Looking for journal articles on Assessment? Try these:


A paper that proposes a set of conditions under which assessment is best organised so that it supports student learning. It looks at how students 'read' and 'experience' what assessment signals to them about their learning. The set of conditions are justified according to theory and empirical evidence, and then offered as a framework for university teachers to assess their own assessment practices.


With the effort expended in writing descriptors, criteria and standards for increasingly clarity, this paper argues that their success lies less with clarity and more in processes which unpack the tacit knowledge surrounding them. The paper describes an action research strategy, where the focus is on helping students grapple with the difficulty of assessment criteria through providing an opportunity to test out and practice their understandings.


This paper argues for a holistic approach to the complexity of plagiarism – an approach which relies on shared responsibility between students, academics with the whole institution – and supported by external agencies. To illustrate the approach, the article draws on three case studies from different institutions (Sheffield Hallam & Oxford Brookes in the UK, and Newcastle, Australia) and ends with a checklist that will help initiate discussion on the adequacy of systems and processes designed to address plagiarism.

How do you answer a question like that?

"It fed like a seven." 

"It was a good credit-level report." 

"It was better than the reports I gave six to ... but not quite as good as the eights and nines." 

Anyway, why, oh student, do you think your report deserved something different from the seven I gave? What was going on inside your head when you wrote the report? What 'quality' of report were you targeting?

Standards referenced assessment is one way that academic judgments can be made more explicit. A student’s work is compared to a set of published standards and the measure of performance is based on the comparison. Of course there is much devil-in-the-detail and difficulty in interpretation of standards – particularly at the boundaries. Nevertheless, well executed standards referencing is an attempt at transparency, and perhaps more importantly, it can shape productive dialogue between students and staff.

"I gave you seven because your report addressed the reasons for doing the experiment. However, you didn’t relate this to the literature, and this was required if you were to get eight. Did you think you erred in your experiment to previous work?"

Academic Board has embraced standards referencing as the University’s preferred model of assessment and most of our undergraduate students are very familiar with its principles as a result of changes to the NSW Higher School Certificate in 2001. However, informal observation suggests that when given the chance, both students and staff can quickly revert to norm-referenced thinking and modes of operating. We – students and staff – need to be kept engaged with the standards.

Below I describe a simple approach and set of procedures that has helped maintain the engagement with the standards for one type of assessment.

Bachorl of Health Science students enrolled in the unit of study Basic Sciences for Health Studies write reports of practical investigations that they design, implement and interpret. These projects have been instigated to allow students to undertake simple but authentic research from their second day at university. The unit of study has also been targeting the written communication skills of students and provides support for students undertaking technical report writing.

The cover sheet for the report includes the standards required to achieve the various grades for its main components. In the past, students had been encouraged to refer to these standards when they wrote their reports. However, their reports as well as informal conversations, suggested that many of them had not engaged in any meaningful way with these standards. This year I changed the cover sheet so that students were required to self-assess their report against the standards and indicate their judgments on the sheet before submission. They did this by simply ticking the relevant boxes for each section of the report that indicated the standards that they thought they had achieved.

In this way, students were provided with greater encouragement...
to engage with the standards. In passing on their self-assessment, they were also feeding forward their perceptions of what they had done, and this also produced some unintended benefits described below (see table over page).

Teaching staff use the same cover sheet to indicate their judgments regarding the Materials and Methods section were different, and the written feedback could concentrate on this discrepancy in perception. Since students and staff judgments regarding the Materials and Methods section were aligned, there is no point dwelling on this, but rather specific feedback may be better used to provide direction to the student as to how they could have achieved a higher grade. This makes marking more interesting!

Despite 450 reports being submitted this year, there were only a couple of follow-up discussions about grades. This is in marked contrast to previous years where, although essentially the same published standards had been used, students were not required to first self-assess their reports. It appears that the process of self-assessment and peer-mediated dialogue of feedforward and feedback had settled most issues. Students were more effectively engaged with the standards.

Does the system have any disadvantages? It seemed that a few students trivialized the process and did not provide thoughtful self-assessments. I say “seemed” based on the fact that there were a number of examples of self-rating at the highest level on all dimensions when staff perceptions were that actual performance was nowhere near this. Can staff assessments be influenced by feedforward of students’ self-assessment? Probably. In order to tailor feedback, staff cannot be blinded to student ratings, but undue influence is ameliorated by the requirement to anchor assessment to specific descriptions of levels of achievement. Staff have to engage with the standards.

This very simple tool and associated process means that the standards are explicitly presented to students and staff. The standards are used to determine both feedforward and feedback. Differences in the alignment of staff and student judgments can form the basis for productive, efficient and targeted discussion and learning.

“I’ve done a Medline search and found this other research that looked at … Do you think that is relevant to our next experiment?”

Further Reading


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