



## Questioning assessment

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### ***Abstract***

This brief communication offers a summary of our experience of holding a series of university-wide online discussions which explored and questioned the many assumptions we bring to assessment practices in higher education. It aims to demonstrate the value of such discussions, highlighting key lessons we learned, what they suggest for the future of assessment, and how we can better understand and support our students with the benefit of insights gained. Finally, we offer some practical tips for fellow higher education professionals new to this format, based on what worked well for us.

**Keywords:** assessment; assumptions; discussion; professional learning; online; connecting; students; trust; understanding

### ***Introduction***

In this brief communication, we want to demonstrate the value of explicit, university-wide discussion of the assumptions we bring to our assessment practices. These assumptions are often unconscious, but they are powerful and can profoundly affect our relationships with our students. They should always be questioned.

## **Background**

As far back as 1967, Oppenheim et al. identified 21 assumptions that underlie university examinations. These included, for example, that forced regurgitation of knowledge under stress is predictive of future performance, and that uniformity in undergraduate exams is essential; all students in each year group must pass the same examination paper, and examinations tailored to individual needs should not be allowed. Assessment practices have changed and advanced since then, and assumptions such as these have been challenged (e.g., Elton, 2004), but to what extent have they been replaced by other assumptions about assessment practice and students?

At the Swansea University Academy of Learning and Teaching, we began to explicitly examine and challenge our assumptions about assessment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout the higher education sector as a whole, there was an urgent need to move away from traditional assessments (particularly in-person exams) and to do things differently. Although an emergency response, this was an opportunity to reflect on our conventional assessment practices and processes, to assess the needs of different academic disciplines, and to address the changing needs of our students. We hoped to support our colleagues to make positive changes to their assessments at a time of great uncertainty by challenging them to identify and debate their personal assumptions about the impact of assessment on students.

## **What did we do?**

We invited colleagues and students from different academic disciplines to reflect on the assumptions they make about the value of assessment practices, and the way that students engage with assessment. We had four key questions that we posed in a series of online panel discussions over the academic year. We expected diversity of opinion and wanted to invite interactivity through 'chat' and 'Q and A' functions. We also recorded the sessions, with everyone's permission, allowing us to curate our sessions into an asynchronous resource (Berry et al., 2002). Our sessions were well attended, with high-level interactivity.

These were our key questions:

### **Why assess?**

What are the fundamental assumptions we make about the nature and purpose of assessment? Do we always assume that we know what is best for our students? Do students only do things if we assess them? Do academics from different disciplines make different assumptions? What are our core values and are they appropriate for today's students?

### **Does pressure in assessment lead to resilience?**

Does assessment need to be challenging to be effective? Should all students be pushed outside their comfort zones? Do the positives outweigh the negatives? What is the impact of exam stress on an already anxious student? And what do we even mean by 'resilience'?

### **Why do students fail?**

What do we mean by 'failure'? Who decides what this looks like? What are the reasons for 'underperformance' or 'underachievement' and how do these vary according to the other assumptions we make about students? What if, for example, a student does not submit an assignment? How many of us assume that they simply did not try hard enough?

### **Do we trust our students?**

How does trust affect our relationships with students? How does it affect our policies and processes? And perhaps most importantly, do our students trust us to always have their best interests at heart?

### **What we learned...**

By questioning and debating these questions, we realised that, despite differences in academic discipline and approaches to teaching, many of us were making similar assumptions across the university about our students. The common thread to all our discussions was trust – not only whether we can trust students, but whether *they* can trust *us*. It became clear that lecturers frequently assume they know what is best for students. We realised how common it was to make simple assumptions about why students fail or fall behind, rather than appreciating that 'failure' is complex and that students have complex lives, just like us. Too often it is assumed that students know how to do their assessments and can meet deadlines. We assume that they will tell us if they face

difficulties and that if they do not ask for help, they do not need it. But if we always make assumptions about students, why should they trust us?

## **Conclusion**

How then can we build trust with our students? At an institutional level, we need policies and practices that encourage ongoing reflection and engagement between lecturer and student. Instead of 'doing' education to students, we need to do it 'with' them – but it is not as simple as co-creating curricula or assessments or increasing opportunities for student voices. Our questioning of assessment suggests that, in order to create trust, we all need to question our assumptions regularly and talk to students about their needs and concerns. We cannot assume that they think like us or understand why we do things.

Our 'Questioning Assessment' programme led to an in-person, interactive panel discussion at our university's annual learning and teaching conference in 2023, broadening the discussion and reflecting on the many changes we are currently experiencing in higher education that are likely to affect the future of assessment. It also influenced further online professional development sessions and opportunities for university-wide discussions (academics, professional service staff, and students). Feedback tells us that connecting colleagues together like this provides support in the implementation of assessment changes, for staff and students. The themes in the findings of the programme align with the way we are approaching curriculum review and continuous enhancements at Swansea, such as greater emphasis on programme level assessment planning (avoiding assessment bunching and overassessment), and a move towards more creative, inclusive assessments that integrate transferrable skills.

## **Our top tips for university-wide discussions**

- Plan discussions well: have a clear purpose, a defined theme, and specified roles.
- Strong partnerships between academic, professional service staff, and students in the planning, advertising, and delivery of discussions.
- If taking a panel approach, be inclusive. Invite panellists who represent diverse interests and experiences, and a university-wide audience.
- Use a familiar platform for online sessions.

- Remember that university-wide discussions complement, but by no means replace, faculty, school, or departmental ones.

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