Assessments

Assessment is a powerful force in student learning. From the student’s perspective only the most important activities in a subject are assessed.

Simply by changing the assessment of your subject, you can affect the way students engage with the subject content. A review of the literature shows that finding the right balance of student workload, goal alignment and formative feedback is likely to have the greatest impact on improving student learning. The four elements of proper Assessment Strategy are:

- Developing explicit outcomes and criteria
- Writing formative feedback
- Involving students in assessment
- Streamlining grading

Assessment Criteria

Having pre-determined standards of performance is the most defensible approach to assessment. Without a clear understanding of the subject’s goals, students have a greater chance of becoming confused and wasting time trying to discover what it is we want them to learn.

As you plan your teaching you will make choices on what you think is the best way to learn a particular skill, knowledge or attribute. If you go a small step further and make these goals clear to your students, then the written objectives used in curriculum design will serve a useful purpose in assisting your student’s learning. The most direct way student’s experience what is needed to achieve the subject's learning objectives is through the assessment criteria.
Writing Assessment Criteria

Once the goals of assessment have been determined it is necessary to describe the criteria that will be used to judge whether the desired level of performance has been achieved. Learning objectives consist of three parts:

- the student action;
- the content; and,
- the standard required to meet the objective.

Assessment criteria relates to the third part of the objective, the standard of performance.

Criteria are developed by analyzing the learning outcomes and identifying the specific characteristics that contribute to the overall assignment. These are the standards by which learning is judged.

Capturing the multiple dimensions of student performance is at the heart of criterion development. A range of diverse performance measures can be formulated for any given performance. The main question is, how many criterion are needed that contain neither irrelevant or miss important areas? The criteria then need to be linked with marks in some form of combined composite score.

Formative Feedback

Students say the quality of the feedback is the same as the quality of teaching by the instructor. They find that only the instructors who really care about their learning provide feedback. Poor quality feedback reflects poorly on the college. Students expect more feedback now that they are having to fund their own education. These are questions of accountability and transparency. The main academic reason given for not providing feedback is because it is too much work. Not providing students with feedback on their work gives the impression of overcrowded classes, a lack of personal help and encourages cheating.

It is a common misconception that students are only doing courses to pass assignments. The majority of students say they are enrolled in their subjects to
They stress that a high workload is only worthwhile if it results in higher quality learning. Many students interviewed stated that the effort that they put into their projects is not reciprocated in the quality of feedback they received from the lecturers. Students expect to be able to experiment but also to have their ideas challenged and tested.

Feedback helps students to improve and prevent them from making the same mistakes again. It is useless if feedback comes back too late in the semester. Students sometimes wait on the feedback before they feel capable of going onto the next assignment. Examinations are usually a summative form of assessment and therefore not used for feedback. Students who attempt to learn from their examinations are often frustrated that they cannot get copies of their exam papers.

For students, high quality feedback consists of following three things:

1. A clear criteria against which to judge the comments.
2. Comments that are detailed and related to specific aspects of their work.
3. Comments that are improvement focused.

**Students in Assessment**

Ultimately the goal of any college level course is for students to be able to make judgments on their own and other’s work. The more time students spend on higher-level abilities, like analyzing and evaluating, the better they will get at assessment. Habeshaw, Gibbs and Habeshaw (1995: p. 155) suggest one approach to getting students involved in their assessment is by having them develop their own assignment questions. If students are concerned with the subject’s assessment they will be encouraged to engage in their subjects in deeper and more meaningful ways.

Peer assessment develops the ability of students to make independent judgments by involving them in commenting on and judging other students’ work. It is commonly a part of group work, in which a variety of assessment methods are undertaken as a group assignment, to develop student’s teamwork skills and/or enable students to
undertake larger tasks than could be done by an individual. Peer assessment has a vital role to play in formative assessment, but it can also be used as a component in a summative assessment if carefully implemented.

Self-assessment generally supplements, rather than replaces, teacher assessment. An ideal resource for those interested in involving students in taking responsibility for making judgments about their own learning is David Boud’s (1995) "Implementing Student Self Assessment." Boud argues that students see evaluating his or her own work as an important skill to which colleges rarely contribute. Boud provides 6 case studies of the application of self-assessment to undergraduate courses.

Online Assessment

With the wide availability of course management software like Blackboard, the World-wide Web is becoming increasingly attractive as a mechanism for the delivery of assessment. Many students now use Blackboard in their day-to-day studies and integrating the technology into the assessment brings the assessment regimen closer to the learning environment of students.

Despite the widespread use of computers in teaching and learning, their use for assessment has been limited. There is a tendency to associate computer-based assessment with automated multiple-choice questions, possibly because it was one of the earliest uses of computer technologies. Computer-based assessment not only automates routine tasks like grading multiple-choice questions, but can enrich student’s learning experiences (Brown, Race and Bull, 1999).

Currently, the main use of online assessment is for summative rather than formative testing of students. This is done mostly through multiple choice and fill in the blank online quizzes and tests. Another popular use of online technologies is for the electronic submission of written assignments.

There are a number of benefits to using online assessments, which Harvey and Mogey (1999) list as,
• Large numbers can be graded quickly and accurately
• Student responses can be monitored
• Assessment can be offered in an open access environment
• Assessments can be stored and reused
• Immediate feedback can be given
• Assessment items can be randomly selected to provide a different paper to each student

Assessing Online Discussion

Both email and online discussions are commonly used to provide feedback for students on their assignments. Current online instructors using discussions, as an assessment, caution that it cannot be assumed that all students know how to use online technologies. Your class may be their first experience with online learning and so there is a danger that they may not perform as well online as you expect. As a consequence it is a good practice to introduce your students to Blackboard and make them aware of its student support facilities such as the student technical helpdesk.

The main advantage of online technology is the increased flexibility in providing faster feedback on student’s work. Students also like the immediacy implied by being online. It gives them a greater opportunity to communicate with their instructors and peers.

When participation in online discussions is required as part of the criteria for the subject, instructors need to determine how the online interactions will be assessed. Online discussion forums lie somewhere between tutorial discussions and essays in style. They have the informality of a tutorial but provide a permanent written record of what was discussed. It is customary to assess the extent a student contributes to the discussion and how they draw on the resources of the subject to formulate their answers (Lea, 2001). As with essays, coherence, style and presentation may all be essential criteria that are assessed in the student’s online contributions.
Online Discussions

The assessment of online discussions is the part of most online courses students have the least experience with. To start off, instructors should provide the students detailed information in the course outline explaining to their students what your requirements are in regards to online discussions.

For example, the instructor can state that online discussions are 20% of their final grade and involves the students contributing a minimum of 2400 words to an open forum over the entire semester. The purpose of posting online is that students can read each other’s contributions and comment on them. Instructors have found that the online forum provides opportunities for students who are not talkative in the classroom to participate in the discussions. To ensure regular involvement there is a minimum word count of 150 words for each week, which is intended to stop students from putting their entire 2400 words in the last week. There is no maximum word limit.

The students are asked to try and relate their discussions to the readings that are set for each week. Generally the first threads are almost always about the readings, however, by the end of semester a thread that was started in the first week may still be ongoing and has transformed into a broader discussion. As long as the students keep on interacting in a suitably scholarly way, there is no limit to what they discuss.

The instructor does not need to read every piece of work as it comes throughout the semester, but must keep abreast of the broad movements in the students' postings. To assess their online discussion you can use the sorting tool, within Blackboard, to sort each student's contributions into a list and as a result can get an instant impression of how much they have done each week.

The instructor then reads through the student’s contributions (recommended on a weekly basis) and the instructor can then ascertain how each student applied their knowledge to the general themes that emerged in the online discussion. The students receive half their marks for their engagement with the topics and their understandings of the areas, plus their use of the theorists from the readings. The
other half of their final assessment is based on how much they have interacted with the other postings in the forum. The students will get the highest marks when there is a good balance of engagement with the text and the ideas in the subject, along with a very interactive conversational approach towards their fellow students.

Online Examinations

Students find a number of benefits in online examinations. It is well known that many students suffer from anxiety when faced with large, end-of-semester exams. Sambell, Sambell and Sexton (1999) found that their students reported less exam anxiety when computer assessments were a component of continuous assessment, throughout the semester, as each test did not represent a high level of risk for the students, and they were able to build their confidence in their abilities along the way. Students particularly appreciated the opportunity to do practice tests online, reporting that they assisted them in knowing what to study and the practice tests helped them to pace their revision so students did not just cram for the final exam.

Harvey and Mogey (1999) suggest that the advantage of online assessment is the possibility to introduce more variables into the structure of the assessment pattern, so that computer-based tests can be offered at different times, locations or even different tests to different students.

This report is intended as a resource for you to become familiar with the issues behind online examinations. It draws from a number of recent studies on online assessments and on interviews with staff and students on the assessment practices in different sections of community colleges. This report presents information and examples on using question banks and student authentication.

The idea that computers can automate grading is one of the attractions of putting assessments online. As attempts to grade student essays are still in their infancy (Shermis, Mzumara, Olson & Harrington, 2001), the major focus of online testing has been on multiple-choice questions (MCQ). MCQs have a long association with computer assisted assessment and are relatively easy to convert to an online format.
As with all MCQs it is the question design that makes multiple choice tests effective. An important, but time consuming, procedure in MCQ examinations is to produce a test that differentiates between levels of intellectual ability. These questions take more time to create but once produced, they offer flexibility in the delivery of examinations. They also increase the efficiency that can be gained through a computer calculating and recording student's grades. Pritchett (1999) cautions that even with careful question design, it is difficult to assess the highest level outcomes, like synthesis and evaluation, by using multiple choice responses.

As with all assessment, MCQs should test clearly identified learning outcomes and be integrated into the course rather than treated as an afterthought. An advantage of using MCQs online is the ease in scheduling an examination once you have a pool of questions. Known as "question banks," these are a store of large numbers of questions in one subject area. Question banks also allow for any particular test question to be selected from the bank at random. Having randomized questions with the same structure but different content is considered a way to deter cheating, as there is no advantage by seeing another student's exam paper. For this to be effective, the question bank needs to be large enough to prevent high levels of repetition.

**Authentication and security**

On the whole, instructors are still wary of setting examinations online. When the students are off-site, the instructor's main concern is with student authentication. They want to be sure they know who exactly is 'pushing the buttons' in the exam. Even though there is no way to ensure the identity of a student at a remote site, the greater concern to many instructors is how to ensure that students did not receive outside assistance to improve their test score. One approach is to make all online examinations formative and open-book exams.
References
