

Serial number 0185
Title A participatory approach to developing outward-facing assessments
Submitter Dr. Thomas Kador, Prof. Helen Chatterjee

A participatory approach to developing outward-facing assessments

Note

This paper is linked to a round table session on external-facing assessments, proposed by Nicholas Grindle and Vincent Tong.

Introduction

Outward-facing assessments, i.e. students producing assessments directed at audiences, have been identified as an important element in students' immersion in their learning (Evans et al. 2015), thus helping them acquire both discipline specific and transferrable skills, such as team working, communication and digital practice (Fung 2017, 101). This is also in line with Knight's (2002) identified need to design assessments that are authentic, thus reflecting real world situations, and allow students to express themselves in their own voices (Fung 2017, 103). However, on a practical level, our experience tells us that students appear to struggle conceptualising an audience and how to reach and communicate with it, in the abstract. Put differently, they seem to find it difficult to produce outward-facing assessments aimed at imagined or notional audiences (Kador et al. 2017). Consequently, the best way to help students engage with the needs and interests of different audiences as well as to consider the most appropriate means and language to address them with, would seem to be through direct, actual engagements between students and real audiences as part of the learning process (Erekson 2011; Burns 2013).

In order to address this issue for two modules at University College London (UCL) we have devised a collaborative research project involving two student interns and the university's Public Engagement Unit (PEU).

Project background

Vertebrate life and Evolution (BIOLM018) is a third year undergraduate module primarily taken by biological science students. The module involves lectures, lab-based sessions and practicals. One of the latter involves students receiving an unidentified part of an animal, a 'mystery specimen', which they then have to try and identify, ideally to species level. They write their research up in the form of a journal article and present their discoveries through a seven-minute presentation, to their fellow students, university staff and the general public at the Grant Museum of Zoology.

Object Lessons (BASc2001) is a second year core module on UCL's interdisciplinary Bachelor Arts and Sciences programme. For the duration of one academic term each of the module's 45 students is allocated an object (item or specimen) from across UCL's museums and collections, including archaeological artefacts, art works, ethnographic objects, natural history, pathological or anatomical specimens, as well as rare books and manuscripts. The module is divided into an initial individual research component, where each student investigates and writes about 'their own' object, and a group work element, involving five/six students bringing their objects together to curate a virtual exhibition. Additionally, they get to present their exhibitions to staff and fellow students as part of a presentation day.

Both of these modules already incorporate an outward-facing dimension in terms of the public presentation for BIOLM018 and both the presentation and virtual exhibition for BASc2001. However, as mentioned above, it is very clear that many students find it difficult to conceive of an audience at which to pitch their research without having had the benefit of having interacted with it (Kador et al. 2017). This results in language being too academic, if a presentation/exhibition is aimed at children or teenagers, or too simple if the audience is a professional or graduate one. At worst, it can even make the students question the usefulness of such assessments – compared to more traditional essays or exams – if the actual audience receiving and assessing it is the same anyway, i.e. their teaching staff.

In this context we have decided to collaborate with two students, who each have taken either one of the two modules, in turning their notionally outward-facing assessments into assessments that are truly pitched at and communicated with specific public audiences.

Process and method

Initially the students each produced a critical review of the entire modules (not just the outward-facing assessment component) from a student's perspective, taking into consideration the module handbooks, assessment guidelines and online documentation (on Moodle) as well as student feedback gathered as part of the modules. Based on these reviews they highlighted where the modules fail to communicate their aims and objectives sufficiently clearly and made recommendations how this could be addressed.

From the outset of their involvement, the students also attended regular meetings with the UCL PEU who advised them on best practice in public engagement and key things to bear in mind when working with public audiences and community partners. On completion of the reviews the students began working with the PEU more intensively on redesigning the modules with a view to involving community partners in the learning and assessment process. This necessitated also reorganising the modules more holistically so that the outward-facing elements join up with other aspects of the modules.

Findings

While the project will only be truly completed when the first cohorts of students have taken the re-designed assessments (in 2017-18), there are several important insights that the project has already provided. First, initiating a genuine dialogue with undergraduate students and engaging them in questions of module design has been extremely eye opening to us as teachers in terms of how the students see the content of the modules and has thus already been very helpful in identifying specific areas where the clarity of how the modules are communicated to students could be improved. Equally, the students clearly benefitted from exploring the modules they had recently taken from a curriculum development and assessment design perspective. Second, collaboration between a student from a 'hard' science subject, such as Biology, with one from a culturally driven module, such as Object Lessons, has also been extremely beneficial to their respective understating of the occasionally competing epistemological frameworks of the two. Finally, thinking about potential audiences has made us all reflect on who the learning that students undertake, and the outputs they produce, within this context, is relevant for; especially beyond the university. This in turn forces us to confront the key question of the value of learning and how it relates to the 'real world'.

References

- Burns, H. 2013. Meaningful sustainability learning: A study of sustainability pedagogy in two university courses. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 25/2, 166-75.
- Erekson, K.A. 2011. From archive to awards ceremony: An approach for engaging students in historical research. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 10/4, 388-400.
- Evans, C., Muijs, D. and Tomlinson, M. 2015. *Engaged Student Learning: High-Impact Strategies to Enhance Student Achievement*. York: Higher Education Academy.
- Fung, D. 2017. *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education*. London: UCL Press.
- Kador, T., Chatterjee, H.J., and Hannan, L. 2017. The Materials of Life: Making meaning through object-based learning in twenty-first century Higher Education. In. D. Fung & B. Carnell (eds) *Disciplinary Approaches to Connecting the Higher Education Curriculum*. London, UCL Press.
- Knight, P.T. 2002. Summative Assessment in Higher Education: Practices in Disarray. *Studies in Higher Education* 27/3, 275– 286.