
CASE STUDY 6

Student Engagement with an Assessment Lexicon; a Structured Self-assessment to Help Demystify the Assessment Process

Discipline: Art & Design
Student Numbers: 24



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Introduction and Context

I am a studio-based Art & Design lecturer and I primarily teach 4th year students. One of the most commonly-received requests from my students is for more feedback during modules. I have often found this request confusing - I meet with every student multiple times per week for one-to-one tutorials specifically about their work, the quality of their work and their progress. Clearly this is not the kind of feedback they are looking for when they request more; I've come to understand that many of my students are really hoping for an indicative grade at interim parts of their project - they are looking for a benchmark. As they are entering the terminal phase of their undergraduate degree, a time when they should be exercising large amounts of

autonomy, self-direction and acting on coherent critical reflection of their work, they are also looking for multiple points of external validation and assessment during a module.

Speaking to my students over the years I know that they enter 4th year with a confusion about where grades 'come from' as well as a drive to maximise their academic and creative potential during an important year of study. However, I do not believe that interim indicative alpha grades are really of any help and I tell them this directly. Work in progress rarely relates in a linear way to the final piece and I do not want to give false assurance or criticism of unfinished work by assigning potentially inaccurate and misleading alpha grades as part of an interim assessment.

As an alternative I planned an interim assessment exercise that gives students two key opportunities:

- 1 to build their own language of achievement for their work.
- 2 insight into the grading process.

Of key importance to this exercise was briefing the group beforehand on the rationale and purpose, as well as providing a responsive individual discussion with each student so they had a chance to discuss the exercise. As a result of this exercise I hoped to achieve a few small things that can be built on as the year progresses:

- 1 put student's minds at ease during the module - this was an opportunity to discuss their successes and failures to date in an open, and dialogic manner that had no associated credit weighting but still afforded them a benchmark.
- 2 to test the language in a theoretical 'assessment lexicon'
- 3 encourage them to start thinking about developing their own language of achievement so that they can critically assess their work and motivate themselves during a difficult year of study.
- 4 introduce the idea of assessment-specific language so that they can participate meaningfully in a 'build your own rubric' exercise later in the academic year.
- 5 to satisfy their legitimate and understandable desires for 'more feedback'.

Applying the principles of Universal Design/Inclusive Assessment.

As studio-based learners my students all benefit from diverse modes of assessment throughout their four years of study. This exercise aligns well with inclusive assessment and Universal Design strategies in the following ways:

- 1 it is designed to provide transparency in assessment and feedback.
- 2 it is a scaffolded method of assessment, affording students prompt guidance and discussion about their engagement with the exercise.
- 3 it reduced the assessment load by replacing what could otherwise have been a formal interim presentation.
- 4 it gives the students voice and agency with regard to assessment and an opportunity to discuss their progress openly.

Design and implementation of the initiative

The first module of 4th year for my students is called the 'Initial Project'. This 8 week-long studio module is their first fully self-directed project. The students are required to propose, design and make an original piece of work. The work is broad and typically ranges in any year from museum display work, original stop motion puppets, game character design, props for film and tv, silicone work and animatronics. It is assessed via a summative panel assessment after 8 weeks. During the module each student meets with at least two members of the lecturing team twice a week to discuss their progress.

Four weeks into the module I convened the group and explained my reservations about alpha grades in interim assessments and told them I hoped to give them a useful interim assessment. I introduced them briefly to a suite of assessment theory and explained the relationship between the QQI L8 Art & Design standards, the programme document and their module. I showed them an 'assessment lexicon' that has been developed by colleagues within my department (Figure 1).

QUALITY	Excellent		Good		Satisfactory			Un satisfactory	
AWARD	1st		2:1	2:2		3rd		(Condoned Fail)	FAIL
GPV	4	3.5	3	2.75	2.5	2			0
ALPHA	A	B+	B	B-	C+	C		D	F
%	80-100	70-79	B 60-69	55-59	50-54	40-49		35-39	0-34
	sophisticated	refined	thoughtful	tested	established	unadventurous	derivative	partial	incomplete
	rigorous	finesse	accomplished	thorough	complete	proficient	competent	clumsy	deficient
	incisive	flair	skilful	accurate	conventional	capable	superficial	unclear	unable
	scrupulous	dynamic	assured	grounded	clear	inconsistent	initiated	inappropriate	absent
	penetrating	lucid	dextrous	consistent	appropriate	straight-forward	threshold	misconstrued	erroneous
	insightful	distinctive	analysed	coordinated	coherent	hesitant	sufficient	unconsidered	wrong
	astute	inventive	critical	imaginative	reliable	outline	adequate	careless	mistaken
	innovative	comprehensive	decisive	independent	cautious	charted	unimaginative	curtailed	formless
	perceptive	expert	convincing	synthesised	resolved	tentative	inaccurate	faltering	unstructured
	challenging	perceptive	developed	effective	evidenced	provisional	unresolved	basic	shapeless
	definitive	cogent	fluent	complete	summary	uncertain	indistinct	undisciplined	
	authoritative	systematic	confident	logical	solid	indicative	imprecise	disorderly	
	commanding		robust	proficient	reliable	interim	inexact	vague	

Figure 1. A locally devised ‘Assessment Lexicon’

This assessment lexicon isn’t used as a stand-alone and strict measure of student work, it is not a rubric. The lexicon theorises and proposes language that is appropriate to describe work at all stages of the alpha-grades we use in the department and is intended to be shared with students to afford them insight and to help them build their own language that addresses their ambitions and standards for their work. This lexicon is intended to be a living document that colleagues may

modify and adapt, it is intended to increase dialogue and prompt reflection on the standards that are relevant to discrete and diverse disciplines and modules of study. The lexicon can aide discussions between the lecturing team, help external examiners gain insight into programme priorities, to discuss standards and expectations with students and acts as a tool in students' own critical reflection and development.

I had prepared a document for each student which had four statements in areas related to the weightings and assessment outcomes for this module (research, fabrication & design). After each statement there were nine words, one from each alpha band on the proposed lexicon (Figure 2 and Appendix A). Each student was instructed to circle as many words as they felt described their work to date (Figure 3).

Research
(this includes technical, material and contextual research)

The standard of my research work to date on this project has been:

- a Definitive
- b Comprehensive
- c Accomplished
- d Thorough
- e Reliable
- f Provisional
- g Superficial
- h Inappropriate
- i Unstructured

Figure 2. A sample statement and nine standards to choose from.

Research
(this includes technical, material and contextual research)

The standard of my research work to date on this project has been:

- a) Definitive
- b) Comprehensive
- c) Accomplished
- d) Thorough
- e) Reliable
- f) Provisional
- g) Superficial
- h) Inappropriate
- i) Unstructured

Figure 3. A completed sample from a student of the first statement.

After giving them time to complete the document, I spent time with each student discussing the words they had chosen and I gave them my own impression of where their work sat in relation to the words on the page. This exercise was described as an opportunity for them to tell me how they were progressing (not for me to tell them). I would explain my perspective and give them insight into my opinion of the standard of their work and they were welcome to ask me why I held the opinions I did.

In order to test the appropriateness of the lexicon students were encouraged to tell me when words didn't make sense or if the hierarchy of words seems wrong or if my interpretation of their work seemed confusing or incorrect.

The total class size was 24 and 21 of these student participated in the self-assessment exercise and 12 of these students let me keep their forms for further analysis (see figure 5).

Results/Finding/Feedback

The feedback from students was generally positive, with all who completed it declaring that it made sense and they felt as though they were confident about how to appraise their work at that stage in the project. A number immediately identified priorities and goals they could change as a result of considering their work in this way. Students also asked why this wasn't done earlier in their studies and felt that an exercise like this that explains the language of grading and standards would be very useful from first year on.

Few problems were encountered; however, it did expose how the language in the lexicon used is not perfect - students don't understand all the words and at times the hierarchy seems incorrect and inconsistent. Generally most students struggled with understanding how some of the words would be used in the context of their work. Words that were confusing to them are listed in Figure 4.

Words students found confusing in the context of their work		
Provisional	Established	Sophisticated
Perceptive	Confident	Reliable

Figure 4. Words students needed to clarify or didn't understand.

This feedback is useful for future development of the lexicon and I believe it demonstrates an opportunity to develop a separate lexicon that describes incomplete bodies of work such as those presented at an interim assessment.

It is difficult to measure the impact of a single event like this on such a small group of students, however one anecdotal measure could be the 'success' of summative feedback this year. Of a total of 24 students only 1 expressed surprised or upset with their final grades, and this student did not attend the interim assessment. After seven years of running this module, that is the highest rate of meeting expectations I have ever experienced. Historically 4 or 5 students typically articulate disappointment with a grade lower than they expected.

The exercise allowed students to select multiple words (Fig 3), and they expressed interest in this approach. Allowing multiple replies was intentional in order to afford students insight into the conflicts and difficulties inherent in adjudicating a single alpha grade for complex work. It allowed them to openly declare that work could be both 'thoughtful' and 'inexact' at the same time.

Figure 5 graphs the difference between the self-assessed interim grade and the final grades received by 12 students in the class.

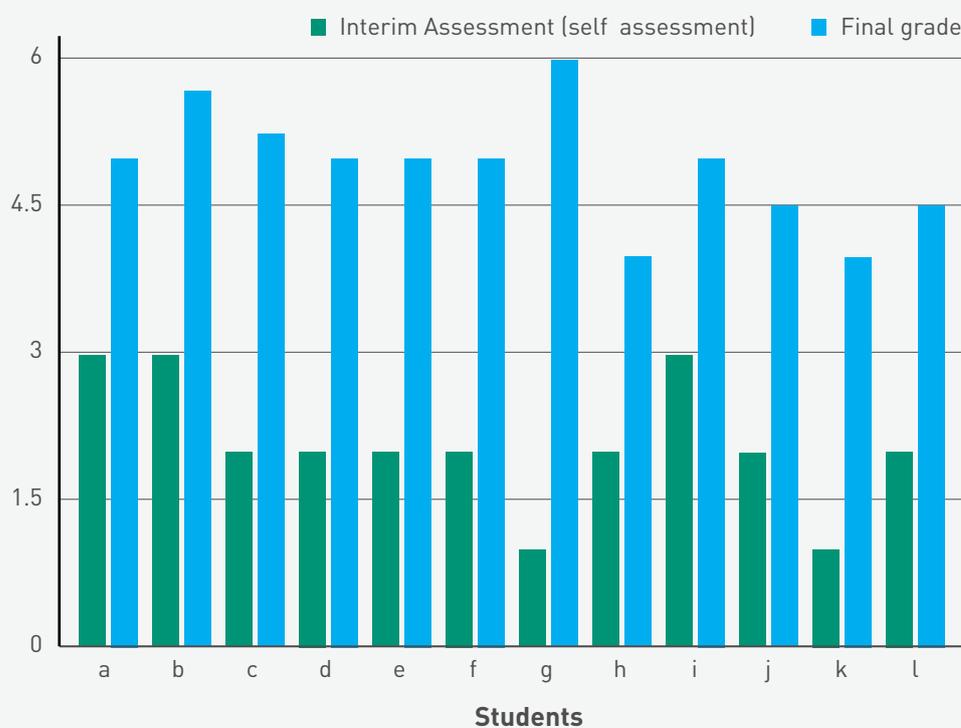


Figure 5. Comparing the standard adjudicated in the interim assessment with final grades.

A number of things are worth noting about this particular analysis of the self-assessment exercise. :

- Every student received a higher standard in the final assessment than the one they gave themselves in the self-assessment.
- The graphing was completed by assigning a number value to the 9 columns in the original lexicon document (A = 9, B+ = 8, etc...) and assigning the same number value to the final grades awarded to the students after formal panel assessment.
- It is clear that the group of 12 are among the better students in the class - all final grades in figure 5 are either a B, B+ or A. Weaker students may not have attended the self assessment, lacked the confidence to formally submit their self assessment after our discussion or perhaps they were unable to derive benefit from the exercise.
- It cannot and should not be concluded that participation in the interim assessment resulted in a higher final grade. Rather this data might illustrate well why alpha or fixed grades are of very little use at an interim assessment on many modules. Measuring a relationship between the work in progress is not clear.

Advice to others for implementation

This exercise is only useful if done as a method of facilitating a conversation around grading. If there is no time for the follow up one-to-one sessions then it should not be attempted. There is value in taking time to describe the relationship between language, standards and assessment, but the core value here is in the resultant individual discussions. Discussion should focus on helping students identify good habits and focus on maintaining these and work towards any desired improvement of standards for the remainder of the module.

It is important to note that this exercise describes the self-assessment of the standards of work rather than of learning, however the structure could be used to assess learning. A focus on learning may be a useful exercise to perform at the beginning of each year of study as it would prompt students to reflect on learning to date and identify any gaps in learning they felt they may need to address in order to succeed during the upcoming year.

In this case I have worked from an existing document that is locally referred to as a 'lexicon'. It may make more sense in other disciplines to develop this as an informal rubric or a taxonomy. If no similar document exists that is useful within other disciplines it is possible to develop one by drawing on a number of resources. Resources like QQI standards, module and programme learning outcomes and rubrics are helpful. However, I believe it is most useful to become critically aware of the more informal language used when assessing work - what words are used in verbal feedback and when describing student work to academic peers? This more informal and dialogic language can be very useful to reflect on. I know that in my own case this language reveals a lot about my own expert but subjective opinion of work.

Sharing language with students and provoking them to engage with it allows them to build a language of competency and excellence that will hopefully guide them well during their studies and prepare them for the professional standards they will meet in the careers. By interrogating, refining and sharing the language used within disciplines it is possible to develop a suite of exercises that can allow students broader and more equal participation within their learning and assessment processes.

References & Resources

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Appendix A

The self-assessment exercise handout

DL828- 3D Design

Initial Project

Self Assessment 1

Name: _____

Date: _____

This exercise is based on an Assessment Lexicon – a document that summarises words that can be used to describe and help assess work.

There are four statements below which you need to complete, do this by highlighting as many words as you think are applicable to your work to date on the Initial Project.

As you do this exercise carefully consider the meanings of the words below and critically consider your work to date on this module.

This is a self assessment and an interim assessment - the important outcome is to participate, reflect and use this exercise as a way to discuss your work with the lecturing team and as a way for you to set expectations and goals around the standard and quality of your work.

Research

(this includes technical, material and contextual research)

The standard of my research work to date on this project has been:

- a Definitive
- b Comprehensive
- c Accomplished
- d Thorough
- e Reliable
- f Provisional
- g Superficial
- h Inappropriate
- i Unstructured

The collection, organisation and presentation of my research work to date is:

- a Rigorous
- b Expert
- c Thoughtful
- d Coordinated
- e Established
- f Inconsistent
- g Inexact
- h Vague
- i Absent

Fabrication

(this includes armatures, rigging, maquettes, sketches, molds & samples)

The standard of my fabrication & modelling work to date on this project has been:

- a Sophisticated
- b Refined
- c Skilful
- d Reliable
- e Proficient
- f Inconsistent
- g Imprecise
- h Clumsy
- i Formless

Design

(this includes your development of new work from diverse sources and your refinement of solutions and original work in response to the parameters of your self-directed project)

The standard of my design work to date has been:

- a Innovative
- b Perceptive
- c Confident
- d Imaginative
- e Conventional
- f Straightforward
- g Superficial
- h Unconsidered
- i Shapeless