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Introducing Non-Traditional Assessment Methods

Introduction

It is increasingly recognized that the most important influence on what students learn and the way that they learn it—above all, whether student learning is active or passive, deep or surface—is the form in which assessment is carried out (Gibbs 1992; Marton & Saljo 1984; Rust 2002). The limitations of a traditional exam-based approach are clear: where students are offered a choice of questions, it may be entirely rational for them to question-spot, revise selectively and think of the subject in terms of a series of discrete topics rather than attempt to develop their understanding of it as a whole, while often ‘all that may actually be being assessed are the students’ memorizing and essay-writing skills’ (Rust 2002: 147). The introduction of assessed coursework essays is often seen as a means of encouraging students to focus more on analysis and evaluation than regurgitation of information, but with mixed results; moreover, it immediately raises concerns about the issue of plagiarism (Carroll 2002).

The obvious conclusion is that we need to adopt a wider range of assessment methods, tailored to the needs of students and to the learning outcomes of units and programmes. However, attempts to introduce such methods into the mainstream of higher education have highlighted a range of problems; in particular, the extent to which non-traditional assessment methods may require greater input from academics in both marking and feedback than traditional methods. It cannot be denied that the traditional written exam is a highly cost-effective method for grading (not necessarily assessing) large numbers of students, especially as it is rare for markers to have to provide anything than the most general feedback on performance.

One argument likely to be employed with increasing frequency to persuade the reluctant academic to innovate is that, as students and their families have to make greater contributions to the cost of university education, they will expect a greater emphasis on relevant transferable skills and the development of employability (Assiter 1995; Bloxham 2004). However, this begs the question of what students in fact want from their degree—which may not be the same at every stage of their university career. It neglects the possibility that there may be great resistance from students when staff attempt to introduce new methods of assessment into their programmes. This may be particularly the case when such new methods are introduced piecemeal, so that the majority of students’ units are still being assessed in a traditional manner (cf. Benson & Blackman 2003: 53). If such resistance is then expressed in unit or programme evaluation questionnaires, it is likely to be cited as further grounds for persisting with traditional forms of assessment.

The Case Study

All second-year students on the Ancient History programme at the University of Bristol take a unit entitled *Approaches to Ancient History*, which explores issues in the theory and practice of history, including the use of concepts from the social sciences in the study of the ancient world. The unit emphasises the skills of analysis, critical evaluation and the application of knowledge in new situations (for example, applying new theoretical ideas to historical material with which the students are already familiar), and expects students to reflect on their own historical practice (cf. Gunn & Rawnsley 2004).

Approaches has traditionally been assessed through a conventional essay and exam, equally weighted. From 2001, the 'essay' took the form of a project, in which students were asked to evaluate a theoretical approach of their choice by considering its application to historical material which they had studied in earlier units (Morley 2001). This change was intended not only to relate the assessment more directly to the specific learning outcomes of the unit, but also to promote the development of the students' ability to direct their own learning and design their own research project, skills which are essential for the compulsory final year dissertation. From the lecturer's perspective, the change was very successful; compared with previous years, virtually all the work submitted not only offered a far clearer indication of students' attainment of the intended learning outcomes but was, by the department's marking criteria, significantly better. However, the students themselves did express anxiety in their evaluation forms about the change, above all on the grounds that half of the unit mark rested on their performance in something that they had no experience of doing. Moreover, the exam, intended to test the breadth of their knowledge and understanding, continued to elicit superficial answers that tended simply to regurgitate lecture notes rather than engage with issues or debates.

In 2004, therefore, a new approach was adopted: the exam was abandoned, and students were required to submit a portfolio of work at the end of unit. This portfolio had to contain four specific exercises—a book review, a rhetorical analysis of a passage of historiography, a reflective journal on the unit and a theoretical evaluation along the lines of the projects of previous years—but there was no restriction on the number or nature of additional pieces of work that could be submitted, and there were no fixed word limits for any of the exercises. The exercises were intended to assess more directly the range of analytical and evaluative skills at the heart of the unit, giving the students freedom to develop their own approaches and testing their ability to make use of this opportunity. The flexibility of the portfolio format was intended to relieve the anxieties about 'putting all one's eggs in one basket'; students could submit several different attempts at the same exercise if they were unsure of the best way to approach it. It was made clear that the mark would be based on the portfolio as a whole, judging it in the light of standard marking criteria and the learning outcomes of the unit, rather than allocating a set number of marks to particular exercises.

Extensive guidance was given in the unit handbook about the rationale for the portfolio (emphasising its intended role in developing and assessing transferable skills) and how it might be approached; this was supplemented by a lengthy discussion at the first class and frequent question and answer sessions in later classes. The lecturer was able to respond to e-mail queries within a day or so, and was available for individual tutorials (though in the event very few students took advantage of this opportunity). Finally, examples of theoretical evaluations from the

previous year were made available, to show the sort of work expected for that particular exercise.

The Lecturer's Experience

Only one student out of a class of 25 actually took full advantage of the flexibility of the portfolio and submitted more than the four required exercises; most did, however, take the opportunity of the relaxed word limits to write considerably more than is normally required of second-year essays in the department. Many students had problems with one or other of the exercises; some chose books for the book review that were too basic and/or general for them to be able to develop any detailed analysis, while some failed to grasp the idea of the reflective journal and simply provided a summary of their lecture notes. In all but one case, however, weaknesses in one area were compensated by strengths in another. The variety of tasks and the emphasis in the marking on all-round performance meant that no one was disadvantaged by the form of assessment; many students received the highest marks they had yet been given for any of their work. My strong impression is that most students had made a greater than usual effort; in the absence of any complaints about the amount, as opposed to the nature, of the work, I am inclined to take this as a positive outcome, rather than reflecting any sense that it was necessary to work much harder in this unit to get a decent mark. Certainly much of the work clearly showed, in a way that the exam never did, that students had achieved the unit's learning outcomes in engaging with issues and developing and practising key skills.

The drawback was that this form of assessment was significantly more demanding for the lecturer in terms of time and effort. A great deal of time had to be spent in different classes explaining the idea of the portfolio and responding to questions and anxieties, to the extent that it was not always possible to cover all the material planned for that session. At certain points, the experience of dealing with student scepticism and even hostility threatened to become demoralising. The process of marking took considerably longer: over an hour for each portfolio, whereas I would normally expect to spend 20-25 minutes on an essay and about 15 minutes on an exam script. Partly this was due to the need to adjust to new forms of assessment myself, deciding how the generic marking criteria—virtually second nature in essay-marking—should be applied to a book review or a rhetorical analysis. Partly it was because the work itself demanded more extensive feedback; because the exercises were unfamiliar, it seemed necessary to explain to students where they had gone wrong in more detail than one normally would in an essay. More positively, the best work called for an equally lively and engaged response from the marker in order to do it justice.

In conclusion, the new form of assessment elicited student work that was far more closely related to the aims of the unit and its intended learning outcomes, and much more interesting to read. The real test will be whether students can repeat their performance in other units, especially in the final year where independent and self-directed learning is a central part of their activities, but my feeling is that the students were compelled by the form of assessment to develop and employ a range of relevant skills which would not otherwise have been tested specifically. The change has enhanced both the learning and teaching experiences, but at the expense of more work for the lecturer; even with the benefits of experience, which should to some extent reduce the marking time for each portfolio, this approach will always be more time-consuming and demanding than the traditional essay plus exam.

Students' Responses

As noted above, a great deal of time was spent discussing the portfolio in class. Much of this was devoted to explanation, of what was expected of different exercises, and guidance on how to develop a project, how to review a book and so forth. However, it was also necessary to defend the new form of assessment against a number of vocal objectors, who forcefully stated their preference for traditional methods. Interestingly, they were entirely unconvinced by attempts at emphasizing the role of the new assessment in testing transferable skills, and by the argument that this was actually a response to concerns raised by previous cohorts of students. Concern was focused almost entirely on the likely effects on their marks of this unfamiliar form of assessment.

Surprisingly, despite being encouraged to reflect on any aspects of the unit that interested them, only three students commented on the form of assessment in their reflective journals. One noted simply that 'I would have preferred the usual essay and exam; I found the theoretical evaluation extremely difficult to get my head around.' Another remarked that 'it will be fascinating to see the results of the portfolio as it encompasses so many different styles of written work' — a more positive response, but one which still focuses on marks. The third student went into much more detail, making suggestions about the timing and the nature of the exercises, and remarking generally:

I did feel extremely anxious, having done nothing comparable to the assessed pieces. I felt uncomfortable knowing my entire grade for the course would be determined by something with which I was unfamiliar.

All students are expected to complete a unit evaluation form in the final class, ensuring a response rate of 80%. Unfortunately this took place before the assessment had been marked and returned. Moreover, the form does not include a specific question on the form of assessment, though students are able to comment on this in the context of questions on the overall design and structure of the unit. 12 out of the 20 students who completed the form made no comment at all. Other comments were highly varied:

Innovative form of assessment; original and challenging.

Assessment good, but waiting for feedback.

The assessment was different from other units but I thought really interesting and varied, which was good as a respite from the essay/exam structure. Although I didn't (and still don't) really understand the point of the reflective journal.

Form of assessment: not enjoying it at the moment, feel very rushed but I may feel differently once I've got it handed in.

Essay and exam would be preferred [no explanation given].

I would prefer essay/exam — stick to what we know!

Portfolio smacks a little of GCSE English, but is a way of assessing variety and extensiveness of knowledge. Essay and exam perhaps better.

While the portfolio style of assessment did encourage interesting research and thinking, an essay/exam format would be more suitable, and perhaps fairer, for those who didn't enjoy the unit.

These comments were less negative than I would have anticipated at the beginning of the unit, with at least some recognition of the intended aims of the assessment. The most interesting question raised by the responses is why a traditional essay and exam should be considered fairer for those who did not enjoy the unit; because they can fall back on technique, and can count on a reasonable mark despite lack of engagement?

In the hope of gathering responses to the assessment method at the very end of the process, after the work had been returned, students were asked to complete an anonymous web-based survey on their views and experiences. Unfortunately, despite several reminders and despite having a month in which to complete the survey, only 7 students actually did so, clearly reducing the utility of the results. Nevertheless, the responses raise some interesting points. Five of the seven respondents said that they would initially have preferred a traditional essay and exam; all said that they now favoured the portfolio. The reasons given include getting the whole assessment of the unit out of the way rather than having to take an exam in the summer; 'exam conditions would not allow the best work to come through'; 'essay/exam is a bit boring'; 'the portfolio was much more enjoyable'. Almost all (6 out of 7 in each case) liked the flexibility of the portfolio in terms of number of exercises, choice of approach and relaxed word limits, even if they had not taken full advantage of it themselves.

The survey asked the students to comment on how far they felt the portfolio had helped them to develop their skills and knowledge:

| | A Lot | A Bit | Not Much | Not At All |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|----------|------------|
| Analysis & criticism | 1 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Research skills | 1 | 1 | 5 | 0 |
| Historical understanding | 3 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| New perspectives | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Independent learning | 0 | 4 | 3 | 0 |
| Self-reflection | 0 | 2 | 4 | 1 |

These results, limited though they are, are rather alarming. They certainly support the argument that a key aspect of developing employability must be to teach students to identify the skills that they are actually acquiring in the course of their studies (Moon 2004). These students were well aware of the knowledge they had acquired (as can also be seen in some of the responses on the evaluation forms), but had little sense of having developed skills of research (despite being required to research a theoretical approach) or self-reflection (despite having to write a reflective journal!), and only a limited idea of what independent learning might involve (despite being asked to develop their own projects and set their own questions).

It is abundantly clear that the reasons for their 'conversion' to the idea of the portfolio had little or nothing to do with any sense that it had helped them to develop relevant skills; it was due to their enjoyment of the activities, to the removal of any need to worry about a summer exam—and, one must suspect, to the fact that it had not after all damaged their prospects of a good degree.

Concluding Remarks

There is a striking contrast between the initial reactions of these second-year students to the portfolio and those of the year below them to a similar form of assessment. All first-year Ancient History students take a unit called *Introduction to Ancient History* in their first term, which is assessed through five skills-based exercises; students regularly complain that this unit does not, as they had expected, provide an introductory survey of the ancient world but is focused on historical skills, but none raise any objections, either in class or in unit evaluations, to the form of assessment. It would appear that, at the beginning of their university career, students have no prior expectations about the sort of work they will be asked to do; indeed, they may be expecting it to be quite different from school work. By the beginning of the second year, however, they have developed the perception that assessment will normally be in the form of essays and exams, and have developed skills specific to this form of assessment.

This is in fact perfectly rational behaviour on the students' part, especially as their perception of the value of their degree in terms of employability continues to focus almost exclusively on marks and results rather than on transferable skills. Asking them to do something different *is* then threatening the outcome of their studies, and so a hostile reaction is almost inevitable until the work is returned and they see that their marks have not actually suffered. If new and better forms of assessment are to be introduced successfully into the curriculum, therefore, this needs to take place on a broader front than one or two isolated units in any single programme. Students need not only to be introduced to different assessment activities from the beginning of their studies but to continue to be challenged, to avoid creating any impression that 'essay and exam' is normal or any incentive for them to orientate their studies solely towards improving their performance in those activities.

3059 words

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