

Assessment

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is the thing that tells us, and students, how well they have learnt. But if assessment is badly planned and implemented, even the best students will find it difficult to demonstrate their learning.

Assessment practices vary enormously in art and design, and it was an area of concern in many Quality Assurance Agency inspections and internal reviews. This is odd as many of our practices – the use of portfolios for assessment, project-based work and group work, for example – are potentially very good methods of assessment. So what is going wrong?

QUESTION

Think about assessment objectively. If you can, try to remember how you viewed assessment when you were a student.

<p>What problems are there with, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● students understanding briefs,● briefs keeping the focus on what the module or unit was all about,● giving feedback,● agreeing on marks?	
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Those four areas are ones we need to be more focussed on. Before we look at them in detail, read the case study and make a note of anything you think is an interesting idea, and anything you find worrying...

Case Study

My background is in advertising and marketing. I taught in Further and Higher Education for six years, then became a part-time lecturer in Higher Education. I had three part-time jobs that made up one full-time job, so I've had a lot of experience as an hourly-paid lecturer teaching at all levels from Higher National Diploma to MA. I've worked in art and design departments at several institutions, mainly in fashion and marketing.

I've found that assessment needs to vary according to the level; it's more prescriptive for a foundation degree, for instance, than an MA.

In art and design, a lot of assessment is coursework based, with some exams. So as well as tests, you can have quite varied coursework, including individual and group projects. If I'm planning assessment, I start by looking at the learning outcomes, then think about what would be appropriate for that level and subject. There are different ways of approaching it.

Presentations are a good way of assessing as they also involve communication skills. The students can also present in groups to develop teamwork skills.

Group work is also a good way of assessing work at foundation and degree level; it gives experience of the real world, and learning to work with people of different qualities. The students have to be disciplined as it involves working with other people, and they find out the challenges of working together.

We do industry-linked assessments, where they work together on a 'live' brief. The topics will be set by me together with a senior member of the company we're working with. We'll create the brief,

and then the students visit the company or vice versa. Sometimes a senior member of the company will also come and give a guest lecture, which helps to inspire the students to want to improve their own presentations. We incorporate prizes for the best team. There will be three to five people in a team. First of all we use peer assessment to pick the best five teams to present to the company, then a senior member of staff will come in and judge the presentations. Doing this has led to greater institutional involvement and sponsorship. Working with a company the students work harder as well, they see it as having more credibility.

Different forms of assessment are appropriate for different size groups – presentations are fine for smaller groups, but for larger numbers you need to use written assessment or exams. At the moment I have 150 students in my group, so I can't do individual presentations, but they do a written group assessment instead.

Another approach I like is integrated assessment, which involves more than one subject. For example the students had to construct an advert for Advertising, and deconstruct it using semiotic analysis for Cultural Studies. It is also useful putting it together with many other visually-led subjects. It does involve more work. We had one integrated project which covered all subjects together with the whole team involved in creating the brief, and had a presentation day. It was time-consuming but worthwhile, because it provides links and joins up the separate topics.

I've found that the brief needs to be very clear, with no ambiguity. Some institutions have a specific format that has to be followed, and the learning outcomes and criteria have to be stated. The language needs to be appropriate as well.

For group work I get them to keep a log, which has to be completed for the end of the assessment, because some students may not work as well and so don't deserve the same grade.

I include a list of suggested learning resources that are available in the institution or through web links. The Internet helps a lot for students. For essays I also ask for an appendix and bibliography, and correct referencing – in whatever is the institutional style. You need to be aware of the referencing requirements.

I create a feedback sheet which mentions the criteria in the brief and leaves space for comments so that the students are very clear about why they got the grade. There are two kinds of assessment feedback: *summative*, which counts towards the grade for the module or year (such as the accuracy of the content), and *formative*, which is

transferable to other assignments, gives a sense of progress, although the mark does not contribute to the grade for the module or year (such as the structuring of paragraphs and referencing). If your handwriting isn't clear it's a good idea to type it! If it's group feedback, then I give them verbal feedback and a written version as well. The students also have access to the best assignment posted online. I do request permission and keep it anonymous, but I've found it really works. I talk to other lecturers as well about their assessment strategies.

When the students have individual assignments, I suggest that they share the research and allow them to swap articles etc, but they have to do the writing individually.

I get the students to give their feedback on the task they have been set – there's a statement on the form about the assessment. This is really important, it helps to keep improving and they make suggestions for changes.

Incentives are good in art and design, and we gave vouchers as a prize for the best presentation. Competitions too can be incorporated into assessment.

Visiting tutors often have contacts and links they can bring in – it helps their profile and builds up contacts for the students. It's really important though to make sure that what you're proposing is appropriate and the students will enjoy it.

Another form of assessment is giving an exhibition at the end; this is good for the students, and helps them to get recognition. Taking part in summer exhibitions enhances students' CVs and helps recognition for lecturers as well.

Workplace assessment is a way to help the students to experience the real world. It can be a work-based project or a presentation following work-experience.

I've experimented with a lot of strategies. Different approaches are suitable for different levels:

FOUNDATION/HND	PRESENTATIONS, LIVE PROJECTS AND EXHIBITIONS
BA	SOME OF ABOVE, PRESENTATIONS, PLUS MORE INDIVIDUAL EXAM-BASED
MA	INDIVIDUAL/EXAM-BASED

At foundation level the students can be assessed through portfolios of work that show their progress through time. “Mood boards” are good for this level. The students had to cut bits out of magazines and create a “Versace customer”, which would help them at interview for further education or employment as well.

If you are *not* involved in setting the brief, then you need to:

- **BE CLEAR ABOUT THE BRIEF, TALK TO THE PROGRAMME LEADER; MAKE SURE YOU ARE FULLY BRIEFED. DO CHECK THE OUTCOMES AND THE CRITERIA – YOU NEED TO BE AWARE OF ALL THAT**
- **MODERATION IS IMPORTANT – SAMPLES OF THE MARKED WORK SHOULD BE MODERATED (CHECKED BY ANOTHER PERSON) TO ENSURE CONSISTENCY**
- **IF YOU’RE WATCHING PRESENTATIONS, GET SOMEONE TO COME AND WATCH ONE WITH YOU, OR TO CHECK THREE ASSIGNMENTS THAT YOU’VE MARKED**
- **THERE ARE REGULATIONS IN PLACE, AND IT’S THE INSTITUTION’S RESPONSIBILITY TO ENSURE THAT YOU KNOW WHAT THESE ARE AND THAT YOUR MARKING IS CHECKED**

For exams, open book exams are useful in Art & Design, I let the students bring an annotated version. This is a good approach for a case-study based exam, they can bring one annotated version of the case study. This can be called a “time-constrained assignment”, which sounds less intimidating, but I’d always check on the regulations first.

Copies of sample assignments and assessment feedback should be kept for course monitoring. At the end of the year, the course tutor looks through all the course stuff to check that it hasn’t been over or under assessed.

I have had a few problems with assessment, such as when two students copied each other. With something like that you may need a viva, but I’d consult the module leader about it first. Plagiarism is a real problem, with increasing resources available on the Internet. Some institutions have software to identify it. As a part-time lecturer it’s important to know the institutional policy and check the regulations on assessment.

Sometimes with presentations the students are too nervous to do it, or peer pressure stops them. They can suffer panic attacks or just

nervousness. It's very important to be calm, and to work with them to find a solution. On occasion I've had students present just to me and two people that they choose themselves. I do have to be flexible, but still make sure it meets the criteria, and of course time can be a problem. If you have more than one assessor you need to be very clear about the marking criteria, otherwise the results can be inconsistent. Feedback is very important too; I give verbal feedback for a group and written feedback for an individual.

If I'm planning changes, I look at what's happened before and make minor modifications but not drastic changes without checking with the course leader first.

When I'm planning assessment I try to:

- INCLUDE FLEXIBILITY
- KEEP IT INTERESTING FOR MYSELF AS WELL AS THE STUDENTS
- GIVE A CHOICE WHEREVER POSSIBLE, SUCH AS CHOOSING FROM A PARTICULAR COMMERCIAL SECTOR
- ASK THE STUDENTS WHAT THEY'VE DONE
- GAUGE THEIR LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING

Then I look at the appropriate level for learning, teaching and assessment.

Students *like* being asked; if they can be part of the process and not just the subject of it they're far more responsive, and they enjoy the dialogue.

Timing of assessment is important. Check with the course leader and the students. It is important for assessment to link with teaching in some way. Some assessment is progressive so the students have to experience the lectures and tutorials in order to complete the assessment. This type of assessment can be handed out at the beginning of the course with the understanding that it is done in stages.

Discussion

This tutor has some great approaches to assessment and is almost too good to be true (but it is true!).

Let us look at some of the main points, including the four areas of concern highlighted earlier.

STUDENTS UNDERSTANDING BRIEFS

Research has shown that the way in which students are briefed, and the feedback they receive during a project, can alter their understanding of even the “simplest” brief. For example, in one project that was intended to assess students’ understanding of fashion trends, two tutors kept telling students their presentation boards were untidy, and that they didn’t like the typefaces they used.

What do you think the consequences were?

How can you still advise students on general issues but make sure you don’t change their conception of the assessment task?

BRIEFS KEEPING THE FOCUS ON WHAT THE MODULE OR UNIT WAS ALL ABOUT

A common error is to come up with an “interesting” project that has absolutely nothing to do with the module or unit being studied. In the case study, the tutor tells us that the learning outcomes are consulted before coming up with the brief. This is exactly right. Before you decide what students will do, read the learning outcomes. Then decide what teaching and learning is required to arm the students with the appropriate knowledge to meet those outcomes. Then, and

only then, should you devise assessment tasks that allow them to demonstrate their learning. Never brief students on a project that has not been written with the learning outcomes in mind!

Look at a brief you are working with at the moment. Without cheating, write down what you think the learning outcomes for the module/unit are. Were you right?

If you asked students what you think the brief is assessing without letting them read it, what would they say?

GIVING FEEDBACK

Feedback during a module needs to be focussed on the learning outcomes and evaluated against the assessment criteria. Many students complain that they are given feedback during a project that suggests they are doing well, then receive marks that say otherwise. This is because the feedback is not based on the outcomes or criteria, or because the final marks aren't.

Feedback needs to be fairly detailed and focussed on what the project was intended to assess. For example, commenting on a student's presentation skills if it was their understanding of typography that was being assessed is not very useful for the student. (If you marked a student down for something that wasn't in the assessment criteria, the student could appeal.)

Keep comments focussed on the learning outcomes, sandwiching constructive criticism between positive remarks. Extra comments can then be added at the end, but with it being clear to students why they got the grade they did.

Feedback is such a useful learning tool it is worth spending time producing worthwhile comments. However, this can be made easier by focussing on the learning outcomes, not asking to see everything students have produced, using "comment banks" so that common comments can be ticked on a feedback sheet, or assessing with students present so they can make their own notes of your comments.

- **IS YOUR FEEDBACK VALUABLE TO STUDENTS?**
- **DO YOU THINK IT IS DETAILED ENOUGH?**
- **DOES IT RELATE TO THE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA AND THE GRADE?**
- **WHAT PROBLEMS DO YOU FIND IN WRITING FEEDBACK?**

AGREEING ON MARKS

Work should rarely, if ever, be assessed by tutors who do not know the project. Make sure the assessment criteria are clear, and that marks are given for the right reasons. It is not uncommon to hear two tutors disagreeing about a grade because one tutor “likes” the piece and another tutor doesn’t – that is never a valid criterion for a mark! In assessment it is almost always the process that is being assessed, not the product, and judgements should be as objective as possible.

As a part time tutor, if you are asked to assess, make sure you discuss the assessment criteria beforehand with your colleagues to ensure there is agreement on what is being marked.

- **ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH ASSESSMENT CRITERIA WHEN YOU MARK?**
- **IF DISAGREEMENTS OCCUR BETWEEN STAFF, WHAT USUALLY CAUSES THEM?**

INVOLVING STUDENTS

Getting students involved in assessment is a proven way of improving their learning. Clearly written learning outcomes and assessment criteria open up the opportunity to allow students to devise their own projects.

You could also identify learning outcomes that can be assessed by students, so relieving yourself of lots of work – remember, the ability to critically evaluate their own work is essential, so introduce self and peer assessment with a clear discussion on what constitutes good work. Evaluation – may involve individuals or groups analysing their own performance, however it does not count toward the actual mark.

Assessment – could use similar processes to evaluation but, crucially, counts towards the mark. Often it is easier to use student evaluation rather than student assessment prior to tutor assessment since evaluation does not count towards the mark it does not need to be so strict and systematic.

Be open about assessment. Ask third years to help you assess first year work, and vice versa – the results are interesting not just in the grades, but also the improved understanding of assessment that students go away with.

- **IS ASSESSMENT SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS TO, OR WITH, YOUR STUDENTS?**
- **DO YOU ASSESS IN SECRET OR ARE STUDENTS PRESENT?**
- **WHAT OPPORTUNITIES ARE THERE FOR STUDENTS TO ASSESS EACH OTHER? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?**

QUESTION

<p>Look at the notes you made when reading the case study. Discuss with a colleague the points you thought were interesting and that you would like to use in your own assessment.</p> <p>Then discuss the problems you identified. For example, if you highlighted group work or self assessment as things you don't like the idea of trying, discuss those. For every objection you can think of, try to come up with a solution.</p>	
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Exercise

Think back to a recent assessment, and the feedback you produced. What sort of comments did you find yourself making? Try to devise a “comment bank” like the example below that could be given back to students to save you time writing the same things over and over again. Think of comments for each “grade band” from referral through to distinction, with “good work” being the pass standard. Make sure these tie in to the correct level, and come up with comments for each learning outcome.

A good comment bank also has space for extra comments, again clearly identified as relating to the grade or more general in nature.

FEEDBACK RELATED TO YOUR GRADE

- Very well researched – excellent work
- More research would have helped you produce a more relevant piece – good work
- More research needed on audiences

OTHER COMMENTS (not related to your grade)

- Presentation could have been more professional
- Try to make your reasons for choosing a particular design more clearly linked to your research
- Try to choose a more appropriate typeface