Part 2 – A four step approach to QAA of assessment planning¹.

Duncan D. Nulty

Summary

What follows is Part 2 of a 3 part quality assurance of assessment framework.

Each part may be used independently of the others, or as part of a staged process of curriculum review and improvement. Parts 1 and 3 comprise:


Part 3: A description of an approach to reviewing your assessment plan from the perspective of its contribution to internationalisation of the curriculum.

You can use these resources, in whole or in part, as an individual or in a team, to help improve the ways you assess students’ learning, and consequently also the students’ experience, and the quality of their learning outcomes.

Part 2 – A four step approach to QAA of assessment planning².

This section describes a four step, iterative, process, designed to support course and program convenors in evaluating and improving the assessment practices used in their courses and programs. It relates directly to level 1 of the first part of the QAA framework described above: Course Assessment Planning. It is intended that you use the materials below consecutively so that you take a systematic approach to the evaluation of your assessment methods and strategy.

Each step that follows involves critical reflection of different kinds. The four steps mirror the "PIRI" Quality Assurance process: Plan; Implement; Review and Improve. For the sake of convenience, only courses and course convenors are referred to. However, readers who are program convenors may substitute “programs” and “program convenors” in each case (the same process applies).

¹ Acknowledgement
The process and materials presented here are an adaptation and elaboration of original ideas developed and presented by Duncan D Nulty, Sally Kift, and Terrilyn Sweep at the Evaluations and Assessment Conference 2003: A commitment to quality, Hosted by University of South Australia at the Hilton Hotel, Adelaide 24-25th November 2003.

² Acknowledgement
The process and materials presented here are an adaptation and elaboration of original ideas developed and presented by Duncan D Nulty, Sally Kift, and Terrilyn Sweep at the Evaluations and Assessment Conference 2003: A commitment to quality, Hosted by University of South Australia at the Hilton Hotel, Adelaide 24-25th November 2003.
The four steps are:

1. **A self-reflective analysis of planned assessment practices.** This is done prior to students undertaking the course/program. It focuses on the way the assessment is intended to work from your perspective as the course convenor. It is meant to help you with your assessment plan, or improvement of an existing plan. A self-reflection checklist is included as a guide.

2. **A self-reflective analysis of the students' experience of the assessment practices they undertook.** This involves using a survey to collect student feedback about their actual experience of undertaking the assessment. These data focus on how the assessment worked in practice from the perspective of the students who did the course. Students' actual experience may differ from the intended experience. A student experience of assessment (SEA) questionnaire is included as a guide.

3. **Peer review of assessment practices.** This involves critical reflection with one or more peers (trusted colleagues acting as constructively critical friends). Each person considers any differences between the ways the assessment was intended to work (from your perspective as a course convenor) and the ways it worked in practice (from the perspective of the students' actual experiences). This step is meant to help you to identify those aspects of the assessment that are working as they were meant to, and aspects that require modification. Working as a pair, or in a small group, helps you to be more constructively critical, and to generate new ideas for improving assessment practices. It also emphasises the benefits of collegial sharing, and facilitates greater symbiosis between courses – particularly if your colleagues teach courses related to yours in a program.

4. **Improve the existing assessment.** The outcome of your peer review is a revised assessment plan – essentially returning you to step 1.

Thus, step one focuses on your plan, step 2 on its implementation in practice, step 3 on review, and step 4 on improvement – PIRI.
Step 1: Self-reflective analysis of planned assessment practices

Use the Quality of Assessment, Self-reflective checklist to guide your reflections on the quality of the assessment you have planned for your course. This checklist includes a range of characteristics of good assessment practice that are briefly listed below.

Notes that the opening premise for this part of the QAA framework is that a high quality assessment plan is purposeful. You will therefore be in a better position to ensure your assessment plan is good if you have a full appreciation of the purposes it seeks to meet.

Purposes of assessment

A high quality assessment strategy should:

1. Be Valid. It should validly and directly relate to the course learning objectives. The relationship we claim that exists between learning outcomes and assessment should be meaningful and valuable - not superficial.

2. Be reliable. It should reliably assess student’s level of learning achievement. The same result should be derived no matter who does the assessing or when. Note that this dimension relates also to (a) transparency and to (b) fairness.

3. Be transparent. It should clearly convey to students what its purpose is, and the qualities of work that are valued. Ultimately, students need to be able to determine for themselves what characterises high quality work. So, we should be open about the assessment criteria we use and the performance standards we apply for each criterion. This helps learners to learn for themselves - not only now but into their future. It also helps teachers to teach because they can be clearer about what they are trying to achieve.

4. Be fair. For example, use of a grading curve can be seen to be unfair if it allows people to get high grades for relatively poor work, or low grades for good work. Grading should be based on the level of learning achievement evidenced by the assessed work the student completes – not how it compares to the average performance level of a relatively small cohort.

5. Be unambiguous in its intention. The relationship between the assessment and the desired learning outcome should be obvious to the learners - ie they should be able to see the relevance and purpose of each assessment activity. If so, students will be able to engage with the assessment tasks in it in a self-directed and purposeful manner. They will find it easier to be motivated about the task. They can be creative in drawing in associations from other areas of their knowledge and skill because they can actively hypothesise about inter-relationships. They can construct for themselves something bigger than simply doing the assignment piecemeal.

6. Be authentic. Assessment tasks should resemble tasks that students would have to do in a genuine work or life situation.

7. Be interesting, engaging and motivational. Tasks that possess these qualities are more likely to lead to students utilising behaviours that result in higher quality learning outcomes.
8. Give some consideration to differences in cultural and social backgrounds and to the range of personal and professional aspirations of students: what is relevant, interesting and engaging to one is not so to another.

9. Support students’ learning by being constructive. This means starting small and simple, then building up.

10. Support students’ learning by relating appropriately (ie in the right ways and at the right times) to different stages of learning. For example, learning often involves the following stages of learning – each of which would be best supported by assessment methods that are characteristically different from the others:
   • Acquisition of information;
   • Assimilation/ transformation of information to form knowledge, make sense, and understand principles;
   • Application of understanding and principles;
   • Analysis and evaluation to extend understanding and derive new principles

11. Support students’ learning by relating well to different learning styles. i.e. aural, visual, and kinaesthetic.

12. Support students’ learning by relating well to different cognitive styles. i.e. divergers, convergers, assimilators, and explorers.

13. Support students’ learning by obliging them to engage in learning behaviours that bring about deep learning rather than surface learning.

14. Avoid “negative backwash”: undesired effects on students behaviours caused by a failure to realise how they will respond to the total assessment strategy within their context.

15. Support students' learning by re-iteratively providing timely information about the students' learning. i.e. it should both formative and summative: information of a diagnostic nature, information of a guiding nature, information of a summative nature

16. Support teachers' teaching by providing timely information about the students' learning. i.e. it should yield both formative and summative information

17. Be manageable by both staff & students. The work-load associated with marking students work is within the capacity (in terms of skill and time) of the teaching staff available, and the students.

18. Provide equal opportunity. Assessment should provide equal opportunity to all students in a group. This means that the only factor limiting a student's performance should be their ability - not any variation in the opportunity for support we provide to one student relative to another. Note that this means that we can (and do) provide some students with more support that others. BUT, we should offer the same level of support to all of them.

Assessment strategy as a whole, should:

1. allow students to demonstrate their learning in different ways
2. encourage students to learn in different ways
3. cohere together to make a systematic and complete assessment
4. be up-scaleable or down-scaleable if the total number of students (or staff) varies

Quality of Assessment: Self-reflective checklist.

Use this self-reflective checklist to make a simple appraisal of how well designed you think your course assessment plan is.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria (for individual assessment items)</th>
<th>Poor (1)</th>
<th>Fair (2)</th>
<th>Good (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Is the assessment valid?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Is the assessment reliable?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Is the assessment fair?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Is the assessment unambiguous in its intention?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Is the assessment authentic?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 Does the assessment help students to learn by:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being constructive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating well to different learning styles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating well to different cognitive styles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obliging deep learning strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing timely formative feedback to students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Does the assessment help teachers to teach by:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing timely formative feedback to teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Is the assessment workload manageable by students?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Is the assessment workload manageable by staff?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Does the assessment provide equal opportunity?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Is the assessment ethical?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria (for the whole assessment strategy)</th>
<th>Poor (1)</th>
<th>Fair (2)</th>
<th>Good (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-18 Does the whole assessment strategy:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• allow students to demonstrate their learning in different ways</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• encourage students to learn in different ways</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• cohere together to make a systematic and complete assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Is the whole assessment strategy scalable (up and down)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Does the assessment strategy either:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• progress appropriately through the assessment of content knowledge,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to understanding to application?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Or,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have an appropriate emphasis on one (or more) of these?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Score
Step 2: Self-reflective analysis of the students’ experience of the assessment practices they undertook.

Use the student evaluation of assessment (SEA) survey to gather data reflecting the students’ views on the assessment methods used. Use these data to inform further reflection on how good you think your assessment plan was.

**Student Evaluation of Assessment Questionnaire - SEA**

Use the following scale to indicate the quality of your experience of your course assessment plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unacceptable</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Validity of assessment**
1. How well did the assessment in this course relate to the learning aims of this course?

**Fairness of assessment**
2. How fair was the assessment in this course?

**Purpose of assessment**
3. How clear was the purpose of the assessment in this course?

**Authenticity of assessment**
4. How similar were the assessment tasks in this course to activities you would expect to be doing if you were employed in this field?

**Constructive assessment**
5. How well did the assessment tasks in this course progress from simple toward more complex tasks; or build on work you had done earlier in other courses?

**Assessment & learning styles**
6. How well did at least some of the assessment tasks in this course suit your way of thinking about things?

**Obliging deep learning strategies**
7. How well did the assessment tasks in this course make you think about what you had to learn so that you understood it better?

**Timely formative feedback**
8. How well timed was the feedback you got on your learning?

**Was the assessment workload manageable by students?**
9. How reasonable was the workload associated with the assessment tasks in this course considering its level.

**Overall**
10. Overall, how good was the assessment strategy used in this course?
Step 3: Peer-review of assessment practices

Involve selected and trusted colleagues in discussions about how they regard the assessment plan you have used so that you can get their perspectives on how good they think the plan was, and their ideas about how to improve.

Step 4: Improve your assessment plan.

Implement improvements to your plan and repeat from step 1.

Write up what you have done and what you learned. Share appropriate portions of this with your students and colleagues. Consider whether your write up can be developed as a publishable paper (after several iterations it might be) - even consider writing something "in-house" which your colleagues may find useful.

References:


Sadler, D. Royce. (June 2010) Assuring Academic Achievement Standards at Griffith University. Griffith University.