

Inclusive approaches to developing assessment models

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Introduction

The article reports on the review of an L6 module's assessment model by the author in his capacity as module leader (ML). Following Morrison (2003), the ML sought to achieve a robust and inclusive review by: identifying the goals for the review; involving and taking on the perspectives of a range of relevant stakeholders, including the students, when gathering input; and finally using the input to redesign the assessment model. The ML sought in this way to tap into a 'partnership learning community' (Healey et al, 2014), the principles and values of which would strongly support and serve to underpin social justice (HEA, 2014) and the university's Education For Social Justice Framework (ESJF - 2019).

Module

"Organising and Managing Across Cultures" is a core module for about 30 students on the BA Hons in International Business Management, with three additional international students, studying at GSBL for just one semester.

The Learning Outcomes (LOs) state that students passing the module can:

- 1) demonstrate increased awareness of, and sensitivity to, their own and others' cultural background and influences;
- 2) evaluate the impact of culture on organisational behaviour and management practice, using a range of theoretical concepts to analyse and explain issues of management and organisation in a cross-cultural context; and
- 3) deploy appropriate research, analytical, communications and problem-solving skills for exploring the influence of culture and for suggesting how complex issues of management and organisation can be addressed.

Assessments

Biggs (2003) argues that, for teachers, assessments are at the end of the teaching-learning sequence, whilst for students they are at the start. However, the 'key is that all components in the teaching system - the curriculum and its intended outcomes, the teaching methods used, the assessment tasks - are aligned to each other.'

There are three summative assessments on the module: a team report (25%); a team presentation (15%); and an examination using an unseen question on a case study provided to students several weeks in advance (60%).

Early in the module, students are allocated randomly (as advocated by Cotton, 2013) into teams of three or four by the lecturer, using a transparent process. Random allocation eliminates student cliques developing and ensures that students interact and work together across cultures. Students stay in these teams to deliver assessments 1 and 2. Teams choose their question from a set of ten. Having choice is 'conducive to the group work element, building on the diversity of knowledge and abilities' (ibid).

Rationale for the review

The ML identified a number of shortcomings with the assessment model:

There were no formative assessments on the module. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) (now Advance HE) assessment review tool advises 'an appropriate balance between summative and formative assessment at the programme level' (2012, Part B1.3). Formative assessments enable tutors to 'feed back to students what they have learned well to that point and what they need to learn better' (Lau, 2016). In addition, formative learning and assessments have developmental or societal dimensions (Warren in Pokorny and Warren, 2016, p.15) and in recent decades there has been a shift towards integrating such dimensions in professional courses.

- 1) Assessment deadlines on the module were bunched in weeks 9, 11 and 13/14. The timing corresponds to Lau's critique (ibid) of summative assessments (after Bloom et al, 1971) as 'judging, grading and certifying what the learner had achieved at the end of a course or programme'. Lau (2016) suggests that 'summative assessment in practice often leads tutors to 'teach to the test' and students to take a more 'surface' approach towards learning'.
- 2) Group assessments work well in order to achieve the LOs of the module. Furthermore, some studies suggest that weaker students perform better in group work (Pokorny in Pokorny and Warren, 2016. p.79). However, all team members received the same mark, encouraging social loafing, whilst over-burdening strong performers. The ML also found giving feedback at team level could be problematic because, when explicit, it could trigger dissatisfaction and recrimination amongst team members ("you did that/were supposed to do that"), but when feedback is rendered applicable to the whole team, it offers limited feed forward value.
- 3) The average mark achieved on assessment 3 was consistently lower than on the other two assessments.
- 4) The ML also considered the findings of Jackson (2006, p.66), whose participant educators propose a range of changes to assessments: 'more formative assessments; assessments that were in some way contributory (otherwise, they argued, students would not do them); and more variety in the assessments.' This ensures greater inclusivity in terms of the range of learning approaches preferred by different students (Fleming, 1978). Finally, whilst pointing out areas for self-improvement, they should avoid 'destroying confidence.' Jackson (2006, p.66).

These five areas of concern prompted the ML to redesign the assessment model and the changes are presented below:

New Assessment 1 (Team Presentation):

This becomes formative and is delivered by students in week 7, 2 weeks *before* the report. Formative feedback is said to ‘help clarify what good performance is’, facilitate ‘the development of self-assessment in learning’ and ‘encourage teacher and peer dialogue around learning’. Formative assessments also allow the teacher and students to help ‘close the gap between current and desired performances’ and ‘provide information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching’ (adapted from Nicol and MacFarlane Dick (2006, p.205), by Pokorny in Pokorny and Warren, 2016).

Cotton (2013) proposes a set of principles to guide the design of effective group work. These include encouraging mixed cultural groups, and placing equal emphasis on social and well-being goals as well as academic goals. Arguably formative assessments meet these criteria more effectively than summative ones, whilst also addressing the aforementioned issues over the fairness of team level marks. In formative team work, feedback can be tailored to individual team members, without creating ill feeling. International students can “have a go” at presenting in English without fear of losing marks or impacting on the marks of others in the team. Because of its developmental nature, the formative presentation can also be brought forward in the teaching schedule, allowing the ML to “check in”, assess how far each student has engaged in relevant reading, and identify gaps in students’ knowledge. In short, it offers a signposted developmental path for students to perform better across the module, whilst freeing up more time for preparation to achieve better marks on assessment 3.

New Assessment 2 (Individual Report based on the Team question):

The report remains summative but team members write individual reports, choosing different countries/cultures/sub-themes as the lenses through which to explore the question. The earlier formative team dialogue should have enabled *all* team members to develop a broader and deeper insight into the cultural complexities embedded in the question and of the relevant literature. Further, the use of individual submissions eliminates the social loafers.

Assessment 3:

This remains the same with a slightly reduced summative weighting (50%).

Feedback received on the proposed changes - Student driven insight

Morrison (2003) recommends that changes to the assessment components and their evaluation should keep sight of the student as stakeholder. Carey (2003) proposes involving students as partners in the process to achieve “learner-centred’ course development’ (McAteer in Harvey, 1998) and encourage student creativity. Indeed, in this project, the first stakeholders approached by the ML were the students.

The ML conducted an anonymous survey of all students on the module (Feb 2020, using surveymonkey). An HEA publication on Assessments (2012, p.17) states that assessments need to be seen by students as ‘relevant and worthwhile’. Accordingly, the survey measured these using a Likert-type scale and also included six open questions (two on each of the assessments).

The report and the exam scored well as both ‘relevant’ and ‘worthwhile’. The team presentation scored just above neutral on these measures. These data offered further justification for turning the

presentation into a formative exercise and for loading the other two assessments equally for summative evaluation.

Students also welcomed bringing forward the presentation and converting the report from a team to an individual submission. One student said 'individuals should be considered always'.

Conclusion

Morrison (2003) describes five characteristics of an ideal evaluation. The first four are *reliability*, *validity*, *acceptability* and *triangulation*, all of which can be facilitated by gathering views from more than one source (ibid). This assessment review has adhered to those criteria as well as his fifth criterion, *inexpensive*, which, Morrison argues, reduces possible bias in evaluation. The author adopted Morrison's criteria, and sought to ensure fairness, inclusivity and transparency in the review.

Assessment 'can and should take the central role in curriculum design because it is one of the first things students look at and because it defines the curriculum for them' (Meyers and Nulty, 2009, p.574). Yet it is also argued that students should be at the heart of assessment models, course and module design. Bright et al (in Pokorny and Warren, 2016) state that the development of practice by a professional in HE is underpinned by his/her professional values and ethics and that these include 'equality in teaching ... and understanding of how students learn, a concern for student development and the development of practice in learning and teaching'.

This review reports on students' participation in the assessment design, as well as in the assessment processes, and offers evidence to show the value of harnessing students in that process. Future students on the module will also be encouraged to participate iteratively to improve teaching and learning on the module.

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Biographical note

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