

Why change assessment? Understanding more about lecturers' attitudes towards innovative assessment.

The Towards Learning Creatively (TLC) project initiated in October 2004 and based in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism aims to support lecturers in developing more inclusive modes of assessment. In order to understand more about students and lecturers' experiences with assessment the TLC team undertook their first phase of qualitative (constructivist) and quantitative (positivist) research during year one of the project. Staff and student focus groups were held at three universities involved in the project in 2005 and an audit was conducted of over 250 assessments on five undergraduate courses at the same three universities.

The emergent themes from the focus groups were further explored during a TLC Steering Group meeting and the TLC project team collaborated in prioritising key areas for further research. The research design adopted by the team followed a flexible approach with the research questions emerging from themes identified by research in year one. In year two the team decided investigate further, lecturers' attitudes towards assessment. The focus was on lecturers who had already made some changes to their assessments with the intention of gaining an insight into these lecturers' experiences and opinions. Again a constructivist approach was considered the most appropriate research paradigm.

The study aimed to investigate lecturer's attitudes to assessment at two different levels. Firstly, qualitative semi structured interviews were conducted with seven lecturers who had made changes to their assessments and written reflective case studies for the project during the previous year. In addition telephone interviews based on similar research questions were conducted with an Educational Developer and a Head of Department at each of the universities involved with the TLC project, in order to investigate their understanding of assessment practice within HLST. All these interviews were either face-to-face or telephone interviews.

The research questions were adapted to fit the different research participants (see Annex A for table containing research questions)

The analysis examines the narratives to look for emerging themes. The discussion combines views from the two different sets of participants in this study.

Coding of Heads of Department and Education Developers at different H.E.I.'s

HEI	Code	Job Title	Background experience
1	A (Ed Dev)	Education and Staff Developer	4 Years experience, 50% of role. Also PGCTLE, M Ed and support, PG Cert. Induction workshops, online academic support group
1	B (HOD)	Associate Dean Enhancement	10 Years. 4 main roles L&T, advanced scholarship, staff development and quality but the quality is 70% of the job.
2	C (HOD)	Head of Teaching and Learning	Range of responsibilities
2	D (Ed Dev)	Head of Services Sector Management	Has worked in 5 south Eng HEIs.

Lecturers who have worked for the TLC project have not been identified individually.

Results of the interviews with Education Developers, Heads of Department and lecturers

1. What is your understanding of the FDTL5 TLC project?

(Education Developers and Heads of Department)

HEI (1)

ED (A) HOD (B) had a general understanding and awareness of the TLC project.
ED (A) *"Its about creative assessment, non and partly written to give students the best opportunity of success.*

HOD (B) *" Its called unleashing creativity, you have two partners, £250,000 to encourage non written assessment and geared at dyslexia".*

HEI (2)

HOD (C)

"I am a bit hazy... as I understand it its about assessing students more creatively. I am really interested we have a lot of international students here, when English Lang is important we give marks for it, but there are many other ways of assessing them not dependent on language.

ED (D)" its about exploring methods of assessing without using the written word".

There was some awareness of the TLC project but this was quite limited at HEI (2), although they did see the relevance of the project to their institution

1a. What motivated you to become involved in the TLC project?

(Lecturers)

Lecturers who had been partners or buddies had become involved in the project for a variety of reasons. Initially many buddies had been motivated by the enthusiasm of the Project Director who was described as *"approachable"*, *"a known quantity"* and *"easy to work with"*. Other themes centred on:

Linking with employers

Partners saw the benefits of the TLC project in terms of linking with employers,

"It is good for academics to do partnership work with organisations".

Recognising benefits to students

They also saw the benefits to their students of diverse assessments. It helped students by offering them an *"appropriate assessment"* that matched their needs. For instance for events management students it is not always appropriate to set an exam, when their skills and competencies can be tested in other ways. Sometimes changes were made due to feedback from lecturers about the traditional nature of assessments and therefore changes were made that *"suited the unit"*. Other lecturers were new to lecturing and *"wanted to be creative from the start"*.

Professional Development

Developing professionally was also important and the project has helped one partner gain confidence in using diverse assessments thus enabling them to “*challenge colleagues about the way they assess*”. Some lecturers had a particular expertise in pedagogy or a research interest in assessment issues surrounding dyslexia, which they were able to bring to the project initially. They were bringing their knowledge and experience to the project and in return there were personal benefits to them such as a reduction in teaching hours, or gaining experience that could be added to a c.v.

There was a passion for “*getting it right.*” it was also highlighted that “*teaching, learning and assessment are important*”.

2. What is your understanding about the general nature of assessment in your subject area? (HSLT). (Educational Developers/Heads of Department

HEI (1)

Both the ED and HOD had little knowledge of what type of assessments took place within their departments.

ED (A) “*I would hope they are not doing too many written assessments and exams. Don't know. Because of the nature of the subject I would expect assessment to be more innovative. Also practical because of the coaching units.*”

HOD (B) “*I don't have a lot of involvement*” “*I don't feel part of the school, its hard to say*”. They were not able to provide many concrete examples.

At HEI (2)

HOD (c) . “*I'd say this subject area is quite advanced in more flexible learning and assessment. Especially through functions in hospitality and event management in leisure. As a subject area we have been doing this for a long time. Sometimes other subject areas say they are doing innovative things but we have been doing them for much longer. We are doing much more than just marking presentations.*” The HOD appeared enthusiastic about diverse assessment and felt the subject area was ahead of others in this respect. They recognised the benefits, but acknowledged that it is difficult for student to excel in all areas,

“*the trouble is that few people can excel in all three areas so the marks tend to merge at a mid point of 50 or 60. Some people are not very good at writing but the excel at managing and communicating.*”

ED (D) said it was difficult to be specific. “*What comes to mind is a very varied and a wide range of methods*”.

2a. What is your understanding about the general nature of assessment in your subject areas? (lecturers)

Sports Science/Sports and Leisure lecturers

“There is a reasonable variance, although exams and written work dominate It is fairly diverse – they have broken away from tradition – use video streaming.” (Sports Science).

“Lots of the units are practical e.g. ‘Dragons Den’ and this relates to how students would have to operate in the real world.” (Sports Science)

“I think in our area in Sport and Leisure we tend to have a bit more diversity around the margins of the traditional core assessment, we perhaps try more diverse assessment, but I can’t prove that, it is just a feeling”

Marketing

Marketing assessment is half an exam, half is presentations, I have got rid of a lot of written work, there are a lot of formative assessment..... Marketing lends itself more readily to examinations.”

Tourism

In this lecturer’s department it is changing all the time. Staff are open to new ideas and want to know what students want. There is a concern over plagiarism with written work and using visual methods can help ameliorate this, as students can’t access it anywhere else. There is a lot of experiential work, reflections and synthesis with theory. There is a lot of freedom to try new things out at this HEI. Lecturers have to take responsibility that if things go wrong the students are not disadvantaged. There are a lot of support mechanisms at this HEI.

Events Management

“.It seems fairly dependent on the subject areas as to whether there is much innovative assessment. . Sports/Arts/Leisure areas are still fairly traditional. They don’t produce many very academic students who go on to further study.

Summary

All the buddies/partners were aware of diverse assessments within their subject areas, although in some cases written work still dominated, with one partner commenting that there were areas of ‘diversity around the margins of core assessment.’ It was also highlighted that lecturers try to get a balance of assessment. One partner considered Sports/Leisure and the Arts to be fairly traditionally assessed, whereas other subject areas (Tourism) contained a lot of “experimental work, reflections and synthesis with theory.” Where assessment was perceived to be diverse, it was noted that the HEI was supportive to lecturers and there “was a lot of freedom to try new things out.”

The assessment of students can be influenced by the universities corporate plans and changes in senior management can affect priorities within institutions

3. Are you aware of any good practice in innovative assessments in your dep/fac/school? (HODs and Ed Dev)

In HEI (1)

The ED (A) talked about a unit in their subject area that was completely based on problem based learning, but stated *"I don't really know what everyone else does"*.

The HOD (B) did not know of any innovatory units *"off the top of my head"*, but felt a move away from exams was a *"good trend"* as they promote surface learning. He stated that there are attempts to reduce the length of exams and dissertations and that some units are over assessed. He pointed out that some subjects e.g. accountancy, content is driven by professional bodies.

HEI (2)

The ED (C) found this a difficult question to answer. They do a lot of group work and don't have a much written work. Although this is different and innovative, he is not sure whether it is really innovative. *People are moving forward on the formative front, we are plugging learning and the use of technology.* They are using technology and moving towards Blackboard IT based assessment. Lecturers are sceptical of non written assessment, no one is saying, *"I've found this new assessment."*

The HOD (D) mentioned 'events' as an example of good practice where They *"allow students to integrate what they have learnt from across the course, a bit like the integrating functions of the old BTEC units."* There was also a consultancy project in the final year where students work in groups and do presentations to industry as well as a dissertation *"it gives students another set of skills"*.

3a. Are you aware of any good practice in innovative assessments in your dep/fac/school? (Lecturers)

Lecturers were all aware of good practice in innovative assessments taking place in their departments. These included video streaming, oral methods, debates, practical assessments with sports development (Leadership and event organisation), vivas, running events, involving people with disabilities in assessment, PASS, Story Board, scrapbooks (all related to industry), posters, portfolios, negotiated assessment and concept mapping.

Research proposals, pitches of events in level 2, pitches – level 3 for a fictitious conference, and they bring in industry, Viva – masters 25%, Peer Assessment with a mark that counts, self assessment in different forms.

One buddy felt isolated in not being involved in team teaching. He was aware of colleagues running innovative assessments and thought colleagues *"brave and ambitious"*.

A staff development teaching and learning conference at one HEI run has led to people picking up on what they are doing. For example, there is a plan for the business school to do one assessment where a business and marketing plan is done as a poster.

Apart from concrete examples of good practice, the point was made that small changes are also valid. Incremental change can result in innovation. *'Changes are not always innovation at this HEI but it might be in for a larger environment.'*

It is interesting that sometimes Education developers interviewed had little awareness of good practice in their department, whereas the lecturers were able to give numerous examples. The point was also highlighted that some lecturers were still sceptical about 'innovative assessments'. Perhaps there is more work to be done on convincing the 'doubters'.

4. Why do you think some lecturers change how they assess? (ED and HODs)

HEI (1)

ED. (A) She felt she wanted to teach her subject in a more exciting way. The more she learnt about assessment theory, the more confident she became and was able to make changes.

HOD (B). The two main reasons mentioned were, to reduce marking and because of the pressure from line managers. B Considered the drivers behind change were university culture and internal league tables. Sometimes lecturers see how other faculties have different assessments and this makes them think about changing, but there are those people who do not like change. Minor modifications made to assessments need to be tracked.

HEI (2)

ED (C). Considered new technology as being a driver for change with people looking to be more time efficient and more exams to reduce plagiarism. Pedagogic drivers are PG certs, MAs, and staff development.

HOD (D) considered this was really about what drives change. Lecturers are driven by improving student learning and exciting students to perform. They are also '*unleashing potential*, and "*allowing us to get away from the slavery of assessment*". He also added that again there are people who don't want to change. There are lecturers who "*may have tried many different types of things and found this works best for them*".

4a. Why do you think some lecturers change how they assess? (Lecturers)

Lecturers mentioned the following reasons for changing the way they assess:

- Multiple choice exams don't encourage deep learning
- To meet and respond to the needs of the students,
- Constructive alignment, lecturers can see the relevance of it to students.
- Get good feedback from students and see academic rigour is not compromised
- Motivates and engages students, can be fun
- Can be quick to assess, "free up time"
- Innovative assessment can prepare students for industry (employability)
- People want to change to be "more creative".
- By seeing others change, they follow the guidelines and try it out for themselves.
- Intrinsic satisfaction of seeing students doing well and developing.
- Regulations dictate change.

- PGCert L & T exposes new lecturers to pedagogic principles.
- Culture within the HEI that encourages change and development, “*dynamic shifting teaching environment*”. If staff who have responsibility for Learning and Teaching Development and expertise to support staff who want to make changes.

5. How do we encourage lecturers to be more innovative? (Eds and HODs)

In HEI (1)

The ED felt that lecturers don't want to engage with the debate, “*I did this when I was a student and it was good enough for me.*” There is a fear that it will be more work and an awareness that helping students might mean an even higher workload. (barriers). There is a particular problem with part-time unit leaders.

HOD – thinks the CPD is important? (Jenny some confusing here over who is speaking)

In HEI (2)

The HPD felt it was better for big teams than one person units. The ED felt it was about sharing good practice and that it tends to be young staff coming into lecturing as they are engaged in different things.

5a. In what ways has being involved in this project impacted on the way you approach the assessment of students? (Partners/Buddies)

- **Increased awareness of assessment**

It has increased awareness of different ways to doing things and incorporating “*It has taken me away from my original thoughts which were very rigid and made me realise just how wide and creative you can be in assessment*”. She thinks more critically about what she wants to achieve from assessment.

- **Awareness of the balance of assessment.**

One partner looks at the assessment each year and checks the students aren't being over assessed and that there is a balance between written and non written and that the hand in times are spread evenly through out the year.

- **Increased awareness of students needs.**

She listens to the feedback from students – some say ‘it is the best module they have ever taken’. Developed an awareness of students’ needs and an appreciation that students need a variety of assessment

- **Increased awareness of pedagogic underpinning to innovative assessment**

Increased confidence meant this partner could challenge herself and other people, because of the literature and evidence and because it is a HEFCE national funded project

“my understanding of teaching and assessment theory has greatly improved I am able to give better arguments now. Why should I change, I can come up with good theory with my colleagues “

- **Implementing Changes**

“For me, personally I have changed some unit assessments, specifications for new units as we have just validated some new units And also made some changes to some existing units. “

- **Fear of change**

One partner felt that there was a fear surrounding changing assessments. There is pressure from external examiners, you don't want to have a high-risk unit and what has worked in the past need you to be pragmatic, can't be too idealistic.

6. How do you think more innovative assessment patterns impact on student performance? (HODs Eds)

HEI (1)

ED, *“You have to be careful that you don't have too many different types of assessment going on so it gets too fragmented. You have to make sure it makes horizontal and vertical sense”.*

HOD, There is no data so its hard to make informed judgements. I did two degrees and I just did exams which were memory driven. The only time it all made sense to me was about 6 weeks before. I remember it clearly. Now it is more flexible and integrated so it should be much better.

HEI (2)

I've absolutely no idea. (is this both people?)

6a. What impact have the changes in assessment made to your students? (lecturers)

Confidence/motivation/engaging

It has increased confidence, motivation, encourages them to read around the subject e.g. for orals. They find it more interesting and engaging and relevant. *“It is easy to motivate them, as relevant to their career”.* (Partner).

“This year the poster and leaflet assessment led to students have greater motivation and they came up to her with ideas and there was positive feedback. It has made it hard work but fun for most students.” (Partner)

Improved performance

“Their enthusiasm is up and there is an improvement in performance. The average marks are higher. Event Management is a new module and the marks are higher than average in the department. Other modules are also higher and the students are performing better.” (Partner)

Better prepared for industry

“It prepares students for industry, real life situations, they have to think on their feet and respond by being more innovative in their learning.” (Partner

Negative impact on students

Some students don't like creative assignments,
Not all students enjoy it as some find it a challenge.
Some students find the presentations nerve wracking,
Some students don't engage with it and buy into it, they don't get organised in time.
They want people to tell them what to do.

7. How effective do you feel staff development is in this area, and can you provide examples? (HODs EDs)

HEI (1)

The ED (A) felt the PG Cert in T & L for new lecturers can be effective in encouraging to lecturers to look at their assessments. They gave an example of a lecturer taking on peer assessment and encouraging others to do the same (link with informal social networks research being effective). There was a warning about the 'scatter gun effect' and moving too quickly without understanding the impact of the changes and difficulty getting people to engage.

HOD (B) feels a team project will be more likely to have an impact than one person on their own. University teaching fellows had some marginal impact but it is hard to tell (how do you measure – any research?). There is a need to get staff to look outside and have things to compare to us (Jenny this might be C) He thinks the PG Cert has an impact and that mentoring schemes would be a good idea. The challenge will be to get accountants to do something different.

HEI (2)

HOD (D) said they run weekly sessions for staff, so there are opportunities available, but it tends to be 'preaching to the converted'. People are driven by the need to be time efficient and the majority of lecturers believe in traditional ways of assessing and are concerned about losing the traditional skills of graduates.

7a. How should we support lecturers who want to develop more innovative assessment? (lecturers)

Provide theoretical underpinning

It is useful to know there is theory to support the learning – papers justifications – one partner felt he could approach team for reference sources.

Ideas for sharing good practice

Let people share assessments in a non-threatening atmosphere. It is very difficult to explain it in writing.

Put lecturers on a super unit where they feel really involved but with no responsibility and they are encouraged to be really creative – a chance to breath. Once we are accountable creativity doesn't flourish. Share resources rather than reinventing the wheel each time. Good to have a bank of assessments

Booklet on assessment.

Produce a benchmark of ideas in a booklet or a list of examples of different forms of assessment. They can be shown to people – have a read – this is what we have done and sometimes you need inspiration and then you can develop your own from these guidelines.

Workshops

“Formal workshops and informal sessions through colleagues or courses”. We need more face-to-face and materials”

Using technology

One partner suggested an electronic chat room. Learning outcomes could be posted and other lecturers could improve on them. Lecturers could discuss the positives and negatives.

Mentoring

Get experienced tutors to mentor less experienced. This could cross subject disciplines.

Lecturers need to be inspired. If they work on their own, then they need to take a workshop and work on the learning outcomes and the practicalities. When they don't have the confidence to assess creative work, they need a confidence boost – someone to hold their hand and provide practical support.

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