Rationale and Objectives
Both employers and the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education (QAA) require that Business Studies degrees prepare students for the world of work (QAA 2007). Besides knowledge and understanding and critical engagement, however, there are softer skills that pose serious challenges for all institutions to deliver. Knight and Page (2007) call these 'wicked competencies', skills that are highly valued by employers such as effective team working, on-line collaboration, giving and receiving feedback. They are also deemed to be difficult to assess.

As a team developing a new course Business Organisations and Their Environments, we wanted to take on this challenge and, using new learning technologies, find ways of developing and assessing these competencies in ways that would enhance students’ employability. We were particularly concerned to engage students in deep, meaningful learning about the relationship between business theory and their day-to-day practice. Rather than the more traditional notion of applying theory to practice, we hoped to encourage students to think of a more dialogic or reflexive relationship between the two.

At the same time, we needed to improve student retention. Students on long 60-CAT-point distance-learning courses often have a decline in motivation at around 3-4 months, and we thought that by introducing a completely different approach to studying at the course midpoint, we would help to re-motivate students and reinforce their learning. We therefore sought to develop an assessed activity for an assignment that would fulfil a number of objectives:

- Engage the students in an on-line collaborative activity that would reflect and impact on their work practice.
• Increase retention by creating a new and exciting activity just when motivation is most likely to flag.

• Create an activity that has intrinsic worth for students.

Context
Even in face-to-face teaching environments, it can be hard to motivate students to undertake group work and often this is deeply unpopular, particularly for highly motivated students who can resent being dependent on others for a really successful and highly marked assignment. In a distance learning setting like the Open University (OU) this can pose an even greater challenge. Convention has it that students choose the OU because of its flexibility. They usually have a much greater degree of freedom than full-time students about when and how they study. In contrast with conventional universities, OU students are generally experience rich and time poor. Thorpe (2009 reported the extent to which students juggle around tasks and have to work in often short concentrated bursts. However, the OU Business School student profile does resemble that of other higher education institutions (particularly post-1992 institutions) rather more than other OU students.

In the cohort we evaluated, almost 25% of the students had English as second (or third or fourth) language. 60% were under 30 - much younger and therefore more extrinsically oriented (i.e. motivated by the qualification, rather than intrinsically, or motivated by learning for its own sake) than the average slightly older OU student. Frequently, students study two or more courses at the same time (as well as working) to lessen the time on their journey to the degree. In this case, 38% were also studying at least one other course, often as well as a full-time job. However, the younger age profile does have advantages in that many of the students are both familiar with and comfortable with information communication technologies (ICT).

The other factor affecting OU students is geographical dispersal. Although the current offering of the degree is mainly in UK and Europe, in reality, OU students can be anywhere in the world. For example there are always a sizeable number in the armed forces who may have tour of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. Tutorial attendance is optional and throughout the OU there has been trend towards students concentrating on electronic interaction via discussion forums and email, rather than attending face-to-face sessions, so the logistics of organising the activity can be complex. In these circumstances, introducing a requirement to work with others within a specified time-frame creates more challenges than students and their tutors usually have to manage.

As the university had very recently adopted a Moodle\(^1\) platform as the basis for its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and was adapting this for the OU context, the course team had the opportunity to use the collaborative tools to facilitate this learning. We were able to set up sub-groups on Moodle discussion forums for the students which enabled them to undertake the collaborative elements of the assignment online.

\(^1\) http://moodle.org
Description
Against this backdrop, the course team decided first to look at other courses within the Open University for inspiration and experience. One member of the course team, for instance, had been involved with the design of an online scanning activity as a part of a postgraduate course in fundraising for non-profit organisations, and was convinced of the value of students gathering, assessing, and using information from various sources. This sort of activity created a framework that could allow us to explore some of the other outcomes we wanted to achieve in the assessment, and so it became central to the assessment design.

The team's attention was also drawn to a short introductory course in health and social care, in which students were required to work together in small groups for an information-gathering exercise (Northedge, 2006). In this case, the highly structured software interface ensured student compliance with the process, and included elements for the formation of the groups, specific stage- and task-completion requirements, and an in-built discussion forum system enabling students to work together. The software also required students to complete their individual tasks before the group project was considered complete. One guiding principle behind the system was that it was ‘fail-safe’ (Northedge, 2006), so that students could not duck out of their participation in the process.

The benefits of Northedge’s system were more than apparent and were reflected in both the student and tutor feedback on the course. Students were freed from the organisational burdens of group work, considered especially onerous in distance- and blended environments, and they could focus on the tasks at hand. The tasks themselves were quite clearly structured, leaving little room for ambiguity or confusion. Finally, the system imposed on each student the burden of completing his or her personal tasks (with a clear visual marker, seen by all students in the group, as to each fellow student's status) so that the group project could be completed.

As we considered the design of the collaborative assignment for the course, the course team began to wrestle with some of these and other pedagogical issues. After all, group work, in the real world of business, is rarely a simple and structured experience with clearly laid-out tasks and an in-built, at-a-glance management system. How could some of the benefits of the web-based group activity be achieved without the highly structured software interface? Were there ways that students could be encouraged - by the design of the assessment - to participate in the activity? Could we design the assessment so that it felt to students like a genuine learning experience, rather than another assessment burden? And finally, could we do all of these while meeting the learning outcomes we wanted to achieve?

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2 At the Open University, the course team is made up predominantly of permanent members of academic and academic-related staff who design, write, and produce a course module. Associate lecturers, or tutors, are part-time academic staff who teach the course around the regions and nations of the UK, as well as internationally.
The course team felt that, while it was a considerable challenge, these and other issues could be dealt within the assessment project. The design of the assessment activity began to take shape with a number of key features:

- **Assessment can be authentic**
  From one perspective, assessment is a necessary evil that is often designed for the benefit of teachers and examiners. However, it can also be a learning experience in which students have a chance to try new ways of thinking and working in a low-risk environment. It can also be designed with elements that reflect the ‘real world’ of the discipline or field of study.

- **Student choice**
  Students have both the choice of the focus for their assignment, and also work together to negotiate the criteria for evaluating what they find in their search.

- **Assessment of, and through, the process**
  The assessment design focuses not only on what the students produce, but how they engage in the process. The outputs are only part of the activity. Marks are awarded for participation in the process as well as the final product, so that students cannot attempt to produce a passing piece of work while opting out of the process.

- **Peer review**
  The process attempts to help create and foster a sense among students that they can learn from each other rather than just from their tutor and their course material. By designing a process that pushes students to each other for their first feedback experience and by asking structured feedback of them for their student colleagues the activity builds an ethos of collaborative knowledge creation. Importantly, peer review gives students not just a chance to learn about their own work, but to learn from what they see in others' work as well.

- **Conducting, and evaluating the products of, online research**
  Students' first port of call for research is often the Internet and other online resources, yet frequently this research is not directed and the results are not clearly evaluated. The process pushes students to triangulate their information sources.

- **Scaffolding the learning, even within an assessment activity**
  At each stage of the process, students need to be supported in their work. These supports can be fairly minor—perhaps only an explanation of what is expected—but are nonetheless crucial to the learning process. Sometimes that scaffolding can be field- and discipline-specific, such as referring to sources of authority in a field.

- **Making learning techniques explicit helps students learn**
  Metacognitive approaches explicitly point out what is happening in a learning setting to students, so that they begin to learn how to learn and why learning in particular ways is beneficial. These can make a positive difference for
student learning. For example, often students don’t understand the point, the process, or the value in peer review. Outlining and explaining these things gives students the chance to participate actively in the process and understand what is expected.

- **Individual and collaborative work are both important**
  Individual production of academic work, the mainstay of traditional assessment activities, is valuable and important. But collaborative processes can improve the quality and the learning experience associated with that individual work.

- **Managing group processes**
  In the real world of work, people often have to come together to work with people to accomplish a shared and common goal. Occasionally, these groups have problems with interaction or execution. In this process, students are faced with that reality and encouraged to work through any problems that arise.

- **Staged design**
  Because the process is such a valuable part of the learning experience, each stage of the assessment feeds into the next. Rather than attaching small amounts of marks to each step, the design of the process encourages students to go through each step. In order to complete the activity in the second stage, a student needs the inputs that are products of the first stage.

The completed assessment consisted of four basic stages, and each corresponded to a 12-14 hours of work for students. During the first stage of the exercise, students have two basic tasks to accomplish. They are asked to choose a field of work, an organisation, or a particular job role that they aspire to, and begin their online research on what it might be like to work in that area. While that research is ongoing, students began to work together to come up with their own agreed group list of criteria for how they might judge and assess the evidence they have collected. Students are given a prompt to begin to work from, in the form of the results of a survey from the Chartered Institute of Management.

Continuing that negotiation process into the second week of the activity, they finalise their list of criteria and their chosen research focus, and begin writing their individual report. In the third week of work, they finish their individual report and post it for their peers to review. Finally, in the last week, each student reviews the work of two colleagues, providing structured and focused feedback based on the learning outcomes of the activity, while receiving feedback from two colleagues on their own work. Using that feedback, students have the opportunity to rewrite and augment their work to take into account what they have learned. To reinforce the value of the peer review process, students are asked to write a small reflective paragraph on the feedback process explaining their perspectives on, and use of, the feedback they received (see Figures 1 and 2 below).
Box 1 - Learning Outcomes

Because these weeks are focused on completing the fourth assignment of the course, the learning outcomes for these weeks are slightly different than in other weeks. To complete these weeks' work, and in submitting your assignment, you will demonstrate your:

- ability to research issues concerning domestic and international business organisations and their environments
- critical thinking, analysis and synthesis
- ability to evaluate and compare competing perspectives
- critical appraisal of a range of materials drawn from a variety of sources and selection of the salient issues and arguments from these
- effective communication of information, arguments and ideas using language and styles appropriate for a business context and audience
- ability to work effectively in a team environment in a virtual context
- effective self-management of time, good planning, individual initiative and enterprise.
- use of interpersonal skills appropriate to business such as negotiation, persuasion and presentation
- application of course ideas to your own interactions with organisations and your own life experiences.

Figure 1 - excerpt from course website

Structure of Weeks 17–20

Week 17 TMA 04: Selecting an area of work
In the first week of the exercise, you will choose a field of work to explore and begin to research what it might be like to work in that field, including in a particular organisation or job role. In collaboration with your colleagues, you will begin to develop your own list of criteria of what you think is important in a workplace or a career.

Week 18 TMA 04: Choosing your organisation
In the second week of the exercise, you will finalise your list of criteria with your colleagues. You will pick one of the organisations you identified in the previous week and use it as the focus of the rest of the exercise. You will research information on the employer and the sector you’ve chosen, and begin planning and writing your report.

Week 19 TMA 04: Sharing your preliminary report
You will finish writing a report of approximately 1000 words and share it with two of your colleagues for feedback. You will read two of your colleagues’ reports and provide structured feedback on their work.

Week 20 TMA 04: Giving feedback and submitting your TMA
Using the feedback you received from your colleagues, you will make any changes or additions to your report. Your TMA submission will include your original report, the feedback you received from your colleagues, and your rewrite that incorporates the feedback you received.

Figure 2 - Structure of the assessment with week-by-week activity descriptions
Evaluation
The course team was committed to closely monitoring the first year delivery of the course to evaluate the reception and the outcomes of the assessment; this was achieved using a variety of approaches. Because the course was based on the University's Moodle-based Virtual Learning Environment, an asynchronous conferencing system was, from the start of the course, open to both course tutors and members of the course team. In attempting to create an environment of support and responsiveness to tutor concerns, the course team actively encouraged tutors to direct feedback, questions, issues, and concerns to this forum. Because this assessment occurred some four months into the course, tutors were quite comfortable using the forum, and posted to it frequently.

During the first presentation of the course, while many of the early forum postings were concerned with the specifics of the assignment tutors enquiring with their colleagues about advice to give to students, checking in to make sure that the process went smoothly, and querying the technical details about how marks would be awarded there were also some quite clear anxieties about the tutor role in such an unusual assessment. There was also anxiety about whether students would ‘do’ the collaborative work, or whether the group interaction would actually happen. The online community, however, helped mitigate some tutors’ concerns. Like several of his colleagues, one tutor posted how pleased he was about how his groups were getting on with the work without much input from him; ‘I think,’ he wrote, ‘that some of the real learning for them lies in them doing that.’

Once the deadline for student submission had passed, the tone of the postings changed, as tutors began to mark the assignments. Because the process generated a fairly large amount of material - postings to the small group discussion forums, the individual reports, and students’ peer reviews of each others' work tutors found this assignment much more time-intensive to mark than previous traditional-style assessments. The forums also began to fill with tutors reporting their students’ feedback, usually unsolicited, on the process, which was mostly overwhelmingly positive.

Students talked about how it helped them re-evaluate their professional and career goals, and how it gave them a new perspective on what tutors go through in marking student work. One student mentioned that, of over 25 assignments for Open University courses he had completed, this was the most enjoyable assessment experience he had had. Another talked about the assessment as one of the ‘most constructive academic activities I have ever done’, partly because of the innovative approach to group activity. Many students talked about the peer review process as being a powerful learning experience, citing the challenges of learning to give useful feedback, and of taking into consideration their peers’ comments on their own work.

Interestingly, some students framed any frustrations they might have had with the assignment in terms of learning experiences. Instead of venting about how the asynchronous nature of the forums was a frustration, one student talked about how the lack of ability to fall back on face-to-face contact in a collaborative setting showed how careful and attentive one had to be to the online activity.
Further evaluation included the quality assurance process of monitoring tutor marking; a process that echoed some of the trends initially spotted in the tutor forums. Monitors reported that students seemed to be giving cogent and focused feedback, and that their comments often made reference to the learning outcomes of the project or to specific course themes and theories. Further evaluation of the process, based on an analysis of students' interaction with the process and their feedback to colleagues, is currently underway.

Conclusion
Overall, the outcomes of the first presentation of the course indicate that it is possible to design and deliver an assessment that addresses some of the so-called ‘wicked’ competencies that are so often avoided in formal assessments in higher education, while also creating a learning experience that students find relevant and enjoyable. Further, it is possible to encourage students to collaborate on assessment activities without undue fear that doing so will compromise the integrity of the assessment. Finally, these tasks can be accomplished even when working in blended and distance-learning environments.

References


Biographies
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