

Assessment *in* Practice

Finding the Way in the Assessment Landscape: Developing an Effective Assessment Map

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Assessment is a major landmark on every student's journey through their program of studies. It is a significant driver of student learning (e.g. Ramsden, 1992), and is often a source of anxiety (e.g. Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Perhaps it is not surprising that assessment and feedback are not rated highly in the national UK course evaluation survey, the National Student Survey (NSS), which is completed every year by undergraduate students in their final year of study (Surrige, 2006).

One initiative to address the lack of satisfaction with assessment is the Higher Education Academy's TESTA (Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment) method. The method consists of a programmatic assessment audit, focus group interviews with students about assessment, and a program-wide *Assessment Experience Questionnaire*. When we used the TESTA method at the University of Birmingham, UK, we found that even at the stage of the assessment audit - which should have been a simple data collection exercise - assessment information was not always easy to track. It is little wonder then that students should struggle with seeing connections between assessments and do not find feedback useful (particularly in terms of advancing future work).

To address the issue of showing interconnections between assessments across the program, we decided to compile an assessment map to illustrate the relationships between assignments and to collate assessment information into a single user-friendly context. To this effect, we wanted to create a visual, interactive assessment map.

We found little evidence of specific assessment mapping in the literature, although there is evidence of curriculum mapping (e.g. Harden, 2001) and mapping of learning outcomes to a program (e.g. Biggs

& Tang, 2011). These are similar concepts in that they also map aspects of learning (often in grid form), but they do not specifically deal with the assessment landscape across which students navigate.

In order to identify students' assessment mapping needs, we carried out individual interviews with students from a variety of courses and reanalyzed the TESTA focus group data. In the individual interviews, we asked students to describe how they found assessment information on their courses, what they felt worked well and what could be managed better. We also asked what information they felt was important for completing their assessments. We then described an assessment map, and solicited comments about it, asking what features students would like to see on the map (see Table 1).

We complemented these findings with comments made during the TESTA focus groups that could be related to assessment mapping. For example, there were eighteen comments that addressed issues with timing of assessment, often expressed in terms of x deadlines in y days, and a sense that work could not be completed successfully until just before it was due. (e.g. "*We always had a week where we had nothing in and then a week where we had five modules in and it was just ridiculous. Because they wouldn't teach everything you needed to know until the Friday and so then you've got less than a week to do it*").

What should be on an assessment map? Features mentioned by students in interviews on assessment mapping and focus groups about assessment.

- Deadlines/submission dates and times
- Weighting of assessment and module
- Type of assessment
- Timing of hand in and feedback
- Examiners/moderators
- How to do the assessment/guidance documentation.
- Criteria/expectations
- Grading information and boundaries
- Exemplars
- Checklist
- Personal feedback
- How it links in and what it is related to
- Resources (links)

We found that much of the information about an assessment that students are initially concerned about is 'basic' and not related to the more sophisticated concepts of assessment literacy (Price et al, 2012; e.g. what does "critically evaluate" mean?). However, it is the large volume of low-level information that is key to the process of managing assessment (Margaret Price refers to this as 'assessment hygiene', personal communication). For example, an assessment map could include features to show a student when information required to successfully complete an assignment is available, but could also be used by faculty to help distribute deadlines across a program more effectively, so that feedback is received in advance of any assignments to which it might be relevant.

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Using these findings, we created an assessment map prototype (see Fig.1) and piloted it in the School of Psychology at the University of Birmingham. The prototype included limited low-level assessment information, and was based on a wall-planner calendar layout. Each assessment deadline had an entry which included a comment box that was revealed when the entry is clicked.

We evaluated the prototype using a questionnaire asking students about the perceived importance of the features of the map, their usage of the map, and their experiences of working with the map. We also asked students to rank the importance of a series of other features to add to future versions of the map.

	Week 4		Week 8	
	1		1	
	2		2	
	3		3	
	4		4	
	Research Methods D - Research Design (Tutorial-Linked) (5%)		5	Essay
	6			
	7			
	Week 5		Week 9	
	8		8	
	9		9	
	10		10	
	11		11	
	12		Research Methods D - Group Oral Presentation (20%)	
	13		Research Methods D - Group Oral Presentation (20%)	
	14		14	

Fig.1: Prototype assessment map. This is based on a calendar with each assignment deadline highlighted and color-coded by module. If clicked, basic comments about each assignment appear as in the orange box.

We found that what students most wanted from the map was information that is already available, but in a more easily accessible form. They are after basic information: not so much ‘assessment literacy’ as ‘assessment alphabet’ – basic building blocks of assessment. Thus submission deadline, word limit, assessment type, and return of feedback date were viewed as the most useful features of the prototype.

When asked about features to include on a future map, ‘assessment for learning’ did rank highly in students’ hierarchy of importance (see Fig. 2). They seemed generally focused on each assignment in isolation and aspects of assessment related to course outcomes and the overall learning experience were ranked less highly than assessment-specific information.

While the map was well received as a tool to help manage assessment and reduce associated stress (and not just for students), the students’ hierarchy of the important features of the map do not sit easily with what we, as educators, would view as important in terms of facilitating learning and the development of knowledge and skills. This could be an issue of what students are able to imagine given the current issues with accessing assessment information. If a map were

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integrated into a supportive learning environment, and information the students perceive as important is readily available, then they might also be able to start engaging with more sophisticated features of the assessment process. For example, students might not see the usefulness of mapping the interconnections between assessments because information learned in one context does not easily translate to another (Schwartz, Bransford, & Sears, 2005). This suggests that making interconnections visible as part of the mapping process might help students 'see' how what they do for each individual assignment feeds forward to other assessments and eventually may translate into their professional practice.

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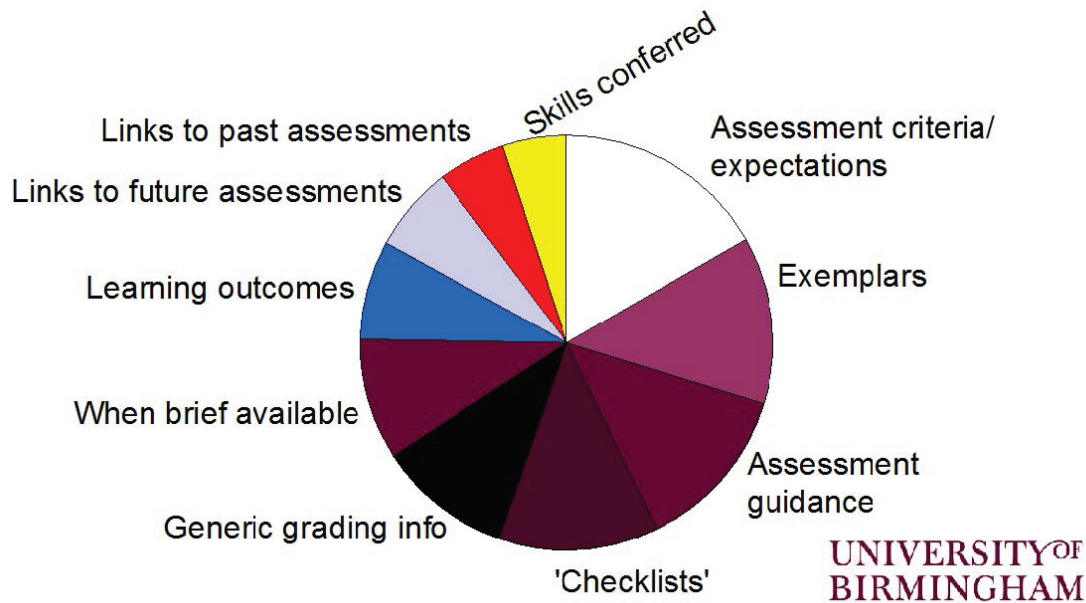


Fig. 2: Proposed features of a future assessment map. Students ranked these features in order of importance. The chart represents the cumulative 'importance count' of each feature. The bigger the section, the more important the feature is perceived to be.

One way of making connections between assessments more visible is sketched in Figure 3. The idea here is that each level of assessments is presented in chronological order coming 'out of' the screen. Each assessment is represented by a node, which can be activated by hovering the mouse over it. An information box for the node will appear much as in the original prototype map (Fig. 1), but with more extensive information, including links to other information sites about the assessment represented by the node. The nodes in the figure here are uniform, and evenly spaced, but in a more nuanced map they could be color-or shape-coded by assessment type or by module. They could also be of different size depending on the assessment weighting as part of the overall course. Each node will also be 'clickable' so that all assessments that either feed directly into this assessment or feed forward are highlighted. In Figure 3 the shade of the related nodes provides information about relevance: the richer the color, the more direct the links between the assessments highlighted.

It does not have to stop there: depending on the complexity of a course of study, an overall map like this might be far too detailed. Thus, it would be useful to include a feature that allows students to personalize their map by specifying which modules they would like to view. The map could also provide information about optional modules that might make it easier for students to make educational choices.

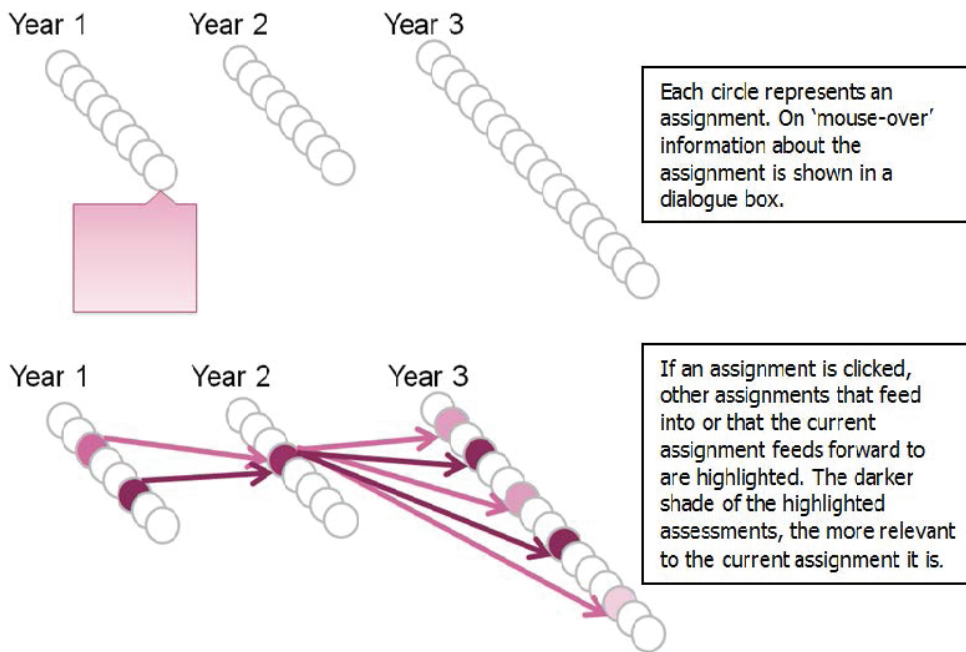


Fig.3: Assessment map sketch. The map is intended to be fully interactive/ navigable.

The next step is to integrate an updated assessment map prototype into a program's information structure and to evaluate it once it has been used as the primary 'go-to' portal for assessment mapping information.

At the moment, the fully navigable, interactive and personalized map does not yet exist: the difficulty is not in achieving the look and feel of such a tool in an online setting, but in creating a sustainable and easily updated tool that remains efficient as courses evolve and modules change. For us, the next step is to integrate an updated assessment map prototype into a program's information structure and to evaluate it once it has been used as the primary 'go-to' portal for assessment mapping information.

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- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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