



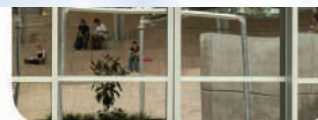
KIFT ALTC SENIOR FELLOWSHIP: ARTICULATING A TRANSITION PEDAGOGY

COMMENTARY ON FIRST YEAR
CURRICULUM CASE STUDIES:
ASSESSMENT PERSPECTIVE

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THE FIRST YEAR CURRICULUM PERSPECTIVE

02. This commentary examines formative and summative assessment for transition in first year curriculum design.

THE APPROACH ADOPTED

03. It is easier to be proclaimed an expert on the breeding of ashy-faced owls (only 28 breeding pairs in captivity in the whole of the world) than on assessment, about which all teachers know something and many know a great deal. A google search of 'first year experience assessment' comes up with over 6.5 million hits, only a few of which are referred to here. Given that all the case studies were specifically asked to address assessment, it may be thought that this task was a relatively easy one: there was at least some guaranteed material on which to compile a commentary. In practice, the approach taken was to try to tease out the underpinning strategy which linked assessment to the other key components of a successful first year experience so that some tentative conclusions could be drawn that would prove transferable. After a few opening remarks about assessment, all the case studies are considered individually below, in the order in which they were received and read by the author, and then some conclusions drawn. The commentary concludes with a selected list of resources.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF GOOD ASSESSMENT PRACTICE

04. As Mantz Yorke would say, and indeed has (2007), there is not a great deal that is new to report in relation to successful transitional first year assessment, but there are new ways of doing it, mainly using online resources outside of contact hours. Yorke stresses the fundamental importance of formative assessment to first year students and his paper emphasises 'the significance of feedback in aiding students' transition into higher education' and also 'the importance of finding ways in which that feedback is put to good use' (p. 1). This latter loop-closing is sometimes not given the attention that it should. From the student's perspective, assessment is a means of discovering the relevant standard and how to achieve it (Taras, 2006, p. 367, quoting from Sadler, 1983, p. 121) so that both the tutor and the student need to (a) have a concept of the standard being aimed for, and (b) compare the actual level of performance with the standard. In the case of the student there is, of course, a third requirement: that they take the appropriate action to close the gap between the two.

05. The author was looking for evidence in the assessment strategy of the case studies that this third requirement was being addressed. Sometimes this can be done quite simply, by ensuring that formative assessment feeds directly into the summative assessment so that a comparison can be drawn, but it is recognised that there are other factors to take into account: first year students need to be assessed but not over-assessed and there are resource issues also — assessment, if done well, is expensive (Nicol, 2007).

06. According to James, McInnis and Devlin (2002), the core of any assessment plan involves three principles:

- development and learning
- measurement of outcomes (validity and reliability)
- academic standards.

07. It is the first principle that is of primary importance for transitional assessment, which is why formative assessment is so crucial. Taylor (2008) has developed six 'notions' that should be considered when designing assessment, many of which were picked up implicitly in the case studies. They are (p. 3):

- Assessments must be both formative and summative in order to give value to the student and be valued by them.
- Assessments have a role to play in assisting students to negotiate and access the university culture of knowledge and learning.
- Timing of assessments must be directed by student needs rather than administrative or financial efficiencies.
- Early assessments are important for novice students to ensure that engagement is encouraged and feedback provided early.
- Assessments can assist in the development of self-regulatory behaviour in students.
- Assessment schemes must not suggest unreasonable workloads for students, teaching staff or departmental budgets, especially in large programs.

THE CASE STUDIES

08. As stated above, all the case studies were read separately and in the order in which they were received by the author. They are referred to here for ease of reference by their subject area rather than by author or affiliation. Some were easier to engage with than others in that sometimes aspects of assessment were explained clearly, whereas in others it was implicit and occasionally there was comparatively little detail—it is appreciated that many authors may not have spelt out what they perceived to be obvious, but it was not this author's task to fill in the gaps, but merely to pass comment on what was written.

EDUCATION CASE STUDY (HEALY, QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY)

09. Given its context it is hardly surprising that the Education Faculty at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has a highly developed approach to assessment. It was QUT that developed the six first year principles used as templates for the case studies and they can be seen underpinning the assessment strategy. The Education Faculty's views on what constitutes good practice are barely alluded to in their case study simply because it is embedded in everything they do: for example, ensuring assessment maps are constructed for each first year student, developing an annotated assessment repository (of which more below). Standards are rigorously enforced, some might say regimented in that 'each school has a "sign-off officer" to ensure the clear articulation of subject objectives to approaches to learning and teaching and to assessment'.

10. The main aim of assessment in the first year is to support students and this curriculum is developed as '*assessment for, of and as learning*' (emphasis in the original). The author continues 'the heart of this approach is a negotiated learning experience where students begin their assessment paths through the learning experiences ...'. This conjures up a useful vision of the assessment tasks as stepping stones on the journey of learning (through, for some, rapidly flowing waters), rather than boulders that have to be climbed over. The 'learning by design' model encapsulated here also encourages students to think of alternative assessment modes of delivery so that they can, to a limited extent, personalise the assessment and be given some element of choice.

11. A key feature of this case study was the provision, at an early stage, of examples of work to students in the form of an assessment repository which comprises different types of assessment and annotated examples (from poor to exemplary) that can be accessed online.

Low stakes formative assessment is provided before week 5. Assessment is designed to become increasingly complex within the developmental framework and is based on a series of nine principles provided to the first year coordinators to ensure consistency of approach. Training is provided to ensure that feedback to students is effective and ‘to assist positive student attitudes, clarity of comment and consistency for grading’.

12. This case study was particularly rich in material and provided a useful benchmark for the others. It is difficult to encapsulate their approach but one sentence in their practice examples struck a chord as it encapsulates the ‘stepping stone’ approach: ‘design assessments as integral to all subject activity — flag as assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning’.

APPLIED SCIENCES (TECHONE) CASE STUDY (FEE AND MCCRACKEN, SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY)

13. In this case study assessment was first raised as a demonstration of how student engagement is designed into subjects. In one subject (*Technology in Everyday Contexts*) students are asked to select, research and post blogs on a particular technology in accordance with a provided structure. The types of technology suggested include ‘... mp3 players, podcasting, text messaging, digital cameras, ... printers, currency, toothbrushes, armour, toilets, sporting equipment ...’. With this wealth of choice it is not surprising that student engagement is high. Students could also choose another example of technology if there was nothing on the list that excited them. (How is that possible? This author wanted to do all of them!). *Choice* thus came through again as an important element in early assessment, empowering the student into recognising that learning is a cooperative process of which assessment is an integral part, not the imposition of a hurdle. Structure is important, but so is choice within that

structure — either choice of topic (as here) or choice of presentation method (as in Education).

14. The second assessment chosen to demonstrate student engagement was that for the subject *Spatial Thinking and Communicating* which required team development of an automated toy. This started with a design on paper (on which the team got feedback), the use of software to visualise a 3D design (more feedback), followed by development of a prototype (more feedback), all of which were supported by lectures and workshops. All of the above was designed to illustrate student engagement and yet they encapsulate some key features of good assessment practice, including the value of feedback derived from ‘hands on’ experience.

15. The feedback loop was discussed in relation to the subject *Communication, Teamwork and Collaborative Process*, which is described as ‘writing-intensive’. Here initial assignments are ‘low stakes’ formative assessment and more importantly ‘all assignments can be reworked until final deadlines’. It is recognised that this can be resource-intensive: students can be referred to other support within the university if required.

ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (EXPLORATIONS) CASE STUDY (MARCHBANK AND FEE, SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY)

16. This case study, as for the one above, is based in a Canadian university and describes an innovative program that integrates arts and social sciences. Although not directly related to assessment, the author was struck by the ‘Transitions’ section in this study by the reference in a heading to ‘unlearning’. This term was not used again but it did strike a chord. Students in their early weeks at university need to learn how not to repeat certain behaviours more appropriate to secondary education

(for example, careful transcription from an unattributed source with nothing added, also known as plagiarism).

17. The case study refers to ‘assessment diversity’ and gives examples of ‘traditional essays, examinations, oral presentations, creating of artefacts, visual presentations, performance, literary reworkings, pop quizzes, posters etc.’ It also notes that ‘formative assessments and constructive feedback are provided as are multiple points of assessment to assist in the development of a successful study experience’. Some of the subjects use ‘small stake summative feedback’.

WRITING AND COMMUNICATION (BILBY) CASE STUDY (RADBOURNE AND LEROSSIGNOL, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY)

18. The first thing to strike anyone reading this case study is how assessment is linked to everyday life via the virtual learning environment (VLE) of ‘Bilby’. This is a second example (Education being the first) of assessment being integral to the subject activity so that the question of the student ‘when are you being assessed?’ becomes synonymous with ‘when are you learning?’ The ability to get students to do ‘learning’ tasks has ironically been made easier by ‘reality’ TV shows such as ‘Big Brother’ (do this and get extra food/wine/treats) or ‘The Apprentice’ (do this and demonstrate your skills in a controlled environment) and the use of a VLE undoubtedly assists in making learning fun as it relates more to real life.

19. In Bilby students are asked to ‘write media releases, job applications, reports, proposals and feature articles for a newspaper’. Overall formative assessment flourishes in an online environment: students generally prefer not to physically write given a choice (they mainly send texts and e-mails) and if the ‘writing’ is online, it is deemed more real. *Choice* is again prevalent: ‘Students discover the town of Bilby at their own pace and from their own

areas and levels of interest’. There is plenty of online support: models of all writing tasks are provided and there are also additional resources (for example, job descriptions for job vacancies to provide context for the tasks of CV and application writing).

20. Bilby incorporates, in some ways, aspects of problem-based learning in that students progress at their own pace, finding out what they need to know when they need to know it. This case study addresses directly the challenge of accommodating different learning styles. The program adopts a variety of assessment tasks starting with the familiar, becoming more complex, and a final examination which requires tasks already practised.

SCIENCE (BIOLOGY) CASE STUDY (GLEESON, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE)

21. This program uses independent learning tasks (ILTS) online to develop student learning, which students can do at their own pace in their own time. These consist of quizzes based on lectures that test their knowledge and also extend it. There is also an online support program ‘Academic interactive Portal’ (AirPort). This is not unique to the study of Biology, but there is a section there on writing Biology essays that demonstrates how to ‘pull apart the question’. Students are also provided with a marking scheme and are required to mark three student essays. They can then submit an essay online and this will be marked by a tutor. It was not detailed how many students took up this opportunity.

22. Whereas the Arts and Social Sciences case study refers to ‘unlearning’, this Science case study refers to ‘unteaching’ in order to prepare students for ‘life-long learning’. ‘There is certainly some un-teaching of strategies for learning carried over from school. The emphasis on the examination and TER score is difficult to unteach.’ It is an important aspect of assessment that tutors recognise that students do not arrive at university with a blank canvas ready to receive information on what they need to

do — they are tainted by their perceptions of what was valued and rewarded in their earlier educational (and life) experiences. Their ability to learn is thus often affected by how much they need to unlearn.

23. Instant feedback in Biology is possible in a variety of settings because of the nature of the discipline — students get tested on a competency such as preparing a slide and receive immediate feedback, while there are opportunities for short, multiple-choice tests at the end of some practicals. (There was not a case study featuring language studies but it is implicit in those subjects too: all tutorials provide opportunities for tutors — and fellow students — to correct language errors, so in a sense all contact time provides valuable opportunities for feedback.) There are plenty of low stake assessments early in the subject and the final examination uses a variety of assessment tasks (multiple-choice questions, short essay questions, essays) all of which have been practised earlier in the year.

Their ability to learn is thus often affected by how much they need to unlearn.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CASE STUDY (NELSON, QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY)

24. The Information Technology (IT) case study is also based at QUT and therefore articulates clearly the underpinning principles of first year curriculum design. Several examples of assessment which promote student learning are given: for example, *ITB002* (a core subject) has an early item of assessment which is used to provide formative feedback, monitor participation and, if necessary, trigger interventions by connecting the student with the appropriate support service. This case study also recognises diversity of learning styles in assessment methods: oral assessment is used, as is team-based

work. One subject awards marks for weekly participation and ‘encouraged students who were not so keen to speak to augment their marks through a reflective journal’.

25. The importance of consistency is highlighted and this ‘is achieved by cross fertilising assignment requirements format and language, marking criteria and performance standards’. Students thus know what is expected of them, whether writing a reflective commentary or making an oral presentation.

26. Whereas ‘Bilby’ above provides a virtual real world environment, IT students have industry participation built into their curriculum so that they, for example, conduct interviews with industry personnel, perform business analysis and develop a business case for an industry project (and several similar examples).

27. Assessment in the first year of the program prioritises assessment *for* learning over assessment *of* learning so that the main purpose is to assist students in their learning. Several aspects of this approach are highlighted: for example, the assignment communication format (written, oral, visual, task based); the media used (for example, paper, system, electronic); the balance of formative and summative assessment and of individual and group work. Seminars are assessed in the second semester by means of reward tokens for adding value to class discussion. These can be converted to marks for up to 30% of the subject (but it should be noted that this is a controversial practice that some students perceive as unfair).

28. Feedback is provided in a variety of formats including peer and tutor review of work in class, presentations, comments on drafts. Problems with group assessment are dealt with head-on; ‘team marks will be adjusted to reflect evidence of inequitable team contributions’. The system adopted involves a complex triangulation of individual performance in class and participation online with their peer and self performance evaluations.

LAW CASE STUDY (WESTCOTT, JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY)

29. The objectives of the first year program include ‘effectively delivering a fully integrated first year educational package that implements (across all subjects) constructive alignment of learning outcomes, teaching settings and assessment practices’.

30. The law team also emphasise the importance of consistency by ensuring ‘a consistent look and feel to study materials ... the provision of assessment rubrics ... and consistently applied referencing styles for all assessments’. A range of ‘low stakes’ early and formative assessment tasks are ‘embedded throughout the program’ (see below). Tasks are also designed ‘so that they represent authentic and real life scenarios’.

31. For one subject (*Legal Institutions and Processes*) students are required to submit four law blogs (‘blawgs’). The first ‘provides an opportunity for social engagement’ (they introduce themselves), but then the tasks become more complex and law-focused: for example, a report on a court visit, a critique of a news report, and a comment on research material. There is choice involved in the order in which these are done, the word count is low (100–400 words), as are the weightings (5–10%). For another subject (*Legal Research, Writing and Analysis*), students compile a written portfolio on a weekly basis over ten weeks, so reflecting on their weekly subject content and practising

... all of the assessment tasks are aligned with the various learning activities and provide opportunities to practise tasks that will be summatively assessed later.

their writing skills regularly. They receive weekly feedback on this and also a small summative mark for ‘timely completion and compliance with instructions’ (well, this is a law course!).

32. Time and space do not permit further detailed explanation of the various assessment tasks, but they include a tutorial portfolio whereby students can opt to have some of their preparatory work assessed, group work supported by wikis to evidence their engagement in group activities, and traditional examinations. Although there might appear to be a great deal of assessment, the case study points out that all of the assessment tasks are aligned with the various learning activities and provide opportunities to practise tasks that will be summatively assessed later.

OVERVIEW AND CONCLUSIONS

33. **T**here was such a variety of material relating to assessment that it is difficult to draw conclusions that will prove to be transferable across all discipline areas, but the following seemed to emerge.

(A) CHOICE

34. Promoting the idea of assessment **for** learning, whereby assessment is a ‘stepping stone’ on the learning path, is undoubtedly assisted by allowing the student some basic choices early in the program. These may be as simple as deciding the order in which things are done (Law), or the medium adopted for delivery (Education), or a choice about the object that will be assessed (Applied Sciences). This is linked with **transition** — higher education is an adult world and adults usually have some sort of choice.

(B) CHALLENGE

35. This came through in a number of case studies in the variety of first year assessments and links assessment with the concept of **engagement**. It also encompasses the notion of ‘unlearning’ which appeared in the Arts and Social

Sciences (*Explorations*) and Science (Biology) case studies. Students should feel challenged by their early assessments but also supported. Samples of work that they can access are particularly helpful (Education and Science).

(C) CULTURE

36. This links assessment with the concept of **diversity**, which came through in all the case studies as a challenge when designing assessments for those, for example, with different learning styles. The majority of students in the programs highlighted are young, many having come straight from secondary school, and if youth culture is reflected in assessment this also helps with transition. Frequently this is to do with format: students often relate better to online interactions and appreciate instant feedback in the form of online quizzes and multiple choice tests. All the case studies had examples of this and those that relate assessment to the 'real world' seem to have an additional edge (Writing and Communication (Bilby), IT, Law).

(D) CONSISTENCY

37. This links assessment with **design**. First year students are helped by consistency of approach in relation to assessment and if the program team ensures that there is commonality in relation to assessment tasks students will feel more secure. This can be addressed by the way materials are presented and (for example) referencing adopted (Law), to the more fundamental assurance that criteria are interpreted in similar ways across program subjects (implicit in most case studies).

CONCLUSION

38. It has been recognised that the Fellowship first year curriculum design principles relating to assessment are evidenced in all the case studies so that students do receive regular formative evaluations of their work, which provide feedback to both staff and students. This commentary has attempted to identify other aspects that may not immediately spring to mind as being of fundamental importance when addressing first year

assessment, but which nevertheless assist with student transition.

RESOURCES

39. In addition to the authors cited in the commentary (references are at the end) readers may be interested in the following sources which all have something useful to say about assessment. Don't forget there are another 6.5 million online via google too ...

Bloxham, S., & Boyd, P. (2007). *Developing effective assessment in higher education: A practical guide*. McGraw Hill, Open University Press.

Bone, A. (2006). *The impact of formative assessment on student learning*. UKCLE website <http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/research/projects/bone.html>.

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Further resources developed under this ALTC Senior Fellowship, *Articulating a Transition Pedagogy*, are available at <http://www.altcexchange.edu.au/first-year-experience-and-curriculum-design>