

What are we assessing for?

Does conventional assessment undermine learning outcomes?

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Overview

Part 1.

Academic standards in a global context

Part 2.

The changing ground of assessment

Part 3.

What are the implications of the standards agenda for assessment?

Part 4.

Some challenging implications

Part 1

What are academic standards now and why should we bother with them?



What do we *now* mean by academic standards?

From

positional rhetoric:

‘we are committed to maintaining high academic standards’

to

something we are judged by:

‘are your assessment practices up to standard?’

From where do academic standards arise?

- Intrinsic to the structure of disciplinary knowledge
- consensus views of experts
- analysis of actual professional practices



From whom do they come?

- Ourselves/our discipline
- Professional bodies
- Accreditation agencies (eg. AACSB)
- International agreements (eg. AHELO)



The new landscape of academic standards

- National Qualifications Frameworks
- National Quality Assurance Agencies
- The OECD move
- Professional registration bodies
- Accrediting agencies, eg. AACSB for Business
- Threshold discipline learning outcomes
- Most importantly, ourselves, but beyond the implicit standards of disciplines
- Underpinning this is empirical justification of standards and comparability



Part 2

The changing ground of assessment



What does assessment need to do?

- Contribute to certifying student performance
 - Summative assessment
- Provide students with useful information to aid their learning now
 - Formative assessment
- Build students' capacity to make judgements about their own learning
 - Sustainable assessment

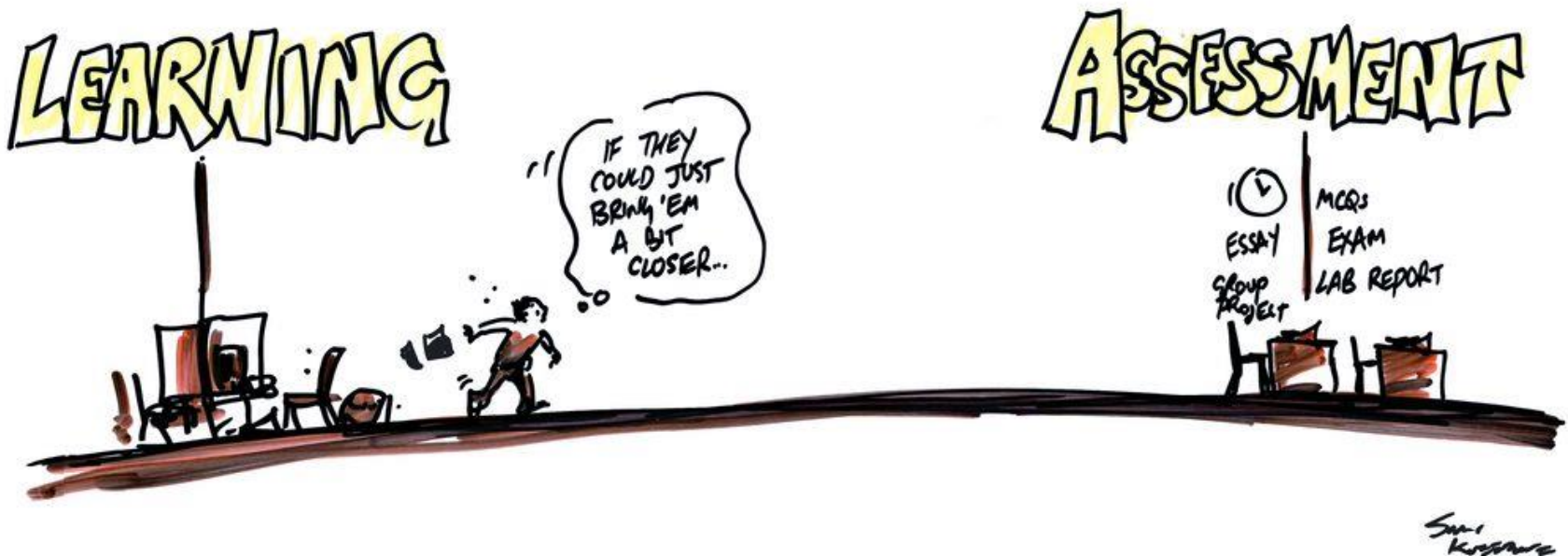


Managing the complexity of demands

- One activity cannot meet all the requirements of assessment
 - This is not a simple matter of having a diversity of methods
- Some purposes are incompatible because of timing or type of information needed
 - Eg. grades versus rich information
- In any given instance one purpose needs to be dominant
 - This needs to change over the progress of a course or program

Part 3

What are the implications of the standards agenda for assessment?



The context of assessment today

- Assessment carries the burden of many sets of expectations
- Academics mediate these to ensure courses are worthwhile and are not captured by any one interest
- Assessment decision-making, is about balancing different sets of considerations, with a core of ensuring students have high quality experiences



What is assessment (in the context of learning outcomes)?

- Assessment is a judgement about whether students can demonstrate attainment of learning outcomes to a given standard.
- Transparent standards must be established for assessment tasks
 - Setting a pass mark is not setting a standard
 - Setting a general set of standards for a course is not enough
 - Use of terms such as good, superior, excellent does not indicate a standard or communicate a level
- All assessment must be standards-based (criterion-referenced)
 - Norm-referencing is excluded
 - Judging students against each other undermines standards

What does this imply?

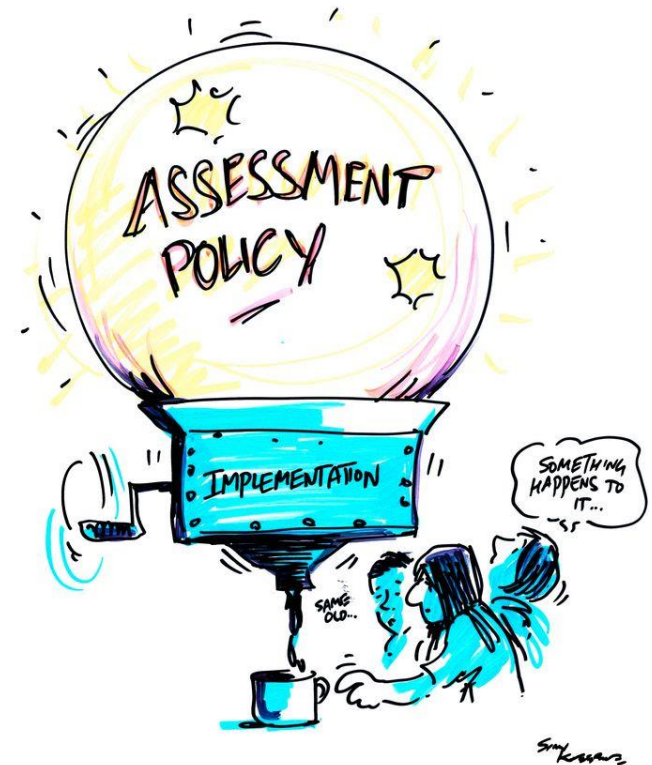
- All assessment involves the identifying appropriate standards for the tasks students undertake
- A *range* of assessment approaches must be used appropriate to the range of learning outcomes to be assessed
- The *balance* of assessment approaches must reflect the range of learning outcomes
- Ensuring all the necessary outcomes are met by all students

What does it *not* imply?

- Standards are unilaterally applied
- Students are not involved in assessment
- All learning can be predetermined
- All learning can be easily measured/judged or is worthwhile
- Existing use of marks and grades is compatible with a standards framework

Part 4

Some challenging implications



The ground has moved

- Conventional assessments (exams, tests) do not map well (if at all) on to standards and criteria
 - So, what are they measuring?
- If we claim that our courses address international standards how do we demonstrate that?
 - Not through norms which imply a consistent student cohort or marks that do not relate to an explicit benchmark

What happens to grades, marks and portrayal of outcomes?

- If course outcomes are important, why do we report by course units
- If standards are important, why not report in terms of them?
- Why aggregate incommensurate marks for different outcomes?
- Why pretend to have greater levels of accuracy than are possible? eg. percentage marks

Some terrible implications

- Tests, exams and assignments whose elements cannot be linked directly to desired learning outcomes have no place
- Adding marks related to different standards and outcomes is invalid, so why should only one grade per course unit be recorded?
- Grade point averages are a legacy from norm-referencing: new ways of identifying excellent work are required

Drinking doesn't kill brain cells,
grading essays does.



Where does this leave us?

- Demonstrate that all graduates meet threshold standards
- Systematically show that course *units* taken as a whole address *coursewide* learning outcomes
- Develop forms of portrayal of student outcome that show what they can do in terms of course learning outcomes
- Enlist students in making assessment meaningful
- Realise that many of our assessment conventions were created for a different era
- Celebrate excellence, but in meaningful ways



Specifying standards is not enough

- Having students meet pre-specified standards and criteria does not in itself create worthwhile graduates
- We do not want graduates that can flourish in educational institutions but not in the world beyond
- Being effective in the world requires each of us to be able to identify appropriate standards and criteria and apply them to our own work and that of others
- Assessment therefore needs always to ensure that it does not undermine the very qualities we are trying to foster



What are our basic assessment responsibilities?

- Providing structured opportunities to help students meet learning outcomes
 - including feedback processes and fostering the development of their judgement
- Providing trustworthy portrayals of how students meet the standards of the course from which they graduate

How can students be more actively involved in assessment?

Applicable to all students

- Through not being the passive recipients of assessment acts
- Through choosing assessment tasks appropriate to learning outcomes
- Through identifying standards and developing suitable criteria by which to judge their work
- Through acting as sources of feedback information for others
- Through being expected to act on feedback in subsequent work