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Issues arising from the implementation of a comprehensive assessment approach in a large, multi-modal Bachelor of Commerce unit

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Abstract: Recent literature in higher education argues university assessment has been too narrow and hasn’t adequately reflected the quality, breadth and depth of students’ learning. Research shows students often prioritise and learn what they need to know for formal, graded assessment and disregard other academic content seen as less relevant to those requirements. The predominance of essays and examinations has therefore tended to constrain learning. The case for a more comprehensive approach has been clearly articulated. So what happens when staff take up the unique challenge of designing fair and uniform assessment for a large, core, multi-modal, multi-campus unit offered nationally and internationally?

When developing an undergraduate Bachelor of Commerce unit at Deakin University, staff considered the most appropriate ways to assess a range of conceptual understandings and communication skills. This resulted in the mapping and adoption of a comprehensive approach incorporating teacher, peer, and self-assessment aspects, individual and group work, oral and written presentations, and the use of portfolios and journals. Particular practices were adopted to control workloads, ensure fairness in marking, and overcome some problems generally associated with group work. When implementing the approach, practical issues arose that demanded adjustments. This paper details the approach taken, outlines research activities, and discusses the practical implications of issues that arose.

Keywords: Broadly-based assessment, large classes

Introduction

The importance of assessment in higher education has long been recognised by educators and has been central to the learning experience in students’ minds. Assessment has tended to drive their learning, so what has not been formally assessed has often not been learnt (except perhaps by highly motivated, high achievers). The predominance of essays and traditional end-of-semester examinations in university assessment has sometimes constrained learning because students focus only on what they need to reproduce to pass. The key questions of why, what and how to assess, and how to interpret and respond to assessment clearly enunciated clearly by Rowntree (1977) still remain enduringly important. What has changed are the circumstances in which responses need to be formulated to these questions.
New imperatives are now driving the need for systemic change in assessment practices. Scholars such as Gibbs (1992a), Brown and Knight (1994), Morgan and O’Reilly (1999), Entwistle (2000) and James et al. (2002) have highlighted major inadequacies of university assessment design and the issues associated with changing practices in the context of staff and student conservatism. Their work suggests that the quality of student learning can be improved by re-conceptualising and broadening assessment approaches.

Imperatives for change relate to enhancing students’ employability by developing generic and discipline-specific student attributes that need to be developed in contexts of increasing student numbers, diversity of student experiences, abilities and motivations, and in myriad locations of study and work. Changed circumstances have given rise to new issues requiring new responses to the enduring questions mentioned earlier. James, McKinnis & Devlin (2002, pp.4-6.) outline five new assessment issues in higher education pertinent to this paper:

- Capturing the potential of online assessment
- Designing efficient and effective assessment for large classes
- Responding to plagiarism and developing policies to foster academic honesty
- Using assessment to guide effective group work
- Recognising the needs of students unfamiliar with assessment practices in Australian higher education.

The paper presents a case study of a large undergraduate unit in Deakin University’s Bachelor of Commerce program. The unit, MMH299: Business Communication, is offered on three campuses in different Victorian cities, and off-campus nationally and internationally. It focuses on the development and assessment of key generic student attributes relating to the professional field of business. The unit was developed and offered in multi-modal form in response to University and Faculty teaching/learning plans and policies emphasising graduate attributes and outcomes, experiential learning, and greater use of information and communications technologies (ICT). It was offered for the first time across all modes in 2002. Teaching staff and students’ experiences were researched as part of this implementation. Teachers’ and learners’ experiences with the unit’s assessment approach are the focus of this paper. The design and enactment of the assessment had to deal with each of the five issues reported by James et al. (2002) by setting aside older essay/examination responses and substituting these with a more diverse, relevant, authentic assessment approach. The challenge for academic teaching staff involved in such endeavours is while assessment needs to be more comprehensive, relevant, and authentic in response to new imperatives, it also has to be more strategic, cost-effective, and require less of time overall. This is particularly pertinent in respect to assessment of large classes as revealed through consideration of eight major issues emanating from the research.
**Assessment approach in MMH299: Business Communication**

*MMH299* is a core semester unit that aims to broaden students’ understanding of the complexity of communication and develop their ability to communicate effectively in a variety of business contexts.

Approximately 1200 students were enrolled in 2002, 600 each semester. This has increased to over 800 in 2003. When developing the unit, staff considered the most appropriate ways to assess a range of conceptual understandings and communication skills. This resulted in the adoption of a comprehensive approach that incorporated teacher, peer, and self-assessment aspects, individual and group work, oral and written presentations, and the use of portfolios and journals. Brown and Knight (1994, p.23) support the notion that ‘multiple methods are best’. For each piece of assessment, (See Table 1), students received online detailed guidelines, information about marking criteria, and a list of relevant resources.

**Table 1: Assessment approach used in MMH299: Business Communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment type and %</th>
<th>Features of assessment</th>
<th>Description of requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Progressive assessment tasks: worth 70%</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral presentation 10%</td>
<td>Oral assessment <strong>Group</strong> assignment</td>
<td>Groups of 6 students had to research a topic, and give a 15 minute oral presentation to their class. Each member had to speak for 3 minutes. The group then had to generate a 5 minute whole class activity and discussion of the topic.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher assessed (written feedback)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer assessed (written, criterion-based feedback)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document creation test 20%</td>
<td>Written <strong>individual</strong> open-book test</td>
<td>In open-book test conditions, students had to create two brief business documents using the principles and procedures discussed in classes and texts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher assessed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written proposal 20%</td>
<td>Written group assignment, <strong>Teacher</strong> assessed. <strong>Self</strong> and peer assessed – Group members’ grades sometimes varied depending on peer assessment of contributions.</td>
<td>Groups of 6 students had to produce a formal written persuasive proposal for a new business venture. Various sections of the writing task were allocated to each group member.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional portfolio 20%</td>
<td>Selected <strong>individual</strong> pieces of written work presented as a personal portfolio</td>
<td>Students had to collect sample business and employment documents (resumes, job applications, business letters) completed during semester and present them as a portfolio.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher assessed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal (with portfolio)</td>
<td><strong>Individual</strong> reflections recorded in journal. <strong>Teacher</strong> assessed</td>
<td>Students were expected to keep a reflective journal throughout semester with entries based on weekly tutorial experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final examination tasks –30%</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>M-C Questions 15%</td>
<td>Individual tick-box test</td>
<td>MCQs were designed to test knowledge and understanding of business communication theory and practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher assessed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document analysis test 10%</td>
<td>Written <strong>individual</strong> test</td>
<td>Students were required to analyse business documents under test conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher assessed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short answer test – 10%</td>
<td>Written <strong>individual</strong> test</td>
<td>Short answer questions were designed to test knowledge and understanding of business communication theory and practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher assessed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data gathering methods

This paper draws on data gathered as follows:

- On-campus students studying MMH299 were surveyed in second semester 2002 about aspects of their experience, including assessment processes. The survey was delivered to students during the final tutorial classes for semester; 332 responses were received. (Melbourne campus, 255, Geelong, 554 and Warrnambool 23 - 10 off-campus). Additional data is being gathered from off-campus and off-shore students this semester.

- Taped interviews were conducted with all lecturers (4) and tutors (8) who taught the unit during 2002. Questions relating to assessment focused on the perceived value of the tasks for building students’ understandings, the extent to which they achieved their intent, the balance between self, peer, and teacher assessment, and the value of marking criteria guidelines.

- Background information was gathered from unit materials, University and Faculty strategic plan documents.

Findings and issues are drawn from experiences of on-campus students, half of whom were aged 18-20, approximately half were international students, 1/4 worked full time and 60% worked half-time, mostly in business-related jobs.

Key Findings and Issues

So what happens when staff take up the challenge of designing fair and uniform assessment for a large, core, multi-modal, multi-campus unit offered nationally and internationally, with a curriculum focus on generic student attributes in the field of business? Eight major issues emanated from the research on experiences of engaging with the new assessment requirements.

Changing students perceptions of the nature of assessment

When a less traditional assessment approach is used, students may not understand its rationale. Being so accustomed to summative assignment/examination models, they can become confused when different responses are expected. To achieve quality assessment practices, students’ perceptions of the nature of assessment need to be changed. In particular they need to understand formative assessment as a learning activity. While detailed assessment instructions are usually provided for students, the purpose of each assessment piece and its relationship to other assessment and learning objectives is seldom articulated. In MMH299, details regarding each piece of assessment were available online and reinforced in class. Nonetheless, traditional practices were more likely to be highly valued; teacher assessment (53%), written work, (40%) and oral work (41%). Less traditional practices including peer and self-assessment and tasks done on computer were highly valued by less than 20%, though they were moderately valuable to over half. Since students do not always read printed information, their perceptions of assessment need to be challenged early in semester in a tutorial situation to
prepare them for involvement in a broader, more holistic approach. Staff managing MMH299 have realised this and have undertaken a ‘training’ program to prepare students and tutors for assessment this semester.

**Increasing students’ understandings of the meaning and value of assessment tasks**

To leverage full value from an alternative assessment approach, students need to understand fully the meaning and purpose of the tasks, the way their design integrates with curriculum objectives, and the value of learning promoted through assessment for long-term benefit. Segrave and Holt (2003) have articulated the importance of whole curriculum design. Assessment tasks are often seen as isolated pieces of work necessary for obtaining grades. They rarely see the overall picture of how tasks are integrated (if they are) and designed to assist learning that relates to the whole curriculum. Some students studying MMH299 reflected this way of thinking. The extent to which they understood and valued the assessment tasks depended on their level of engagement, and their organisational and time management skills. However, staff were satisfied that by the end of semester, students understood and derived some value from most tasks.

Over 80% of students highly or moderately valued all assignment tasks, except the journal. Staff thought the purpose of the oral presentations was clearly understood and valued even though many were anxious about doing it. Student data confirms this; 48% highly valued them and 45% thought they were moderately valuable. Having to dress formally and present professionally appeared to make the task more real and valid. Most students appreciated the document creation tasks (high value, 73%; moderate value 445%). However, staff thought some may not realise the real value of these activities until they are in a professional situation. The document creation test was valued (highly 37%, moderately 46%), but problematic because some students didn’t have enough time to complete the test, and believe in a real situation, they would have more time. Staff thought the business proposal caused some difficulties and was not valued as much as expected. It was due close to exam time, so students who had not prepared early had to work hurriedly. Nonetheless, 35% highly valued it and 51% thought it was moderately valuable.

Staff felt the journal was not valued, though 16% highly and 39% moderately valued it. A few students wrote entries regularly throughout semester, but many wrote the whole thing just before it was due. Their entries tended to be more descriptive than reflective which suggests there was a lack of understanding of its purpose. Although the portfolio was valued (37% highly, 45% moderately), students have not collected them, indicating they regarded it as an activity to achieve a grade rather than something valuable for future purposes.

Students appeared to focus the immediate value of obtaining a grade without thinking about long-term benefits. They didn’t understand until later in the semester what the assessment tasks really involved, which may explain discrepancies between staff perceptions and student data.
Assessment tasks that suit some students do not necessarily suit others. However, by designing a range of assessment incorporating oral and written activities, assignments and exams, particular preferences are not advantaged over others, ensuring more equitable outcomes. The meaning and contextualisation of an assessment approach could be articulated more clearly for students by providing a matrix aligning tasks with a rationale, learning objectives, their place in the overall curriculum, and likely long-term benefits of completing the assessment. These alignments could be reinforced through the provision of assessment information and accompanying learning resources in hypertext form on a CD-ROM. Use of online time-released messages at the commencement of each assessment task could further emphasise alignments. It may be useful to tailor these trigger messages to particular needs of different groups studying the unit.

**Achieving the intent of assessment tasks**

MMH299 assessment tasks were closely aligned with the particular concepts and skills students were expected to develop. Tasks were authentic because they reflected real business communication activities. Staff felt they achieved their intent very well. What students got out of them depended on the effort expended, but almost all demonstrated some skill development; 52% agreed assessment activities increased awareness of business communication and 50% believed they helped to develop designated practical business communication skills. With more time for incremental feedback, students may have achieved better results. Staff believed the *oral presentations* resulted in very good learning outcomes, though only the best students excelled in both content presentation and delivery. Despite the stress, students acknowledged it was a good learning experience, Varying standards were achieved with *document creation/analysis* tasks though staff felt all students showed improvement. Some didn’t prepare well for the test and ran out of time. Better results may have been achieved by doing document analysis tasks for homework. The *business proposal* outcomes were varied and were affected by group dynamics and leaving the work until late in semester. Staff thought submission of a rough draft would help in future. For most students, the *journal* didn’t achieve its intent of having them reflect on their work to advance insights and understandings. The *portfolio* requirements forced students to develop their CVs and practice job application letters. These reflected various standards but the task gave students something to build on. A few have successfully used their CVs to obtain jobs.

There was quite a degree of ambivalence about the extent to which assessment activities helped develop skills. Between 30% and 40% neither agreed nor disagreed with each statement. Perhaps, students do not necessarily think about what they are learning as they respond to assessment directions.

**How should undergraduate students be assessed?**

Self and peer assessment have been promoted as valuable options for higher education. But how realistic are they and how fair are the outcomes? In considering this issue we need to distinguish between informal and
formal modes of assessment. Students can informally critique their own and their peers’ work in ways beneficial for individual and collective learning without marks being assigned to contributions. Online environments can facilitate this type of interaction, with students’ online postings contributing to more formal assessment for teacher grading. In contrast, MMH299 staff built individual and peer assessment into their formal approach, though only 10% of the overall grade total was allocated to these elements.

Some issues arose from the peer assessment component of the oral presentation. While most staff thought the balance between self, peer, and teacher assessment was appropriate, some were not in favour of peer assessment because they believe students are not qualified to do it. Some students believed that assessment marking was the teacher’s responsibility. Perhaps these are legitimate concerns in respect to undergraduate courses. Students are not trained to assess, they pay fees to be assessed professionally by staff with particular qualifications. They need to feel confident their assessment results are outcomes from a fair, reliable system.

Another issue was that a number of students didn’t treat the exercise seriously and didn’t follow the criteria. Some were overly critical, sometimes vindictive, others were very generous and gave perfect scores to friends irrespective of the quality of work. A few made rude, insulting remarks. From the staff perspective, the logistics of manually adding up students’ grades, averaging them, then averaging that with the teacher’s grade took a significant amount of time for an insignificant outcome. Perhaps the extra time taken by staff to attempt some peer assessment was not commensurate with the overall benefit for students. If such a process could be automated through an online system, it would significantly reduce the onerous nature of the task. In MMH299, peer assessment has been retained, but students and tutors received more preparation and training this semester. Staff are currently trialling the Universities new LMS online assessment feature to allow them to receive, mark, and return assignments online.

**Group assessment**

From philosophical and practical perspectives, group work is accepted practice in the B. Com. Staff regard it as authentic work reflecting what happens in business environments. Hence, many units require group-based assignments. In some units, students are randomly assigned to groups, but in others, like MMH299, they largely self-select. Group dynamics and varying contributions to output have often caused difficulties when implementing group assessment. With more students in the workforce while studying, it is becoming more difficult for a group to get together in a face-to-face situation. The larger the group, the more difficult this is. In MMH299, students were usually assigned to groups of 6, but consideration is being given to having groups of 4 to ease the logistics. Most MMH299 students valued group work tasks: 48% highly valued the oral presentation, 45% thought it was moderately valuable; 35% highly valued the written proposal, 51% thought it was moderately valuable. It appears difficulties were outweighed by perceived benefits in this case.
Plagiarism

James et al (2002) cited plagiarism as one of the major issues confronting institutions today. During data gathering processes in 2002, this wasn’t an issue in MMH299. Only one student failed the unit as a result of plagiarism. However, according to the unit coordinator, ‘this semester, (2003) the amount of web material included without attribution has escalated dramatically’. It appears as more work is done online, the likelihood of plagiarism increases even though students are warned about it and given precise instructions on correct citation. There is a need to research student conceptions of plagiarism and their understandings of accepted ways of citing source material in the field of business communication. Staff believe international students may have different understandings of what it means to plagiarise as a result of different cultural practices. It may be regarded as a mark of respect to use other people’s work in their assignments while not appreciating the need to acknowledge the work.

Another factor that may lead students to plagiarise is the extent to which they confront competing work-related and other demands outside university. Perhaps they have less time to gather evidence and cite it correctly. Given the ubiquity of information on the Internet, people see less need to officially acknowledge specific instances of it. Ready availability of information across all media is taken for granted – the trend towards plagiarism is a cultural phenomenon not confined to academia. For instance, ABC’s Media Watch has demonstrated the attitude of some reporters to citing sources, a professional behaviour that could be emulated by students.

The MMH299 assessment approach coupled with other unit requirements might lead students to plagiarise as a coping behaviour. This raises the need for unit-based assessment demands to be seen in the context of the overall program design. A program-wide design would adopt a sharper view on which particular attributes should be developed and assessed in particular units in ways that maximise program-wide learning and minimise excessive, overlapping assessment and workload.

Tension between consistency and equity in assessment and catering for diverse student cohorts

There is a tension between the need to design reliable, fair, and cost-effective forms of formal assessment for a large, core undergraduate unit and the need to cater for diverse student backgrounds. For consistency and equity purposes, all MMH299 students received the same teaching resources and approaches, though extra support tutorials were offered to students who wanted more assistance. Staff acknowledged different cohorts would have experienced the unit differently. For example, off-campus and mature-aged students were generally more motivated, worked harder and had higher expectations than younger on-campus students. The unit work was more meaningful for them, because they could relate it to their work situation. They were more accepting of what had to be done, but sometimes more sceptical about different ways of doing things.
Culture had an impact on the way students experienced the unit. International students often had difficulties with language, (particularly written communication) and focused more on correct document design and memorisation of different models. Some international students were reluctant to do activities requiring initiative, cooperation and communication with others, and sharing ideas, therefore potentially compromising one of the unit aims of developing skills in cross-cultural communication. There were also cultural differences in terms of attitude and respect. However, there was some scepticism on their part because communication practices in their own countries were different from what was being taught.

Staff believed the diverse cohort enriched students’ learning experiences. Young undergraduates learnt from the experiences of older students already in the workforce. Local students were exposed to other cultural practices and international students learnt about Australian ways. Staff sometimes used students as resources and would like the opportunity to discuss students’ experiences more extensively.

**Tension between staff workloads and quality assessment practices**

Implementation of a broadly based, quality assessment approach in MMH299 increased staff workloads in terms of preparation and marking. To keep workloads under control, criteria marking guidelines for all staff, and marking time guidelines for casual tutors were developed. Most staff found the criteria marking guidelines very useful for accuracy and consistency and for enabling them to focus on exactly what students were expected to produce. However, this didn’t allow for a global perspective on students’ work because there were many miniscule details to attend to. Sometimes there was disparity between a global mark and the mark arrived at using prescriptive guidelines. This was generally resolved through consultation with other tutors and moderating outcomes. The need to moderate grades across campuses and tutorial groups required a further time commitment from lecturing staff to ensure equity and consistency.

Although the unit coordinator adopted many of the suggestions made by James et al (2002, pp.34-35) to ameliorate workloads and manage casual staff, the budget didn’t provide funding for professional development and weekly meetings for tutors. All tutors found the marking time guidelines to be inadequate, except for exams. Overall they spent much more time on marking than was allocated; this extra work was unpaid, but professional responsibilities were regarded as more important than remuneration. In particular the mechanics of removing and replacing each piece of portfolio work was very time consuming and reduced the time available for providing feedback for students. To enable more cost effective assessment of students’ portfolio work, the unit coordinator has decided to trial the University’s new electronic portfolio software in 2004.
Conclusion

Given the increasing number of undergraduate units like MMH299 which have large, diversified and distributed student cohorts, we see effective unit management and appropriate assessment practices being more strongly supported by the newer information and communication technologies. These technologies are increasingly being implemented as integrated enterprise-level systems in universities. Some of the challenging issues raised in implementing a relevant, reliable, fair assessment regime in MMH299 could be addressed through further development of online unit-wide learning communities and local learning communities, multimedia role plays, as well as the use of online technology. Mention is made of the current and potential use of online technology for enhancing the quality of learning and the efficiency of teaching through online assignment submission and marking, assessment/learning resource digital mapping, electronic portfolios and journals, and plagiarism detection software. The movement to adopt ICTs for these purposes will require ongoing changes to the role of the academic teacher and changes in students’ conceptions of learning effectively in computer-supported learning environments.

References

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