

THE 5 CS FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT COMMUNICATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Purpose: Higher education students experience elevated levels of anxiety in relation to summative assessment (Walsh, 2021; Knight and Walsh, 2023). This can be exacerbated by ineffective communication of assessment requirements and expectations. However, developing clear, accessible and inclusive assignment briefs is challenging.

Background: Drawing on best practice and emergent research, this practical, hands-on workshop will share a recently developed framework to support the development of effective assignment briefs as part of inclusive assessment practices. By the end of the workshop, participants will be able to: identify the characteristics of effective assessment communication; apply a critical framework to an assignment brief to identify potential communication issues; and, use a framework to develop a communicatively effective assignment task.

Key points: The *5 Cs Framework* requires assignment briefs to be *clear, consistent, concise and comprehensive*. It is also important to design opportunities for students and staff to engage in *conversation* around the brief. This promotes critical engagement with disciplinary, academic and institutional norms at a level appropriate to their needs and supports the internalisation of valued tacit knowledge.

Procedure: Following a brief presentation and rationale for the *5 Cs Framework*, participants will engage with and critique an example brief and then develop their own assignment briefs. Participants are encouraged to bring their own assignment briefs for review and development. Workshop activities will involve a mix of individual and paired/group work with opportunities for questions and discussion.

Participants: This workshop is relevant to all higher educational professionals involved in assessment processes.

Keywords: *Communication, assignment brief, inclusive assessment, 5 Cs Framework, higher education.*

1. Introduction

Assessment is central and unavoidable within higher education (Boud, 1995), with challenges for both students and educators (Boud, 2006). Students experience elevated levels of anxiety in relation to summative assessment, which can be exacerbated by ineffective communication of assessment requirements and expectations in assignment briefs (Walsh, 2021; Knight & Walsh, 2023). At the same time, developing clear, accessible, and inclusive assignment briefs is challenging. Embedded within their own disciplinary and professional communities, educators may have different understandings of what can be tacitly assumed and what should be made explicit in their communications with students (Williams, 2005; Collier & Morgan, 2008). Their own knowledge of rhetorical practices within their disciplines may also be largely tacit and under explored (McGrath, Negretti & Nicholls, 2019). The aim of the *5 Cs Framework* is to provide educators with a means of designing effective assignment briefs that reduce student anxiety and provide a basis for confident and optimal engagement with assessed work.

The concept of academic literacies (e.g., Lea & Street, 1998, 2006) provides a useful frame within which to contextualise and examine the challenges faced by students in interpreting assignment briefs. Armed with what prior knowledge they have and only a partial understanding of the disciplinary discourse, students must find ways of engaging with their assessed work. They must do so according to rules and assumptions privileged within their disciplinary contexts which may be at best be only partially visible and acknowledged and at worst arcane and opaque (Lillis, 2001). Their situation is exacerbated by the unequal power differentials inherent in the higher education context which render the assignment brief authoritative in the Bakhtinian sense (1981), and thus incontestable, even when it is problematic. Where assignment briefs are ill-formed, ambiguous or unclear, students can locate difficulties in interpreting them internally,

with consequent implications for their confidence and identities as learners. Assignment briefs have a normative function in that they provide the very fabric upon which students develop confidence in and understanding of valued and privileged ways of thinking and doing within their disciplines (Knight, 2024). This relates strongly to Sadler's (2014) concept of goal knowledge. Goal knowledge is the student's idea of 'what a final work should look like' (Sadler, 2014, p. 4); it is a complex combination of understanding both the end (the final work) and the means, the process and structure by which the end is achieved. The assignment brief plays a key role in providing the basis for students to respond appropriately to the assessed task. Clearly, the student has to invent their own response, but without clear and unambiguous guidance, they cannot be expected to do so successfully.

Although assignment brief design is a relatively unexplored aspect of the assessment process (Gilbert & Maguire 2011), Gilbert and Maguire (2014) provide a robust set of guidelines for the design and delivery of effective assignment briefs and Hughes (2009) outlines a useful framework for the design of effective assessment tasks. Drawing on both, the *5 Cs Framework* was developed by the facilitators as part of doctoral research activities in Ireland and the UK (Walsh, 2021; Knight, 2024). Its aim is to provide an intuitive, portable, and non-disciplinary specific tool to guide educators in a critical engagement with an aspect of the assignment setting process that may otherwise remain unexamined. A further practical motivation in developing the *5 Cs Framework* is to ensure that assignment briefs are cognitively efficient (e.g., Sweller, van Merriënboer, & Paas, 2019). That is, that they support students in processing their instructions and task (i.e., intrinsic cognitive load) and remove, where possible, any distracting and unnecessary material (i.e., extraneous cognitive load) in order to allow students to focus their finite cognitive capacity and affective resources on engaging with the assessed task itself (germane cognitive load).

2. Purpose and objectives

The aim of this workshop is to share the *5 Cs Framework*. This framework is intended to support the development of effective assignment briefs by requiring them to be clear, consistent, concise, and comprehensive. It is also important to design opportunities for students and staff to engage in conversation around the brief, promoting critical engagement with disciplinary, academic, and institutional norms at a level appropriate to their needs (Cureton, Groves, Day, & Williams, 2017). It arguably also provides a basis for transformative engagement with the assessment process (Lillis & Scott, 2015).

By the end of the workshop, participants will be able to:

- Identify the characteristics of effective assessment communication.
- Apply the *5 Cs Framework* to an assignment brief to identify potential communication issues.
- Use Hughes' Assessment Task Design framework to develop a communicatively effective assignment task.

3. Workshop format

This 45-minute workshop begins with a brief 15-minute explanation by the facilitators of the underlying rationale for the *5 Cs Framework*. Working in pairs, participants will use the framework to engage with and critique an example brief and apply Hughes' Assessment Task Design framework to redesign the assignment task (20 minutes). The workshop will conclude with a 10-minute plenary with opportunities for comment and discussion.

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