

Making a Difference

Assessment Literacy:

A Precursor to Improving the Quality of Assessment

Janice Orrell

Higher Education today....

Puts pressures on assessment:

- Public accountability
- Collaborative relationships with industries and professions
- Burgeoning new possibilities for place, space and mode of education
- More students
- Diversity of students' backgrounds

Assessment is High Stakes

- Defines educational goals and outcomes
- Shapes student learning
- For many years, students are defined by the grades they receive
- Academics are defined by the grades they give
- Grades used as currency

Assessment is regarded as vehicle for reform but ... **systemic change is difficult**

- Attempts for reform are atomistic,
- Attends largely to the point of practice
- Ignores
 - the complexity
 - the integral relationship with T&L
- Resistance to reform is reinforced by tradition, common practice, social expectations

Responses to the Challenges

Varied and recognisable on a continuum

Conservative to Innovative

Resistant to Adaptive

Merely useful to Really useful

Conservatism is evident in much of respected higher education assessment practice

Longing for past glories

Efforts focus on inventing better mouse traps

Assessment measures knowledge known & is *merely useful*

Conservative responses to the challenges

Seek assessment processes that are:

Fixed, non-negotiable

Within known boundaries

Predictable

Safe

Prevailing source of assessment
“expertise” is its own practice.

Practice making practice is
problematic (Britzman, 2003)

*Many of the major problems academic organisations experience today is due to a habit of **clinging to past practices** and organisational structures*

(Tierney:1999,172).

Adaptive approaches to assessing learning are...

Constructivist
Independence & challenge seeking
Interdependent & collaborative
Authentic & relevant
Reflective and creative
Engage in self review & peer review

Adaptive

The context in which information is used is unpredictable, so...

Learning to learn independently and interdependently is really useful

Risky

Seeks to identify the unknown and ways to find out.

'Ignorance' curricula(Ann Kerwin)

The desire for such innovation, exploration of the unknown and risk taking is highly evident in the posted theories and ideals of the everyday academic but.....

Assessment practice is surrounded by uncertainty (Allen 1998)

Academics award grades that,

- They feel comfortable with,
- They believe the student will feel is fair,
- Can withstand robust scrutiny by colleagues.

Decisions that lead to preferred and expected outcomes using their experience to predict the best and worst outcomes!

New Possibilities with ICTs

Dialogue between learners

- Dialogue using appropriate evidence well
- Dialogue with experts in the field
- Focus on what is to be learnt and what is not already known or 'coverage'.
- Self assessment & immediate feedback for low level learning

Goal: Critical consuming of available information

Assessment Practice Embodies Choices

Formative or summative	Grade or no grade	How much feedback?
Teach to the test or encourage creativity		Essays or authentic projects
Weekly work or end of semester exam		Student or peer assessment or teacher graded
Individual or group work		Who will grade? University or clinicians
Set or negotiated tasks?		Assess participation in class or not?
How many pieces of assessment is enough?		Seen or unseen exams
		Open or closed book exams
Should presentation impact on grades?		Should all students have to do the same tasks?
		How important are “hand-in” dates?

Assessment is driven by the best of intentions

- Motivate and reward student learning
- Fairness and equity for students
- Maintenance of intellectual rigour in disciplines & standards of professional practice (*Fit for purpose, Biggs*)
- Efficiencies in practice
- Conforming to government & social expectations (*Value for money, Biggs*)

“Good practice” in assessment underpins fairness

- ✓ Appropriate tasks that encourage learning
- ✓ Clear descriptions of grading criteria & grade related performance standards
- ✓ Decision-making guided by posted criteria and standards when grading
- ✓ Timely feedback that linked to the assessment criteria (adapted from Carroll 2004)

Assessment cannot be fair unless students know the ‘rules of the game’

How is this possible if those managing ‘the game’ don’t understand the rule or their basis or make the up as they go along???

Assessment in higher education is often a triple blindfolded high jump!

Many academics are unclear about exactly what they are expecting students to produce.

- Many rules governing assessment are tacit & are learnt by trial and error.

Assessment is Complex but...

Few are adequately prepared for their assessment responsibilities

- as assessors (graders),
- designers,
- policy drafters,
- examination boards,
- curriculum leaders,
- accrediting bodies.

Assessment is Complex but *Over Simplified*

- Identified as marking or grading
- Is a postscript in curriculum design and development

Assessment is Complex but...

It is rarely guided by scholarship

Available information is:

- Theoretical treatise
- 'Gut piece' writing
- Atomistic research
- 'How to' guides

Oils ain't just oils!

Assessment is treated differently depending on the orientation or paradigm used!

- Vocational/Traditional
- Liberal progressive
- Socially critical

Common Strategies

- Staff training (curriculum development & grading)
- Student education and remediation
- Curriculum review & innovation
- Policy revision and expansion
- Funding (learning & quality)
- Govt audits, regulation & monitoring

These are NOT NEW Solutions!

But problems with assessment persist !

So what are we not addressing?

Assessment reform

Has failed to systematically engage institutional and system wide leadership and management of assessment.

Has not recognised the need for **assessment literacy** of its formal and academic leaders

Leadership grounded in assessment literacy is the **missing factor**

- Providing vision and reform
- Resource allocation
- Moderation processes
- Confronting and managing the academic culture

Academic leadership is crucial in assessment reform!

- Focus on **assessment literacy**
- Engaging with **discipline cultures**
- Explicit confronting of the **academic culture**
- **Multi-level** institutional & academic assessment leadership
- **Holistic**, systems approach

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 (<http://dizzy.library.arizona.edu/users/brewerm/sil/prof/> accessed 18/11/2005)

Awareness of their **inter-relatedness**

How individual decisions about one aspect impacts on all the processes involved

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

Interpretation & grading is influenced by **non-student performance**

- Quality of other student's work,
- Assessors' personality
- Assessors' experiences and beliefs
- Knowledge of the student and classroom events

Surface features,

- Introductory paragraph,
- Presentation factors

Some other issues (Baume, Yorke, & Coffey (no date))

Asking assessors to explain and justify grades may reduce the grade!

Even where criteria exist assessors themselves may not understand them or agree with them!

Assessment policy?

What is a good assessment policy?

Analysis of 10 randomly selected universities

Shows the following

Common Policy Concerns & Principles

- Fairness & equity
- Transparency and clarity of expectation
- Fitness for purpose
- Alignment
- Timely feedback and opportunity for practice
- Student centred/learning centred
- Attend to and support generic graduate attributes
- Validity, reliability, consistency, reproducibility
- Realistic submission deadlines
- Catering for students' special needs

Uncommon Policy concerns

- Exploration of potential unintended negative consequences (Sydney)
- Efficiency for students and staff (Sydney)
- Access to remediation (Sydney)
- Ethical relationship between assessor and student (QUT)
- Engage reflective capabilities (Curtin)
- Considered assessment of First Years (QUT)

Assessment literacy is essential at every level

- Institutional policy makers
- Educational leaders & managers
- Curriculum designers
- Academic teachers & tutors
- Students and student associations
- Ministers of Education
- Community stakeholders

SACWG in the UK multi-institutional studies

Comparison of coursework & examination marks
Mark distributions and marking practices
Benchmarking and threshold standards
Discipline related marking behaviour
Honours classification standards
Impact of modular mark distributions
Impact of assessment in first year on Widened participation agenda

Our Challenge

Collaborative research and development agenda that engages multiple institutions and all stakeholders in establishing multi-level literacy.

- Impact of assessment on widened participation agenda
- Impact of particular forms of assessment on graduate capabilities

Achieving Assessment Literacy

(Holroyd 2000)

- Activities informed by different paradigms
- Assessment scholarship*
- A range of types decision making
- Collegiality, negotiation and interaction between all stakeholders
- Code of practice for assessment grounded in values
- A commitment to critical reflection