



# Relative requirements and responsibility in assessment design

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For several years I have been experimenting with various schedules of assessment for a post-graduate course in management. I have worked on the basis of several assumptions which I now wish to question.

The first assumption is that since learning is a multi-faceted process and that students learn in many different ways, it makes sense to offer students a variety of types of assessment. The second assumption is that since this is a post-graduate course, and independent intellectual endeavour is valued, it makes sense to maximise the flexibility of assessment. Converting these assumptions into principles of design obviously entails an assessment process that is more complex than the standard two essays plus examination model. Whilst I remain convinced that this standard model is substantially deficient, I am becoming aware that the alternatives I have used present problems of their own.

The first problem is that given the prevalence and acceptance of the essay as a form of assessment, any variation requires careful justification. Indeed, many colleagues insist that despite the manifest problems of plagiarism and undetectable assistance, the essay remains the only valid form of assessment. Occasionally participation and presentations abet the weighting of essays, but then, assessing participation and presentations present problems of their own.

The second problem is that notwithstanding what the handbook might explain or what I might say in class, students will look at the assessment schedule and count the number of assessments, and on the basis of there being more assessments in this course than in another, assume that the workload is greater. To put it crudely, two assessments consisting of 1,000 words each, is considered less than five assessments of 300 words each. That may or may not be so. The point is that effective assessment demands rigorous distinctions between time-for-task, commitment required, effort required and attendance required. For example, five 300-words assessments may take less time than two 1,000-words essays, but demand more commitment and effort. This may or may not be offset against flexibility, and allowing, for example, the best of three of five submissions as opposed to two compulsory submissions. Allowing for flexibility however, leads to a third problem.

Providing flexibility entails complexity. Students sometimes resent having to make complex decisions about how they will be assessed, even if the complexity emerges from maximising their choice. I can understand this, having sometimes lost my own way when I designed an assessment schedule that offered several different activities to which the students themselves could then attribute different weightings to come up with their final mark. Keeping aside the issue of the lecturer's workload and staying with the view of a student, I can sympathise with a sense of frustration and impatience with a system that demands a lot of effort to understand. After all, they have signed up for a course in, say, change management, not a course in course design and assessment.

This acknowledgement however, raises a problematic dilemma of responsibility. As a course designer and presenter, to what extent can I require students to engage with what I see as important pedagogical problems and my efforts to solve them through complex assessment designs, when they may well prefer to go through the more widespread standard process of accreditation?



By way of illustration and as a basis for discussion, I present an assessment schedule used in a post-graduate single semester (12 weeks) course in advanced change management. What is presented here is the extract from the course handbook. I use this particular example of assessment because it presents a fairly unusual feature. The course is explicitly arts-based. Various aspects of change management are approached through the medium of illustration, drama, sculpture, poetry and music. Thus, the five essays and presentations refer to “Picturing Change”, “The Drama of Change”, “Forms of Change”, “A Poetic for Change” and “The Music of Change”. And yes, the presentations consist of drawing, acting, sculpting, writing a poem, and a musical performance. In each instance students are expected to engage with the theory as presented in a standard textbook.

It so happened that in this course (I am currently half-way through presenting it) the student numbers were dramatically less than in previous years due to extraneous factors. Only five students registered. Then two withdrew, citing comparative workload as the reason. Later, another student enrolled. The small number of students has some advantages. Group cohesion and trust is high, there is plenty of time for explanations, and discussion is lively, with full participation. On the other hand, it puts more pressure on presentations and makes differences in abilities more apparent.

I would like to engage in discussions with colleagues about the relative rights and responsibilities of learners and course designers in assessment. I suggest the following question as a starting point: To what extent is the assessment of learning in any subject integral to that subject? After all, managers appraise, doctors diagnose, engineers assess, accountants analyse, etc.

#### **ASSESSMENT (EXTRACT FROM COURSE HANDBOOK)**

The assessment of this course comprises a class test, essays and presentations.

The class test is compulsory. Aside from the test assessment you construct your own assessment profile by selecting four assessments from a choice of 5 essays and 5 presentations.

Your assessment profile must conform to the following;

three individual pieces of work, which comprise either two formal academic outputs (essay/case study) and one presentation or two presentations and 1 formal academic output (essay/case study), *and* two pieces of group work, one an essay and one a presentation.

Groups may self-select but can only have 3-5 members. Essays will be assessed by Damian according to clear criteria. Presentations will be assessed by Damian *and* the contributing lecturer, according to clear criteria.

You will count the best four of these five assessments plus the test towards your final mark. You must do five assessments to complete the course. You may do more than the minimum five; what you do will be marked. Alternatively you might wish to write off all assessments as quick as possible. Your final mark is calculated on what you submit in your profile, not on what you do.



You might find the following table useful:

<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Individual</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Weighting</i>	<i>Your mark</i>	<i>Final Submission</i>
<i>Essay 1</i>			20%		
<i>Essay 2</i>			20%		
<i>Essay 3</i>			20%		
<i>Essay 4</i>			20%		
<i>Essay 5</i>			20%		
<i>Presentation 1</i>			20%		
<i>Presentation 2</i>			20%		
<i>Presentation 3</i>			20%		
<i>Presentation 4</i>			20%		
<i>Presentation 5</i>			20%		
	<i>(1e+2p)or(2p+1e)</i>	<i>(1e + 1p)</i>	<i>(80%)</i>		
<i>Test</i>			20%		
<i>Final Mark</i>			100%		



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