Thumbs Up! Thumbs Down! A 5-Step Assessment Approach to Enhance First Year Assessment Practice

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Abstract

Participants of FYHE Adelaide, step back in time to pass judgment on the Essays of Former First Year Law Students.   To help you in your decision, you'll be equipped with the learning objectives, evidence of different performance standards and levels and a clear criterion-referenced marking sheet and rubric.   But the decision is yours. Thumbs up? or Thumbs down?

In the ultimate in audience participation, attendees in this session will step into the shoes of a first year student facing their first assignment. In a fun and interactive way, you'll be taken step-by-step through a simple 5 step-assessment practice intended to give students the confidence, skills and approach needed to succeed in their studies.

The SIMPLE 5-step assessment approach

In higher education, assessment is the key to the curriculum. Assessment frames student learning and achievements, and significantly influences students' experience in higher education and all that they gain from it (Boud, 2010). In first year, in particular, assessment practices can contribute to normalizing the experience of higher education, and assist students with the skills they need for learning success.
The purpose of this session is to show how an assessment task can be successfully communicated to first year students through a simple 5-step process. This communication strategy is research-led, and implements the principles of excellent assessment from, inter alia, the 7 assessment propositions articulated by Boud (2010), the 11 principles of good assessment design by the Re-Engineering Assessment Practices in Scottish Higher Education (REAP) project (Nicol and Marfarlane-Dick (2006) and Gibbs and Simpson (2004)), the 7 principles of good feedback practice in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson (1991)) and the principles for effective assessment stated by James, McInnis and Devlin (2002).

The 5-step process in this session can be summarised in the acroymn SIMPLE:

1) **S** - Set assessment that guides and encourages effective approaches to learning (James, McInnes & Devlin 2002), focuses student on their learning (Boud, 2010), is scaffolded (Boud 2010), communicates high expectations (Chickering & Gamson 1987).

2) **I** - Implement and effectively communicate the assessment task to students including:
   - the articulation of explicit learning outcomes and student expectations (James, McInnes & Devlin 2002);

- the induction of students into the assessment practices and cultures of higher education (Boud 2010), including skills relating to study, methodology, research and referencing;
- the use of criterion referenced marking sheets distributed before, during and assessment task to allow students to actively engage with goals, criteria and standards (REAP Project) with explicit criteria for learning outcomes and explicit levels of achievement (James, McInnes & Devlin 2002)

3) **M** - Model excellence in assessment practice by an interactive learning task (Thumbs up! Thumbs Down!) involving the use of annotated assessments ranked from fail, credit, high distinction. This is an approach based on matching student/teacher expectations to equip students with the skill of making judgments about their own learning (Boud & Falchikov 1989), starts a dialogue as to assessment processes and standards (Boud 2010) and assists in an understanding of the learning process and the criteria against which it is marked.

4) **P** - Provide a comprehensive 3-tiered system of summative and formative feedback including the meaningful award of different grading levels (and explaining this in the process) (James, McInnes & Devlin 2002) comprised of:

- First tier: Student self-reflection on performance task;
- Second tier: The return of student assessments with both individual feedback and marking based on criterion-referencing; and
- Third tier: Class feedback, including norms & value of discipline.

5) **L** - Learn from the assessment process including self-reflection, peer-review and/or informal or formal dialogue with peers (Boud 2010).

6) **E** - Enjoy all of the above!

The example is a practice-based initiative implemented in a first year law unit (MLL110 *Law Society & Civil Rights*) at Deakin University, Victoria but this approach could be adapted to other year levels and other disciplines. This presentation is based on several 2010 Conference topics including:
- *Assessment and FY students*
- *Managing the expectations-reality mismatch*
- *Exemplar and innovative practices to support FY students*

Overall the purpose of this assessment approach is to make assessment expectations clear, explicit and achievable – consistent with the overall conference theme of Aspiration, Access and Achievement.

Session plan and key questions

This is a predominately interactive session with a high level of active participation by the audience. After explaining the 5-step assessment practice outlined above (in the first 8-10 minutes), the presenter will ask conference participants to step into the shoes of a first year student for the remainder of the session.

The presenter will model the role of a University lecturer in explaining assessment to a large class through the Up! Thumbs Down! Interactive Task. In this task, participants will be asked to read through a brief piece of work (500 words), and discuss with a partner the mark they would apply to the work applying the criterion-referenced marking sheet. For each of the separate assessments provided, the participants will be asked to vote 'thumbs up!' (for work graded over 50%) and 'thumbs down!' (for work less than 50%). A discussion of the criteria as applied to the model assessments will then occur, with the lecturer showing annotated samples of the same work to explain the marking process.

Participants will then be provided with the 3-tiered system of feedback explaining the grading levels, and given hints, tips and ideas on efficient marking practice based on this approach.

This activity is designed to be fun to show that both the communication of assessment tasks and the marking of them can be enjoyable! Key questions underlying this session include:

- Do you have any suggested improvements to the SIMPLE 5-step assessment plan?
- Are efficiencies in marking processes necessarily at a cost of quality feedback?

Description of expected impact

Participation in this session should enable attendees to learn from the 5-step assessment process:

- the principles for assessment in higher education, based on the literature and demonstrated in a practical and hands-on session linked to a real 'nuts and bolts' example;

- for participating academic staff, hints tips and ideas as to efficiencies in marking whilst providing quality feedback and the opportunity for self-reflection as to existing practice; and importantly, how to make assessment enjoyable;

- for participating professional staff, an appreciation of the assessment process and suggestions as to integrating academic skills, library research and general study advice within the curriculum of a first year unit;

- for all participants, the opportunity to discuss in an informal setting assessment practice and start a dialogue with peers.

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