

Teaching and educational note

The use of on-line summative assessment in an undergraduate financial accounting course

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Abstract

According to the Quality Assurance Agency [QAA (2006). *Section 6: Assessment of students, Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. <<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/>>. Accessed 14.03.2007] “Assessment describes any processes that appraise an individual’s knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills” and is inextricably linked to a course or programme’s intended learning outcomes. Assessment also has a fundamental effect on students’ learning where it serves a variety of purposes including evaluation, feedback and motivation. Assessment also provides a performance indicator for both students and staff. Computer-aided assessment (CAA) offers an option for “sustainable assessment” and provides opportunities for creating innovative assessment practices that help engage students and increase their motivation for learning. This paper reports the findings of a qualitative study where a series of on-line summative assessments were introduced into a first-year financial accounting course. Feedback from students obtained from an evaluative survey and focus group interviews indicates that assessment played a significant role in the teaching/learning process. That is, students perceived a beneficial impact on learning, motivation, and engagement.

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1. Introduction

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International regards student learning as the central activity of higher education and considers the key features of any academic program to be the definition of learning expectations and assurance that graduates achieve these outcomes (AACSB, 2002). Assessment is aligned to a course or programme's intended learning outcomes and so is a means by which learning goals or expectations can be measured and monitored (Biggs, 1999). In the UK the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2006) describes assessment as "any processes that appraise an individual's knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills". Assessment, however, is not solely concerned with outcomes, goals or expectations as it has a fundamental affect on students' learning (QAA, 2006; Rowntree, 1987) and can be used to effectively promote learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2003). Vos (2000) sees assessment as providing feedback to many stakeholders: to the students on their learning process; to faculty managers on the achievement of learning outcomes; and to the teacher by indicating the steps to be taken in improving assessment, learning and teaching.

Assessment serves a variety of purposes, including evaluation, feedback, motivation, and student learning (QAA, 2006). The evaluation of student work provides a performance indicator (Knight, 2001), which can be used to inform progress or outcome decisions and helps to create productive instruction that leads to more effective learning. Feedback provides students with information that can promote their learning and improve their performance. It also provides teachers with information on their own effectiveness and success at promoting learning (Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 1997; Brown & Smith, 1999; Race, 1993). More recently, the AACSB (2007) reinforced the importance of assessment on teaching and learning: "...By measuring learning the school can evaluate its students' success at achieving learning goals, can use the measures to plan improvement efforts, and (depending on the type of measures) can provide feedback and guidance for individual students" (p. 60).

The importance of assessment on students' learning has been viewed as having a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor (Boud, 1988; Brown et al., 1997; Miller & Parlett, 1974; Snyder, 1971). Although assessment is seen as a significant prompt for learning (Boud, 1995) and an important service that teachers offer to their students (Race, 1995), it is not just about grades and feedback. Assessment is thought to develop in students a motivation and a commitment to learn (Rust, 2001, 2004).

Technological advancement has had a dramatic impact on the delivery and assessment of higher education courses with virtual learning environments (VLE) and computer-aided assessment (CAA) now being commonplace. However, Rebele et al. (1998) identified a lack of research evidence to provide guidance on the integration of technology in the curriculum and called for more research in this area to "explore how educational technology can contribute to the continuing evolution and improvement of accounting education... focussing on whether and in what context the application of the technology results in more effective and efficient learning" (p. 207). Similarly, Aisbitt and Sangster (2005) raised the concern that, whilst faculty are moving towards adopting e-learning strategies, "there is very little evidence that technology can be used successfully" (p. 383). In a review of the accounting literature from 2003 to 2005, Watson, Apostolou, Hassell, and Webber (2007) called for empirical studies into the effectiveness of using technology in accounting education.

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