Consistent Engagement: Blackboard learning journals for summative assessment

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Description | What was done?

Background and Motivation

In the 2016/7 session, I co-led a funded research project to investigate 'Diversifying Assessment' in the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading. The project aimed to embed a wider range of assessment formats into our UG English Literature degree programme; the overwhelming majority of modules were assessed via an assessed essay (worth 33% of a module at Part 2 and 50% of a module at Part 3) and an exam weighted at 67% (Part 2) or 50% (Part 3).

Though this pattern had many virtues and suited some modules perfectly, it was not necessarily appropriate to the teaching and learning objectives of all modules. In addition, the standard model potentially worked against inclusive practice because it tended to favour students from traditional educational backgrounds who were well-trained in essay-writing and exam technique.

A further issue with the essay + exam pattern involved students' tendency to settle themselves into a comfort zone of essay-writing, producing safe but often unambitious work. We also wanted to tackle the student habit of strategically tailoring their learning to the requirements of the essay and exam: often, texts deemed 'unnecessary' for assessment were not read and the seminars discussing them were not attended.

Another motivator to introduce some variety into our assessment formats involved 'employability', expressed as 'Graduate Skills' in the University of Reading's 'Curriculum Framework' document: employees require graduates who have flexible writing skills – the ability to write a highly competent essay is not usually top of an employer's list of requirements. There was, therefore, a compelling argument for disrupting the homogeneity of assessment in our UG Programme.

The 'Diversifying Assessment' project convened student focus groups to identify a range of alternative assessment formats capable of improving student's consistent engagement with a module, of including a range of different writing skills, and of encouraging students to aim for more than a safe mid 2:1 mark. Students drawn from all levels of the UG programme were included in the focus groups and we discussed a selection of alternative assessment ideas including presentations, wikis, blogs, extended essays, 'posters', and so on.

The research for the project led me to investigate Blackboard online learning journals; this format involves students writing 500 words in the week between seminars discussing any aspect of the text studied that they found intriguing, bewildering or just plain irritating. Audio-visual files can be used, as can Powerpoint presentations, and students are able to attach self-created images. Students are free to use more or less any type of presentational format to express their ideas because files can simply be attached to a learning journal entry.

The focus groups immediately approved of this new assessment format and the students felt it could replace an exam on a module. They were mainly in favour of retaining a formal critical essay because they felt that they produced their best work in this format.

As a result of my research and of the students' feedback, I replaced the exams on my two Part 3 modules ('Margaret Atwood' and 'Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury') with learning journals in the 2017-18 session. I retained the formal 2500-word assessed essays on both modules. I have competent IT skills but the first time I set up the journals I asked a colleague from our Technology Enhanced Learning team to check what I had done. The Blackboard learning Journal is extremely straightforward so I now complete this process myself on an annual basis.

To help the students adjust to the new assessment format, I produced a 'Guidance' document, indicating the kinds of material they could consider including in their journals and outlining why the learning journal was being used: its central aims were to demonstrate engagement, development and independent/original critical thinking. I reserved a few minutes at the beginning of every Part 3 seminar to answer any questions students had about their journal entries and to provide any other support as necessary. I told the students that I would be keeping an eye on the journals to make sure that students were uploading weekly and I reassured them that I would provide full formative feedback on the developing journal during Week 6 of term. I also reassured the students that I was the only person who would be able to read their entries and that they would not be visible to other students in the group; this produced a 'safe space' for students in which to express their ideas.

In the first seminar of term, I asked students to use their various devices to follow the pathway through to the 'new entry' page in each journal: not all Humanities students have advanced IT skills so I decided that 'show and tell' would be the best approach. At Reading, we have a 'green sticker' system for SpLD students and, as part of my introduction, I included instructions about how to attach a digital 'green sticker' to the Journal.

I was also very clear in the 'Guidance' notes, in formative feedback, and in general advice that the journal should be regarded as a type of 'thinking space' where ideas could be developed. I encouraged students to take advantage of the opportunity to use a range of formats and to include some 'critical' pieces (for example, engaging with a critical opinion or reading) and some 'creative' pieces (including poems, recipes, images) to access ideas via alternative means. At the same time, however, I reassured students who did not consider themselves to be remotely 'creative' that using each entry to probe critical issues in a more conventional form was perfectly acceptable; once calmed, they tended to risk the more 'creative' forms of which they were so initially nervous and they frequently surprised themselves by excelling. These students were also comforted by the fact they would only have to offer 5 of the 10 entries for assessment; any entry that had not worked well could be ignored and not offered for assessment.

Learning journals did, however, have to be 'complete' and the usual Department penalties would be applied if it was not or if it was submitted past deadline: 'completion' depended on the inclusion of all 10 entries with one entry discussing every text taught on the module. It was also necessary to include a final 'reflective' entry in which students could discuss, for example, their response to the module, the impact that any particular text had on them, their evaluation of the journal format, and the challenges they had overcome or opportunities they had welcomed. As with every other element of this assessment format, decisions about what they would include in this final piece were made entirely by the students.

Successes/ Challenges/ Lessons Learnt

Successes

The new format immediately made a significant difference to my modules. The double groups meet once a week for a 3-hour seminar; because students knew they would need to write 500 words on their response to the text discussed that week, attendance moved from around 75% to 95%. Higher attendance in itself produced stronger student engagement because the more students learned, the more they had to contribute to seminar debate, and the more involved with the material of the module they became.

From my point of view, one of the most fascinating aspects of reading the students' journal entries was that I was able to see for the first time how engaged they were with their learning. Also, because the learning journal is so flexible and slightly less 'formal' than other types of assessment, students were able to make thoroughly interesting and original connections between texts and cultural debates and were able to take more risks in their readings. Because students knew that the assessment of the learning journal used only 5 of the 10 entries, they were free to experiment, to innovate, and to move beyond their comfort zones. Since one of the key learning objectives for my modules is to develop independent critical thinking, the learning journal proved better suited to the key pedagogic principles of the module than any other teaching and learning tactic I had tried previously.

When the journals were complete and when I was marking the entries, I was so astonished by the quality of the students' thinking that I decided to work with the students to move the journals offline and to produce a University of Reading book to showcase their work: Second Sight: The Margaret Atwood Learning Journals was collected together by a student editor and designed by a student from the 'Real Jobs' scheme in the Department of Typography. Students who wanted to be included in the book simply signed a 'permissions' form and submitted their journal entries on Word files (to preserve the integrity of one-to-one feedback and marks within Blackboard).

Published in June 2018, a copy of the book was sent to Margaret Atwood who wrote to praise the collection (much to the delight of the students) and ordered more copies, and it subsequently won the 2018-19 UoR Collaborative Award. The book contained images, critical writing, poems, mock-recipes (for example, 'How to Make the Perfect Ideological Woman' in response to The Edible Woman), the imagined perspective of a character who does not speak for themselves in the novel (for example, Serena-Joy in The Handmaid's Tale), and so on. I saw detailed and sophisticated critical analysis, extraordinary versatility and significant creativity, and several students who consistently struggled with the assessed essay thrived in this format; one student moved from their usual low 2:1 essay mark to a high First in the Journal.

I have now replaced the exam with a Learning Journal on a Part 2 module I convene ('Critical Issues') and this has had the same effect on this difficult module as it has had on my Part 3 modules. Together with students, and supported by funding from our Vice-Chancellor, I am currently working to produce a second edited collection of journal entries for my 'Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury' module. A Room of Our Own: The Virginia Woolf Learning Journals will be published on Dalloway Day 2020. One clear impact of this versatile assessment format is that it seems to generate a range of associated teaching and learning projects and opportunities.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

My experience of using the Blackboard Learning Journal format has been overwhelmingly positive and I would recommend it for modules in the Humanities and possibly some Social Sciences where there is a dominant discursive emphasis within modules. I know very little about the content of modules in other disciplines (particularly sciences and technology), but I would guess that the online journal format is less well-suited to teaching and learning in those areas.

Before replacing a more conventional assessment element with a learning journal, however, there are certain issues you need to consider. Firstly, most students have not used a digital learning journal before; together with the implicit encouragements to abandon the comfort-zone, this can lead to heightened levels of anxiety in the first few weeks of a module. This anxiety needs to be offset by effective 'scaffolding' of the type outlined above (a clear set of 'Guidance' notes, a weekly Q&A session, full and early formative feedback). Though I am not suggesting this as a way forward for everyone, our publication of Second Sight has helped a great deal to allay the anxieties of students new to the format because they can see that I really mean it when I advise (to quote Woolf), 'Any method is right, every method is right, that expresses what [you] wish to express.'i

Secondly, it is helpful to reflect on how you are going to dissuade students from playing the system by not uploading work weekly. I have been using online learning journals on all my modules for two years and I always have a small handful of students who decide to store entries on desktop, refining them and improving them as their knowledge increases, finally submitting fully polished pieces at the end of the module. This minority gives themselves a significant advantage over the majority of students who comply with the spirit of the journal and who use it as a developing 'thinking space'. You could consider a system of penalties but this may become complicated; a formal 'penalties' system may not be sufficiently flexible to allow students to upload late entries when they have been ill, for example. My resolution to this problem is more 'carrot' than 'stick': rather than imposing penalties for long-delayed entries, I reward students who have observed the rules and who can therefore demonstrate strong development from the beginning of the journal to the end.

Thirdly, it is not possible to provide in-line annotation within a Blackboard Learning Journal: formative comment is placed underneath each entry in the 'comments' box; summative feedback is contained in the 'final comment' box to the right of the screen. The lack of in-line annotation can be frustrating but I identify any consistent grammatical errors and explain why a reading does not withstand close scrutiny within the 'comments' or 'final comment' sections.

Fourthly, be clear about what constitutes a valid journal entry: an attached pencil sketch of Virginia Woolf in the British Museum is not 'an entry'. Such a sketch may, however, be attached to a 500-word critical analysis on, or a creative re-imagining of, the 'Museum' section of A Room of One's Own and be used to connect with or illustrate a core idea presented in the text.

A further area to note involves the issue of 'Inclusion'. While learning journals score highly in terms of rewarding skills that are not usually recognised in essays and exams, and benefitting students from diverse educational backgrounds, some students with SpLDs can struggle with the continuous nature of this assessment. To place this in perspective, however, I have now seen over 200 students through learning journal assessments and only 5 of them have struggled because of an SpLD. Further, though I have not taught any visually-impaired students in the past 2 years, such a disability would obviously

present an access challenge. There is, though, no assessment format that is fully inclusive of every single group and of every single skill-set; in my view, the learning journal is the most inclusive assessment format that I have yet identified.

Finally, be aware that learning journals will take longer to mark than exams and you will spend more time on providing useful, detailed feedback. At the University of Reading, we have a 15-day Turn-Around-Time (TAT) and the journals are submitted at the end of the term; the placement of this deadline helps a great deal because the University closure days can be used for marking. If journals are submitted at a point in the term where marking and teaching must both be accommodated within a tight TAT, you may need to retain an assessment format which requires less feedback time.

Despite these issues, I would not return to the exam format for my modules because the quality of the work that is produced in the journal, and the rather heartening insight into students' engagement with the module, more than compensates for any additional workload.

Scalability/ Conclusion

Scalability

At the University of Reading, I have used Learning Journals as a 50% assessment element with a Part 2 lecture group of 60 students and with Part 3 seminar groups of up to 36 students. With modules involving more than 60 students, learning journals could easily increase the assessment workload to an unsustainable level, as noted above. For a single colleague, marking more than 35 x 5,000-word Learning Journals within a tight TAT would not be a realistic proposition, even though (at the University of Reading) only half of the entries in the journal are offered for assessment.

Conclusion

The undeniable benefit of the learning journal format is that it encourages consistent engagement with learning and it allows a marker to reward independent critical and creative engagement; both have the effect of raising the average marks on a module by between 5%-10%. Some students discover talents they did not know they possessed; other students find that the journal very significantly enhances learning because it helps them to link texts and ideas (and even modules) together in a way that they would not otherwise have done. Journals solve any attendance problems and encourage students to read all the set literature on a module; there can be no 'tailoring' of reading in order to cover the needs of an essay and exam. Students therefore seem to connect more with the module, apparently undertaking more of the secondary reading and research around it than they would otherwise do.

More colleagues in my Department have now adopted learning journal assessments on their modules, but diversifying assessment obviously involves using a variety of assessment formats across a programme; using Learning Journals as an element of assessment on every module would be no better than using a standard assessed essay + exam model on every module. Besides this, the Journal may not suit every module or subject area. That said, if 'engagement' and 'attendance' are issues you are keen to address, and if you would like to prompt students into more ambitious or independent thinking, or towards enhanced writing flexibility, I would thoroughly recommend this format.

References

1 Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays, ed. David Bradshaw, Oxford: OUP, 2009 edition, p.10.

Additional Resources/ files

https://blogs.reading.ac.uk/t-and-l-exchange/connecting-with-the-curriculum-framework-using-focus-groups-to-diversify-assessment-part-2/

https://blogs.reading.ac.uk/t-and-l-exchange/connecting-with-the-curriculum-framework-using-focus-groups-to-diversify-assessment/

https://blogs.reading.ac.uk/t-and-l-exchange/celebrating-student-success-through-staff-student-publication-projects/

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1 Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays, ed. David Bradshaw, Oxford: OUP, 2009 edition, p.10.