Overview

Selecting assessment tasks is a complex process, whether you do it for a whole program or course of study or for a single component of a course. You must take account of the learning and teaching context, and respond to the influence of many different variables.

Most importantly, you must select assessment tasks that align well with the intended learning outcomes, and focus the overall design for assessment on encouraging, enabling and supporting learning—that is, on assessment as learning.

Aim to include a mixture of assessment tasks that enables students to build a more holistic picture of their learning, integrating the diverse strands of their program of study.

When to use

Select appropriate assessment tasks with a range of factors in mind. First, consider the context of the learning and teaching, which probably influenced the initial development of the intended learning outcomes. It will certainly help you decide what types of assessment tasks are most suitable.

The disciplinary context

Educators may have had strong reasons for using traditional assessment approaches and tasks in particular disciplines. However, you can adapt, or adopt, alternative approaches from other disciplines in order to deliver additional benefits for learning, and expand your staff’s assessment repertoires.

The program structure and pedagogy

The structure and pedagogy of the course, and the program to which it contributes, set critical parameters for assessment planning.

In some programs, assessment plans may be systematically integrated; a detailed curriculum map may outline how graduate attributes are developed and assessed. In other contexts, course coordinators may have relatively free rein with regard to design.

Other factors that will affect the assessment plan include:
• the level of study and the extent to which students have been prepared in advance for particular types of assessment tasks

• the pedagogical approach within the course or program—for example, a problem-oriented pedagogy would be unlikely to be highly dependent on assessment by exam.

The class and the students

The specific class and the particular students will affect the selection of assessment approach and tasks.

• How big is the class? This will determine how much pressure is placed on resources.

• Does learning take place on campus (or across multiple campuses), at a distance, or online? This will influence the form and channel of assessment approaches.

• How will you accommodate diversity in students' backgrounds in the design of the assessment - for example, the extent of their experience in workplaces, or their diverse cultural backgrounds?

The available resources

Assessment plans need to be able to be implemented within the resources available. For example:

• How many hours of staff time will be available for evaluating and assessing students' work? Can new staff be appropriately inducted into their roles as assessors?

• Are funds available to support the invigilation of examinations?

• Do assessments have to be undertaken within specialist facilities such as laboratories and clinics?

• Are additional funds available to support the development of innovative assessment approaches?

• Can you invest in developing online quiz item banks with a longer-term shelf life?

• What technologies can you use to support the assessment?

Benefits

When you select assessment tasks after careful consideration and planning, the assessment profile is more likely to meet the learning and teaching needs of your course and the broader program.

Appraise and revise traditional assessment methods regularly, for your own and your students' benefit.

Challenges

Adopting a more strategic and holistic approach to the selection of assessment tasks can require teaching staff to:

• devote time to exploring suitable assessment types, assessing their benefits and feasibility and tailoring them to the relevant course
Strategies

Determine the optimum mixture of assessment tasks

At the course level, an assessment plan that comprises several different components or tasks will increase the likelihood that students experience at least one task type that suits their preferred learning style.

As a guide to planning for the optimum mixture of assessment tasks, consider a range of dimensions. Figure 1 sets out some dimensions of assessment tasks, with examples of the kinds of characteristics that can distinguish different assessment tasks.

These prompts may be useful when you are thinking about the parameters of individual assessment tasks, and how they will combine into a well-integrated and coherent assessment plan. Most course assessment plans would include tasks that offer a range of characteristics within the dimensions.

Figure 1: Some dimensions of assessment tasks

<table>
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<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Example characteristics</th>
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<td><strong>Learning outcomes</strong></td>
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<td>declarative</td>
<td>vs. performative</td>
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<td>reproducing</td>
<td>vs. transforming</td>
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<td><strong>Timing and assessment status</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>continuous</td>
<td>vs. fixed time</td>
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<tr>
<td>early in course</td>
<td>vs. late in course</td>
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<tr>
<td>formative (for learning)</td>
<td>vs. summative (for grading)</td>
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<td><strong>Topic flexibility</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>negotiable</td>
<td>vs. pre-determined</td>
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<tr>
<td>choice of topic or focus</td>
<td>vs. no choice of topic or focus</td>
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<tr>
<td>students orient to own world</td>
<td>vs. staff orient to ‘course’ world</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task setting and evidence-base</td>
<td>based on student’s experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>substantiated by theory</td>
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<td>simulated setting</td>
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<td>Interpersonal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>personalised</td>
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<td>for a private audience</td>
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<td>Task engagement</td>
<td>individual</td>
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<td>competitive</td>
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<td>once-off</td>
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<td>Assessable material</td>
<td>process</td>
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<td>work-in-progress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment context</td>
<td>private individual space</td>
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<td>Cost / benefit</td>
<td>low student workload</td>
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<td>low staff workload</td>
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<td>low weighting in grade</td>
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**Broad assessment task activity**

Think of assessment tasks in terms of the main overall activity through which students demonstrate their learning. These will be doing, making, speaking or writing activities, as depicted in Figure 2.

*Figure 2: Broad assessment activity types*

We don’t propose that you use these clusters as formal and mutually exclusive categories, but analysing tasks in this way can help you align assessment activities with learning outcomes, and see the potential for expanding the repertoire of assessment types by using alternative tasks.

A single assessment task can combine several activity types. For example, an e-portfolio or a capstone project may entail activities in all 4 dimensions.

Considering the assessment mix using activity types can help you address the common problem of certain forms of assessment (typically academic writing tasks) dominating, while other ways that students can engage in and demonstrate their learning are under-utilised. Departmental audits of assessment practices often reveal this problem.

The following examples are loosely clustered into the 4 types. The Assessment Toolkit elaborates on some of the examples presented here in greater detail. Some case studies of practice across a wide range of assessment tasks are elaborated in more detail in Nightingale et al. (1996).

"Doing" tasks

Doing tasks generally require students to engage in practical, hands-on activities to demonstrate their level of skill or capability in the performance of intended learning outcomes according to pre-determined standards. Increasingly, technologies are being deployed to enable ‘doing’ tasks to be undertaken in simulations and virtual worlds. Typically, students find such assessment tasks:
motivating because of their authenticity

engaging because of their physical presence and involvement in the task

fair because the link is clear between learning activities and assessment, and

productive for their learning because of the immediacy of feedback.

However, "doing" tasks can also cause considerable performance anxiety for students. To alleviate this, you can combine such tasks with tasks of reflection (in writing or speaking) during which the student examines their learning from the experience. Indeed, such reflection can often carry significantly more weight than the actual "doing", so that students can demonstrate their learning achievements regardless of the success or failure of the performance of the original task.

You can specify that "doing" tasks be undertaken in a controlled classroom setting (face-to-face or online), in a simulated physical or virtual setting, or in an authentic practice setting. Assessment criteria can include:

- practical and manipulative skills
- the capacity to apply theoretical and conceptual knowledge to solving problems, and
- interpersonal and communication skills associated with the social dimension of the tasks.

Some common examples of "doing" tasks are:

- laboratory practical work
- demonstration of procedure
- professional practicum performance
- creative performance
- clinical performance
- Objective Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE)
- role play
- class participation (face-to-face and online).

"Making" tasks

Some assessment tasks involve students in making something, either a concrete thing, or a model or design of a concrete thing. Such engagement is one step beyond the "doing" activities in that a tangible item is produced.

Such "making" tasks can be stimulating and exciting in their authenticity, but can cause a high level of anxiety for students if they do not make the item successfully. As with "doing" tasks, a process of reflection often accompanies these tasks to enable students to consider the experience and present a case about their learning as a result of completing the task, whether successfully or not.
In fields where learning has creative and artistic goals, particularly studio-based fields, the notion of learning through "making" forms "the basis of an investigative and creative process which is driven by

- research, exploration and experimentation
- making and constructing
- critique and reflection." (Studio Teaching Project website)

Thus, the product that is made is merely the vehicle for learning, rather than the end point in itself.

The scientific and technical disciplines substantially share this integrating view of learning and assessment. However, while the aesthetic qualities of the thing that is made are still important, the focus of assessment may be oriented more towards the design of "an economically viable product, process or system to meet a defined need" (Moore & Williamson, 2008: 46). Notions of fitness for purpose and replicability become more important in the assessment criteria.

Assessing originality and creativity are difficult because of their subjectivity. Ensure grading reliability by codifying criterion-based standards, and implementing grade moderation processes. Incorporate self-assessment and peer assessment as legitimate learning outcomes in their own right.

External involvement, for example of industry experts as assessors, can add significantly to the learning value students perceive in these tasks. Additionally, students showcasing their completed work to external assessors or industry professionals can yield many learning benefits beyond the assessment task itself.

Use technologies to support "making" tasks in simulated environments. Although it may be costly to develop such environments, the ongoing operational costs of fabricating products (for example, materials, workshop facilities and supervising staff) tend to be considerably reduced, and students can try out skills in the safety of a virtual setting.

Examples of "making" tasks include:

- an artistic composition
- a scale model
- a working prototype
- a website
- a computer software application.

"Speaking" tasks

"Speaking" tasks allow students to develop their oral interaction and presentation skills. Such tasks can be:

- monologic, such as formal, prepared oral presentations to a class or other group, or
- more dynamic and dialogic, such as interviews and debates.
Tasks can engage students in a range of roles, from student to quasi-expert, from subject to facilitator, from defendant to protagonist, and so on.

Assessment reliability can be an issue with "speaking" tasks conducted in real-time face-to-face sessions. The immediacy of the situation can make it difficult for assessors to distinguish between what the student says, how they say it and their personality characteristics.

For this reason, audio or video recording of the performance of "speaking" tasks is often used so that the student's performance can be reviewed later. This can be particularly helpful when you grade spoken work by students whose English pronunciation is poor.

Use universally available technologies such as mobile phones to facilitate the digital presentation of speaking tasks. This way, students can refine and improve their performance before submitting it, and post their work online for peer assessment.

Examples of "speaking" tasks include:

- oral presentation (individual or group)
- peer teaching
- elevator pitch (30-second speech)
- **Pecha Kucha** (presenting 20 slides, at 20 seconds per slide)
- interview by student of an expert
- debates and discussions
- critical incident interview
- viva voce examination
- mooting.

"Writing" tasks

Completing writing tasks, in what is often seen as the distinctively "literate" culture of university learning, is an important part of the process of student learning. In writing tasks, students express their understanding, refining it as they review their own words on the page or screen.

Writing allows students to show their understanding of key concepts and relationships in their courses of study. Writing tasks test students' capacities to express themselves for different purposes and to different audiences, through a variety of media and dissemination channels. They can also demonstrate students' ability to learn and interact socially through the written word.

With writing tasks, students generally have more time to reflect on their ideas than they do with "speaking" tasks, although some writing tasks, such as exams and quizzes, can be timed. Students can undertake writing tasks individually or as a group, and you can set them up to be more immediate and reactive (such as discussion board posts) or more considered and contemplative (such as essays and reports).
Extended writing tasks allow students—in the context of undertaking a sustained, in-depth critical analysis of a complex issue—to develop and demonstrate:

- higher order thinking and reasoning skills
- creative and independent thinking
- the skills of marshalling evidence to develop and substantiate a case, and so on.

The sheer scale of extended writing tasks can make it difficult within a course for students to complete the task and also receive timely enough feedback to influence their learning and subsequent improvement. For this reason, their use with students in their first year needs to be carefully scaffolded and supported. By contrast, extended writing is an essential component of an assessment plan in advanced level courses to assess higher learning.

Shorter writing tasks, while enabling similar skills to be fostered and assessed, are more constrained and do not necessarily depend upon sustained exploration of a topic. Their parameters are prescribed in a more limited way, although often the products that result from shorter writing tasks can be aggregated together as elements of more extended pieces of writing.

For example, shorter writing tasks can be set as an integrated series of steps towards the production of an extended task, thereby scaffolding the process for students of producing a larger scale written product with assessment feedback at each step along the way. The "patchwork" text (Winter, 2003) is an example of this kind of staging of learning through assessment.

In your course assessment plan, incorporate opportunities for students to learn by writing in technology-enabled environments, so that they develop digital literacy and social and collaborative writing skills.

Examples of extended writing tasks include:

- case study analysis
- essay
- literature review
- report on experiment (lab, field, project)
- report on evaluation of something
- research paper
- reflective journal / diary.

Examples of shorter writing tasks include:

- summary or abstract
- critical review of one/a few articles
- annotated bibliography
Communicate the assessment plan to students

However you determine the shape of the assessment plan and the tasks it comprises, it is critical that you make the requirements clear to students through explanations and discussion, covering:

- the conditions associated with assessment tasks (such as word length, and presentation formats or channels)
- any support details such as procedures for group work
- guidelines on how to prepare and present work or protocols for behaviour in work-integrated learning projects.

Focus on how the course assessment plan presents a coherent and supportive framework to develop their learning.

Ensure fairness

When you make the plan flexible, you improve the chances of success for all students. When students can shape assessment requirements to their own backgrounds and experiences, you create a more inclusive assessment process that acknowledges and values their diverse perspectives.

Where appropriate, make special accommodations and equivalent forms of assessment for students with disabilities.

Refer to Assessing Inclusively and Responding to Cross-Cultural Diversity in this Toolkit. (See also the Creating Accessible Teaching and Support [CATS] website.)

Use technology

Use technologies to support the selected assessment tasks, to significantly enhance the learning experience for students, and to make assessment more effective and efficient. Technologies are increasingly being used to transform learning and assessment through the creation of media-rich environments supporting interactive experiential learning through assessment.

Where students are being introduced to new technologies for the purposes of assessment, ensure that they are well supported and have opportunities to practise and receive formative feedback before undertaking tasks that will be graded summatively.

This page on the UNSW TELT platform provides a summary of available technologies that can be used to support learning and assessment tasks according to different types of learning outcomes. More specifically, the Moodle support site contains an index of pages about the assessment tools available in UNSW Moodle.
External resources

Resources produced for an ALTC-funded project:

- Creating accessible teaching and support (CATS) (See “Teaching and Assessment” section).
- EnRole: Encouraging role-based online learning environments
- Studio teaching project

UNSW Teaching Gateway:

- Matrix for selecting technologies

Further readings


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