188

Interest-Based Assessment: The Role of Student Choice and Real-World Connections

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

In a context of greater financial and curricular constraints, we propose the notion of interest-based assessment to enable personalised learning in higher education. Through this student-staff partnership project, we asked what makes assessments interesting to students. We surveyed 668 students about their most interesting, engaging assessment and analysed 301 qualitative responses that explained why that assessment was so interesting. The most common explanation students offered was choice in some aspect of the assignment, including choice of topic, process, output format, or a combination. The second most common explanation was real-world connection, through issue, task, audience, or place. In systems of mass education with highly structured curricula, students need more spaces to explore and develop their own interests. We conclude that choice and real-world connection can underpin the design of interest-based assessments that enable students to pursue their own interests and goals, personalising their own education.

Full paper

Introduction

In many parts of the Global North, financial constraints are leading to rising class sizes and curricular revisions that involve fewer choices among modules (courses). Students, squeezed by cost-of-living increases, are also more likely to be working alongside studying, limiting their opportunities to engage in co-curricular activities. In this landscape, it is increasingly difficult to carve out spaces in which students can explore their interests and personalise their education. Yet, opportunities for students to pursue and develop their own interests are vital to their overall development, including their employability and capacity to engage in social change. While personalising learning to address student interests is common in primary education (Kucirkova et al., 2021) it is not well-developed in HE (Zhong, 2023).

Leveraging assessments, which are mandatory and occupy considerable student time and attention, may help. By asking what features of assessments students find most interesting, we

open discussion about how educators might design interest-based assessments that enable students to personalise their education.

Conceptual framework

We frame the study in interest research. Interest is characterised by 'increased attention, effort, concentration and affect during engagement' with meaning-making and deeper understanding (Renninger and Hidi, 2016, 9; Renninger and Hidi, 2022). Interest motivates students toward many positive learning behaviours that lead to higher academic achievement as well as influences career decision-making and success (Harter et al. 2016; Jansen et al. 2016; Nye et al. 2012; Quinlan and Renninger 2022; Renninger and Hidi 2022; Sansone et al. 2019). Interest is rewarding (Gottlieb et al. 2013), thus students seek it in their university programmes (Vulperhorst et al. 2020) and careers (Gallup, 2019).

Because interest theory assumes that students' interests are mutable, much research in this tradition has focused on instructional design features that stimulate and support students' interest, including cognitive activation, utility value, choice, novelty, and cultural sensitivity of curricula (Guo and Fryer, 2022; Hecht, et al., 2021; Patall et al., 2008; Quinlan, 2019; Quinlan et al., 2024). Choice is a pillar of learning personalisation (Kucirkova, et al., 2021; Patrick et al., 2013).

Methods

668 first year through master's students studying a range of disciplines at a mid-ranked English university responded to a short survey, briefly describing the most interesting, engaging assessment they have done at university. Students also rated the emotions associated with the assignments on a five point scale (1=not at all; 5=very strong) using a validated measure (Pekrun et al., 2017). Students rated the positive emotions of interested, curious, enjoyment and excited moderately to strongly, with means ranging from 3.35 (excited) to 4.04 (interested). Thus their described assessments were perceived, on average, as not just as relatively, but absolutely, interesting and engaging.

301 students (45%) voluntarily elaborated reasons for why they found this assessment interesting (n=343 explanations because some students gave multiple explanations). We focus on those explanations here. We coded each explanation, initially staying close to students' own words before combining common themes. For the most common codes, we delved into students explanations to develop sub-themes.

Results

Students described a range of typical assessment types, implying that any type could be engaging if designed appropriately. Table 2 summarises the explanations students offered. Choice was the most common theme (116), followed by real world connection (52). Most comments coded choice or real-world connection only had a single code (only 34% and 27%

overlapped), whereas challenge, collaboration and novelty tended to be secondary, overlapping codes.

Table 1.

Explanations students gave for why assessments were engaging or interesting

	N
Career related	12
Challenge	15
Choice	116
Collaboration	30
Deeper learning	24
Game-like	6
Integrative learning	5
Lay person audience	9
Multi-media	16
Novelty	32
Public demonstration	12
Real world connection	52
Self reflection	19
Other (e.g. hands-on, feedback, lower anxiety)	7

Students appreciated choice in the topic, process, output format of the final product, or a combination of these different kinds of choices. Real-world connections explanations were sub-coded as focussing on real-world issues, tasks, audiences, or places.

Discussion

Choice was central to promoting student interest in these assessments, offering students a rare opportunity in an otherwise highly structured curriculum to personalise their own learning. Choice has been under-researched in both assessment literature (Tai et al., 2021) and in interest research in higher education. More attention to how to effectively design interest-based assessments is needed. Further research on the effectiveness of these features in typical assessments (rather than their 'most interesting') is recommended. Students may also need scaffolding or support to ensure they are able to take best advantage of these features.

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