The assessment arms race and its fallout: the case for slow scholarship

Ruth Wong Memorial Lecture on Education 2018

Professor Tony Harland

Part 1: The assessment arms race

Part 2: The case for slow scholarship
The New Zealand Experiment

PART 1 The Assessment Arms Race

1984-1996 Radical reform of ‘mass’ higher education
1997 The introduction of:
- Semesters
- Modules
- New assessment policy

Not questioned for 17 years

Roger Douglas
Richard Richardson
Graeme Fogelberg

When all learning is connected to a grade that counts

- What are the impacts on student learning experiences?
- What are the impacts on teaching?

Which then led to the question:
- What can be done to ensure a more worthwhile educational experience?
  - Pilot: 6 students and 6 lecturers
  - Main study: 46 students and 16 lecturers
  - N=58 – largest qualitative case study I have ever undertaken
An important distinction

Summative assessment that carries a grade that counts towards passing a module (paper) and the award of a degree, and is perceived as high stakes by students.

In contrast to:

Formative assessment that consists of feedback comments and/or a grade, but the grade does not count towards a module (paper) or degree.

Students’ experiences

1. Students were being assessed constantly and so had no time to do work required of them outside core graded-curriculum activities.
2. All students regularly missed teaching sessions in order to cope with assessment loads.
3. Students who had high expectation for their grades felt they were always working at sub-optimal levels.
4. Students were stressed by the lack of coordination of assessment tasks.
5. Students expressed a preference for having many small internal graded assessments and said large assessments were too risky.
6. None wanted to revert to a final examination carrying 100% of the marks.

How many assessments?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course type</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Average number graded assessment per week</th>
<th>Range of graded assessment per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>0.5-3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.5-1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional subjects</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.0-2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NOTES:
Evidence that students who are constantly graded in a competitive environment tend not to take risks
Not wanting to be wrong suppresses creativity
No one likes to be assessed anyway

Lecturers’ experiences

1. Lecturers did not know how many assessments each student was required to do.
2. They were reluctant to reduce the number of assessments, despite experiencing high marking loads. The reason given was that students would then spend all their efforts on tasks that carried marks in other modules.
3. Lecturers felt that they were under student pressure to give marks for any submitted course work, even when they thought this might not be appropriate.
4. It was recognized that overall grades might not reflect overall performance when small marks were given for tasks.
5. Non-graded forms of assessment (i.e. formative assessment) were not considered.

NOTES:
Although both pilot and main study showed no formative assessment, this is not strictly true as formative is (sometimes) done
Many innovative practices
What is very rare is formative assessment that is distant from a grade

Field notebook observations
Graduate profile

Hostile to nearly all ‘attributes’ required for university study

- Critical thinking
- Creativity
- Life-long learning
- Self-motivation (self-directed study and ability to work independently)

What about reading for a degree?

Reading for a degree

How often students went beyond the syllabus for study and learning in relation to their academic goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Course</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>How often do you go beyond the syllabus?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top Marks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle range</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Field notebook observations

NOTES:

- Fragmentation and miniaturization of knowledge in micro-modules
- Students as "tourists in the classroom"
- There are never winners in an arms race
Student learning

Students were asked what type of assessment they learned most from (n=85 with one student unclassifiable)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of grade</th>
<th>Type of assessment</th>
<th>Depth</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Larger</td>
<td>Survey, test, research</td>
<td>Deep</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller</td>
<td>Shorter, frequent test</td>
<td>Surface</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Policy failure and success

Radical change and then 17 years of policy (none) compliance

New Policy (2014)

1. Lack of agreement and opposition to change
2. Restored freedom and scholarly judgment
3. Opened doors for long term change
4. New forms when new courses proposed

Two principles:
- Assessment drives learning
- Curriculum drives assessment

Breaking the grading habit

What can be done to ensure a more worthwhile educational experience?

Change the curriculum - change the assessment

1. Fewer graded assessments
2. Assess only the important aims for learning
3. Integrated assessment
4. Creating space and time for formative purposes
PART 2 The Case for Slow Scholarship

Ecology example: ‘research from day one’

Curriculum and assessment changes:
- Focused database searching and literature reviews
- Formulating authentic research questions
- Designing experiments and field studies
- Learning new methods and analytical techniques
- Writing grant applications
- Giving seminars
- Presenting a conference poster
- Writing research reports and journal articles
- Attending conferences, seminars, lectures
- Being a peer reviewer

Slow scholarship through authentic research

Slow scholarship concepts

<table>
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<th>Slow</th>
<th>Fast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge producers</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberative thinking</td>
<td>blended with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic learning</td>
<td>against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic academic practice</td>
<td>blended with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critic and conscience of society</td>
<td>no alternative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Integration strategy

1) Between modules and years
   - Slow learning
   - Fewer grading points

2) Contingent on prior work
   - Emphasis on formative feedback
   - Fewer grading points

3) Re-assess internal coursework in exam
   - Assessment to strengthen learning
   - Indicative grades only for coursework
   - Fewer but larger assignments

4) Combining knowledge from different teaching modes
   - Assessing broad knowledge area
   - Fewer but larger assignments

5) Only assess what is really important
   - Parsimony
   - Fewer grading points

6) Assess drafts of work
   - Emphasis on rehearsal and feedback
   - Use of indicative grades and formative assessment

7) Assess complex performance
   - Professional judgment
   - Fewer grading points

Methods of integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integration strategy</th>
<th>Graduation</th>
<th>Coursework grading</th>
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<td>Between modules and years</td>
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Integration (1): Between modules and years

2018-2019

ECOL 212
- Three-day field course
- Write a grant proposal
- The proposal is subject to double blind student and teacher peer review (4 weeks)
- Re-refusal
- Re-drafts

ECOL 313
- Carry out the research (seven days in the field)
- Present research at a symposium (peer feedback given)
- Write research report (option for outstanding work to be published as a journal article)
Integration (6): Assess drafts of work (e.g. peer review)

- Various forms of formative (only) peer review
- Developing peer review skills over three/four years
- Scaffolding and long term training in evaluating others’ work
- Insight into one’s own work – self assessment

Review comments received from peers

Summary

- Radical change to education system gave rise to an assessment arms race based on ideas of constant reward and control
- Current practices impact on graduate outcomes (from day 1)
- Institutional change through POLICY difficult
- New assessment GUIDE from 2014
- Curriculum has been the key to change: ecology embraces slow scholarship (through student research training) and so opts out of the assessment arms race