

MOTIVATING AND ENGAGING STUDENTS THROUGH FLEXIBLE ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

What motivates and engages students to learn is changing rapidly: educators must adapt to meet the needs of their students. Research into the effects of personalising the learning process suggests that emphasis on an understanding of self and the way one learns has positive and measurable outcomes with respect to performance in assessment pieces. It has long been understood that people with different personality types learn in different ways, and that teaching more flexibly can accommodate these different learning styles.

Heightened motivation to learn comes from active personal commitment, and one of the key factors known to enhance motivation to learn is choice, which creates a feeling of power and autonomy. There is evidence that assessment dominates students' attitudes towards learning, and that assessment often causes significant anxiety, which can have negative effects on motivation and engagement in learning activities. Some advocate for student choice as an adjunct to constructive alignment.

Flexible assessment addresses many of these concerns. It is known that students experience a sense of increased ownership and engagement and therefore increased responsibility for their learning when offered involvement in assessment processes. Many tertiary educators already offer flexible assessment via internal choice in exam questions. Flexible assessment can also be interpreted as students choosing: which or how many tasks to complete, when to complete them, the weighting for each task, or even crafting their own assessment criteria.

This project explores student uptake of flexible assessment opportunities in a second year zoology unit in an effort to increase student motivation and engagement. Students could "play to their strengths" by selecting to more heavily weight tasks at which they believed they could perform strongly. Almost all students agreed that students should have the option to adjust task weightings, and many expressed feelings of increased ownership and responsibility as positive factors increasing their desire to direct effort into assessment tasks. Interestingly, only 42% of students elected to adjust their assessment. The rest stated that they did not know their own strengths well enough, or did not want the responsibility of reweighting assessment items in case they made the wrong decision and caused themselves to be disadvantaged.

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