

The convergence of actual and perceived outcome in group work assessment design: do the students fail their assessments or do the assessments fail their students? (0223)

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Abstract

Assessment measures both learning processes and the student experience. Research into student discipline cases involving assessment items, and appeals by students against assessment outcomes in both undergraduate and postgraduate studies, investigated whether students failed assessments or whether assessments failed students. Good assessment design produces authentic, appropriate-to-discipline, professionally contextualised assessment, with rigorous academic standards based on pre-determined, clearly articulated criteria that build upon the diversity of the student body and which mitigate disadvantages that students may have. Group based assessment exacerbates student vulnerability language, culture, diversity, or social factors are highlighted. The research reviews how design of group based assessment exposes risk, how the student experience is dominated by assessment processes rather than teaching and learning processes, what student satisfaction survey data reveals about the correlation between assessment and students experience, and how both academics and students focus their engagement on assessment events and instruments rather than ways of ensuring learning.

Key words: *Assessment design, group work, student experience, learning outcomes, authenticity, engagement, quality of learning.*

Introduction

Assessment design can be considered the primary measure of both learning processes and the student experience. If an institution claims that it provides a service such as employment ready graduates, there must be mechanisms to demonstrate that they achieve this by formally recognised and robust assessment. Failure to do so brings their reputation into question. Accepted assessment methodologies ensure the survival of educational institutions and provide "... [a]dequate guarantees that the integrity of the educational process is not being compromised" (Trenholm, 2006-07).

Growing concern about technology-based academic dishonesty fosters the decline of proctored assessment events. As Hard, Conway and Moran, (2002:1058) report: "Student academic misconduct, such as cheating and plagiarism, has increased in recent decades and is an important concern in higher education." Another issue for academics is the impact on teaching from workload inflation, resource depletion and changing study patterns.

Methodology

This research reviewed 129 cases of academic misconduct brought before the Faculty Student Discipline Panel, and 15 assessment appeals related to group work. In the assessment appeals, nine cases were dismissed while six were upheld. In the discipline cases, all the students (some of which involved more than one student) were disciplined for breaches of academic integrity, mainly plagiarism. 79 misconduct cases occurred in units where group work had a weighting of 100%.

This research was not concerned with 'traditional' cheating, cyber cheating, cut-and-paste plagiarism, or other forms of academic dishonesty such as contract cheating. The research considered cases where group work was weighted above 25% of a final grade, where group work was both peer assessed and instructor evaluated, and where group work was assessed as a single mark for the group product, then allocated to individuals.

The units in which discipline or appeal cases emerged were assessed for compliance regarding learning outcomes. All had clearly specified learning outcomes and graduate attributes listed. All had pre-determined assessment items with the values (Weighting) of these indicated. All had specific notes on group selection processes, and self-evaluation/peer evaluation of group members' input and contribution. In terms of compliance these published "unit outlines" met requirements and conformed to policy.

The research cross-referenced the views it was forming from discipline and appeal cases, with the cohort-wide student unit experience survey instrument called "eVALUate". This survey is conducted at the end of each teaching session/term, across all units/subject taught that semester. It has set questions and free flow text options for response. Comments and scores from students respondents were used to audit claims and assertions made in the discipline and appeals submissions.

Findings

The research found there was extensive collective marking. There was little or no evidence of individual marking. Emphasis consistently pointed to assessing the product of group work, which was assessed in much the same way as individual tasks and there was little or no evidence of understanding the group as they worked towards their goal(s). The design principle that required students to use knowledge and skills in group settings to solve problems in ways that are akin to how they are realistically used in *actual contexts* were difficult to identify terms of process evaluation.

There was little to no evidence of instructor leadership or guidance in determining group membership, in most cases students self-selected their groups, which were then essentially 'friendship groups' which defeated the authenticity claims that group work should reflect the workplace where the choice of co-workers is limited or not an option. Other deficits identified by student satisfaction surveys included the role(s) and responsibility of group members, group meetings, defining group processes and procedures.

The main concern for faculty and students was whether assessment of group activities fairly, equitably and transparently recognised the contribution and rewarded the learning of individuals. Student Satisfaction surveys indicated this to be a divergence zone rather than a convergence zone. Confusion and dissatisfaction about about how group, peer and self-assessment contributed to the fairness of the final grade was extensive, and quality assessment of learning, including moderation of results, was compromised.

There were particular concerns around the fairness of setting and assessing work in multi-cultural groups. Most appeals against assessment outcomes were from multi-cultural groups, and most discipline cases involved students where English was a second language for the majority or all of a group.

Conclusions

Assessment can be regarded as the one single factor that affects every students' life. Literature points to the notion that that students can escape from the effects of poor teaching, but it is likely that they cannot escape the effects of poor assessment if they wish to graduate.

The research concluded that while assessment is a central element in curriculum development because it critically links – *converges* - learning outcomes, content, learning and teaching activities. It does not only gauge what students have learned, it shapes how students approach their learning. Students attend university to get a degree, not to be entertained by 'good' instructors or to indulge in laboratory demonstrations. Student want to get qualified; in order to qualify they must pass assessments. The goal of deepening their understanding of their chosen discipline is not the reason students undertake a university education: it's to get 'a degree'. As such, their learning is focused on what they need to know and do to pass their coursework and examinations.

Implications for further research

Group work encourages peer learning and peer support. It demonstrates learning efficacy when conducted under proper conditions. This research uncovered less than ideal conditions and situations which are likely to be universally applicable; institutional initiatives and communities of practice are possible if the converging acrimony, conflict and freeloading, and a less than acceptable student experience that permeates poorly designed assessment such as the group work researched herein can be mitigated. The caveat that assessment is the first thing considered by students in planning their engagement with a topic should drive renewed optimisation as the consequences of group work for learning are viewed through the eyes of students, and not be used a mechanism for diverting academics from the technicalities of grading and moderation.

REFERENCES

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