**Aim 1**

**1-hour**

- Understand the relationship between assessment and other parts of the scholarly teaching model
- Appreciate the significance of choice of assessment method from a student learning perspective.

---

**Topic #1.1**

How is assessment related to other parts of the model; what are the connections?

---

**Assessment as another aspect of Method**

In the previous section we discussed "Teaching Method" as the means by which we attempt to achieve or realise the Content Aims of a subject or course of study. Assessment, from this perspective, is yet another kind of "method" - the means by which we attempt to find evidence that the Content Aims have been achieved, or the extent to which they have been achieved.

Accordingly, there is the strongest possible logical nexus between Assessment, Aims/Content and Method. It is impossible to engage in assessment without a knowledge of the Aims/Content specifications, as well as a knowledge of the Teaching Method that was chosen for trying to achieve them.

A paradoxical - and highly contentious - point arises when we ask about the relationship between Assessment and Evaluation. It comprises two aspects, the first of which is straightforward enough; it is the second proposition that raises very difficult questions:

1. Evaluation of teaching, to be comprehensive, must include evaluation (an attempt to measure the effectiveness or quality) of the assessment methods used. That is, evaluation includes evaluating the assessment processes to see how they stand up.

2. The problems arise when we ask "If assessment is to be a measure of the achievement of content aims in individual students, why is assessment not thereby the primary datum of the evaluation of teaching?". If students have failed to learn what was intended, or in the manner that was intended, does this provide the first and most telling evidence of the quality of teaching?"

Most commentators will argue, however, that proposition (2) is false. It is strongly recommended that
you seriously consider why it is almost certainly false; read, discuss, think and compare your conclusions with others.

Notwithstanding the virtually unanimous rejection of proposition (2) as a whole, the paradox remains that, in evaluating teaching, there nevertheless do appear to be reasons why we should look at student assessment outcomes and results. In effect, we both reject and accept the proposition. What reasons would you give (and what ones would your colleagues accept) for including some consideration of student assessment results in an evaluation of teaching? Under what conditions? In what manner? This issue will be taken up again in the following section on Evaluation.

Topic #1.2 How is assessment related to student learning; what is its significance from a student learning perspective?

It is here that the inadequacy of a merely instrumental (means to an end) understanding of educational methods in general can be most acutely seen. We have already argued that teaching methods need to be understood as part of (integral to) the very end (student learning) which is our aim. The experiences and perceptions of the student whilst studying and whilst being taught are inseparable from the outcome - they directly influence it and become part of it. The same, perhaps even more pointedly, can be argued for assessment.

On a purely instrumental view, assessment might be conceived as a piece of educational investigation; a way of discovering what is in the mind (or the capacities, attributes, competencies or abilities) of the student. We wish to know what these are, so that we can grade, rank, and eventually acquit the student as "satisfactory" or worthy of the credit or title they have studied for. The more accurate and reliable we can make this "method", the better we can trust our final decision (pass, failure, distinction or whatever). This view has broadly prevailed throughout education in this century- it is the dominant assessment paradigm.

On a student learning (integral) view, assessment is a crucial part of the environment, the context, in which learning will take place. By its very presence, whether as something that is to take place, or that is taking place, or that has taken place in the past, it is one of the key determinants of how the student will understand and approach their study tasks. It does not merely try to tell us what the outcome of that studying as been; it substantially determines the quality, the very nature, of that outcome. In brief, we might claim that in the most substantial ways, what is learned is determined by whether, and how, it is assessed. It is one of the "process" variables in the "3P" model.

How assessment operates as a process variable has been interpreted in a number of different ways. Some critiques of inappropriate assessment speak about "what" is being assessed; others with "how" it is being assessed and others still with the pressure or dominating effect of assessment demands. Look for all these, and more, in the readings that follow.
# Aim 2
1 hour

- Examine how your own views of learning might inform the approach you will take to assessing students
- Broaden your familiarity with the higher education literature regarding the development of assessment methods

## Topic #2.1
Refer back to the brief reader on Learning Theories and to your own attempts to locate yourself in relation to these. Each position vis a vis Learning Theory will naturally incline a teacher to adopt a compatible approach to assessing students. And, just as each of these historically dominant theories of learning has at least something in its favour, each supplies something of what a comprehensive student assessment approach might comprise. We need to emphasise what was said earlier, that adopting or favouring one view does not require that all other views are regarded as wrong or invalid or unable to illumine the complex matter of human learning. All have something worthwhile to say in informing our practice, but we need to use informed discrimination in choosing how and when to use the approaches suggested by each. For example:

- **Behaviourism**: assessment approaches based on the view that a correct response is evidence of successful learning; short-answer, true-false and multiple-choice tests are high on the list.

Through your own reading (start by looking back over the notes in this course) and discussion, choose one or two examples of assessment approaches typical of or compatible with (not necessarily to) the four remaining learning theories:

- Humanism
- Cognitivism
- Constructivism
- Experientialism

Then reflect on your own current views of student learning (see earlier module) and the assessment approaches you currently **favour** (NOTE not those you necessarily use, as these are sometimes externally determined). This exercise can be done globally at first, or in respect of complete programs. Later we shall do a formal activity in which you will need to focus on a particular subject; use this present activity as a preparation for that, in which you consider which subject might be the most productive one to choose for a close examination of assessment methods later.

## Topic #2.2
To our knowledge the definitive text in a student learning approach to assessment has not yet been written. We can however learn much from what has been published by critiquing it from a student learning perspective. It is important that we do not all into the trap of thinking that a student learning approach to assessment automatically renders everything previously published obsolete. What a student learning stance demands from us is the exercise of intelligent discretion, a sense of judiciousness and discrimination, in choosing and using established assessment practices.

Examine the assessment section of the supplied book (253 Ideas for your Teaching) or one below. Select items that look interesting to you, and interrogate its approach from a student learning perspective. In this process you may find approaches to assessment which you would like to adopt in your teaching.


## Note
**Flexible Learning Issue: Student Choice in Assessment**

Among the characteristics of an assessment system recommended by a student learning approach, one we have not hitherto addressed is the issue of choice. In this case it would refer to giving students a choice...
degree of choice in how they are to be assessed; for example, letting them select either a multiple-choice test plus extended essay or else compiling a research project report from an actual investigation.

Choice becomes an issue because there is evidence that in its absence, students are likely to perceive the learning environment as constricting, or ungenial, or unresponsive to individual situations or individual differences, and whether in resentment, anger, discomfort or some other negative state they will incline to adopt an approach to study that fails to do justice to either themselves (what they are capable of) or the aims of the course (what is expected of them).

Reasons a student might have for preferring one to the other are likely to impinge upon issues in their personal lives, as well as preferred learning styles, that make one approach more congenial or attractive than the other. This highlights one aspect to be considered in the implementation of a flexible learning approach.

One dictum in the ideology of traditional assessment approaches, largely deriving from behaviourism and systems-theory, is that choice unavoidably subverts inter-student reliability of marks and grades. You cannot compare students fairly and honestly, it says, unless they have sat for the same test. Accordingly, proponents of student choice in assessment need to consider how they would defend their practice against this charge.

**Aim 3**

2-hours

- To become familiar with the essential features of the student learning approach to developing assessment through one selected text

**Read**

Ramsden, Chapter 10. Pages 181-213 "Assessing for Understanding"

**Topic #3**

In studying Ramsden's account of the relationship between assessment and student learning, note the following:

- The Chapter's title. Whether deliberate or not, it is ambiguous. It may mean "Assessing for the presence of understanding" or it may mean "Assessing in the interest of furthering understanding". Speculate on whether, and why, in terms of our study of student learning so far, both these may be worthwhile goals.

- Ramsden's reference to multiple "forms of knowing" on p. 182 and assessment being about "several things at once" seems intended to deter us from approaching it simplistically, as though there were one obvious "right way to assess" in any given case. How does that pluralist, eclectic view square with prevailing views of assessment in your department?

- His accusation of amateurism at most academic's competency at assessing, linked to the claim that assessment is an "essential part" of teaching, not an "addition" to it (p.183). We do it poorly, he argues, because we fail to understand its significance for student learning.

- Identify some theories of learning, and connect them with previous work in this module, within the text on pages 182-187.

- The Aims/Content- Assessment issue is tackled on pages 187-190. To what extent do you think it possible that the studies by Beard & Hartley and Elton (p. 189) also describe the situation in your department's assessment practice?

- Make your own checklist of all things Ramsden refers to as matters which assessment might wish to identify or measure. How many of these are things you attempt to use assessment to measure in your subjects? And are there others you could add to his list? This question of what assessment tries to measure, and whether it actually achieves it, is the "validity" issue in assessment.

- Pages 191-192 argue for variety in assessment methods and for the need to appreciate the issue of "reliability" but not to let ourselves be fooled by it. These are important matters and Rowntree's book (see above) contains an excellent discussion of these issues under the topic "convergent and divergent" assessment methods and the pluses and minuses of each. Definitely worth reading.

- Feedback to students (pages 193-196) touches on one of the assessment issues that most impacts on economics - both human and fiscal. Critique Ramsden's proposals from the perspective of whether
there would be time and money to adopt them in your department; and, if not, whether other alternatives might be feasible, that are also economical.

- Making expectations clear (pages 196-197) locates assessment squarely within course content - part of the things to be talked about, articulated and clarified; consider the implications of this for available time during classes and the danger of how over-much talk about assessment may diminish opportunity for discussing subject content. How could this tension be resolved?

- Study each of the Case Studies carefully and identify those closest to your own area of work and kind of teaching; this will be very useful for the next activity we do. Even if it is totally new to you, take particular attention of the discussion of SOLO on pages 201-208. Further valuable discussion of this remarkable device can be found in Biggs, J.B. and Collis, K.F. (1982). *Evaluating the Quality of Learning: The SOLO Taxonomy.* New York: Academic Press.

- What practical use could Ramsden's "Fourteen Rules" be in your department? How might they be used to stimulate discussion or debate about assessment?

### Aim 4
3 hours

**Enhance your critical awareness of the variety of ways of, and reasons for, using particular assessment methods in your own disciplinary setting, and develop a critique of these from a student learning perspective.**

### Topic #4

Earlier we suggested you do a quick global stocktake of the main kinds of assessment conventionally or customarily carried out across your department and start thinking about how comfortably these might sit alongside a student learning stance to teaching. We shall now develop that idea further.

**Let us define your own "disciplinary situation" in terms of:**

1. The kinds of subject matter you are called upon to teach
2. The kinds of students you have to teach it to (i.e. programs they are enrolled in, expectations they have, backgrounds they come from, previous subjects they need to have studies, subjects they have to do after yours etc)
3. The levels at which each particular field of subject matter needs to be taught, and the accompanying standards that are expected to be reached by students.
4. The culture of assessment in your department; the expectations, traditions, models, your department gives you, the amount of freedom you have to improvise or innovate, the obligations you have to other assessors that constrain how far you are permitted to depart from the prevailing norms.

**Using these four notions, write a synopsis of your own personal disciplinary assessment situation.**

### Task

**Detailed analysis of one problematic assessment situation.**

1. First, choose from the overview you have just done, one assessment situation that you would like to understand better, in order to improve or develop it further. Identify, within this situation that you would like to understand better, in order to improve or develop it further. Identify, within this situation, precisely what you are trying to achieve (your overall intention) and how you are trying to do it (your overall strategy).

2. Write down the answers to as many of these questions as you find relevant:
   - What "kinds of understanding" do you aim for in the subject?
   - How confident are you that assessment is at present giving satisfactory evidence of these? (make notes on problem areas)
   - What other matters beside "understandings" is the subject trying to teach?
   - How confident are you that assessment is at present giving satisfactory evidence of these? (make notes on problem areas).
   - Which theories of learning seem to inform the way you approach teaching this work?
   - How do those theories of learning relate to the assessment practices currently used?
   - If "validity" is used to mean "success in assessing the very things the subject intends students to learn", how valid (on a scale of 1 to 10) do you think your present assessment is? (make notes on validity problem areas)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aim 5 2- hours</th>
<th><strong>Study relevant parts of the Discipline based literature that provide accounts or recommendations of assessment methods within your own discipline, and critically appraise this from a student learning perspective.</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Topic #5** | - Identify a journal, or failing that a book, that addresses assessment or teaching and learning or educational issues within your own disciplinary area or your field of academic or professional interest.  
- If you choose a journal, take a recent, representative sample of what it publishes- perhaps a complete year's Issues from within the last five years. [If no journal is available in your precise field, try to locate one in a reasonably similar or related field. Failing that, try the library catalogue for any text whatever that deals with assessment in your subject area. Failing that, look through some recent years of the HERDSA publications: the journal (Higher Education Research and Development) and the annual conference proceedings (Research and Development in Higher Education); scan the contents pages and try to locate any articles at all that refer to assessment within your area or an area close to it.]  
- Locate and critically read a few papers or chapters that appear, from their titles, to be likely to address, recommend, critique or evaluate, an approach to assessing students.  
- Read whatever you can find, and summarise what position the respective authors appear to take about assessment. Then make notes of your own in the form of the draft for a critical response to these articles, from a student learning perspective. |
| Aim 6 2- hours | **Reflection**  
Bring together new ideas you have been asked to encounter within this Module and relate them to your own present position, your current perspective on, or your stance towards the choice of assessment methods in your discipline or scholarly field. Try to come to some interim conclusion, regarding where you stand about the question of how to assess student learning within your field. And also relate this to how you believe your departmental colleagues would more probably view the assessment issue within your department. |
| **Topic #6** | The goal of this section has been to study the question of the selection, or development, of appropriate methods of student learning assessment within a discipline and to establish some personal grounding in a student learning perspective towards assessment methods, understanding what the perspective implies or suggests a scholarly teacher would go about developing assessment methods.  
- Try to capture in a paragraph or two the main issues you think arise out of trying to incorporate a student learning approach to assessment in your discipline or subject field.  
- Write a brief note on what you consider the most substantial overall critique of current assessment methods used in your subject area - to locate the place where there might be a priority for change.  
- Draw up an outline plan for how you might be able to go about implementing over a defined period (eg one or two semesters), a plan for modifying assessment in a particular subject so as to bring it closer to what a student learning perspective would require and indicate how you would evaluate the success of the plan if it were implemented.  
Against what you have written in the third point above, mention what you think would be the most predictable responses to your plan by colleagues, by your Head, and by students themselves. |
What suggestions do you have for anticipating and eventually meeting any objections contained in those responses?

**Note**

This particular flexible learning "overlay:" is in the form of a mental task; its aim is to help you think through one of the issues in "flexibility", namely the possible reasons why different students of apparently similar ability perform differently on assessment tasks.

Consider the task you carried out (above) and the particular subject you had in mind as you worked on it.

1. Reflect on the ways your students actually respond, at present, in their answers, tests, assignments, examinations and projects, to the assessment demands of that subject.
2. Specifically consider those whose work is exemplary, who respond to the assessment demands in the way you really want them to; and contrast that with those whose work is at the other end of the scale, who appear to respond to assessment demands quite inappropriately. Think about what it is that the two groups are doing so differently - the most conspicuous criteria that distinguish good work from poor in your subject. Try very hard to avoid comparing the two groups in terms of the conventional notions such as aptitude or competence or ability - suppress that as far as you can; if necessary hypothesise that every student might have (who knows?) about the same innate ability to do the course well. Imagine that the full range of differences in assessment outcomes was due, not to some innate ability, but to the fact that the two groups (the tops and the bottoms) have responded to the demands of the assessment process in different ways. Those who did well responded to it productively, those who failed responded unproductively. (Remember - this is a hypothetical, an attempt to think through assessment in a different way to the usual one.)
3. Now ask yourself WHY more or less equally gifted or equally equipped students would respond to the same tasks in such different ways. Speculate on the causes. Maybe there are different motivations, different amounts of intrinsic interest in the subject, different feelings of interest in the subject, different feelings of its relevance, different outside pressures on them - make your own list as long as you can; put everything on it that looks even remotely possible.
4. Now study your list and see whether you have included the idea that there may be different ways of perceiving the assessment demands - that is, different "readings" or "understandings" of what the same set of statements, the same set of expectations, the same assessment structure, actually meant. The hypothesis here is that some students may be failing or doing poorly because they honestly think that what you want from them (as indicated by assessment methods you use) is something quite different form what you actually intend them to think.

Finally, try to devise a way of throwing light on whether this hypothesis could be true; that different perceptions of assessment demands might conceivably be a factor in different assessment outcomes. What kind of a test or investigation could you perform to inquire into it, either with some or all of your students? What kinds of evidence would you accept to convince you that the hypothesis might have something going for it? How might you obtain that evidence?