

Assessing Students Using Student Decided Assessment Medium

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Abstract

It has been identified that the student population and their learning styles are both increasing and diversifying. This presentation will demonstrate how this can be utilised with the result of an increase in student satisfaction, an increase in pass rates and a decrease in student stress levels.

Assessment is an educational tool in itself. Brown (1999) notes that students are assessed by assignment/written work in around 80% of cases internationally. However, this means that students are assessed in the subject matter as well as on their literacy skills; skills which are not the focus of the assessment yet are reflected in the mark awarded. To combat this, an approach to assessment was taken where students are asked on an individual basis how they would like to be assessed from a 'menu' of methods at the commencement of my module. This module is run on the BSc (Hons) Nursing course (Mental Health) and is compulsory for students to successfully qualify as a registered nurse.

There is a paucity of research in this area of allowing student choice in assessment and so I conducted a study into this. The study found that the pass rate was significantly improved when students were allowed to pick how they were assessed (pass rate improved from 44% to 83%). The study, using a phenomenological approach, also considered how students perceive being given a choice. Several benefits were identified by the students in addition to the increase in pass rates leading to the decision to keep this method of assessment.

Overall, this presentation will discuss my study and the issue of allowing greater student autonomy in assessment method, highlighting the benefits provided to students, lecturers and institutions.

Like all forms of communication, knowledge transfer may not be delivered/received appropriately and so errors may occur. Despite advancements in teaching methods, some people may fail when assessed on their taught knowledge – indeed it can even be argued that *some* failures are needed in order to indicate that 'standards' are being set and appropriately measured. This paper questions whether this knowledge is *appropriately* measured or is measured using a method of convenience. A small study was conducted into using idiosyncratic methods of assessment whereby students could pick individually from a menu of options.

The decision to examine accuracy of assessment was brought about following the realisation that more students sought tutorial support *after* they had failed a module and had to re-submit for a second attempt. Incidentally it was also noted that the overwhelming majority of students seeking tutorial support before assessment passed at their first attempt. All of the students seeking tutorial advice after failing were subjectively assessed using questioning and it was noted that many of these students had knowledge that suggested that they should have passed. This dichotomy of attained knowledge and demonstrated knowledge not matching was put to a group of students who stated that they *'were no good at writing but better at doing'*. This therefore leads to the question of whether the failures were not due to poor knowledge transfer but due to the method of assessing that knowledge. Brown (1) said that any assessment *"should be fit for purpose"* and highlights that assessments should be mindful of the student's capabilities. This suggests that assessments need to be tailored to the individual and not to a method that is repetitive, possibly because of tutor preference.

It is also worthy to note that Gibbs [2] has the strong belief that students learn more through assessment than through teaching. Therefore, getting the assessment method correct would enhance knowledge transfer to produce more informed students.

In recent years, the student population has increased both in number and diversity [3] and this includes the number of learning styles. It is this last point that needs to be considered; if it is accepted that teaching should account for a variety of learning styles then the ensuing assessment should equally account for a variety of knowledge transfer from student to assessor. Offering only one choice of assessment clearly does not fit Brown's [1] fit for purpose suggestion.

In order to address this, a menu of assessments was offered to students for them to pick an option of how they want to be assessed on an individual basis. There were 5 options:-

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1. Assignment topic subject 1
2. Assignment topic subject 2
3. Assignment topic subject 3
4. *Viva voce* presentation
5. Unseen examination

Students were given this selection at the commencement of a module and were required to submit their choice at the end so that appropriate arrangements could be made. All options were graded using the standard marking criteria of the University and were moderated internally and externally.

The overall pass rate increased from 44% to 88% - a remarkable increase which is made more pronounced when the exam and *viva* pass rate was 100%. Clearly by allowing students to transfer their knowledge to the assessor using a medium of their choice was rewarded by greater student achievement. But why?

It has been found [4] found that students perceived alternatives (as opposed to assignments) as preferential and more equitable (though do not expand on this latter point). It is noted that by understanding students' perception, it may lead to lecturers facilitating the adoption by students of a deeper approach to learning. The obvious implication therefore, is to place emphasis on the discrete needs of each student rather than a generic stereotype. This would appear to be a clear indication that offering choice is appropriate.

In the field of psychology, human motivation has been the subject of much work and research. Maslow [5] formulated a 'hierarchy of needs' (though he first postulated this many years previously) that identified five areas that would motivate a human into action. These five areas were set in a hierarchy whereby lower order needs must be met before any higher needs become stimulus for action. The first motivational need Maslow [5] suggests is for physiological satisfaction, for example food. The following need as suggested by Maslow [5] is safety. He exerted that humans need to feel safe and secure and that this includes freedom from anxiety. Maslow [5] also suggests that people prefer and gravitate to, the known in preference to the unknown. If this is linked to assessment choice, then two contradictory ideas emerge. The first is that students are highly motivated in order to reduce their anxiety and so would prefer an assessment method that they feel comfortable with and have chosen. However, as suggested by Brown [1] assignments are the academic norm and any deviation from this would be atypical – the contradiction arises if a student believes (for example) that a verbal presentation would suit them. Therefore, the verbal presentation becomes the 'unknown' quantity (when compared to the assignment) that Maslow suggests people would migrate away from to the safer harbour of the 'known'. In other words, students would simultaneously prefer to deviate from the norm yet stay with the norm. This incongruity could easily manifest as stress in the student

In further explanation of Maslow's earlier work, it is identified that the safety need includes the issue of freedom from stress. If a person cannot avoid the stressor, then they will seek to exercise some control over the stressor in an attempt to alleviate some of the stress. If it is taken that most assessments induce stress (a psychological threat to the person) then it can be inferred that if an element of control can be transferred to students, then this may reduce stress. However, is this too simplistic a view? If students are told that they *must* be assessed, then they are not given a true choice but rather a false one that serves merely as an illusion. True choice would include allowing a student not to be assessed but this is not offered for the obvious reasons. Of course this does not suggest that a person should be offered *total* control but merely *some* control. This emphasis on some control suggests that the extent offered, however minor would serve to alleviate some stress, again however minor.

If a person has made a choice, then they are more likely to succeed when following that choice. This could be interpreted as a natural result of reduced stress from being allowed to choose, that the power base has shifted to the individual. It has been identified [6] that many students like taking ownership of their course and perhaps that the prescriptive assignment may alienate many students and that the provision of choice facilitates students to enjoy their learning. By allowing students to capitalise on their own intrinsic factors may encourage a deeper approach to learning. The above suggests that when a student has an 'investment' in the assessment process rather than being a passive recipient, they become more engaged in the whole learning process. The issue of 'power base' appears highly significant, specifically where the power lies. Lecturers have an almost inalienable hold of 'power' by virtue of their position. Yet this does not mean that some 'power' should not be devolved to students – after all, students studying this are adults and should be treated as such.

A study was conducted seeking the views of students and staff using questionnaires and interviews. It was found that students:



- Greatly appreciated being given a choice
- Wanted the choices reduced to three
- Wanted more 'structured' guidance
- Wanted to be assessed in the room that they were taught in.
- Experienced less stress

These findings were all implemented changes and after four years the pass rate stands at 93% and until recently, the exam and viva options had a 100% pass rate.

Possible reasons for this improvement include:

- Students could play on their strengths – put simply, students could demonstrate their knowledge in a way that best suited them, not the assessor.
- It acknowledges that students are adults and appreciate being given a choice. This acts as a strong motivational factor.
- The greater guidance allows the students to see exactly what was required of them, allowing them to make a fully informed choice.

In conclusion, this study found that by increasing student autonomy, pass rates can dramatically increase with a reduction in stress levels. Further work in this area is clearly needed.

References

- [1] Brown S (1999) in Brown S, Glasner A (1999) (Eds) Assessment Matters in Higher Education Great Britain, Open University Press
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- [4] Stryven K, Dochy F, Janssens (2012) Students perceptions about assessment in higher education: a review Paper presented at the Joint Northumbria/Early SIG Assessment and Evaluation Conference, University of Northumbria in Newcastle, August 2012
- [5] Maslow, A (1987) Motivation and Personality (3rd Ed), USA, Harper and Row
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