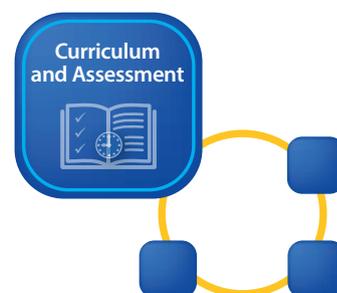


# Powerful Design: Design assessments to be catalysts for learning

Assessments can be designed to do much more than grade students. They can be designed to act as catalysts for learning: Motivating, focussing, and guiding students in their learning endeavours.

## Why

Catalysts excite students and get them going. They encourage students to invest deeply in the process and to make an effort. Assessments that facilitate learning also provide opportunities for students to take control of where and how they are going, and to improve their outcomes. In this way, assessments not only determine what students learn but also how well they achieve (Boud, 2010). Designing assessments so that they act as catalysts for learning promotes effort, and that effort lays the way for student achievement and success.



## How

Here are some ways to design your assessments so that they act as catalysts for learning.

### Design assessments to meet student goals

Designing assessments so they align with students' goals and aspirations for the future is highly motivating. It is the students' goals for the future that strongly impact on the focus and the effort that they will put in (Bandura, 2001; Pintrich & Zusho, 2002). This has implications for assessment design. Designing assessments that clearly relate to the future lives of students as social workers, engineer, or 'exercise physiologists' is highly motivating.

There are several types of assessment that relate to future lives and aspirations. The starting point is the assessments that build on the background knowledge, skills, and abilities needed. Particularly motivating also are the assessments that mimic what the students will be doing in the workplace and the broader community. These authentic, complex and often messy assessment tasks reflect the real world, making students feel like they are really doing the subject (McDowell, Montgomery, & Sambell, 2012). These include authentic assessment tasks such as design briefs, case management plans, and feasibility studies.

### Design an assessment structure that builds confidence and competence

Meeting students' goals involves using a range of different types of assessments within your unit. However, it is important to choose the right type of assessment at the right time. An assessment structure that aligns with the logical development of the students' knowledge of the unit builds student competence and confidence through the process of assessment. This creates a success-oriented assessment structure that promotes learning and achievement. Such an assessment structure may build from closed question type assessments through to more authentic open-ended tasks. Structuring assessments in this way gives students the opportunity to come from an informed and competent base, to then employ their rationalising, problem-solving, and decision-making skills in the authentic tasks later on.

A success-oriented assessment structure also ensures that students receive feedback on their emerging knowledge and skills early on. It allows students to use that feedback in a different, more complex assessment task in which they re-adjust and extend their developing knowledge and skills.

### Design assessments that allow for some pursuit of individual interests

Particularly motivating are authentic assessments that allow students to make some choice about what they will focus on in their assignment. This might be the selection of the company for whom they design a marketing plan, it might be the type of bridge they design for a client brief, or the disease process they choose to investigate. Such autonomy may also include how they go about the process and how they report on it. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), autonomy is highly motivating where one is competent, hence the need

to ensure competence through the assessment structure before placing students in a more autonomous assessment situation.

## Empower students to take control of their achievement levels

With highly motivating tasks in place, you can also set up assessments in a way that enables students to evaluate how they are going and to take actions to improve. Clearly explained standards and assessment criteria help students take control of their achievement levels, particularly when these are coupled with self-reflective exercises and models which allow them to see these standards and your expectations 'in action'.

## In summary

You can design your curriculum around a carefully structured assessment program that facilitates learning and achievement. With clearly established expectations and standards, you can provide a success-oriented curriculum by drawing together highly motivating assessments in a competence building sequence that also allows for some student autonomy.

## Find out more

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