

Succeed together, fail together?
Exploring individual and group assessment at final year undergraduate level.

Dr. Carol Moran
moran.carol@itsligo.ie
Faculty of Business & Social Science
Institute of Technology, Sligo
Sligo, Ireland

Abstract

This paper seeks to improve understanding of the impact of individual and group assessments on final year undergraduate students' grades and explore the student experience of continuous assessment during their final year Macroeconomics modules. This study sought the opinions of final year students who had the option to complete an individual continuous assessment in their first semester but were required to complete a group continuous assessment in the second semester. This paper seeks to determine if their attitudes and opinions towards assessment are correlated to their level of educational attainment.

Keywords

Assessment, group work, undergraduate.

1. Introduction and Motivation

This study was prompted by two main observations during the author's twelve years lecturing Macroeconomics to final year undergraduate business students. The students more frequently failed the module Macroeconomics 1 which is taught in first semester than failed Macroeconomics 2 which is taught in the second semester. Initial instinct were that perhaps students were acquiring more knowledge regarding the subject itself and the extent to which they had to demonstrate critical thinking to achieve better marks; but this was idea was challenged by a second observation. During successive exam board meetings there were students who had failed a terminal exam yet were achieving an overall pass grade for the module based on the weighted continuous assessment (final exam 70%, continuous assessment 30%) which had been completed within a group. This phenomenon occurred more frequently in second semester where all students had to complete a group continuous assessment than in first semester where they have the option to complete the work individually or in a group of up to three people. This raised questions as to what extent are students who had performed well in their final exam disadvantaged by the group continuous assessment and whether a correlation may exist between students' preferences for individual assessment and their individual result.

2. Literature Review

It is broadly accepted that employers value graduates who have experience of working collaboratively and co-operatively, and this is embraced by the vocational approach to education traditionally found in Irish institutes of education. There has been a shift in emphasis away from solely academic achievement to a broader understanding of how higher education can prepare students for life and work (Lejk et al., 1997). Many novel approaches to assessment have been put forward in order to try to make the assessment process fair and consistent for both students and academic staff, particularly where large numbers of students must be assessed (Clariana et al., 2011; Race, 1999). Glazer (2014) advocates the use of both summative and formative assessment for undergraduate groups and outlines the important role of feedback following formative assessment in contributing to the student's learning. However, a study by Almond (2009) found that group summative assessment was

disadvantageous to high individual scoring students and he contests that this fact is largely underreported (2009, p. 147).

There are other concerns related to group assessment, perhaps most concerning that group assessment does not accurately reflect individual academic ability and may provide the means for weaker or lazy students to be awarded marks that really should be attributed elsewhere. Such concerns as outlined by Heathfield (1999) were confirmed by the study of group assessment at first year and final year degree level by Plastow et al (2010). They discovered that there was “no statistically significant correlation between group and individual assessment” (Plastow et al, 2010, p. 400). Their study revealed that for all modules examined most students scored significantly higher group assessment marks than individual marks. This echoed the work of Knight (2004) who discovered that marks for group work were higher than for individual assessments and the number of fails was lower in group assessment than in individual. As the literature suggests there are many advantage to group learning, and evidence shows its particularly advantageous for weaker students, however, there is little focus on the impact it has on students with strong individual academic performance and that is the gap in literature that this paper is intended to fill.

3. Methodology

The overall research philosophy underpinning this research is participatory where the research is taking place in the natural setting i.e. the lecture environment and the lecturer as the researcher is highly involved in creating and trying to improve the actual experience of the participants (Creswell, 2003). The author’s role as an advocate for her students, and her desire to ensure that they have access to fair assessment is the driving force behind this enquiry. While the participatory paradigm is largely associated with qualitative research, a mixed methods research design was considered most appropriate for this study; by combining both qualitative and quantitative aspects it is envisaged that the quality of the study can be strengthened. This allowed for the participatory aspect to ensure the social phenomena is being observed holistically through the qualitative aspect of the research, while the quantitative element would help to test the hypothesis that there is a correlation between student assessment preference and educational attainment. Furthermore, the mixed methods approach will improve utility (Bryman, 2006) by making the findings

more useful to the author as a practitioner and it is hoped for other practitioners who lecture final year undergraduate students.

The population under investigation were all students taking Macroeconomics 1 and/or Macroeconomics 2 as part of their final year undergraduate. Given the author's access to the population it was decided that no sampling per se would be undertaken, rather all members of the population would be invited to participate. The author was aware of the power distance relationship between lecturer and student, and so ensured that students knew that participation was voluntary, would not be rewarded and that they would have the right to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, they were advised that the findings may be published in aggregate, but no student would be individually identified.

A short survey was formulated with both closed and open-ended questions, to try to gauge students' attitudes towards and experience of individual and group assessments. The survey was distributed to the students ($n=148$) at the end of the second semester during lecture time over three academic years. Students who were not in attendance on that day were simply not included; this may indicate some bias in the results towards more motivated students who attend lectures. Additional qualitative data will be gathered from the reflective learning reports submitted as part of the group assessment in semester two. Students are required to reflect on their assessment and through their reflective practice establish what they found most challenging and rewarding during the group assessment.

The results achieved for each module will be cross referenced against the student attitudes towards assessment. The results will be taken from the lecturer's copy of the examination attendance sheets, which are the official record of student results per module in the institute.

4. Initial Findings

Some preliminary data analysis has been undertaken to date, focussing on the responses to the class surveys. No analysis has yet been undertaken to examine the relationship and potential correlation between the reported attitudes towards assessment and educational attainment.

Using one data set from the student cohort of 2017/18 when asked what they like least about individual work the most prominent response (38%) related to the amount of

time that the individual had to spend working on the assignment; followed by the loss of the opportunity to work with others and “bounce ideas off” other students (23%).

Some responses are outlined below:

“Well I suppose the huge workload if you are by yourself it can be more time consuming.”

“It takes more time (sometimes) and you can't bounce ideas off of another person to help formulate an outline.”

“Can be stressful without help from others if it is a subject which you are weak at.”

From the same cohort, when asked what they liked most about individual continuous assessment 67% believed that they were more in control of the assignment and 33% liked that you were being awarded a mark for your own effort, rather than a group effort.

“As this is our final year, final grades are so important. Working alone ensured I had full control of the work that was completed and equally, the standard. I could do it in my own time and as I had to do all the work, I learned far more than if I were to work in a group.”

“Your mark is a reflection of your work alone, and in cases where you are in an inefficient group you can feel that the others can sometimes cause poor reflection on your own mark.”

The next phase of analysis will seek to establish whether those students who report a preference for individual assessment and enjoy the sense of control and individuality associated with it performed better during their final exam.

5. Conclusions and Future Work

This study will now require the analysis of the responses from the students, in order to classify them according to their preferences for individual or group assessment. Secondly, this will be measured against their performance in the final exam and a determination as to the extent to which their group continuous assessment improved or impaired their overall mark will be made. It is expected this research may show some correlation between the impact of group continuous assessment on the student's final mark and preference for assessment type. Further work would involve understanding educators' attitudes towards group versus individual assessment at final

undergraduate level, given that they are responsible for both determining and implementing the assessment strategies for the modules they teach.

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