
Tip sheet - Negotiated assessment

Negotiated assessment is where students are provided with opportunities to have input into how they are assessed. It applies where the topic coordinator has indicated it as part of the Statement of Assessment Methods (SAM) and differs from the application of negotiating variations for elite athletes or defence reserves as indicated in the [Assessment Variation Procedures](#).

Negotiated assessment can have application in many contexts. A common example is in teacher training, where students adapt the assessment to suit their specific learning needs. Another example is where students work with peers and determine what they would like their peer to focus on. Using negotiated assessment as part of peer assessment has the advantage of students applying their experience and understanding of being assessed to considering how they approach the assessment of others.

When considering negotiating assessments

Students need to know why you are using a negotiated assessment and how they might benefit as result. Guiding them in how to choose an assessment that will most benefit them, not just play to their strengths for better marks/less effort is also essential. Helping them understand the reasoning behind the use of negotiated assessment and supporting them as they choose how they might be assessed can be more motivating for students as they have agency in how they meet the learning outcome.

Advantages and challenges

There are advantages to allowing students to have input into how they are assessed. Giving students an opportunity to negotiate aspects of their assessments:

- provides them with insight into how assessment works helping students to improve their assessment literacy
- helps to demystify assessment and reduce some of stress students may feel in relation to it
- is student centred and supports students as partners in their learning.

It may also be more rewarding for teaching staff as students have opportunities to demonstrate their passion for particular areas, talents and skills which may otherwise remain unknown.

Negotiated assessment may not be appropriate in all contexts as there may be situations where it cannot be applied. For example, where accrediting bodies require students to be assessed in specific ways or learning outcomes do not lend themselves to a range of assessment types. As discussed in this tip sheet the aspect of assessment which is negotiated may take several forms providing greater flexibility and opportunities for negotiation.

There are also challenges which need to be considered when negotiating assessments. Students may opt for assessments that do not support or sustain learning more challenging aspects of the skills or knowledge they require. Staff and class time need to be taken up negotiating the assessments and more time may be required for marking a range of assessments and ensuring grading is fair and equitable across different approaches taken by students.

Care needs to be taken to ensure assessments are carefully considered and discussed between staff and students to ensure the end products can be fairly graded and the time taken to complete the task are roughly the same. Despite a final product looking relatively simple, students might be asked to complete 'time sheets' or provide evidence of how they have reached the final outcome/product.

Approaches to negotiated assessment

There are aspects of the assessment you may consider as part of the negotiated assessment. These include:

- Topic area focus
- Assessment format
- Evidence provided to demonstrate achievement of learning outcome
- Focus on alignment with topic learning outcomes
- Criteria weighting (on rubrics)

Negotiated topic area focus

Engaging students in negotiating their area of focus within a topic may occur in two ways.

1. Teaching staff provide a list of ideas related to an overarching assessment type (presentation, report, interview etc.) which students may then choose from
2. Students identify an aspect of the topic of interest to them and provide an appropriate response which addresses the topic learning outcomes

Examples may include:

- In anatomy, allowing students to choose the body system (nervous, circulatory, digestive, etc.) they focus on for a particular assessment (then requiring they change it for subsequent assessments)
- A history or archaeology topic may allow students to apply learnings from the semester to their own choice of era or civilization during assessments (provided these were discussed during the semester)
- In marketing or management students may choose the campaign or industry for their assessment
- Creative arts students may be given the opportunity to choose an artistic production/artefact and exegesis which might be written or presented

Assessment format

Students may be given a list of assessment types to choose from or can negotiate a format which allows them to demonstrate their capacity to meet the learning outcomes (for example, concept map, abstract, demonstration etc.). The scope of the negotiated assessment could be limited to a specific list of assessment formats or as open ended as appropriate for the topic content. For example, a student may choose to make a short film to reflect how they meet the learning outcome “Apply basic strategies to assessing an environmental health hazard”.

However, there may need to be some caveats placed on the scope of what students can choose. Examples may include:

- where the assessment ‘product’ needs to be submitted electronically there may be specific parameters placed on what can be done (e.g. linked to technical limitations on file formats)
- marking requirements such as marking time may limit negotiating some formats
- digital literacy considerations (students may be disadvantaged in relation to their access to technology and teachers may not have the expertise or required software etc. to assess a wider choice of multimedia formats)

Evidence provided to demonstrate achievement of learning outcome

Students are given the opportunity to choose both the subject matter and the format of their assessment in relation to demonstrating their achievement of learning outcomes. They may be given a list of suggestions alongside an opportunity to determine their own approach to the assessment. One example related to the learning outcome “Critically analyse relevant literature to support chosen essay

question” could be allowing students to interview two or three relevant experts in a field and write up their findings as a report rather than writing an essay using peer reviewed sources.

Focus on topic learning outcomes

As with criteria weighting (on rubrics, discussed below) students are provided with opportunities to identify their strengths and weaknesses and/or determine areas on which to focus their learning (regarding specific learning outcomes). Students are therefore provided with both autonomy and an opportunity to focus on developing their skills and knowledge in particular areas of interest or where they believe they need improvement. For example, where a student can indicate they have met a learning outcome (through a previous assessment, a different topic or via another qualification) they may be given the opportunity to focus their efforts on other learning outcomes. Gosling (2000) discusses post graduate students with professional backgrounds who are given opportunities to “determine the evidence they will provide as indicators of having met the agreed learning outcomes in their portfolio” (p. 295).

Criteria weighting (on rubrics)

To engage students in negotiating the weightings on rubrics requires a clear and well-designed rubric. Students are then required to:

- identify their strengths and weaknesses
- determine areas on which to focus their learning
- indicate how the rubric should be weighted to meet their individual learning requirements

These criteria are drawn from the rubric and might include critical reflections, use of language, discussion of issues etc. It is important to bear in mind the value (%) of the assessment type is not altered through the process of negotiated assessment only the weighting of predetermined assessment criteria indicated within the rubric.

Assessment in groupwork

Negotiated assessment can also be used in groupwork. Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999) suggest it allows for the scope of group members with specific skills or interests and application to tasks to be appropriately accommodated. Negotiating the assessment could be considered fairer as all students in the group learn from each other, utilise strengths and focus on interests as they meet learning outcomes. Required team tasks are then undertaken and goals met to ensure learning outcomes are achieved by all team members. Luca and McMahon (2004) suggest allowing students to choose team members “and allocate their own tasks based on their skill strengths” (p. 564). In group work it is essential to reward equivalent efforts. Use of evidence or peer assessment within groups may be helpful in supporting more equitable assessment of team members.

References

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