About Synergy

Synergy is a scholarly forum for the discussion and debate of higher education teaching and learning at The University of Sydney. Produced by the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL), Synergy is published twice per year—usually May and October and is circulated to staff through academic and research departments. Synergy is edited by Dr Tai Peseta in consultation with the Director and staff of the ITL.

Contributions to Synergy

Synergy’s purpose is threefold: first, it is intended to showcase the variation in learning and teaching initiatives taking place across the university; second, it is a forum where staff (particularly those new to researching and writing about teaching and student learning) can publish their innovations in a scholarly manner; third, it acts as a vehicle for critical and public discussion of key learning and teaching issues.

The Editor welcomes contributions from the university community all year round. Synergy particularly welcomes contributions written collaboratively by staff and students that:

- report on, or are critical reflections of, an aspect of teaching or students’ learning;
- report on a teaching, learning or curriculum initiative designed to engage students in active learning or inquiry;
- use disciplinary research/concepts to develop ideas about teaching and student learning;
- report on curriculum initiatives designed to bring teaching and research together to improve student learning;
- draw on research and scholarship to comment critically and thoughtfully on an aspect of teaching and learning in the university;
- theorise or problematise the contribution of teaching, learning and pedagogy to the nature of higher education.

Scholarly and research-based contributions to Synergy attract points on the University’s Scholarship Index. Further information about the Index is available at http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning/quality/si.shtml. On occasion, the Editor will invite contributions to Synergy in accordance with the focus of the Issue.

Synergy publishes contributions of varying word lengths—anywhere up to 5000 words. We strongly encourage contributors to read through previous issues at: http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/synergy/. The Editor encourages all potential contributors to make contact before the submission of an article. We welcome the addition of graphics and visual images to enhance your contribution.

Referencing standards

Contributions to Synergy should be formatted using the American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines. Further information can be found at http://www.apastyle.org/.

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Feedforward and feedback: helping students and staff engage with the standards
If the wealth of literature on student learning is correct—that assessment drives student learning (Biggs, 1999; Ramsden, 2003), that it signals what and how we want students to learn and to what standard, then a focus on assessment processes and systems seems a wise move. Jan Orrell (2005) puts the issue thus: there is a need to improve assessment literacy. She writes that our decisions about assessment are rarely guided by scholarship—rather, they are informed by “theoretical treatise, ‘gut-piece’ writing, atomistic research and ‘how to’ guides”. Perhaps more worryingly, she suggests that a missing dimension of assessment reform has been in its leadership and management. So, if assessment does drive student learning, then much is at stake if the academic community gets assessment wrong.

In developing our assessment literacy, some very difficult questions are bound to surface. How does an institution such as a university manage to be ‘on the same’ page about something as complex as assessment? Do we have a consistent philosophy or set of principles that guide our decision making about assessment? Are there habits, rituals and routines governing the ways learning is assessed in our disciplines and professional contexts, and can we indicate with confidence that there is a scholarly basis for their continued application? What view of learning underpins our approach to assessment? Is it a view based on evidence? Is it the same view our students carry with them? And at a time when all universities are subject to increasing regulation, what does the quality of USyd graduates say about the rigour of our assessment practices? There is, of course, a need to ensure that assessment focuses on developing the capacities of individual learners but there are also matters of fairness, flexibility, equity, workload (staff and students) and resources to attend to—systemic matters. Then there are the usual questions related to the differences between criteria, standards and grade descriptors; the proper relation between the quantitative mark and the qualitative textual description; whether we use the bell curve too much, too little or need to abandon it altogether, and whether it is possible or desirable to rid our judgements of subjectivity while keeping up the appearance of objectivity. Like any scholarly endeavour, assessment literacy contains its own nomenclature and set of thematics. One of those themes, as John Cowan (2006:26) has written, is that “there are nowadays more stakeholders expressing strong views about what should be assessed than a generation ago […] together with an increasingly effective student voice”. Another theme is how we can use assessment for learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004) rather than become too preoccupied with the accuracy of method or the right technique in ways that distract us from the question of the quality of students’ learning. If there is more pressure on assessment than ever before, it is important, as Orrell argues, that we develop our capacity to engage in intelligent and scholarly conversation. That conversation must also recognise the institutional position on assessment—even if it is to invite a more critical spirit. A sensible start is the Academic Board Policy Assessment and Examination of Coursework supplemented by meaningful, informed and robust reflection and discussion.

This special issue of Synergy is intended to join the conversations already happening in the university community about assessment. It explores the issue from a variety of perspectives (sometimes focused on the teacher, at other times, on the student), with different lenses, intentions and contexts. In some cases it will challenge our usual practices and in others, it will reaffirm what is already known. Four of the six papers in this issue began as presentations at a forum held in June earlier this year, Best Practice in Assessment and Student Feedback, organised by the Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching). The remaining two came from other, more organic sorts of conversations.

The opening piece by Sandra Pitronaci & Francesco Ricatti illustrates how two sessional tutors work together to keep a check on each other’s tutoring. Their collegiality in this endeavour ought to be seen as a form of peer review; a way of keeping in circulation and assessing each other’s learning about teaching, and how to improve it. Next, Marianne Hulsbosch draws on her context of visual arts education to describe the link between assessment and learning through a RAT (Rich Assessment Task). Her paper asks: how do we organise learning and assessment so that some judgment can be made about the art experience? Her answer: students create something called a Body of Work. The student example is a lovely illustration of rich learning. I am really pleased to include Megan le Masurier’s piece on the difficult issue of plagiarism and academic honesty. Any one of my ITL colleagues will tell you that plagiarism, cheating and dishonesty are inevitable in discussions of assessment. They are the ‘elephants in the room’ and in some ways, are the easy things to focus on because they remove the prospect of scrutiny from our own teaching practices by placing responsibility entirely onto the student. While Megan’s paper begins with her experience of how to understand and respond to seemingly high incidences of academic dishonesty (the university’s preferred term) as a university
Beyond these set of rich and very different papers, we feature an extended conversation about assessment with three Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning): Diane Collins, Mark Freeman and Jennie Hodgson. This is a new addition to Synergy. They were each kind enough to donate an afternoon of their time to set up their own blog as part of an assessment task, they argue, helps in the exploration, discovery and development of their “voice”. A blog is another forum where students test their ideas and the veracity of their scholarly claims in an online learning community comprising of their peers. Finally, Ian Cathers writes of his efforts to encourage students to engage with grade descriptors. He does that very simply: by requiring students to self-assess the quality of their work according to those same descriptors as part of the assessment task itself. So, it is not just that there are grade descriptors, but that students internalise and test their meaning. The point is that students themselves must invest in their relevance in order to achieve the best learning possible. Ian’s paper shows that part of our role as teachers is about helping students do precisely that.

I’d also like to express my personal thanks to each of the authors who wrote papers, together with those others who laboured with me in the preparation of this issue, particularly Rachel Williams. Your work is the substance of what Synergy is intended to represent. On behalf of all in the ITL, we wish you a safe and relaxing holiday and we look forward to a flurry of teaching and learning activity in the new year.

Tai Peseta, Editor
Institute for Teaching and Learning

References
The rhetoric of collaboration, especially of team teaching, is often present, but its power is subtly destroyed by the toll that collaborative work takes on teachers. The conditions under which team teaching is introduced almost always ensure its failure (Brookfield, 1995:249).

While we cannot argue against team-teaching and collaborative work being by nature time-consuming, we wish to challenge the notion that collaboration is merely utopic. In this article, we share our desires, reflections, and experiences as sessional tutors in Italian, experimenting with a form of team-teaching. Our main responsibility as tutors is first-year language teaching. We feel there is a need to improve first-year students’ language learning experience, and so we have introduced an element of team-teaching in our practice as tutors. Our experience of working collaboratively as tutors demonstrates that there have been reciprocal benefits for our own learning as beginning university teachers, as well as that of our students. In this article, we describe how we came across the idea; we illustrate how it works in our classroom; and we suggest that it need not be quite as difficult as Brookfield suggests.

We started teaching together in an intensive Summer School course, where we observed and participated in each other’s classes as a form of moral support to help survive the long, hot Summer days. We were struck by the added dimension of enjoyment and interest that we encountered, both on our part and on our students’, due to the presence of the second teacher. We enjoyed the idea of having a ‘back-up’ teacher as support, and the students seemed to enjoy the novelty factor of having two teachers in the classroom, presenting themselves as a united front, or perhaps a ‘community’ of language teachers. It was this very thought that struck us in the context of teaching Italian – language students often learn language in isolation from the culture and community from which it comes, with only one point of reference, the single teacher, whose linguistic abilities and value as linguistic role model are never put to full use due to the limited interaction possible with beginner speakers.

So, in terms of our learning outcomes as teachers, our aim has been to put the rhetoric of collaboration to good use; to re-think the notion of team-teaching within the discipline of language teaching; and introduce it with certain conditions and modifications to ensure that it can succeed. In terms of student learning outcomes, we wish to present ourselves as a small linguistic and cultural ‘community’ of teachers/speakers who allow for student learning of languages to be influenced by relevant exposure to ‘authentic’ language situations, complemented by the contemporary mix of explicit grammar teaching and a communicative language teaching approach.

To our knowledge, the literature on team-teaching within the discipline of modern languages is scarce. In the absence of this literature, our ideas have developed from a more general literature regarding university teaching and learning that has engaged with some of the criticisms that surround team-teaching. Our focus has been on finding and adapting the various models in order to come up with what we believe to be our own new approach to language team-teaching.

The notion of team-teaching as a teaching method has been around for the last 100 years or so, in many shapes and forms. Chamberlin (1969:11) observed that as team-teaching was going through a ‘boom’ period, especially in the English school system:

The success of a team teaching program seems to depend more on the willingness of the staff to plan and work together than on the details of structure. Communication, cooperation, and collaboration seem to be the important “three C’s” of team teaching.

In more recent years, we are presented with a slightly more cynical approach, such as Brookfield’s observation mentioned above, or the following, where the teaching institution is placed in the role of thwarting the success of such collaboration:

Although collaboration has often been by-passed by faculty, it has, of course, been done, and often successfully (George & Davis-Wiley, 2000:75).

This is a legacy we want to both question and unpack. In doing so, our aim is twofold: to make team-teaching feasible, sustainable and enjoyable in our field; and to enhance our students’ learning experiences by providing them with authentic language exposure. In this collaboration it is vital that the aim be clear, simple, and common to both teachers. Attempting such an initiative without a definite, shared and elaborated purpose will inevitably lead to problems, as forewarned in so much of the available literature:

No team-teaching plan is likely to be successful unless it starts from detailed and lengthy discussion by the staff.
concerned and unless it has a clear-cut aim to begin with (Adams, 1970:12).

After we had clarified our aims, our detailed and lengthy discussion led to the establishment of three main issues that we needed to address and agree upon in order to achieve these aims, these being: the agreed teaching methodology; the way in which we would present the team-teaching; and all practical considerations.

Language teaching methodology
In terms of ideal language learning situations, current Italian language teaching methodology suggests a ‘mixed learning’ approach. While guided learning must involve rules and patterns, and the natural acquisition approach leads to more spontaneous communication, the ‘mixed learning’ approach, which incorporates both of these situations, appears to promote better linguistic outcomes (De Marco & Wetter, 2000:40).

The approach to syllabus design currently adopted by our department appears to be consistent with ‘mixed learning’ approach model with the natural learning aspect being promoted by extensive use of multimedia. There are, however, limitations in terms of ‘authentic’ language situations in which students, rather than passively watching or listening, can engage. Apart from (limited) interaction with each other, they have no model except one teacher, whose function as the native or near native speaker is limited to interaction with beginner speakers.

In a recent primary team-teaching experiment, the researchers observed the following:

...we believed the children could also benefit from seeing adults collaborate and cooperate on a goal, which some students may not see in their regular, single-teacher classroom (Goetz, 2000:2).

We believe that our students can benefit from seeing us collaborate and cooperate on a common goal, that is, they can see us as language teachers and speakers who converse and engage in the target language, hitherto observed by them only through the audio-visual material. Furthermore, the students themselves could then become part of the collaboration by taking the extra step of actually engaging and conversing with us in these more authentic situations. In this sense, they are no longer limited by the hierarchical and linguistically imbalanced beginner/student - advanced/teacher conversation.

Presenting the team-teaching
While it appears that team-teaching carries a reputation for being problematic in terms of successful collaboration, the major challenge for us is to develop and present what we envisage as ‘happy’ team-teaching. Our focus has been on offering a repertoire of opportunities that expose our students to learning and engaging in the target language through the continuous interactions between the two teachers in the classroom.

We define our team-teaching as ‘happy’ for three fundamental reasons. First of all, a vital goal of our project is to increase the degree of enjoyment and happiness in the classroom. We believe that the presence of a second teacher for one hour per week in a four hour course adds a sense of novelty to the lesson. Moreover, the interaction between the two teachers certainly allows for a more lively and engaging lesson. It is not by chance that we chose a late Thursday afternoon class for our happy team-teaching challenge. For the majority of students, it is their last hour of lessons for the week. They are usually tired and anxious to go home. What better time to understand if the contemporary presence of two teachers can increase the level of attention and vitality of our students? Moreover, when the two teachers are of a different gender, it might be argued that the gender relations within the class are more balanced.
The second reason we label our team-teaching as ‘happy’ is that we as teachers are happier. Students want to learn from teachers who are passionate about their subject. Our teaching together makes the lesson run more smoothly and makes it more engaging not only for the students but also for the just-as-weary teachers. It allows each of us to have a moment or two to rest and reflect during the lesson; it makes it much easier to observe and help students, to check their progress, and ensure they are participating; and it provides them with the opportunity of conversing together and with the students in a more authentic and fun way. The lesson is much less likely to become heavy and dull and the teacher much less likely to fall into a monotonous one-hour soliloquy. Moreover it gives teachers the continuous possibility of considering the strategies and methods utilised by the other teacher, promoting the learning of new techniques and solutions to teaching language. To use Schön’s (1987) work, it is both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

Finally, our team-teaching model could be defined as ‘happy’ because we envisage it as being relatively cost-effective for the department.

**Practical considerations**
To help not only our students but also ourselves as teachers find satisfaction in teaching and learning, we want to specify the main characteristic of our team-teaching experiment. The unit is coordinated and managed by only one of the two teachers, while the other teacher essentially acts and works as a ‘guest’. In other words, in order to keep things simple and save time, only one teacher has the ‘pleasure’ and responsibility of coordinating the course, defining the outline, preparing the lessons, marking the assignments, acting as a point of reference to the students, assessing and evaluating student progress and so on. The idea is to avoid all the problems of coordination between the two teachers and the possibly infinite discussions about methods, goals and results. We want to effectively utilize the presence of another language teacher who once a week can enhance the lesson with a different perspective through more realistic dialogues and interactions. This idea has been proposed by Noble and Yanamandram (2006:50), who observed the necessity of the appointment of one team-teaching member to “act as a central gateway for student questions on the subject and overall management of the subject’s non-teaching activities such as the recording of student grades etc.”
Essentially, we believe that it is vital to identify a ‘principal’ teacher who takes the responsibility for the teaching and learning outcomes, while the ‘guest’ teacher follows clear indications and lesson plans and contributes to the class within the boundaries established by the principal teacher. This process simplifies the activity of coordination required by the two teachers enormously, as well as limiting the opportunities for eventual difficulties that may arise during collaboration. We believe that this notion of having a ‘guest’ teacher is not too foreign for language teachers, as our department for example often invites native-speaker guests into the classroom to engage and converse with the students. In our context, the second teacher would be the ‘permanent guest’.

In terms of costing, a team-teaching set up according to our model will require only slightly more funding than a regular unit taught by a single teacher. The principal teacher remains unaffected, while the guest teacher who does not have to manage the course would cost only one hour of teaching plus half an hour of preparation (Yanamandram & Noble, 2006). For a four hour per week course that requires eight hours per week of preparation, the cost increase would only be 12.5%. While we understand that the present financial conditions of many universities means that this costing may not seem defensible, we do feel that the improvement in the teaching and learning outcomes and the satisfaction of students and teachers would justify this limited expense. It would represent a positive investment made by the university – particularly in relation to a better support system for sessional tutors.

**A typical lesson**

This semester we have been trialling our team-teaching model with a Beginners Italian unit. The lesson is usually prepared by Sandra. The day before the lesson we set aside half an hour during which Sandra illustrates the lesson plan to Francesco, provides him with the material for the lesson (textbook reference, photocopies, games, slides, etc.) and explains how the lesson will be presented. Minor possible modifications to the lesson plan and to the content are discussed.

The guest teacher arrives when almost all students should already be in class. Teachers greet each other in Italian, asking each other simple questions:

- ‘Come stai?’ [How are you?]
- ‘Come è andata la giornata?’ [How was your day?]
- ‘Sei stanco?’ [Are you tired?]

This allows for informal, authentic speech in Italian outside the boundaries of the lesson but still experienced by students as a seamless part of their learning.

Throughout the lesson, as teachers, we interact mainly in Italian. We rarely speak to each other in English except to clarify a point with students. A typical activity is that of an interview, where the teachers interact in this way according to the theme or grammar being covered, and the students have to interview, where the teachers interact in this way according to the theme or grammar being covered, and the students have to

When students are required to work in pairs or small groups, each teacher helps, gives explanations to and follows the progress of half the students. This simplifies the teachers’ roles and allows for more explanations and suggestions within a limited time. Moreover, students are under a still discrete but more efficient gaze and therefore they do not start to speak in English or focus on another activity instead of completing the required task.

During the lesson we aim to make the most of our special abilities and knowledge. This may include visual grammatical explanations, singing, drawing, or miming actions and words without giving explanations and translations in English. At the end of each lesson, while students are leaving the class, we continue to speak in Italian, so they are exposed to yet more authentic language beyond the limits of the lesson. After the lesson, usually on the walk back to our office, we spend ten minutes reflecting on and discussing which activities worked well and which not so well.

**Conclusion**

Our team-teaching experiment is still in progress. We began this semester and intend to continue into next year as well. Informal student feedback has so far been very positive, with students asking to see more of Francesco as the guest teacher. They claim that the team-teaching is helpful and stimulating and that the presence of two teachers allows them to feel more immersed in the language. While we are yet to analyse the outcomes more deeply next semester, we remain convinced that this method can offer significant linguistic improvement in terms of student learning outcomes.

**References**


Sandra Pitronaci received a Faculty of Arts Excellence in Tutoring Award in 2004. Francesco Ricatti is completing a PhD in Italian Studies with a focus on Italian migrants’ material and discursive practices about the body.

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Learning in the Visual Arts

Interesting myths and misconceptions abound in discussions of learning, and the assessment of that learning in the visual arts. Parents of school children preparing artwork to be submitted for the HSC in particular will quiz you at length about the subjectivity of assessing aesthetics. They (and not only parents of HSC students) will impress upon you how artmaking is considered an exploration of the human condition and as such, is a creative impulse that should be appreciated and respected but that the art object itself is beyond judgment. They will argue that artefacts are imbued with personal symbolism and meaning, contextualized within certain cultural values which elicit a personal response and therefore are impossible to evaluate without prejudice. And they will tell you that therefore, the only learning that can be assessed is the process, not the actual outcome of artmaking. The physical object can only be objectively assessed when examined from a technical perspective. Interestingly, these sentiments are rarely expressed about art history or art critiquing, or in looking at the written or spoken word. It appears to suggest that there is a rational basis for the appreciation of art that can avoid subjective opinion, and which makes the product easier to assess. Using this argument people tend to divide learning neatly in the visual arts into art making (practice) and art theory. Thus, the perception is that in order to critically assess and evaluate the learning that takes place in visual art education, one has to examine the process (art making) as well as the product (artefact and written tasks such as tests, theses and essays). However there is more to learning in art education than products and processes; it is the extended art experience that is the most valuable learning experience of all. The question then is this: how are we to assess the nature of students’ learning experience?

The Importance of Visual Arts Education

A plethora of investigations into the validity of learning in, and through, the arts is testimony to the recognition of art experience as meaningful, authentic, critical and constructive learning (see for example (Catterall, 2005; Eisner, 2002; Sullivan, 1993). Catterall noted that ‘art-rich’ students outperform ‘arts-poor’ students by ‘virtually every measure’ (Catterall, in Fiske 1999:viiii). His findings provide a strong argument for an art-rich curriculum. Eisner (2002) makes the link between art-based learning and the creation of mind. He suggests that engagement in the arts assists students in making excellent judgments about qualitative relationships. It also facilitates critical thinking through materials because it involves students in complex forms of problem solving (Eisner, 2002:72). Furthermore, art education allows students to develop visual, linguistic, mathematical, audio, sensorial, interpersonal and intrapersonal, multi-literacy, communication skills. Artmaking goes beyond technical processes, because the students employ the qualities of creativity, self-expression and communication to express the highest aspirations of the human spirit. Art education requires students to be creative, enterprising, flexible, and technologically adaptive.

What is the ultimate learning opportunity?

The challenge for lecturers in visual art education then becomes the devising and implementing of assessment activities and strategies that measure student engagement and disposition to learning about, in, as well as through, the visual arts. The learning experience has to be authentic, non-linear, meaningful, integrated, considerate and relevant to the student cohort. It has to represent a set of strategies that exemplify students’ individual application of knowledge, understanding and skills.

The learning experience serves two purposes. Developmentally, it needs firstly to challenge, motivate, stimulate, guide and reinforce students’ deep approaches to learning. Secondly, the tasks that make up the learning experience should be designed in such a manner that they provide a valid and reliable basis for student performance and the improvement of student learning. Assessment then is not considered as a way of testing the end of learning in a particular year or component of a course, but rather as an integral means for continually shaping student development (James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002:1).

What are RATs?

Students are considered active and reflective learners who engage in research and are capable of articulating their learning journey in order to learn to ‘know’, to ‘do’, to ‘live together’, and to ‘be’ (Delores, 1996:131-132). Enter Rich Assessment Tasks (RATs). RATs offer students a complete learning experience.

RATs in the Ranks of Visual Arts Education

Marianne Hulsbosch
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that allows them to express their diverse opinions and values with integrity but also adheres to this university’s Learning and Teaching Values: excellence in students’ learning experiences and opportunities to engage in intellectual inquiry and academic freedom (University Teaching and Learning Plan 2007-2010). These assessment-for-learning tasks (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005) will have to be rich in content, multi-modal in approach and mediated, so that they cater for different learners and allow them to analyze and evaluate their learning throughout the process of the task. RATs need to be structured ways that are developmental and that facilitate positive criticism and judgment to achieve the aims of learning to know, do, be, and to live together and be tolerant of one another. They are mediated learning experiences that are guided by the learning community of students and their peers, lecturers and tutors, the education community and the wider community. The interaction between these parties will allow for learning to take place within a diverse community of learners.

The Features of RATs

It is the trans-disciplinary integration of learning that makes RATs unique and rich. In collaboratively negotiating outcomes that provide opportunities for students to construct their own knowledge, rich tasks facilitate different approaches to learning. Throughout the development of the task the student is able to demonstrate a variety of different knowledges, understandings, values, skills and achievements, making rich tasks truly student-centred. Therefore, RATs provide meaningful learning opportunities and experiences for all students. Furthermore, the tasks are relevant to real-life situations as they recognise and build on lived experience. RATs are problem-based and model various learning theories. They require group and individual work combining cognitive and affective learning.

For students, the development and presentation of a RAT involves putting to work various communication skills and multi-l literacies. This is because all components are interrelated so that earlier information gained is continuously revisited and revised. Students need to engage in critical analysis and evaluation, and to demonstrate superb interpretation skills as well as overall application and dedication to the task. Complex and higher levels of thinking are necessary in order to achieve the aims and goals of RATs and to simultaneously motivate and engage students whilst providing deep learning experiences.

The RATs allow students to develop and articulate their conceptual understandings, along with their ability to transfer knowledge between different contexts. These higher-level thinking skills and attributes directly align with Bloom’s taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) and Biggs’ SOLO (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome) taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982).

Assessing RATs

In order to assess both qualitative and quantitative learning outcomes of RATs, it needs to be recognized that these outcomes are “determined by a complex interaction between teaching procedures and student characteristics” (Biggs & Collis, 1982:15). The structure of Biggs’ SOLO taxonomy is developed in such a manner that teachers can develop
programmes that enable students to “enhance the depth of their learning” (Hattie & Brown, 2004:7). SOLO is a hierarchical taxonomy that is based on an analysis and evaluation of “structural characteristics of questions and answers” (Hattie & Brown, 2004:26). Appropriate use of SOLO allows for the identification of increasing qualitative and quantitative dimensions of understanding. Biggs and Collis have developed a taxonomy that not only assesses content knowledge but also provides students with an opportunity to explore the full range of understandings related to a given task (Hattie & Brown, 2004:28). A RAT is complex, challenging and authentic, and links together sub-tasks situated within Bloom’s higher-level thinking. It is underscored by Biggs’ SOLO framework that describes constructivist learning.

A RAT in Visual Art Education

The multifaceted, flexible nature of RATs ensures that students perform at different levels. They need to be creative, resourceful, entrepreneurial, inquisitive and critically reflective and take risks and think laterally. The high quality, deep learning that is shaped whilst undertaking these tasks is on-going and constructive and involves outcomes that are trans-disciplinary, with practices and skills that are transferable to other contexts.

To develop an understanding and assess the whole learning of students during their final year of the Master of Teaching degree in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, the student submits a Body of Work (BoW) ready for display at the Annual Creative Arts Festival. The BoW should demonstrate the understanding of artmaking as a practice and represent ideas and interests through the interpretation of subject matter and use of expressive forms. The BoW must represent a coherent point of view in relation to conceptual strengths and meaning and it must be executed in a media not familiar to the student. This criterion is crucial to student learning as the students are forced out of their comfort zone and placed in a challenging position where they need to develop new and appropriate technical skills and know-how. Additionally, by positioning the student teacher in a situation similar to that of their future pupils, they are able to critically analyse and evaluate their own learning throughout the developmental processes of their BoW.

This empathic learning is documented in a self-reflective diary that demonstrates clear and sustained reflection on the implication of the development of the BoW on matters relating to teaching and learning in the visual arts. Furthermore, there should be evidence of research within the creative process, investigation of subject matter, interests, issues, processes, expressive forms and conceptual challenges within the reflective diary. The diary is intended to be a documentation of learning, a clarification and justification of sustained critical reflection, together with an analysis and evaluation of creative processes and decision-making.

Once the BoW has been completed, students present their work in a public art gallery. The curating, management and marketing of this exhibition is a collaborative effort that is entirely student-driven. In addition the visual art students invite their peers in drama, design and music education to perform at the opening night. The students organize all fundraising, catering, the selection of opening speaker, and the planning and coordination of the entire event.

When assessing this RAT, the focus is on all processes, progress and products of learning. The key ingredients of RATs are depth, breadth and applicability. Throughout the task, students’ learning processes are self, peer and tutor/lecturer assessed, according to collaboratively designed assessment criteria. The final presentation is self-assessed and evaluated by the lecturer. This ensures that the students, under the guidance of staff, are able to define and articulate specific task criteria according to the set learning outcomes. This RAT is valid and has relevance because it accommodates a range of student learning. The tasks are research-based and collaborative, and involve critical self, peer and team evaluation and continuously offer the student the opportunity to refine achievements after on-going feedback. Furthermore, this RAT, the BoW and its attendant processes, not only focus on the development of education skills and content in the visual arts, they also focus on empathic student teacher learning, as all aspects of teacher preparation (education and training, research and management) converge. Below is an example of the BoW and the accompanying artist statement of one of the Master of Teaching students. Her statement is indicative of the research and conceptual stages she uses to frame her work.

Conclusion

Rich Assessment Tasks encompass a spectrum of authentic, flexible learning experiences that are inclusive and respectful of current and future contexts of the individual student. The learning throughout these tasks is based on prior learning and challenges students at various levels. The tasks assess aspects of student growth and maturation as equal members of a dynamic learning community, and offer the opportunity to construct individual learning aims and objectives that facilitate all aspects of whole student development. They are true to the philosophy and vision of the degree, the course and the individual.

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LILA AFIOUNI: ARTIST’S STATEMENT

There is something inspiring about reconnecting with the past in order to move forward. My work takes its cue from alchemical objects in medieval Europe and the Arab lands. The word ‘Al-kimia’ is Arabic for ‘alchemy’ and translates to ‘the black soil art’. The Arabs in the 12th Century practised alchemy in secret, hidden away from their Islamic faith. Alchemy is often known as a ‘hidden or occult’ art and many philosophical texts have been written about it. I find it intriguing that growing up within a Western culture, I have turned to my own heritage to look for more substance about who I am, where my people came from; which caravans toured what lands and deserts, in search of jewels, magic, philosophy, art and science. I define alchemy as always searching, always questioning and trying to discover something better than what lies in the present.

This survey of work allowed me to consider the artefacts of my own culture and the ruptured heritage that was never passed on from my own family (since emigrating to Australia and bringing limited possessions). Although my own history is fractured, I would like to create a new quilt of informed cultural identity, which I can pass on to future generations, an identity that is informed and inspired by organic, decorative and functional forms of ancient times, but unlike the original inspiration, my forms are non-functional. The vessels are hollowed and feature cracks, which have become a metaphor for the imperfections of human existence.

Artwork and photo: Lila Afiouni
Tom Hubble, School of Geosciences, Faculty of Science

Tom Hubble refers to himself as “old-school” because he was originally appointed to a teaching-only tutorial position and has had something of an atypical route into academic life. Rather than completing a PhD and a couple of post-docs before applying for a teaching position, he began his teaching career as a first-year teaching assistant. “It might make me something of a relic but when I started almost twenty years ago the tutors were an integral part of the teaching effort.” He had been a research assistant before that and was finishing off a Masters when the research grant money ran out. The Head of School asked Tom to help with the first-year practical classes, which was extended to second and third year classes and “before I knew it I was giving some of the Honours coursework. People would quit or retire and the Prof. just kept finding money to keep me on. By 1995, I’d been reappointed on so many six-month and one-year contracts that I had to be given a permanent position. Along the way I finished a Diploma of Education and was looking to teaching as a career.” This time spent in the classroom honing his skills and having an education background obviously stood Tom in good stead for his future achievements. In 1999, he was a recipient of a Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Outstanding Teaching, and more recently in 2004, a NSW Minister’s Award for Education & Training/Australian College of Educators Quality Teaching Award. When asked why he thinks his teaching has been recognised, Tom responds: “I like teaching and I like people. That’s always a good start. Most of the really good teachers I’ve worked with or observed seem to be naturals - it’s got something to do with the way they’re built. We can all get better with the right training or by thinking about the issues but I think a lot of my success results from enjoying students’ company. I like to see them broaden their knowledge and understanding. These days I also consult and research in engineering and environmental geology which helps me make my classroom teaching edgy and relevant to work environment most of my students will go to when they finish their degree.”

One aspect of teaching that has changed since Tom took his undergraduate degree in Geology and Geophysics is the sheer volume of new content to be got through. This always presents challenges. He says, “I call this the ‘stack of books problem’. When I was a student, the questions about what should I read, what should I know in order to be a good geologist – there might have been about a dozen books to read. If students were to ask me the same question now, the stack of books would be 10 times as high. Knowledge is increasing at an exponential rate while the available teaching time is decreasing, so you’ve got to make some decisions about what’s important to know; you’ve got to put a framework around things and help the students develop the confidence required to be able to find things out for themselves because there is no longer the time to teach the breadth.” Tom’s energies are focused on helping students ask questions that have a problem at their root. In doing so, students develop the analytical techniques, skills and confidence to solve the problem. There is every indication that Tom’s approach works. “Usually, when we get to the end of a semester it doesn’t seem to me that we’ve got through all that much, but when I go through and mark the exams and reports and see what students can actually do, I realise that not just trying to cram tonnes of stuff into them, works.”

Tom’s more recent challenge has been in moving outside the classroom to assuming faculty based roles that concern the consolidation of teaching and learning improvement. He represents the Faculty of Science on two major institutional teaching and learning initiatives: the first is the Faculty of Science representative on the Evaluation and Quality Assurance (EQA) Working Group and the second is the eLearning Working Group. Both roles offer different perspectives on how well the faculty is travelling when it comes to teaching and learning. “Working for the Faculty gives you a much more global picture about what everybody does, and there is a commonality of purpose and approach that I still find surprising. Eight or nine major disciplines – each divided into as almost many sub-disciplines. I talk with people in different Schools, get their views and communicate messages and in doing so I’ve found out how we do, what we do. Our researchers are very successful but that is by no means all that we’re good at. There are lots of good teachers and a few really great ones. And the variety of the teaching is astounding when you think about it. From the large classes, particularly the first-year Physics, Chemistry Biology, Psychology, Microbiology and Maths units which are massive operations that provide tutes, prac and lectures for between 500 and 1800 students week-in, week-out to the Talented Students Program (TSP) where small groups of three or four students work on a one-off
project.” What Tom likes about both these roles is a security in the overall sense of something common. “Even though our Schools are very different and tend to operate independently of each other, we are all training students to solve problems with data sets they collect and analyse themselves. Students will do that at different times during their degree—some in second year, some through the TSP and others, as part of their Honours degree. But they all do it somewhere.” The next challenge as Tom sees it will be to integrate that learning experience with the web. “The current generation of students we’re teaching now is fairly connected to the web. But the next generation won’t know much of anything else. And we hear that they don’t like reading books much either. Many would much rather do a Google search, expecting things to animated, glossy and fun. And they’ll expect to use the web. Some of those are new things for us and we need to come to grips with how to provide students with those experiences without unduly increasing our workload. That will be the next test of modern academia.”

The other major challenge as Tom sees it is the balance between teaching and research. As the latest round of successful ARC grants demonstrate, the Faculty of Science continues to maintain its rich international research reputation. “This Faculty is doing a lot of good things in both teaching and research. That was recognised through our Academic Board Review and in the visit from AUQA (Australian University Quality Assurance Agency). My job in representing the faculty in teaching and learning is to be strategic about where to focus our efforts. There is a constant desire to improve teaching and learning and we do want to improve the things about teaching that need improving but we don’t want to do that at the expense of diminishing our research results.”

On the relation between teaching and research, Tom ends with a reflection. “Some of the people who taught me were both great researchers and great teachers. There was one, Peter Valder, a botanist who taught my prac group for about three weeks when I was in first-year. He was a great communicator, wickedly funny, a researcher and incredibly knowledgeable. It was inspiring to be taught by somebody like that. He was having fun with us and telling us really interesting things about plants at the same time. That kind of enthusiasm just rubs off on you. When I became a teacher I thought to myself, ‘I want to be like that. I want to find out new things and communicate them to students.’ His final thought is this: ‘if there is a message for any set of teachers, it is that you should sit down and really think about why you’re doing what you do; what makes the curriculum work and how much stuff is really required to get it to work’.”

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Teaching our way through plagiarism in the academy

Megan le Masurier
Department of Media and Communications
The extent of plagiarism took my breath away.

120 students, 12 per cent plagiarism, all by students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Beyond the respiratory challenge, the emotions are what get to you first. A wave set of shock, disbelief, anger, a contained desire to bargain or ignore, then a desire to just fail the bloody lot of them. After that, a period of waking somnolence, going through the motions. Then acceptance – this is how it is. The grief process writ small.

All affect, I responded personally to my students’ high level of plagiarism. Renewed to the academy after a working life in journalism, of course I thought I’d got this teaching thing all wrong. Colleagues assured me that this was all part of the academic experience of teaching students in the 21st century.

While the various modes of academic dishonesty are clearly not the sole province of international students, the concern—we could even call it a moral panic—about plagiarism has grown in tandem with the increase in overseas students coming to study in Australian universities. Without wanting to contribute to the panic, this correlation was born out by my experience in teaching a postgraduate course this year on magazine culture and practice, where the numbers of international students had increased dramatically. At undergraduate level, where the numbers of international students are lower, there had been minimal plagiarism when I taught the year before.

The plagiarism was detected too easily with an advanced Google search; time-consuming but not difficult. (Midnight, growling: “Make it hard for me why don’t you?”). The internet has made copying chunks of text easier, but also easier to trace. The process took a solid month of suspecting, proving, meeting with students, meeting with the post-graduate co-ordinator and listening to student explanations, excuses, confessions and bewilderment. The next step was to make an initial determination as to whether the plagiarism was negligent or dishonest, in accordance with University of Sydney policy.

In the recently amended Academic Honesty in Coursework academic board resolutions (http://www.usyd.edu.au/ab/policies/Academic_Honesty_cwk) plagiarism is defined as “presenting another person’s ideas, findings or work as one’s own by presenting, copying or reproducing them without due acknowledgement of the source.” A clear distinction is made between plagiarism which “may not necessarily involve dishonest intent” (2.2.3) and plagiarism with the “intent to deceive” (2.3.1). Negligent plagiarism, which can be due to genuine misunderstanding of referencing or paraphrasing practices or fear of “writing in their own words”, can be “addressed as an educational issue” (2.2.3). There appears to be a shift here away from a punitive approach to plagiarism per se towards a more nuanced understanding of the levels of academic honesty and dishonesty.

The task of determining deceitful intent is simple when the student has lifted an entire article from The Korea Times or Allure magazine. But trying to determine whether students have major conceptual difficulties understanding plagiarism and what constitutes ‘original’ work, whether they simply misunderstand how to attribute sources or the craft of paraphrasing, whether they really did ‘intend to deceive’ is difficult. Even more so when language becomes a barrier rather than a conduit to communication. The problem is that the differences between negligent and dishonest get lost in translation when there appears to be a basic conceptual gap between the word and its meaning in practice. I found this critical distinction one that was almost impossible to make.

So, in the preliminary meetings, first with the postgraduate co-ordinator and then with the Head of School, we collectively tried to determine which cases were and were not ‘negligent’. Then, after contacting students and scheduling times, came the gruelling final meetings where we played good cop/bad cop attempting to fathom the students’ mis/comprehension of plagiarism, watching their pain and shame, then casting judgement. Despite what we thought was a clear and detailed explanation in all Course Readers, despite in-class explanations and warnings, when asked how they would define plagiarism, many students would not or could not answer. A few threw a doubtful question back: “Copying?” Or, as one student said with mild indignation: “I don’t understand why this is so important.” Like detectives without enough proof, we waited for a confession to make the decision easier. Course! Re-submit for a 50? Fail the assignment? Fail the unit? Repeat offender? Refer to Registrar?

The reasons why ‘this is so important’ seem to be clear. When students are prepared to kidnap qualifications to achieve their aims, the value of degrees and the reputation of universities are at stake. As is the morale of teachers and the learning experience of students who do not engage in plagiarism. And if the students who do plagiarise tend to be international students, and mainly those from non-Western educational and cultural backgrounds, there is a risk of indulging and encouraging racism rather than understanding, and working with, cultural differences.

But I feel our panic about plagiarism could be even more complex than this. The emotions that plagiarism raises, the heightened moral injury, even anger, which teachers exhibit when they suspect and catch plagiarists, perhaps speaks of something deeper. It is a peculiar transgression,
this copying of other people's words. It connects deep to the heart of our culture, where individual ownership of property is sacrosanct, and individual creativity is an expression of our being. It is as though our very definition of self is under threat when confronted by plagiarism. When students mix their metaphors or confuse their plural or mimetic structures or hand in late papers, we do not view this as violation of our ethical standards or as criminal behaviour. These are mistakes, vital steps in learning the discursive practice of a particular discipline or field. But failure to attribute quotes or paraphrase correctly? Here we move into the territory of psychopathology and criminality.

Moral indignation, detection and disciplinary action are the required responses in a time of intensified media interest in international students and academic dishonesty. But this is action after the fact. The more pressing problem is to find ways to help students avoid plagiarism in the first place. This may be how it is, as I first thought, deep in resignation, but it does not have to stay that way.

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Much has been written about academic dishonesty, as I discovered when I chose the intellectual rather than the affective route as a way to understand teaching within the contemporary academic environment. The field of ‘plagiarism studies’ (if I may call it that) has grown dramatically in the past decade, in response to the increase in academic dishonesty. My brief immersion in the literature was a steep learning curve. Plagiarism studies is as intricate a field as you would expect when academics begin to wrap their minds around a problem.

Older work (and not so old) stems from the belief that plagiarism is theft and a crime against western academic values (Mallon, 1989). There are handbooks for detection, and disturbing attempts to construct criminal profiles. The title of Chapter One in Whitley’s Academic Dishonesty: Guidebook for Educators, for example, indicates the flavour: Academic Dishonesty: The enemy within our gates (Whitley, 2002). Whitley implies that western universities are witnessing a new ‘culture war’, this time over plagiarism. He presents tables of motivations, justifications and characteristics as an aid in “identifying potential violators”. We learn, for example, that students who are younger and have high workloads are more “at risk for dishonesty” (p. 29). As are students who engage “in other forms of minor deviance such as risky driving behaviours, lying to friends, negative on-the-job behaviours, and bullying” (p. 29). We get an exam tip: “require students who wear baseball caps to turn the brim to the rear” (p. 102). The underlying message is clear: academic dishonesty is just another form of deviant anti-social behaviour and you can spot it coming if you read the signs.

But most of the recent literature tends to be moving away from this pathological profiling. Margaret Price is one of many who question the concept of ‘one’s own work’ in university policies, at a time when ‘the author’ has become “one of the most thoroughly questioned entities in recent scholarship” (Price, 2002:93). She dissected the instability of plagiarism. “What we think of as plagiarism shifts across historical time periods, across cultures, across workplaces, even across academic disciplines” (Price, 2002:90).

Rebecca Moore Howard goes much further. Over her decades of work on the subject, the concept of plagiarism is critiqued from many perspectives including; the positive pedagogic use of patchwork plagiarism (Howard, 1993), the inadequacy of using a moral framework to judge textual practices (Howard, 1999a), and the function of plagiarism policy to prop up distinctions between high literacy and low (Howard, 1999b). In a recent article, Sexuality, Textuality: The Cultural Work of Plagiarism, Howard argues that the discourse of plagiarism “regulates not only textuality but sexuality. Embedded in the discursive construction of plagiarism are metaphors of gender, weakness, collaboration, disease, adultery, rage, and property that communicate a fear of violating sexual as well as textual boundaries” (Howard, 2000: 474). Indeed, she calls for us to abandon the word plagiarism altogether because of its “unacknowledged work” in the “regulation of student bodies” (p. 475).

Like Howard, Jonathan Hall suggests abandoning the term plagiarism for more precise terms such as levels of ‘fraud’ and levels of ‘inadequate documentation’. The legalistic idea of plagiarism as theft is not a conducive incentive to acquiring membership of an academic community.

If the plagiarist is trying to ‘pass’ as a member of a community into which he or she has been imperfectly integrated, then we can see why it is off the mark to conceive plagiarism as theft: the plagiarist is not going to snatch and run, but rather is going to hang around the neighbourhood and try to look like he or she belongs (Hall, 2005:7).

Hall calls for a shift in pedagogic desire, from detection and punishment to prevention. “We cannot condone fraud, but we need to go beyond policing borders, and recognize plagiarism as symptomatic of deeper tensions in a student’s writing environment (Hall, 2005:14).”

The issue of international non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students has aroused more urgent, and for my purposes here, more relevant debate. In collegiate discussions of plagiarism we often hear that reproducing words or ideas that are not the writer’s own, without attribution is accepted practice in non-western educational systems. That paraphrasing is considered disrespectful, that adherence to experts rather than original thought is rewarded; that good students do not challenge authority, that group consensus is more important that individual creativity and thought.

In trying to establish some facts behind what she calls the ‘urban myths’ around plagiarism in different educational traditions, Lise Buranen, after doing research and interviews with international students and English Speakers of Other Languages (ESoL) teachers, ended up “more confused now than when (she) started the project” (Buranen, 1999:70).

As am I. You might expect that by turning to the literature, which spans decades, we’d have the facts about cross-cultural educational beliefs about plagiarism sorted by now. But a recent debate in the pages of the ELT Journal illustrates that there is still no firm ground to work from. In his article, Plagiarism and the culture of multilingual students in higher education abroad, Colin Sowden aims to explore the conflict between academic traditions in international students’ countries of origin and Western academic practice (Sowden, 2005). Sowden surveys the literature and points to a number of educational traditions especially Chinese that might help to explain the reasons behind the plagiarism of many international students.

In the same issue, Dilin Liu responded by casting doubt on these claims. He argues that copying, for example, was not a part of eastern, and especially Chinese, educational tradition (2005:234).
PLAGIARISM ... WHAT'S
PLAGIARISM ?!

I'M NOT SURE.
I THINK IT'S A
TYPE OF TRIANGLE.
All my teachers often warned us not to copy others’ work. In fact, the concept of plagiarism as an immoral practice has existed in China for a very long time. Chinese has two terms for plagiarism and they are both derogatory: ‘piao qie,’ which literally means to rob and steal someone else’s writing, and ‘cao xi’ which means to copy and steal (Liu, 2005:235).

Moreover, Liu points out that major Chinese textbooks insist on the importance of citation of sources and acknowledgement of others’ work as a sign of respect. Memorisation as a learning technique is common, but never intended “as a tool for copying” (p. 237). He points to the pejorative term ‘si ji yin bei’ to describe “dead and inflexible memorization” rather than ‘huo xue huo yong’ which refers to the creative use of memorisation as a learning practice (p. 237).

Liu suggests that the main problems for Asian ESOL students are poor language and writing skills. He concludes that the argument about cultural conditioning “yields few pedagogical implications and solutions” (p. 239).

Even so, it would seem critical for us as western educators of students from diverse cultures to have a clear understanding of different educational backgrounds. Such knowledge would allow the practices we identify as academic dishonesty to be situated in precise locations, and could suggest precise pedagogic strategies for intervention. (It would also make it easier to determine whether deliberate plagiarism has really taken place or whether apparent acts of plagiarism are really signs of genuine cross-cultural confusion.)

Given there is no consensus, large-scale research into the beliefs about plagiarism our students bring to their education in western academies promises to be a fertile field for further research. But right now, in designing courses for large numbers of students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, what can be done?

Jonathan Hall’s suggestion is to ‘prevent plagiarism through pedagogy’, by integrating an understanding of plagiaristic practice into assignments and assessment. Hall regards the initiation into a particular ‘academic discourse community’ as requiring a series of graduated steps involving basic subject matter, methods, terminology, rhetorical structures, and documentation conventions.

He suggests:
- nourishing the feedback/revision loop;
- intervening in incremental stages in the research and composition process;
- idiosyncratic assignments that are directly relevant to the material and objectives of the course (Hall, 2005:3).

Another approach is that developed by MacKinnon and Manathunga in their recent research project, Worldmarks: Guidelines for Socially and Culturally Responsive Assessment. Their premise is that “the dominant cultural literacy in a western context relies on a western template of knowledge that can inhibit internationalisation of curriculum unless it is identified, transformed and broadened to become interculturally responsive” (2003:131). Making the curriculum more relevant to students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, allowing them to participate by drawing from their own cultural literacies, would help to redress the “discrimination against students from non-dominant backgrounds” (p. 132). While the Worldmarks research does not specifically address plagiarism, it does suggest strategies to engage students more successfully from non-dominant backgrounds and to “develop intercultural communications skills in all students” (p. 133). If students feel that their own cultural literacies are valued, then perhaps engaging with the western template would not be so daunting as to make plagiarism the only option to ‘pass’ as a member of this dominant community.

Both approaches are inspiring, but do not solve the basic problem that Liu identified: poor language and writing skills. There is only so much you can teach when students do not understand what you say and find the reading lists incomprehensible. Here it would seem that an internal university test for spoken and written English, and an insistence on an intensive ESOL course for those who do not pass, and before they begin other studies, should be a matter for urgent discussion.

Within my own department, the realisation that some of the students we were teaching had a bare grasp of spoken and written English prompted a quick response. We employed an English language teacher, part-time, to work one-on-one with students whose accuracy in written English needed support. The students are appreciative and the bookings are always full. The next step was to lobby for an increase in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) entry score for written and spoken English. We have also incorporated the Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students (MASUS) English diagnostic test (Bonanno & Jones, 1997) into the early hours of the course, so that students with literacy problems can be identified and assisted.

Two colleagues devoted much time to devising an online plagiarism quiz that allows students to test (and re-test) their understanding of plagiarism as concept and practice. For teachers, the quiz serves as a means of eliminating student protests of ignorance. Helping students put this knowledge into practice, in particular academic and journalistic contexts, remains a problem for individual teachers, course curricula, assignments and assessment to address.

For myself, caught on the hop by the huge discrepancy between my expectations and the reality of competency in both literacy in English and western journalistic conventions, I had to adjust the course as it went. What were to be magazines made for an Australian readership, became broadened to allow Asian students to produce for markets more familiar to them. I had Chinese supplements to Australian magazines; magazines conceived for international students in Australia; and one brilliant magazine about Asian youth culture pitched to a global urban Asian youth readership. It was a small concession to the original plan, but the students responded positively.
Although many of my students’ English was poor, written literacy was only one element of the assessment. Students were also assessed on concept, marketing plan, commercial feasibility, cover design, feature layout, branding, content ideas, appropriate images and advertising… all assessment criteria that did not require advanced literacy in English. Some students, who had almost failed the written component of the course, did extremely well.

Under the influence of the Worldmarks research and Hall’s specific pedagogic suggestions, I am currently re-designing the course outline to highlight the value of bringing specific cultural literacies into the classroom, both for international and local students. (And for myself. While I have a fair understanding of journalistic and magazine practices in the West, my knowledge of non-English journalistic culture is minimal. Another learning curve.) Plagiarism and attribution practices, especially for journalism, will be discussed early in the course, accompanied by many short exercises and feedback. Writing assignments will proceed through a staggered and supervised process of research plan, structure, and draft. Any pieces of written work that require interviews must be accompanied by full transcripts. But these suggestions clearly involve time.

It seems that time is partly both the problem and the answer. In a recent essay on Our Future Thinkers for The Monthly, Drusilla Modjeska writes about the lack of time, of ‘spaciousness’, in both the academy and in publishing now.

Learning happens in relationships, in the space between two people at different points on the same path… You don’t learn journalism, and you don’t learn to write in the classroom, unless you’re exceptionally lucky and are taught by someone who has a confident voice beyond the pack, and who also has the time (that rare commodity) to sit with you, page by page (2006: 46).

Immersed in the burgeoning literature around plagiarism, one irony became obvious. In the contemporary tertiary culture of job insecurity, casualisation, large class sizes, and the demand to publish at any cost (even if it involves self-plagiarising or writing articles that barely contribute to the development of a field), time for students is not a priority. Yet academics, pressured to spend time on research and publication rather than teaching, publish articles and books about students who respond with academic dishonesty to this evacuation from teacher-student engagement. Identity is constructed in relationships: teacher/student. If our students plagiarise, then what is it about our teaching or the context in which we now teach, that allows, perhaps even encourages, this to happen?

There is another irony in play too. The time we don’t have for individual engagement with students during our courses, is more than compensated by the time it takes to investigate plagiarism towards the end. We invest time in proving ‘criminality’ but not enough time in trying to prevent academic dishonesty in the first place. Time is not the only solution, but surely it is one of them.

References


Megan le Masurier is a Lecturer, completing her PhD on popular feminism and Cleo magazine.

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The ITL Welcomes a New Director: Professor Keith Trigwell

I am delighted to be a part of the group of people that make up the University of Sydney’s Institute for Teaching and Learning, and whose work you see featured in this publication. For the last six years I have been at the University of Oxford where, as a Reader in Higher Education I was asked to investigate the learning experience of Oxford students. It was a task I approached with some enthusiasm, as the chance to explore the views of this comparatively secret society (the collegiate undergraduate system) with the support of (some of) the colleges, was an opportunity not to be missed. While there were a few surprising differences between the Oxford and Sydney undergraduate systems, it was the extent of similarity that was most surprising. As at Sydney, students’ perceptions of their learning environment are related to their approaches to learning, and one of the biggest barriers to quality learning is the students’ perceptions of their workload.

I became interested in the position of Director of the Institute for Teaching and Learning, in part, because of the reputation of the ITL. It is, without any doubt, an international leader in student learning-focused, research informed academic development. The University of Oxford is using ideas and practices developed here, and academic development practice in different parts of the world is benefiting from an analysis of the way things are done at Sydney. I intend to build on these strengths and consolidate this external reputation. All academic staff in the Institute are research active and we use this research, as well as research conducted elsewhere, in work with members of the University community aimed at enhancing and assuring the quality of teaching and learning. What the ITL offers the University of Sydney are ways of capturing best practice in teaching and disseminating those ideas through combinations of discipline-based and cross-disciplinary discussions. The Institute has three main approaches – a comprehensive student feedback system (SCEQ and USE) to monitor best practice, substantial courses on aspects of academic practice (on teaching and supervision) and Strategic Working Groups focused on exploring enhanced practice in a small number of topical areas. For more information, visit our website at http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au which describes these approaches, including the Institute’s unique blend of teaching and research.

Learning and Teaching Alumni Chapter

The Learning and Teaching Alumni Chapter (LTAC), established by the ITL in 2005, met in September to discuss the NSW Quality Teaching Awards. Past winners of the Awards shared their personal experiences, following some guiding words from Dr Norman McCulloch of the Australian College of Educators. Our Alumni will be holding their next meeting towards the end of the year, so keep an eye on the home page at http://itl.usyd.edu.au/community/alumni.htm. We will be advising our members soon of the forthcoming meeting topic and details.

Principles and Practice Program (3 day program)

Three academic staff members from Nagoya University have enrolled in the ITL’s 3-day program in November, with five staff from Moore Theological College in Sydney enrolled in the February program. Moore College is now requiring most of their new staff to complete the ITL’s program, and the Japanese contingent is evidence of the program’s international reputation. The ITL runs this important program three to four times a year, sometimes with as many as 70 of our own University staff attending. Further information available at http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/programs/3day/.

Call for Presentations ITL Seminars 2007

Would you like to propose a seminar for our 2007 series? Each semester the ITL hosts a series of fortnightly seminars showcasing research scholarship and development activities in university learning and teaching. We welcome scholarly presentations from interested, research-active colleagues and developers at USyd and at other universities. Alumni and graduates of our Higher Education teaching and learning programs are encouraged to consider presenting on scholarly work they have presented or published of late. Visit our current seminars website at: http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/community/researchsem.htm, or email Kim: k.mcshane@itl.usyd.edu.au.
A PhD for the ITL!

Congratulations to Dr Kim McShane, who in recent months completed her PhD thesis entitled *Technologies Transforming Academics: Academic identity and online teaching*. Kim investigated some of the implications for lecturer identity of being, or becoming, a “facilitator” of online student learning. In the early stages of her study, Kim noted: 1. a “silence” surrounding teaching per se in recent policy on learning (and teaching) in Australian higher education, 2. the dominance of “the student focus” in much current learning (and teaching) research that tends to erase the teacher, and 3. a naïve hostility toward the “untechnologised” lecturer and other so-called “traditional practices” in the literature on ICT-enhanced learning (and teaching).

These insights led Kim to conduct an empirical research project exploring the teaching experiences of twelve university lecturers who taught online, or were making the move online. She organized the critical, interpretative analysis of the data according to three common, sacred lecturer identities: the teaching metaphors of performance, care and creative direction. From the perspective of each metaphor position, the move to becoming a facilitator of blended learning was uneasy.

The findings suggest that the teaching values and practices of the performing/caring/directing lecturer, in particular lecturer-student responsiveness and reciprocity, do not adapt to online pedagogies. Lecturers in the study became bystanders and “voyeurs” to online student learning, and they were “de-responsibilised” of their relationship with/to their students, exemplifying “the end of obligated relations to others” (Readings, 1996) in university learning and teaching. While not dismissing online teaching, most participants preferred the spontaneous, proximate contexts of face-to-face teaching for the conduct of critical analysis and reflection, collaborative debriefing, and for pedagogical processes that challenge and “draw out” learners. It would seem then that blended teaching, that combines both online “witnessing” and face-to-face intervening, establishes the transitional conditions for a new, emerging moral order in the ethical relations between university learners (and teachers?).

IS-SoTL Conference 2007

This year Christine Asmar and Tai Peseta have been active members of the Program Committee for the 2007 conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) Conference. The 2007 conference will be held at the University of New South Wales, and is co-sponsored by the University of Sydney. Interest is high among our own ‘teaching scholars’, including past and present participants in the ITL’s Graduate Certificate, and we expect that a very strong contingent from this University will be presenting their scholarly work on teaching and learning in the disciplines.


Bringing together Learning Outcomes & Graduate Attributes

The Generic Graduate Attributes (GGA) Working Group is currently focusing on assessment, beginning with looking at ways of refining and developing effective learning outcomes. Good learning outcomes are a pre-cursor to effective learning and teaching activities. Our aim is to help people write better learning outcomes formulated in consultation with others - past and present students as well as academic and professional colleagues. To this end, faculties are holding a series of workshops or discussions (often within existing learning and teaching events). The overall focus of this series of discipline-specific workshops is to support academics in developing learning outcomes for existing units of study which integrate the graduate attributes. Faculties are working at different levels, as appropriate for each disciplinary context and stage of development or in accord with existing change processes.

Visit the GGA website at: http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/graduateattributes/
This paper describes an innovative method used to enhance student learning and collegiality through the use of student-generated multiple choice questions (MCQ). The unit of study in which these developments have been applied is *Advanced Financial Reporting* (ACCT 6010), which is a Faculty of Economics and Business postgraduate award unit of study. This development follows research by Brink et al. (2004) who document a positive link between quality of student-developed model examinations and final examination scores. Traditionally, we observe the use of teacher-written MCQ as an assessment device to provide feedback on students’ performance. We also have used student-written MCQ to achieve four additional benefits. First, in designing the scope and content of the set of MCQ for a topic, each team of students is directed to focus on the teacher specified learning objectives and are able to better identify the links between the topic learning objectives and material in the text and course pack. Second, as a key part of the learning process, the writing task leads students to ask “what are the important concepts and/or methods related to this topic?” Third, the task of writing MCQ may improve students’ test taking strategies. While the authors of questions focus on the guidelines we provide to writing MCQ questions, these same guidelines to writing MCQ questions can in many cases be ‘mapped’ to guidelines in answering MCQ.

Finally, as the unit of study has several streams (classes), we have been able to assemble a student developed practice test bank, comprising of a selection of questions on each topic. This article documents the motivation for this strategy and explains how it can be adopted by other teachers.

**Motivation**

Given the pace of change of accounting regulation, the ability of teachers to use the test banks that frequently accompany the overseas and more popular local accounting texts also is often limited. Questions quickly become out of date with references to obsolete regulations, specifying accounting techniques that are no longer applied, providing data in a format that is obsolete. In addition, over time answers change and answer keys can become incorrect. In contrast, student-written multiple choice questions will by nature be up to date provided of course that the teacher and the unit of study materials provided to students are up-to-date with relevant current regulations and developments in theory and research.

Whilst multiple-choice questions are widely used in examinations, they have been subject to a variety of criticisms. One significant criticism of their use in business units of study is that many business problems rely on managers identifying what the feasible alternatives actually are as well as choosing the most appropriate alternatives from amongst those identified. In contrast to the nature of decision making, multiple-choice type examinations require students to make a selection from a set of alternatives provided to them – usually developed by the teacher. One approach designed to address this deficiency is to allocate the question-writing task to students so as to engage them more fully in the process of problem solving. This assists them to develop an understanding of not only a preferred solution to a problem but importantly, requires them to identify a series of plausible alternatives. As part of the process of constructing the question, students develop explanations as to why each of the plausible alternatives (distracters) is either incorrect or at least inferior to the preferred alternative. This should assist in developing skills in problem solving and choosing from amongst a number of alternatives.

Through the process of developing alternate plausible solutions, the groups of students may broaden their understanding of a concept beyond the simple “right” answers to consider the variations in the meaning of a concept, and the interrelationships between them. Further, the process of developing multiple choice questions encourages students to distinguish between views/methods that represent good and poor understanding of a concept or its application.

A further practical advantage of student-written questions is that they are replaced by new sets every semester, unlike the test banks provided by publishers. At no great cost to the teacher, this allows students to keep the test paper and to reflect on their responses to each question. This leads to more useful feedback, particularly (as in accounting units of study) where an incorrect answer to a numerical question could be caused by a large number of different reasons.
A further pedagogical advantage is that it ensures a better matching between the teacher-developed learning objectives for each topic and the multiple choice test items than will the use of standardised test banks. This will provide more relevant feedback to both the students and the teacher in relation to the extent to which the learning goals are being met.

**How it works**

The unit of study is divided into streams comprised of approximately 50 students. The different streams have a common unit of study outline and identical assessment tasks. Different topics are taught by different teachers, based partly on the research interests and experience of the teachers on the course. Thirteen groups of three or four students were formed and students self-selected into groups for the task. We allowed students to form their own groups in order to minimise the problems arising from difference in timetables, language, and cultural factors. In other units of study, groups are formed by the teacher so that students develop a capacity to work with and learn from those from diverse backgrounds.

On the day prior to each class, an email message is sent to a selected group advising them that they will be asked to write questions on the topic to be covered in class the following day. This notice is given in advance of the class so that students can consider questions that might be based on the class discussion and activities as well as the material from the text and readings pack. To reduce the administrative burden, emails to student groups are sent in batches every three or four weeks and the messages are held by the email system (Outlook) until the designated day and time for dispatch. Students have seven days from the date of the email (six days from the date of the class where the topic is first addressed) to write questions on the allotted topic and submit the assignment electronically using the Blackboard site. The assignment is submitted one day prior to class in which the questions will be answered by the other students in the group.

Each group is required to prepare between six and eight to allow for variation in the time required to answer individual questions. Students are advised to prepare a quiz that could be completed in ten minutes. If the majority of students within the stream cannot complete the quiz within this time, the teacher allows extra time so that enough answers were obtained to each question to draw conclusions.

Students are told that the teachers will not edit the questions to correct perceived problems in the questions or the responses (alternatives). This includes possible cases of ambiguities in the question, more than one correct answer, no correct answer or errors in the answer key. The only editing done by the teachers is to insert or remove page breaks prior to printing where necessary. This approach avoids disputes that might arise from teacher changes – such as providing different groups with different levels or type of assistance.

The student-written questions are answered by other students in the stream following the session in which the related material was initially addressed. This approach allows students the time necessary to complete the required reading and personal study questions assigned for the related topic. The weekly review questions also serve to further encourage students to keep up-to-date with reading and study activities. The multiple-choice questions are attempted by other students in the section and are allowed a fixed amount of time determined by the teacher. Students record their answers on a standard answer sheet and also on the question paper. At the end of the quiz, students hand in their answer sheets and retain a copy of the test paper.

Immediately following each test, students are provided with the answer key as advised by the authors of the questions. This provides students with immediate feedback. We also encourage students to discuss other answers – which provides lecturers with feedback about the areas where students experience most...
difficulty. Informal feedback is also provided to the authors of
the questions. This is always a good opportunity to discuss the
material with students who often do not interact with faculty
staff in small groups.

Where we considered it necessary, comment was made on the
answers provided by students. Our experience is that there are
rare cases where one or more of the answer keys were incorrect.
One of the reasons for this is that assignments are prepared on
a group basis and discussed within the group, or “trial sat” by
other students in the group. Questions tend to be unambiguous
and evidence in relation to this is sourced from data on the
percent of correct answers. This is discussed further below in
the context of assessment.

Assessing the MCQs
Completion of the question writing task resulted in the award
of up to five marks towards each student’s unit of study total.
There are a number of ways in which questions could be
ranked: individual questions themselves; originality; degree of
difficulty; and the extent to which the questions related to the
learning objectives to the topic. In the case of the questions
as a set, consideration could be given to the breadth of cover-
age, depth of coverage (e.g., using Bloom’s taxonomy or the
‘revised taxonomy’ (Anderson et al., 2001)), and time required
to complete the questions.

The student questions are graded based on two criteria: link
to topic and the percentage of correct peer responses. The
first criterion was included to discourage questions based on
prior topics (unless linked to a later topic) or material that
might be covered in the related textbook chapter but explicitly
excluded from coverage in the unit of study. The second cri-
terion serves a number of functions. A low percentage correct
(normally) penalises for an incorrect answer key, more than
one correct answer and questions which are too difficult. A
very high percentage of correct responses was also penalised. It
might be argued that the questions are trivial in nature or the
distracters provided were not designed well enough to allow
for common alternative approaches or minor variations in a
concept or method.

In terms of grading questions in relation to the percentage
of correct responses, we set wide boundaries and considered
acceptable cases where the percentage of correct responses to a
question falls in the range 30%-80% inclusive. Table 1 below
provides a summary of the scores for this task.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Relative Frequency (%)</th>
<th>Cumulative Frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.23</td>
<td>7.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13.07</td>
<td>20.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>22.88</td>
<td>43.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>56.21</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean: 4.25
Median: 5.00

Student-written MCQs can also be utilised to generate practice
question sets for use by students as part of their preparation for
examinations. Prior to the date of the mid-semester and final
examinations, the unit of study teachers assemble test banks
from the sets of student-designed questions. Questions were
selected to provide a breadth of coverage of the topic and to
provide a similar degree of difficulty to the set of questions
written by teachers for the examination. Completion of these
revision tests enabled students to identify topics or methods
that require further attention prior to the examinations.

Students were able to access these practice sets via the unit of
study web page. This becomes viable where a unit of study is
taught in streams and students agree to share questions across
streams. It further enhances teamwork and provides a sense of
unit of study coherence which can feel divided by the streaming
process. This also allows students to review topics in which they
had not performed well, based on earlier feedback including the
in-class multiple choice questions.

Conclusions
The innovation used in this unit of study, to use student-written
multiple choice questions, was well received by students as a
means of providing a more active approach to learning as well as
improving their ability to analyse and respond to multiple choice
questions used in examinations. The approach encourages students to
focus on the learning objectives of the individual topics covered in the unit of study and the links
between these objectives and the material covered in the text.

The development of questions also led students to consider
a variety of possible solutions to accounting problems and
possible subtle variations of meanings of concepts and their
application.

The advantages of using student written rather than teacher
written questions needs to be balanced with the extra time
required to administer the processes involved in communi-
cation with students and assessment. If the quizzes are to
be used in class, another approach might be to use current
infra-red devices which will eliminate paperwork from the
administration of the test. However, to a large extent, many
of the processes that have been employed could be undertaken
using online tests that are completed outside of class time.
This could be enhanced by the use of online discussion boards
and dedicated forums which could enable students to discuss other
possible answers.

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Choice Test Items: What are Textbook Authors Telling Teachers?

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The Digital Cultures Program in the Faculty of Arts offers a BA (Digital Technology and Culture) degree and a major in Digital Cultures for those undertaking undergraduate degrees in the Faculties of Arts and Science. One of the learning outcomes for students is to develop critical understandings of contemporary information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the context of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences scholarship. We have been piloting the use of student blogs in assessment tasks in two undergraduate units of study: ARIN 2610: Web Production and ARIN 2620: Cyberworlds, with class sizes of which range from 50-70 students. Students in our classes require no prior knowledge of the web beyond the ability to use search engines and email. We decided to trial the use of blogs to see whether the less formal, more conversational tone of blogs could assist students to develop their own ‘voice’ in debates around key issues in our units of study, and to promote the online sharing of resources and exchange of ideas. We have found that the use of blogs has been very successful and we are currently implementing curriculum changes to take further advantage of blogging possibilities for enhanced student learning.

In this paper we firstly outline the advantages of blogs for the promotion of a deep approach to learning and the specific uses of blogs in our units of study. The second part of the paper discusses students’ responses to the assessment and includes our reflection upon the insights gained in relation to the processes of learning.

What are blogs?

Blogs are a form of micro-publishing and simple way to author for the web. Blogging began as a medium for the publication of online personal diaries, or logs, but has now become one of the simplest ways to engage students in sharing knowledge and resources, promote collaborative activities, and encourage reflection and debate. Blogs consist of a series of time-stamped postings listed in reverse chronological order; that is, the latest posting appears at the top. Usually readers can add comments. Often blog postings take the form of an annotated reference where the author comments on an online resource they have found. By posting a hyperlink to the resource, subsequent bloggers can read the article before joining the discussion.

In order to encourage a sense of online community amongst student bloggers and to facilitate easy access for reading and commenting upon others’ blogs, two approaches were taken.

One was to create a directory or list of all blogs so that students could find each other’s blogs. The other approach was to set up a ‘planet aggregator’. This automatically combines a short summary of recent postings into a single page, so that students are able to find new postings easily. This acts as a barometer of the blogs, giving an overall sense of the amount of blogging activity as well as the topics that were generating student interest.

Why use blogs?

Blogs have many uses to enhance student learning in higher education: as forms of reflective journals for individual and collaborative learning activities, as learning diaries during internships and postgraduate research, and as fora for debates around key articles. Blogs assist in the development of students’ deep approaches to learning in several ways. Since blogs usually incorporate a hyperlink to a text, they encourage collaboration through the sharing of links to online resources, and building a set of resources related to particular issues and debates. This provides a learning environment which encourages revisiting and rethinking key articles and an opportunity for students to engage with others and be able trace one’s development of thought about a topic.

One of the main aims for both of us was to assist students to develop their own ‘voice’ in key debates. Having a voice involves the ability to develop and defend one’s informed opinion; blogging ‘forces students to confront their own opinions and contemplate how their views might be interpreted and reflected upon by others’” (Mortenson & Walker, 2002, cited in Williams & Jacobs, 2004:235). Students created online identities and developed their own voice in ways that had to make sense to other members of the learning community. We had anticipated that some students may hesitate, if not resist, the idea of ‘going public’ but we found this was not the case; indeed, students were excited and keen to have their own ‘15 megabytes of fame’ on the internet. They personalised their
Blogs allow students to experiment with different voices and tones of writing.

Student feedback
It was evident that students appreciated the assessment task as being relevant to their lives:

The format of a blog essay made it exciting, more like a real world thing than a traditional essay. Open topics, relevant to what’s happening on the net TODAY... in the world TODAY.

It was a practical way of learning about the culture/politics of the web. It was a pain free intro to HTML.

Students who had preconceived (usually negative) notions of blogs reconsidered their assumptions.

It got me to think about blogs in a different way, like a kind of journalism instead of some self-indulgent exercise for people with no social skills.

The fact that you were able to work at home and post things up as you completed them was definitely a bonus. It was also good to be able to see what others had done and to comment. It just provided greater engagement.

Cyberworlds (Christine’s experience)
The content of the Cyberworlds curriculum included themes: online representation and expression of self, online identity and online communities. Learning outcomes involve the demonstration of critical analysis, online research skills and the online engagement with peers as part of a learning community. Students were asked to construct their own blog, and write three blog postings, the content of which relates to issues discussed in classes. The first posting (of no less than 500 words) consisted of a review of an online article of scholarly merit, and two blog postings (no less than 250 words each) which commented on others’ reviews. Guidelines for the article review are provided, as are criteria for marking.

Students’ postings suggest that the informal, conversational tone they adopted in blogs allowed them to make connections with their own experience. Many blog postings included an analysis (‘informed opinion’) of the article which revealed students’ capacity to reflect upon past learning and experiences, and revise them in light of what they have learnt by participating in the unit. ‘Joe’, for example, connects past learning with a topic initiated by another student’s blog:

‘Hamish’ chose to review an article on ‘cyberpunks’. His blog involved a description and analysis of the article in the context of a long and engaging narrative about his experiences in market research at a call centre. As many did, he enticed readers to his review by using conversational style:

The last bit (of the article) I found to be the most enlightening... ‘kate’ did a good job of drawing a relationship between Bourdieu’s theories of power and field – theories that I was briefly acquainted with last year but had conveniently forgotten – and the notion of a new model of power in cinematic relations, between producer and consumer.

Later he writes:

The last bit (of the article) I found to be the most enlightening and much more refreshing... [the author] talks about the move to an information and service-oriented society. He remarks that the future will no longer be about what we know but how we find the appropriate knowledge....

And later:

So here’s the twist. I got this article from an e-journal, Cybersociology, for social-science researchers. It even had references at the end. Then I looked up some of the mentioned Newsgroups. There was so much overlap in all the texts! Am I learning Cyberpunk Lesson Number One – Finding the Importance and Reliability of Information?"
As well as fulfilling the requirements of the assessment, many students began posting to their blog to communicate about themselves. This gave me a great deal of insight into the lives of students – their activities and interests, as well as the way they approach fulfilling assessment tasks. ‘Helen’ writes:

So it’s Sunday afternoon and I’m being the procrastinator extraordinaire….never mind that there’s an impending 60% essay due very soon in (name withheld), not to consider that I shall have to do a presentation on (name withheld). No, instead I’m lucid dreaming, and blogging….. I’ve been reading other people’s blogs… I have a story to tell but I question whether our Super Cyber Wielder of Justice – our marker – will find it appropriate. So I’m just going to talk about how long I’ve found things lately…..

Students’ comments upon others’ reviews included agreeing and adding new perspectives or insights, with hyperlinks to similar articles, to ‘informally challenging’ and outlining an alternative analysis, and generally engaging with peers in a conversational tone. ‘Gay’ had already completed her assessment; she subsequently writes to another student blogger:

…so when I came across your blog I was truly surprised … and, of course, just had to comment… I thought it would be interesting to compare how different our reviews were. How different our responses to the article were!! – my main points were about the unrealistic expectations of romance online, and the idea of being able to survey a large quantity of potential mates/dates…you can view my blog at (web address withheld). I noticed you summed up the article with more relevance and precision than I did, but what I found most interesting about your review was your emphasis on gender. I agree the advice is stereotypical. Is the way to every man’s heart really through his stomach? Do women all really want/need another pair of shoes? What are we really saying here? Are online dating services perpetuating more traditional myths/stereotypes of gender?

I was particularly encouraged to continue to develop a learning community in future classes by the small but noticeable incidence of frank disclosure and self-assessment, evidenced in Gay’s comment: ‘You summed up the article with more relevance and precision than I did’. Gay’s comments were not uncommon in the (non assessed) blog postings. Several such postings were made before the assessment task was submitted, with the knowledge that the marker will read all postings.

Our reflections

Blogging is an editable medium where students are able to keep editing their posts after an assessment deadline. In order to “fix” the text, students were expected to submit their assessable postings as hard copy printed on paper.

In developing a blogging assessment task, it is important to consider that students are authoring in a shared space that other students in the class are encouraged to access. At first glance this may arouse concerns relating to plagiarism. In Web Production students were encouraged to develop their own individual topic of inquiry. Oravec (2003:225) suggests that “individuals can develop an individualized voice that can reflect facets of their personal style and idiosyncratic intellectual approaches. Fostering such a voice may offset pressures to plagiarize materials or to withdraw in academic or personal discussions”.

With more conventional Discussion Boards, students’ writing is often scattered across a number of forum threads. With blogs a student’s writing builds up in one common location to form a body of text. It would be useful to investigate further how this might influence the students’ sense of ownership of their writing.

While often blogs have an informal tone, there are also examples of blogs that have a more rigorous and scholarly tone. Blogs allow students to experiment with different voices and tones of writing. Our motivations for incorporating blogs into these units were to provide a more conversational, informal learning forum for students to explore their ideas with others and to provide an opportunity for the development of skills in critical thinking and analysis. There are some situations where it may be more appropriate for student blogs not to be publicly accessible. Indeed in some circumstances, the use of a blog as a reflective journal for a student undertaking an internship at a workplace, or for students reflecting on group dynamics, it would be appropriate for only individual students and their teachers to have access. Feedback from students has encouraged us to pursue the use of blogs in these classes.

Blogs foster the development of communities where learners can engage in the process of recommending and referring others to significant articles as well as developing their own voice as part of their online identity. We propose that blogging offers the opportunity to observe students’ learning processes and may offer new ways to understand, evaluate and assist the development of student-created knowledge.

References


John Tonkin is an internationally recognised digital artist who is currently researching contemporary and historical metaphors of subjectivity and identity. Christine Crowe’s research interests include online identity and ‘Generation Y’. She is a recipient of several teaching awards: Faculty of Arts Teaching Excellence, Teaching Initiative Awards and in 2004, the Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Outstanding Teaching.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

2007 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (IS-SoTL) Conference

From July 2-5 the University of Sydney is to co-host the 4th annual IS-SoTL conference with the University of NSW. Held at the UNSW campus, the theme for next year’s conference is Locating Learning: Integrative Dimensions of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. The theme is intended to cover wide terrain and looks at three in particular:

• Perspectives: the multiple points of view we bring to the understanding and development of the scholarship of teaching and learning

• Pathways: the different ways that the scholarship of teaching and learning is developed

• Change: the impact of the scholarship of teaching and learning on students, academics, institutions; and what constitutes evidence of change and/or impact

The conference promises to be an exciting forum for those who have been working to develop the scholarship of teaching and learning, and those interested in how to develop it. Conference participants will be able to exchange and test their ideas about learning and teaching with an international audience of disciplinary-based colleagues and to learn about initiatives going on elsewhere.

The IS-SoTL conference will also host the launch of a new book edited by Angela Brew (ITL) and Judyth Sachs (PVC Learning and Teaching)—a book that showcases the work of the University of Sydney in developing the scholarship of teaching and learning. Several colleagues from across the university have contributed chapters to the book and its launch promises to be one of the conference highlights.


University Farewells
PVC (Learning & Teaching)
Professor Judyth Sachs

Before the year is over, the university will say farewell to PVC (Learning and Teaching) Professor Judyth Sachs. After 10 years at the university, 4 of those years as Chair of Academic Board and 3 years as PVC (L&T), Professor Sachs takes up the position of Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Provost) at Macquarie University.

"During her time both as Chair of the Academic Board and also as PVC (Learning and Teaching), Judyth has been a tireless supporter of good quality teaching and learning. One of her key achievements as Chair of the Academic Board was the establishment of the Faculty Reviews. In identifying areas of good practice and areas needing improvement, these reviews have greatly assisted the ITL in its work to support the faculties in learning and teaching and in their efforts to improve the student learning experience. Our own ITL reviews have also been positive and valuable experiences. As PVC (Learning and Teaching) Judyth has utilised her expertise in professional education to bring people together in collegial forums for discussion of learning and teaching issues and strategies. She been an invaluable supporter of ITL work and we wish her well in her new position."  
Associate Professor Angela Brew

Learning and Teaching Plan
2007-2010

The University has a new Learning and Teaching Plan 2007-2010. The Plan is founded on a core set of values:

• Excellence: of students, learning environments and learning experiences
• Intellectual inquiry
• Academic freedom
• Diversity of defensible opinions and values, and
• Integrity and ethical practice in academic endeavours

It can be downloaded at http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning/planning/uni_plan.shtml. To find out all the latest information about Learning and Teaching in the University, visit http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning/
Learning & Teaching Symposium: Curriculum Reform and Renewal

On 3 November, the Office of the PVC (Learning and Teaching) hosted the third of its seminars on curriculum reform and renewal. The symposium was an opportunity to showcase institutional achievements in curriculum change.

In her opening remarks, Professor Sachs noted how changes to the higher education sector were strong drivers in shaping the nature of curriculum reform. She noted that widening access, professional accreditation, inclusivity, audit and accountability measures and competition/differentiation were now all part of the learning and teaching environment. Professor Sachs also observed how the Academic Board policy to standardize units of study to six credit points provided opportunities for conversation about workload, equity and assessment. Professor Richard James, Director of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, then gave a presentation on what has become known as the 'Melbourne Model'. Of some interest were his comments about a compulsory 25% breadth-component across all the new generation degrees. This is the idea that 25% of the learning experience in the undergraduate curriculum will derive from a content area different from the degree major. Professor James also spoke at length about the curriculum change from three distinct perspectives: pedagogical, political, and market and logistical.

The remainder of the day was devoted to discussing the substance of curriculum change, reform and renewal within the university. Colleagues from the faculties of Arts, Economics and Business, Engineering, Conservatorium, Veterinary Science, Dentistry, Health Sciences and Pharmacy each presented on the on-going work in their contexts to drive curriculum change. What seemed clear from each of their examples were the following: the need to examine the rationale for change; how it might achieve a multiplicity of outcomes; the importance of strong leadership from Deans; the resourcing of curriculum change; its implementation from consultation, discussion and communication; and attending to the emotional costs and labour.

In summation, Professor Keith Trigwell, Director of the ITL, argued that the perspectives raised during the day provided different lenses through which to view curriculum reform and renewal. Firstly, is the idea that curriculum might be seen as an expression of the university’s identity; secondly, it might be seen as a site for the nexus between research and teaching; thirdly, that curriculum is also intended to be an expression of the students’ experience of learning, and finally, he addressed the difficult of work of implementation. In ending the day, Professor Trigwell encouraged those present to continue to articulate the pedagogical rationale that sits behind key change and reform mechanisms.

To view the resources from each of the presentations, visit http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning/quality/curriculum_reform.shtml

Upgrading to WebCT CE6

From January 2007, all WebCT sites at the university will be operating on CE6. The aim of the WebCT upgrade is to provide us with the capacity for greater capability, more flexibility and a more up-to-date learning management platform. Some changes you will notice after CE6 begins operating include tools that users have been asking for, such as:

- sign-up sheets;
- the ability for students to upload their own files into WebCT;
- better ways for staff to upload files.

Additionally, CE6 has other ‘backend’ advantages, and it will make it easier for the university to upgrade to new products that become available after the WebCT/Blackboard merger takes effect. Things are changing fast in the world of online education, and by upgrading the University learning management system we are ensuring that the quality of students’ online learning experience will not fall below the standards being established by the higher education sector in Australia and internationally.

Workshops will be held throughout November and December 2006, and January 2007. Further information available at http://www.usyd.edu.au/webct/teach_online/workshops/beg_ws.shtml
Talking
ASSESSMENT
standards
literacy
and reform
Assessment probably provokes more anxiety among students and irritation among staff than any other feature of higher education. It occupies a great deal of time that might otherwise be devoted to teaching and learning, and it is the subject of considerable debate about whether it is fair, effective, worth spending so much effort on. Assessment is a topic about which people have strong opinions, though whether those opinions are backed by what it is and how it works is less certain (Boud in Bryan & Clegg, 2006: xvii).

The conversation that follows here is an attempt to flesh out the complexity of assessment, and then to share ideas about ways of addressing that complexity. One example of this complexity is how we might assure assessment standards within and across units of study, course degree programs and at the institutional level. This discussion began at the Best Practice in Assessment & Student Feedback held in June earlier this year where, at that forum, Diane Collins, Mark Freeman and Jennie Hodgson gave a paper called ‘How academic communities assure assessment standards’ as members of the University’s Evaluation and Quality Assurance (EQA) Working Group. Even though they are each located in different faculties, and those faculties differ in size and scale, degree offerings and cohort of student, the challenges they face in considering assessment appear to be quite similar. In the first part of our discussion, we focus on student and staff experiences of assessment within their faculty contexts; in the second, we address the various drivers that influence decision-making about appropriate assessment; and in the final section, Diane, Mark and Jennie share a number of strategies they have been developing to enhance both their students’ and colleagues’ assessment literacy. What comes out in the conversation is the need to adopt an evidence-based approach to assessment reform.

Diane, Mark and Jennie are Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning) in the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, the Faculty of Economics and Business, and the Faculty of Veterinary Science, respectively.
Experiences of Assessment

Tai: I wonder if we might start by exploring the experience of assessment in your different contexts. We know from the literature that assessment is highly powerful in shaping student learning yet it can often be the last component that teachers think about and the first thing they point to in terms of their workloads. Could each of you say a little about the conversations happening about assessment from both the students’ and staff’s perspectives in your contexts?

Jennie: The conversations in our faculty have been driven by a curriculum review process which began about five years ago. That review process has helped us to think about a whole number of issues: learning outcomes, activities and aligning them with assessment. It’s been a good driver for considering the whole issue of standards-based assessment. That was some years ago now. More recently, our conversations have become more sophisticated. There’s been a strong emphasis in the faculty for variety in types and forms of assessment. And this has had workload implications for both staff and students. We’ve almost gone a bit too zealot-like and in some ways, we’re now over-assessing. So the conversations now are about re-evaluation and consolidation and looking at quality rather than quantity. We need to better align assessment as a whole in the faculty, as well as within whole years rather than focusing on individual units of study. We’ve needed to get better data about students’ experiences of assessment and workload so that we can tease out that connection more fully than is currently available through the Unit of Study Evaluations (USE) or the Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ).

Tai: And of course that’s a really difficult thing to do—getting a coherent sense of assessment when students can take optional units of study across several different course degree programs.

Mark: We looked at this same issue through the timetabling of our assessments over the year and it was a nightmare—impossible to coordinate! The feedback we get from students (from our Student Reference Group, from the USE and the SCEQ) has told the same story for a number of years. Not only is workload an issue but students aren’t clear about how much input ought to be associated with different assessment outputs. They’re saying that there are issues with group-work, that they don’t feel like they’re getting adequate feedback to inform their learning… so that’s about formative assessment. We’re slowly moving away from conversations that start with: “How do we stop plagiarism?” to “How do we help students develop the skills of good academic writing?” We’ve still got some way to go. Because we have such large numbers of students (for eg. 1600 in a first year unit), there are very real workload issues for staff—and that is causing us to think more creatively.

It is critical that we think through the aspects of assessment that are best as formative or summative, and what can be efficient as well as effective. Peer and self-assessment are examples worth considering.

Diane: In smaller faculties like the Conservatorium of Music, a lot of these procedures happen informally but of late, a lot of energy has gone into making them more formal, into codifying them. We’ve drawn up grade descriptors and are beginning to have more conversations around assessment criteria. We try to consult students along the way. A lot of our energy has gone into making assessment more efficient, particularly in relation to performance. We’re also trying to better align standards and practices across various units. The Con is not very large but it is very compartmentalized so there is an issue of consistency across, as well as within units. There is always the issue for us of very high numbers of casual staff and we are concerned to find ways of drawing our casual staff more closely into conversations about learning and teaching practice.

Tai: Diane, what do you think have been the effects of this work around assessment on students? What feedback are you getting from them?

Diane: I think students can see that assessment has a high priority at the Con. We’re really trying to work on improved models now. We’ve just completed an evaluation about 100% teacher assessment and sought student/staff opinion on that. I’d also like to have better mechanisms for student feedback. I want to develop the teaching and learning pages of the website so students can access what happening in committees and across the faculty more than they do now.

Mark: Just want to mention an interesting piece of research out of Oxford Brookes in the UK (http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learrntch/aup14pr.html#02). They took a degree program, a Bachelor of Statistics and added up the number of assessment tasks over the course of the degree and it came to 116 tasks. Then they ranked ordered the students degrees and then they took away a piece of assessment to see if it changed the degree classification and it didn’t and they had to get down to six pieces of assessment before it did. I like it because it gets people to think about how much assessment is necessary for a summative purpose— and how much for summative and can therefore be provided in other ways.

Jennie: Yes, I was floored by that figure of six, and am not sure if it would hold true for all university courses but I think that it provides a starting point for discussion in our Faculty as to how much summative assessment is really required and what its purpose is! At a meeting in our faculty on assessment and workload, we discovered that in one semester some students had 28 assessment tasks! Now, a lot are quite small but it still raises issues about whether we are over-assessing. I think that figure was driven in part by a perception that the university was driving us away from 100% exams so in responding to that, I...
Issues in assessment reform

Tai: An issue I've been thinking about is whether we are too wedded to the idea of needing to assess all students in the same way, using the same methods. I often mention that idea to academics in my own teaching and the messages I get from some quarters is that it is far too radical an idea. What do you all make of that idea in the light of assessment also needing to fulfill a credentialling function?

Jennie: We would have a hard time convincing our accrediting agencies that not assessing everybody in the same format would be fair, but maybe that's the whole problem. Maybe that's where the whole profession is lagging behind!

Mark: Oh, it can be very satisfying giving students choice from equivalent assessment. It's not easy though and a lot of people would be averse to that idea.

Tai: In our Graduate Certificate in the ITL, we have a total of three pieces of assessment that run across two units in our first semester and it always amazes me that some people want more assessment. Just the variation in what people desire as learners around assessment continues to surprise me.

Jennie: I gave that figure (6) to my group and they were adamant: “There's no way in the possible world that could we only assess six times and truly evaluate people!”

Diane: I think there is a strong desire to have more flexibility in assessment than there has been in the past but it needs some parameters. I think in music teaching, the teacher-student relationship can be particularly challenging because one-on-one relationships are extremely unusual in the university. There is quite a lot of sympathy at the Con to try and move away from such reliance on examinations. We aim to tailor the assessment processes to develop more autonomy in our students.

Mark: I think the reluctance in my faculty has to do with sheer numbers of students and therefore trying to ensure that the process has integrity and is of quality, that the students are treated fairly, is really key. And secondly, there is still some degree of cynicism about whether students would treat the process of something like self-assessment appropriately.

Tai: Just to change focus for a minute and shift to the development of criteria, standards and grade descriptors... It seems to me that a lot of what we're taking about in terms of the flexibility of different modes of assessment and the incorporation of self and peer assessment relies on a degree of clarity about what is being assessed. Could you each comment about the way a conversation about grade descriptors has been quite useful.

Mark: I came across this wonderful piece of research by Rust, Price and O’Donovan (2003) out of Oxford Brookes University where they've taken an evidence-based approach to the development of assessment criteria. They found that a 90 minute workshop with students, where they use the criteria to evaluate an exemplar task had a significant and lasting impact on students' abilities. We're going to embed this task in some of our core units of study. At Oxford Brookes, they've picked someone in each faculty who's going to try it.

Jennie: That's very interesting. Our work with grade descriptors has focused much more on staff development than on students' understandings. We've been trying to standardize our grade descriptors across units but we now need to engage our students as well. Because we have a relatively small cohort of students, we can look at their assessment across a variety of units and see how they perform. We have noticed large discrepancies between units of study in the number of students getting certain grades—so while we've been working towards developing our understanding of grade descriptors, and realize that there must be some variation—the variation we're getting has been more than might be expected. So as a faculty, our first task was to engage with the concept of grade descriptors and introduce them into all our units of study. Now we can say that we're not achieving as much cohesion in our grade descriptors across the Faculty as we would have liked and we now have data to show us that. So there's some revisiting to be done.

Mark: That's precisely what this Oxford Brookes research found. They spent all this time developing faculty-wide grade descriptors but they found that it was being used in some places and not in others. They also found that there was much greater success with those staff who adopted an active social constructivist approach. In that 90 minute workshop, the key part was when students said “Oh... so that's what you mean”. So the students first use the criteria to mark the exemplar assignments and then discuss that with their peers. Then, the tutor explains the criteria, and the students re-mark the exemplar assignment in small groups before the tutor goes through the actual criteria and marks, and provides the annotated assignments. It's just so good because students get to ask questions derived from their own understandings: “What's the difference between a 60 and a 75?”

Diane: At the Con, I put a lot of energy in the first few weeks talking to new students about assessment as a two-way process. Students need to realize that if they don't...
understand comments on their essays; or feel that an assignment is misjudged then they should actually go back and ask for explanation or elaboration. Students at the Con seem relatively reluctant to pursue a query about their assessment and I think it’s partly because of the nature of the music student/teacher relationship.

**Mark:** There’s another piece of research from England that looks at when to provide the tutor’s mark versus the peer and self-assessment feedback. This work found a clear benefit in getting students to engage in self-assessment first rather than have access to the tutor’s mark first. So, we need to find ways of making it easier for that to happen. We’re going to be trialing a process where students submit a self-assessment of their work according to the standards, alongside the assignment itself. Then, when it gets marked they can get a feel for how accurate the assessment of their own learning was. It’ll be automated through technology to reduce the logistics of the feedback loop.

**Jennie:** We’ve experimented too with self and peer assessment in a variety of our units and what we’ve found is that our students just don’t like, or value peer evaluation at all. It would appear that they think: “I’m not learning from this. I want to be learning from you telling me what to do”. Perhaps it’s partly to do with the way we’ve sold this form of assessment or it is just the competitive streak of our students.

**Tai:** There is something about developing a disposition for learning that should also be about caring for someone else’s learning too. It’s that idea of being responsible to, and for, each other isn’t it? It’s about helping students see that part of their learning too. It’s that idea of being responsible to, and for, each other.

**Diane:** One issue that was flagged at the last Learning and Teaching Committee meeting was the need for more information about what students mean in wanting more qualitative feedback. Again, there seems to be a lot of variation across the university on this issue. One question then might be looking at where that feedback needs to come from: teacher assessment or different forms of self and peer assessment?

**Mark:** A colleague at another research university recently told me that they were getting terrible scores on the feedback items in the Course Experience Questionnaire. They addressed it by explicitly saying to students: “This is feedback… I’m going to give you feedback now about how everybody went in their assignments. This is feedback. Here’s an online quiz for you to complete that is self-marked… This is feedback. These grade descriptors that you receive on your essays constitute feedback”. And the students’ responses improved because they saw they were getting feedback.

**Diane:** I also think there’s not enough discussion about how to provide feedback in ways that preserves the student’s self esteem, where you give them an incentive to develop, to rectify their errors and that doesn’t destroy them at the same time; that it is encouraging, realistic and tied into professional expectations.

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### Strategies for developing assessment literacy

**Tai:** I want to explore this idea of assessment literacy a little more. What are some of the strategies, projects or initiatives underway in your faculties that are systematic attempts to improve an understanding of assessment?

**Jennie:** We use a workshop model. We come together in groups to discuss issues. It’s about giving a sense that none of us need work in isolation.

**Diane:** We have an Annual Teaching Day where assessment is a standard issue. We also have a Teaching and Learning Newsletter. It’s important to have continual conversations about assessment. These other mechanisms are all good but one can’t completely undersell the informal processes–staff having conversations in the corridor, or discussing these issues with students in tutorials.

**Jennie:** These conversations have to become part of the whole culture and part of the set of expectations and responsibilities we have of teaching staff, don’t they? So Mark, what do you do in a big faculty like Economics and Business to try and get those conversations happening?

**Mark:** I couldn’t imagine 400 academics turning up at a workshop so I’m much more inclined to go with peer review processes. There’s some evidence from a UK-based survey of academics where they’ve asked: “Do you know about your central learning and teaching unit?” (Yes). “Do you use them?” (No). “Where do you go when you want some help?” (Office next door). It relates to all that literature about disciplinary tribes and cultures. So I’m keen to encourage peer review processes wherever possible. In terms of specific strategies, we have Learning and Teaching Associates (LTAs)–people from each discipline, and we meet once a month. So, when a question about assessment comes up in someone’s teaching, we hope they feel able to go to an LTA because they speak a similar disciplinary language. Second, we’re trying to provide people with the data and then the opportunity to have those conversations. We might make available data from the USE which allows staff to engage with students’ experiences of assessment, feedback or workload. We can say that this is the ‘mean’, this is the ‘interquartile range’ for this item in this discipline versus that; or for undergraduate versus postgraduates, or for first years etc. It’s really about making opportunities for
I’d like to see people take an evidence-based approach to their teaching which is what happens in research. Mark Freeman

Tai: I think there is a challenge too in that—which is to ensure that disciplines aren’t just reinforcing the same conversations or rehearsing the same habits about teaching and learning. Those conversations need to represent an element of challenge and new learning as well.

Jennie: In the Vet faculty, it’s been quite remarkable how similar the evaluation of our students has been by both our internal and external clinicians. And that’s very gratifying. At present, our professional body (which oversees accreditation of all Vet faculties in Australasia) is evaluating two new faculties of Veterinary Science. So there has been some initial discussion about whether we need a formal mechanism of final assessment for all our veterinary Faculties, as there has been in the United States. Even if this doesn’t eventuate, they will be asking us to be clear about what our standards are, and to provide evidence that we are achieving these standards. If we do introduce assessment at the end of the course degree program, it’s an important process for us to be involved in.

Mark: We’ve got our international accrediting agencies too. I would really like to see a process where a staff member says: “I want to check that my standards are OK. I’ll ring up my colleague down in Melbourne. Look, I’m sending this through... What do you think about the criteria?” And with standards too: “Here are some papers I’ve marked. Can you look at the standards?” Having that happen as a matter of course would be wonderful.

Two things we haven’t touched on very much are (a) scaling; (b) diversity in the student culture. Both those are real challenges for some academics to deal with. I get a bit horrified with some of the public statements being made about international students, who don’t understand the assessment requirements and who are doing all the plagiarizing. Comments like those need to be supported by evidence and that is not always the case. The second thing is scaling. Following Academic Board policy, our faculty made a decision to move away from scaling. And that’s quite a shift in culture. I’m sure colleagues are challenged by the idea because they’ve had to revisit what they’re doing. The point I always challenge people on is this: How fair is it to put someone down simply because they happen to be at that part of the bell curve? And similarly with pushing people up. I’ve been really impressed about how far we’ve come in that process.

Jennie: We don’t scale at all in our faculty and it has never been extensively used. However, one problem we are having since making our assessment criteria clearer, in providing better feedback and with having more diversity in assessment tasks, is that student grades have been gradually improving. This has resulted in more students achieving Honours within the Faculty and this has been a concern for the University. It is almost as if we were doing something wrong.

Diane: Well I think the university has to accept that the better we assess, the more detailed our criteria are, the better our grade descriptors are, the better the quality of feedback, that students’ results should improve. In fact, that’s exactly what we’re aiming for. The Con doesn’t scale, but it will occasionally moderate marks if it thinks that teachers have deviated too far.

Jennie: Especially when you have so many casual teachers.

Mark: And that’s why peer review is so important. Being able to say that a colleague down at Melbourne has reviewed my standards and assessment is additional leverage in securing the academic credibility of someone’s decision-making.

References

Of all four parts, it is the first Pedagogic content that instantly appeals—partly because it lays the groundwork for why change in assessment is necessary. Graham Gibbs’ chapters on this issue, particularly How assessment frames student learning make for easy and convincing reading. The second part Implementing feedback contains a number of chapters that put the importance of formative feedback squarely on the agenda. In doing so, each one asks whether we know if students find our feedback useful and how we can make it so that it contains opportunities to maximise their learning. Above all, I was taken by Evelyn Brown and Chris Glover’s chapter Evaluating written feedback because it asked me to revisit my own purpose in providing feedback and processes designed to address plagiarism. 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.

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 felt 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 related 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 a tool and set of procedures that has helped maintain the engagement with the standards for one type of assessment.

Bachelor 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 and grading of each section of the report. This is a simple matter of highlighting the relevant description of what they think the student has achieved and forms part of the feedback to students. Staff can also provide other written feedback to students, but since students have already fed forward their perceptions, this individualized feedback can be more efficiently targeted. In the example below, the student indicated that for Introduction, they did not think they had attempted to relate the experiment to a wider context. The staff assessment of this was different, and the written feedback could concentrate on this discrepancy in perception. Since student 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 paper-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 the feedforward of students’ self-assessment? Probably. In order to

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<th>Section</th>
<th>Fail</th>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Research Question and Context</td>
<td>Research question is not clearly stated.</td>
<td>States research question only or relates to an irrelevant context.</td>
<td>Research question is integrated into relevant literature and other research. Proper referencing.</td>
<td>Research question is integrated into relevant literature and other research. Properly and coherently explained.</td>
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<td>Materials and Methods</td>
<td>Only lists equipment used and/or a numbered “recipe” that was followed.</td>
<td>Equipment and arrangement described in such a way that the experiment could be repeated. Any significant safety issues highlighted.</td>
<td>As for Pass but reasons given for choices.</td>
<td>As for Credit but description of experiment indicates that it has been carried out with care.</td>
<td>As for Distinction but coherently and concisely explained.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Tables, Graphs and Analysis</td>
<td>Results clearly labeled and presented. Appropriately axes, headings, legends etc. Irrelevant data presented or data presented repetitively.</td>
<td>As for Pass but only relevant tables/values/graphs provided that are related to research question.</td>
<td>As for Credit but also implemented a thoughtful analysis of results, such as errors and distributions.</td>
<td>As for Distinction but also considered higher level analyses.</td>
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<td>Description</td>
<td>No, little or inaccurate description of results.</td>
<td>Description of main results.</td>
<td>Important trends in results indicated, particularly those related to research question.</td>
<td>Main features of results described as well as any other important trends or features of the results.</td>
<td>As for Distinction but coherently and concisely explained.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion and Conclusion</td>
<td>Experiment</td>
<td>Comments on the problems with the experiment.</td>
<td>Identifies particular ways that the experiment could be improved.</td>
<td>As for Pass and also suggests other relevant experiments.</td>
<td>As for Distinction but relates these aspects to the literature. Coherently and concisely explained.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Only restates or summarizes the results. No accurate connection between experimental findings and research question.</td>
<td>Connection made between results and research question.</td>
<td>As for Pass but relates results to a broader and relevant context.</td>
<td>As for Credit but integrated with relevant literature. Properly referenced.</td>
<td>As for Distinction but coherently and concisely argued.</td>
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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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Ian Cathers is a Lecturer in Health Sciences and is recipient of a Faculty Learning and Teaching Award. Ian has been Deputy Chair for Health Sciences Learning and Teaching Committee, and Associate Director for eLearning.

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<td><strong>Ideas in Cyberspace Education (ICE) 3</strong></td>
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<td><strong>JUNE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>18th International Conference on College Teaching and Learning</strong></td>
<td><strong>Spring Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) Conference</strong></td>
<td><strong>Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) Conference</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme: Strategies to Improve Online Learning</td>
<td>Theme: Exploring Enhancement in Further and Higher Education</td>
<td>Theme: Evolving Scholarship</td>
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<tr>
<td>2-5 April</td>
<td>10-11 May</td>
<td>13-16 June</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sawgrass Marriott Resort &amp; Spa, Florida, UNITED STATES</td>
<td>Marriott Hotel, Glasgow SCOTLAND</td>
<td>University of Alberta, Edmonton, CANADA</td>
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<td><strong>Postgraduate Supervision: The State of the Art and the Artists</strong></td>
<td><strong>Canadian Association for University Continuing Education (CAUCE) Conference</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teaching for a Change Conference</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>23-26 April</td>
<td>Theme: Portraits of Tomorrow: Landscapes, Learners, Leaders</td>
<td>Theme: A Celebration of Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centre for Higher and Adult Education, University of Stellenbosch SOUTH AFRICA</td>
<td>May 30-June 2</td>
<td>18-20 June</td>
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<td><a href="http://academic.sun.ac.za/chae/conf/index.htm">http://academic.sun.ac.za/chae/conf/index.htm</a></td>
<td>Westin Hotel, Edmonton, CANADA</td>
<td>The Canyons Resort, Park City, Utah, UNITED STATES</td>
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<td><strong>JUNE</strong></td>
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<td><strong>International Institute for New Faculty Developers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>18th International Conference on College Teaching and Learning</strong></td>
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<td>24-29 June</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme: Strategies to Improve Online Learning</td>
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<td>University of Ottawa, CANADA</td>
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<tr>
<td>2-5 April</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.uinfld.org">http://www.uinfld.org</a></td>
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