



## Transforming Assessment In Higher Education

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### A Case Study Series

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## Case Study 5

# Dissertations in 2<sup>nd</sup> year? Promoting assessment literacy for independent research

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## Background

In Japanese Studies, undergraduate students spend their entire third year in Japan, where their sole focus is on language acquisition. This presents two issues: first, being in Japan is great for researching Japanese language and culture, but students perhaps do not necessarily have the skills or level of reflexivity needed to make the best of the opportunity; second, once back in Edinburgh, students are expected to complete a 10,000-word dissertation. This abrupt transition from language to 'studies' is the cause of much anxiety for our students, many of whom struggle to make progress with their dissertations. The course discussed in this case study, *Researching Japan*, came about in response to these challenges. It was designed to guide students through the process of conducting independent research, and help them internalise the standards by which their dissertations will be assessed in 4<sup>th</sup> year by promoting their assessment literacy.

## Approach

Prior to the advent of this course we delivered details of assessment for the dissertation to students via a number of documents. However, this clearly was not working. Students continued to ask the same questions about formatting, referencing, structure, and sources and unfortunately many dissertations did not engage with the assessment criteria. Thus, the programme team decided to take an experiential approach to promoting assessment literacy. The philosophy was simple – the earlier we start talking about and *doing* independent research the more students will engage with and internalise the principles of sound research design by which they were to be assessed.

To facilitate this engagement we needed a course with constructively aligned assessments that would promote 'deep learning': seeking connections between concepts and ideas as opposed to the 'surface learning' of unconnected facts (Gibbs 1992, p. 2). In the case of Japanese studies, which can fall into the trap of being overly descriptive, deep learning means developing in students the ability to articulate complex historical explanations of social phenomena, and understand the connections

between history, culture, politics and society in Japan. As a subject area without a defined set of methods, deep learning in Japanese also means being critically aware of the methodological implications of different questions. Both of these skill sets are assessed via the dissertation, and it is therefore crucial that students both understand and demonstrate their competence in them.

*Researching Japan* was introduced as gateway to the honours years with the following learning outcomes, which in turn related to the assessment criteria for the dissertation itself:

1. Identify and evaluate key theoretical approaches to the study of Japanese society
2. Reflectively evaluate their own knowledge of Japanese society, history and culture
3. Critique academic work on Japan in terms of theory, method, evidence, and argument
4. Design and conduct autonomous research on contemporary Japanese society

The first two learning outcomes require students to come to terms with a range of different analytical approaches to the study of Japanese society, and then reflect critically on how these frameworks influence their own understanding of Japan. To promote deep learning in a relatively safe environment, we ask students to keep a class diary, on which we offer feedback. Students are encouraged to draw connections between the different concepts they have explored and ask questions about how their own views of Japan have changed as a result. Importantly, we encourage students to use their own voice, which lowers the barriers to experimentation with theory.

Learning outcome 3 is assessed via two 1000-word reviews of academic articles. We systematically dismantle each article in class, meaning that students can draw on their discussions with their peers when constructing their own critiques. As with the research diaries, via engagement with the assessment criteria we encourage students to think about the implications of the articles for their own understanding of Japan, and promote joined up thinking across the programme as a whole. In contrast to the diaries, however, we do require the reviews be written in an academic style (more formal, structured, well referenced etc.), as we see them as an important step towards learning outcome 4.

The ultimate goal for this course, learning outcome 4, is to develop the skills necessary to conduct autonomous research. We therefore introduced a 3000-word 'mini-dissertation' on a topic of the student's choosing. This word-limit was chosen because it is slightly more than 2nd year students are usually expected to write, but is not unmanageable. One 1-hour session per week is dedicated to the mini-dissertation. The

process of research and writing is broken up into interconnected stages – brainstorming questions, reviewing the literature, writing abstracts etc. – and students bring their work to each session for discussion and peer-critique. To simulate the act of writing a dissertation, the entire 30% of course marks allocated for the mini-dissertation come from the final product. Thus while the emphasis on ‘process’ is formative, the culmination of this work leads to a graded summative product.

## Outcomes

Of the three pieces of assessment discussed above, it is the mini-dissertation that presents the biggest challenge and due to space constraints it will be the focus of this section. Overall the exercise has been a success in relation to our goals of socializing students into the processes and standards required for good independent research. Students have responded positively to the autonomy granted to them, and we have seen a marked improvement in the quality of 4<sup>th</sup> year research. For example one student commented:

*Interesting topics and good opportunity for discussion. Loved being allowed to choose topics for the second semester. Happy with process I made and my abilities now.*

Students also commented on the connections between 2<sup>nd</sup> year preparation and 4<sup>th</sup> year research and assessment. For example in response to what was good about the course one student wrote:

*Building upon the idea of ‘Japan’ as academic inquiry. What sociological concerns we can learn through readings coursework which will serve us well in 4<sup>th</sup> year. Independent research project is very good, as were discussion/debate.*

Some challenges, however, have arisen that were not foreseen when designing the course. First, we have found that, to an extent, the intended learning outcomes for the project are in tension. Namely, the importance of process is emphasized throughout the course, which suggests an assessment strategy that allocates a certain percentage of marks to each step of that process. But the mini-dissertation is also intended to simulate the experience of writing the 4<sup>th</sup> year dissertation, albeit with much more guidance. One of the unique aspects of the dissertation is that marks are allocated at the end of a sustained independent piece of work that requires a high degree of self-discipline to complete successfully. Thus the scaffolded experience of the mini-dissertation may give students an inaccurate idea of what the 4<sup>th</sup> year dissertation experience will actually feel like.

There is also the question of expectations. According to Cross (1996), there are three conditions for excellence in student achievement: (1) high expectations, (2) student

participation and involvement, and (3) assessment and feedback. We make it clear from the beginning that, given the level of student participation and involvement, and the large amounts of feedback provided, we have very high expectations of the students – we essentially look for work that would receive a pass mark in the 'good' category of our honours marking scheme. But we also encourage students to follow their interests and to be bold. Indeed, we would rather students aim high, 'fail', and receive feedback, than play it safe. But such an approach to assessment again comes into conflict with the simulation component of the mini-dissertation.

On reflection, it is our impression that even when learning outcomes are constructively aligned with assessment, tensions within the learning outcomes themselves can lead to uneasy compromises in assessment practice. In this case, preparing students for completing an honours dissertation, which requires students to experience some of the associated stress and strain, comes into conflict with an equally strong urge to provide students with a safe environment in which they can constructively fail. This is a microcosm of an embedded tension in higher education more generally: namely the need to provide a place of safe, constructive learning, while developing resilience for life in what can be an unforgiving world.

## References

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