

## Civics teachers' assessment practices in Swedish upper secondary schools. A qualitative study.

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**Keywords:** Civics, assessment decisions, teacher agency, assessment practice, assessment rationales

### Highlights:

- Civics teachers assess a broad content, but there are some core areas.
- Different cognitive skills are measured focusing on reasoning skills, characterizing Civics.
- Teachers use a variety of methods, though written assignments are most common.
- Contextual factors and teachers' beliefs strongly affect teacher agency in assessment decisions.

**Purpose:** The aim is to qualitatively explore Civics teachers' assessment decisions regarding content, skills, and methods in Swedish upper secondary schools.

**Methodology:** Thematic analyses of assignments and interviews of thirteen Civics teachers in Swedish upper secondary school.

**Findings:** The open Swedish curriculum and Civics syllabus enables teacher agency in assessment decisions and teachers do not find it necessary to assess all content. The thirteen teachers varied their assessment methods, which are mainly chosen from rationales other than measured content and skills. Teacher agency in assessment decisions is affected by teachers' experiences and beliefs, Civics canonic traditions, and context, rather than education or curricular demands, except for a performative discourse focusing on grades.

**Research limitations/implications:** Though limited to a small sample in Swedish upper secondary schools and Civics, findings may be applicable in similar open/flexible subjects and similar national contexts.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In this article, thirteen Civics teachers' decisions about content, skills, and methods in assessments is explored, as are factors influencing these decisions. Every day teachers evaluate students' knowledge and development, and assessing is an integral part of instruction (Penuel and Shepard 2016). Teachers were found to spend as much as one third of their working hours on assessment activities (Moss 2013). In this, they make many decisions about what content and skills to measure, and which methods to use (McMillan 2003). Teachers' assessment decisions are influenced by different factors, like personal beliefs and the curriculum (McMillan 2003). Still, little is known about these processes, as only a few empirical studies, mostly survey studies using teachers' self-reports, address teachers' assessment decisions (Bonner, Torres Rivera, and Chen 2018). Drawing on interviews and examples of teachers' assignments, this study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of teachers' assessment practices.

Irrespective of whether the purpose is formative or summative, methods need to be appropriate to the skills they are intended to measure (Kane and Wools 2020). Even if validity is of greater importance to summative uses as grading, assessments should also be appropriate for formative uses, as teachers need to give relevant feedback which guides students toward the intended goals. Exploring teachers' assessment decisions about content, skills, and methods is therefore of interest for both summative and formative uses.

Teachers' assessment practices are often constrained by their teaching environment (James and Pedder 2006), affecting teacher agency (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). Different socio-cultural contexts affect teachers' assessment practices differently (Allal 2013; Edwards 2020; Klenowski 2013). Therefore, it is of interest to investigate teachers' assessment practices in different countries. In Sweden, unlike in most other countries, teachers grade students, justifying with teacher-made assignments (Lundahl et al. 2015). These grades are used to select which students will attend higher education and influence employers' choice of whom to hire. This makes most teacher assignments important and high-stakes for students. What content and skills teachers assess, and how, will influence students' perceptions about what is important to learn and students' learning strategies (Brookhart and Durkin 2003). The specific Swedish context makes it interesting to explore Swedish teachers' assessment decision-making and agency.

School subjects differ in their character of both content and skills, for example a subject can be open and flexible (like Civics), with weak frames, or closed and hierarchical (like mathematics), with strong frames (Bernstein 1975; Biberman-Shalev et al. 2011). The character of the subject seems to affect teachers' assessment practices (Biberman-Shalev et al. 2011; McMillan 2001; Prøitz 2013), and this might also affect teacher agency (Priestley et al. 2015). But only few studies, not least in Civics, explore the influence of the subject matter on assessments (Barton and Avery 2016; Torrez and Claunch-Lebsack 2014). This study will contribute to the understanding of how subject matter might influence teachers' assessment practices.

## 1.1 Purpose

The aim is to qualitatively explore Civics teachers' assessment decisions in the Swedish upper secondary school. Research questions are: What content and skills are assessed in teachers' assignments, which methods are used and how are these related? What influences teachers' decisions regarding content, skills, and methods?

## 2 CIVICS IN THE SWEDISH CONTEXT

The national context as well as the subject's character seem to affect teachers' assessment practices. Therefore, the specific Swedish context needs to be outlined.

After compulsory school, most youths continue into the Swedish upper secondary school ("gymnasium"), attending either vocational or higher education preparatory programs, in which subjects are studied in different courses (Skolverket 2011). All courses' syllabi consist of three parts: the aim of the subject, core content (including both facts and skills), and grades' knowledge requirements. Some courses are mandatory for all programs, and the first Civics course is one of these (Skolverket 2011). Students in preparatory programs study a more extensive course, Civics 1b, and students in vocational programs a shorter course, Civics 1a1. This article focuses on these two courses, both of which have broad content. The core content in Civics 1b is (Skolverket 2022):

- Democracy and political systems at local, national, and international levels; and political ideologies.
- Human rights.
- International law in armed conflicts.
- Labor market and its parties, labor law, and work environment.
- Groups and individual identities, relationships and living conditions.
- National economics.
- Personal finances and consumer rights.
- Media and information technology.
- Source criticism.
- Social science concepts, theories, and methods.
- Presentation in various formats (both oral and written).

Civics 1a1 differs in that it excludes the content about political ideologies, national economics, and social science.

Grades use the scale A–F, where A is the highest grade and F means failed (Skolverket 2017). The knowledge requirements express skills with different levels of quality for each of the grades E, C, and A. An example of a knowledge requirement in Civics for grade 'E' is as follows:

The student can also briefly outline human rights (Skolverket 2022).

The progression between grades is expressed by exchanging the bolded words to **extensively** for grade C and **extensively and nuanced** for grade A.

Civics is considered an open and flexible subject with weak frames, lacking a clear canon (Hadley and Young 2018; Öberg and Bäckström 2021). This view has been criticized, as this vagueness is mainly based on curricular studies (Olsson 2016). Empirical studies in Sweden show a clearer subject, with a core content of political science and economics (Odenstad 2011; Olsson 2016). Therefore, even though the Swedish Civics syllabi might be vague, there seems to be a common core content in teachers' teaching and assessments, indicating a canonic tradition (Öberg and Bäckström 2021). At the same time, a great variation in teaching and assessment methods between teachers were found, explained by teachers' different preferences.

The Swedish curricular reform in 1994 marked a change from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced grades, emphasizing more reasoning skills (Wahlström and Sundberg 2015). Summative assessments were more emphasized in the curricular reform 2011, while also a strong discourse for formative assessment has been developed. There are no external tests in Civics at the upper secondary school in Sweden, only in other subjects (Lundahl, Hultén, and Tveit 2017). Instead, unlike in most other countries, Swedish teachers are responsible for assessing and grading students, making teachers' assignments decisive when it comes to students' grades.

The subject character is civic competence (Torrez and Claunch-Lebsack 2014), focusing on citizenship, reasoning skills, and critical thinking (Sandahl, Tväråna, and Jakobsson 2022; Wahlström, Adolfsson, and Vogt 2020). Wahlström, et al. claim the syllabus involves performance-based generic competencies, which they find to be more emphasized than a discipline-based content. They still find them to be strong frames, as the performative discourse accentuates the grading knowledge requirements, forcing teachers to gather evidence for grading. Teachers, however, express these generic competencies in connection with subject content and seem to perceive skills such as analysis as different in Civics than in other subjects (Jansson and Löfgren 2022).

### **3 THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This article explores factors influencing teachers' assessment decisions about content, skills, and methods. Civics teachers are not entirely steered by influencing factors and maintain some professional autonomy (Forsberg and Wermke 2012). The theory of teacher agency will contribute to the understanding of influencing factors and teachers' autonomy in assessment.

Teachers can achieve agency (an ability to act) "through the interplay of personal capacities and the resources, affordances and constraints of the environment by means of which individuals act" (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 17). Agency is a temporal process, influenced by history (iterational dimension), oriented towards the future (projective dimension), and an action in the present (practical–evaluative dimension).

In the iterational dimension, teacher agency is influenced both by general history (for example educational reforms), and teachers' individual histories, like earlier experience and education. Agency will be enriched if teachers have a broad repertoire of options to

choose between, which are affected by teachers' personal capacity, beliefs (both private and professional), and values.

The projective dimension is an ability to see several alternative trajectories for action, which can be short- or long-term. Teachers' ambitions regarding their work are important, for example, if they are oriented toward improving student learning or are more instrumentally oriented toward maintaining a normal and acceptable classroom. These ambitions are often based on teachers' beliefs and values.

The practical–evaluative dimension is about teachers' daily work environment and entails teachers' capacity to judge among alternative courses of action, within prevalent contextual conditions. These contextual conditions may enable or constrain agency, which means teachers' beliefs and practices do not necessarily align. Conditions are cultural, structural, or material. Cultural factors are ideas, values, beliefs, and discourses. Structural factors are social structures in form of relationships, roles, power, and trust. Material factors are resources that inhibit or make agency possible, and the physical environment. The Swedish curricular reforms in 2011 changed the cultural context, and teachers' earlier autonomy became more restricted (Bergh and Wahlström 2018). Also, earlier experiences were challenged, and teacher agency were perceived more restricted. Both more and less experienced teachers express increased pressure regarding assessments.

There are tensions between different dimensions (Priestley et al. 2015), for example, between an open curriculum enabling teacher agency and policies to improve quality through increased control like inspections and external tests. Another tension is between teachers' beliefs and values and social conditions, for example a non-collaborative culture may limit a teacher with a broad repertoire and strong ambitions. Swedish teachers express a need to balance summative grading demands in the curriculum and formative wishes to pull students for success (Bergh and Wahlström 2018; Jansson and Löfgren 2022). Also, improving learning and pulling for students have to be balanced with administrative limitations like lesson length and teachers' workload (Jansson and Löfgren 2022; Lumadi 2013).

Accordingly, teachers may achieve agency in assessment decisions, influenced by the iterational, projective, and practical–evaluative dimensions, within their cultural, structural, and material context. Therefore, this study use teacher agency when analyzing influencing factors on teachers' decisions about content, skills, and methods.

#### **4 RESEARCH ON ASSESSMENT PRACTICES**

There is literature about how teachers should design assessments (c.f. McMillan 2018), but research about teachers' actual assessment practices is rare, both in general and specifically in Civics (McMillan 2013; Torrez and Claunch-Lebsack 2014). Some studies were found which concern teachers' assessment practices in relation to different school grades, national contexts, and subjects. Also, some studies concern explanations for teachers' assessment practices.

#### **4.1 School grades and national contexts**

Earlier studies found teachers mostly assess recalling facts using paper-and-pencil tests, even though teachers express they prefer alternative assessments (Bonner et al. 2018; Brookhart and Durkin 2003; Mattson 1989). Practices seem to differ between school grades, where primary and elementary teachers tend to use more informal assessments, like observations, while secondary teachers use more written tests, home assignments, and essay items (Acar-Erdol and Yıldızlı 2018; Brookhart 2013; Onyefulu 2018; Osman 2021; Suah and Ong 2012; Zhang and Burry-Stock 2003). There seems to be some differences between countries, indicating national differences in assessment practices (Allal 2013; Klenowski 2013), which motivates research in different national contexts. This study is only about upper secondary school, and recent studies have found that secondary teachers used a vary of methods, such as teacher-created tests, oral questions and exams, home assignments, observations, and presentations (Kippers et al. 2018; Wherfel, Monda-Amaya, and Shriner 2022).

#### **4.2 Subject differences and civics**

Various subjects face different challenges, including the curriculum, which seems to affect teachers' assessment practices. Studies imply that subject matter affects assessment practices (Acar-Erdol and Yıldızlı 2018; Prøitz 2013). Also, teachers' assessment practices seem to differ across content areas (Zhang and Burry-Stock 2003). American secondary teachers were found to mainly use varying teacher-made assessments, where quizzes and objective tests were most common, and authentic assessments, team projects, and oral presentations were less common (McMillan 2001). English teachers appeared to differ the most, emphasizing higher-order thinking, using more constructed-response items and less recall items, objective items, and quizzes, than science, mathematics, and social studies teachers. A Canadian study found similar results, but mathematics teachers differed the most in more preferring constructed-response assessments than teachers in other subjects, although quizzes and objective assessments were still the most frequently used (Duncan and Noonan 2007). The differences in both studies were slight, though, and more research was suggested. Swedish studies found low alignment in content and cognitive skills between upper secondary history teachers' assignments and the syllabus, although alignment seems to have improved in recent years (Kakoulidou 2021; Rosenlund 2016). History teachers tended to emphasize remembering and understanding facts rather than reasoning skills.

Knowledge about assessments in Civics is rare (Torrez and Claunch-Lebsack 2014). Due to the character of Civics, literature emphasizes inquiring methods and alternative, authentic, and performance assessments instead of paper-and-pencil tests. Teachers' practices seem to differ from these ideals, as Civics teachers often use objective tests measuring factual knowledge, instead of performance assessments (Brookhart and Durkin 2003; Curry and Smith 2017; Jansson 2011; Mattson 1989; Odenstad 2011). In

Sweden, assignments in most subjects (95% in Civics) measured factual knowledge in the 1980s (Mattson 1989). Later studies found assessing factual knowledge was still common in Civics, differing between 50–90% of the items in paper-and-pencil tests, although other skills were measured more often than before (Jansson 2011; Lindmark 2013; Odenstad 2011). Also, paper-and-pencil tests were more common when assessing the content areas of Swedish government and economics than other areas (Öberg and Bäckström 2021; Odenstad 2011).

### **4.3 Explanations for assessment decisions**

American teachers find it difficult to provide explanations to their assessment decisions (McMillan and Nash 2000). Their assessment practices have been found to be idiosyncratic, and teachers consider assessment a private matter, rarely discussed with colleagues. Their decisions are, however affected by what kind of knowledge to measure, for example when measuring recalling, objective items were used, and constructed-response items were used to measure understanding, applying, or reasoning. The teachers also express the importance of variation, and mostly rely on teacher-made tests instead of publisher-made tests.

Teachers promote a variation of assessment methods, mainly because this would help students succeed (Atjonen 2014; Jansson and Löfgren 2022; McMillan and Nash 2000). Finnish comprehensive schoolteachers expressed the importance of obtaining clear evidence from assessments and avoiding inappropriate methods, for example using numerical feedback (Atjonen 2014). Teachers, though, seem to be suspicious about using alternative assessments and are deeply rooted in traditional assessment methods, using numerical assessment of factual knowledge (Davis and Neitzel 2011).

Interestingly, teachers do not seem to use many of the assessment methods recommended by literature and there is a discrepancy between teachers' perceptions of assessment and their practice (Acar-Erdol and Yıldızlı 2018; Amani et al. 2021; Campbell 2013). An explanation may be that teachers lack formal education in assessment processes, being unprepared and having inadequate knowledge in how to design, evaluate, or use assessments (Amani et al. 2021; Campbell 2013; Cooper, Klinger, and McAdie 2017; Moss 2013). Instead, their practices are influenced by the socio-cultural context in which they learned and worked, from their experience, and from colleagues. This also includes emotions for certain methods (Edwards 2020), and intuitive feelings (Vanlommel et al. 2017).

Furthermore, the environment influence assessment decisions, constraining or easing different practices (James and Pedder 2006; Klenowski 2013; McMillan 2003). In theory, class size might ease time-consuming assessment practices like performance assessments and observations, but a Canadian study did not support such influences, nor a significant effect of school size on assessment practices (Duncan and Noonan 2007).

In summary, research on what and how teachers assess is still rare, as is knowledge about explanations for teachers' assessment practices. This article will contribute such knowledge.

## 5 METHOD

This study explores teachers' decisions about content, skills, and methods in assessments and explanations for these decisions. Most research about assessment practices have used teachers' self-reports, relying on either surveys or interviews. A few also used observations, mainly to explore informal assessments. However, only rarely have teachers' assignments been used. This study uses both teacher-made assignments and semi-structured interviews to strengthen its findings on teachers' assessment practices (Bryman 2016).

### 5.1 Sample and collecting data

First, all 108 Civics teachers in all upper secondary schools in 17 municipalities, varying in sizes, were asked to submit a set of assignments used in the first Civics courses 1a1/1b. Only 16 teachers submitted assignments, which risks a biased sample, for example teachers believing their assignments are not good enough may be unwilling to participate. There was, however, a good variety in their assignments, enabling rich data for thematic analyses (Braun and Clarke 2013). Therefore, all 16 responding teachers were asked for interviews, and 13 accepted. These had different backgrounds, six woman and seven men, all were of Swedish origin except one. They worked in different settings, in both public and private schools, differing in size and in both larger cities and small towns. They were all experienced teachers, had obtained a Civics teacher degree between 1988 and 2014 (except one teacher who was educated in subjects other than Civics). None of the teachers took an assessment course during teacher education, such a course first became mandatory for students beginning in 2011 (graduating in 2016).

The interviews lasted between 46 and 106 minutes and were conducted at the teachers' schools during spring 2019. To allow teachers to talk relatively freely, broad main questions were asked (Appendix), i.e., "tell me about how you do your assessments", or "tell me how you reason when choosing between different assessment methods". Follow-up questions concerned, for example, what affects their decisions, and the relationships between content, skills, and methods. Specific questions about their submitted assignments were also asked. Towards the end of the thirteen interviews, data saturation was perceived. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In accordance with the ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council (2017), the participants were informed, both before and during the interview, about the aim of the study, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. Also, their anonymity was guaranteed, and therefore pseudonyms are used in the excerpts.



## 5.2 Thematic analysis

To describe teachers' assessment practices, thematic analyses were conducted (Braun and Clarke 2013). The themes about content, skills, and methods (in the tables) are mainly based on the 13 teachers' submitted assignments but are also supplemented with the interviews when they mention assignments they use but did not submit. Quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate these themes. The interviews were also analyzed to find themes about explanations for the teachers' assessment decisions.

The interviews and the assignments were read several times to get familiar with the content. Close to the empirical data, initial codes emerged. Independently of frequency, all potential codes were sorted into preliminary themes. These were sorted into main themes and sub-themes, then examined and revised several times to get clear definitions and names. The themes about methods and explanations only emanate from data, though teacher agency is used to discuss influencing factors. The themes about content were sorted in accordance with the core content of the Civics 1b syllabus, and the themes of assessed skills were created from Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson et al. 2001).

**Figure 1. Customized bloom's revised taxonomy as used in the analysis**

The knowledge dimension	The cognitive process dimension						
	Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create	
Factual knowledge							
Conceptual knowledge							
Procedural knowledge							
(Metacognitive Knowledge)							

This taxonomy consists of two dimensions (Figure 1). The knowledge dimension is about knowledge content. 'Factual knowledge' is the basic facts of a discipline, like terminology and specific details. 'Conceptual knowledge' is the interrelationships between these basic facts, such as classifications/categories, generalizations, models, and theories. 'Procedural knowledge' is about subject-specific skills and methods. 'Metacognitive knowledge' refers to general cognition, like learning strategies and self-knowledge.

The cognitive process dimension is about how knowledge is used, for example, you can remember or apply conceptual knowledge. 'Remember' is to retrieve knowledge. 'Understand' means to construct meaning, for example by being able to interpret, exemplify or explain. 'Apply' is to implement for example a theory or a model. 'Analyze' means to see relations between the parts and their over-arching structure. 'Evaluate' means making judgments, for example about pros and cons. Finally, 'create' is to reorganize knowledge in new patterns, for example by generating new hypotheses.

In the analyses, no differentiation was made between factual and conceptual

knowledge, as it was not found purposive. Most codes were sorted into the different cognitive categories relating to factual and conceptual knowledge. Some codes, mainly about disciplined inquiry, were sorted into procedural knowledge but were not divided into different cognitive skills. A few codes also related to metacognitive knowledge.

## 6 FINDINGS

Teachers' assessment decisions on content, skills, and methods were explored. The qualitatively different themes found in these three areas are described below, followed by analyses of relationships between them. Thereafter, teachers' explanations for their decisions are analyzed, and finally influencing factors on assessment decisions and teacher agency are discussed.

This is a qualitative study, and although some findings are presented in tables with numbers, and wordings, like "most" and "only one", are used, these are only indications, not generalizable results.

### 6.1 Assessed content

The themes regarding assessed content were compared to the Civics syllabus' core content. Teachers were found to assess a variety of subject areas covering all the core content (Table 1). The content most often assessed involves political systems, especially the Swedish government, human rights, groups, and individuals' living conditions, national economics, personal finances, and source criticism. Other content is more varied, and some are often assessed in connection with another area, for example the labor market can be assessed with national economics and media with political systems. Some teachers also assess sustainable development, which is not explicitly addressed in the syllabus' core content.

All teachers do not assess all core content, at least not explicitly. Esther explains:

I think I have become more relaxed about the core content over the years. In the beginning, and I don't know why, I was like, I had to check everything. But we don't need to. Instead, some things can be less attended to, and then we deepen into something that suits well. So, I think the core content is, in a way, like a smorgasbord; we take it into account and then it comes into an assignment.  
(Esther)

Early in her career Esther was more anxious to assess all content, but with experience, her approach to the syllabus has changed, and is now more relaxed. Using the metaphor "smorgasbord" she expresses, like several others, that she can choose what content to emphasize and assess. Therefore, the syllabus seems to be a week frame, as the core content seems not to be perceived as something teachers must assess.

The teachers express different preferences about what they do not always assess, mentioning the labor market, the European Union, international law, and the media. Some

say they do not have a specific assignment for groups' and individuals' living conditions but include this in other tasks. All teachers emphasize however, that they address all content in their teaching. The specific subject areas of ideologies and social science methods are not included in the shorter course for the vocational programs, and therefore not assessed in vocational classes.

**Table 1. Number of assignments assessing a content area**

Assessed content	Teachers n = 13	Assignments n = 99 (15)
Democracy and political systems at local, national, and international levels. Political ideologies	13	30 (5)
EU	8	9 (2)
Ideologies	8	9 (2)
Swedish government	12	19 (1)
Human rights	12	18 (0)
International relations	9	12 (1)
International law	7	8 (0)
Labor market and its parties, labor law and work environment	9	12 (0)
Groups and individuals' identities, relations and living conditions	12	28 (3)
National economics	12	27 (3)
Personal finances and consumer rights	12	27 (3)
Media and information technology	5	8 (2)
Source criticism	13	25 (0)
Social science concepts, theories, and methods	8	10 (1)
Sustainable development	3	4 (0)

*Sub-themes are included in main themes numbers. Numbers in parentheses are the number of non-submitted assignments found in the interviews.*

Most teachers express that almost the same content areas (political systems, economics, and source criticism) are the most heavily weighted when grading. Also, human rights and personal finances are mentioned, not necessarily because teachers find these to be especially important, but because they are specific knowledge requirements. Teachers therefore express that these areas specifically must be assessed. Several teachers, however, find it troublesome that these specific issues so heavily influence grading. The knowledge requirements therefore seem to influence assessments more than the core content.

In Civics, the teachers express the importance of relating assignments to current issues, as this characterizes the subject. Maria expresses:

It can be like that I change, yes, I can change altogether. It really depends on what is happening in the real world. (Maria)

Maria says she revises her tasks considering current topics. Still, this updating falls within the core content, for example Nora says she relates her assignments in human rights to different current topics. Several teachers also say they choose issues they believe students

are interested in, to motivate them. These issues can be, but are not necessarily, current topics.

In summary, these findings are in line with earlier studies, which found a core of political systems and economics (Öberg and Bäckström 2021; Odenstad 2011; Olsson 2016), but this study also adds a focus on human rights, group and individual living conditions, and the skill to criticize sources. The character of Civics also influences assessments, as teachers relate assignments to current issues.

## 6.2 Assessed skills

The themes of assessed skills were sorted into the different categories in Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson et al. 2001). When teachers talk about assessed skills, they frequently mention "reasoning", but do not always explain what reasoning is. Nora gives an explanation that summarizes what most teachers express:

For example, an extended reasoning, well, it can be to give two-to-three examples that you discuss in several stages, and they understand it. Or a nuanced reasoning can be to view a phenomenon from different perspectives, to twist and turn and analyze opposing arguments. (Nora)

First, Nora express reasoning to involve exemplifying and understanding, which correspond to 'understand' in the taxonomy. To discuss in several stages and use different perspectives corresponds to 'analyze'. Finally, handling arguments relates to 'evaluate'. Reasoning, therefore, seems to mean to understand, analyze, and evaluate.

The teachers assess different cognitive skills, emphasizing the reasoning skills to understand, analyze, and evaluate factual and conceptual knowledge (Table 2). Several teachers still assess remembering skills in written tests, but this does not seem to dominate assessment practices. They also assess skills to apply and create, but more rarely. They also often assess procedural knowledge skills, mainly writing reports and source criticism. One teacher, Simon, regularly uses exit tickets to evaluate metacognitive skills.

When assessing 'remembering' teachers mainly use written tests with short-answer questions and/or essay-questions. Only one teacher, Erik, used multiple choice and binary questions. Some other used a matching item (pairing party leaders to their parties). This seems to differ from practices in many other countries, where objective items are more common (McMillan 2001; Onyefulu 2018; Osman 2021; Suah and Ong 2012). Some items may seem to evaluate more complex skills, for example discussing the pros and cons of using GDP as a measure of welfare, but such discussion is common in most textbooks. Also, the same reasoning that is asked for in a test item sometimes occurred during class, as Erik says:

but everything that will be assessed, I have actually told them. (Erik)

This means students do not necessarily need to discuss themselves in the test, and such items risk that students will only remember from class or textbooks.

**Table 2. Number of assignments assessing skills**

Assessed skills	Teachers n = 13	Assignments n = 91 (7)
Cognitive dimension (regarding factual and conceptual knowledge)		
Remember	10	17 (0)
Understand	13	75 (2)
Apply	7	13 (0)
Analyze	13	53 (0)
Evaluate	13	49 (2)
Create	10	14 (2)
Knowledge dimension		
Procedural knowledge	13	39 (5)
Metacognitive knowledge	1	3 (0)

*Sub-themes are included in main themes numbers. Numbers in parentheses are the number of non-submitted assignments found in the interviews.*

'Understanding' is assessed in most assignments teachers use. Students often need to explain in their own words, to summarize, to draw simple conclusions, or to exemplify. They also need to understand to solve applying, analyzing, and evaluating tasks, which explains why understanding is coded in most assignments. Applying is not measured as often as other skills in this sample. Example items can be to use some models, especially in national economics, or to apply theories or concepts.

Analyzing tasks are often about finding causes and consequences, or to do complex comparisons, for example between different governmental systems. An example is:

The students can see the whole, if they can see the whole, they understand better how everything is connected. (Simon)

Simon expresses that students need to see relationships between different parts, and how the parts relate to the whole, which corresponds to 'analyze' in the taxonomy. Analyzing items are always about some subject content, and sometimes teachers also provide specific social science analytic models. (The only exception is Simon, who expresses he can use students' analyses from other subjects, like science, when evaluating student performance in Civics. Simon is also the only teacher not educated in Civics, which might explain this.) In contrast to the curricular findings of Wahlström et al. (2020), the teachers seem not to view analyzing as a generic competence, but a subject specific competence (Jansson and Löfgren 2022).

'Evaluating' tasks are often about seeing pros and cons, identifying different views, seeing weaknesses or strengths, or arguing for or against a topic, for example globalization. To 'create' involves tasks asking students to draw conclusions, make hypotheses, or to come up with solutions.

'Procedural knowledge' is mostly about social science methods, although not often involving collecting empirical data, but rather compiling information from different texts. This measures students' skills in searching, choosing and processing information, and

writing reports in a scientific manner, including referencing. Several teachers emphasize source criticism as a character of Civics, like Lars:

But in Civics, I think, source criticism and referencing is rather central. (Lars)

Other more rarely assessed procedural skills include debating, presenting, or holding speeches.

In summary, earlier findings found that Civics teachers mostly assessed remembering skills using paper-and-pencil tests (Brookhart and Durkin 2003; Curry and Smith 2017; Lindmark 2013; Mattson 1989). This study implies changed assessment practices, as assessing 'remembering' seems not to be as dominant as before and teachers use more performance assessments; measuring reasoning skills as 'understanding', 'analyzing', and 'evaluating'. This means teachers' practices are more aligned with assessment literature, the syllabus, and the subject character, which focus reasoning skills and critical thinking (Sandahl et al. 2022; Torrez and Claunch-Lebsack 2014; Wahlström et al. 2020).

### 6.3 Assessment methods

There is a great variation in the methods teachers use. Most common are written assignments, followed by oral, while multimedia assignments are rarer (Table 3). Only one teacher used multimedia tasks regularly, while two others gave them as alternatives to an oral or written assignment. All teachers use classroom activities for mostly informal, but sometimes formal, assessment. They do express, though, that classroom activities weighted low in grading. They are mostly used for borderline cases to strengthen doubtful performances, helping students achieving a higher grade. Regarding other oral formats, presentations, seminars, and debates are other oral formats sometimes used, while others are rare. Several teachers express they would like to use more oral tasks, as discussing is central in Civics, but they find documenting oral performances difficult, and such performance is often only noted in teachers' minds.

Home assignments are the most-used written method, and the most used of all methods. All the teachers use home assignments, although some let the students do them at school. These tasks can either be restricted tasks with specific questions, or more extensive tasks where students choose an issue to write about. Traditional paper-and-pencil tests (sometimes completed digitally) are also common, but are not used by everyone. Some teachers even express they do not like written tests, others say they use them because their students want them. Reports are also often used, but mainly in preparatory programs, as this is a specific goal in their Civics course, but not in vocal programs. Other written formats are sparsely used.

Finnish teachers express using numerical scores in assignments as inappropriate, although they still use them (Atjonen 2014). The Swedish teachers are divided about this. Erik says:

**Table 3. Number of assessment methods**

Assessed methods	Teachers n = 13	Assignments n = 111 (30)
Multimedia formats	3	3 (1)
Pod/Film	3	3 (1)
Website	1	1 (0)
Oral formats	13	35 (12)
Class activity	13	17 (14)
Debate	5	5 (3)
Individual oral presentation	1	1 (0)
Make a presentation	8	11 (0)
Make a speech	1	1 (0)
Roleplay	2	2 (1)
Seminars	6	9 (3)
Written formats	13	74 (9)
Debate article	2	2 (0)
Exhibition, poster	2	2 (1)
Home assignment	13	41 (3)
News coverage	1	1 (1)
Report	8	10 (3)
Written (paper-and-pencil) test	9	18 (1)

*Sub-themes are included in main themes numbers. Numbers in parentheses are the number of non-submitted assignments found in the interviews.*

I use written tests because it's something that has high acceptance among students, and they know that format and it has some sort of legitimacy [...] So it's rewarding to design written tests that way and they are used to this with scores and the like. (Erik)

He is positive to use both written tests and numerical scores because students, especially in vocational programs, find them legitimate, being accustomed to such practices. Most of the others are critical, like Esther:

This is totally alien to me, as we have our knowledge requirements that, like this question [...] it measures problem-solving. How can three points be something then? I don't know! (Esther)

Referring to the knowledge requirements, which emphasize reasoning skills, Esther expresses that scores are useless, as they do not say anything about the strengths and weaknesses of student performance. Also, scores cannot be used for formative purposes. Most teachers in this study agree with their Finnish colleagues, but unlike in Finland, numerical practices seem more uncommon in Sweden.

All teachers vary the format of their assignments, and several teachers talk about the importance of variation, for example Alva states:

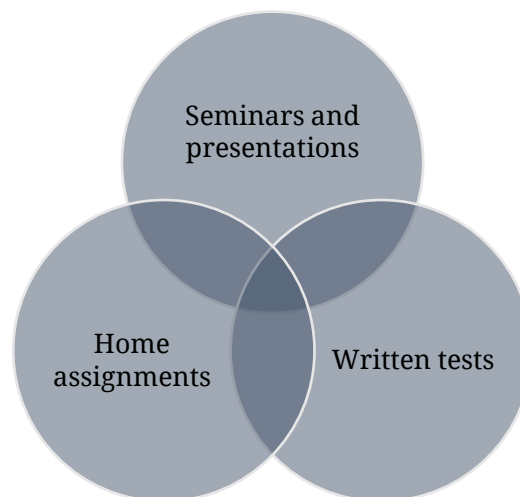
But then, a variation is demanded, both from the outside as it is written in the syllabus up to the steering documents, but also because we need this variation.

The students with different abilities should at least sometimes have it their way.  
(Alva)

Variation, Alva says, is important because it is stipulated in the curriculum and the syllabus, but also because of the need to accommodate different students' needs. It is both an external demand and a teacher belief. Teachers sometimes also adapt to students' needs by letting students choose assessment format, either individually or in groups.

Among the teachers, three kinds of assessment method practices appear (Figure 2): one preferring oral assignments, mainly seminars and presentations, and the other preferring written assignments, of which one mostly uses home assignments and the other more written tests. They also use other formats but do so more rarely. As all teachers vary their assignments, these practices overlap. Irrespective of format, teachers mostly design their own assignments, and only a few were not teacher-made<sup>1</sup>, which is similar to earlier findings (McMillan 2001; McMillan and Nash 2000).

**Figure 2. Teachers' assessment method practices**



In summary, these findings imply a changed assessment practice among upper secondary Civics teachers in Sweden. Earlier, written tests were most often used (Jansson 2011; Mattson 1989; Odenstad 2011), but now practices are more varied and home assignments are the most common, implying Swedish Civics teachers are not suspicious to alternative assessments (Davis and Neitzel 2011). Furthermore, their varying practice differs from practices in other countries like Finland and the USA (Atjonen 2014; Bonner et al. 2018), but is similar to Dutch teachers, who also use a variety of assessment formats (Kippers et al. 2018).

#### **6.4 Relationships between content, skills, and methods**

The interviews were analyzed to find relationships between content, skills, and methods. According to assessment literature, some methods are more suited to measure some



content or skills than others (McMillan 2018). Therefore, a rationale for assessment decisions could be which content or skills intended to be measured. But when asked about this, several teachers found it difficult to answer, for example, John says:

Yes, I believe it does. I haven't had any deeper thoughts about it at least. Yet, I think most of them work. Or, like I said, I just haven't thought much about it. I think it works rather well. (John)

John expresses he has not given such relationships much thought and he, like the other teachers, thinks most content areas and skills can be measured with any method. As earlier research found (Acar-Erdol and Yıldızlı 2018; Amani et al. 2021; Campbell 2013), the teachers do not seem to follow the recommendations in literature. Instead, they express personal, and even emotional, preferences for their choice of methods, for example, Rebecka says: "but I love seminars!"

Several teachers express the importance of designing different assignments that make it possible during the course to evaluate all different skills in the knowledge requirements, but also to evaluate student performance on different grade levels. For example, Lars says:

But how can I design a task that covers all levels: is it possible to answer extensively and nuanced on this question, or is it designed so it's only possible to answer briefly? (Lars)

He expresses the need to design items that enable enriched answers to be able to measure the progression between grades. The knowledge requirements therefore seem to strongly affect teachers' assessment decisions.

The teachers are divided about the use of written tests. Most of them use them, but some of the teachers do not because they find them to be inappropriate. Those who use them find them useful for assessing content areas characterized by facts and terminology, like national economics, and political systems, especially the Swedish government. Some teachers also use written tests to measure skills other than 'remembering', using mainly restricted essay items, for example, to measure 'analyzing'. Other teachers find them less useful for reasoning skills, as Nora says:

I would say that written tests are the most difficult to design and evaluate [...] But I think it's difficult to evaluate the different grade levels with written tests when students have a limited time to write and then they still must have the possibility to achieve a nuanced reasoning. That's hard. (Nora)

Nora finds the limited time for completing a test restrictive for developed answers. Such items are also difficult to design. Therefore, she finds written tests more appropriate for 'remembering' than reasoning skills.

All teachers use home assignments, expressing that these are more useful for reasoning content, and therefore for measuring reasoning skills like 'analyzing', for example, relationships or cause and effect. Hanna says:

I think that much of the analysis benefits from working with something for a longer period, because then you can write some now and then, you read through, and you come up with new stuff, and that's how an analysis develops. And then I find home assignments better than written tests, in which you must perform in a short time, many students also being stressed, and analyses won't be as deep. (Hanna)

Hanna expresses deeper analyses require time, and therefore home assignments are better than written tests for measuring reasoning skills. Teachers find home assignments to be less useful for remembering facts, however, as students have access to textbooks. Teachers also mention preventing cheating to be problematic when teachers cannot control the entire work process, as students do some work at home. Some teachers prevent this by using digital exam programs which the students can only use in school, not allowing them to work at home.

The teachers also find reports useful for reasoning content, like democracy, human rights, gender, and when students can freely choose topics to explore. With reports, teachers express they can measure analyzing, discussing, and arguing skills, but also the ability to perform scientific methods and reports. Also, reports give students an opportunity to present in different formats.

Some teachers use arguing assignments, either oral or written, which they find useful for topics, like gender or the death penalty. Teachers express that oral assessments in general are useful for reasoning and complex content, like sustainable development, private finances, labor law, and norms, but not political systems and national economics. Teachers orally measure skills like arguing, discussing, being creative, and using concepts and knowledge.

An advantage of oral assessments is the possibility to ask follow-up questions, enabling students to develop their answers, for example in an analysis. Some teachers express that oral assessments are underestimated and could be used more often, but they also express that they are difficult to evaluate. Furthermore, because of the summative focus in the 2011 reforms, teachers say they use written assignments more often, as these are easier to document for grading. Another difficulty is expressed by Hanna:

But it could just as well have been an oral exam, but it's rather that you don't have the time, if you have 30 students you can't have an oral exam. But it would have worked just as well. (Hanna)

She finds oral exams to be just as useful as written tests, but they are time-consuming and therefore hard to use. Another use is that most teachers let students complement inadequate written assignments orally.

A few of the teachers involve their students in a UN roleplay. They express that this task allows them to evaluate students' skills in arguing, analyzing, and discussing when students, representing different countries in UN committees, discuss and argues for their countries' positions.

Multimedia assignments are rare. Tomas sometimes uses pods or films, for example on private finances and consumer rights, as an alternative to a written presentation. The students choose whether they do a pod, a film, or write a text, and they are expected to reason about the topics, not only describe them.

In summary, several teachers initially express that there are no clearly adequate methods for assessing different content or skills. Like in McMillan and Nash's (2000) study, the Swedish teachers found it difficult to explain their assessment decisions. This might imply that teachers' assessment decisions are intuitive, emotional, and unreflective (Edwards 2020; Vanlommel et al. 2017), but also that teachers may lack a professional language for assessments (Colnerud and Granström 2015). Assessing seems to also be a tacit knowledge, and teachers' practices, like in other countries, are shaped more by experience than by teacher education (Amani et al. 2021; Campbell 2013; Cooper et al. 2017), which may explain teachers' difficulty in explaining their rationales.

But like American teachers (McMillan and Nash 2000), the Swedish teachers do express some relationships, as several of them express that written tests are suitable for content with a lot of facts and therefore to evaluate 'remembering', but for reasoning skills like 'understanding' and 'analyzing', they use other formats, mainly home assignments and seminars. For procedural knowledge skills, teachers mainly use performance-based assignments like reports. Their assessment decisions seem to be based on their own preferences and earlier experiences, rather than on teacher education (Edwards 2020; McMillan 2003; Öberg and Bäckström 2021).

## **6.5 Influencing factors and teacher agency**

Teacher agency in assessment decisions was found to be influenced by teachers' earlier experiences in the iterative dimension. Teachers in many countries lack education in assessing, and assessment practices are shaped by teachers' own values and preferences (Amani et al. 2021; Campbell 2013; Cooper et al. 2017). All the teachers in this study attended teacher education before an assessment course became mandatory, and they all express that assessment was only rarely addressed during their education. Instead, they express that their practices are influenced by their experiences as students, from colleagues (especially during their first in-service years), and later from their experiences as teachers. They also express individual preferences for some methods, including emotional rationales (Edwards 2020). The lack of assessment education risks a narrower repertoire of assessment options, further restricting agency (Priestley et al. 2015).

The projective dimension in teacher agency is future-oriented and about seeing different trajectories for action. The teachers seem to think long-term when planning their assessments for a whole course. They want to cover all knowledge requirements during the whole course, preferably twice, to enable students to improve. They also want to prepare students for upcoming courses and for higher education (Jansson and Löfgren 2022), which is why they emphasize source criticism and using reports in preparatory

programs.

The discourse advocating for formative assessment in Sweden (Wahlström and Sundberg 2015) is a cultural factor that might influence teacher agency in the practical–evaluative dimension. Interestingly, even though teachers often express formative purposes, to improve learning and pull students to success (Jansson and Löfgren 2022), teachers do not talk much about formative assessment when reasoning about designing assessments. The use of assessments to promote learning seems to not seem affect decisions about content, skills, and methods, except that several teachers strongly reject numerical practices, finding them to be useless for formative purposes.

Instead, educational reforms have a greater impact on teachers' assessment decisions. The 2011 reforms meant a performative discourse emphasizing summative grading assessments (Bergh and Wahlström 2018). The teachers who were in-service before the 2011 reforms, express that these reforms affected their assessment practices. They felt a stronger demand for gathering evidence for grading, which affects their design of assignments, for example a need to assess all knowledge requirements and all grade levels. Like earlier findings (Bergh and Wahlström 2018; Priestley et al. 2015), this means the performative discourse restricts teacher agency.

Priestley et al. (2015) also describe tensions between an open curriculum and performative policies. This seems to be true regarding the knowledge requirements, but teachers seem to have a more relaxed approach to the Civics syllabus' core content. The core content seems not to restrict agency; instead, teachers express great freedom of choice about what content to assess and which methods to use (except they must use both oral and written assignments). This seems to confirm that Civics is an open and flexible subject, lacking a clear canon (Hadley and Young 2018; McMillan 2001; Öberg and Bäckström 2021). Still, there seems to be a subject core content that is assessed more often. Furthermore, current topics, a subject character, are something teachers consider when designing tasks. Earlier studies also found a common core content in teachers' assessments, indicating a canonic tradition in Civics (Öberg and Bäckström 2021; Odenstad 2011; Olsson 2016). This canonic tradition discourse seems to influence assessed content more than the rather open syllabus. One exception is the specific content about human rights and personal finances in the knowledge requirements that all teachers feel obliged to assess (Jansson and Löfgren 2022).

Students' needs and interests are structural factors teachers consider to some degree. Sometimes this influences teachers' choice of method, for example, some teachers express they use written tests even though they do not like them because students want them. Teachers sometimes also let students choose assignment format, for example either write a text, or present orally, or (rarely) make a pod. Class size could also affect the choice of method (Duncan and Noonan 2007; James and Pedder 2006; McMillan 2003), but only a few teachers mention this, expressing organizing seminars and the like are easier with smaller classes.

Teachers' relationships to colleagues, another structural factor, seems to not be as important, except during early service. The teachers express they mostly design their assignments themselves and rarely do so together with colleagues. But even though this is a non-collaborative culture, it does not necessarily mean it limits teachers with a broad repertoire and strong ambitions, as Priestley et al. (2015) found. Assessing seems to be a strongly individual practice, each doing their own work, not interfering in each other's domains.

Material conditions also affect assessment decisions. The teachers express they need to consider the schedule, students' workload, and teachers' working hours in their choice of number of assignments, content, and methods, but also in the design of single assignments. For example, some would like to use more oral assignments, but limited time makes this difficult. These material conditions therefore restrict teacher agency, and they cause tensions to both curricular demands and teachers' own beliefs and values, for example improving learning (Jansson and Löfgren 2022; Lumadi 2013).

In summary, the Swedish curriculum and the Civics syllabus define a core content and grading standards, but do not prescribe certain methods, enabling teacher agency in assessment decisions. Teachers achieve this agency and vary their assessments. They do not find it necessary to assess all content and choice of methods are made from rationales other than measured content and skills. Teacher agency regarding assessment practices is also influenced by teachers' experiences and beliefs, the Civics character, and canonic traditions, rather than education or curricular demands, although the grades knowledge requirements strongly affect assessment decisions.

## 7 DISCUSSION

Civics teachers seem to achieve a great deal of agency, as they are all able to form their own assessment practice, with a variation of assessments. However, teachers' assessment practices seem to be idiosyncratic (McMillan and Nash 2000). They emphasize different content and skills, and they have preference for different methods. Some teachers use written tests more often, mainly to measure remembering facts, while other use more home assignments or seminars focusing on reasoning skills. As assessments heavily impact what students learn and their learning strategies (Brookhart and Durkin 2003), students may develop different strategies and learning depending on their teacher's assessment practice. Students also risk being graded on different grounds, which risk equivalent assessment. Still, this freedom can be positive, as teachers can adapt assessments to students' needs and interests, but also to teachers' own interests, making their work more meaningful.

Teacher agency is also affected by a strong performative discourse, which teachers need balance with formative purposes like promoting learning and pulling students to succeed (Jansson and Löfgren 2022; Priestley et al. 2015). They also need to balance their preferences to limited administrative resources as schedule and work-time (Lumadi 2013). At the same time, teacher agency could be enhanced if teachers were less bound to canonic

traditions. Assessment education could also improve teacher agency and their assessment decisions, giving teachers a broader assessment repertoire. This could also enhance validity, equipping teachers to choose adequate methods, depending on what content and skills they intend to assess.

This study implies that Swedish Civics teachers' assessment practices are more aligned today with the assessment literature, the reasoning character of the subject, and the curriculum, which also means that assessments are more valid to curricular purposes. This might be an adaptation to the changes in the curriculum and syllabus. The teachers in this study say that they changed their assessment practices due to the 2011 reforms, at least to some degree, mainly adapting to the knowledge requirements. But the criterion-referenced grading emphasizing more reasoning skills was already introduced in 1994. Still, written tests measuring remembering facts seem to have been common in Civics fifteen years later (Jansson 2011; Lindmark 2013; Odenstad 2011). A faster adaptation after 2011 may be explained by more teachers being educated in accordance with the cognitive views of the 1994 curriculum. If so, teacher education could be important in supporting and developing teachers' assessment practices (Cooper et al. 2017). However, Swedish history teachers seem not to have changed their practices (Kakoulidou 2021; Rosenlund 2016). This could be due to different framing (Bernstein 1975), Civics having weaker frames and history stronger frames due to subject traditions. Further studies need to be conducted to explore whether assessment practices might differ depending on teacher assessment education or on the subject matter. This also implies that teachers' beliefs and values more strongly affect assessment practices than the curriculum. Teachers' beliefs and values seem to take a long time to change, something that needs to be considered when implementing political reforms.

## 8 LIMITATIONS

This study is based on data from only thirteen teachers, which means generalization is not possible. The participants' different backgrounds and settings though, should enable capturing most of the variation in Swedish Civics teachers' assessment practices and enable qualitatively distinct themes (Braun and Clarke 2013), and interesting indications are found. The findings may also be used for "generalization through recognition of patterns" (Larsson 2009) and may be applicable in similar open/flexible subjects and similar national contexts. However, further research is needed to strengthen the findings and should also be conducted in other contexts and subjects.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mainly some cases from the Swedish Consumer Agency, but also a UN roleplay.

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview guide**

1. My primary interest is to know how teachers make their assessments and how you reason about your assessments. I am grateful to you for setting aside time for this interview which is supposed to take no more than an hour and a half. In order not to take more of your precious time than that, I could sometimes interrupt you to move on to get answers to the questions that are my focus. To begin with, I would like to know a little about your background as a teacher, can you tell us a little briefly about it?
  - What subjects do you teach (have a teacher degree in)?
  - What Civics courses do you teach?
  - What programs do you teach on?
  - How many years have you worked as a teacher?
  - What training have you received in assessment?
  
2. Tell me about how you do your assessments in the courses Civics 1a1 and/or 1b.
  - What assessments are used?
  - How many?
  - Do assessments differ depending on the program? If so, how?
  - What are assessments used for? (summative, formative, diagnostic, etc.)?
  - Do Civics teachers at your school cooperate on the construction of assignments and in assessment? How?
  
3. Tell me how you reason when choosing between different assessment methods.
  - When do you choose which assessment forms to use?
  - What (factors) influence the choice of assessment form?
  - Do all students do the same assignments or are they adapted to students' needs/wishes? (How?)
  - Are some forms of assessment better suited than others to different content areas? (How? Why?)
  - Are different forms of assessment better suited to some forms of knowledge than others? (How? Why?)
  - How do you reason about the assessment of the central content of the course? (Does everything need to be assessed? Why/Why not? What content is assessed? Why these? Why not the others?)

4. Tell me how you do when you are going to set grades in a course.
  - How is students' knowledge development documented in different assignments?  
How is informal assessment documented in the classroom?
  - How are different assessments weighed together into one grade?  
(Are some assessments more important than others?)
  - How do you handle (informal) assessment in the classroom when grading?
  - How do you deal with borderline cases? How do you deal with students with uneven knowledge profiles?
  
5. You have submitted your assignments that you use to assess students' knowledge development. Could you tell us a little bit about the context around them and how you thought about each of them?
  - What forms of knowledge are each instrument intended to assess?
  - What kind of feedback do students receive in the different assessment instruments?  
(i.e., scores, ratings, matrix, formative comments)
  - What information did students receive about the assignment (purpose? Assessment criteria?)
  - [Specific questions about the submitted assignments.]