Engage in assessment for learning and feedback for undergraduate dissertations

Dr Llewellyn Tang  
BSc(Hons), PGcert, PhD, MIET, FHEA  
School of Construction Management and Engineering  
PO Box 219, Whiteknights, University of Reading, U.K.  
l.tang@reading.ac.uk  http://uk.linkedin.com/pub/llewellyn-tang/17/22b/9b2

Abstract  
Referring to an assessment system adopted by a Built Environment School in 2009 this paper starts a critical review on the strengths and weaknesses on assessing undergraduates’ dissertations. Over the last two years a series of changes has been made to the module and the impacts of these changes have been analyzed and reviewed. This paper demonstrates part of the findings of this completed project. Overall, the use of an electronic system to streamline the process of feedback and assessment for learning was very effective. Particular concerns were raised e.g. on improving the quality of intermediate and final feedback, and minimizing conflicting comments between markers. These are indeed the most difficult areas to be addressed as the timing of ‘hands-on’ or ‘hands-off’ (that is, engagement in assessment for learning) are based on both the commitment of the student and also the quality of supervision from an individual lecturer. This leads to the argument of whether the assessment is more like a self-learning process, or indeed should the school expect to get the most out of the students by learning through the module.

Keywords  
Assessment, built environment, dissertations, feedback, learning and undergraduate (UG).
1. Introduction

There have been increasing demands for higher education worldwide during the last decade and more recently, due to the dramatic increase in students’ fees, increasing concerns of league tables. All these increase demands to improve standards of teaching and learning and also the quality of assessment and feedback. The vision of the UK Higher Education Academy is, “for students in the UK higher education to enjoy the highest quality learning experience in the world.” (The Higher Education Academy, 2008). Therefore, there is a timely and urgent need to ensure high quality and consistent assessment for learning and feedback for any assessed work. This Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) project at Reading University provides good practice guidelines to the general audience on how to engage in assessment for learning and feedback for undergraduate (UG) dissertations, which are an important piece of work for most of the higher education degrees in the UK. In particular, with specific reference to the principles of assessment for learning, it makes use of the existing strengths and improves the weaknesses of the adopted Quality Assurance Agency code of practice (QAA, 2000) on dissertation assessment in a Built Environment School. Questionnaires for students in 2009-2011 were conducted in order to understand the effectiveness of the implemented new system. Selected final year students in 2009-2011 and dissertation supervisors were invited to interview and provided perspectives for further changes and improvements to the changing system on maximizing engagement in assessment for learning through a mix of holistic and analytical perspectives. This paper presents part of the findings of the project and consists of the following sections: the function of assessment and feedback (Section 2), the development of good practice guidelines for UG dissertations and their associated summarized evaluation (Section 3), and a brief conclusion (Section 4).

2. The Functions of assessment and feedback

A dissertation can be defined as follows: “The student (usually) selects the project topic; locates his or her own source materials; presents an end product (usually a report and often for assessment; conducts an independent piece of work (though there are also group projects). The project lasts over an extended period and the teacher assumes the role of advisor” (Cited in Marshall, 2009 in Henry, 1994: 12). To assess and give feedback on such a large piece of work is very difficult (Mills and Matthews, 2009); there is an increasing argument for greater quality, consistency and clearer criteria of assessment against existing dissertation assessment mechanisms, and for a greater accountability of academic professionals. In Maclellen’s (2001) survey, where lecturers and students were asked about perceptions on assessment, most lecturers responded that feedback was always helpful in its details, while 30% of the student sample said that feedback provided never helped their understanding.
Indeed, assessment is more influential than teaching for students, while feedback is equally important in making a major difference on students’ learning. Gibbs (1999) argued that the six functions of assessment are to capture student time and attention, to generate appropriate student learning activity, to provide timely and constructive feedback, to help students internalize disciplinary standards and notions of quality, to generate grades which distinguish between students and/or which enable pass/fail decisions, and to provide evidence of standards to external bodies. The last two functions are the primary focus of this research; however, at the same time they are costly in relation to our time and inconsequential to student learning. This leads to the question of assessment for learning or what was awarded in the assessment system, e.g. the concentration of passing the dissertations/exams rather than understanding the subject (Gibbs 1992). A balance needs to be achieved on this between the perspectives’ of lecturers and students, as students have become more strategic with the use of their study time which is indeed being influenced by the demands of the assessment system (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004).

3. Development of assessment for learning guidelines

Figure 1 shows good practice guidelines on UG dissertation assessment for learning in a Built Environment School. It shows the timelines on the changes made over the last three years. The QAA argues that student assessment is central to the assurance of education quality as a whole. The QAA code of practice (Section 6) was developed in terms of standardizing the assessment of UG dissertations via these guidelines.

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**Figure 1:** Good practice guidelines on UG dissertation assessment for learning (Note: suggestions highlighted in red were not implemented at the time of the study)
The suggested five initial changes to the module were implemented in 2009 in an attempt to improve the quality, consistency and criteria of assessment for learning on UG dissertations. In order to understand the effectiveness and impact of the implemented changes, two questionnaires were developed and sent out to 128 and 136 UG dissertation students in 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 respectively. Selected final year students and dissertation supervisors were invited to interview and provided perspectives for further changes and improvements to the changing system on maximizing engagement in assessment for learning through a mix of holistic and analytical guidelines. The following points summarize the findings on the improvement of the quality of feedback with reference to the principles of assessment for learning. Please refer to the full report for details (Tang, 2011).

The quality of feedback during standardized supervision meetings is crucial to the success of a good dissertation. Feedback has to be specific, detailed, and clear enough to be useful (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). It needs to focus on students’ performance, their learning, and actions that are under the students’ control. Students have to be motivated, rather than simply asking them to correct errors, for effective learning through assessment and feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2002). The timing of feedback is therefore important, and past studies have highlighted that it is one of the key principles of good practice in UG education (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Dunkin 1986). Multiple stages of feedback can help redirect students to correct ways (Careless, 2002). Sometimes, “imperfect feedback from a fellow student provided almost immediately may have much more impact than more perfect feedback from a tutor four weeks later” (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004).

To summarize briefly, the following suggestions by the survey respondents and interviewees were made to further improve the quality of feedback. They need to be enforced through timely individual supervision meetings (that is, stage 3 of the QAA practice, service delivery). After having the new guidelines in place, there were only three official appeals from students to the school on poor learning and feedback during their supervision meetings in 2009/2011. Common suggestions from both supervisors and students are to:

- Provide intermediate informal feedback electronically;

- Provide more in depth explanation of what is expected of a student's dissertation so that feedback is wholly comprehensible in meetings;

- Provide additional detail to what is required in each chapter of the dissertation, perhaps by breaking it down into a step-by-step process.

- Give a greater focus on the understanding and drawing of conclusions from primary and secondary data as time always ran out towards the end of supervision;

- Allow more time to be spent on referencing, understanding why references are important, and aiding students in feedback on how to reference; and

- Provide a more detailed final feedback focusing on both the strengths and weaknesses of the dissertation.
All these are in line with the Gibbs (1999) first four holistic functions of assessment; to capture student time and attention, to generate appropriate student learning activity, to provide timely and constructive feedback, and to help students internalize disciplinary standards and notions of quality. Overall, its purpose is to encourage students to continue studying (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004).

In the study of Hand and Clewes (2000), they point out that double standards create feelings of discomfort and fear between students and dissertation tutors. There are two different types of assessment methods which are being used in dissertation assessment; one is namely impressionistic/holistic and the other one is analytic/weighted. A set of explicit assessment criteria is also needed to negate the needs for double marking. It is necessary to pay attention to the conducting of defensive marking strategies so that the assessors avoid giving the actual mark to a dissertation. Consistency of standards in assessment is therefore a critical part for all students’ assessments, which could be affected negatively by the issues associated with the subjective opinions from different lecturers (Saunders and Davis, 1998). The approach of combining both holistic and analytical perspectives therefore creates major impacts to the module, and it has been streamlined by the introduction of a new online submission system which not only allows an automatic “Turnitin” plagiarism check, but has timely intermediate and final electronic feedback for students.

4. Concluding remarks

It is essential to ensure high quality and consistent assessment and feedback for any assessed work, and in particular for the final year dissertations. In order to avoid any tick-box behavior and conduct assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning, mixed perspectives on quality, consistency, and criteria of assessment for learning are needed. Pathirage et al. (2004) reflected that approximately 70% of practices had explicit criteria, one third out of which presented that they adopted the holistic or impressionistic assessment method. In particular, they only provide brief instructions for assessment instead of specific criteria for both supervisors and students, the balance (a mix of 30-70%, 30% holistic while 70% is analytical) between them directly affects the design of a good UG dissertation feedback and assessment for learning mechanism.

5. Acknowledgement

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6. References


