

Five a Day

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So, my first full semester teaching at the University, and I decide to make more use of the facilities offered by Blackboard. Being a bit of a computer geek, and having done this sort of thing before, I decided to set up some on line quizzes for a couple of 2nd and 3rd year modules. Nothing too complicated, some straightforward multiple choice questions to get people thinking about the module content and to let them assess what they already knew (i.e. what have they recalled from the pre- requisite modules). I stressed of course that these quizzes were not mandatory and did not count towards assessment but would still be useful to do. Seven weeks in and 2 students out of 80 have attempted them. So, I'm a little disappointed but not surprised. I've seen a similar thing happen before. One of the OU courses I tutor used to have a series of 6 computer marked assignments; they were not individually mandatory but did count towards a final summative assessment score. Numbers attempting these assessments were consistently high; some students took a tactical view (if their current assessment score was high enough, they would maybe skip one of these assessments); but in the main the dangle of a carrot in the shape of some impact on summative scores attracted most.

Recently, the assessment regime was changed, and these computer marked assessments became purely formative. Result? Far fewer students attempting them, in spite of (or because of?) exhortations from members of the course team. Hence the title of this piece. We all know that eating five pieces of fruit and veg a day is good for us, but because our arms don't drop off if we miss a day, we are not always fully motivated to consume our quota. I think students may view formative assessment in this way; they know it's good for them, but with no immediate consequence it can just be something else to (never) get around to doing. On the other hand, they know that summative assessments will result in pass/fail, and eventually degree classifications. Not surprising then that students become very attentive when we devote time to looking at summative assessments. I imagine for most students getting a (good) degree is their aim and this translates into maximising summative assessment scores.

Of course, the student devotion to these assessments then puts a big onus on academic staff to get these assessments right. Are the assessments a logical part of the module? Do they provide for different skills and aptitudes of students? Do we mark and grade them fairly? I know that there is a wealth of literature on this, some of which I am grappling with on my PG Certificate course, and the more I read and grapple the more confused I become.

So what to do? Well here a couple of thoughts off the top of my head. How about covert assessment (formative and summative)? We don't actually tell students in advance what we are assessing – we just make them aware that assessment will be taking place over the life of the module. Sounds somewhat creepy but could be fun for lecturers. Another option is to simply ask students to present some work that they feel represents what they have got from the module; who are the movers and shakers in the field; what areas did they most enjoy (and why); write and answer their own problem; describe how this module complements other modules they have done.

Of course there are problems with these approaches, not least of which is the marking load on lecturers. The potential breadth of responses under my second option would surely require more time in marking and grading. Keeping records under covert assessment would again consume academic time. Other issues are how do we ensure consistency of grading

and eventual degree classification, without the artefact of an objective assessment task (please impute a sense of scepticism to several of the lofty ideals set out in the first part of this sentence). Some professional bodies are wedded to 3 hour closed book examinations and they would not look kindly on other forms of assessment.

Of course, please don't take these musings as anything other than someone thinking out loud; at the moment I am a little uneasy about assessment but maybe time and experience will teach me otherwise. In any event, it's always good to reflect isn't it?