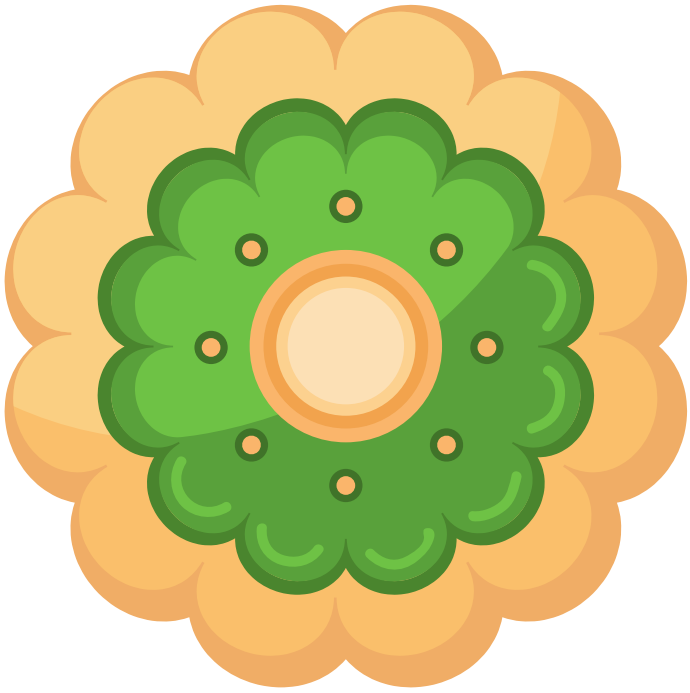
THE BISCUIT GAME:
Exploring Criteria for Assessment



This game has been devised for use with students, staff new to assessing and experienced staff. It is a fun activity to raise some very serious issues about the complexities and socially situated nature of assessment and to build assessment literacy (Smith, Worsfold, Davies, Fisher, & McPhail, 2013). The exercise gets people thinking about what a biscuit is and what the criteria are for biscuits of different quality and then gives them a practical task assessing biscuits, and aiming to achieve consensus. This is important because according to Price *et al*. (2012) newcomers need to learn about assessment as they do anything else: through doing and dialogue rather than simply receiving information.

This activity is designed to be serious fun: the biscuits are real but are also metaphors for assessed tasks like 'portfolios' or 'design briefs' or 'reports' with parallel dialogue around what they constitute, what a good one looks like and so on. The limits on how many people you can run this task with are constrained by the size of the room and the budget of the biscuit buyer.

EQUIPMENT NECESSARY

For each table of up to 10 people you will need a selection of 'biscuits' including, for example, a Jaffa cake, a rich tea biscuit, a ginger biscuit, a bargain-range shortcake biscuit, an expensive 'quality' biscuit and a Hobnob, plus a cream cracker, a high-bake water biscuit, a piece of Scottish shortbread, a piece of flapjack, and a large coffee shop cookie. These should be on a plate on top of the table and should be covered with foil or a napkin so they are not visible. If you are feeling generous you might choose to have spares of all of these biscuits available for eating after the exercise.

THE ACTIVITY

Task one: As an individual, in 180 characters describe what a biscuit is, either on paper or as a Tweet. If the latter, these can be shared on the hashtag #biscuitcriteria

Task two: With colleagues at your table, compare your definitions and aim to achieve consensus about what biscuits are.

Task three: Unwrap the biscuit plate in the middle of the table and collectively try to decide, using your agreed definitions, whether the items on the plate are biscuits.

Task four: At your table, discuss what the criteria are for good biscuits. Aim to have criteria across five grades: outstanding biscuits, good biscuits, adequate biscuits, poor biscuits and completely unacceptable biscuits.

Task five: Collectively choose from your plate five items that you agree are biscuits and collectively rate them on the scale of 1 to 5.

Task six: Discuss how difficult it has been for you to achieve consensus on the ratings for your biscuits.

Task seven: Discuss in small groups, or in plenary, the assessment issues that have arisen during the biscuit exercise. Explore how the same issues are reflected in confusion by both students and academic markers about what criteria really mean in practice, how these might be differentially weighted, and how clarity on consensus can be achieved prior to use on a real assessed task.

At the end of the task, if you haven't already over-handled the biscuits, you may eat them.

COMMENTARY

A. It is often useful to start from individual perspectives at the outset of an assignment and clarify preconceptions.

B. Assessment is a complex, nuanced task with some grey areas, and just as agreed definitions of biscuits are not always readily achievable, also assignments benefit from ample dialogue at an early stage to clarify expectations and surface tacit assumptions.

C. Category definitions can sometimes be complicated when setting assignments. It is helpful well in advance of an assessment to agree definitions of what is for example a portfolio.

D. It can be helpful for new staff and experienced staff, to bring to the surface the fact that although criteria may be considered to be explicit, the way people interpret and apply agreed criteria can differ substantially.

E. Assessment of complex works is an imprecise and inexact activity and it is helpful to recognise that absolute certainty about grades is not always achievable, especially if more than one person is involved.

F. Generic discussion about assessment, and how we grade, can be extremely valuable in developing assessment literacy.

NOTES ON BISCUITS: see #biscuitcriteria

The term comes from the French, 'bis cuit' i.e. twice cooked, but not all biscuits are cooked twice (although Italian biscotti certainly are).

Precise distinctions between biscuits, cookies and crackers are difficult to achieve.

Many would suggest that the difference between a biscuit and a cake (according to UK legislation relating to VAT payable on Jaffa cakes) is that biscuits go soft when stale whereas cake goes hard.

There are potentially cultural dimensions to biscuit definitions, for example, in the US, 'biscuits' can be what people in the UK call 'scones' and may be served with gravy (which is rather different from UK style gravy). In many nations, the concept 'biscuit' is not widely understood or frequently used and tea or coffee is more normally served with cake.

Contested criteria include whether they have to be sweet and crisp, the extent to which they can be dunked and whether a very large biscuit should technically be called a cookie.

REFERENCES

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This game and many other valuable resources are also available in the *Anglia Assessment Album* www.anglia.ac.uk/anglia-learning-and-teaching/good-teaching-practice-and-innovation/assessment-and-feedback/angliaassessment-album)

FURTHER NOTES

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