

Widening participation for non-traditional students: can using alternative assessment methods level the playing field in higher education?

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Abstract This paper will explore and examine the notion and practice of using alternative assessments as a means to overcoming barriers to learning and success for under-represented groups, such as mature students returning to learning. Since widening participation initiatives began, many universities have begun to engage in practices that are conducive to their learners successfully accessing and achieving in higher education. The pedagogical practice of using alternative assessments for students who are considered to be at a disadvantage, not because of disability, but because of their background and affiliation with under-represented groups in higher education, may go some way to levelling the playing field.

Key words widening participation; alternative assessment; non-traditional student.

Introduction

Using alternative forms of assessments other than the traditional academic essay or exam, may go some way to levelling the playing field for students from under-represented groups, entering higher education (HE), and who may be considered as non-traditional learners. This practice is already well used in the area of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). If a learner has a special need that inhibits their learning, such as dyslexia, allowances can be made. This is referred to as ‘special educational provision’ (Hodkinson & Vickerman, 2009: 3). The type of provision will depend on the disability, and the learner’s needs, and may involve offering a different type of assessment - one that allows the learner to reach their potential without being disadvantaged by their condition.

However, other types of learners can be disadvantaged too. According to Burke, non-traditional students are often hesitant at re-entering the classroom

(2002) and this could be due to a lack of confidence in academic ability. Using alternative methods of assessment might be an effective approach for building confidence in learners while they acquire the academic writing skills needed in higher levels. In this paper, I will argue that many types of learners experience barriers to learning and, while we make special provision for learners of SEND, some learners have hidden disabilities that are not so obvious or easily supported. This paper will explore the pedagogical practice of using alternative assessments for students who are considered to be at a disadvantage, not because of disability, but because of their background and affiliation with under-represented groups in higher education. This is an important consideration for institutions and policymakers who are engaged in and committed to the widening participation agenda in higher education because, as Burke points out, ‘Widening access and participation is largely concerned with redressing the under-representation of certain social groups in higher education’ (2012: 12).

Mature students are considered to be an under-represented group in HE. They are a non-traditional type of learner as they will have had a break in their education, as opposed to progressing straight to HE from school. In addition, mature students tend to come from the lower socio-economic groups (David, 2010) and, historically, in the UK, social class has been a barrier to academic success. Widening participation enabled changes in policy and pedagogical practice to allow larger numbers of under-represented groups to enter and take part in higher education.

Non-traditional students in HE

Since widening participation initiatives began, many universities have begun to engage in practices that are conducive with their learners successfully accessing and achieving in higher education. Nottingham Trent University (NTU), for example, have produced an assessment guide that supports staff with designing assessments for inclusion. In it they provide examples of students who may find essay writing challenging. One such example is mature students ‘who have not been in formal education for a lengthy period of time’ (NTU, 2013: 4). NTU also allude to their ‘ethos of inclusion ... providing an enabling environment for all students’ (NTU, 2013: 1). What NTU strive to provide is a fully inclusive institution that enables all learners to achieve their potential, not just the ones who have a legal right to special educational

provision. Unlike traditional students, who progress straight from school or sixth form college, non-traditional, and especially mature students often arrive in HE without the already established and necessary study skills. Research conducted by David et al. found that, for some non-traditional students in their study, ‘not only did they lack preparation for university but also their previous experience of learning had in many cases been negative and undermining ... for the mature students their time away from academic study compounded their lack of self-confidence’ (David, 2010: 185-6). Hatt and Baxter’s research into students transitioning from further education to higher education suggests that ‘knowing the rules of the game distinguished the A Level entrants from the other groups’ (2003: 25). Traditional groups of learners tend to know what is expected of them, whereas non-traditional students are still learning the ‘rules of the game’. In addition, those rules may have changed since they were in education; therefore, learning what their lecturers require of them takes time and effort, from both students and institutions. In addition, Farenga discusses the ‘difficult transitions’ that widening participation students often have to deal with, including adapting to new social groups and being an independent learner (2018: 73).

Many different learners experience barriers to learning, not just those with recognised disabilities. As outlined above, these may range between adapting to new groups, acquiring the necessary study skills and over-coming negative previous experiences of learning. As David (2010) points out, for mature students having had a break – sometimes a lengthy one – in their education, not only does this have implications for their academic performance, but also on their levels of self-confidence. In addition, and according to Burke (2002), some may also have had negative past educational experiences that make them reluctant to re-enter the classroom. Crossan, Field, Gallacher, and Merrill note that:

‘Non-traditional learners becoming involved in formal learning are often (if not always) initially tentative about engaging in the process. Their previous life experiences have often given them little confidence about engaging in the process of learning, and indeed in some cases will have resulted in hostility towards educational institutions’ (2003: 58).

Non-traditional students are those who come from social groups that traditionally have not participated in higher education in large numbers. They are also known as under-represented groups. Taylor and House (2010: 46)

explain that under-represented groups are ‘those with no family history of HE experience, from low participation neighbourhoods, socio-economically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities’. Mature students are also considered to be non-traditional because of the break in education and returning to learn in later life. David (2010) comments that mature students also tend to be from the working class, or as Taylor and House (2010) assert ‘socio-economically disadvantaged’. Coming from a low socio-economic status group also has implications on educational achievement. Reay (1997: 552) asserts that ‘working class identities are not associated with academic success’, and this is because, historically, the working class did not participate in higher education. Crozier, Reay and Clayton (cited in David, 2010: 74) have noted that ‘Universities traditionally have not been places for the working class’. Working class people tended to leave school and go to work. If they did not participate in higher education it was out of the economic necessity to find a job. However, the implications of this situation has meant that ‘working class people may not think they are eligible for opportunities to achieve because of their internalised assumptions that certain opportunities are “not for the likes of them”’ (Bowl, 2003: 129). This may explain why it has been difficult for some universities to recruit from the low socio-economic groups (BIS, 2010). Paton (2007) points out that the decision not to participate in higher education, or a process of self-exclusion ‘accounts for a higher proportion of elimination’ (cited in Burke 2012: 40).

It seems then that non-traditional students may be disadvantaged on several levels. First, they may belong to a social class that is not synonymous with educational success, and possibly possess internalised assumptions about what they can and cannot achieve; second, they may have had a break in education as opposed to progressing straight from school which has implications on their preparedness; third, research into this student group (Burnell, 2015) has shown that they may well have had negative past educational experiences, usually at school, and this has already labelled them as failures, before they even arrive at university. All of these disadvantages may mean that they have the added problem of lacking in confidence and self-esteem (David, 2010; Crossan et al., 2003). Given these factors, it is reasonable to argue that not all students enter higher education on a level playing field; some are extremely disadvantaged compared with others.

Overcoming barriers and challenges to learning

Much research has been conducted into the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education (Reay, 2001; Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2009; Burke, 2002; Taylor & House, 2010; Pearce, 2017; Hatt & Baxter, 2003; David, 2010; Burnell, 2015, 2016). One of the biggest barriers they face is one of overcoming their own feelings of educational failure, and building enough confidence and self-belief to accept that they can be successful in higher education (Reay et al., 2009; Burke, 2002; David, 2010). In these studies into the learning experiences of older, mature undergraduate students, confidence was a key factor in the success of their participants. Pearce asserts that ‘confidence plays a crucial part in the experience of these students, and that as their confidence grows, their time management and engagement with the wider undergraduate culture improves’ (2017: 72). For many students their failure has been internalised and they blame themselves for not achieving at school (Burnell, 2015, 2016) when in actual fact it was often the system that failed them. However, once these learners do reach the university, there are certain policies and practices that institutions can implement and engage in, in order to enable them to reach their potential and succeed. Some of these practices may include teaching and learning activities, for example, how we engage students in learning. Other examples could include the ways in which we assess learners. There are many varied ways of assessing students and measuring their knowledge and understanding. Different courses use different methods. For example, on a biology degree where a student may spend most of their time in a laboratory, practical assessments would be used. On a social sciences degree, where subjects such as sociology and politics are studied, the traditional essay is the dominant form of assessment. However, as I have already explained, for students who have had a break in education, this assessment method can be a barrier to success. I would argue that, allowing alternative types of assessments, like presentations, posters and even role play, students can use the assessment method that fulfils their potential and allows them to ‘shine’ in the way that best suits them. Trinity College Dublin (TCD) introduced an inclusive system that gives everybody a choice of assessment because, as they point out:

‘Many of our current assessment methods were established when the student population lacked the diversity that we find today. As the student population diversifies we need to reassess assessment methods so as to respond to the needs of this diverse student population. Inclusive assessments are designed

to be accessible to all the students in a diverse student body' ([Trinity College Dublin, 2016](#)).

Critics may argue that universities are 'dumbing down' assessments to allow more students to pass (Petre, 2016). I would argue that, as long as the student is conveying the required knowledge, using relevant theories and concepts, and backing up their assertions with references, far from dumbing down, using alternative assessments is enabling them to meet the learning outcomes in much the same way that an essay would – it just uses a different format. In addition, there is another mechanism at work here; using alternative methods in the first year of study enables learners to build their confidence, break down that barrier created by past educational failure and realise that they can be academically successful. It is the first year where students struggle the most – they are trying to understand an unfamiliar system, learning new and often difficult theories in large daunting institutions and, as Hatt and Baxter point out, learning 'the rules of the game' (2003: 25). The practice of using alternative assessments, whilst coaching them with their academic writing skills, means they will be better equipped for success and more confident as learners as they progress into higher levels where writing skills are vital and much needed. In addition, they will be learning skills that can be of use in future roles such as employment. Employers expect a range of 'soft skills' from graduates when they enter the job market. In a report by The Telegraph (2017) in which employers are asked what they are looking for from graduates, one responded with: 'We're looking for exceptional, rounded, ambitious individuals who can show sustained involvement in activities other than the purely academic...'. Therefore, using a range of assessments enables students to acquire a range of skills that would be beneficial in employment.

University College Dublin (UCD) also adopted the alternative assessments method to allow a diversity of learners to reach their potential. They began the scheme by allowing a choice of two assessments (University College Dublin, 2010: 5). One example of how UCD managed this was on their 'Human Rights Law and Equality' module in which they offered a choice of being assessed by 1) an essay or 2) a presentation with a reflective writing assignment. The rationale for this choice is documented in their handbook 'A Practitioner's Guide to Choice of Assessment Methods within a Module' (2010). In the guide, the module leader comments that 'some students' abilities, in particular oral communication skills, were inadequately rewarded. Additionally, I felt that allowing students to choose their mode of assessment would reinforce the ethos of empowerment and inclusivity we strive to uphold

in the School’ (UCD, 2010: 19). For a mature student on this module, having had a break in education and returning to learning, having the alternative presentation could go a long way to levelling the playing field, whilst they gradually acquire the academic writing skills needed in the higher levels. In addition, the module leader argues that, ‘I am now confident that theoretical material can be validly assessed in less conventional ways’ (UCD, 2010: 19), demonstrating that, in this case, a change in assessment method does not equal invalidity, or a ‘dumbing down’ of assessments (Petre, 2016).

However, there is another argument, and one that draws on Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (2011). ‘The theory proposes the idea that we all have various levels of intelligence across a range of intellectual areas’ (Pritchard, 2013: 38). Gardner’s concern was that, when learners are tested, using commonly used tests – and in higher education that would be the essay and the exam – that these tests ‘do not allow those tested to demonstrate what they are really good at or where their intelligence lies’ (Pritchard, 2013: 38). Gardner suggested a set of nine different intelligences that can be displayed by people, depending on their individual intellectual make-up. It logically follows through, that if people display a range of different intelligences, that these intelligences should be measured, or tested, accordingly, and not using a narrow set of traditional assessments. Pritchard asserts that ‘an ignorance of – or disregard for – individual ‘intelligence’, in Gardner’s terms, can lead to disadvantage’ (Pritchard, 2013: 39).

A commonly used, although heavily criticised (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004; Hattie, 2009; Scott, 2010), model for measuring learning styles is VAK (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic), later extended by Fleming (2001) to VARK (visual, auditory, reading, kinaesthetic). Although VAK is criticised and widely unsupported, it does demonstrate the range of activities that can be deployed within a pedagogical setting. Add to this the theory of multiple intelligences, and Gardner’s argument that ‘those tested [should be allowed] to demonstrate what they are really good at or where their intelligence lies’ (Pritchard 2013: 38), and you may have a model that looks like this:

Learning style	Learning preference	Teaching style	Method of assessment
Visual	Handouts and illustrations	Projecting text and using images such as	Essay, report, exam

		charts and graphs	
Auditory	Listening and talking	Explanation, verbal examples, Q&A	Presentations and debates
Kinaesthetic	Taking notes and being interactive	Allow interaction, moving around, practical projects	Poster, film, role-play

More and more providers are responding to employers and embedding employability skills into their courses in order to boost their students' chances of employment in the graduate job market. Just as the mature students bring a life skills set that benefits them at university, for some students, the skills that they acquire at university can be transferred into their chosen careers; drawing on their past in order to build their future. Being assessed by using a range of methods could be the key to learners acquiring transferable skills and building up a skill set that will be to their advantage in the workplace. I previously highlighted an article from The Telegraph that reported on what employers were looking for in graduates. One of the employers they spoke to commented on the importance of 'well-roundedness' and the ability to offer skills 'other than the purely academic' (19 February, 2017). In a pilot project by the University of Nottingham, and documented in Fallows and Steven (2013), the university spent two years embedding key skills into teaching and learning in order to equip students with a transferable skills set. Fallows and Steven comment that:

'The development of key skills relevant to employment and future learning is an integral part of the university's Teaching and Learning strategy and it is a general requirement that all modules be written in terms of the transferable skills to be developed' (2013: 68).

Conclusion

Although the opportunity to enter higher education is presented, many are daunted by returning to learn (Burke, 2012), and may feel un-prepared, unconfident and that they do not belong.

Using alternative assessments for students entering HE, and in particular, those from non-traditional groups, is an effective method for building confidence and self-belief in learners while they acquire the traditional study skills needed for academic success.

In addition, and as Fallows and Steven go on to assert, 'If learning is to be transferable, assessment must be multiple in mode and context and relate to life outside college' (2013: 40). Acquiring transferable skills and building up a skill set that will be to their advantage in the workplace is equally as important as building confidence in non-traditional learners.

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