

Do you know... about assessing students?



As teachers, one of the most important things we do with students is assess their learning and provide them with feedback. Get it right and students are more likely to thrive and succeed; get it wrong and the effects can have lasting consequences.

One must know what is to be assessed before one knows how to assess it – Erwin , 1991

It is important that assessment strategies and methods are appropriate. This DYK introduces some key aspects of assessing students; future editions will address other aspects.

WHY DO WE ASSESS OUR STUDENTS?

Assessment = ad sedere = to sit beside

The Otago Medical School (OMS) defines three main purposes of assessment¹.

1. **Guiding student learning** – enabling students to understand their progress relative to defined standards, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, evaluating their self-assessment, directing and motivating their future learning, identifying areas they might see as potential for improvement and achieving personal excellence;
2. **Ensuring that individual students are satisfactory to progress** – ensuring that during the course students are performing above satisfactory standards to progress, and that at the completion of the course students have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes/behaviours that lead to safe, fit-for-purpose practice;
3. **Evaluating the course** – assessment results should be used as part of the quality improvement process for the medical degree.

The second and third purposes deal with student progress decisions and course improvement. These are usually the responsibility of the module convenor, school, and programme. At times these two purposes appear to command a disproportionate amount of attention from both students and staff (e.g. higher stakes assessment like the end of Year 5 examinations and OSCE).

However, many of us who encounter students on a daily basis will contribute the most to the first purpose, guiding student learning, which can have a significant impact on longer term student learning.

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts – Aristotle

All three assessment purposes have their place in an overall assessment system. No one purpose should dominate; each should complement the others. The OMS assessment strategy is moving towards this type of multi-faceted system, in which decisions on student performance are not based on any single assessment.

Each piece of information is important but of itself does not tell the whole picture.

Student performance becomes clearer the more information (assessment data) we can gather.



ASSESSMENT DRIVES LEARNING

This statement can be viewed negatively, especially when the learning environment is seen as competitive and grade-driven using standard assessments (such as 'tick-box' exercises). But, the 'motivation' of a student to learn for assessment can be seen in a positive manner if what is assessed is what you believe to be important.

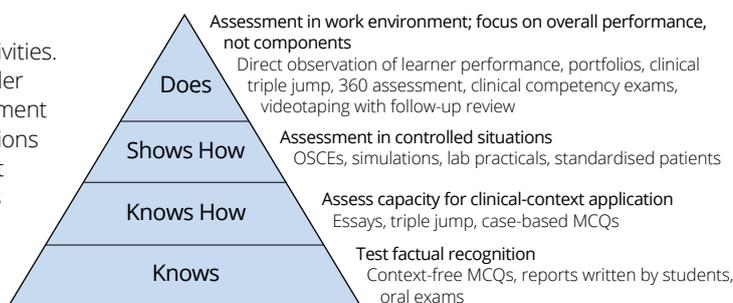
Assessment ... is the engine which drives student learning – John Cowan

HOW CAN YOU CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH ASSESSMENT?

As assessment and learning are related, you can employ any combination of strategies to best guide student learning using assessment:

- Assess what you and the student believe to be important.
- Promote discussion between you and the student, and if still unsure contact the module convenor.
- Focus on improving the student's performance, not judging the student. Be specific on what you observed the student doing or ask what they were thinking when doing something to get to their logic pattern.
- Establish feedback partnerships with students as an integral part of your assessment routine. This practice will improve student learning and your teaching.²
- Remember, when you assess a student, you are providing one piece of evidence on where they are in their learning. Your evidence, as good or poor as the outcome was, will add to the many other pieces of evidence that will be gathered from other sources.
- Try to use a variety of assessment methods that will gather a variety of information about where a student may be in their learning.

Miller³ proposed a framework 25 years ago that is still useful and may help guide your assessment activities. The diagram shows the levels of competence as Miller presented but added in are various types of assessment tools you could choose. While most of your interactions with students may likely be in the work environment (hence the 'Does' tip of the pyramid), there are tools that you can use to explore the other levels.



REFERENCES:

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3. Miller, GE. The assessment of clinical skills/competence/performance. *Acad Med* 1990;563-7.

FURTHER READING

1. Cantillon P, Wood D. *ABC of Learning and Teaching in Medicine*, 2nd Edition. UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2010.
2. Tweed M, Wilkinson T. The seven deadly sins of assessment. *The Clinical Teacher* 2009; 6:164-166.
3. Wilkinson TJ. Assessment of clinical performance: gathering evidence. *Internal Medicine Journal* 2007; 631-636

For further information and assistance, contact your local Medical or Clinical Education Adviser: otago.ac.nz/medicine/mbchb

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