Assessment Tasks in Online Courses

Shijuan Liu
Indiana University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Assessment tasks refer to tasks that an instructor requires students to complete and that counts towards their final grades in a course. Assessment tasks, in the relevant literature, are also called assessment (e.g., Dirks, 1998), assessment methods (e.g., Flinders University, 2002), assignments (e.g., Arend, 2006), or assessment tools (e.g., Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2002). While there is a plethora of literature on assessment tasks in traditional environments, there is a paucity of discussions on assessment tasks in online environments (Comeaux, 2005). This short chapter discusses (1) importance of assessment tasks in online courses, (2) opportunities and challenges that online environments bring to assessment tasks, and (3) principles and strategies in design and use of assessment tasks in online courses.

IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSMENT TASKS IN ONLNE COURSES

The importance of assessment tasks has been well documented in the literature. First, instructors can indicate what they think is important in the courses they teach through the assessment tasks they use (Anderson, Bauer & Speck, 2002). To a certain extent, assessment methods are teaching methods as well (Dewald, Scholz-Crane, Booth, & Levine, 2000). Boud (1995) further points out students can escape bad teaching (e.g., finding an excuse for being absent from a class) but they cannot escape bad assessment. Not surprisingly, therefore, assessment is acknowledged as a fundamental element in course design (Christen, 2003; Liang & Creasy, 2004).

The assessment tasks used by instructors also affect the depth of student learning, the learning strategies they take, and how they manage their study time (Australia National Training Authority, 2002; Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 1997). Furthermore, from the feedback they receive on the assessment task they complete, students can tell to what extent their learning outcomes met the instructors' expectations. Assessment is also a key factor in motivating or demotivating students in learning (Boud, 1995; Harlen & Crick, 2003). Considering these important roles that assessment plays in teaching and learning, it is reasonable to agree with others (e.g., Anderson, 2004; Hannafin, Hill, Oliver, & Glazer, 2003) that no factor influences a learning environment as much as assessment.

Assessment tasks are even more important in online environments because of the special characteristics of the delivery mode (Rovai, 2000). According to Anderson (2004), most online students, who are busy adults with many family and work commitments, tend to be more practical and are less likely to participate in activities that are viewed as supplemental to the course goals and assessment scheme. Morgan and O' Reilly (1999) further point out that in face-to-face environments instructors have opportunities to go over the course materials with students, while in online environments, where students have more flexibility in deciding when and what course materials to read, "the instructor's efforts may be wasted unless assessment tasks are closely aligned and interwoven with study materials" (p.22).

OPPORTUNTIES AND CHALLENGES FOR ASSESSMENT TASKS IN ONLINE COURSES

Online environments bring opportunities and challenges to assessment tasks (e.g., Comeaux, 2005; Rovai, 2000). The key opportunities and challenges indicated by the literature are summarized in Table 1 below.

PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES IN DESIGN AND USE OF ASSESSMENT TASKS

Many general principles of good assessment practice apply in any learning environments and context, al-

Table 1. Summary of key opportunities and challenges for assessment tasks in online environments

Opportunities	• Every learner has the opportunity to respond to every question the instructor asks (Liu, 2006). • Students have more opportunities and ways to receive feedback (Comeaux, 2005). For instance, students could receive feedback on their assessment tasks (e.g., weblogs that they are required to write for a course) from not only their instructor, but from their peers, experts in the field, and even the public at large. • Students have greater flexibility in where, when, and how assessment is taken (Australian National Training Authority, 2002) • Instructors can provide immediate feedback to individual students via the aid of the automatic feedback mechanisms (Booth, et al., 2003) • Instructors can track, monitor, and document students' activities and learning process conveniently with the technology (Comeaux, 2005; Liu, 2007).
Challenges	• Instructors may find that there is more grading work to be done (Bonk & Dennen, 2003; Morgan & O'Reilly, 1999) • Instructors may find it more challenging to handle cheating and plagiarism issues, e.g., the instructor may not know whether it is the student who is actually taking the exams at a distance (Christen, 2003; McKeachie, 2002)

though how to implement these principles may differ. The following are some key principles that appear to be especially important for an online environment:

- Assessment tasks should match teaching and learning objectives of the course (e.g., Bonk & Dennen, 2003; Morgan and O'Reilly, 1999).
- Assessment tasks should be ongoing, monitoring the process as well as the product of student learning (e.g., Rabinowitz, 1995; Rovai, 2000).
- Assessment tasks should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate circumstances and needs of students (e.g., Australian National Training Authority, 2002).
- Assessment tasks should be explicit concerning its objectives, values, requirements, and grading criteria (e.g., Brown, Race, & Brenda, 1996; Simonson, et al, 2002).
- Assessment tasks should be authentic, helping students to apply what they learn in the real world (e.g., Heyes, 1999; Hjelm & Baker, 2001).

Based on relevant literature (e.g., Flinders University, 2002; Fripp, 1997; Hotton & Smith, 1995; Liu, 2007; Mason, Pegler, & Weller, 2004), Table 2 below summarizes advantages and limitations of some assessment tasks as well as strategies in design and use of them. These assessment tasks include asynchronous discussions, quizzes and exams, essays, simulations, reflections, and e-portfolios.

CONCLUSION

This short article reviews the importance of assessment tasks in online courses, opportunities and challenges that online environments bring to assessment tasks, as well as principles and strategies in design and use of assessment tasks in online environments. The advantages and limitations of some types of assessment tasks are also described. It is worth mentioning that much of the literature available on online assessment is anecdotal or opinion-based, as many researchers (e.g., Arend, 2006; Liang & Creasy, 2004) note, more research is needed to explore this important area.

REFERENCES

Anderson, R. S., Bauer, J.F., & Speck, B.W. (Eds.). (2002). *Assessment strategies for the on-line class: From theory to practice*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning. no.91, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Anderson, T. (2004). Teaching in an online learning context. In T. Anderson & F. Elloumi (Eds.), *Theory and practice of online learning*. (pp. 273-294). Athabasca University, Canada. Retrieved March 5, 2006 from http://cde.athabascau.ca/online_book/ch11.html

Arend, B. (2006). *Course assessment practices and student learning strategies in online college courses*.