

The Potential Use of Elective Assessment

Andrew Searle
Department of Health and Human Sciences
London Metropolitan University

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Introduction

Elective assessment (EA) is defined for the purposes of this paper as an assessment that makes a contribution towards the final module mark but is treated as optional by the student. It occupies a place somewhere between formative and summative assessment. As stated by Yorke (2003), “[t]he central purpose of formative assessment is to contribute to student learning through the provision of information about performance”. Formative assessment can strengthen the student learning experience through assimilation of feedback from the tutor (Carless *et al.*, 2006), but does not necessarily carry marks. Summative assessment, on the other hand, judges the student’s attainment of the learning objectives for a module (Elton, 2003), and usually involves the award of grades.

A student who is willing to engage actively with the learning materials is more likely to succeed on a module. This engagement can be supported through the tutor providing feedback on formative assessment and the student acting upon the advice – the “feed forward” process (Knight, 2006). However it is a common experience that many students will only complete assignments that lead to grade-bearing summative assessments. A substantial problem remains in how to encourage students to make more use of the benefits that spring from formative assessment.

A simple solution to the problem would be to make all formative assessments have an associated summative component. In many instances this would require increasing the number of formally recorded assessments for a module. It is generally recognised that operating a modular scheme leads to situations where both examiners and students often complain of ‘over-assessment’ (QAA Round Table, 2005). In order to improve the student experience, particularly in terms of progression and achievement, it is argued that course designers should seek to have as few as possible assessments for each module. Such a desire has been articulated in London Metropolitan’s *University Assessment Framework* (2004) as follows: “The volume of assessment should not be so

excessive as to prevent students from demonstrating (through the learning outcomes) their achievement of knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes”. This leads to a conundrum – how to use a sufficient quantity of assessment to improve student engagement without over-burdening the student.

An alternative approach is to allow the student to choose (elect) whether or not to undertake an assessment. In this way they benefit by engaging with the assessment, thereby gaining experience and a mark, or they benefit by reducing their assessment burden through not engaging with the assessment. Clearly any student, at present, can achieve the latter simply by not submitting an assessment, but this results in reassessment and/or failure of the module.

However an uncompleted EA would still permit the student to pass the module. This is achieved by making the EA part of a larger assessment component where the student will be successful providing the overall component is passed. This would work most easily where portfolio assessments have been approved; the EA could simply become a component of the portfolio. In other cases, changes to assessment profiles would need to be approved (through quality procedures) to accommodate an EA.

Case Study

Project Preparation (BM2E01N) is an Intermediate-level module for programmes in Biological Sciences, Biomedical Sciences, Human Biology and Microbiology, serving about 120 students. It concentrates on employability development and prepares students for their Honours-level project. A portfolio that is worth 40% of the module mark summatively assesses the Employability aspect of the module. The remaining part of the module is summatively assessed by another portfolio, the project proposal, which is worth 60%. The module runs in both semesters. In the autumn semester 2005/06 students were asked to work with their project supervisors to reinforce and develop practical skills relevant to their forthcoming project in 2006/07. No mark was attached to the completion of this activity and there was evidence that the student engagement with this component was poor. In an effort to improve the experience, assessment for the spring delivery of BM2E01N was altered slightly to include a laboratory skills exercise (LSE). This was part of the project proposal portfolio and carried 6% of the module mark. No minor module modification was sought or needed since the overall project proposal remained at 60%. The LSE consisted of a series of smaller practical exercises designed to encourage students to work on their own. These exercises were tailored to the students’ needs, so that a student intending to undertake a biochemistry project would develop a different set of subject-specific practical skills from a student destined for a microbiology project.

It was made clear to students that, although the LSE was a component of the project proposal, they could not fail the module if they did not attend the LSE. They were also told that the exercise carried a contributory mark. Thus students were able to choose whether or not they attended this session. If they felt that they had sufficient skills, were performing well enough on the module and they could benefit from a lighter assessment load then they could choose to miss the LSE. In practice, most students (98%) elected to attend and thereby to benefit from the formative and summative approach of this exercise. The few students that elected not to take the LSE passed the module with high grades.

Discussion

In the context of the Project Preparation module this EA has proved to be a welcome addition to the battery of assessment procedures. There was no desire by teaching staff to make the LSE a summative assessment since that might prove to be an unwelcome extra burden for students. However if it had been solely a formatively assessed but non-contributory piece of work, it is most likely that it would have been poorly attended, as shown by evidence from the autumn semester. Poor attendance would result both in a waste of resources and a lost opportunity to engage the students.

The LSE is well suited to be an EA since the laboratory exercises allowed students to reinforce and develop skills and practices that they had already met in previous laboratory sessions on other modules. In these earlier sessions students worked in groups not as individuals. It became apparent that encouraging students to work as individuals in the LSE promoted self-awareness and confidence. Students who had already developed these attributes through relevant work or practical experience were in a good position to miss this exercise.

During the LSE tutors were able to observe individuals then give immediate formative feedback on techniques and problem-solving approaches. The exercise also allowed some students to realise that, in the subsequent Project module, they would prefer to prepare a dissertation rather than undertake laboratory work. An analysis of student feedback revealed a generally positive response to the LSE (see table 1); over one-third of the students noted added value because the LSE had enhanced their understanding of the module and 44% of respondents felt that the LSE provided sufficient practical experience on the module.

One emerging issue is the percentage contribution to the overall module mark. If the percentage is set too high then the EA effectively becomes a summative assessment. This would be the case since few students would dare risk missing an assessment that made such a significant contribution to their final module mark. If the percentage is set

too low then students may not perceive it to be sufficiently important. The 6% level in BM2E01N appeared to work since there was a high level of engagement but for those who did not attend the LSE it was still possible to perform well on the module. Further work should be undertaken to determine the acceptable limits for a percentage contribution.

It would be interesting to analyse EAs forming part of other modular assessments and so see the extent of their contribution to improving student engagement. This could be measured subjectively through student feedback and objectively by comparing performance between modules where the EA is present or absent. By increasing the student's assurance as an independent worker in the laboratory, it is possible to be confident that student engagement with laboratory skills in BM2E01N will have a positive 'knock-on' effect into their Honours-level projects.

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Biographical note

Andrew Searle is a Principal Lecturer in Biochemistry in the Department of Health and Human Sciences. He has particular interests in the role of assessment as a tool for enhancement of learning, and how quality procedures can support teaching. **Email** a.searle@londonmet.ac.uk

Table 1. Student Response to Elective Assessment Activity in BM2E01N

	Strongly agree/ agree	Disagree/ strongly disagree	No strong view/ no response
There were sufficient practicals* in the module	44%	28%	28%
The practicals* helped me to improve my understanding of the module	36%	26%	38%
The practical * instructions and supporting information were clear	56%	14%	30%
Practical* resources were good	41%	14%	45%
Mean of all comments on practicals*	44%	21%	35%

*The Laboratory Skills Exercise (LSE) contained the only practicals in this module