

Assessment, Technology and Innovation in Distance Learning in the Bloomsbury Learning Environment Institutions

Executive Summary

The Bloomsbury Learning Environment (BLE) commissioned an external review to examine the use of technology in assessment practices within Distance Learning at the BLE institutions: Birkbeck, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Royal Veterinary College, School of Oriental and African Studies, UCL Institute of Education and the University of London. The aim was to outline issues and opportunities and to offer recommendations for future improvement in the use of technology in assessment.

The majority of data was gathered in the form of interviews with a variety of stakeholders within the BLE member institutions. Supplementary information came from questionnaires completed by them and others working in similar roles.

The review focused on postgraduate international courses, with a wide variety of students, a range of cohort size, and where the desired learner achievements have to be accomplished within a set framework of assessment. MOOCs, as a new and innovative form of distance learning, were also included. The reviewers devised a model which incorporates three approaches to assessment:

- Model 1: Functional approach
- Model 2: Enhanced functional approach
- Model 3: Innovative approach

All three models are in evidence across the BLE, with Models 1 and 2 as predominant. However, some examples of Model 3 from several institutions suggest a movement towards innovative practice in both Distance Learning (degree) courses and MOOCs.

Common areas of concern which also provide opportunities for improvement are:

- Communications and sharing: across and within institutions
- Skills, support and training: technical and online learning
- Assessment and activity design: aligning assessments to good learning design
- Cost and resource: including time and manpower
- Authenticity and identity: addressing verification and plagiarism
- Technology and access: including complexity of systems and internet access by students around the world
- Course size and student profile: how these affect course design and assessment
- Attitudes toward DL and online learning within colleges

The overall impression gathered in the investigation was of desire for improvement and recognition of the difficulties of implementing change. The complex web of relationships between the BLE institutions and the University of London can lead to both opportunities for and obstacles to change.

Introduction

The brief for this review was to examine the use of technology in assessment in Distance Learning (DL), including Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), within the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (BLE) institutions and offer commentary and recommendations for future improvement.

The majority of data was gathered in the form of hour-long interviews with lecturers, course directors, distance learning co-ordinators and learning technology staff within the BLE member institutions. Supplementary information came from questionnaires completed by them and others working in similar roles.

While complete coverage of all DL courses and programmes was not possible within the scope of the review, a general understanding of current practices employed by consortium members has led us to devise a model of the use of technology for assessment. This model provides the framework for discussion and, crucially, moves us away from a too-specific emphasis on individual technologies and toward a focus on good practice in learning design in relation to assessment.

The analysis set out in the *Assessment Toolkit* developed by Claire Gordon, et al, offered a useful starting point for developing the model: "Assessment influences what students learn, the way they approach their learning and their attitudes towards learning and their course. Well-designed assessment tasks can also help prepare students for future employment or further study" (5).

The overarching context that we considered was that of postgraduate international courses, with a wide variety of students, a range of cohort size, and where the desired learner achievements have to be accomplished within a set framework of assessment. With this in mind we constructed a model for analysis of DL programme and course assessment of BLE member institutions which is informed by the suggested main purposes of assessment:

- Assessment **of** learning, which occurs when teachers use evidence of student learning to make judgements on student achievement against goals and standards (*summative*).
- Assessment **as** learning, which occurs when students reflect on and monitor their own scaffolded progress to inform their future learning goals (*formative*).
- Assessment **for** learning, which occurs when teachers use inferences about student progress to inform their feedback and teaching. Peer interaction and assessment occurs (*formative*).

The model we devised incorporates three approaches to assessment:

1. A **functional** approach, in which compliance processes are met. Resources and results are generally available through technology. Summative assessment is more prevalent than formative assessment
2. An **enhanced** functional approach, where there is an increase in the use of formative assessment with tutor interaction and individual feedback enabled through technology
3. An **innovative** approach, with a strong collaborative pedagogical rationale and increased variety of learning activities

Approaches One and Two are hierarchical and additive in nature: One is the baseline; Two contains all of One with the addition of other, more formative features. However, Approach Three

represents a different vision of assessment, in fact to whole course design -- a vision that is more activity-based with collaborative features which serve to increase feedback to students. There is some overlap between the approaches, particularly One and Two, and some of these courses are beginning to bring in elements of Approach Three.

Approach Three courses incorporate higher levels of formative assessment and they have a greater variety of assessment activities. Formative feedback comes not only from tutors but also through peer-to-peer communication and collaboration. A high value is placed on formative assessment, peer interaction and feedback, which begin to rival summative assessment in emphasis.

According to the Assessment Reform Group, a task force set up by the British Educational Research Association, formative assessment or 'assessment for learning' is a key tool for raising achievement. Improving learning through assessment depends on the provision of effective feedback to students and on a recognition of the profound influence assessment has on motivation -- students need to learn how to assess themselves and understand how to improve. (ARG, 1999)

We do not make any judgements about the quality of the assessment feedback in courses, nor do we claim that high quality feedback can only be accomplished through technology. However, we see technology as a key enabler for improvements in assessment practices in DL, and the way technology is used is often indicative of which approach prevails.

I. The Current Situation

To consider the three approaches, it is useful to match some of the courses included in our study to the approaches set out in the model to stand as examples. This is a subjective process, and while we feel that many courses have elements of more than one approach, most fall more strongly in a single category. Moreover, rather than listing out in exhaustive detail every assessment element or tool, we present 'snapshot' examples that represent typical practice. This analysis is therefore intended as a starting point for discussion rather than a 'set in stone' classification or map of assessment taking place in BLE DL courses. (More specific details about the technology used for assessment by institution can be found in the Appendix: Matrix of eAssessment Tools in use at the Institutions)

1. Functional Approach

The **functional** approach to assessment applies

- when courses comply with university regulations in terms of assessment and course structure
- when resources and results are generally available through technology
- when summative assessment is more prevalent than formative assessment, which may not exist at all

All of the DL courses within the scope of the review fulfil the minimum standard comprising the Functional Approach to assessment: courses in this group comply with University regulations in terms of assessment and course structure. These may be legacy courses, originally correspondence courses where the material was formerly posted out rather than posted online. They are now mostly 'paperless' with assessment results available through technology.

Summative assessment generally dominates, though formative assessment may also be present in some form. A high percentage mark is attached to the summative “unseen” essay examination (not seen before the examination sitting): up to 80%. Multiple Choice Question (MCQ) tests sometimes form part of this grade.

The rest of the assessment mark comes from coursework tasks which may include reviews, reports, essays, oral presentations, case studies, journals, logs, scientific and mathematical exercises, audiotapes or videotapes, depending on the subject matter of the course. Moodle and Turnitin are commonly used to access material and to upload assessments.

In the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the Centre for Financial and Management Studies (CeFIMS) has exams worth 80% of the grade, which are held in Examination Centres around the world. Coursework (20%) is generally online in Moodle. Huge numbers of students in over 160 countries participate. Centre for Development, Environment and Policy (CeDEP) courses allow two sessions of preparation prior to the exam, which again is worth 80% of the final grade; 20% comes from coursework. All submissions are now made online, for instance coursework PowerPoint presentations.

At Birkbeck runs four degrees for distance learning (with entry certificate routes). These are taught with full video streaming of lectures and are supported by digital lecture notes, email / phone / Skype tutorials. There are optional residential field classes and use of an electronic library. Many assessments do not require online interaction other than downloading the assessment. They do however make provision for electronic upload of standard practical assessments and also for essay style questions, requiring submission through Turnitin. This year they have started to use audio/video in formative assessment. The Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences offers all certificate and degree programmes via distance learning as well as face-to-face or blended routes - whilst the final exam is mostly unseen essay questions, there are MCQ papers. Other Birkbeck courses are considered later.

University College London (UCL) and Institute of Education (IOE) courses use Moodle and Turnitin to upload coursework assignments, such as self-recorded presentations, essays and quizzes. Feedback is available prior to final submission. Grademark software is used for marking.

Distance Learning students taking two of the Royal Veterinary College (RVC)’s MSc courses (MSc Veterinary Epidemiology and Public Health, and Livestock Health and Production) sit exams held in local exam centres. There are also one to three coursework assignments per module uploaded in Turnitin with feedback by email. Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice (CertAVP) has at least one module assessed by a short open book exam. Formative assessments include self- assessment quizzes. In the MSc Veterinary Education, written assignments are submitted online and feedback given via Turnitin.

The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) does not use Turnitin. The Infectious Diseases Programme (IDP) core has an unseen hand written exam which is scanned and marked online. Electives are submitted and marked online with comments from markers to agree grades. The IDP core assignment is marked and feedback submitted online. Global Health Policy final exams use exam centres and also require short essays with online feedback.

2. Enhanced Functional Approach

The **enhanced** functional approach to assessment applies

- when there is an increase in the use of formative assessment
- when there is tutor interaction with individual students
- when feedback is enabled through technology

Courses which exemplify Approach Two appear to be common in the DL landscape of the BLE institutions. Whereas Approach One is more or less based on the traditional form of the correspondence course, updated with modern communication tools for some of the delivery of (primarily summative) assessments, Approach Two courses show a greater recognition of the value of formative assessment and feedback. It is likely therefore that the majority of all DL courses in the BLE group fall into this category.

Discussion forums in Moodle for peer-to-peer and peer-to-tutor interaction are standard in DL courses at LSHTM, as are Skype sessions with project supervisors and online seminar (Collaborate) sessions with groups. The MSc in Clinical Trials also offers online study materials with embedded questions and pop-up answers for automated formative self-assessment.

All of the RVC course modules provide peer feedback forums, and some courses offer optional Skype tutorials. The CertAVP course offers self-assessment (formative) quizzes, in the form of either multiple choice or essay.

Some of the University of London International Academy (UoLIA)'s innovations fall within Approach Two (some in Approach Three below), such as the custom built self-assessment plug-in for essay type questions with model answers. Students have the option to self-mark their answers against the model answers. They have also introduced new support personnel, student relationship managers and a Student Advice Centre, which all provide feedback and monitor engagement.

Panopto is used to record face-to-face lectures at Birkbeck, and Skype has been used for seminars for ten years. Formative assessment includes essays and mock exams with feedback.

SOAS CeDEp uses a Moodle tutor-led discussion forum. There is also unofficial student interaction. Skype is used for 'student voice' interaction with a designated tutor involved.

UCL/IOE uses a variety of forums, blogs and wikis, which are embedded in online activities, some are mandatory. There is some formative feedback in discussion boards and web conferences. Online tutorials use Blackboard Collaborate or Skype. Flexible means of feedback include the use of audio. Portfolio-type assessments and reuse of module activities towards a final submission are used in the Education & Technology MA.

3. Innovative Approach

The **Innovative** approach to assessment applies

- when there is a strong collaborative pedagogical rationale
- when there is increased variety of learning activities

In identifying courses, or parts of courses, that might be deemed to exemplify Approach Three, the key diagnostic is the degree of student interaction and number of collaborative learning activities that occur. The thinking behind such activities draws on cultural theories (including social constructivism) and scaffolding for learning comes from tutors and peers in online activities. This underlying rationale influences both course structure and assessment.

There were several courses in our study that went some way towards this kind of structure in their formative assessment. UCL Eastman Dental Institute's Paediatric Dentistry MSc offers blended learning. The online interface (iPad Mini provided) allows staff to support students' day-to-day work. Assessment is through written and practical presentations, essays and vivas. An innovative online logbook is provided as part of the programme; it records treatment and can be used to support further career progression. There is some degree of peer interaction.

The new Birkbeck Geochemistry MSc utilises their online learning environment. Geochem students are provided with high quality photos of rocks (via Xerte tutorial) to analyse and comment on, peers and tutors take part in the discussions that follow. Other assessment elements include unseen examinations, theoretical and practical assessed coursework, oral presentations and associated handouts, a research proposal and a dissertation.

The Financial Sector Management course (MSc) has been developed by academics at SOAS's CeFiMS working with UoLIA. Through their Online Learning Environment (OLE) students communicate with an assigned academic tutor, administrators and other students on the course using discussion forums. The OLE is however mainly used to access study materials, to submit assessments, to communicate with tutors and support staff and to gain access to the University of London Library.

However, in development is a complex module that introduces a variety of activities, and activity-based assessments, into the course through a strategic simulation. Students carry out research which is then applied to a strategic case study. The case study will be supported by a simulation model enabling the student to build a business plan and carry out risk analysis and scenario planning. Students make a series of annual decisions to implement their business plan. At the end of each decision year, they will receive feedback on their progress and be able to reflect on their performance, comparing actual results against plan and benchmark their performance against other students / teams. Students will work in teams of five to plan and manage their business, establishing long-term collaboration as a significant factor.

The course which most fully embraces online interaction between students and tutors in its activities and assessments is the MA in Global Diplomacy (Online Learning) course developed by the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy (CISD) at SOAS. The course demonstrates an holistic approach to assessment design where it is integral to course design and where assessment activities are mapped onto learning outcomes. Each module is assessed by five written online assessments ('etivities') comprising 30% of the module mark and one longer essay comprising 70%. The etivities provide formative and summative feedback to students as a means of monitoring their progress and encouraging areas in which they can improve.

The concept of etivities, which underlies the course, was first set out by Gilly Salmon in 2002. An etivity is a framework for online, active and interactive learning that states clearly to the students its 'purpose' the 'task' the contribution (response type) and the 'outcome'. She describes how learners should be supported through five stages in progressive participation in an online learning community: access and motivation, online socialization, information exchange, knowledge construction and development. These are integral to this course design and assessment.

Another promising development is UoLIA's 'Track C', which is setting a foundation for more courses to move towards Approach Three. Track C is a technical framework or template for new courses

and is designed to lead colleges toward change by getting Programme Directors to rethink how they approach DL. As some DL programmes are run by a small number of people with few resources to make big changes, UoLIA established the framework first and then looked for partners to develop new courses. This strategy is an effort to get control of content, establish coherency and increase efficiency to all programmes. UCL's Professional Accounting course is currently running in the Track C framework, with group work (formative) in project teams running simulations.

In addition they have created a series of tools for mapping and tracking performance, which bring assessment into line with pedagogy. These include formative assessment questions (e.g. multiple choice, self-mark, etc.) which are mapped and weighted against learning outcomes. The Learning Outcomes Profiler (LOP) tool provides a single view to show progress against all learning outcomes within the module. Students are able to monitor and record their own perceived progress against key learning targets, and tutors can use the data to provide targeted support.

The RVC is on the cusp of Approach Three with the MSc in Veterinary Education: for the teaching observation, students are asked to prepare a plan for a teaching session with all supporting materials, to video themselves delivering the teaching session and to write a critical analysis of the video. This is then submitted online and summative feedback is given by Skype. This activity shows an innovative approach to solving the problem of observation in a remote situation, but in order to fit within Approach Three, it could be revised to include formative, peer-assessed or collaborative elements.

There could very well be other examples of Approach Three innovative practice happening within the BLE, which may come to light.

4. MOOCs

MOOCs are special cases of DL courses. They are not included in the Model outlined above primarily because they sit outside the assessment and accreditation requirements for qualifications and degrees that govern regular university DL programmes. As such, they are freed from the rigours of summative assessment. However, the novelty of MOOCs and rapid changes in what they are, what they can be, and what they should be when administered by universities means they need to be watched.

The very nature of their 'massive' and 'open' status makes the typical challenges of administering DL courses pale into insignificance by comparison. MOOC course design is tested by size, student range and global reach. Most MOOCs use basic multiple choice online tests to provide assessment, whether as formative 'self-check' mechanisms, or as the summative test at the end of the course to assign 'pass' or 'fail'. Automation is key for managing the numbers and providing uniformity of result.

When it does occur in MOOCs, activity-based formative assessment and interaction are generally peer-to-peer due to the sheer impracticality of tutor-student interaction. A large online discussion forum space is a standard feature.

Forms of assessment in BLE institution MOOCs are somewhat constrained by what is available in the system being used. University of London International Programmes (ULIP) offers MOOCs via the Coursera platform, which provides feedback through a range of assessment formats:

- In-video questions (lightweight, ungraded questions presented within a video lecture)

- Discussion prompts (discussion questions formatted as content items within a specific lesson; learners can respond to the prompt, read others' comments, and continue the conversation in the discussion forums)
- Quizzes (supporting a range of question types including multiple choice, numerical response, and text response)
- Peer-graded assignments (open-ended assignments in which learners grade one another's work according to a rubric provided by the instructor)
- Programming assignments (machine-graded assignments that require learners to submit computer code)

In "Paragogy and flipped assessment: experience of designing and running a MOOC on research methods", Yen Lee and J. Simon Rofe set out some original alternatives to current thinking on MOOC course structure and assessment. The course described in the paper is the product of a partnership between SOAS, providing academic expertise, and UoLIA, providing investment and project management, in liaison with Coursera as the platform operator.

The course is structured around a series of e-activities essential to learning research methods, each of which has a stated purpose, task, response and outcome. The course is based on a peer-led constructivist approach incorporating assessment for learning. Forums, central to self-reflection and peer support, were initially led by tutors but with 60,000 students, trained volunteer community mentors became essential. Small group discussions initiated by students used Google hangouts.

A community of learners developed where students tried things out with their peers before submission (flipped assessment model). This model drew on elements of 'paragogy' (learning alongside peers) and the IR approach (intellectual reflection) that acknowledges and exploits peer learning. The course design moved away from 'talking heads' prevalent in MOOCs to recordings of researchers 'in conversation'. The course thus provided learning opportunities that are not routinely captured by 'completion' metrics.

In general, there is a wide variety of methods of assessment taking place in BLE distance learning courses. The context of the courses is extremely varied, particularly in terms of student numbers and governing regulations. The assessment model may become a helpful tool to understand other DL courses in the BLE and determine ways to raise Approach One courses into the Approach Two level, or whether to plan for more extensive re-design in the aim to reach Approach Three.

II. Issues and Opportunities

The overall impression we gathered in our investigation was one of desire for change and improvement but a recognition of the difficulties and frustrations of actually implementing change. The complex web of relationships between the BLE institutions and the University of London can lead to both opportunities for and obstacles to change.

This section includes the opinions and experiences of staff working within the institutions, and our observations on those perspectives, leading to recommendations. In the interest of anonymity to protect respondents, names and institutional affiliations have been omitted.

Not surprisingly, there are a number of common concerns across all the BLE, and these have been brought together under specific category headings:

- Communications and sharing: across and within institutions
- Skills, support and training: technical and online learning
- Assessment and activity design: aligning assessments to good learning design
- Cost and resource: including time and manpower
- Authenticity and identity: addressing verification and plagiarism
- Technology and access: including complexity of systems and internet access by students around the world
- Course size and student profile: how these affect course design and assessment
- Attitudes toward DL and online learning within colleges

1. Issues

Generalised here as ‘issues’, these experiences and views reflect the frustrations, problems and concerns around assessment of staff currently working in DL in the BLE institutions.

Institutional communication and sharing

‘Siloing’ is a key problem for many of the institutions, in that there is a relative lack of sharing of ideas, resources and practice especially between institutions, but even within them. One institution described how there is little knowledge sharing across departments, and there appears to be no central role for overseeing, or even just being aware of, DL courses or practices within those courses. Even where intra-institutional communications and oversight are present, the sharing of practice between institutions is limited.

Skills, support and training

Most of the institutions in the review remarked about skills gaps in both students and teaching staff and the difficulty of training and supporting remote students, tutors and off-site markers. Of concern are both general technical abilities and those skills specific to using course technologies and working/learning in an online environment.

Assessment and activity design

Assessment design is (or should be!) intrinsically linked to course design. One of the problems and frustrations we encountered was a recognition amongst staff that many DL courses suffer from their legacy as ‘correspondence’ courses and need to be updated to benefit from more learner-centred design and take advantage of online tools -- to move from their position in Approach One into Approach Two, if not to be redesigned completely as Approach Three courses

Others expressed a dissatisfaction with the way e-learning is experienced online and the difficulty of navigating around the course website and locating activities.

Taking into consideration access to technology (see below), there can be a conflict between designing rich, activity-based online learning and making learning accessible to international students in the field or in areas with poor internet reliability.

There is also a frustration that despite efforts to develop engaging activities, a number of students do not participate.

Development cost & resource

Following on from the previous point, creating engaging assessments and activities is labour-intensive and calls for certain expertise that may not be already in the skill set of the staff. There may also be additional costs associated with development of such materials. The cost areas affected are:

- budget
- time
- manpower

These are the three areas that are generally already in short supply in higher education.

That said, the existing assessment regimes, particularly for managing summative assessment, are very labour-intensive, and respondents expressed a need for new systems that streamline processes.

Candidate authenticity and identity

Common to all the institutions is the concern for authenticity in the assessment practice in DL, particularly when moving to online assessment. The ability to verify identity and have confidence that the work submitted was indeed produced by the student being assessed are fundamental issues. It is of high importance that the colleges and the University retain their reputation as degree-granting institutions with high standards. Plagiarism, cheating, false identity all potentially undermine the value of that degree.

Course size and student profile

A wide variation in the number and demography of students in DL courses is a common challenge. Some issues are addressed in other headings in this section, such as available technology and internet access in countries across the globe, but there are many other factors that make it difficult to serve a large, dispersed student population, including: culture, language, age, life experience, career level, time zone and sheer numbers. In many cases, this situation extends to tutors and markers, who may also be widely dispersed.

Technology and access

Internet and data security are a concern amongst technology specialists. Some expressed the worry that too many people have access to sensitive data.

Others who administer the courses find the assessment technology has 'glitches' or is not completely fit for purpose, in some cases having been developed without understanding the learner experience or the needs of those giving feedback or marking.

Another issue, related to student profile (above), is the availability and type of technology and internet access for students in other parts of the world. The prevalence of mobile devices and relative lack of desktop computers makes online learning that is not optimized for small screens difficult -- sometimes impossible -- to use. Similarly, unreliable and slow connection speeds can

hamper the ability of students in remote areas or who need to work in the field from accessing their courses.

A proliferation of different online systems across the University and colleges, many of which are not interoperable, creates a drain on resource, time and personnel. In some cases, it can also create a dangerous reliance on the individual(s) who built the systems. In one college, there is only one person who can maintain a complex, homemade assessment management system. If he or she is absent for any reason, there is no safety net.

Attitudes

Some staff members witness a lingering attitude in departments or colleges that DL is considered a lower priority or less worthy than traditional on-campus learning, which leads to under-resourcing as well as low morale.

Other attitude problems are apparent with colleagues who remain sceptical about the value of online learning more generally. This can also drain morale and continually undermine attempts to expand online offerings and to innovate.

2. Opportunities & Recommendations

‘Opportunities’ here includes the views of those working in DL as well as the cross-college commonalities and possible ways forward that we identified. Some of this takes the form of observation together with some suggestions and recommendations for change.

Institutional communication and sharing

The BLE is a solid start to sharing practice and resources. Similar initiatives could be established with the aim of building up assessment design skills across programmes and institutions. The expertise displayed by staff running innovative courses, as seen in Approach Three, could become the basis for hands-on practical workshops on formative assessment design, which could take as their guide *The Assessment Toolkit* (see below).

Other DL courses may be using innovative practice in BLE Institutions, but these were not apparent in our investigations. A job role that includes developing a clear overview of DL across the piece would provide the foundation for dissemination and sharing.

Skills, support and training

Support and training in courseware and online learning for both staff and participants (students) is frequently an afterthought to any kind of online learning in any sector. It’s the factor most often under-planned and under-resourced, but which causes so many problems for the success of programmes. One benefit to centralising key systems is the ability to centralise training on that system (see below).

One of the more significant developments around supporting students in online learning is coming from UoLIA, who are adopting an approach to surround courses with dedicated student support teams. This has the benefit of providing a reliable first point of contact for any problem a student is facing, performing triage and then finding the right mechanism to get the specific support needed. This avoids the common problem of students barraging their tutors with technical problems and

questions about extraneous issues such as exam policies, etc., leaving the tutors to concentrate on learning.

An idea to address the need for more general skills associated with learning online is to expand on RVC's pre-study, orientation style mini-MOOCs for prospective students to give them time become acquainted with the specific technologies used in the full course. These can also address library use, academic writing and a wide range of other skills students will need before they start the course. Postgraduates require many of these same skills and, particularly, need to familiarise themselves with the culture and workings of the institution they are entering.

Similar attention should be paid to training and supporting staff in all areas of online learning: courseware technology, learning technologies and media (i.e., video) , online tutoring and facilitation, assessment design.

One thing to keep in mind is that training and support are not the same thing. Training is proactive: it involves defining lessons and actions that build toward a particular goal (i.e., learning how to use the online system). Support is reactive: it steps in to address questions, problems or needs expressed by the user. Training is a visible provision, while support, with its ad hoc nature, is not so visible. Unless participants complain about not getting support, the deficiency can go unnoticed.

Assessment and activity design

Certainly an overhaul of existing courses to update the assessment and activity design is a labour-intensive and time-consuming job (see below). However, with the relaxing of strict exam regulations announced by the University earlier this year, we recommend that colleges undertake a review of assessment in their DL courses with a view toward increasing formative assessment and student interaction. This is already happening in some of the colleges and should be extended across the board.

Many new opportunities are opened up by the change in assessment policy, but caution is also required in order to avoid overwhelming students and tutors with a raft of exciting, new but unnecessary assessment activities that mainly serve to increase workload. Rather than adding more formative assessments into an already rigorous course, it is better to replace work done one way with work done another. Scaffolded assignments are a good way to shift existing appropriate workload towards sensible deadlines and timely support and intervention.

Where there is already high quality feedback using traditional methods, a shift to electronic delivery should not erode quality, but this would need to be monitored and supported while staff become accustomed to change.

UoLIA and some colleges are planning for or already bringing in progress tracking, and there is discussion underway about introducing peer assessment.

Generic activity templates for various types of formative assessment, complete with mapping to learning objectives, could be developed for use and reuse across the BLE. These would save time and provide guidance for course developers and tutors. As a starting point for this, the *Assessment Toolkit* detailed below has a table illustrating a mapping of different assignments against learning objects.

The Assessment Toolkit

A significant piece of work that should have wide application across the university was published last year. *The Assessment Toolkit* (2015), co-authored by Claire Gordon, Jane Hughes and Colleen McKenna for the University, was designed to support the review and redesign of existing courses as well as the development of new ones for ULIP. The toolkit does not preference particular assessment methods and offers a thought provoking tool for reflection.

The toolkit is built on the principles that assessment should be valid, reliable, fair and inclusive. The first table provides a comprehensive breakdown of how assessment tasks might fit learning outcomes in courses. Sections on assessment design that reduces misconduct are helpful.

Use of a range of assessment methods is then detailed. This included: bibliographies, blogs, computer based assessments, essays, MCQS, oral presentations, policy papers, portfolio, posters short answer questions and other online assessment activities.

When considering combining assessment methods, many factors such as accessibility, scalability, and range of feedback formats are considered and a useful mapping exercise is set out. The Masters in Global Diplomacy, SOAS is used as a case study for this.

Marking and feedback are reviewed in detail and questions are offered to allow reflection on the approaches that course designers might use. The appendices offer a comprehensive list of other similar resources.

Our recommendation is that this resource should be considered essential reading, and efforts should be made to support staff in using the guide to improve the formative assessment in their DL courses.

Development cost and resource

Shared practice can reduce costs and resource. In addition to utilising the templates in the *Assessment Toolkit*, the BLE could provide a central bank or library of activity designs, technology, video clips and other plans, tools and materials, which can prevent the ubiquitous problem of 'reinventing the wheel' for every new course or module. Commonalities of virtual learning environment (VLE) platform across institutions can reduce the workload on support staff and shared resources (see below). Content, module plans, instructional design tools (i.e., learning objective maps, etc) that build on the Toolkit exemplars can save course director and tutor time through duplication in development.

UoLIA's Track C framework and assessment mapping tools also appears to offer a productive way forward for new courses, whereas existing courses could benefit from ad hoc sharing and combining efforts as discussed above.

Implementing sensible systems for online delivery and management of summative assessment could ease the workload for staff who are currently burdened by this problem. That, in turn could free up time to work at increasing formative assessment.

Candidate authenticity and identity

Ways to combat fraud and cheating are being researched within the institutions, and if there isn't one already, it would be worth putting together a task force to explore the latest tools and services for assessment, building on the suggestions in the Toolkit.

This problem has, in the past, been a legitimate obstacle for wholesale adoption of online assessment, but that is no longer the case: a number of companies have stepped into the void to provide validation services and administer safe exams online (such as ProctorExam, Software Secure, and Assessment Systems for Good Measure, etc) Whether or not the University and/or BLE institutions wish to buy in a service, they need to understand new opportunities to administer secure assessments.

Course size and student profile

According to respondents, there is some indication that DL student enrolments are up in BLE member institutions. With this positive development, it will be important to prepare for scaling courses for greater numbers and accommodating the variation in student populations. Lessons may be learned from the experience of running MOOCs (below), and some solutions to problems with technology may be addressed by using more ubiquitous online systems. Moreover, assessments can be designed and modified to fit the needs of the students.

Student needs can be monitored through requesting frequent feedback that targets particular issues and by implementing technical data collection and analysis tools within the courseware (i.e., page views, statistics).

Technology and access

Technology design should be user-focused, with design and testing performed in collaboration with representatives of all user groups: students, tutors, markers, admin staff, etc. Some institutions are using online forums to provide a platform for student voice, which is a good step forward. The tension between standardisation and individual needs is ever-present and seems to make compromise a constant. However, there may be times when the apparent drivers for needs are more about tradition or arcane policy than about true necessity. In (re-)designing systems, it is worth getting to the root of anything that surfaces as a conflicting need to see whether

- it is really driven by absolute necessity
- it can't be accomplished by a completely new approach
- another college or department has solved a similar problem

If there is effective technology available that is underused (i.e., Grademark, audio feedback, web conferencing, etc), efforts could be made to encourage use through workshops and one-to-one advice sessions.

In the case of multiple systems for assessment and marking, simplification and standardisation, wherever possible, would increase efficiency, save costs and decrease demands on staff. It also allows training and support materials and regimes to be centralised and shared across the university. It ensures greater capacity for support and maintenance by increasing the number of staff (or external support communities) who understand the system and avoids colleges being left paralysed by the loss of a single staff member.

We recommend that development or buying-in of individualised technology with limited application be phased out except in very specialised circumstances.

Attitudes

There is no absolute solution to the problem of poor attitudes to online or distance learning. In either case, the fight tends to be against a retrenched conservatism rather than a specific foe that can be attacked head on. There are only three approaches that seem to have any effect, and -- ideally -- they will be employed simultaneously:

- tireless 'hearts & minds' campaigns that continually show off good practice, good results and high standards;
- buy-in from people in high places who can lend their power, authority and standing to the work;
- attrition: the world is changing in the direction of more remote and online learning. Those who object will increasingly be out-voted, converted or retired.

MOOCs

MOOCs can be the agents of change (whether embraced with eagerness or dragged with reluctance) for more traditional DL programmes. The SOAS/UoLIA course outlined by Yen Lee and Simon Rofe shows that MOOCs have the capacity to provide a testing ground for innovation. If interactivity and peer feedback can work with massive student numbers, they can work in a typical DL course.

One word of caution, however: when MOOCs are used as tasters or marketing tools to increase enrolment in full courses, the student experience in that MOOC will affect the expectations of students who go on to take the full DL course. Any innovations introduced to make the MOOC engaging, such as variety in formative assessment, will be accepted by the students as a true reflection of the full course to come. To retain student satisfaction, the full course will need to carry through the experience of the MOOC.

Conclusion

In this report, we have frequently moved beyond a strict adherence to the topic of assessment to include wider issues of DL and even online learning more generally. This is due to the fact that assessment, when approached effectively, is intricately entwined with other aspects of learning: assessment is itself an aspect of learning. Moreover, the issues and opportunities we identified and explored through the filter of assessment and technology are common to the wider picture of online learning. *Assessment* for learning is part and parcel of *design* for learning.

While we don't claim to have silver bullets to address the issues or solve the problems identified by BLE DL staff, we hope that this report and the opportunities we suggest may provide an objective viewpoint that shows up common ground between institutions, affirms individual perceptions and experiences and provides some new ways of looking at assessment in distance learning.

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