

Students and innovative assessment

Liz McDowell

Summary

This article looks at assessment from the student perspective based on some recent research. It concentrates on methods of assessment which many people consider to be innovative such as assessment by group project or oral presentation and self- and peer- assessment. It's very important to understand how students react to assessment because this has such an impact on their learning. For example, assessment always produces some kind of motivation but is it the motivation just to get by with the least possible effort or the motivation to try to really understand the content of the course? Newer methods of assessment are often introduced to try to improve learning and to change the culture of assessment. Hopefully, these pages will give some ideas of the issues to consider, by looking at assessment from a student point of view.

Biography

Liz McDowell works at the University of Northumbria. She has been managing research and development projects and initiatives for more than ten years. Her main research interest is in assessment and she is the convenor of the Northumbria Assessment Conferences. Liz is currently heading a team managing the implementation of the Blackboard learning environment at Northumbria.

Keywords

innovative assessment, assessment methods, student perspectives, purposes of assessment, motivation, approaches to learning, deep and shallow learning feedback, clarity, authentic assessment

The Impact of Assessment research

The Impact of Assessment study was undertaken at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle. We investigated students' perceptions and behaviour when experiencing innovative assessment. The thirteen case studies covered a range of subjects and a variety of assessment methods such as: individual research projects; self and peer assessment; oral presentations; group projects; open book exams; poster presentations; simulated professional tasks; portfolios; and profiles. Data was gathered from individual and group interviews with students and lecturers, from course and assignment documentation and by observing relevant course sessions and students at work on assessment tasks. The project gave some insight into the impacts of new forms of assessment in the real world of current university courses.

References

McDowell, L. & Sambell, K. (1999) The experience of innovative assessment: student perspectives, pp. 71-82 in S. Brown & A. Glasner (Eds) *Assessment matters in Higher Education*, Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press

Sambell, K., McDowell, L. & Brown, S. (1997) 'But is it fair?' an exploratory study of student perceptions of the consequential validity of assessment, *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 23 (4), pp 349-371

Sambell, K. & McDowell, L. (1998) The construction of the hidden curriculum: message s and meaning in the assessment of student learning, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 23(4), pp.391-402

New assessment methods

Probably every assessment method we use today has been used by someone, somewhere for a very long time, but these are some of the methods generally considered to be 'new':

- Forms of exams such as open-book and take-away exams
- Projects and investigations
- Varied writing tasks
- Multiple choice and other objective tests
- Oral assessment
- Realistic or problem-solving tasks
- Assessment based on simulations or role play
- Computer-assisted assessment
- Portfolios and profiles
- Negotiated assignments and learning contracts
- Group assignments
- Self, peer and co-assessment

What makes assessment innovative?

Assessment is innovative for students and staff if it is new in their context. If most people in the university think it's something new, we would probably feel quite justified in calling it innovative. There is another way of looking at it. Perhaps what makes assessment innovative is that the assessment is trying to do something new. There is a shift in purpose rather than using a new method but otherwise carrying on as before. The terms used to label new forms of assessment seem to suggest this. Consider:

- innovative assessment
- alternative assessment
- performance assessment
- authentic assessment

References

Angelo, T. A. & Cross, K. P. (1994) *Classroom assessment techniques: a handbook for college teachers*, 2nd rev ed, San Francisco: Jossey Bass

Birenbaum, M. & Dochy, F.J.R.C. (1996) (eds) *Alternatives in the assessment of achievements, learning processes and priori knowledge.*, Dordrecht: Kluwer

Brown, G., Bull, J. & Pendlebury, M. (1997) *Assessing student learning in higher education*. London; Routledge

Brown, S. & Glasner, A. (1999) (eds) *Assessment matters in higher education*. Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press

A culture shift in assessment?

Many people see innovation in assessment as part of a culture change or new paradigm - from a testing, psychometric or measurement approach to an educational assessment or judgmental approach.

What is assessed?

A SHIFT FROM

the testing of discrete, de-contextualised elements of knowledge and skill

TO

The assessment of more holistic, complex activities, for example, using knowledge and skills in problem-solving or authentic tasks

How is it assessed?

A SHIFT FROM

highly standardised and controlled testing methods which result in quantitative scores and where assessment is strongly separated from teaching and learning

TO

A more diverse range of assessment methods, resulting in qualitative descriptions or judgements and where assessment is often integrated with teaching and learning and may involve students as active participants

What underlying purposes are served?

A SHIFT FROM

Identifying and categorising underlying ability or 'intelligence' and ranking student performance in relation to their peers

TO

Identifying and describing achievements according to relevant criteria and standards

References

Birenbaum, M. (1996) *Assessment 2000: towards a pluralistic approach to assessment*. In M.

Birenbaum, M. & Dochy, F.J.R.C. (Eds.) *Alternatives in the assessment of achievements, learning processes and prior knowledge*. (pp. 3-29) Dordrecht: Kluwer

Dochy, F.J.R.C. & McDowell, L. (1997) *Assessment as a tool for learning* *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 23 (4), pp. 279-298

Gipps, C. V. (1994) *Beyond testing: towards educational assessment*. London: Hodder & Stoughton

Hager, P. & Butler, J. (1996) *Two models of educational assessment*, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 21(4) pp.367-378

Wolf, D. Bixby, J. Glenn III, J. & Gardner, H. (1991) *To use their minds well: investigating new forms of student assessment*. *Review of Research in Education*, 17, pp. 31-73

Students and innovative assessment

If innovative assessment is to be used to good effect, we need to know how students respond to it. Can we really promote good learning by using a particular assessment approach, or is this just a case of pious hopes? There is research which gives some indication of how students respond to innovative assessment in practice. Some key points to note are:

- Students' behaviour is affected considerably by their perception of what the assessment requires. Lecturers frequently argue with us that many students have the 'wrong idea' about, say, exams. Nevertheless students act according to the situation as they currently see it, not as lecturers would like them to see it.
- Students often see value in innovative approaches to assessment and believe that they are interesting, worthwhile and help them to learn, but not all students think in exactly the same way. Views vary considerably and are affected by a number of factors such as students' reasons for being on the course in the first place.
- When assessment promotes some worthwhile and meaningful activity, students appreciate it on the one hand but, on the other hand, find that it means more work, so they may resist it. You might hear them say 'It's really good in theory, but we just don't have the time...'
- Students frequently criticise conventional assessment, especially traditional exams, seeing them as artificial, pointless, misleading, unfair and so on. But they may at the same time prefer exams because they are 'less work'. Individuals who have always been good at exams (a significant proportion of university students) may be strongly in favour of them. From their point of view - why rock the boat?

References

Ashworth, P., Bannister, P. & Thorne, P. (1997) *Guilty in who's eyes? University students' perception of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment* *Studies in Higher Education*, 22, pp. 187-203

Boud, D. (1995) *Assessment and learning: contradictory or complementary?* In P Knight (Ed) *Assessment for learning in higher education*. London: Kogan Page

Entwistle, N. J. & Entwistle, A. (1991) Contrasting forms of understanding for degree examinations; the student experience and its implications *Higher Education*, 22, pp.205-227

Hampson, L. (1994) *How's your dissertation going?* Lancaster: Unit for Innovation in Higher Education, Lancaster University

Hinett, K. & Knight, P. (1996) Quality and Assessment, *Quality Assurance in Education*, 4, pp.3-10

Nichols, T. & Smith, P. (1996) *Assessment as communication in the learning of students and tutors*. University and Colleges Staff Development Agency, (UCoSDA) Briefing Paper No 29, Sheffield: UCoSDA

Students and assessment - what makes the difference?

There are some intrinsic features of innovative assessment which students see as a 'good thing' balanced by some strong extrinsic factors militating against it being 'good in practice'. Some of the key issues which determine whether innovative assessment fulfils its intended purpose or not from the students' perspectives have been drawn from the Impact of Assessment research. We identify them as:

- Motivation
- Approaches to Learning
- Feedback
- Openness and clarity
- Accuracy
- Organisation and feasibility

Reference

This section is based on:

McDowell, L. & Sambell, K. (1999) Fitness for purpose in the assessment of learning: students as stakeholders. *Quality in Higher Education*, 5 (2), pp. 107-123

Motivation

Students need deadlines, just like the rest of us. Assessment can perform this function, acting to provide extrinsic motivation to get on and do some work, as one of the students surveyed suggested:

'...to know you've got an exam in two weeks or whatever acts as a focus, and makes you get things together. You need those points of focus to motivate you to work to that date.'

But students can be dissatisfied when that kind of extrinsic motivation is all that they get from assessment. Sometimes, especially in the case of innovative assessment, they become more involved and interested - a kind of intrinsic motivation. Another of the students said:

'An assignment's sort of laid out. It gives you the question and wants you to answer that questions - nothing more, nothing less. That's all it wants. With this group project, you all come up with different ideas, putting a bit more in, taking a bit out, changing it ... and you can get something really good out of it. You can't do that with a formal assignment or exams. They're only looking for one thing - a simple answer to a calculation.'

References

Biggs, J. (1999) 'Setting the stage for effective teaching' Chapter 4 in *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Buckingham: SREH & Open University Press

Approaches to Learning

For some of the students surveyed assessment often requires them to engage in unsatisfactory learning, just to get by:

'You shallow learn for an exam, but you don't **know** the stuff. It's poor learning which you quickly forget.'

Even a small change, in this case the introduction of an open-book exam into a course where most exams were of the conventional closed-book nature, can make a difference to the type of learning students do:

' You sit there and actually read the stuff, rather than just sit there and commit it to memory ... I found myself questioning key concepts and ideas, rather than hard facts about things. I was trying to understand the subject rather than memorise it.'

Other forms of assessment may have similar effects in encouraging students to get involved and try to really understand. In a course where students had to give a presentation in class as part of the assessment one said:

' I found that [even by the end of the year] you always knew the subject you'd done your presentation on really well'

Another student said of a research-based task:

'It became a real personal project for me'

Students' views of both what was being assessed and the way in which it was being assessed affected their approach to learning. Where students felt that they were being assessed on their knowledge of 'useless information' they were unlikely to invest energy in real learning. On the other hand where they were learning things that seemed useful, relevant or which they could see were enhancing their own capabilities, the effort of learning was much more worthwhile:

' It tests your abilities for more than your remembered knowledge ... to research, analyse ... bring forward information out of a set of data. Those kind of analytical abilities I think are important.'

Similarly, some ways of assessing seemed to students to be completely unrealistic, artificial and missing the point:

'Often with essays all you have to do is go to the library, look up the relevant books and just copy down the relevant chapters in a different language'

Assessment which students view in this way are unlikely to call forth much learning effort and instead become simply hurdles to be overcome.

References

Marton, F., Hounsell, D. & Entwistle, N. (1997) (eds) *The experience of learning*. 2nd ed, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press

Feedback

Students need to know how they are doing - and not just after the event! All things being equal, the majority of students want to do as well as they can so they need feedback and opportunities to improve on what they are doing. Whilst most assessment provides some kind of feedback, even if it is just a grade, it may not be feedback that students feel they can realistically use. Module marks received when students have already started on the next set of modules will probably not be seen as useful. A set of continuous assessment tasks with feedback may be seen more positively. A student in our survey undertaking a staged assignment with feedback at each stage said:

' This sort of thing is not a one-off thing like an exam. Say I got a bad mark today, I can improve on that next week and I can see where I've made my mistakes today and work it all out.'

References

Brown, S. & Knight, P. (1994) *Assessing learners in Higher Education*. London: Kogan Page

Openness and clarity

Students would like to know what is expected of them in any assessment. This is not the same as 'asking for the answers' ! They would like to know the practical arrangements and requirements - when is the assignment due in? what is the word limit? They would also like to know how their work will be judged and what standard they have to attain. However, giving a list of assessment criteria to students, may not be enough in itself.

When considering the criteria given for Design projects, one student in our sample said:

' I don't really know what the criteria mean. They're a bit confusing really. It's a bit difficult for me to understand exactly'

But for one of her fellow students the experience was quite different:

' I realised that they were looking for research and your development. How you got the things rather than the piece itself. In the first project I tried to get the finished piece done, but now I know that isn't really that important, as long as they could see what you were going to do. So now I concentrate on the design sheets and the research.'

A lot has been written about ways of helping students to understand assessment criteria and get a feel for the standards they have to reach.

References

Boud, D. (1995) (ed) Enhancing learning through self-assessment London: Kogan Page

Orsmond, P., Merry, S. & Reiling, K. (1996) The importance of marking criteria in the use of peer assessment *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 21, pp. 239-249

Stefani, L. (1998) Assessment in partnership with learners. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 23(4), pp.339-350

Accuracy

Students partly judge the value of assessment by the extent to which they feel the marks given accurately reflect their achievements. This is not just about consistency in marking, although that is important too, but students may believe that the form of the assessment doesn't allow real learning to be evaluated:

'Exams test your ability to pass exams, not your knowledge of the subject'

This can also occur with innovative assessment such as an oral presentation:

' No matter how well you've researched, if you present it badly, you've had it! And then even if you've done minimal research but you present it really well, you can make it sound very good. '

Students feel that some assessments are designed to catch you out and more likely to show what you don't know than make any assessment of your capabilities:

'In a normal exam, you learn a whole essays and it doesn't come up, so it seems to the examiners that you know nothing.'

On the other hand some forms of assessment, such as an extended written assignment of a more open-ended kind, give you the chance to show what you can do, making it possible to assess it more accurately:

' I think this gives a much better indication of what you know ... more chance to express your ideas. You can actually demonstrate ... how you can interpret things'

Organisation and feasibility

This is about the practicalities of assessment. Firstly, is the assessment properly organised and conducted? Secondly, and probably even more significant from the student perspective, is it actually feasible to complete the assignment given the workload, time pressures, resources available and so on? It's often suggested that students need to be better at time management but this plea from one student gives something of a feel for the real context in which current students struggle to complete their coursework:

'It's always easy to look back and say 'We should have done this, or we should have done that', but at the time it's not that practical to be able to get everything done because it's over such a wide time. It means that so many things get in the way and then what do you give priority to? Because every subject will say 'Work on my subject'. They say you've got all this spare time but each individual has to give up their spare time - like I've got a part-time job. There are just so many other factors to consider.'

Some useful Web sites

Collections of resources on assessment

A very useful Web site which gives access to a wide range of materials on assessment including innovative assessment is the one managed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation
<http://ericae.net%20>

Another collection of links and resources can be found on the American Association for Higher Education Web site:
<http://www.aahe.org%20>

A collection of Web resources on outcomes assessment produced by Mark Troy, Texas A&M University can be found at
<http://www.tamu.edu/marshome/assess/oabooks.html>

Case studies of innovative assessment

Many universities or subject associations make case studies of innovative assessment available. Here are some:

Oxford Brookes University
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/2_learnth/aup14pr.html

University of Queensland
<http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/assess/assessment/>

University of Adelaide
<http://www.acue.adelaide.edu.au/leap/focus/assessment/index.html>

UK Geography Subject Network
<http://www.chelt.ac.uk/el/philg/gdn/resdata.htm>

A number of the university sites above also give some advice, guidance and background material on assessment designed for lecturers. Useful material of this kind can also be found on the pages developed by James Atherton, De Montfort University:
<http://www.dmu.ac.uk/%7Ejamesa/teaching/assessment.htm>

Higher Education projects dealing with assessment

One of the best sources of information on current funded projects is the website of the National Coordination Team:
<http://www.ncteam.ac.uk/index.html>

For example, some of the FDTL projects dealing with innovation, change and diversification in assessment are:

Self-assessment in Professional & Higher Education
<http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/Education/saphe/default.htm>

Assessment strategies for popular music
<http://www.salford.ac.uk/FDTLpop/welcome.htm>

Assessment strategies and standards in sociology
<http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/socassess/>