Exploring assessment task design and implementation in the practices of award-winning university teachers

Professor David Carless, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong

Abstract

Assessment task design plays a major role in influencing how students engage with their studies. This paper uses a case study approach to explore the assessment practice of five award-winning teachers across five different disciplines. The research method involved ethnographically-oriented classroom observations and multiple interviews with participants. Four key features of assessment task design are discussed: developing participation in the discipline; spreading student effort evenly through a module; involving some personal student investment or choice; and facilitating dialogic feedback processes.

Introduction

Seminal studies from the late 1960s onwards (Becker, Geer & Hughes, 1968; Miller & Parlett, 1974) established that students' learning orientations are, to a large extent, driven by their perceptions of the assessment tasks that they are undertaking. The design and implementation of 'good' assessment tasks is one of the most significant things a teacher can do (Knight, 2002). What good assessment tasks in undergraduate education are or might be represents the focus of the paper.

By assessment task design, I mean the assessment tasks which students need to complete successfully in order to pass the modules which form part of the qualification they seek to attain. A challenge for task design is that assessment is beset with tensions. As Knight and Yorke (2003) put it: "assessment techniques are often chosen as the least bad way of resolving a number of competing contingencies" (p.73). A fundamental tension in the design of assessment tasks is the need to fulfill the dual purposes of fair certification and the promotion of student learning, paralleling trade-offs between reliability and validity.

The main features of productive assessment task design seem to derive principally from syntheses of literature or expert opinion based on long-term experience of the field, rather than through in-depth empirical research across multiple disciplines. Analysis across disciplines is useful because it enables us to contextualize insights and derive potentially generalisable or conflicting messages. The aim of this paper is to analyze data from the practices of five teachers in different disciplines to develop some principles for productive assessment task design.

Framework for assessment task design

All assessments lead to some kind of student learning (Boud, 2000), but a fundamental challenge is to stimulate deep approaches to learning. A seminal study of Law students at the University of Edinburgh (Miller & Parlett, 1974) suggested that the most important single dimension of assessment is the complexity of intellectual

operations required to perform the assessment task. The design of assessment tasks is thereby a vitally important means of harnessing student cognitive engagement in productive ways. This engagement will not be uniform, however, in that students perceive assessment tasks differently and at least some of these conceptions will be incompatible with their lecturer's intentions (Joughin, 2007).

An influential synthesis of eleven conditions under which assessment supports student learning (Gibbs, 2006), derived from an extensive literature review, posited three conditions relating to task design. The first relates to time on task: assessment tasks should capture sufficient study time and effort. The second seeks to avoid students concentrating their study effort principally towards an end of semester task, such as an examination or essay: assessment tasks should distribute effort evenly across topics and weeks so as to encourage consistent student engagement. The third relates to the quality of student cognitive engagement, especially in relation to deep or surface approaches to learning: assessment tasks should engage students in productive learning activity. An implication of the three conditions is that assessment tasks should involve multi-stage assignments which encourage meaningful student engagement throughout a module, not focused principally at its end.

In a recent state-of-the art vision of 'assessment futures', Boud et al., (2010) propose that assessment tasks should: form a fundamental part of curriculum planning; be significant learning activities in themselves; provide evidence of integrated learning through larger-scale tasks; enhance student engagement by requiring substantial involvement over time; and be designed in an interlinked and coherent sequence.

Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery (2013) provide a useful synthesis of ideas on the kind of dispositions that assessment task design should encourage: deep approaches to learning through the development of integrated knowledge, sophisticated cognitive abilities and critical thinking skills; participation in a disciplinary community and engagement with methods of enquiry valued in those disciplines; collaborative tasks as well as individual ones, so as to develop teamwork skills; and elements of student choice so students are able to pursue topics in which they have a personal interest.

I wish to sum up the key issues so far in the form of questions which I address in the remainder of the paper. How are assessment tasks arranged in modes, quantity and sequence? To what extent do assessment tasks mirror the discipline? To what extent do tasks facilitate student choice and personal investment?

Method

The research questions guiding the study are as follows:
RQ1 What assessment tasks are used by selected award-winning teachers and what is their rationale for these tasks?
RQ2 How do students respond to these assessment tasks?

Participants

The teacher participants from an international research intensive university had all been recipients of internal awards for teaching excellence. Researching award-

winners is based, not on a conviction that they necessarily represent good or best practice in teaching or assessment, rather that they represent practices which may be innovative, provocative, attractive to students or worthy of scrutiny and critique.

There is some evidence (Norton, Norton & Shannon, 2013) that there are more sophisticated assessment practices in 'soft' rather than 'hard' disciplines. Accordingly, I focused the sampling mainly on cases of teachers in the Humanities and Social Sciences: Architecture, Business, History and Law; and I included a case from a hard discipline: Geology, based in the Faculty of Science.

Student participants were undergraduates enrolled in the chosen courses taught by the award-winners. In the process of observations, my co-researcher and I interacted with a range of students and invited a random sample of them to participate in the study.

Data collection

The study was ethnographically-oriented in that I endeavored to understand how students experienced assessment in the selected modules. Following from this orientation, the principal means of data collection were classroom observations and interviews.

The main purposes of classroom observations were to develop an understanding of how classroom processes unfolded; and to understand aspects which were relevant to the design and implementation of assessment tasks. Classes were of two hours duration in Geology, History and Law; three hours in Business; and in Architecture the nature of studio activities was open-ended and did not follow a clear time structure. Six to ten sessions per teacher were observed, totaling 39 sessions across the five teachers or 92 hours of classroom observations. Detailed field notes were collected to describe classroom processes; develop provisional insights into issues relevant to the RQs; and identify issues for follow-up through interviews.

I carried out two interviews with each teacher: one at the outset of the study and one during the process of data analysis after the observations were completed. The first sought mainly to understand teachers' rationale for the chosen assessment tasks; and the second principally explored perceptions of issues arising from their implementation.

Students from each of the classes were interviewed in order to gauge their perceptions of the assessment tasks which they were undertaking. The number of students interviewed per discipline was: Geology six; History twelve; Architecture eleven; Business nine; and Law fourteen. Teacher and student interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed as per the procedures described below.

Data analysis

My interpretation of qualitative data analysis leads me to infer that the main steps in data analysis are an iterative process involving: data reduction; drawing inferences from data; verifying and disconfirming inferences; data display; building up a narrative; and relating insights to relevant literature.

The observational and interview data were assigned codes which represented what I saw as their main meaning. This involved a high degree of data reduction whereby data were sorted, focused and organized around key issues relevant to the RQs. Processes of data collection and interpretation operated in tandem, so preliminary insights could be put to the teacher or different student informants. Data were condensed and displayed in various diagrammatic forms (see, for example, tables 6 and 7 later in the paper).

The trustworthiness of interpretations was developed mainly through the second formal interview with teachers and through additional follow-up via e-mail in which I discussed with them various emerging propositions. A further strategy to strengthen trustworthiness of findings involved presenting drafts and issues to my co-researcher and making revisions or reflecting further based on her comments.

Findings: Assessment tasks, rationale and students' perspectives

The findings comprise separate sub-sections on each of the five cases and conclude with a cross-case comparison of the modes of assessment.

Business case

Creativity and Business Innovation, taught by Alex (all names are pseudonyms), is an elective with a class size of 20 students made up of second and third years or students on International Exchange programmes. The essence of the module is to develop students' thinking skills through applying principles of creativity and innovation in dealing with complexity and designing new products or services.

In relation to assessment, Alex is firmly against examinations "because they encourage students to see education as a product, removing the whole process of learning and discovery". The design of the module assessment is summarized in table 1 below.

Table 1. Assessment design in the Business case

Case, Class and Blog Discussion	40%
Individual Written Case Assignment	30%
Term Project	30%

Case, class and blog discussion includes informal oral presentations; dialogue in class; and contribution to the course blog. Alex explains as follows:

> Participation constitutes a large part of the assessment. They need to be interactive during class and prepared through the reading and thinking they have done beforehand. …Students are expected to demonstrate effective skills in communicating their thoughts. So class participation is based on effectiveness not quantity.

Observation of classrooms evidenced extended in-class dialogues in which participants discussed both content and learning processes, with Alex probing and

facilitating to elicit progressively deeper student contributions. Students also reported preparing for these informal discussions, prior to coming to class.

The individual written case assignment is a conventional task involving written analysis of three assigned cases: highlight the major issues in the cases; provide an analysis of the situation; and present a well thought-out implementation plan.

Term project involves groups of four students developing a socially innovative idea, for example, in relation to corporate responsibility or improving the lives of the under-privileged. Students deliver a group oral presentation focused on selling their idea to the audience; receive feedback from Alex and their peers; and one week later submit a related written report.

I outline students' perspectives on the assessment approach through two representative quotations:

> I think the assessment approach is good and it suits the module content. How do you assess innovation on paper? You can't really do that, so I think that asking students to present innovative projects is the right way to do it.

> The assessment task design inspires thinking. I like writing reports, doing projects and doing the case assignment as that enables me to learn more than doing exams. During the term, I pay more attention to this course than other ones and then later I have more time to prepare for the other exams.

If I relate these comments to literature, I infer that the first comment is hinting at the Biggs notion of alignment, whilst the second one invokes Gibbs' idea of assessment spreading effort evenly across the module.

A number of students commented that 40% was a relatively high weighting for participation. Some noted that it is difficult to award a fair and accurate grade for participation, but concerns were expressed mildly, partly because students had selected the course, enjoyed it and had a high degree of trust in Alex. Having a grade allocation for the blog was seen as "given some life to it" and also catering for students preferring written communication to in-class oral dialogues. Some students commented that a limitation of the blog was that classmates were more active in posting their own comments than building cumulatively on what other students had contributed.

In sum, a major theme in this case was in-class feedback dialogues facilitated by student participation. Real-life aspects of the discipline were highlighted through analysis of cases and persuasive oral presentations. Personal student choice and investment mainly occurred in relation to mode of participation and the topic of their project.

History case

Making History is a first year foundation course taught by Marty and taken by a cohort of 110 students from various disciplines. The assessment task design is summarized in table 2.

Table 2 Assessment design in the History case

Individual project	40%
Fieldwork report	30%
Participation	30%

The individual project is essentially a 3000 word essay, although it can alternatively be presented in the form of a podcast, wiki or other use of technology. Students can choose from a list of topics related to course content or propose their own topic. They receive 10% of the mark for a first draft on which they receive tutor feedback, and the remaining 30% for the final project submission.

The fieldwork report of 1000 words involves a choice between a Museum visit (to a local Museum of their own choice) or a Scavenger Hunt (an internet-based simulation in which participants visit parts of Hong Kong scavenging for historically-based clues and artefacts). Both options are intended to address: interconnections between past and present; a critical approach to historical artefacts examined; and a critical engagement with how the past is represented.

Participation comprises 15% for tutorial participation in the weekly tutorials facilitated by a teaching assistant; and 15% for a weekly personal response task entitled 'one sentence response' (OSR). This OSR task requires students to complete, at their chosen time during the weekly lecture, a short handwritten personal response of about 20-30 words. They respond to an issue which is covered in the next lecture rather than the current one. Marty saw this as "putting students' voices into the class" and enabling him to understand their thoughts which could facilitate his preparation for the next lecture. Some OSR tasks are related to students' own lives, whilst others require more critical thinking. Examples of each type are:
- Describe your fondest memory. Explain your choice.
- Is history a science or an art? Explain your answer.
In the next class, Marty displays selected student responses and shows some data in the form of pie-charts so that students can see how other classmates have responded.

I outline some students' perspectives on the overall assessment design through two quotations:

> The assessments motivate you to learn more. If you want to get an outstanding overall result, you have to work hard on each task.

> The assessment is open and flexible and you can have your own ideas. What I have gained is not so much knowledge but regeneration of ways of thinking, understanding issues from other angles.

The first comment seems to relate to the Gibbs notion of consistent effort throughout the module and also hints at quite a heavy assessment workload for the students (and the teacher) in this module. The second comment relates to flexibility, student choice and new ways of thinking being developed.

Another student who did relatively poorly in his assignments felt there was a lack of congruence between what was covered in lectures and the project assignment. This suggests that a potential drawback of student choice is that it may make alignment between module content and assessment harder to achieve if students opt for a topic outside the scope of lecturers, even though the concepts and thinking tools from lectures may underpin the assignments.

Students were positive about OSR in that they felt it encouraged their thinking and involvement; and promotes the skill of concise expression. It can also fall foul of some student malpractice, such as attending for a few minutes only to submit OSR; or submitting OSR for a classmate. We observed both of these things and Marty also noticed them and warned students against such practices.

The main themes in the History case were participation in the discipline, especially via the Fieldwork report; personal investment and student choice, principally through the individual project; and evenly spread effort via the ongoing assignment work, tutorial participation and OSR.

Geology case

Introduction to Physical Geology is a year 1 module entitled taken by 135 students. The class was taught by award-winning teacher, pseudonym Jamie, and a team of one other professor, a teaching assistant and some PhD students who led lab work. The main intended outcome is for students to understand the earth's structure, its material composition, internal and external processes. The assessment for the module is summarized in table 3.

Table 3 Assessment design in the Geology case

Laboratory work and practicals	20%
Group project	30%
Final exam	50%

Jamie commented on the assessment task design as follows:

> Students have different abilities and some may respond better to different forms of assessment. Many students are accustomed to examinations through their previous experience and some respond well to the pressure of an exam. Exams are useful, as part of the assessment but not for more than 50% of the overall total.

The Faculty of Science was reported as being positive about the use of examinations, although Jamie noted that setting a good exam was a difficult skill.

The lab work and practicals involved hands-on experience working with rocks and minerals, and the completion of various related tasks. Perceptions of both teachers and students were that if students attended regularly and did the required work, it was relatively straightforward to achieve a satisfactory or better grade. The lab work was also seen as good preparation for the final exam in that there was some overlapping content.

For the group project, students worked in groups of four and choose a novel problem related to geology to explore. They submitted an initial outline and received feedback on it. Jamie explained that main aim of the group project is for students to gain experience of working in teams. The grading for the group project was broken down into three elements each worth 10% (group oral presentation; group written report; and individual contribution to the report). Awarding grades for both group and individual components was an explicit attempt to discourage free-riding.

I outline students' perspectives with two quotations:

> I prefer a group project to an examination. Examination is the most difficult type of assessment and its heavy weighting produces a lot of psychological pressure. You need to spend a lot of time preparing for an exam if you want to get a good result.

> Group projects are a good way to make friends, develop interpersonal communication and problem-solving skills but they are time-consuming … Projects are quite good for learning. I think that what I learned from doing the project will make a deeper impression on me than the examination does.

Overall, students had mixed views on examinations and project work. Some students referred to their familiarity and experience in preparing for exams and working individually, as opposed to some of the more uncertain challenges of group work which was seen as meaningful but time-consuming.

The main themes in this case were a variety of tasks spreading student effort over the course of the module. Personal student investment was mainly through the group project and this also generated some dialogue and feedback. The regular lab tasks reflected real-life participation in the discipline and also served to prepare some of the skills needed in the examination.

Architecture case

The Architecture case was a first year Introduction to Architectural design with 65 students divided into 6 tutor groups of around 11 students per group. We followed the students in the group taught by Sam. The course was organized around architectural planning for a Chinese village within a few hours travelling distance of the university and field trips were arranged to the site. The focus was on engaging students with a range of design exercises addressing core issues essential to the training of an

architect. Work is regularly presented and discussed in critical review (crit) sessions. The crit allows students to present their work in progress publicly, self-evaluate their progress and receive feedback from course tutors and peers.

Assessment is through a portfolio of drawings, diagrams, photos, renderings, animations, physical models, prototypes and project presentation as summarized in table 4. For Sam, the portfolio "represents an opportunity to visually integrate all the work together in a final output".

Table 4 Assessment design in the Architecture case

Portfolio, including series of designs: a design for the village as an overall structure; and the design of a house as a contemporary alternative to generic house types.

As a studio-based subject, Architecture was different from the other cases in that the ethos focused on the process of becoming an architect and socializing students into a culture of long hours and vocational commitment. The crit formed part of this, providing students with experience in explaining and justifying their designs in public. The crit opens up opportunities for dialogic forms of feedback and also inducts students into the discourse of the discipline. Students perceived the process as developing their ability to judge their work and make sound architectural decisions which made sense to them.

In relation to assessment by portfolio, this represented the norm in Architecture so was accepted readily by students. An issue which provoked a variety of student views was the extent to which the judgment of the portfolio was based on the continuous appraisal throughout the semester or solely on the quality of the final product. A student commented as follows:

> Our grades do not solely depend on how good the portfolio is. It also includes how diligent we are, what alternative designs we have attempted, how well we expressed our ideas and what progress we have made.

Sam's view was roughly congruent with this position:
> The portfolio serves to make their progress clearer. Students are assessed on the overall process, including their presentations and iterations of designs. More often than not it just substantiates what we already know, but it's good to have evidence which the teachers can use to standardize grades.

To sum up, in the Architecture case the contextualization of the design tasks within a real Chinese village represented a particularly strong relationship between assessment and real-life uses of the discipline. The processes of regular reviews also spread effort evenly throughout the module and led to dialogic forms of feedback. There was also a high degree of student personal investment in their designs.

Law case

Tort Law is a core first year module with around 150 students in the class we observed. The module aims to provide grounding in the functions and principles of Tort Law, and for students to engage in meaningful legal analysis of tort issues. It is year long period of study (September to May) comprising two elements Tort 1 and Tort 2 which are assessed as a single entity.

Chris is particularly well-known for his innovative assessment practice. Although the subject of Law is usually dominated by examinations, Chris seeks to diversify assessment and reduce the weight accorded to exams. Table 5 summarizes the assessment for the module.

Table 5 Assessment design in the Law case

Reflective media diary	20%
First semester test	20% OR Test 10% + Photo essay 10%
Final Exam	60% OR Exam 40% + Research essay 20%

The final exam involves students choosing three out of five questions based on news reports from local newspapers. Each answer counts for 20%. An option for students who prefer coursework to examinations is to answer two (instead of three) exam questions and also do a research essay. Similarly, in the first semester students can reduce the weighting of the test by choosing an additional assignment (either a tutorial problem discussion involving 600 words of legal analysis or a photo essay). The photo essay involves identifying potential tort law situations in local daily life, such as a traffic black spot or a dangerous construction practice; explaining the potential tort situation supported by photographs; and a brief legal analysis citing one or two cases.

The reflective media diary (RMD) involves two staged submissions, one in the first semester and one in the second. RMD requires students to identify a wide range of tort law-related events reported in the media, to provide a provisional legal analysis, to keep a diary and track the subsequent developments, and finally to provide a legal analysis of selected items. RMD is similar to a portfolio in that it involves collecting, selecting and editing material over time.

Chris's rationale is as follows: "the learning and assessment material should be designed to reflect the way that the discipline has meaning in everyday life, and that where possible, learning and assessment should be based on authentic material". Chris also coined a term 'real-time feedback' to refer to immediate follow-up on a completed assessment task, such as a tutorial or examination question. At the end of an exam or test, students are invited to remain on a voluntary basis to discuss the answers to the questions they have just attempted. As Chris puts it, "this allows students to engage in a deep discussion of the assessment problem and clear up misconceptions at the moment when their focus is strong".

Students' were positive about how they were assessed in Tort Law, for example, they particularly appreciated not being assessed 100% by examination. RMD was seen as

being useful in "training our ability to identify legal issues related to things happening around us". The process of RMD was also seen as cohering well with the exam, a student put it as follows:

> The exam is in the same format, so RHM trains us in how to frame an answer and get a good score. Also, Chris wants us to be exposed to real-life cases instead of hypothetical ones.

Students identified two minor disadvantages of RMD: heavy workload and frustration when there are few 'suitable' legal issues arising in a particular period.

The main themes in the Law case were analyzing legal occurrences arising in the local context to bring some degree of authenticity into learning and assessment. There was a certain amount of personal student investment in RMD, and the research essay or photo essay if students opted for them. Assessment was mainly focused on performance on end of semester tests or examinations, whereas the development of the RMD was spread evenly across the module. 'Real-time feedback' aimed at providing immediate dialogue around tutorial and examination answers.

Summary of assessment tasks in the cases

In this final section of the Findings, I summarize the main trends in assessment across the cases. A major noticeable feature of the assessment task designs in the five cases is that with the exception of Architecture which involves a portfolio, the other four cases all involved three separate assessment components. Lest the reader might think that this may follow from some central institutional guidelines this is not the case. Faculties and teachers in the university are permitted a high degree of autonomy in the design of assessment and for example, 100% assessment via an end of semester examination or essay is not an uncommon means of assessment in a number of Faculties.

The assessment strategy of three small items in a module provides a variety of tasks which is summarized in table 6 below. The varied suite of tasks has potential to cater for different strengths of students, with respect to written and verbal communication, individual and more collaborative skills. With three relatively small items in a module, there is some danger of fragmentation or over-assessment. A more cumulative strategy is implemented in the Architecture case, whereby the different iterations of designs are consolidated into an overall portfolio.

The most common assessment mode was an extended written piece of work in the form of an essay, case report or project report which occurred in four cases. There was also a focus on oral modes of communication in four of the cases: a participation grade (Business and History); an assessed oral presentation (Business, Geology and implicitly in Architecture); only the Law case did not involve any form of oral assessment.

Table 6. Modes of assessment in the cases

	Business	History	Geology	Architecture	Law
Examination	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

Essay/report	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Group project	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Participation grade	Yes	Yes	No	To some extent (implicitly)	No
Oral Presentation	Yes	No	Yes	Yes (implicitly)	No
Portfolio	No	No	No	Yes	Yes (RMD)
Other		Fieldwork report	Lab work		Photo essay

Discussion

This study sought to explore the issue of assessment task design in the practices of five award-winning teachers in different disciplines. The teachers all had different emphases in their task design. In the Business case, the assessments involved continuous assessment with a focus on communication and dialogue: graded participation, including a blog; oral presentations and related written cases. In the History module, there were varied written tasks, involving student choice; and a 30% weighting for participation, including OSR. The Geology assessment principally comprised an examination and a group project. Architecture was assessed by portfolio, the conventional mode in that discipline, and included critical reviews in which students presented work in progress. The Law case involved an examination and more innovative modes of assessment, such as RMD and photo essay. As a whole, the cases have provided evidence contextualized within different disciplines of how well-respected teachers handle assessment task design.

Students reacted to assessment tasks in different ways. Given that the teachers were award-winners and popular with students, it was not unexpected that their assessment practices were generally met with approval. With respect to the six main methods of assessment highlighted in table 6 above, the only mode of assessment which engendered more critical than positive comment was examinations which were generally seen as failing to lead to deep learning experiences. There were mixed feelings expressed about group projects, whereas the other assessment methods were viewed generally positively.

Table 7 below summarizes key concepts from the literature review and suggests the extent to which they were applied in the cases. The first three features are consistent with the literature reviewed earlier. Learning-oriented task design: develops participation in the disciplinary community through mirroring real-life uses of the discipline; spreads effort evenly across a module; and permits some degree of personal investment and student choice.

Table 7. Features of assessment in the cases

	Business	History	Geology	Architecture	Law
Real-life participation in discipline	Yes	Yes	Yes: To some extent	Yes	Yes

Effort spread evenly	Yes	Yes	Yes: To some extent	Yes	Yes: To some extent
Personal student investment	Yes	Yes	To some extent	Yes	Yes: To some extent
Dialogic feedback	Yes	To some extent	To some extent	Yes	To some extent

The fourth feature of dialogic forms of feedback has, hitherto, tended to be underestimated in relation to task design. I thus propose that an additional characteristic of effective assessment design is that it promotes dialogue with peers, self and tutor. Assessment task design can be engineered to promote feedback dialogues through multiple stages of assignments and opportunities for peer- and self-evaluation; and related interactions with the teacher (Carless et al., 2011; Nicol, 2010). Feedback dialogues were at the center of the Business and Architecture cases, and were also evident to a greater or lesser extent in the other cases, even when class sizes were large. This focus on engineering feedback opportunities is important because feedback is known to be central to student learning, yet an area of considerable student dissatisfaction (Evans, 2013). Feedback is more than about feedback per se because of its relational nature and my position is that it is, to some extent, a task design issue.

The assessment of participation is only sporadically analyzed in detail in the literature and I had not considered it seriously before the data collection for this study, dismissing it as ad hoc and unreliable. My observation of the Business and History cases led me to infer positive elements of assessing participation: students are actively involved; they are more likely to prepare before coming to class; they learn to articulate their own views; and they participate in disciplinary dialogue with the teacher and peers. From the History case, I infer that OSR is a strategy well-suited to eliciting regular student participation within a large class. Short written responses also play a valuable role in providing feedback to the teacher in gauging student thinking and progress. There are of course challenges in reliably assessing participation, but as long as it involves clearly defined contributions supported by criteria and is not just a reward for attendance, assessing participation can be a useful part of an overall assessment design.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the main characteristics of assessment task design for productive student learning. Returning to the tensions to which I alluded in the introduction, recommendations in relation to assessment task design are ideals which may not be fully realizable in a particular context or situation. Notwithstanding the need for compromise, following from tables 6 and 7, I would like to suggest the following propositions guiding assessment task design:
- Spread effort evenly throughout the module through a series of tasks or a portfolio; and/or assessing participation;
- Permit some degree of student choice and personal investment so that students can develop some ownership of learning;
- Set a judicious mix of individual and collaborative, oral and written tasks, so that students are developing a wide range of competencies;

- Engineer regular in-class feedback opportunities in relation to tasks and work in progress.

The latter is particularly important in view of the widespread recent concerns over the effectiveness of feedback practice. It signals an area for further research as examining feedback within a wider framework of task design rather than focusing more narrowly on the timing and quality of written feedback on completed assignments.

References

Becker, H. S., Geer, B., & Hughes, E. C. (1968). *Making the grade: The academic side of college life*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Boud, D. (2000). Sustainable assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Studies in Continuing Education* 22, no. 2: 151-67.

Boud, D. et al. (2010) Assessment 2020: Seven propositions for assessment reform in higher education. Accessed June 14, 2013 www.olt.gov.au/system/files/resources/**Assessment%202020**_final.pdf

Carless, D., Salter, D., Yang, M., & Lam, J. (2011) Developing sustainable feedback practices, *Studies in Higher Education,* 36, (4) 395-407.

Evans, C. (2013). Making sense of assessment feedback in higher education. *Review of Educational Research*.

Gibbs, G. (2006). How assessment frames student learning. In *Innovative assessment in higher education,* ed. C. Bryan and K. Clegg, 23-36. London: Routledge.

Joughin, G. (2007). Student conceptions of oral presentations. *Studies in Higher Education* 32, no. 3: 323-36.

Knight, P. (2002). *Being a teacher in Higher Education*. (Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press).

Knight, P. & Yorke, M. (2003) *Assessment, learning and employability* (Maidenhead, Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press).

Miller, C. & M. Parlett. (1974). *Up to the mark: A study of the examination game*. London: Society for Research into Higher Education.

Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: Improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 35*(5), 501-517.

Norton, L., Norton, B. & Shannon, L. (2013). Revitalising assessment design: what is holding new lecturers back? *Higher Education*,

Sambell, K., McDowell, L. & Montgomery, C. (2013). *Assessment for learning in higher education*. London: Routledge.