

Assessment and student performativity: the surveillance of social attitudes and behavioral skills

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Background/context

Over the last 20 years radical changes have taken place in the way in which students are assessed in higher education. The shift toward more continuous assessment is widely regarded as ‘relatively uncontentious’ (Richardson, 2014:10) since it is connected with active, student-centred learning (Coates & McCormick, 2014). The diversification of assessment tools incorporates a stronger focus on group and peer learning processes seen as providing more ‘valid’ or ‘authentic’ forms of assessment relevant to employment (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). For this reason the literature on university assessment is focused principally on the learning benefits students derive from diversification and ways of operationalizing assessment tools.

However, many of these newer methods of assessment are notable for their emphasis on performativity defined as the measurement of observable student behaviours and attitudes which are audited in a public as opposed to private learning space (Macfarlane, 2014). Notably these include attendance and class contribution grading. The concept of performativity emerges out of the audit culture (Power, 1997). Increased demands for accountability via the auditing, monitoring, and evaluating of activities is associated with a loss of trust (O’Neill, 2002). The features of performativity may now also be observed in relation to the treatment of students at university.

Methodology

The research was based on a questionnaire asking undergraduate students at a university in Hong Kong (n. 299) to respond to a series of statements about the extent to which performative forms of assessment are used such as attendance and class contribution grades. It also sought to gain an understanding of student perceptions of these forms of assessment. Using a grounded theory approach based on systematic design (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) the qualitative comments were analysed to identify common themes arising from the data in representing the factors most frequently identified by the participants.

Findings

(i) Bodily performance

Attendance registers are taken ‘often’ or ‘always’ according to 59% of respondents but students were overwhelmingly critical of their use. These criticisms can be divided into *rights-based* and *learning-based* arguments. The former is represented by the view expressed by many students that they are adults/mature learners and should be entitled to choose and take the consequences accordingly (eg ‘students are mature enough to judge’; ‘student should be allowed to make choices themselves’; ‘universities should be a place to let students learn not force them to do so’). Unflattering parallels were made between university and school cultures in terms of the former granting no greater degree of personal autonomy than the former (eg ‘the university is now more like some kind of secondary school’). Other objections to attendance registers are

essentially learning-based. Students argued that attendance requirements do not necessarily produce learning benefits or foster student responsibility (eg 'sometimes attendance can really force students to go to class but just to sit in rather than engage'; 'if a student is able to be self-taught at home then he/she should have the right to choose not to go to the class'; 'professors should encourage students to attend class by their interesting teaching style instead of forcing them.' etc).

Respondents identified poor teaching as the main reason why students do not attend (eg 'if students find the lecture useful or informative they will attend of their own free will instead of being forced to do so with the attendance sheet.'). In-class assessments, such as tests and oral presentations are experienced 'often' or 'always' by most students (71%). These are associated with teachers using attendance proxies to ensure the physical or virtual presence of students (eg quizzes, tests, group work, compulsory on-line postings and hand outs only available in class) (eg 'many lecturers resort to other measures to ensure students attend class, such as giving out solutions to problems only during lectures and refusing to provide them on-line.').

Only a small minority of respondents supported the idea of compulsory class attendance as they regarded it as the student's responsibility and as signifying respect for the teacher and fellow students (eg 'attending class shows respect to peers and the lecturers'; 'being punctual is very important to show respect for the professor').

(ii) Participative performance

56.7% of students are 'often' or 'always' awarded an individual grade on the basis of their contribution in class. A minority of respondents felt this practice can be beneficial by developing their professional or work-related skills, making the learning environment more active. However, the vast majority of responses identified negative implications of grading class contributions. Learning-based criticisms were focused on the inappropriateness of this form of assessment for students who are shy, quiet, or prefer other learning styles; the way such grading practice overlooks other forms of participation (eg 'there are many students who listen to the lecturer all the time but do not say anything'); and the perception that class contribution grades are unfair (eg 'participation grades are impression marking and depends on the professor's impression without objective criteria'). In terms of rights-based arguments, students also argued that contribution grades might constraint free discussion as they are 'forced' to contribute (eg online discussion boards should be a 'way for us to learn rather than force me to speak'). The word 'force' or 'forced' was used 35 times in all comments. Finally, there was a keen awareness of the performative dimension of this form of assessment resulting in game-playing behaviours (eg 'students who speak because of marks not learning').

Implications/conclusion

Performative expectations have profoundly changed what it means to be a higher education student. The way in which university students are assessed now increasingly evaluates their social and behavioral skills rather than their intellectual understanding and achievements. Despite the purported benefits in terms of student learning this shift in assessment patterns is regarded by students in a largely negative light as undermining their freedom to make choices as

mature adults. The performative elements of what it means to ‘play the game’ of acquiring grades for attendance and class contribution are suggestive of an underestimated element in the university’s hidden curriculum.

References

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