

'It's all about the grade.'

Students perceptions of innovative assessment methods

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1. Background

- Assessment has been acknowledged as being of central importance to the student learning experience. However, assessment practices have been consistently highlighted as one of the weakest features by the Quality Assurance Agency (Rust, O'Donovan & Price, 2005).
- Literature has emerged over the past decade surrounding the issue of assessment practices in Higher Education, in particular how assessment can enhance the student learning experience. (Bloxham & West, 2007; Rust, O'Donovan & Price, 2005; Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2005).
- However, research has suggested that students are outcome orientated in that they do not focus on the *process* of learning, or even the product, rather the *consequence* of the product. (Biggs, 2003).
- As a result, this raises the question of how we encourage students' to focus on the processes of learning.
- In recent years there has been a dramatic growth of 'innovative' assessment types, e.g. e portfolios such as Pebble Pad, peer assessment, and forms of computer supported learning.
- Therefore, it is important to examine students' perceptions of assessment, to explore how they are assessed and the impact that this may have on their approach to study.

Research question

- Do innovative assessment methods encourage students to focus on the processes of learning?

2. Method

- Focus groups were conducted with 8 undergraduate and 7 postgraduate Psychology students.
- The students ranged in age from 19 to 38 with a mean age of 23.1 (SD = 5.8) years.
- Students were drawn from a convenience sample.
- Students were excluded if they had not previously completed any form of innovative assessment.
- Transcripts from each focus group were analysed using Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) Thematic framework method.

References

- Biggs, J. (2003). Teaching for quality learning at university (2nd Ed.). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
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- Rust, C., O'Donovan, B. & Price, M. (2005). A Social constructivist assessment process model: how the research literature shows us this could be best practice. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30 (3), 231-240.
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3. Findings

- Students' perceived innovative assessments to have a positive effect on their learning if they:
 - **Related to authentic 'real world' tasks.** These authentic tasks were perceived positively by students and represented the kind of activities that they may encounter in 'real life'. Innovative assessments, such as the negotiated learning module, were also viewed as an opportunity to develop knowledge and capabilities that may benefit them in the future and consequently be of long term benefit.

"It also forces you to apply your psychological knowledge to like actual situations whereas before like you would just write about theory and critique it and that's it done whereas like the weblog, it forces you to think about how it fits in with life."

3rd year BSc student

- **Encouraged the application of psychological knowledge.** Students additionally emphasised the benefit of innovative assessment in enabling them to apply their psychological knowledge to real world contexts.

"For anyone who is thinking about a career as a lecturer I think the module is a great idea. Designing modules is obviously something that lecturers have to do so having a practice run at it was really fun. I think it's not just about knowing about a topic or area of psychology but being able to apply it."

MSc student

- **Encouraged the development of transferable skills.** Students identified that widening participation has led to an increased number of graduates and are aware that they may not walk straight into a job after they have graduated. Consequently, students perceive assessments that facilitate the development of transferable skills necessary to gain employment as instrumental in the effectiveness of innovative assessment.

- Innovative assessments may also **enhance the learning experience** of students encouraging engagement with course material and an emphasis on meaning making.

"Even though it's innovative and new, my focus is still the grade because at the end of the day, when I leave university that's what people are interested in."

3rd year BSc student

- However, the extent to which these perceptions impacted upon the students' approach to study was unclear. Despite the positive features of innovative assessments, students' remained outcome orientated and perceived their assignment grade to be of ultimate importance. This was directly related to students' aspirations on leaving university, particularly employability and progression onto postgraduate courses.

4. Conclusions

- This study has demonstrated both the benefits to and challenges of implementing innovative assessment methods in higher education.
- Students persistently stressed the importance of the outcomes of assessment suggesting a limited focus in the processes of learning.
- Greater emphasis ought to be placed on students as active participants in the assessment process and improved alignment between the expectations of the tutor and those of the student.



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