

Transition units

Approaches to assessment

In the last issue of *info@ncca* (Issue 9, available to download from www.ncca.ie), we described some of the steps involved in writing up a transition unit (TU) to the NCCA template. In this article we look at the approaches you could take to assessment when developing and teaching a transition unit or for general use with your other classes.

Before continuing, it's important to say that assessment time should be built in to the 45 hour TU and not be treated as an added extra. Remember too, that TUs are not 'exam subjects'—they won't be externally assessed, and they don't count for 'points'.

The purpose of assessment in transition units is to provide really good feedback to students on what they have learned and achieved in the unit, and on how they can improve their learning both now and in the future. This is essentially an Assessment for Learning (AfL) approach. What you find out through the assessment will also help you to spot any gaps in the students' learning or understanding, and to adapt the content of the unit or your teaching approaches accordingly.

Assessment methods can include:

- a project
 - a portfolio
 - an essay
 - a report
 - an interview
 - an oral presentation
 - self-assessment
 - keeping a learning journal
 - an end of unit examination,
- but not all in the one unit! If you try to assess everything that the student learns or does you will end up overburdening your students, and yourself! In the context of TUs, we recommend picking one or, at most, two methods of assessment.

Getting the right fit

When it comes to deciding how best to assess a TU, it is helpful to ask yourself: *What are the really important things that I expect the students to learn in the transition unit?* This question will bring you back to the aims and learning outcomes of the unit and to the way in which the learning takes place. For example, a TU entitled *Speech and Communication Skills* would probably be best assessed through an oral presentation; a TU entitled *Environmental Studies* could be assessed by a project where students devise ways to reduce the school's 'carbon footprint,' and assessment of a TU entitled *Community Service* might involve students presenting a diary of their community-based work placement.

Some assessment approaches worth considering

Transition units provide an opportunity for you to try out new approaches to assessment. So why not think about using self-assessment or peer-assessment with your students?

- **Self-assessment using an assessment proforma** – An assessment proforma is a kind of checklist which students and teachers devise together. The teacher sets the students an assignment and then asks them to discuss: *What criteria would you use to judge an excellent assignment?*

From this a list of *criteria for success* can be agreed which will form the basis for an assessment at the end of the assignment.

- **Self-assessment using a personal learning journal** – This is particularly useful when the learning relates to the development of the student's attitudes and values, as well as their knowledge and skills. If you check out the NCCA website you will find a very good example of a learning journal in the transition unit *Ireland – A Level Playing Field?* devised by the Combat Poverty Agency. See www.ncca.ie/seniorcycle and follow the links to sample transition units.
- **Peer-assessment** – Peer-assessment is something that needs to be carefully planned and works best when students are clear on what a good piece of work looks like. An assessment proforma can also assist in peer-assessment as it helps focus the student on the agreed criteria for success. A sample proforma which shows how peer-assessment is used in a transition unit entitled *Environmental Studies* is shown on page 6 and can also be found on our **ACTION** website, at www.action.ncca.ie.
- **Peer-assessment in groups** – Here's an approach that involves students in peer-assessment of any piece of completed work, small or large, in any subject.

Environmental Studies Assessment of a Project

Project Title

Presented by

Give an example of one environmental issue/problem that was presented

List some of the causes of this environmental problem

List two steps that can be taken to address/change this problem

1.

2.

What was the best aspect of the project or presentation and why?

Do you have any suggestions that might help to improve the project?

Assessed by Class Date

Sample peer-assessment worksheet (Developed by Terry Lawless, Bray)



Having agreed on the *criteria for success*, each student carries out the assignment. When the assignment has been completed (over a period of time, overnight or in class), students are arranged in groups of three or four to view the material. They read and pass around each others work silently until all samples have been viewed by everyone. The students then discuss any differences. They then mark each piece of work together using the agreed criteria, perhaps starting with one that best meets the criteria for success discussed. The teacher then holds a class discussion as to what decisions were easier or harder to make. Again, you can view an example of a proforma to support this activity if you log on to our **ACTION** website.

Advantages

There are many advantages to using both self-assessment and peer-assessment.

“ Student self-assessment and peer-assessment are skills which need to be built up over time. Students do not automatically have these skills, but should teachers invest the time, it will bring dividends in the long run. ”

These include

- making students aware of the characteristics of ‘good work’
- encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning
- encouraging them to reflect on themselves as learners and so learn how to learn
- encouraging students to learn other ways of approaching a task other than the approach they used
- using peer pressure in a positive way to increase students’ motivation
- students using language that their peers understand and are familiar with

- students sometimes accepting criticisms from their peers that may have been ignored if given by you!

Student self-assessment and peer-assessment are skills which need to be built up over time. Students do not automatically have these skills, but should teachers invest the time, it will bring dividends in the long run.

In the next issue of **info@ncca**, we will continue to explore ideas around transition units and we will be sharing some interesting teaching approaches.

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