



PRINCIPLES OF ASSESSMENT

'I am returning this otherwise good typing paper to you because someone has printed gibberish all over it and put your name at the top'.

A professor of English,
Ohio State University

Few issues currently get more attention in higher education than the assessment of student learning. Assessment is a very emotional topic, feared by students and seen as tiresome by faculty because of the amount of work involved. Yet, when assessment is done well, involving different methods, aligned with the curriculum and where students are given clear feedback on their work, the experience can be very worthwhile learning experience.

I am currently involved with a 'Benchmarking Club' on assessment, involving eight institutions, a key feature being the involvement of students. Comments made by two different students highlighted for me the need to listen to students and to ensure a common understanding of the issues relating to assessment. The first student said, "I never realised that assessment was for learning." The second comment related to the feedback this student had received on her work, where she was told that the page numbers should have been put on the bottom right hand corner of the page and not in the middle! As well as the significance of these comments, it highlighted for me the need for staff and students to engage in debates with each other on assessment. I think we often take for granted that each group has a clear and shared understanding and it is only when the two groups meet to explore such issues that these mismatches become clear.

I also worry about what we as staff take for granted. For example, in the early weeks of a university course we bombard students with information relating to assessment. We talk about rules and regulations, what happens if

they fail and then get them to sign a form on plagiarism. Two questions I would ask about this are, 'do they need to know all this information in week one' and 'do they really understand about plagiarism? A more effective way would be to jointly explore with them why we assess, i.e. to help them learn and the role of feedback in that process. One resource that you could use with your students is from the yellow 'Assessment Box' from the Generic Centre. There are currently 12 briefings, with three more to be added later this month (<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp?id=16896>). The one I want to draw your attention to is entitled "Assessment: A Guide for Students" written by Phil Race. The contents cover 11 sections including, 'How important is assessment', 'What is assessed', 'Managing your exams' and 'Plagiarism and cheating'. These could be used at the start of a course, where for example groups of students could discuss each section and report back with three key learning points and any questions. This highlights assessment as important and gives both staff and students an opportunity to explore their understanding and any misconceptions they may have about assessment.

I would also suggest that course teams spend time reviewing their assessment practices within the framework of an assessment strategy. To help with producing such a strategy another Briefing in the Yellow Box is "Assessment: A Guide for Heads of Department" by Alistair Mutch and George Brown. Sections include, 'What is an assessment strategy', 'Approaches to take' and 'Preparing to develop a strategy'.

I believe a useful place to start is to discuss the principles of assessment that such a strategy would be built upon. It is also beneficial to have a framework around which to build discussion. One such framework is available from the LTSN Bioscience website

(<http://bio.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/assess.htm>). Feedback to students on their work is one area I would highlight for attention. In our busy lives and with increased numbers of students, comments are often perfunctory, not read by students and not used by students to make progress. The Scottish Educational Developers have been collating case studies of good practice in feedback to students on their work and these can be downloaded under the SENLEF project on the Generic Centre website (<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp?id=19681>).

Here you will also find a briefing on seven principles of good practice and details of forthcoming events to disseminate this material.

Finally good luck with your assessment practice and I hope all your students know that assessment is for learning.

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The LTSN Generic Centre has 20 copies of the Yellow Box to give away free on a first come first served principle (normally £75). If you would like a copy please email carrie.drewer@ltsn.ac.uk with your address to discover if you are one of the lucky 20.

SUPPORT FOR BLIND AND VISUALLY-IMPAIRED BIOSCIENCE STUDENTS

The National Centre for Tactile Diagrams can provide practical help with training and tactile graphics resources. Further information is available at <http://bio.ltsn.ac.uk/ftp/advertising/nctd.pdf>