The role of assessment literacy in encouraging students to choose alternative assessment modes

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of assessment literacy in encouraging students to choose alternative modes of assessment. Research has illustrated that when provided with a choice of mode of assessment students often select traditional mediums due to the 'comfort factor', (Garside et al, 2009) unless provided with adequate support (O Neill, 2017). Students in two modules were provided with an option of selecting a variety of assessment modes. To support the process students engaged in activities which allowed them to self-assess how alternative modes of assessment met assignment criteria. This paper explores if assessment literacy increased the number of students choosing alternative assessment modes. It details a practical case study of how alternative assessment literacy can be integrated into teaching.

Keywords:

Introduction

In recent years, students as partners in the education process has gained popularity. Students as partners has been identified as a means of enhancing learning and encouraging self-directed learning (Bovill et al, 2010).

Several researchers have illustrated that providing students with a variety of assessment modes enhances learning (Bevitt, 2012; O Neill, 2011). The NF encourage Assessment As and FOR Learning, which empower students to become better learners, they suggest several ways of applying this principle, one of which is to '*Give students some choice of the methods used to assess them*' (NF, 2016).

Research has illustrated that students without support choose more traditional assessment modes such as essays or exams due to their familiarity with these modes of assessment (Garside et al, 2009; O'Neill, 2017). Therefore, the authors incorporated assessment literacy into their teaching to illustrate to students how alternative assessment modes can be developed to address assessment criteria. This paper explores if introducing assessment literacy into teaching increased the number of students choosing alternative modes of assessment?

Background

This paper illustrates how assessment literacy was provided to support alternative assessment methods in two modules an undergraduate and postgraduate module

The first module is a third-year undergraduate module delivered to 24 education students. In their first assignment students are given a choice of a mode of assessment. The motivating factors for providing assessment choice is that the module is underpinned by UDL principles and the author wished to model this by providing the students with opportunities for multiple forms of expression. The learners could choose how they would like to submit their design plan (assignment) from one or more of the assessment modes.

The second module is a Master of Education programme for practicing teachers and principals in Irish-medium and *Gaeltacht* schools that is delivered through a blended learning model to 31 students. The first module students undertake as part of the programme is a module on language teaching and learning, which incorporates theories of second language acquisition (SLA), individual differences in second language learning and pedagogical practice in an Irish-medium and Gaeltacht setting. Students were given a choice in terms of a mode of assessment for their second assignment, which was a language glossary to foster engagement with the learning and assessment process and to provide opportunities for self-expression. Students were provided with a choice of modes of assessment to complete their language glossary assignment.

Implementation

Different methods of assessment literacy were used for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

For the undergraduate module it was felt that students would require more significant support as they are novice learners. As a result, the students were provided with a two-hour class on assessment literacy two weeks prior to the assignment submission. In this session students were shown various technologies to enable them to produce alternative assessment modes, they had to grade a written sample assignment and discuss how they would redesign to an alternative mode. In addition, over the remaining classes students were invited to bring in their alternative draft assessments for discussion with the author.

Assessment literacy for postgraduate students was integrated in the module and facilitated throughout. The content of the module itself and the self-profiling task, provided students with opportunities to self-reflect and self-assess on their learning preferences and strategies. In addition, sample multimodal assignments were demonstrated and discussed with the students. This framework was used to scaffold the students' assessment literacy.

Impact

Results upon submission of the assessment among postgraduate students show a variety of chosen modes of assessment. Although at first glance the written mode seems to be the most popular choice among students (Figure 1.1), impact shows alternative modes of assessment being used by almost two thirds of participants. A small number of students identified alternative modes that were not included in the guidelines, where two   students designed social media language glossaries on Instagram and Twitter and another student designed meme to explain SLA terms through humor.
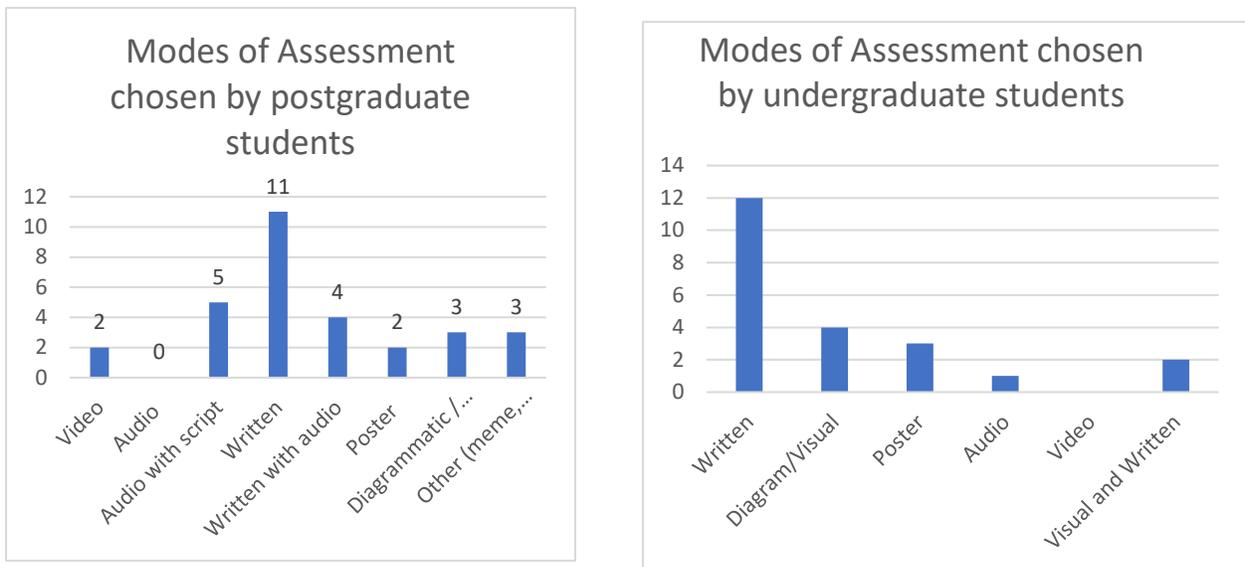

Figure 1.1 Modes of assessment chosen by students

Compared to the postgraduate cohort the uptake of alternative modes of assessment was quite low. For the undergraduate module there was a strong preference for written assignments see figure 1.2. 55% of the class chose written forms of assessment. In total 45% of students selected alternative assessment modes. The most popular alternative assessment type was diagrams/mind maps which 18% of students chose. The second most popular type was a poster which 15% of students chose. In these instances, a template was provided for students to scaffold their assessment. Many students had not experienced been provided with a choice of mode of assessment

previously and struggled to identify how alternative assessment modes could be equitable to written assignments.

For undergraduate students the two-hour assessment literacy class triggered significant motivation and engagement in the assessment process. It initiated a significant amount of peer and student-teacher dialog that took place both in and outside of class over the proceeding two weeks leading to the assessment submission date. This resulted in informal formative feedback over the period of two weeks. It was felt that additional supports could be provided in the next iteration of the module to support self-assessment to empower the learners to choose the mode of assessment most relevant to them. These would include

- A class-based discussion on multimodal assessment to encourage learners to self-assess their individual needs and how they can exploit their strengths to meet assessment criteria/rubric
- Providing an activity that allows students to 'grade' the alternative assessment modes produced in the sample assignment. Learners would exchange the sample assignments developed and use the rubric to generate feedback for a whole class discussion.
- As it is many students first time experiencing multimodal assessment and assessment choice, where possible provide templates to scaffold the process.

For postgraduate students, the following recommendations could further enhance the practice:

- Support and guidance on assessment literacy could be further developed within groups to facilitate peer learning. Where some students displayed ownership of their learning experiences, some relied more heavily on the module content and delivery.
- More examples of multimodal forms of assessment could be incorporated into the assignment workshop to demonstrate how a language glossary could be presented through various modes to increase confidence in engaging with alternative assessment modes.

- The rubric could be adapted to incorporate creative thinking. Also making assessment literacy more explicit may increase learner confidence in engaging in alternative assessment modes

Overall, assessment literacy shows to have played a significant role in encouraging students to choose alternative assessment mode. The multimodal model suggests that students provide strong evidence of understanding module content and of learning outcomes in their assessments. Findings also show that students demonstrate a high degree of self-expression, self-reflection on preferred assessment modes for learning and self-awareness of individual strengths.

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