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Enhancing student engagement through assessment - a case study exploring the use of group debates in an undergraduate elective module

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Background

 'If you want to change student learning then change the methods of assessment' (Brown, Bull and Pendlebury, 1997, p.7)

Universities report increased challenges around student attendance and engagement (Landin and Perez, 2015; Mearman, Pacheco, Webber, Ivlevs and Rahman, 2014). Lecturers often invest time in lesson preparation to ensure that their materials are stimulating – though many present to sparse classrooms and there can be limited use of resources within the virtual learning environment (VLE) (Mearman et al, 2014; White et al., 2014). However, attendance is credited with heightened development of soft skills, the assets most in demand by employers (Cohn and Johnson, 2006). There is an appreciation that assessments should develop students' capacity to make judgements (Boud, 2017) and to have moral awareness and social skills that equip them to work in a dynamic, uncertain future context (Kreber, 2017). However, many students are still being exposed to quite traditional modes (Bartram and Bailey, 2010) which concentrate on testing knowledge (assessment of learning) rather than coupling this with varied skills assessments (assessment for learning (Knight, 1998).
This case study describes the use of assessed group debates within an undergraduate elective module on ethics and moral reasoning to enhance student engagement, cooperative learning, knowledge and skills.

Approach

Abertay University introduced elective modules in 2015 in order to expose students to a broader syllabus in their early years of study. Students are required to study an elective module (not associated with their main degree programme) during each of the first two stages of study.

One of the elective modules, '*Ethical Reasoning for a Global Society*', challenges the students to consider moral and ethical dilemmas within a citizenship and future employment context. The early part of the module exposes students to legislative frameworks and case study material, with the students working in groups within the university's new collaborative learning suite. *VIA* software is used to promote cooperative engagement with classroom material. Students share case study responses with the class and are encouraged to present counter viewpoints in the knowledge that academic discourse will not always result in consensus. The module has two units of assessment, a group debate and a portfolio of engagement. These have been designed to challenge critical thinking, oral fluency when presenting a counter-position, capacity to work within a team, and collegiality. Students are organised into multi-disciplinary non-self-selecting teams of 3-4 people and randomly choose to oppose or propose a given motion. Time is given in class for students to gather and share resources and to start building their arguments (guided preparation). This work continues within the virtual learning environment (VLE) with module lecturers able to provide feedback as the discourse develops. The level of engagement in this forum (frequency, volume and content of postings as well as the level of peer support being provided) contributes to the portfolio grade, as does the in-class preparation. Students are informed of the marking criteria for both units of assessment from the outset (assessment literacy) and are aware that the group mark for the debate is differentiated by the standard of individual presentation and participation in the rebuttal and audience questions. This latter aspect is built into the grading for the debate therefore attendance and engagement is key. The coherence and fluency of each team's debate is also graded allowing cooperation to be rewarded.

Outcomes

Twenty eight students enrolled for the first iteration of the module during the 2016-17 academic session. No student had prior debating experience. Consequently, it was a real pleasure to hear the voice, rationale and confidence of some of the student presenters. Voting software was used to make the debate interactive, and while some found engaging their peers in the debate preparation challenging – students enjoyed participating in a different non-written mode of assessment. Student evaluations were overwhelmingly positive though some acknowledged that they had felt '*out of their comfort zone'* during the debate but were pleased with what they had achieved. The occasional student made comment that it seemed that '*students were having to do all the work'* and that teaching staff were *'getting an easy ride'*. This was coupled with '*I wish I had chosen an alternate elective where we get to listen to speakers doing the debates rather than having to do them ourselves'*. However, in general, students were particularly appreciative of working with peers on other programmes of study and

considering alternate disciplinary approaches (a central objective of the elective suite of modules). Some students used the VLE forum to good effect - those who engaged well with this platform were able to evidence heightened cooperative learning, with students pooling resources and developing their lines of argument. Other students needed several prompts to start posting material and for some there was limited engagement with the forum (this was reflected in the grade that was finally awarded). Student attendance averaged 68% across all weeks including the final 4 weeks when the in-class assessments of the debates occurred. This was at a point in the term when attendance was waning for other colleagues and many were experiencing attendance levels akin to c.30%.

Business representatives have stated that students are not work-ready (BCC, 2016) and in the context of employability, universities are being questioned about skill development (UUK, 2013). Employers recognise that subject specific knowledge is important – however, transferable skills particularly those of communication, reliability and team work are also valuable for the workplace (Bevitt, 2015; Shah, 2013). Broadening the variety of assessments for a more diverse student body with a range of learning styles has the capacity to increase student engagement and enhance employability (O'Shea and Fawns, 2017; Brew, Riley and Walta, 2009). The feedback from the first cohort taking this elective module suggests that the majority of students appreciated the exposure to an alternate assessment format which for some was personally challenging but also developmental. The feedback and guidance provided in class, and online, helped build student confidence that the work that they were producing aligned with assessment expectations. They were also particularly appreciative of the 'richness of conversations' and the 'holistic way of thinking' that emerged from the module activity.

The assessment modes did not follow traditional formats and instead required the student to orate a coherent argument, as well as demonstrate collaboration. Students place less value on co-operative assignments (Machemer and Crawford, 2007) and are known to prefer written coursework, perceiving these as less stressful, fairer and allowing more time for preparation (van de Watering, Gijbels, Dochy and van der Rijt, 2008; Bartram and Bailey, 2010). This is despite increased recognition of the value of exposure to collaborative assignment modes (O'Shea and Fawns, 2017) which enable the development of skills of negotiation (including dealing with conflict), organisation and management of time and resources (Shah, 2013; Clarke and Blissenden, 2013). Bevitt (2015) and Bartram and Bailey(2010) acknowledge that because of the challenges of introducing new and different assessment modes many educators may shy away from making changes to their practice. However, as evidenced here, there is merit in persisting with alternate assignments that heighten engagement but it is vital that

students understand the worth of their personal investment in terms of deeper learning and the development of attributes that employers' value.

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