Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

Alternative Assessment Methods: A study of the non-pedagogical factors surrounding their implementation

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Abstract: A study was conducted of alternative assessment methods. There are ample pedagogical and non-pedagogical arguments for moving beyond the essay and/or examination as the fundamental basis of assessment in HE, but a range of non-pedagogical factors tend to retard the employment of alternative methods such as group work, presentations, posters or online discussions, including concerns about the impact on workload, the student experience, or university bureaucracy. Staff at a UK Russell Group institution were surveyed by questionnaire and 17 more detailed case studies were conducted from September 2018 - January 2019 to gather information on the perceptions and processes involved with instituting alternative methods. It was found that students, staff and external bodies were generally enthusiastic about these methods, though we acknowledge our sample is self-selecting. Impact on workload was less clear, but alternative methods were found to typically spread out the load rather than concentrate it at the end.

Paper:

Introduction

We define "alternative" assessment methods (alt.assessment) as types other than essays (including variations such as literature reviews and reports) and examinations. These are not usually noted as non-traditional forms reviewed in recent research (e.g. Campbell, 2010). Common types of alt.assessment include, but are not limited to, group work, presentations, posters, videos, portfolios, podcasts, and online discussions. Some methods may be traditional in some disciplines but alternative in others, e.g. writing a computer program in Computer Science or Sociology, respectively.

Pedagogical arguments in favour of alt.assessment include the need to promote transferable skills. An ability to collaborate, communicate well and think critically is cited by employers as a core attribute of graduates (Chatterton and Rebbeck 2015). Theorists such as Bruce (2008) and Lloyd (2010) have noted the importance of having students work with information in ways that reflect workplace practices. In addition, the threat posed by 'essay mill' services to the integrity of assessment has prompted interest in grading the student, rather than their words. Digital technologies offer new opportunities: for example, it is now easier and cheaper to produce and store information in video form.

But despite these arguments, barriers to adoption remain, including a lack of objective data on issues like the impact on staff workload, the student experience, and whether alt.assessment meshes with other university procedures. Much information on these matters is anecdotal. There are widely-believed tropes such as "students dislike group work" which are not necessarily supported by evidence (itself, largely anecdotal) from those who have worked on assessing students in groups (Bevitt, 2015; Li and Campbell, 2008).

This study

We investigated non-pedagogical drivers and barriers for alternative methods. Our project ran at a large UK Russell Group university. An online survey was live between October and December 2018 for academic teaching colleagues to submit perceptions of alt.assessment. 84 responses were received, principally from Humanities and Life Sciences subjects (we received comparatively few responses from Engineering and the Physical Sciences).

Respondents who reported using alt.assessment were invited to volunteer for the second phase, a multiple case study with 17 participants. Each kept a weekly workload diary which itemised time spent on different aspects of the assessment process including: general preparation and administration; briefing students; assessment in progress; grading/marking; and student feedback. Participants were interviewed about their motivations and experiences with alt.assessment.

Our findings can be grouped into three key themes: learning outcomes; staff and student attitudes; and regulation and bureaucracy.

1: Learning outcomes

Many respondents stated that alternative methods allow students to develop and display skills valued by employers and professional bodies, such as collaboration and team work, time and project management, using different writing styles (e.g. for public engagement), reflective practice and using information in ways valued in the workplace (Bruce 2008). Alternative methods helped students relate theoretical knowledge to practice and 'real-world' situations, something seen as particularly important in clinical subjects. One interviewee whose students made a YouTube video to communicate concepts in pharmacy said:

> We can teach them a lot of technical stuff but when you are conveying information to a patient, it has to be in a way so they can understand it.

Nevertheless, outcomes valued in the disciplinary setting (for example, referencing and synthesising the literature) can still be addressed by alt.assessment. They complement traditional methods, helping structure students' learning and, for example, help with exam revision. Interviewees also noted that alternative methods guard against impersonation and malpractice, as they are more 'personal', assessing the student in context, not just the words on the page.

2: Staff and student attitudes

Students are often apprehensive about alternative methods in advance. Perhaps paradoxically, this

may be contributed to by the university taking high-achieving students. One interviewee suggested that such students had learned a way of being successful in exams and assignments, but different, less well-defined, assessments disrupt this approach.

However, respondents noted that as long as students are offered clear support and guidance, the impact on the student experience is positive. One interviewee said this year had been "probably the first time ever where students specifically said in feedback they had enjoyed doing the assessment".

The diaries revealed that impact on workload is variable. Often, work is redistributed through the semester rather than reduced. The first running of a new method requires an investment in preparation time, sometimes involving others (e.g. external stakeholders, technical support), but this investment pays off after the first year. However, almost all staff interviewed stressed the positive impact on *quality* of work, with alternative methods being more interesting to set, support and mark than essays or exams:

> *It helps keep examiners fresh…*

> *I don't have to read the same thing again and again and again*

3: Regulation and bureaucracy

Where relevant, professional accrediting bodies were not only supportive of alternative methods but in some cases actively encouraged their use. External examiners were likewise supportive. Even in this traditional Russell Group institution, there were, generally, no barriers created by programme committees and the like, although the long lead-in time to make amendments to courses was mentioned as one problem.

A recurring issue was that many alt.assessment methods not only cannot be marked anonymously, but to do so would defeat the object of the assessment. Staff using them either sidestepped or simply ignored regulations to mark anonymously.

Conclusion

The full report of the alt.assessment project is available (email drew.whitworth@manchester.ac.uk). Our conclusions include suggestions that the workload allocation model, and course approvals process, be made more flexible to allow for the diversity of alt.assessment. Further research could look in greater depth at how student feedback is affected with particular methods. More broadly, our findings support the notion that assessment for informed learning and the development of transferable skills can be integrated with the evaluation of disciplinary knowledge in ways that do not have a negative impact on either staff or student satisfaction.

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