Can Online Assessment Motivate Students To Engage With The Learning Process?

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Introduction

It is widely asserted that assessment has a "backwash" effect that shapes students' engagement with a course (e.g. Biggs 1999). However, recent research (by e.g. Oliver & Shaw, 2002) has shown that the introduction of online assessment does not necessarily influence students' engagement in predictable ways. This may reflect a recent trend in educational research which questions that there is a strong link between assessment and behaviour, arguing instead that the relationship remains complex and poorly understood (e.g Martin 1999). This paper will argue that on-line assessment does not have to equate with numerical computer-assisted assessment tasks. An honours level course in International Purchasing is the focus of the development, where ranges of innovative on-line assessment materials have been established. The move to C&IT through a Virtual Learning Environment of webCT was intended to enhance the learning experience for large groups. The course, accredited by a Professional body featured some complex material which caused both undergraduate and day release students significant difficulties.

Three sets of assessment activities were devised for the project, the first comprising a set of discussion activities (asynchronous tasks). The second set comprising knowledge, "text based" activities where students need to research material before responding. (text based tasks). The final set of activities took a problem-solving focus, incorporating a gaming element into the teaching. (multi-media tasks). The tasks were evaluated by a student focus-group comprising eight self- selected students.

Assessment

The assessment process remains an area of interest for the academic community. Writers such as Bligh (1975) and more recently Knight (2002) and Hinett (2002) have commented on the fairness of assessment. Knight cites Linn, an academic, who has devoted a career to assessment research, who "would like to conclude that major tests for student and school accountability have improved education and student learning in dramatic ways over the past 50 years. Unfortunately, this is not my conclusion."

Hinett explores issues around assessment, asking whether an approach "that invokes a feeling of failure in individuals" is necessary, and whether there may be less damaging

alternatives. Her tentative conclusions are that assessment tasks need to be genuinely stimulating and offered within a supportive, non-competitive environment. Tasks designed to engage students in problem solving, real-life simulations and the process of judgements are likely to invoke commitment in students, and assist them in differentiating between ego and task, such that academic failure does not infringe on self – efficacy.

However, if the teaching activities of the teacher and the learning activities of the learner are both directed to the same goal, assessment has to be well received, as well as "useful and formative, it is important that effective, and prompt, feedback is given." (Ramsden 1992). To enable effective learning, Gibbs (1992) states the material being studied needs to provide motivation to the student and incorporate material requiring action from the learner and interaction with others, within the context of a well structured knowledge base.

Implications for course design

Drawing on the debate around assessment, two key aims were identified in moving the students towards online assessment. Miller et al (1998), explore the role of feedback in the student context, and conclude that prompt feedback is particularly useful in that it can help to inform students about tutors' expectations at an early stage. Here, students obtained feedback via their personal webCT site, within two days of submitting the weekly task.

The second aim was to attempt to offer students a learning opportunity in their own time and space. This was intended to bridge the gap of "time and space" and offer flexibility within the learning experience (Collis & Moonen, 2001) The course redesign incorporated the ideas of Fisher (1994), where "people's reactions to situations of high demand are distinguished on the basis of their perceived control of the situation." Where the demand is accompanied by a sense of personal control, it is more likely to be seen positively, as a challenge. Giving the students the opportunity to access the materials at a time of their choosing thus gave them some control of the situation.

Example of Asynchronous Task

A video on child slave labour was shown in class, and students were briefed to post comments in response to tutor "starter" questions on the bulletin board area of webCT. To attract the assessment mark, an original message posting plus a response to another student was needed. The responses to this exercise were incredible, given that only one third of students engaged with this exercise in the previous year when the same resource was made available to the class (Holley 2002). This year all the students went online to discuss and debate the issues. Those that missed the class emailed the tutor to ask for the alternative version of the exercise. An analysis of student contributions showed that students who previously didn't engage showed evidence of critical thinking.

Image 1 – an anonymous extract from the online discussion

Example of a text based task

This task was based on a traditional multiple-choice quiz. The quiz examined five main types of countertrade "deals". The format was consistent with the end of chapter questions from the course textbook. Students were encouraged to look at a variety of sources for the answers, and there was a pass mark of 50%. The students in the focus group liked the notion of a "pass mark" for an exercise online.
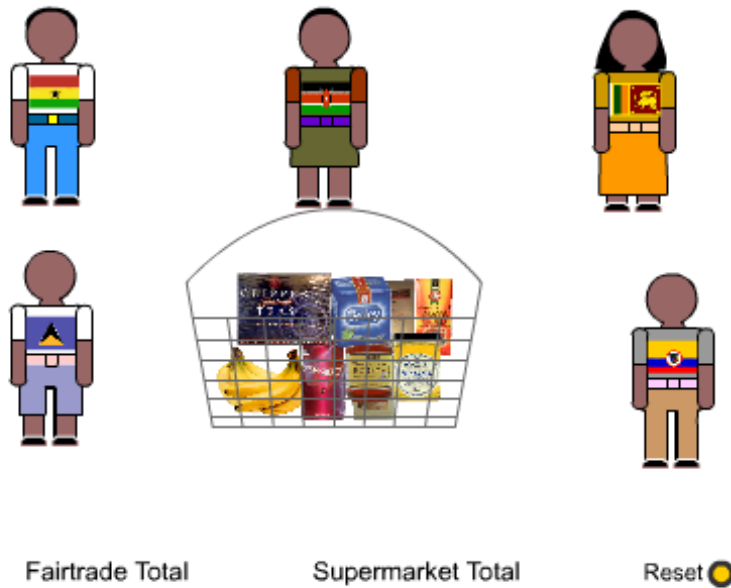
Student F

> *"this one was perfect – I had to read the textbook and lecture notes then answer questions".*

Example of a multi-media task

An example of a multi-media task is shown below - an exercise in fair-trade. Fairtrade is a campaign that offers growers of commodities in developing countries a fair deal and fair price for their products – typically coffee, tea and cocoa. Fairtrade and supermarket prices were revealed, and students had to calculate any price difference before emailing their answer to the tutor.

Students appreciated the format and having to work through the mathematics, and one comment was that the exercise was "sweet but not informative enough." The students wanted more information to enable them to make an informed choice, not a game type exercise based on random selection.

Image 2 - The "Fair-trade" exercise

Conclusions

This paper has reviewed the role of assessment in engaging the student with learning. It describes the redesign of an existing course to include 10% online assessment in a rich, visible, multi-media and problem based format to engage students with learning in a more meaningful way to them.

The first theme that evolved in student discussion was that of erosion of time and space. Literature suggested that moving material online gives the learner more control over their own learning experiences. The students appreciated the new flexibility for a part of their assessment, and thought weekly tasks worked well.

Student G

> *"Only allocating 30% of the marks to the coursework also took a bit of the pressure off."*

However, it became apparent that the bureaucratic constraints of the University assessment system did not maximise the potential use of online tasks for engaging the student beyond the parameters of a 15 week module, followed by a two week assessment period.

The second theme was focused on the role of the tutor and how online engagement had the potential to change it. In general, the more motivated students appreciated the online activities as a supplement to, not a replacement of, the tutor in the classroom. By contrast, students who previously did not respond well to the more traditional tutor-in-classroom scenario welcomed the online tasks, and engaged with the tutor much more willingly online than attending in class. Thus a further theme to explore is the perceptions of

students at both ends of the spectrum as to the perceived value of the tutor in classroom compared to online activities.

Student D

> *"It made me engage with the material in a new way – I expected to attend lectures and take notes – having power point slides available prior to the class really helped this along the way. I also expected to read the textbook, but to look at all these types of activities prompted by something online, visual and different was really good. It engaged my attention – and kept me focused."*

The final theme emerging from the focus group discussion was the way all the students had engaged with the differing materials. The variety of offerings, whether multi-media, text based or asynchronous were welcomed as a more innovative way of enabling students to engage with the course learning materials.

Student E, retaking the course,

> *"for me the key thing has been a different way of learning – lectures and books have a role, and I expected this, but the online tasks made me interact with the material in a different way."*
> *(others nod and agree)*

The limitations of this research, are, of course that it is based on only one group of students taking a single module. It could also be argued that a self-selecting focus group of eight are not necessarily representative of the group of students as a whole. However, the tentative conclusions may be useful for developing theory around the issues of assisting in the engagement students who traditionally do not participate fully in the learning process.

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Biographical note

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