

Innovative Assessment in Higher Education (2006) eds. Bryan, C & Clegg, K.
Routledge, Taylor and Francis

This **INTRODUCTION** to the book may be used for educational purposes to provide an overview and to point students to specific chapters which may be of interest to them.

“It serves no useful purpose to lower our educational aspirations because we cannot yet measure what we think is important to teach. Quite the contrary, measurement and assessment will have to rise to the challenge of our educational aspirations”

(Cross in Crooks, 1988:470)

Measuring achievement has become the obsession of higher education. We use terms such as ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ to describe approaches to learning but more precisely they are approaches to *assessment*. The research of the last twenty years provides evidence that students adopt strategic, cue-seeking tactics in relation to assessed work and we know that in the UK at least, academic staff pursue research funding and publications with promotion and the research assessment exercise (RAE) in mind. What ever we may think, assessment has become the currency with which we trade; the better grade, the bigger and better the reward.

Acknowledging the current obsession with measurement *Innovative Assessment* provides a systematic attempt to redefine assessment as an instrument of

liberation. It offers an antithesis to the old claims of objectivity and reliability in assessment and for some that will make uncomfortable reading. It makes the case that innovative assessments should *enhance* and *enable* self-regulated learning and judgements, rather than merely act as instruments of justification, measurement and limitation.

Innovative Assessment in Higher Education is a collaborative effort which enquires into how we innovate in assessment and what practices 'work' in different contexts and cultures. It provides a fundamental analysis of the role and purpose of assessment and how change can realistically be managed without compromising standards. Contributors reflect the active, organic nature of assessment and its relationship to student learning. *Innovative Assessment* is about continually reviewing and reflecting on current practices so as to enhance the learning experience. It sets out an agenda for innovation in assessment and explains why it is justified given the constraining nature of:

- existing assessment regulations
- quality assurance procedures
- concerns about standards and fairness, plagiarism and cheating
- conservative student expectations
- academic traditions
- increased class sizes
- reduced resources

- diverse types of less well prepared students

A defining feature of this book which sets it apart from many other books on assessment is its conceptual framework which acknowledges that assessment frames learning, creates learning activity and orientates all aspects of learning behaviour. In chapter two Gibbs outlines eleven conditions under which *assessment supports learning* based on the findings from the 'Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ)'. The eleven assessment conditions proved to support learning are summarised here, clustered under the five headings used to structure the AEQ.

1. Quantity and distribution of student effort – assessed tasks need to capture sufficient study time and effort and distribute student effort evenly across topics and weeks.
2. Quality and level of student effort – assessed tasks need to engage students in productive learning activity and communicate clear and high expectations.
3. Quantity and timing of feedback – sufficient feedback needs to be provided both often enough and sufficiently quickly to be useful to students
4. Quality of feedback – feedback should focus on learning rather than on marks, should be linked to the purpose of the assignment and to criteria and should be understandable to students.

5. Student response to feedback – feedback is pointless unless it is received by students and attended to. It needs to be acted upon in order to improve student work or learning.

Working within this conceptual framework, the book offers a comprehensive rationale for changing assessment and what such changes can and do achieve.

The authors of case study chapters do not present assessments as a package of ready made tactics to be pulled off the shelf, but instead provide rationales for their innovations which derive from relevant underlying principles (discussed in detail in the first section of the book). The innovations are problematic and set in complex contexts bounded by regulations, traditions, political pressures and beliefs. Despite these constraints, evidence of pedagogic impact is provided. Our intention is to expose current assessment practices to the scrutiny of peers, you the readers, and to invite you to make judgements about whether they can work.

Can you honestly claim that your assessments:

- enhance the student learning experience?
- provide useful and timely feedback?
- help students to understand and recognize quality?
- lead to improved performance?

If you have reservations about answering 'yes' to any of these questions, this book is for you. Good formative assessment *should* meet the above criteria. Yet too often we focus on the grades and quality assurance aspects of assessment and lose sight of the pedagogic role that assessment can and *should* play in improving learning. In this book, we have tried to redress this imbalance and move away from a 'one size fits all' approach to assessment and academic practice. We have set out to create for colleagues a model of critical examination of our own work in relation to the research and empirical data on student learning. The result is a collection of assessment interventions grounded within a unifying conceptual framework that have worked in practice and which offer an evaluation of the conditions that enabled their success.

What unites us as editors is not just a commitment to enhancing assessment, it is a dogged determination to scrutinise what assessment can and can't do and to offer examples and evidence of the powerful impact it has on motivation, self-efficacy and the general experience of learning. Our common experiences include managing FDTL projects, supporting learning and teaching at subject level (LTSN), teaching and assessing at institutional level and evaluating assessment projects. As such we are active participants, recipients and stakeholders in the assessment game.

How and why is assessment changing?

Modern society is demanding and complex yet many of our assessments are magnificently basic in their nature. Despite work on educational taxonomies and more recently Biggs (1999) advocating a more sophisticated and aligned use of assessment to support high level learning, much of our assessment still focuses on testing knowledge and comprehension and ignores the challenge of developing and assessing judgements. It is time we recognized the changing nature of society and acknowledged that quality is a more complex concept than traditional assessment criteria suggest – quality cannot be reduced to a set of easily quantified learning outcomes. The widespread use of the phrase ‘anticipated learning outcomes’ is in part a recognition of individualized, personal perceptions and reactions to learning situations. People learn what they want to learn and in different ways. What the innovations described in this book show is that assessment which supports learning is flexible and takes into account the need for individuals to make sense of feedback in the context of their own experience.

The book contextualises innovation in assessment within a range of academic disciplines and institutional settings. It provides both theoretical and empirical support thus making a compelling case for *why* we need innovation to bring into alignment the processes of learning, teaching *and* assessment. The book brings together elements of assessment which bridge studies of innovative practice thereby contributing to the growing body of literature which is gradually beginning to impact on pedagogic practice.

How the book evolved through collaborative effort

The inspiration for this book came in 2003 when UK colleagues with a specific interest in the relationship between assessment and learning met to exchange experiences. Most participants were involved in funded projects (e.g. Higher Education Funding Council for England) so the group became known as the Assessment Project Network. Collaboration then extended to include colleagues from overseas who experienced similar problems to those of UK higher education.

On both sides of the Atlantic, calls were being made for assessment practices that enable students to *do* something with the feedback they are given; to *experience* the process of making judgements for themselves; and to become reflective, resilient learners who are able to progress to more sophisticated levels of understanding and application. In order to do this they need to be engaged in assessment processes not simply feel the effects of someone else's assessment.

Structure of the book

The book is divided into four parts. *Part one* deals with the pedagogic context of assessment from different theoretical perspectives; *part two* comprises case studies which illustrate the impact of appropriate and timely feedback in relation to the seven principles of good feedback; case studies in *part three* focus on how to stimulate learning through assessment; and case studies in *part four* illustrate how innovation in assessment encourages continuing professional development.

Assessment innovations are drawn from more than 20 UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with case studies covering a wide range of disciplines including medicine and allied caring professions; humanities; business studies; psychology; engineering; maths for science; geology; performing arts; and sport, leisure and tourism.

The breadth and depth of the research makes this book a valuable contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) which should be of equal value when viewed from both theoretical and practitioner perspectives.

Graham Gibbs explains the pressures to change assessment and outlines the kinds of change taking place in the UK and elsewhere. He cites the collapse of some traditional modes of assessment due to increased class sizes reducing the level of personalised and prompt feedback. Reduced class contact time and the need for students to spend more time studying independently has necessitated

different approaches to teaching which subsequently require new and more relevant ways of assessing learning.

In his second chapter **Gibbs** draws on extensive research and student experience to illustrate how assessment frames learning and in some courses has more impact on learning than does teaching. He then discusses the eleven conditions under which assessment *supports* learning thereby providing a conceptual underpinning to the innovations in assessment described in the case study chapters.

Roger Murphy comments on the curious phenomenon that in the UK assessment debates which have occurred in HE have usually been quite distinct from those taking place in school-level education. The author explores some reasons why this has been the case, noting the marked disparity between professional training for teachers in schools (commonly 4 years) with that of HE lecturers (the majority of whom, until recently, required *no* formal teaching qualification). He welcomes the move towards professionalizing the whole approach to the support for student learning within UK Higher Education (HE).

Marcia Mentowski invites readers to engage in reviewing the ideas and long-standing student assessment-as-learning practices at Alverno College, Milwaukee. She outlines the college-wide assessment process and articulates educational assumptions and learning principles that inform what students learn

and connects them to elements of assessment substantiated by research evidence (e.g., public criteria, feedback, self assessment) that lead to deep and sustainable learning.

David Nicol and Colin Milligan explore how formative assessment and feedback might be used to promote the development of self-regulated learning in contexts in which face-to-face and online learning are integrated. Self-regulated learning (SRL) refers to the active control by students of some aspects of their own learning; for example, the setting of learning goals and the monitoring and regulating of progress towards the attainment of these goals.

Evelyn Brown and Chris Glover describe how the analysis of feedback provided to students on their written assignments can shed light on the way in which they respond to that feedback. The Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ) on which they base their findings has strong links with the conceptual framework for effective assessment and feedback discussed in this volume (Chapters 2 and 6).

Alan Robinson and Mark Udall offer a conceptual model which promotes the design of an aligned teaching, learning and assessment strategy. The focus is on increasing the quality and quantity of formative assessment activities, but within a manageable overall assessment workload for students and teachers.

Margaret Price and Berry O'Donovan offer a cost effective approach to enhancing students' understanding of standards which goes beyond that conveyed by explicit description. The authors consider the application of a social constructivist approach to all aspects of the assessment cycle and how this might support improvement in student learning and performance.

Lin Norton et al discuss the implementation of a programme of writing workshops designed around the concept of 'core' assessment criteria. The workshop approach aims to help undergraduates improve their essay writing and also to adopt a deep approach to their studies. It also aims to encourage strategically focussed students to reach a more advanced conceptualization and understanding of the discipline.

Shelagh Ross, Sally Jordan and Philip Butcher address the problem of providing rapid but detailed teaching feedback to large distance education groups. Their case study researches online assessment of a 'maths for science' course in which meaningful feedback was given in response to student answers on formative and summative assessment exercises.

Lesley Lawrence and Sean Gammon analyse the effect of 'flow' theory (an experience of deep enjoyment, satisfaction and irresistible spontaneity) on the assessment experience of students. The authors tested whether the introduction of flow might reduce student anxiety, increase enjoyment and ultimately increase

the whole assessment experience. Their findings suggest that flow can affect positively the assessment experience of both lecturer and student.

Tony Gardner-Medwin's chapter looks at experience with confidence-based marking (CBM) at University College London over the last 10 years. The CBM strategy was initially introduced to improve formative self-assessment and to encourage students to think more carefully about questions in objective tests. CBM is seen by the students as simple, fair, readily understood and beneficial. They are motivated to reflect and justify reasons either for confidence or reservation about each answer, and they gain by expressing true confidence, whether high or low.

Cordelia Bryan documents an innovative approach to assessment designed to encourage students to *focus on the process of collaboration*. It shifts student attention from focusing almost exclusively on performance and outcomes to attitudes which begin to value co-operation and group dynamics. Evidence is cited which shows how students' ultimate performance grade might be improved when collaborative skills were manifest, observed and an integral part of the learning and assessment process.

Kay Sambell, Liz McDowell and Alistair Sambell focus on assessment as a pedagogic tool to foster learner autonomy. The authors look at both procedural autonomy (managing learning) and critical autonomy (ways of thinking) to

analyse students' views in two case studies. They address the philosophical paradox that to become autonomous, students need tutor help and direction. They recognise the need to structure activities and initially to direct students towards the means which will ultimately enable them to become autonomous learners. They advocate a developmental approach to build up both skills and concepts by scaffolding the student experience.

Sue Williams and Sheila Ryan report the findings of a study on Personal Development Planning (PDP) for undergraduates. They highlight the need for targeted staff development based on a systematic evaluation of staff capabilities and readiness to act as both Personal and Academic tutors. Their findings clarify the responses required of institutions wishing to implement PDP placing emphasis on staff training objectives being linked to defined organizational aims.

Jim Wood, Christine Curle, Catherine Haslam and Jacqui Stedmon address the needs of post graduates in Clinical and Community Psychology by assessing learning outcomes using PBL exercises. The assessment episodes incorporate group outcomes and dynamics in a context where students must manage large amounts of knowledge whilst developing clinical and intra personal skills. The intention here is to make professional training mirror the nature and quality of work undertaken by qualified practitioners. The authors offer some evidence for the success of the approach and have subsequently developed it in other areas of the curriculum.

In this chapter **Simon Cotterill, Geoff Hammond and Philip Bradley** report on their experiences and lessons learnt from developing and implementing Electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) for Medicine. They address the challenges posed by students receiving educational input and assessment from numerous 'suppliers', with formal and informal learning often based in multiple locations and involving a range of different educational and IT infrastructures.

Sue Morison and Mairead Boohan examine the assessment methods developed and evaluated in inter-professional education (IPE) medical and nursing programs. The clinical ward was selected as the most favorable learning environment and two studies were carried out. The first employed role-play to assess clinical, communication and teamwork skills and the second concerned history-taking, problem-solving and reflection.

Lewis Elton explores the extent to which the practice of academic staff may be considered 'professional', how this is currently assessed and how perhaps it should be. He makes a case that genuine professionalism requires a combination of training, education and acculturation and explores how the necessary systematic and personal changes required to achieve genuine "professionalism" might be tackled.

Drawing on recurring themes from the book, **Karen Clegg** and **Cordelia Bryan** argue for a holistic approach to assessment which *enhances* students' skills, abilities and capabilities rather than one which attempts to measure such skills in the misguided notion that it is done so with 'scientific reliability'. The authors point to a need for further research into innovative assessments designed to enhance students' creative processes and develop their professional judgement. Such innovations, they argue, will be required if we are to equip the students of the future to cope with uncertainty and unpredictability inherent in our high risk, super complex society.