

Assessment – formats, issues and learning

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Factors affecting assessment and learning

- Significance
- How much is known and understood about the assessment – format, criteria, grade weighting
- Seen Vs unseen
- Time element - pressure
- Practice Vs one-off
- Format of the assessment
- Amount of content coverage
- Number of assessments
- Conditions
- Isolation Vs collaboration
- Prescribed Vs choice
- Feedback intensive Vs feedback light
- Perceived fairness
- Degree of exam technique required

Structured (m/c) exams

Positives:

- Easier for large cohorts
- Can use for regular formative tests
- Greater content coverage
- Test how fast students think rather than how fast they can write
- Save staff time and energy
- Speedy feedback – students could repeat test to improve
- Can test higher level skills if designed well
- More objective grading
- Can build item bank to develop multiple tests

Negatives:

- The 'guess' factor
- Designing questions and distracters takes time and considerable skill
- May promote black and white thinking – looking for the 'right' answer
- May promote a surface learning approach to content
- Difficult to digest feedback into meaningful learning

Open book / crib sheet exams

Positives:

- Less stress on memorisation
- Allows for more complex questions
- Can demand higher standards from students
- Effective questions can test what students can "do" – rather than what they can remember
- Can measure other skills – retrieval skills, application.
- Reduces student anxiety

Negatives:

- Access to enough books for all students
- Books can be a distraction rather than a help – can hinder weaker students
- Bigger desks needed for exam
- Possible opening for academic misconduct

Written answer or essay exams

Positives:

- Economical – more students assessed at the same time
- Equality of opportunity – all things equal
- Proof of individual learning / achievement
- Relate more clearly to complex thinking and deeper engagement
- Can allow for divergent / individual / creative thinking

Negatives:

- More limited content coverage due to time pressure
- Badly set exam questions (vague /too broad) may still encourage surface learning
- Exam technique is as important as knowledge
- Time it takes to grade papers often = little or no feedback
- Open to more subjective grading
- Lack of clarity of expectations (criteria) from individual tutors and departments
- More challenging for overseas students

Module Essays / Reports

Positives:

- Can assess several skills beyond writing – e.g. broad and focussed research
- Good academic writing is an art in itself
- Expose student's reasoning abilities
- Allow for student individuality and expression
- Essays can reflect deep learning more easily
- More realistic – writing in life is drafted / takes time to develop
- Allow for full development of ideas / revision

Negatives:

- Plagiarism / collusion issues
- Narrow content coverage
- Good academic writing is an art in itself – takes time to develop
- Valuable learning tool if detailed feedback is given
- Time consuming - to write and mark
- Very open to subjective marking

Presentations / peer teaching

Positives:

- Proof of individual learning / thinking
- Students take presentations seriously
- Way to get students involved in active learning in the classroom
- Opportunity for students to learn to communicate in media other than writing
- Better sense of audience for students
- Can be done collaboratively

Negatives:

- Takes considerable class time
- Some students find presenting traumatic
- Students often find listening to other student presentations boring or unsatisfying
- Evidence is transient unless recorded = problems with validity
- What is being assessed – knowledge or technique or personality?

Portfolios

Positives:

- Allows for a variety of assessment formats / media = breadth & depth = rich assessment
- Encourage extended thinking and engagement rather than memory
- Allow students some autonomy / control about what is assessed
- Encourage student- staff contact and early detection of student problems
- Can show student development over time

Negatives:

- Often ill-defined goals = unfocussed collections of bits of work & over -assessment
- Can increase student & staff pressure throughout the course
- Valuable work can be lost
- Grading can be highly subjective and time-consuming
- Early work may skew grading of student achievement
- Validity? Whose work is it?
- Deadlines issue
- Difficult to archive

Group work

Positives:

- Develops complex life skills
- Allows for a variety of assessment tasks
- Allows students to play to their strengths
- Can create positive dynamics / energy
- Can be very motivating / engaging

Negatives:

- Requires a lot of input to work properly
- What to assess – process or product?
- Assessing different contributors fairly
- Can create very negative dynamics
- Can disadvantage certain student groups / demotivate

Diversity of Approaches within one Program

- Mixture of assessment approaches in different modules = providing a broad spectrum of assessment
- Building skills, assessment and criteria through different stages
- Building towards “capstone” assessment in final year