Alternatives to the Essay: Creative Ways of Submitting Work for Assessment

Emma Bond and Jessica Clark

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> Experience is the result, the sign and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication
>
> (Dewey 1934:22)

Introduction

University Campus Suffolk (UCS) is a relatively new initiative to have university education in Suffolk. It is committed to widening participation and the lifelong learning agenda. Students come from a variety of social and educational backgrounds and have a wide range of academic ability and levels of achievement. Located in the Division of Applied Social Sciences, the courses on which we teach adopt a critical stance and aim to provide some challenging ideas on the wide-ranging developments in the fields of sociology, politics, social policy, psychology, anthropology and geography. Modules have a strong academic focus and facilitate a number of important undergraduate academic skills such as reflection, critical thinking and autonomous learning. Contemporary society's knowledge economy calls for graduates to have the ability to 'incorporate information from multiple sources, determine its veracity and make judgements with the view of generating new knowledge or processes' and generally includes problem solving, decision making, logical reasoning and creative thinking (Looi *et al.,* 2005).

Crucial to this process of learning is assessment (NCIHE, 1997). The dichotomy between viewing assessment as a task to be given to students or as a powerful tool (Palomba and Banta, 1999) has been the subject of much debate and is a prominent public policy issue (Ewell, 2003). Ramsden (2003) discusses the power of assessment to determine the quality of student learning and this chapter explores our experiences of introducing creative assessment in an undergraduate module. The student perceptions of the assessment as an effective and powerful tool for learning are discussed, drawing on constructivist theories of learning and experiential learning theory.

Assessment practices play a 'subtle, complex and enormously important role in the students' experiences of learning (Maclellan 2001:308). Whilst assessment is understood as such in educational theory, in practice it can be easily subjected to reductionist attempts to measure learning outcomes. However,

'creativity has now entered the discourse in higher education' (Kleiman, 2008: 209). Courses at UCS are informed and underpinned by the institution's assessment strategy which states that "assessment strategies within a course/route are varied to suit the different learning styles of students and to assess breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding and a wide range of skills" (UCS, 2020). Sound knowledge is based on interconnections "cognitive growth lies not just in knowing more but also in restructuring that occurs when new knowledge becomes connected with what is already known" (Biggs 2003:75).

Contemporary higher education assessment is subject to multiple pressures for example the need to engage in part time work can turn students into very strategic learners (Bloxham & Boyd 2007). Teaching and assessment methods need to foster active engagement with learning tasks (Ramsden 2003:80). The use of presentations as a form of assessment in Higher Education has distinct benefits (Petty 2009), however, the dominant use of individual PowerPoint presentations, explored in the subsequent section, can have a negative impact on both the learning and assessment experience of students.

Background to the Study

There is a complex interrelationship between effective assessment strategies, course design, structure and learning outcomes (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Certainly in our experience the use – or rather *mis*use – of PowerPoint in student presentations has not only challenged the possibilities of effectively measuring knowledge and understanding but also the boredom thresholds of both tutors and students! Maclellan (2001) suggests that if students perceive a need to understand the material in order to successfully negotiate the assessment they will engage in a deep approach to their learning. In spite of giving timely and detailed guidance and advice to students on delivering effective presentations all too often students used slides to provide text dense material which they read from. This can be highly problematic for tutors to assess effectively and the very positive educational principle that underpins the strategy – peer to peer teaching/knowledge sharing is often lost in the monotony of the process.

"Artful teaching requires autonomy" (Anderson 2002:34). Concerned that very precious opportunities for learning were being lost and to increase levels of student engagement, it was decided to adopt a more creative approach to the presentations. The assessment of a final year undergraduate module was changed from a presentation to a 'creative presentation' (using art, structure, poetry, song, film etc.) which encouraged originality, an imaginative approach and to 'think outside of the box'. Reflecting both the proliferation of more diverse and experimental forms of assessment, and multiple forms of knowing within an increasingly culturally and socially diverse Higher Education environment (see Gleaves and Walker, 2008:41) and reinforcing the argument that creativity is imperative for adaptive graduates who can balance complexity, innovation and efficiency (Knight and Yorke, 2004).

Introducing Creative Assessment

> An important and salient feature of this definition of creativity is creative thinking, which can be thought of as a mental process through which a person generates new and valuable ideas or creates a new invention'
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> (Ogunleye, 2006: 96).

QAA (2006) suggest assessment tasks and associated criteria should be effective in measuring attainment of the intended learning outcomes. Buss (2008:304) points out, creative assessment has its challenges. The way that assessment is designed, the methods used and the criteria adopted are all mechanisms for enabling and promoting the desirable type of learning (McDowell 1996).

QAA subject benchmark statements cover Bloom's (1956) categories in the cognitive domain of knowledge, understanding, application, analysis and evaluation (Yorke, 2002).

> Knowledge objectives emphasise remembering and relating. Also, abilities and skills refer to organised ways of dealing with materials and problems but abilities and skills objectives emphasise the organising of material to achieve a purpose
>
> (Poon Teng Fatt, 2000:32).

Knight (2002) argues that whilst assessors look for evidence of achievement, evidence is a teleological concept. The importance of language and articulation to thought and learning seems widely accepted within education (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001), however, as Mcintosh (2008: 131) points out: 'In the process of moving away from 'the literal word' to more symbolic approaches to representation, the question shifts to one of interpretation'. 'Unlike knowledge communicated by words what we show in images…is a different knowledge, stubborn and opaque but with a capacity for the finest detail (MacDougall 2006:6).

The criteria for the module require students to demonstrate knowledge and critical theoretical understanding of the different historical and contemporary constructions of childhood. However, the skill and dispositions of critical thinking that are central to the assessment criteria are outcomes of a singular personal and societal value (Palomba and Banta 1999) and the concept of thinking is itself polymorphous (Knight 2002).

According to McDowell (1996) a relevant factor to successful outcomes is students receiving clear guidance about what was expected and how they would be judged. The importance of ensuring assumptions surrounding creative work are shared between teachers and students should be emphasised to avoid commonplace misunderstandings (Shreeve *et al.,* 2000).

Students were told that they could use any creative medium they wished for their presentation from the use of visual image, for example, collage/painting/drawing or sculpture; digital media in the form of film or

photography or an audio/video presentation or drama, song or poetry. The guidelines also discussed 'performances of understanding' and detailed the benefits for student learning gained from these more innovative presentations.

Whilst the students appeared initially cautious the module grades noticeably rose – not just for the presentation element of the assessment but for the written critical paper also. The informal feedback from the students was also overwhelmingly positive. The quality and range of the presentations improved dramatically – incorporating a wide range of media for example, films and collections of photographs; sculpture, collage and visual representations to role play, rap and poetry. Entitled *21st Century Childhood,* the following poem is an example from that first year that offers a wonderful example of Leitch's (2006: 552) observation: 'Writing and traditional forms of inquiry do not completely convey the sense of felt embodied knowledge in the same way that an image, a poem, a sculpture or a play does'.

21st Century Childhood

Is it wrong to pick up a knife?
With which to threaten someone's life?
Is it ok when it's done by a soldier?
Or simply by somebody who is older?
Is violence inherent in all?
But merely not recognised among the small?
Is crime something we fear,
In those of which we rear?
Has crime among children always be known?
Or is it something which has grown? Is the issue new or old?
Does society need to be told?
Has society created this deviant tool?
Out of a person so young and small?
Hoodies, guns, sex, slums
Knives, thieves, the lies they weave
And now in these times of change, where lives rearrange, and youth grasps hold of much which is directed only at the old,
We must not fear or shed a tear
But deal with what has become the childhood of the 21st century.

By Kirsty Martin

Module development – from creative assessment to embedding creativity

The new strategy appeared to be involving students in a more active approach to their learning. Reflecting MacDonald *et al.*'s (2000) study that assessment, although sometimes viewed by students as 'difficult' and 'time consuming' are by far the most valued learning tool in order to encourage students to understand the content and the concepts which consolidate and reinforce learning. The role of reflection is also fundamental to practice (Jarvis, 2001) and Milton (2002) discusses using experience and reflecting on experience in

order to improve. Critically reflecting on students' experiences of creativity was intended to inform practice further and lead to future developments in both the module and course as whole.

Unlike cognitive approaches to learning the experiential learning style is holistic, including perceptual and behavioural as well as cognitive strategies (Boyatzis and Kolb, 1995). Drawing on experiential learning theory and the broad understanding that ideas are constantly being formed and reformed by experience the module encourages such student reflection through discussion and debate on the ongoing Blog. The Blog provided a space for students to respond to specific formative tasks, upload pictures and photographs and debate lecture topics. New information and communication technologies don't simply provide information for users, instead "they carry images, narratives and fantasies that work on the imagination as much as the intellect" (Buckingham, 2007:78) and takes advantage of this convergence between technologies, cultural forms and practices (see Buckingham, 2007).

> 'Utilising the 'active imagination' process through the development of 'images' acts as a method of data collection. The data are in effect both self-generated and self-collected by the individual who engages in the active imagination process. It is in the act of imagining and the construction of the image that significance ad questions resulting out of the *reflective reproduction* being to be formulated.
>
> (McIntosh, 2008: 141).

Figure A (*insert)*

Students were asked to generate images of the spaces which they inhabit and use within their daily lives.

> 'Images reflect thought and they may lead to thought, but they are much more than thought. We are accustomed to regarding thought as something resembling language…but our conscious experience involves much more than this kind of thought. It is made up of ideas, emotions, sensory responses and the pictures of our imagination'
>
> (MacDougall, 2006:2)

Symbolic interactionism emphasises the importance of recognising the individuality and the importance of supporting and enhancing learners self esteem (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001). The importance of contributing to learner confidence with an emphasis on student choice is further reinforced by Rogers' (1969) ideas surrounding the importance of the development of a sense of ownership of learning by the learner. This was facilitated through the extensive use of group discussion both online and face-to-face and is an example of the neo-Piagetian position that cognitive engagements with other students are powerful stimuli for learning and of Vygotsky's analysis of learning as social acts (as discussed by Knight, 2002). Gleaves and Walker (2008) argue that many students within HE are not able to see the development of

ideas because of issues relating to modularisation or time. The use of the module Blog was thus imperative in terms of providing a space for students to continuously consider issues. The Blog can thus be viewed as a form of ongoing reflective learning.

Creativity itself has often been regarded as an individual activity of self-expression or realisation. However, Cropley (2006) argues that it is in fact a socially influenced phenomenon relying on social support networks. 'This recognition can help foster the courage to deviate from what everyone else is doing' (Cropley 2006:6). The importance of the Blog can thus be further emphasised as the provision of space through which the beneficial effects of creativity can be facilitated (Larey and Paulus, 1999).

'Creativity is not a radical novelty in the sense that it is divorced from what precedes it' (Anderson, 2002:39). Kolb (1984) outlines learning as a continuous circular process of creative knowledge grounded in experience. There are, therefore, repeated opportunities for students to discuss both the concepts and topics covered in the module and to reflect on, make suggestions and receive advice on ways in which their work may be improved before the summative assessment.

Researching Creativity

The qualitative research study took place early in 2011 with a voluntary group of students. The approach emphasises the fairly wide consensus of qualitative research as 'naturalistic, interpretive approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (Snape and Spencer, 2003:3). 'Narratives are an appropriate way in which to capture and understand educational experiences' (Leitch, 2006:549). Through using self-completion reflective diaries and focus-group discussions the research sought to gain understanding of the students' perceptions and experiences of creative assessment. The synergistic nature of focus groups (Morgan, 1997) and individual self-completion diaries have been advocated as effective methodological partners (Kramer, 1983). The ontological stance adopted within this project is one which relies upon participant's own interpretations to provide relevant understanding of the research issues, reflecting the multifaceted and diverse nature of the human experience.

The ethical implications of working with students were carefully considered and ethical approval sought form UCS ethics committee. Students were provided with an information sheet detailing the rationale behind the project, research objectives and proposed methods before they volunteered for the project. The data has been anonymised.

Offering participants the time and tools in the research context provides 'valuable insights into their worlds of experience and meaning making' (Burke, 2008:25). Minton (2002) highlights the need to reflect on learning experiences was itself beneficial to the learning process. According to MacDonald *et al.*

(2000) the manner in which learner's view, review and critically reflect on their own experiences is central to adult learning.

Findings and discussion

Participants in the research identified unanimously that engaging in a creative presentation was a positive experience that resulted in increased enjoyment of not only the assessment itself but the module in its entirety. They enthusiastically recalled the creative presentations which they had seen – praising the work which had gone into the presentation and the originality of the ideas. The data from the focus groups and diaries provided a range of issues which participants felt relevant when exploring creative assessment in higher education: academic skills and employability; peer collaboration and learning, vulnerability and the presentation of self and motivation and effort.

Academic skills and Employability

Participants in the focus groups were asked how they felt initially about engaging in a creative assessment. The responses varied but apprehension was identified by many:

> *"Why? Why do we have to do this? We're not art, or, like, photography students. What's the point of it?" (Roxy).*

> *"Hated it (laughs) I did. I found it really hard to, you know, 'think outside the box'" (Paula).*

It was 'creative thinking…as a mental process through which a person generates new and valuable ideas' (Ogunleye, 2006:96) that students expressed they found difficult. The unfamiliarity with creative assessment methods was responsible for the initial anxiety.

However, other students were excited and pleased:

> *"I loved it. I like 'art stuff' and it will up my grade as I'm not good at anything else" (Jemma).*

Jemma felt more confident about engaging in a creative assessment as opposed to for example, a traditional written essay, as she felt that her abilities were more suited to this type of assessment; reinforcing some of the ideas by Rogers (1969) regarding ownership of learning and the impact of self esteem on learner engagement and success (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001).

> *"Given the choice I would do it all the time" (Jemma).*

Creative skills are key requisite skills in the workforce (Ogunleye, 2006) and it was particularly interesting, therefore, that many of the students (who often enter teacher training after graduation) were quite adamant that the different

types of skills involved would benefit them both during the course and as graduates. Making a comparison to PowerPoint presentations Clara stated:

> *"Teaching 5 year olds isn't done with PowerPoint is it? Being creative and flexible is what makes a good teacher, you can't just read off slides can you?" (Clara).*

The role of creativity and creative thinking as higher order skills essential for graduates to succeed in the workplace is evidenced in the existing literature (Knight and Yorke, 2004) and further reinforced by the participants.

> *"I don't think that those '1st' students are necessarily 'the best', the academic ones that can write really well are not the ones that'll make the best teachers" (Clara).*

Creative assessments were seen by participants as allowing them to demonstrate a range of different but equally – if not more so – relevant skills; appropriate to both their success upon the module and degree and also within wider society.

Peer Collaboration and Learning

Cropley's (2006) argument that creativity is not just an individual endeavour but a social activity was further reinforced by the findings. Participants expressed enjoyment in watching and being part of other student's creative assessments. These ranged from performances and monologues to sculptures, photography, art and poetry. Students identified that despite some similar topics being chosen all of the presentations were completely different and the monotony of watching endless, very similar PowerPoint presentations was avoided and instead they become valuable learning opportunities.

> *"This is a module where I learned something new every single week, it's completely different to anything else we do" (Clara).*

By engaging with assessments individually and by being part of or exposed to other student's work the idea of assessment as an integral part of learning (Huddleston and Unwin, 1997:112).

> *"There are so many choices! I would change my ideas all the time and learned and got ideas from watching all the others" (Paula).*

The diversity in creativity is illustrated in the example below:

Clara's presentation (Figure B) was a monologue where she played a 14 year old girl discussing the risks and benefits of children's use of online spaces.

Frieda's construction of a 'house' sculpture where each brick represents a different way in which the media is involved in children's and young people's private or home domains (both pictured below) are just two examples of the wide variety of creative presentations

Figure B (insert)

Figure C (insert)

Figure D (insert)

Motivation and Effort

The participants stated that they found the creative presentations an exciting endeavour that encouraged them to work harder.

> *"It's more involved, I remembered loads more stuff and did much more research" (Paula).*

> *"I found loads of different kinds of resources, newspapers, YouTube videos, you know" (Roxy).*

The students identified that the work and effort they put into the creative presentation made completion of the associated critical paper easier.

> *"I reckon I did twice as much research than I would have done usually, so when I come to write the critical paper – I'm about half way – I remember loads more" (Clara).*

Maclellan's (2001) argument that if students perceive a need to understand the material in order to successfully negotiate the assessment they will engage in a deep approach to their learning is pertinent here. We suggest that by requiring students to do more than just tell us what they know (Biggs, 2003), through a creative assessment they engage in a deeper approach to learning that is both beneficial for the student's experiences of the module and their success within the assessment itself.

The independent nature of the assessment provided students with a great degree of flexibility and choice. This autonomy allowed students to engage in creativity in a variety of ways with different students interpreting and engaging in the different categories of creativity (see Boden 2001:96-97)

'The metaphor of learning as a journey is used extensively' (Buss, 2008: 303). The choice and autonomy encouraged with creative assessment allowed learners to conceptualise and use definitions of creativity in different ways. They saw the research process involved as more thorough and they saw themselves as being more involved within both the module and the assessment.

Reflections and conclusions

Creativity is a word 'constantly being encountered in everyday life' (Ruhammar and Brolin, 1999: 259). This enquiry has attempted to explore the role of creativity in assessment within Higher Education. Our approach offers 'an alternative to the behaviourist approach to learning' (Buss, 2008: 303) and reflects the shift towards reflective student centred approaches to learning in higher education (Cowdry and de Graff, 2005).

Indeed there are 'differences in the degree of people's creativity' (Ruhammar and Brolin, 1999: 270) but, in spite of this diversity, adult learners share common characteristics and have expectations about the learning process with their own set patterns of learning (Rogers, 1996). The five central processes which underpin successful learning include wanting to learn; needing to learn (motivation); learning by doing; getting feedback on how the learning is going and making sense of what has been learnt (Race and Brown, 1998). The participants in our research identified how the creative presentations allowed them to get excited and be motivated by the assessment itself and as a result they felt they had worked harder and gained more by engaging with them.

Learners vary in how they absorb information and how they transform information into meaning (Kolb, 1984). There is a relationship between the different learning styles and teaching and learning strategies (Buch and Bartley's, 2002). The data presented her suggests that the degree of autonomy and choice involved in completing a creative assessment results in flexibility in the approach which is inclusive to learning styles and needs.

Our research suggests that combinations of creative methods promote constructive engagement with learning activities that lead to changes in understanding. Supporting the principles of andragogy, (see Knowles, 1980:43) 'the art and science of helping adults learn' views adults as taking responsibility for determining their own skill agenda and their self-concept moves from dependency to self-directing. As Entwistle and Smith (2002:338) point out 'personal understanding is essentially a developmental concept' and encouraging student understanding of different perspectives and theories within the module through creative assessment capitalises on this ability and further enhances the development of an ability to synthesise information and the analytical and evaluative skills essential to successful learning and future employability.

The role of creative presentations should not be underestimated as the process by which students come to reach deeper approaches to learning and can be facilitated by engaging in the representation of meaningful knowledge. Yorke (2002:156) argues that 'assessment tends to be a pragmatic exercise that is primarily informed by custom and practice', the creative approach adopted here encouraged both students and staff to 'think outside of the box' and be more flexible and autonomous in their approach to assessment.