Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Using co-construction and continuous assessment to empower and engage first year students

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: This work explores how the introduction of a new assessment strategy based on co-construction and continuous assessment can empower higher education students to become engaged and empowered learners. The motivation for this change was to improve retention, performance, attendance and engagement of a diverse first-year cohort of business students at a London-based institution. Going against the prevailing trends of reducing assessment in HE this strategy focuses on two fundamental pillars: continuity of participation underpinned by continuous assessment, and involving students in the co-construction of content and assessment. Guided by Dillenbourg's notion of students as collaborators, this approach fosters an environment that encourages learning and application and views assessment as an integral component of curriculum delivery, combined with content and student input. These strategies have resulted in increased attendance, participation, and module performance through improved student engagement and empowerment.

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Context

University educators have grappled with first year retention and progression for many years, and these issues have become more pronounced since widening participation has resulted in a more diverse student body from non-traditional backgrounds entering HE. A comprehensive review by Bovill, Bulley and Morss (2011) suggested that students who are both engaged and empowered find more success, and of critical importance underpinning both of these concepts is curriculum design. Therefore, our new assessment approach aimed at generating both engaged students, those investing effort in mastering the intended knowledge and skills (Lamborn, Newmann and Wehlage, 1992), and empowered students, those taking increasing ownership and control of their own learning process (Bovill, Bulley and Morss, 2011).

What we did

We introduced a new assessment strategy based on continuous and collaborative assessment in a core information technology and mathematics module in the first year of a Business School. Cognisant of the range of experiences and abilities that comprise our student body, and driven by a desire to engage this non-traditional cohort,our strategycomprised two elements:

·   an individual assignment based on data the students designedand collectedcollaboratively as a cohort (Boud et al., 1999; Chow, 2010)

·   a series of low stakesin-class tests, each of which was preceded by a practice test providing formative feedback, marked quickly with the solutions discussed in class (Black and Wiliam, 2009; Biggs and Tang, 2010)

In our approachwe have been influenced Dillenbourg's (1999) work on students as collaborators in the learning process, a philosophy of assessment for learning (Wiliam, 2011) and the activation of the learner as an agent making decisions on their future actions, as is common in formative assessment (Black and Wiliam, 2009). In designing our assessment approach, we made a conscious decision not to be limited by the number of assessments, as seems to be the current trend within the HE sector where the overriding approach is to reduce discrete assessment events. Instead, we made the quality and coherence of assessment our primary goal, looking to design a strategy that enables students to participate in richer learning experiences.

Collaboration in Assessment

The first assessment element required students to analyse a set of data and write a report using quantitatively justified statements. Instead of providing all students with the same data set, the data set was co-constructed through collaboration amongst the students. In the first half of the first teaching block the cohort were put into groups in the classroom and tasked to produce ten questions relevant to students on the module. Each group then presented these to the class and collectively they decided on whether to include the question in the final survey used to generate the data for the individual assessment. By performing such group-work in class, this exercise had the benefit of developing group-working skills but without the challenges felt by many non-traditional students who may have long commutes, other responsibilities, and those who live at home and therefore are not co-located with other students in their group. Since these were first year students, face-to-face group interaction was preferred over distributed groups using assistive technologies to reinforce group dynamics. By involving students in the creation of the data, we aimed to instil a sense of ownership and relevance, authenticated by their peers, thus supporting student empowerment by being involved in the academic decisions which affect them.

In order to adhere to Dillenbourg's (1999)classificationand to acknowledge the complexity of power relations in assessment between tutors and students (Reynolds and Trehan, 2000), whist the students self-managed the development of the questionnaires, the academic facilitated the process by randomly assigning the students to their groups, providing guidance on the expectations of the group members, and by specifying the remit of the group as a whole (Dillenbourg, 1999).

To develop the analytical skills needed to analyse their data, the assessment strategy also included a continuous assessment component embedded into the flow of the module, eg: low-stakes in-class activities such as tests and interpretation of graphs. Each assessment element was designed with characteristics after Nicol and McFarlane-Dick's principles of good feedback (2007), including a pre-briefing that focuses on the assessment criteria, a quick turnaround of feedback, and specific timetabled slots for reflection on the process, by both the students and the lecturer, which encourages dialogue and motivation.

The multiple in-class assessments were scheduled from the third week, and then continuedregularly throughout the module, encouraging students to be engaged with the subject materialand receive feedbackthrough the academic year, leading up to the summative analysis of their own data. This mirroredthe frequent formative feedback provided as a significant feature of using students as assessment collaborators (Chow, 2010). At each stage of the questionnaire development the students received formative feedback both from each other and the tutor that fed into the next stage and eventually into the summative assessment. These multiple assessment and feedback points lay the preparatory framework required to complete the individual assignment, with links between the continuous assessment, formative feedback and assignment clearly signposted to highlight this integration. Thus together there is a coherent and cohesive diet of assessments linked through a clear narrativethat the students.

Outcomes

Our experience suggests that given the right environment and assessment architecture, first-year students are keen to collaborate when provided with what they perceive as safe boundary conditions, and can sustain a high level of participation in the module assessments when they percieve their benefits. The assessment strategy outlined above saw improvement in two key measures. Firstly, student responses for metrics relating to this assessment approach supporting their learning have placed these modules in the top 5%, well above other modules in this discipline. Other key satisfaction metrics are also consistently high, and these results have been achieved with some of the highest student response rates for module evaluation feedback university-wide. Secondly, progression rates have also increased for the modules included in this initiative, with improved pass rates of up to 18% seen, compared to the period 2010-2014.

References

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