"This will never work!"—Challenging Assessment Orthodoxy in Online and Distance Learning (0176)

Reedy Gabriel [1], [1]*King's College, London, London, United Kingdom*

Abstract: In an innovative, design-based assessment project for an online distance Business Studies undergraduate course, students are encouraged to work in small groups using online tools to complete both shared and individual tasks. Rather than being of only notional or formative value to students, these tasks then contribute meaningfully to the assessment for the course. The project is designed to reflect the real world of business, while encouraging students to build knowledge collaboratively. The context of the project is explained, theoretical approaches influencing the design of the assessment are discussed, and ongoing further enquiry is outlined.

Designing Collaboration in Distance Learning

Progressive pedagogies have gradually changed the learning experience in classrooms at all educational levels. Students frequently work together on group projects, which involve both individual and collaborative work, and these can have a number of benefits for student learning. However, notwithstanding the widespread use of online forums, it has been harder to encourage collaborative working in online and distance learning environments, where learning is often still conceptualised as an individual endeavour.

The notion of using collaborative activity as a key part of assessed work, though again relatively common in face-to-face classrooms, is usually avoided in distance learning settings. Conducting a project-based assessment with a group of online students at a distance presents a myriad of logistical and technical problems that many distance educators would prefer to avoid.

Further complicating the picture is the call for educators to make their programmes more relevant to students, and to create learning experiences that reflect the fields and disciplines under study. In the case of Business Studies, for instance, it is fairly common for practitioners to work in geographically dispersed, cross-functional teams, which work together to accomplish a shared goal.

Description of the Project

A recent design-based project (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003) created a collaborative, project-based assessment for an open-access, distance-learning, undergraduate Business Studies programme. In addition to some of the issues outlined above, the course team was also concerned with what it means to be a business practitioner, and how that practice can be represented and assessed in a meaningful and genuine way. For instance, in the real world of business, working in a team is rarely a simple and structured experience with clearly laid-out tasks or workflow systems. The design of the assessment attempted to create a more genuine learning experience, reflecting the interpersonal and dynamic nature of working in business organisations.

This paper explores various aspects of the design of the assessment, and the theoretical justification for those design decisions. Further work, in progress, explores the artifacts and the outcomes of the work of over 400 students in the course, in an attempt to understand the nature of the interactions and the learning processes that happen in the process (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999).

Student Experience

The assessment consists of four basic stages, and each corresponds to a week's work for students. During the first stage, students are asked to choose a field of work, an organization, or a job that they aspire to, and begin their online research on what it might be like to work in. Simultaneously, in the group activity, students start to work together to come up with their own agreed list of criteria for how they might judge and assess the evidence they are collecting. The group process prompt is a similar list from survey conducted by a national professional organization.

Continuing that negotiation process into the second week of the activity, students finalize their list of criteria and their chosen research focus, and begin writing an individual report. In the third week, they finish their individual report and post it for their peers to review. Finally, in the last week, each student

reviews the work of two colleagues, providing structured and focused feedback based on the learning outcomes of the activity, while receiving feedback from two colleagues on their own work. Using that feedback, students rewrite and augment their work to take into account what they have learned. To reinforce the value of the peer review process, students are asked to write a small reflective paragraph on the feedback process explaining their perspectives on, and use of, the feedback they received.

Design Approaches

The design was influenced by a number of pedagogical theories and approaches, a few of which are outlined here; further details are included in the full paper and poster. These approaches are necessarily related to each other, and are often seen as complementary.

Genuine Assessment Reflects Activity in the Field

Assessment is often perceived as a necessary evil that is more useful for teachers and examiners than for student learning (Shepard, 2000). But assessment can also provide students with a chance to try new ways of thinking and working in a low-risk environment. In this case, it was designed to more accurately reflect "real world" activity in the field of Business and Management.

Collaborative Knowledge Creation

The process attempts to help create and foster a sense among students that they can learn from each other. By designing a process that pushes students to each other for their first feedback experience - and by asking structured feedback of them for their student colleagues - the activity builds an ethos of collaborative knowledge creation (Vygotksy, 1978). Importantly, peer review gives students not just a chance to learn about their own work, but to learn from what they see in others' work as well (DiPardo & Freedman, 1988; Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999).

Creating a Community of Learners

As one of a series of collaborative enquiry activities over an academic year, this assessment contributes to an environment where students and tutors work together to try and understand what happens in business organizations, and how to analyse business organisations (Brown, 1997).

Metacognitive Strategies for Learning

Metacognitive approaches (Bruner, 1996; Schraw, 1998) define what about a learning activity makes it such, so that students have explicit supports and explanations about what and how they should be learning. In the case of this assessment, each stage is explicitly situated in the context of the overall learning process, as well as in the context of how it reflects the reality of work in the field.

Preliminary Analysis and Further Research

Initial feedback from students and tutors highlighted the powerful learning experience, and the innovative nature of the assessment. Further enquiry is exploring the nature of student interaction, in particular the ways in which students interact in online group settings, and the qualities of student peer feedback.

Word count: 983

References

Bransford, J., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (Eds.). (1999). *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Brown, A. L. (1997). Transforming Schools into Communities of Thinking and Learning about Serious Matters. *American Psychologist, 52*(4), 399-413.

Bruner, J. (1996). *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

DiPardo, A., & Freedman, S. W. (1988). Peer Response Groups in the Writing Classroom: Theoretic Foundations and New Directions. *Review of Educational Research, 58*(2), 119-149.

Dochy, F., Segers, M., & Sluijsmans, D. (1999). The use of self-, peer and co-assessment in higher education: A review. *Studies in Higher Education, 24*, 331-350.

Schraw, G. (1998). Promoting general metacognitive awareness. *Instructional Science, 26*(1), 113-125.

Shepard, L. A. (2000). The Role of Assessment in a Learning Culture. *Educational Researcher, 29*(4), 4-14.

The Design-Based Research Collective (2003). Design-Based Research: An Emerging Paradigm for Educational Inquiry. *Educational Researcher, 32*(1), 5-8.

Vygotksy, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Mental Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.