Commentary: A Case for Slow Scholarship: Implications for Programme Assessment Design

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The ‘assessment arms race’ is about the proliferation of graded assessments in a modular system of mass higher education (Harland, et al., 2015). The findings of this study showed that frequent graded assessments altered the learning experiences of students making certain higher-order objectives harder to achieve. The observed increases in graded work were driven by student demand and a desire by lecturers to regulate student study behaviour. If a task was not graded, a student was likely to ignore it and so teachers on different modules competed with each other for student attention. This created an ‘arms race’ in which assessment frequency had reached a point at which the grade had become the determining factor of the student experience. Students were so busy with assessment requirements that they had little space and time for thinking or doing any study outside of assessed course requirements. The need to grade had led to the fragmentation of experiences and the miniaturisation of knowledge as learning happened in micro-modules. Neither students nor lecturers were entirely happy with this situation and it caused the research team to reflect carefully on their own teaching practices.

I teach ecology at the University of Otago, New Zealand, and I would like to reflect on how the ‘arms race’ research influenced practice. The ecology programme has been undergoing gradual change for the last 15 years and it has led to the development of many educational ideas. In 2002, student numbers were expending rapidly and we set out to ensure that all students, regardless of ability, would come away with a worthwhile education. We began by asking ourselves how we learned as academics and reasoned that whatever we did would be good enough for students. The idea of teaching students as researchers was born and ecology has this research thread running through that starts on the first day our students set foot in university (Harland, 2016). Students are seen as research apprentices and are trained in research by doing the same activities as academics. These include developing original research questions, writing grant proposals, designing experiments, doing field work, presenting at seminars and symposia, and so on. Students are trained over three years in analytical techniques and peer review, and by the start of their third year, some are capable of producing work publishable in international journals. However, what we have found is that all students benefit from this curriculum approach and we have evidence that ecology students have qualities, in terms of critical thinking, organisational skills, problem solving and levels of self-motivation that others at a similar stage in their education do not possess. In addition, teachers have benefitted from this approach, in particular the improvement of their own research.

The arms race research first led the ecology team to cull the number of graded assessments and then to take a close look at specific parts of the curriculum where we thought we could alter the course to achieve an integrated approach to assessment. The first task was simple and resulted in getting rid of any assessment that was more about keeping students on task than being essential to the knowledge project. The second was much more complicated because change had several restrictions that we needed to meet. I will give one example to illustrate the challenge we faced.
The curriculum change concerned student peer review at second year (Harland, Wald, & Randhawa, 2016). Students were required to go into the field, develop an authentic research idea, return to university to write a grant proposal, and then carry out the research the following year (this strategy breaks the modular system). During the grant proposal writing stage, students peer reviewed each other’s work. Here we wanted to create a space in which students had unhurried time to think deliberatively about the task in hand thus engaging in ‘slow scholarship’. To achieve this, each new stage of the peer review process needed to build on the previous one so students understood that if they failed to complete any part, they would not be able to complete the course. This change required a shift in thinking as all students were required to work for each other to improve the quality of ideas and writing. The old system had been an exchange of grant proposals for anonymous peer review that had two grading points and took two weeks. The new curriculum took place over five weeks and students not only provided anonymous peer reviews, but also produced a rebuttal in response to comments on their own proposals. Only the final product was graded and we found that the quality of the proposals far exceeded what had been achieved in previous years.

In this case, we created the same type of space that academics value in their research and changed the way students understood their education as they shifted from working individually for a grade to working to benefit each other. Even though the peer review exercise initially lasted only five weeks, this sustained period of knowledge production contrasted with the more common short-term student experiences. All were ‘encouraged’ to take part but this took a lot of careful planning to ensure that no student, within reason, would fail in any of the tasks. I currently think of this as ‘highly structured freedom’ and this idea seems to me to be central to teaching students as researchers. Like any researcher, they need freedom to learn, but because they are research apprentices and pulled in many directions by other courses and assessment requirements, they also need structure to scaffold a good learning outcome. The lecturer’s role then becomes more like that of a postgraduate supervisor aimed at getting the best out if each student.

Key Insight:
Students need freedom to learn, but they also need structure to scaffold a good learning outcome.

References