



## Emma Finlayson reflects on what quality assessment is really about...

I am a middle career teacher. I have made it past the notorious '7 year quit' and I have taught the full range of students across schools with student numbers between 300 and 1300. My experience has taught me that regardless of context, at the end of the lesson, school day, course, or term, all of our students will need to be assessed somehow.

This article is a guide to what I have learned about assessment; like all the best lessons, much of my wisdom has come from failure-ridden endeavours. These have often been of my own tragic making and have mostly involved me making a fool of myself at school.

## What does good assessment entail?

It is so obvious when you are an early career teacher to simply re-use past examinations. And like many before me, I did!

I was Year 8 Science Co-ordinator when I used a past examination. One of the questions was:

*(Description of Debbie Strauss's work) Debbie Strauss is a zoologist. Describe what her daily job might entail.*

What I did not notice then, and what I always look out for now, is that the choice of verb ensured the question was out of the reach of at least 60 percent of our students, 90 percent of whom were EAL/D.

It was not that the students struggled to describe what they thought a zoologist might do, day to day. It was that they did not understand what 'entail' meant and so they tended to leave the question blank.

I have since written similar questions, but now I ask:

*Describe what Debbie Strauss might study in a normal work day as a zoologist.*

## Take home message

It is easy to forget that a question which seems straightforward in your own mind could be interpreted in a myriad of ways by students, all of whom are nervous and looking to achieve. Look at the wording of your question closely and ask: Is it pitched at an appropriate level for my students?

Incidentally, be aware when re-using or borrowing past assessments. If you use directly without modifying, it is very likely you have not considered the potential problems that may be lurking within.



## Why did I come here?

We are all human. And that means that we are all fallible.

I tend to argue that my examinations are like Celtic art: I deliberately include an error so as not to challenge the perfection of the creator. Ahem. Maybe not.

While this might work the first time, it can wear thin quickly with your students.

When I started teaching, I was horrified by the prospects of making a mistake in an examination paper. I remain vigilant for errors and remember fondly watching a past colleague absolutely own his mistake.

My colleague was called to an examination owing to queries about a question. When he arrived, the students immediately started excoriating him because he had included a question on content that had not yet been covered. He argued, they argued, and then, in the end, my colleague dropped his head and muttered with a groan:

*Why did I come here?*

The students burst into laughter.

What did I learn from this? That when the same thing happened to me, I announced:

*Great news! Your paper will be out of 95, not 100! By the way, cross out Question 30b.*

The students cheered!

## Take home message

It is okay to make mistakes, as long as you acknowledge them. Students know you are human. If we insist on infallibility, the effect is to teach our students to doubt themselves and their knowledge, to freeze up in examinations and become anxious around what might be included in formal assessment. There have been mistakes, even in the HSC. Very few, but still, it happens. It is what we do in the moment that matters and how we reassure our students and plan to avoid errors when it comes to the next task that can make a difference.



## Question 27 is fantastic!

We know we are smart, right? We are teachers! Sometimes this thinking can lead to awkward situations.

Long, long ago, in an education system far, far away, there was a beast called the School Certificate, which was essentially, centralised examinations for Year 10.

A call came through to the staffroom:

*We think there's an error in Question 27! Can someone come and look at it?*

Well, I was the only one in the staffroom. I was also in my first year of teaching, and determined to save the day. So, I ran to the school hall (yes, I ran), grabbed the paper and announced:

*Could all students please put down their pens and turn to Question 27. If you read the question, you will see that...*

Then I read the question. Then, and only then, did I realise it was asking students to correct mistakes in the question. What could I do? I just kept talking:

*You will see that Question 27 is a great question. Isn't it fantastic? Best of luck, Year 10!*

Some of the students saw straight through me and were giggling, most assumed I was new and overeager. Needless to say, I beat a fairly hasty retreat.

### Take home message

I am still blushing over this one. With the benefit of hindsight, I might conclude it is important to act with our hearts in the right place. Possibly, it is wise to first stop, understand the situation, consult with a colleague and, if we are to act (or react), to tread lightly.



## Assessment is more than examination

The above are some things I have learned through failure. Along the way I have also learned much about effective assessment. It is important to see the point of assessment as more than a final examination or even the HSC.

Yes, good assessment entails questions that are meaningful and relevant. Yes, when it comes to formal and summative assessment we should be testing only that which we have already taught. Yes, we should work together to reflect on our pedagogy, and we should talk together about what matters and what we are trying to achieve before we act.

We should also remember to start as well as finish with assessment. Assessment is the initial insights into where our students are and where we will take them next. It is checking in during the lesson and taking time to reteach that which has not been understood before moving on.

Good assessment comes from knowing what is required and understanding why. It is about knowing what will help our students to learn more and how to allow them to demonstrate their best achievements. A starting point to improve your assessment practices for K-10 is the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) [Advice on Assessment](#). For Years 11-12, NESA's [Stage 6 Assessment](#) and [11-12 Assessment Advice](#) are important reading.

## Final thoughts

There will always be days when we could have done better. This article seeks to help you avoid the mistakes I have made. If we begin with our hearts in the right place and with a strong understanding of what is necessary and why some approaches can be effective, we can be well placed to assess in ways which are best and most wise for both ourselves and our students.

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