GUIDE: ASSESSMENT, RUBRICS AND FEEDBACK

Adapted from a powerpoint presentation presented at the Teaching and Learning Retreat in March 2012.

Assessment: a brief introduction

Assessment must be aligned with intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and modular content. It is a very important part of Biggs’ constructive alignment strategy for curriculum design. Assessment provides students with opportunities to show that they can do what is set out in the learning outcomes. ‘Assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as individuals’ (Brown, 2001 in Irons 2008:11). Further, ‘assessment is seen to exert a profound influence on student learning: on what students focus their attention on, on how much they study, on their quality of engagement with learning tasks, and through feedback, on their understanding and future learning’(Gibbs & Simpson, 2004 in Irons, 2008:11). Thus, assessment must be taken very seriously as part of designing a responsive, appropriate and stimulating curriculum for a course or module you are teaching.

When creating assessments, you need to:

1. align the assessment tasks with your stated Intended Learning Outcomes
2. select a range of assessment forms available, both traditional and non-traditional
3. justify the choice of assessment forms by being very clear about why you are choosing it and how it will benefit students’ learning
4. explain and defend marks and weightings
5. meet the criteria for reliability and validity
6. create appropriate rubrics that will give relevant feedback to students on their responses to the tasks

According to Biggs, assessment tasks should:

• provide students the opportunity to demonstrate whether or not they have achieved the ILOs and what level their performance is in those ILOs
• should be appropriately designed or selected to address all the ILOs that we want to assess
• use different assessment methods (tasks) address different ILOs. There should, therefore, be several kinds of task.
• provide the evidence allowing teachers to make a judgment about the level of a student’s performance against the ILOs and to award a final grade.
He provides the following list of common verbs used in ILOs and relevant assessment tasks:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common ILOs</th>
<th>Possible Assessment Tasks (Bi)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>essay question, exam, oral presentation (peer assessment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>assignment, essay question exam, oral, letter-to-a-friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrate</td>
<td>project, assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyse</td>
<td>case study, assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply</td>
<td>project, case study, experiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solve problem</td>
<td>case study, project, experiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design, create</td>
<td>project, experiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect</td>
<td>reflective diary, portfolio, self-assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate</td>
<td>a range of oral, writing or listening tasks, e.g. presentation, debate, role play, reporting, assignment, précis, paraphrasing, answering questions etc.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Constructive alignment of assessments**

**Graduate attributes**

(What are the overarching attitudes, skills and dispositions for UWC students?)

⇃

**Intended Learning Outcomes**

(What do I want my students to be able to do?)

⇃

**Assessment Criteria**

(What do I need to see to know they can do it?)

⇃

**Teaching and Learning Activities**
(What will they be able to do, to know, how will their thinking and behaviour change as a result of the teaching/learning experience?)

Assessment Tasks
(How can I get them to show me those things?)

Assessment Strategy
(How can all my tasks be ‘combined’ to fit the time and cover all outcomes?)

Some guidance on how to align assessments with the rest of your curriculum successfully:

1. Start with the outcomes you intend your students to learn (ILO), and align teaching and assessment to those outcomes.

2. Outcome statements contain a learning activity (a verb) that students must perform to best achieve the outcome, for example ‘demonstrate’ or ‘explain’.

3. Learning is constructed by what students do, not what we as teachers do. Students learn best by listening and doing, rather than just by listening and being told what to do.

4. Assessment concerns how well they achieve the intended outcomes, not how well they report back to us what we have told them. Thus assessment, like teaching and learning activities, must actively engage students in making meaning and in showing deeper levels of understanding and ability than just memorisation and recall.

Types of assessment: summative and formative

Summative assessment usually happens at the end of an assignment or even a course or module (like an exam or test). It involves making a final judgement about learning in relation to specific outcomes, and it usually has a final mark associated with it. This is assessment of learning, and plays a valuable role in a whole assessment strategy. However, it should not be the only form of assessment used in a well-aligned curriculum. The other type of assessment used is formative assessment. This is assessment for learning. Tasks that fall under this umbrella are used for diagnosis of gaps in knowledge or understanding as well as strengths, and aim at promoting growth and improvement in student learning. This form of assessment takes place during learning and can be ongoing, thus formative feedback is important. This kind of assessment and feedback can be time consuming, so when used as part of an assessment strategy they should be used and designed so as to promote student responsiveness; i.e., they should give students something to do to respond to the feedback and to fill their knowledge gaps or improve in areas that the assessment was looking at. Electronic feedback in this regards can sometimes more effective as it cannot be ignored (Winberg, 2008). A well-designed and balanced assessment strategy should include both formative and summative assessment opportunities.
Some questions to think about in terms of feedback

Reflecting on the kinds of feedback you find helpful now, and have found helpful and demoralising, unhelpful or even stunting to your academic development in the past can be a useful and honest place to start when thinking about the feedback and could and should be giving to your students. As their academic mentor, teacher and model, you have a valuable role to play in their growth as scholars, and feedback is one of the main ways in which to communicate with them about their progress.

As a teacher:

- What type of feedback do you give?
- What happens with it?
- What would you like to see happen with it?

Cast your mind back to when you were a student ...

- What types of feedback did you get as a student?
- What did you find helpful?
- What did you do with it?


Good feedback (Winberg, 2008):

✓ Facilitates the development of self-assessment in learning (reflection)
✓ Encourages teacher-peer dialogue around learning
✓ Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)
✓ Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
✓ Delivers high quality information to students about their learning (individual or general)
✓ Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
✓ Provides information to teachers that can be used to shape the teaching

(from HEA guide Enhancing student learning through effective formative feedback, p. 2)

Formal and informal assessment

In formal assessment situations, the structure of the tasks creates awareness in both lecturer and students that assessment is occurring and also about how the results are documented. These tasks are usually more structured and planned, and students are given time in which to complete them. They usually require planning from lecturers in design and timing, and from students in terms of
research, writing and completion of the task by the due date. This is contrasted with informal assessment, which is more spontaneous and not necessarily documented e.g. suggestions for improvement or revision, further drafts, learning activities to elucidate if students grasp principles. A pop quiz, or a game in class, or even an informal role play or debate where there are no marks attached but the aim in to identify gaps in knowledge and to fill them with the students, would count as informal assessment.

**Reliability and validity**

Validity and reliability are important to consider when planning and writing assessment tasks. You need to consider, for example, how closely the questions or assessment tasks relate to content/concepts and learning outcomes being assessed? Are you actually testing the outcomes that your teaching and students’ learning has been geared towards? You also need to consider inter-rater reliability and intra-rater reliability – basically, if your assessment tasks were themselves read and assessed by colleagues teaching the same or similar courses, and by colleagues from the same or other universities, would your assessment task be considered a reliable and fair means of assessing the learning outcomes. A useful thing to do is to ask a colleague whose opinion and skill you trust to read your assessment tasks and rate them as reliable and valid, and then use their feedback to refine and polish the task before giving it to your students.

**Traditional and alternative methods, and ways of assessing**

Traditional methods focus on the products of learning rather than the process and are ‘high stakes’ – there are few opportunities to rewrite or retry a task; marking is cumulative and summative; and the lecturer is the assessor. Alternative methods use authentic situations; focus on processes; use artifacts as evidence of student thinking (e.g. portfolios, blogs, podcasts, journals); are metacognitive; the learning progress and growth is taken over an extended period of time; use self and peer assessment and feedback (critical friends). Both forms can be used, but the most important thing is to judge the most appropriate and relevant forms of assessment that will speak to the ILOs, and allow students to use, as creatively and interactively as possible, their skills and knowledge to credibly show you their level of achievement of the ILOs.

There are two ways of assessing assignments when marking: using norm referencing and using criterion referencing. The former refers to a method of assessment now considered outdated in the academy and seldom used. Essentially you would compare students to one another when marking their work, and try to create a ‘bell curve’ that balances students out across assessment categories or percentage bands. This approach is outdated now because educators have recognized that if the purpose of teaching and learning, and assessment, is to capacitate students with knowledge, skills and competencies that will help them to achieve a set of identifiable learning outcomes, they should not be compared to each other or graded up or down to fit into an artificial curve. Rather, they should be assessed against clear and demonstrable criteria. Thus, criterion referenced assessment in a more accepted and rational assessment practice, and it is this approach that is advocated by the UWC Assessment Policy. Criterion referenced assessment ensures transparency because the criteria against which students’ work will be judged are made clear, ideally before the task is completed, and all students are judged on their own efforts related to the task and the criteria, rather than in relation to their peers’ efforts, so it is also a more just form of assessment.
Rubrics

What is a rubric?

- It is a scoring guide or a set of expectations used to judge student performance.
- It shows students how well they have performed on an assignment.
- It breaks the assignment into parts, using criteria and levels of performance required for the assignment.
- It can be used for a wide range of tasks (essays, research projects, oral presentations, portfolios, etc.)
- It is especially useful for assessing complex and subjective subjects.

Why use rubrics?

- Learners know exactly what is expected; there are clear targets and expectations.
- Rubrics protect against evaluator bias because they are consistent.
- Rubrics evaluate on the sum of a full range of criteria rather than a single numerical score.
- Rubrics empower students because they can use them to develop their abilities.
- Rubrics can be created for any content area and can be modified easily for various grade levels.

Parts of the rubric

A rubric is a grid made up of four basic parts:

✓ **A task description** (the actual assignment which involves performance expected of the student). A task description is framed by you as instructor and involves the performance required by the student to complete the task. It can apply to the overall behaviour required. You can usually cut and paste the task from your course outline and put it at the top of the rubric. This will allow you to communicate your expectations in relation to the assignment to the students. You would also need to include a heading or a title for the task as well as the description of the task.

✓ **A scale** of the levels of achievement (marks or descriptions of levels of achievement) the dimensions of the assignment (a breakdown of the skills/knowledge involved in the assignment). Scale: this shows how well or poorly a particular student has done. You should try to used positive, active verbs e.g exemplary, proficient, partially proficient, incomplete or not yet proficient or exemplary, good, satisfactory, needs improvement or exemplary, accomplished, developing, beginning. These could also correspond to a range of marks e.g. Exemplary 75+; very good 70-74; good 0-69; satisfactory 50-59; needs improvement 40-49

✓ **Dimensions** that show what constitutes each level of achievement (specific feedback). Dimensions give clarity on the parts of the task and which of these components is the most important, how much weight is given to each aspect of the assignment – you can add points or percentages to each dimension. Dimensions show the type of skills that students would need to be competent or to successfully complete a scholarly work. Dimensions clearly show the
components of the task. They enable the instructor to provide feedback on specific parts of
the assignment and how well or poorly they were done. When dimensions are well done, they
will show once a piece has been marked what the student’s strengths and weaknesses at a
glance. Dimensions don’t include anything concerning the quality of the performance.

✔ **Descriptions of the dimensions** a rubric should contain at least the highest level of
performance in that dimension (a rubric that contains only the description of the highest level
of performance is called ‘a scoring guide’ rubric. It allows for greater flexibility and personal
input but increases time for written feedback). The rubric should, however, contain at least 3
scales and a description of the most common ways in which the students meet or fail to meet
the highest level of expectations. What you should first do is to construct three levels of
performance for the rubric, and then expand it to five. It is much easier to refine the
descriptions of the assignment and create more levels after marking some of the students
work or seeing what they are actually able to do. The more levels there are the more difficult
it is to differentiate between them and develop criteria for the scales.

**Example:**

This is a basic example of a 3-scale rubric, indicating dimensions and weighting (out of 100) as well as
the first dimension described in terms of the guidance above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions and weighting</th>
<th>Scale Level 1</th>
<th>Scale level 2</th>
<th>Scale level 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 1: 20</td>
<td>The student has clearly understood the question because the research is on topic and the answer directly and relevantly addresses the task aims and objectives.</td>
<td>The student has partly misunderstood the question, or has missed some of the instructions given. The student has included research that is not fully related to the topic, and the answer is off topic at times.</td>
<td>The student has not been able to demonstrate an understanding of the topic and has misinterpreted that objectives of the task. The answer is largely irrelevant or off topic and the research is poor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands questions and has clearly interpreted the task</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 2: 50</td>
<td>Clearly demonstrates understanding and application of knowledge to the task</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 3: 15</td>
<td>Overall structure is coherent and the written response is well organised and logically constructed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimension 4: 15</td>
<td>Well referenced, not plagiarised and correctly presented.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Checklist for a good rubric:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric Categories</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rubric Categories</td>
<td>Do the categories reflect the major learning objectives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levels</td>
<td>Are there distinct levels which are assigned names and mark values?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criteria</td>
<td>Are the descriptions clear? Are they on a continuum and allowing for student growth?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-friendly</td>
<td>Is the language clear and easy for students to understand?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-friendly</td>
<td>Is it easy for the teacher to use?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>Can the rubric be used to evaluate the work? Can it be used for assessing needs? Can students easily identify growth areas needed?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


