Research and evaluation

Are essays or exams better in supporting students' learning?

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Abstract

Different assessment types can induce different approaches to learning. In considering “the hidden curriculum” (Biggs & Tang, 2011) and “academic backwash” (Snyder, 1971), the research team sought to explore students’ approaches to learning in units assessed mainly by exams and units assessed mainly by essays. Existing literature (Parmenter, 2009; Scouller, 1998; Scouller & Prosser, 1994; Seale, Chapman, & Davey, 2000; Tian, 2007; Walstad, 2006; Walstad & Becker, 1994) espouses deeper approaches with essays rather than exams. Interestingly, the majority of the literature is dated by at least 10 years. Considering especially the re-envisioning of exams as broader than ‘time-constrained’ test conditions (Craddock & Mathias, 2009; Williams & Wong, 2009), revisiting this field of enquiry is vital. This project investigated whether any specific assessment situations countered the “conventional wisdom”.

Fifty-six students completed a questionnaire surrounding their approach to learning in units mainly assessed by exams versus those mainly assessed by essays, as well as their opinions about these assessment types. Reflecting existing literature, students reported deeper approaches with essays rather than exams. Results also suggested that many strategies for encouraging deeper approaches with exams (e.g., open book exams, problem- or scenario-based questions) may be ineffective. Two primary themes emerged from students’ qualitative responses, with essays described as a phenomenon involving “exploration and expression over time”, and exams as a process involving “information retrieval and reproduction in time.”

Participants will consider the advantages and disadvantages of essays and exams from teachers’ and students’ perspectives. Each participant will be allocated to one of four groups to develop a list outlining the advantages of one of the four propositions (e.g., exams are better than essays – from students’ perspectives). Through this, participants will be challenged to consider their own assessment practices, and to reflect on rationales underlying preferred approaches.

References


**Theme**

Assessment that engages students in learning that is relevant to the disciplinary, professional and community contexts (theme 1)