

Assessment patterns that fail, and that work

Criteria for assessment 'working'

1. enough student effort distributed reasonably evenly across all important topics
2. the effort they put in at a high intellectual level – focussed on understanding rather than memorising or 'sufficing'
3. students clear and about 'goals and standards' and orient their effort appropriately
4. feedback is effective: students read it, understand it and use it to improve what they do next.
5. progression over time so that students become more sophisticated in the way that they tackle similar tasks

Assessment patterns that fail

1. Too much summative assessment for marks and too little formative assessment, for learning, resulting in:
 - a student focus on marks
 - not enough student effort, because it is not possible to mark often enough
 - not enough feedback, and delay in feedback
2. Trivial assignments that make low intellectual demands
3. Feedback that does not feed forwards – because:
 - it not relevant to the next assignment which is different in form
 - it is too late
 - it is too specific to the content of the assignment
4. Too much variety in forms of assignment, causing:
 - student confusion about demands and forms of discourse
 - lack of progression in standard over time as too little practice at each form
 - feedback not feeding forwards
 - the whole being less than the sum of the parts
5. Over-reliance on documentation to clarify goals and standards, resulting in:
 - lack of student understanding of goals and standards
 - differences between teachers in marking standards and the focus of feedback, as they don't understand the learning outcomes and criteria

Assessment patterns that work

1. Large number of regular tasks or assignments (or smaller number of large and complex assignments) that generate sufficient effort and distribute that effort across topics. (Unseen exams with clever questions can also achieve this)
2. Most assignments as course requirements, without marks, so that:
 - the focus can remain on learning
 - the marking load is reduced
 - informal feedback mechanisms can operate very quickly
3. Regular cycles of feedback and practice involving a limited range of types of assignment so that student come to understand goals and standards through engaging with those standards, whether or not they are written down anywhere
4. Less reliance on teachers for feedback and more involvement of students to engage with internalising criteria and standards so that they can supervise themselves
...but increasing informal oral feedback from teachers
5. Wide use of exemplars of grades for each type of assignment – for the benefit of both teachers and students - and discussion of these exemplars.

Implications for course design

1. Longer, bigger and fewer course units, in order to:
 - reduce the number of summative assessments
 - free up resources for more formative assessment
 - provide more opportunity for sequences of assignments with feedback that can feed forwards, within courses
2. Limitation on variety of types of assignment, and planned consistency across semesters and years in the nature of assignments and the nature of criteria used in assessing assignments, so as to:
 - provide enough practice for students to progress in their sophistication
 - enable feedback to feed forwards
3. Orienting assessment to programme level learning outcomes, rather than mainly to course-level outcomes, so as to:
 - increase consistency and progression
 - clarify the meaning of goals and standards to students, as they will encounter programme-level outcomes repeatedly
 - increase the validity of degree classifications
4. Less reliance on formal documentation to communicate standards, and more effort to provide exemplars so as to
 - make explicit, and open to discussion, the meaning of goals and standards, for both teachers and students
 - enable students internalise standards, through marking exercises, and through self and peer assessment in relation to exemplars
5. The use of course requirements (with formative feedback) to increase and distribute student effort, with pass/fail judgements on them, or sampling for summative assessment and grading.
6. The use of integrative or 'capstone' courses that carry a heavy summative assessment load, enabling some preceding courses to be pass/fail and focus on learning.

Implications for students

1. Increased volume of regular required work, but with a focus on learning, not marks, allowing more risk-taking.
2. Reduced number of summative assessments (both coursework and exams), reducing overall assessment pressure but increasing the stakes each time assessment happens.
3. Increased volume of more timely feedback, designed to be useful to subsequent assignments.
4. Greater clarity of goals and standards, reducing anxiety and guesswork.
5. Active engagement with the meaning of goals and standards, so as to learn how to self-supervise and be more independent of teachers' judgements.