Using assessment to change student learning

A short introduction
Background

Students are widely expected to:

- master complex subject material
- develop many complex skills
- reflect upon and judge their own achievements
- develop confidence in themselves as independent, flexible and enquiring people
What does assessment do?

- Defines what students will concentrate upon
- Affects how they learn
- Specifies what counts as learning -- gives meaning to ‘critical thinking’, for example
- Provides information about shortfalls between performance and specification
- Stimulates conversations about, and reflection on, improvement
Assessment is more than testing

- See handout #1 on limits to summative assessment

**Summative assessment purposes**
- Grades
- Reliability vital
- Validity often compromised by need to simplify to make the assessment reliable
- Little feedback, if any - especially on shortfall between performance and specifications

**Formative assessment purposes**
- ‘Conversations’ to produce learning feedback
- Validity
- How important is reliability?
Alternatives: 53 assessment methods

- Many methods
- Can assess in many ways
- Good assessment means using a range of assessment methods, i.e. to assess complex learning we need to use a good number of the 53 methods from handout 2

See handout #2 on alternative assessment methods
Alternatives: Constructed response tasks (CRTs)

- Constructed response tasks require students to create an answer (most tests expect them to identify the right answer)
Advantages of CRTs

- Access authentic thinking and performance
- Usually require more than one achievement or skill to be used/displayed
- More valid as indicators of complex learning achievements -- more authentic
- Potentially more interesting/rewarding than MCQs and response tasks: they can make ‘human sense’
Disadvantages with CRTs

- Their complexity makes reliable grading hard and costly
- Their complexity can lead to student complaints of excessive challenge and workload
  - especially if hard-working students feel they are not getting marks that reward the amount of information they have
- They may not really be very valid
Grading CRTs

- Performance criteria (indicators are essential)
  - agreed solutions
  - notes of main points
  - item-specific criteria
  - generic grading indicators (see handout #3)
- Assessor training
- Consider marking parts (samples)
Alternatives: assessment of authentic achievements

- Often known as ‘authentic assessment’ (AA)
- N. American assessment practice often fails to assess the skills, understanding and qualities really involved in professional practices
- But, for AA to be reliable,
  - Good, valid criteria essential
  - Assessor training/monitoring vital
  - More than one assessor needed
  - Repeated, purposeful assessments
  - All this implies an assessment plan
Alternatives: Assessing performances

A form of authentic assessment

- Methods include:
  - Work placements
  - Simulations
  - Reports on problem-working inquiries
  - Portfolios (see below)
  - Case study work (analysing or constructing)
  - Exhibitions
  - Problem-based learning (potentially)
Guidelines for good assessment of performance

Apply guidelines for CRT & portfolio assessment

- *Plus* be sensitive to context
- *Plus* triangulate – get other data
- *Plus* judge extent of student understanding in other ways
Alternatives: Assessment by means of projects

- A form of authentic assessment
- Make sure full guidelines on doing the project are given to students -- see handout #4.
- Follow guidelines on grading CRTs and portfolios
- Consider grading progress reports
- Consider two-step grading process. Completion of all sections is necessary but grades are then based on quality of key sections
Alternatives: Assessment by means of portfolios

- Handout #5 What are portfolios?
- Handout #6 A suggested portfolio structure
- Handout #7 Criteria to guide portfolio-making
- Handout #8 Making portfolios
Grading portfolios faster

- Sample within portfolios
- Concentrate on the first section
- Require portfolios to be submitted with a 1000 word analysis, appreciative or critical appraisal. Grade mainly on it
- Require students to submit self-assessment grids
- Grade on the basis of an examination of one complex question that can only be answered with reference to portfolios, which students bring into the examination room
From summative to formative

- Expense and difficulty – even impossibility – of reliable assessment of complex learning
- Formative assessment can be cheaper and more authentic

Suggestion #1:
- Identify what can be reliably and affordably assessed and invest in assessing it well
- Use formative assessment for everything else

Suggestion #2:
- Make programme-wide assessment plans