Chapter XIII

E-Assessment: The Demise of Exams and the Rise of Generic Attribute Assessment for Improved Student Learning

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Abstract

This chapter explores five reasons for a reduced focus on exams by questioning their value and sustainability in the assessment of student learning. It suggests that exam grades cannot provide accruing developmental information about the students’ attributes and qualities vital for a changing world and workplace. It then argues for the integrated assessment of generic attributes (including those developed through exams) and describes two e-assessment tools developed by the author to facilitate this approach. These tools are based on the concept that assessment criteria should encompass the complete range of attributes and qualities that institutions proclaim their students will acquire. Given that assessment drives learning, explicit alignment between assessment tasks and criteria is essential. It is proposed by this chapter that the development of formative criteria (numerically valued) together with expert-derived criteria groups can facilitate students’ development of important qualities, or generic attributes at both school and tertiary levels of education.
Introduction

The term *generic attributes* used in this chapter (sometimes referred to as *graduate attributes*) is intended to incorporate a broad range of qualities that are often claimed by educational institutions describing those who complete their courses of study. It is broader than the terms *key skills*, *generic skills*, and *key competencies* often interchangeably used in this research area.

The reader may well ask why a senior lecturer teaching visual communication is writing about e-assessment and educational research. It may be wise to slip into first person for a paragraph at the beginning of this introduction to contextualize and validate the contribution that this chapter is attempting to make.

On entering university teaching, my knowledge of educational research was limited to a 1-year postgraduate teaching certificate. A 6-month secondment to the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), Centre for Learning and Teaching initiated my focus on research in this area. The realization that my background in information design and visual communication had something to bring to the design of learning environments led eventually to a research master’s in design education and the design and development of online assessment systems described in this chapter. I do not teach on an exam-based course but have worked for 15 years with colleagues that do so. It is not my intention here to present an in-depth study of exams as an assessment strategy but rather to provide powerful reasons and supporting references that may encourage greater questioning of the value and sustainability of exams in educational contexts. My reasons for encouraging the assessment of graduate attributes are based on a long association with criteria-based assessment. I believe that—in a rapidly changing world and workplace—students, staff, and employers need much more feedback about the development of graduate attributes. These are hidden or simply not assessed by exam-based summative approaches.

The first part of this chapter explores five reasons to question the value and sustainability of exams in formal educational contexts. The references used include educational research, a recent United States patent granted to Microsoft®, and studies on youth suicide.

The second part explores five reasons for the explicit integration of graduate attributes in curricula and assessment processes. The Australian government’s concern with the fact that graduate attributes publicized by universities were often not explicit in curricula or assessed in practice led them to initiate an independent Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA) test. This out-of-context approach is diametrically opposed to the integrated systems proposed in this chapter. A brief analysis of the GSA in this text concludes that whilst a great deal