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Dixon, L Employability and Assessment: how 'blogs' can diversify the assessment diet and enhance transferable skills. Prism. ISSN 1448-4404 (Accepted)

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Employability and Assessment: how 'blogs' can diversify the assessment diet and enhance transferable skills

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Abstract

Shifts in the Higher Education sector over the past decade have seen greater numbers of applicants than ever before entering university. As undergraduate cohorts have expanded, a diverse student body has emerged, with a rich and complex array of learning needs, desires and expectations. At the same time, public discourse around higher education has changed significantly, and particularly following the introduction and increase of tuition fees, this has led to an emphasis on programmes being seen to provide value for money; a value for money that is being increasingly measured via the metric of graduate employment outcomes. As a result, universities are being pushed to find new ways to ensure that students leave their degree programmes with the kinds of transferable skills necessary to succeed in a contemporary job market that following shifts in working patterns introduced during the Covid 19 pandemic, values flexibility, and adaptation. Here it is suggested that one way to achieve this, is for lecturers to integrate employability skills into innovative forms of assessment. A case study - the use of blogging as a summative assessment at Level 6 of an Events Management programme - is used to outline this dual approach, finding that engagement and criticality was successfully enhanced, whilst students were provided with a key skill directly relevant to the Events industry.

Keywords: Assessment, Blogging, Digital, Employability, Inclusion

1. The Changing Landscape of Higher Education

As the Covid-19 pandemic begins to fade, it is becoming increasingly clear that the contemporary higher education sector in the UK is facing not only greater challenges than at perhaps any other point in its recent history, but challenges that stem from a far wider variety of sources than perhaps ever before (Author A). The

way that universities responded to Covid-19 continued, and in some cases even sped up significant changes in relation to undergraduate students' needs, desires and expectations that were emerging prior to it. Perhaps most obviously, despite a deeply rooted and long-held understanding of students as 'consumers' of a service within higher education in the UK, there is little doubt that the introduction and subsequent increase of tuition fees has irrevocably altered the relationship between the institutions and the student body (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p272). The undeniable increase in both the amount of publicity - and the amount of *increasingly negative publicity* - surrounding tuition fees, has led to a direct focus on universities needing to be able to demonstrate evidence of 'value for money' in relation to their undergraduate degrees (Rowley, 2003).

It is a value for money, which has in turn, increasingly come to be measured via perceived levels of postgraduate employability (Tomlinson, 2008). These factors have combined to create a more fully defined 'consumerist' sensibility amongst students, which posits both educational achievement as a 'right' and places an increased emphasis on gaining a degree solely as a direct route to employment (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p272 See: Stephen et al, 2008, p451). The increasing emphasis on employability outcomes in relation to undergraduate degrees, will undoubtedly increase further, as post-pandemic shifts in working patterns, combined with greater recognition of the reality of multi-vocational (rather than unilinear) career paths, means that universities are tasked with ensuring graduates leave university with the skills necessary to adapt to a job market that values flexibility.

At the same time, universities have become key sites of neoliberal 'audit culture' in which a dominance of measuring 'performance indicators' and comparison via 'benchmarking' have become the norm, as attempts to quantify, assess and analyse student experience and overall satisfaction have also significantly increased (Kipnis, 2008). As much as data is being increasingly gathered externally via regulatory bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the National Student Survey (NSS), there has been a concomitant proliferation internally too, as universities attempt to capture data through an ever-burgeoning range of intra-institutional means (Kipnis, 2008). Whether by accident or design, this culture of continual requests for feedback only further enhances the perception of the 'student as customer' (Douglas et al, 2006, p251; Elliot and Healy, 2001; Giannakis and Bullivant, 2015).

This has occurred at the same time that the number of students entering into Higher Education has continued to surge. As the Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows, between 1992 (when the university sector expanded to incorporate former Polytechnics) and 2016, the number of students entering university degree programmes almost doubled, from 984,000 to 1.87 million (ONS, 2018). This growth continued even during Covid, surpassing expectations, with applications from home students up by 2.1% in 2020 and 5.1% in 2021, with a record 750,000 applications for full-time undergraduate places submitted through UCAS in 2021, and 560,000 of these applicants accepted (Bolton, 2022). A key driver of this increase in student numbers has undoubtedly been the result of a sustained and highly successful push to increase access to further education opportunities to those who may not have otherwise had them, through the expansion of 'Widening Participation' schemes (Lane, 2008).

Subsequently, as student numbers have risen, higher education institutions have had to expand their ability to meet the needs of a dramatically more diverse range of students, placing extra pressure not only on frontline teaching staff, but also necessitating the provision of a wider range of additional support services too (Burton and Nesbit, 2008; Rowley, 2003; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003). Perhaps even more importantly, the intake of increasingly diverse student cohorts has been disproportionately met by less well-established institutions, who have as a result, drawn much higher numbers of both 'non-traditional' and those conventionally less well represented groups of learners (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002). Somewhat inevitably perhaps, the more diverse the student body, the greater diversity in terms of learning needs that higher

education institutions need to meet (Burton and Nesbit, 2008; Rowley, 2003; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003).

As academic staff seek to respond to these shifting needs (in terms of both delivery and content) they are simultaneously faced with the repercussions of changes within secondary school education and the impacts these have had on those students who might previously have been seen to have traditionally made up the student body (Jones et al, 2015). As a direct result of educational policy modifications, there is little doubt that there has been an emphasis on students within secondary schools in particular, being 'taught to the test' to ensure that those institutions are able to meet their own government-set standards of attainment (Biggs and Tang, 2007; Jones et al. 2015). Research has begun to suggest that because of this, there is an increased passivity and demonstrably lower levels of engagement, particularly amongst first year students, who consequently lack the kinds of key skills needed to be successful on an undergraduate degree programme (Cuseo, 2007; Jones et al, 2015).

Consequently, it is becoming clear that institutions are experiencing increasing issues with retention, with post-92 universities in particular, seeing much poorer outcomes (Burton and Nesbit, 2008). Lecturers are nonetheless expected to both account for and react to the progressively disparate learning needs of undergraduate students, with simultaneously less means available to do so (Burton and Nesbit, 2008; Rowley, 2003; Wlodkowski and Kasworm, 2003). One increasingly common way that UK universities have sought to respond to the changing needs of students in a way that accounts for the increased complexity of the student body – and their concomitant diversity of learning styles – whilst ensuring that they receive the training needed to succeed in the contemporary graduate jobs market, has been to move away from more traditional forms of assessment, like essays and exams, towards innovative approaches that have transferable skills at their heart. The case study below describes how 'blogs' were used to achieve this in an undergraduate Events Management degree, offering a means to emphasise digital technology and a specific writing style in a way that mirrored the increasing use of both in the Events Management industry.

2. Blogging as a Form of Summative Assessment

The development of web-based technology has undoubtedly contributed towards the facilitation of a pedagogical shift from students as passive recipients of transferred knowledge, to an emphasis on interactivity and collaboration, with students as active and reflective participants in knowledge creation (Ehlers, 2009; Williams, 2004). The open nature of blogging and emphasis on active participation can make blogs especially useful assessment tool, in which knowledge is self-generated 'through allowing end-users to use web space as a conversational field' (Akbulut & Kiyici, 2007, p6). As opposed to more traditional forms of assessment, such as essays or report writing, blogging focuses on a bottom-up model of learning, which has been shown to increase criticality (Hain & Back, 2008; Joshi & Chug, 2009). The necessary inclusion of both academic and contemporary media sources, helps students to relate their learning to the wider context, directly aiding the attainment of the module learning outcomes (Duff et al, 2007).

However, blogging as a form of assessment can lead to a substantive increase in workload - for students and lecturers, it may require training to utilise new tools and where comments are included, issues concerning content ownership (with the concomitant issue this may cause in relation to marking) can arise (Joshi, 2012, p28). Where large numbers of students are participating, blogging can become cumbersome and due to the levels of engagement required, blogging as a form of assessment demands a certain 'levelness' – the higher, in other words, the better (Joshi & Babacan, 2012, p28; Smith et al, 2008). How well integrated blogging is within overall design is crucial (Chen et al, 2008) and the assessment criteria must be completely transparent and the technique is best used with a relatively small (less than 100 student) cohort, for it to work in the way that it is intended to (Chen & Bonk, 2008, p61). In particular, maintaining control of the number of students

participating, allows a balance between student and staff workloads and ensures that the transferability of skills that blogging incorporates can be properly maintained (Chen & Bonk, 2008, p61).

3. Case Study – Blogs in Events Management

A key value of the Events Management programme is to produce 'event ready' graduates. The need for utilising distinct methods of assessment to meet diverse learning outcomes (Nightingale et al, 1996; Morgan et al, 2004), is enhanced by regular meetings with industry professionals, which encourages the incorporation of transferable skills into the assessment diet – the rise of live blogging in relation to events being a case in point. As a result of this, blogging has been incorporated into a module at Level 6, titled: Policy, Politics and Events. The relevant associated learning outcomes for the module are:

- 1 Understand how policy relating to events is formed within a political setting
- 2 Critically assess issues of power in relation to the management, consumption, and performance of events

Students are tasked with writing three, 1000-word blog posts, which critically discuss topics covered within the module. Media links, images, and videos along with relevant academic literature must be included, but the crucial element is that students must develop an opinion on the chosen topic; criticality - in line with institutional level 6 grade descriptors - is key. Students are expected to meet both learning outcomes within the blogs, by linking (particularly mega-) events to their wider political context and to discuss how events can come to be drivers of public policy, with both intended and unintended social, environmental, and economic impacts. Blogs are submitted via the VLE, where they can only be viewed by the assessors, and feedback is provided anonymously online, as per the institutional e-submission processes.

Blogs enable the students to gain experience in an important transferable skill. They learn to write in a different style and to incorporate a range of current online material within their academic work. Training in using the journal tool is provided via an online tutorial video embedded within the VLE. Learning to formulate a personal opinion is scaffolded in preceding lectures in the form of in-class debates and the use of external blogs as part of the teaching material (Larkin, 2002; Rosenshine & Meister, 1992). The topics covered are those which tend to garner strong reactions – for example, human rights, national identity, bribery and corruption. It offers an arena to practice writing for a slightly different audience, and from a personal point of view, which helps students who may be less confident in more traditional assessment style writing.

4. Evaluation

Blogs were marked and moderated as per the institutional assessment guidelines, and they have been extremely successful in helping students to achieve the relevant learning outcomes. Not only were grades consistently higher than in other level 6 module assessments, students became confident in offering opinions so that in-class engagement increased and the ability to critically analyse relevant material was transferred into other assessments. Student feedback was also encouraging – the most recent module evaluation (July 2022) was 100% positive in all areas surveyed, and it was clear from the material included within the blogs themselves that knowledge of current affairs amongst students increased considerably. Anecdotally, a recent graduate attended the second round of an interview where a key task was to write a blog – he was able to build on the skills gained during this module to complete the interview task and ultimately, he was successful in being offered the role, showing the direct transferability of blogging to employment within the Events Management sector.

5. Conclusion

Significant shifts in relation to tertiary education, many of which have been clear for some time, have gained even more salience in light of the impact of, and responses by universities to, the Covid-19 pandemic (Author A). In particular, as the number of students entering higher education continues to rise, the increasingly complex diversity of the student body has pushed lecturers to adapt and adopt more innovative forms of assessment, to ensure that a wider variety of learners have the opportunity to succeed. At the same time, the twin emphases in public discourse on the ever-increasing financial cost of university education, and the consequent desire to ensure that students receive 'value for money' from their degree, has made the incorporation of transferable skills into the curriculum vital, because it is through the lens of graduate employability that such value is increasingly measured (Rowley, 2003; Tomlinson, 2008).

This is made acutely clear from the perspective of undergraduate degree courses in Events Management, which are in many ways vocational, necessitating as they do, the practical attainment of industry relevant skills in order to ensure that graduates are 'events ready' upon graduation. From a programme perspective, this means maintaining good relationships with local events professionals and listening to their expectations of what a graduate with a degree in Events Management 'looks like'. At the same time, it is vital to take on board feedback from students, to ensure that their learning needs are being met, too. With the rise in popularity of 'live blogging' in the events space, adapting a level 6 assessment to include blog writing was a direct response to both, and it was able to successfully provide our students with a key transferable skill; one directly relevant to the events industry. There is little doubt that providing undergraduate training in skills directly relevant to enhanced employability is a fundamental part of the contemporary higher education landscape; a trend that is likely to continue, as universities are increasingly measured according to the metric of graduate outcomes. As with all challenges, however, it also provides an opportunity; not least because as the above case study shows, incorporating employability skills directly into assessments can allow for the possibility of curriculum innovation in a way that appeals to learners from different educational pathways, too.

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