

Designing progressive assessment tasks that scaffold and stage student learning

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Given the substantial and rapidly increasing body of literature devoted to the scholarship of assessment, it is difficult to imagine that any aspect remains unexplored. However, although this literature comprehensively addresses assessment purposes, principles and problems, relatively little attention has been paid to the individual elements of assessment tasks. To address this, a theoretical framework was adapted from systemic functional linguistics to develop an Assessment Task Design (ATD) framework. Since its initial application to the (re)design of assessment tasks for the purpose of deterring plagiarism, the range of ATD applications has expanded in response to suggestions provided through fora such as workshops and conferences. Most recently the framework has been used to organise and extend the outcomes of a discussion among law academics addressing how best to stage assessment tasks for students as they progress through their law program. This workshop provides a brief explanation of the ATD framework before participants apply the framework to an assessment task from their own practice. Participants will then have an opportunity for small-group discussion of potential applications and sharing of examples suggested through previous workshops. The application involving modification of task elements or dimensions to enhance their appropriateness to students at different stages of learning development will be demonstrated, using an example from the group. Participants will then be invited to consider applications in their own disciplinary or institutional contexts and to make suggestions for further exploration in this area of assessment scholarship.

Keywords: assessment dimensions; assessment framework; progressive assessment

Theme: diversity and assessment: diverse students and diverse assessment practices

Introduction

The assessment literature provides many conceptual and linguistic ‘tools’ that can be applied to the design and evaluation of assessment, such as the conditions under which feedback supports student learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004), a feedback cycle (Price & O’Donovan, 2006) and the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982). However, the existing literature does not appear to facilitate either the systematic identification or the analysis of the components of individual assessment tasks. The way in which this project addresses the gap in this literature should be of interest to those whose practice attempts to address the conference theme of “diversity and assessment: diverse students and diverse assessment practices” through the staging of assessment to suit learners at different stages of learning development.

In order to address this gap, the field of systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1994; Martin, Matthiessen & Painter, 1997; Eggins, 2004) was used as the basis for the development of an assessment task design (ATD) framework (Hughes, 2009a). The ATD framework:

- assumes a particular conceptualisation of ‘text’ as what students produce in response to assessment requirements (essays, letters, posters and so on)
- defines ‘text’ to incorporate written, spoken or visual modes (posters, oral presentations, essays, models and so on)
- identifies the cultural and social factors that shape the texts students produce in response to assessment task specifications
- frames assessment task design as the determination of text specifications.

Early application of the ATD framework demonstrated its effectiveness in identifying task components that could be modified as a deterrent to plagiarism (Hughes, 2007). However, as a result of ongoing dissemination through professional development workshops and conference presentations, academics have suggested an expanded range of applications including a capacity to stimulate reflection, analysis, evaluation and innovative task revision.

Most recently the ATD framework has been applied to the incorporation of appropriate dimensions (for example, those identified by Gulikers et al., 2008; and Joughin, 1998) into the design of assessment tasks suitable for students at

different stages in their progression towards the acquisition of particular professional skills. Task dimensions able to be modified to suit student progression include authenticity of contextualisation, predictability or openness of acceptable response and role range and formality. Each dimension is represented as a continuum and the series of continua together offers a way of profiling individual task demands.

Though this most recent application of the ATD framework originated from discussion at an Australian Learning and Teaching Council–funded event for educators in the field of law (Hughes, 2009b), the principles and approaches are suited for adoption across a range of disciplines. The enhanced understanding of individual task specifications achieved through application of the ATD framework facilitates minor or major modification of one or more task elements in order to increase appropriateness for particular students or student groups.

Workshop description

Key objective

On completion of the workshop, participants should be able to use the ATD framework to analyse an assessment task selected from their own educational practice and to understand and propose practical applications of the framework including the modification of assessment tasks to enhance appropriateness to the needs of particular students and student groups.

Activities

The outline of the workshop is as follows.

- Brief introduction and explanation of the ATD framework
- Demonstration of task analysis by applying the framework to an assessment task provided by a participant
- Participants (in pairs) apply the framework to an assessment task from their own educational context
- Whole-group discussion, comments, questions
- Brainstorming (in groups of four) to suggest practical application of the framework
- Whole-group sharing and provision of additional examples by the facilitator
- Demonstration of task modification using example provided by a participant
- Participants (in pairs) suggest ways in which their analysed task could be modified and for what purpose
- Whole-group sharing, comments and questions
- Facilitator summary.

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