

## Updating Learning Programmes III: Assessment

This is the third in a series of articles aimed at organisations and educational institutions who wish to overhaul existing distance and blended learning programmes.

### Assessment

According to the Assessment Reform Group, a task force set up by the British Educational Research Association, formative assessment or “assessment for learning” is a key tool for raising achievement. Improving learning through assessment depends on the provision of effective feedback to learners and a recognition of the profound influence assessment has on motivation — learners need to learn how to assess themselves and understand how to improve (ARG, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

Although assessment for learning is increasingly accepted in schools and had been at the heart of the tutorial model of Oxford and Cambridge, most resource-strapped universities have seen formative assessment decline in recent years. However, for distance learning programmes, formative assessment becomes even more important: with little or no face-to-face contact with tutors or facilitators, carefully designed assessment and feedback on assignments are key motivators and indicators of progress (Gibbs and Simpson, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

Gibbs and Simpson have suggested conditions for supporting learning effectively through assessment. Summarised, these are:

#### Tasks:

- A sufficient number of assessed tasks must be provided for learners to capture sufficient study time.
- These tasks must be engaged with by learners, orienting them to allocate appropriate amounts of time and effort to the most important aspects of the course.
- Tackling the assessed task must engage learners in productive learning activities of an appropriate kind.

#### Feedback:

- Sufficient feedback must be provided, often enough, in enough detail and in a timely manner (i.e., while it still matters to learners and in time for them to pay attention to further learning or receive further assistance).
- The feedback must focus on learners’ performance, on their learning and on actions under their control, rather than on the learners themselves and on their characteristics.
- Feedback must be appropriate to the purpose of the assignment, its criteria for success and to learners’ understanding of what they are supposed to be doing.
- Feedback must be attended to and acted upon by the learner.

It is becoming increasingly evident that assessment is a fundamental part of a learning intervention and should not be treated as an afterthought. Learning activities within programmes can be created as opportunities for formative assessment and establish a feedback loop as key motivators.



**Please share your own experience with assessment and feedback in my blog <http://www.architela.com/blog>.**

Previous posts in the Updating Learning Programmes series: [10 First Principles](#) | [Assumptions that Form Obstacles](#)

In the next post, I'll tackle active online participation.

1 Assessment Reform Group. (1999). Assessment for Learning: Beyond the Black Box. University of Cambridge School of Education. <http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/tlrp/arg/AssessInsides.pdf>

2 Gibbs, G, and Simpson, C. (2005). "Conditions Under Which Assessment Supports Students' Learning." Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. (pp. 3-31)