

# Action and Emancipation: The Flexible Assessment Paradigm

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## ABSTRACT

This paper documents the pilot programme of flexible assessment. The management aspects of the flexible assessor are provided as well as the orientation. This project aims to set forward procedures and guidelines for incorporating flexible assessment methods into final-year degree programmes. The action research method used is described. Student and lecturer opinions, observations, reflections are provided regarding the flexible assessment mode. Additions and enhancements to the implementation of flexible assessment method are provided, given the reflections.

**Keywords:** Action Research; Flexible Assessment and Management



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The case for this paper is the third year degree unit Software Management. The subject has five elements: Software Quality, Software Project Management, CASE tools and Programming Languages, Reviews and Historic and Future Issues.

The purpose of this study is to prepare the managerial framework for flexible assessment; this managerial framework will be tested on the described case study. The experimental design follows the action research protocol. Most studies in the literature develop partial flexible assessment; this study will attempt radical flexible assessment.

This paper documents the pilot programme of radical flexible assessment on the bachelor of Applied Information Systems degree. The programme uses the emancipation action research method. These poses two questions:

- What is flexible assessment?
- What is emancipation action research?

The second question is discussed in the research methods section. Flexible assessment has been attempted and documented several times throughout the literature. The radical flexible assessment carried out for this programme, allows students to:

1. Deliver the evidence for measurement at any time. The students can submit their work any number of times for feedback throughout the enrolment period. The students must submit the work within the enrolment period
2. Deliver the evidence in any mode. Fifty-three ways of assessing students are described in Gibbs *et al.* (1988). Some assessment modes include observation; debates; interviews; presentations; products and

artefacts; theory examinations; and practical examinations.

3. Deliver any evidence that satisfies the learning outcomes. The elements and performance criteria, of the unit under investigation, can be measured using many modes of assessment.

An example of this, is element 2.1 from Software Management: “A wide variety of programming languages can be critiqued and selected for solving various problems”, UCOL (1999). To achieve competency in this element the student could supply different forms of evidence: presentations, practical development of code, and undergo a theoretical examination.

## 2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1 Purpose and Rationale

In general, different students prefer different modes of assessment. The purpose of this study is to document the adoption of the flexible assessment method for the aforementioned case. This innovative approach will take up more facilitator time, challenge tradition, differ from many other approaches, and differ from what other educators expect. However, these innovations will be justified by establishing its greater educational relevance.

In true flexible assessment, the student has the freedom to prove they have met the required standard, using any mode or combination of modes they prefer, and submit for marking whenever they want. Simosko & Cook (1996) describe learner-driven assessment and flexible assessment.

There are several definitions of flexibility; it can be defined in terms of the student-centred environment, institutional-centred or the teacher-centred environment. The definition followed for this research is the student centred definition:

“Flexible learning is an approach to tertiary education that provides students with the opportunity to take greater responsibility for their learning and to engage in activities and opportunities that meet their own needs”, Hudson *et al.* (1997).

Elements of flexibility must be addressed. The elements of flexibility in student centred learning is about meeting the needs of the students using whatever methods of teaching and learning are most appropriate. The tutor, however, is an integral part of flexible learning; resources developed as part of flexible learning are supplementary

to tutor contact. Hudson *et al.* (1997) suggests the following elements of flexibility: access, control, responsibility, and support.

Many educators are afraid of adopting flexible assessment: they don't want to be the first to implement it, the perceived and actual increase in workload and the fear of failure. With this in mind: educators are perpetuating the myths of assessment based on incorrect assumptions (derived from: Simosko & Cook, 1996):

1. Assessment should be competitive;
2. Excellence of the few can be attested by the failure of many;
3. Assessment should be retrospective;
4. Summative and terminating;
5. Grades faithfully reflect performance in units of study and over collections of units;
6. For fair assessment: assessment processes should be hidden and secret from the learner;
7. Knowledge is an adequate indicator of real performance;
8. Fear of failure and hope of success should be the prime motivators for learning; and
9. Anxiety is necessary accompaniment for rigorous assessment.

In regard to the case under investigation, these assumptions were eradicated before and during the investigation commenced. Some organisation effects on the selection of assessment mode include resources available, timetables of those involved, competing job responsibilities, accommodation, and privacy for both presentations & interviews.

Contrary to the beliefs of many educational practitioners, assessment is subjective in nature rather than objective. The educator should be consciously aware of the pitfalls of assessment so that they can minimise the negative effects. These problems include:

- ◆ A particular assessment piece is good or bad, therefore the subsequent assessment will follow suit;
- ◆ Self-fulfilling prophecies of educator given first impressions;
- ◆ Comparison of assessments based on flawed processes;
- ◆ Based on the characteristics of the candidate;
- ◆ Giving more weight to positives than negatives;
- ◆ Assessor as participant effects on the candidate;
- ◆ Measure of progress rather than measuring achievements;
- ◆ Assessor with fuzzy or unclear expectations;

- ◆ Assessor assisting too much in artefact production;
- ◆ Measuring interest of assessed material rather than its worth; and
- ◆ Discrimination to the positive or negative regarding culture, gender, sexual preference, disabilities, race, political, religious, or any combination thereof.

These problems must be minimised to the best of the professional's ability. In traditional assessment, there is no necessary separation of advising, teaching and assessing roles, whereas in flexible assessment, this separation is transparent.

## 2.2 Educator Roles

The shift of the educator from assessor to learning facilitator (with a multi-faceted role) changes the function of assessment from solely a grading tool, to a plethora of other functions including grading purposes, for example:

1. Feedback to students on their progress and how they can improve;
2. Provide feedback to lecturers regarding their students' progress;
3. Provide motivation via goals and milestones;
4. Provide insights to the students regarding their strengths and weaknesses;
5. Maintain expected standards; and
6. Measure the success of units, courses and papers.

The development of the flexible assessor requires some different approaches: advising not telling; mentoring not protecting; resource not councillor; supportive not shielding; and provider. Other essential functions of the flexible assessor are:

- ◆ To encourage students to clarify goals;
- ◆ Help to encourage reflection on achievements, strengths and weaknesses;
- ◆ Assist the personal development towards the requirements of the paper, course or standard to be measured against;
- ◆ Provide correct information and guidance to ensure the students are successful;
- ◆ Help students prepare for assessment;
- ◆ Provide appropriate and informative feedback at the most appropriate times;
- ◆ Liaise with assessors, moderators and educators; and
- ◆ Keep up to date and accurate records at all times.

Clearly, collaboration among all of those involved in the assessment is required. The drawback of the flexible assessment is that extra resources are needed, especially time to conduct the tasks required of the flexible assessor.

## 2.3 Student Awareness & Maturity

Any assessment package developed to test student performance should reflect the full range of purposes for which the learning programme was developed. Once students are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, they can make judgements regarding their preferred assessment mode. The third premise of the learner-centred model states that learning is a constructive process when what is being learned is relevant and meaningful to the learner (McCombs, 1997). It is interesting that one of the most common complaints of students is that what they are asked to learn is irrelevant to them. It is of little consolation to the student when they hear this will be important in the future. Learners will learn more effectively when they are assessed in the mode of their choice and preference.

It has been suggested throughout the literature that if educators can make assessment a positive experience for students then they (the students) are more likely to be successful. One way to make assessment positive is to encourage positive feelings to want to learn. This is the core of Race's practical model, discussed in Knight (1995). Another way of encouraging students to learn is to allow them the freedom to learn what they want to learn (within the learning objectives or curriculum). Race's model has wanting in the core, doing, digesting and final in the outer shell is feedback.

## 2.4 Measurement Approaches of Assessment

Original methods of assessment have adhered to the measurement method of assessment. This traditional approach has been challenged in many institutes using an evidential based approach. The method of assessment poses many questions to the potential assessor:

1. Which mode shall be chosen?
2. What evidence will be produced?
3. Does it involve a research project?

Assessment can then be based on:

1. Specially created assessment tasks;
2. Activity undertaken during learning;
3. Observations; and
4. Recognition of prior learning.

## 2.5 Designing Flexible Assessment

The method of designing flexible assessment follows a two step process: what changes are required and how the changes can be accomplished. The first step consists of analysing:

- ◆ What do we want our students to learn?
- ◆ Is this expressed adequately in our outcomes?
- ◆ Do we assess these outcomes?
- ◆ Are we using appropriate criteria?
- ◆ Are our methods, instruments and sources appropriate?
- ◆ How much time do students and staff spend on assessments?

The planning of the new assessment requires input from the aforementioned evaluations as well as the new design procedure: When to assess; How often to assess; How to assess; Valid assessment; and Reliability measurement.

## 2.6 Evaluation and Feedback

Monitoring and evaluation of flexible assessment are crucial activities in this action research. Continuous improvement of further iterations of this study will add to the strengths and improve weaknesses in the approach. The evaluation is to follow three tried and tested types: quantitative, qualitative and goal free. The evaluation will appear on pre-entry, during and on exit. Student evaluations and associated interviews can be invaluable in the continuous total quality improvement of the assessment procedures and methods. The students themselves could be used to produce the questionnaire. One method is to allow students to evaluate the worth of a collection of assessment modes. The worth of the assessment could be measured from the perspective of learning experience, relevance, enjoyment, as well as the perceived ease of the mode. Students are asked to comment on the timing aspects of assessment, assessment mode, self-assessment, peer-assessment, collective effort, collaborative effort, feedback timeliness and feedback effectiveness.

## 2.7 Current Shifts in Assessment Practice

The suggestion of Freeman & Lewis (1998) of “flexible assessment arrangements (eg flexibility over route, time, place and method)” is later confirmed. There was a wide diversity of views on the most appropriate forms of assessment, which again seemed to identify the need for greater flexibility and choice in the mode of assessment (Askam, 1997). Current paradigm shifts in assessment practice will be provided in the presentation of this work.

The flexibility of assessment mode, however, poses some problems. The dynamic selection of assessment forces the assessor to yield marking criteria for that assessment. A suggestion made by Brown et al. (1995) in Knight (1995), expresses that the marking criteria should be developed in collaboration between the assessor and the student. This adds the advantage of ownership; the student is more likely to be happy if the perception of ownership is on their part. Another advantage is that the requirements of assessment and the assessment process are understood more fully. The hypothesis being that the student should produce better work.

One other reason for the inclusion of flexible assessment is to remove the perceived political power struggle suggested in Harris (1995) in Knight (1995). Harris suggests that the shift in the balance of power from assessor to student overcomes this.

Flexible assessment, however, is not suitable for all students. Some students prefer a strict regime of learning in the form of assessment; some students would often prefer the firmer guidelines since this represents a safer option for them. While using flexible assessment the flexibility itself must cede rigidity when it is required, for if it had the incapacity to be rigid then it paradoxically would be inflexible.

In recent years alternative methods of assessment have been proposed to promote, self regulated learning, for example portfolios, collaborative inquiry, journals, &c. These alternative assessments allow students to be more proactive in terms of their learning. The evolution of an instruction-learning-assessment-based culture is required, see Birenbaum & Andur (1999). The six-stage learner-centred assessment model described in Simosko & Cook (1996) can be utilised as the structured framework for enabling cultural maturation: pre-entry analysis; candidate profiling; gathering, generating and compiling evidence; assessment; accreditation; and post assessment guidance. To enable the development of a successful learner-centred assessment programme and

culture the following functions must be administered: marketing; informing; advising; advocating; setting standards; assessing; keeping records; providing feedback; evaluating; facilitating learning; and managing. The assessor should have a clear plan of action to assess the worth of the student's work.

## 2.8 Orientation

The orientation of students into the flexible assessment environment will be utilised:

1. Framing and opening;
2. An overview of the thesis and justifications for using flexible assessment;
3. The benefits of using this method;
4. An overview of the learning elements and performance elements;
5. Examples of differing assessment modes;
6. Question & answer sessions;
7. Termination and closure.

## 2.9 Management Methods

Acquiring assessment from many different modes requires efficient and equitable marking methods. The assessor should decide upon the validity of the evidence, reliability of the evidence, sufficiency of the evidence, currency of the evidence, and the authenticity of the evidence. If evidence is not up to the required standard, then the feedback should provide what is required and how to get those requirements. However, preventative measures should be built into the assessment choices made by the students so that it maximises the likelihood of student success. This can be based on student learning contracts.

## 3. RESEARCH METHOD

The methodology followed for this study is the action research protocol described in Zuber-Skerritt (1992). The paradigm described in social sciences, recognises the dialectical relationship between theory and practice. The nature of academia is that the well-found theory can be applied to the practical experiences.

Action research can be described as a type of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. In most of its forms it does this by:

- ◆ Using a cyclic or spiral process which alternates

between action and critical reflection; and

- ◆ In the later cycles, continuously refining methods, data and interpretation in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles.

It is thus an emergent process, which takes shape slowly. Additionally, an iterative process converges towards a better understanding of what happens.

In most of its forms, it is participatory (among other reasons, change is usually easier to achieve when those affected by the change are involved) and qualitative: from Dick (1999). This strongly reasserts the usefulness of action research in the study and optimisation of the teaching process.

The emancipatory category of action research has been suggested is the true action research Carr & Kemmis cited in Zuber-Skerritt. In other words action research should be used when the ultimate goal of the study is to improve the practice in a systematic way and to make appropriate suggestions and changes to the:

1. Environment in which the practice takes place;
2. Context of the practice; or
3. The conditions whereby the practice takes place.

The process of action research follows a four-step process as described by Kolb (1984): plan, act, observe and reflect. Plan is the stage which the problem analysis and strategy of the approach is described. Act refers to the implementation of the aforementioned strategic plan. Observe includes an evaluation of the action based on the evaluation of the act by appropriate means and procedure. Reflection of the results of the evaluation may cede new problems and hence form a new micro or macro level study.

The Staff and Educational Development Association accredit practitioners:

Teachers should reflect on their intentions and actions and on the effects of their actions. They try to understand the reasons for what they see and for the effects of their actions. They thus continue to develop their understanding and practice and therefore inform their own learning.

This further justifies the selection of action research in teaching, as the central core of the requirement for accreditation is to reflect on actions. This is the essence of action research.

The type of action research followed is that of the emancipatory category. The forming of an emancipatory action research follows that the researcher wishes to emancipate from tradition, self-deception, and organisational-coercion. The research wishes to transform organisational and educational systems. The role of the facilitator is that of a collaborative effort

alongside the participants in the action research. The practical use of emancipatory research over other traditional social science research methodologies is that it is immediately practical. Practical both during the research and after the research process.

Zuber-Skerritt (1992) describes action research elements.

### 3.1 Plan

For true flexible assessment, the student must be able to choose or have the decision not to choose the modes of assessment. With this in mind, the design and construction of default assessments will occur before the unit commences.

### 3.2 Act

The implementation began in February 1999. During the implementation, the teacher will be both collaborator and researcher. Additionally, the researcher will be observer and participant; some conclusions will be subjective in nature. Some decisions may be made during the implementation of the flexible assessment owing to unforeseen changes. Feedback and evaluation will be extracted from staff members, students and the participant by means of structured interviews and questionnaires.

### 3.3 Observe

Although a well thought out plan of action for the flexible assessment programme is output from the planing stage of the action research. To avoid propagation of error and problems, it is necessary to discuss the flexible assessment method in the first session or orientation session. It is important that the freedom granted by the flexible assessment can result in catastrophic failure, if the students do not perform or put the right amount of effort into their work.

Since the lecturer is both observing and participating, it has been decided that another researcher will also observe the structured videotaped briefings. Observation notes can be compared and contrasted.

### 3.4 Reflect

The reflection stage should result in optimised management of the flexible assessment strategy, as well as the valuable lessons learned from the research process and strategy itself: both positive and negative.

## 4. FINDINGS

The research programme is not yet complete. However, some findings can be extracted. Participant observation was used to triangulate these research findings.

The findings of the research show that the flexible assessment paradigm has greater educational relevance than traditional assessment methods. The students confirm that they appreciate being in control of their own learning and assessment.

The students, in general, submitted their work for proofing and checking several times. The students choose the following modes of assessment: presentations, interviews, reports, computer programmes, systems analysis projects, and prior knowledge re-synthesised. One unexpected advantage of adopting flexible assessment was the amount of time students saved by integrating the assessment with other papers on the degree: this allowed the students to have highly synthesised learning. The students in general did not choose to be assessed as a group. Most students were keen to develop hands-on practical evidence for the assessments. Less enthusiastic students procrastinated and have left work until late in the unit. These students, additionally, did not choose the pre-built assessments. During the course of the flexible assessment, many students deviated significantly from the tutor's knowledge. The educator's knowledge base should not restrict the students learning. Students had access to the tutor between 7:30 am and 11:30 pm: the students, however, used the tutor during office hours only. The flexible assessment method created a co-operative rather than competitive culture. The marking schedules where produced in collaboration: the students appreciated this. Some students did not wish to negotiate distinction criteria. It was observed that the assessment process was fair and equitable as each assessment is explicitly measured against the performance criteria and learning outcomes; it is difficult to fall into the trap of measuring student against student in flexible assessment. The assessment method is transparent: removing the fear of assessment, which can be a barrier to learning. Many misconceptions of assessment are removed implicitly and explicitly when adopting flexible assessment. Several students highlighted the fact that they learned about the way they work during the unit. This, they believe, prepares them well for the industry project. Some students found difficulty switching to flexible assessment. Some students were not motivated. Some experienced difficulties choosing material and assessment modes. The orientation

of students into flexible assessment should be more thorough.

The roles and responsibilities assigned to the tutor and student were well understood by both parties. The students appreciated the fact that they had a valuable resource in the tutor for the paper in question and all other lecturers could assist in their fact finding exercises: again supporting integrated assessment.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper proves that radical flexible assessment has greater educational relevance, with this in mind, the recommendation of this research is that more educators should adopt radical flexible assessment for final degree year units. Flexible assessment can be used for assessment of subjects, which complement or synthesise other subjects or groups of subjects.

The research carried out for this study suggests that flexible assessment is appreciated by hardworking and well motivated students, however, students with low motivation do not perform when given this much freedom: you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink! This warrants further investigation into flexible assessment and its role as a learning motivator.

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