



Selecting methods of assessment

There is a wealth of assessment methods used in higher education to assess students' achievements, but how to choose?

The primary goal is to choose a method which most effectively assesses the objectives of the unit of study. In addition, choice of assessment methods should be aligned with the overall aims of the program, and may include the development of disciplinary skills (such as critical evaluation or problem solving) and support the development of vocational competencies (such as particular communication or team skills).

Hence, when choosing assessment items it is useful to have one eye on the immediate task of assessing student learning in a particular unit of study, and another eye on the broader aims of the programme and the qualities of the graduating student. Ideally this is something you do with your academic colleagues so there is a planned assessment strategy across a programme.

When considering assessment methods, it is particularly useful to think first about what qualities or abilities you are seeking to engender in the learners. Nightingale et al (1996) provide eight broad categories of learning outcomes which are listed below. Within each category some suitable methods are suggested.

1. Thinking critically and making judgements

(Developing arguments, reflecting, evaluating, assessing, judging)

- Essay
- Report
- Journal
- Letter of advice to... (about policy, public health matters...)
- Present a case for an interest group
- Prepare a committee briefing paper for a specific meeting
- Book review (or article) for a particular journal
- Write a newspaper article for a foreign newspaper
- Comment on an article's theoretical perspective

2. Solving problems and developing plans

(Identifying problems, posing problems, defining problems, analysing data, reviewing, designing experiments, planning, applying information)

- Problem scenario
- Group work
- Work-based problem
- Prepare a committee of enquiry report
- Draft a research bid to a realistic brief
- Analyse a case
- Conference paper (or notes for a conference paper plus annotated bibliography)

3. Performing procedures and demonstrating techniques

(Computation, taking readings, using equipment, following laboratory procedures, following protocols, carrying out instructions)

- Demonstration
- Role play
- Make a video (write script and produce/make a video)
- Produce a poster
- Lab report
- Prepare an illustrated manual on using the equipment, for a particular audience
- Observation of real or simulated professional practice

4. Managing and developing oneself

(Working co-operatively, working independently, learning independently, being self-directed, managing time, managing tasks, organising)

- Journal
- Portfolio
- Learning contract
- Group work

5. Accessing and managing information

(Researching, investigating, interpreting, organising information, reviewing and paraphrasing information, collecting data, searching and managing information sources, observing and interpreting)

- Annotated bibliography
- Project
- Dissertation
- Applied task
- Applied problem

6. Demonstrating knowledge and understanding

(Recalling, describing, reporting, recounting,

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recognising, identifying, relating & interrelating)

- Written examination
- Oral examination
- Essay
- Report
- Comment on the accuracy of a set of records
- Devise an encyclopaedia entry
- Produce an A – Z of...
- Write an answer to a client's question
- Short answer questions: True/False/Multiple Choice Questions (paper-based or computer-aided-assessment)

7. Designing, creating, performing

(Imagining, visualising, designing, producing, creating, innovating, performing)

- Portfolio
- Performance
- Presentation
- 'Hypothetical'
- Projects

8. Communicating

(One and two-way communication, communication within a group, verbal, written and non-verbal communication. Arguing, describing, advocating, interviewing, negotiating, presenting, using specific written forms)

- Written presentation (essay, report, reflective paper etc.)
- Oral presentation
- Group work
- Discussion/debate/role play
- Participate in a 'Court of Enquiry'
- Presentation to camera
- Observation of real or simulated professional practice

Variety in assessment

It is interesting to note that the eight learning outcomes listed above would be broadly expected of any graduating learner from a higher education programme. Yet, when choosing assessment items, we tend to stay with the known or the 'tried and true methods', because they seem to have the ring of academic respectability, or possibly because it was the way we were assessed as undergraduates ourselves.

From learners' perspectives, however, it often seems as if we are turning them into 'essay producing machines' or 'examination junkies'. When choosing methods it is important to offer variety to learners in the way they demonstrate their learning, and to help them to develop a well-rounded set of abilities by the time they graduate.

Adapted by Lee Dunn from: Morgan, Chris (1999) Southern Cross University, New South Wales, Australia. (Unpublished material for Southern Cross University booklet 'Assessing Students')

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