with course learning outcomes and programme goals
- Assessment needs to be useful for the long term (relevant and sustainable)
- Assessment should focus as much on process as on product

Note: Assessment needs to be shifted from the periphery of a course to occupying a central place in learning dialogue throughout the course.
A key idea in the counter discourse on assessment is that assessment is likely to be most valuable and useful when it is done with students. Dialogue with students invites them to be more equal partners in assessment and helps to build the academic literacies that can improve students’ performance in the long term. There is also a recognition that we need to help students to build the competencies that will help them to engage meaningfully with assessment and ultimately be able to judge the quality of their own performance.

The notion of “assessment literacy” refers to the development of capacities that can help learners to engage meaningfully with assessment and improve their learning for the long term. Smith et al (2013) show how dialogue and activities around the assessment process can improve students’ understanding of assessment requirements and their performance on assessment.

The authors note that many academics do try to bridge the gap between their expectations of assessment tasks and students’ understanding of these expectations and provide careful task instructions and criteria to guide students. The authors suggest that these efforts are a great improvement on the days when students were expected to guess what the lecturer required. However, in spite of these efforts, many learners still do not seem to be able to decode the instructions and criteria. This can be very discouraging for lecturers and students. Smith et al (2013) suggest that part of the problem is that expectations, instructions and criteria are written in the lecturer’s language and underpinned by his or her assumptions.

Correspondingly, students do not formulate their own understanding of task requirements or of the criteria that help to distinguish one grade of work from another. However clear our instructions may seem, to be most effective it seems that students need to be able to translate them into their own idiom. Smith et al (2013), informed by work in others in the field, for example that of O’Donovan, Price and Rust, (2004) argue that in order to become “successful self-regulated learners” students need to understand a number of elements of assessment (2013, p.45). These elements are the purposes and processes of assessment as well as the standards for judging the quality of the work. With regard to the capacity to make judgements, Smith et al (2013) argue that students need to be given “opportunities to practice judging their own responses to assessment tasks” so that they can learn to distinguish what is good about their work and what can be improved. (Smith et al, 2013, p.45).

See the resource on setting and marking assessment tasks for practical strategies for enhancing students’ “assessment literacy.
KEY TERMS

These are some terms you may encounter in the assessment literature:

**Validity**
A valid assessment task measures the learning that it purports to evaluate.
Consequential validity refers to the consequences of the assessment for students’ learning

**Reliability**
This term relates to the idea that the marking will be the same when marked again by the same assessors and under the same conditions.

**Formative Assessment**
In formative assessment, students have a chance to learn from the assessment and improve on their performance.

**Summative Assessment**
Summative assessment involves a final grading of student learning; students do not have the opportunity to improve on their performance (the sum of the performance is measured).

There are ways of combining formative and summative assessment. One example is to require students to complete a series of tasks which receive formative feedback and a percentage for completion and the final task is graded (such as an essay broken up into a series of steps).

**Diagnostic Assessment**
This is a piece of assessment usually done at the beginning of a course to evaluate what students bring into a course so that their development can be charted. Initial diagnostic assessment also enables the teacher to make the learning more responsive to student needs.

**Learning Outcomes**
Learning outcomes for a paper indicate the attributes a student may be expected to acquire by the end of the paper. Learning outcomes will usually describe a combination of paper content and particular ways of engaging with the content. Learning outcomes for a paper are generally written at the level of learning expected from papers at a particular stage within a discipline and in keeping with university guidelines.

Learning outcomes for qualifications describe the general and specific competencies expected from graduates who have completed a qualification or programme. These will include more general attributes which will vary with academic disciplines and include competencies such as research skills, problem-solving abilities, communication and critical thinking. Qualification outcomes should also incorporate reference to the unique content elements of the programme and particular modes of inquiry. In professional schools, the graduate outcomes, both in terms of content and process will be influenced by the requirements of the relevant professional bodies.
**Norm-referenced Assessment**

A student’s learning performance is measured in relation to the performance of the group as a whole.

**Criteria-referenced Assessment**

A student’s learning performance is measured in relation to a set of clearly defined criteria which have been designed in advance of the assessment and which are explicitly linked to course learning outcomes.

**Threshold Assessment Criteria**

These criteria designate the minimum level at which learning outcomes need to be achieved to ensure a pass.

**Grading Assessment Criteria**

Grading criteria indicate the level of learning above the base level that a student has attained.
REFERENCES


Make a space at your place for teaching.