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Bace, Edward (2016) Incorporating group coursework as an assessment component into online and traditional university programmes. In: 1st International Conference on Advanced Business and Social Sciences, 28-29 Jan 2016, Bali, Indonesia.

Published version (with publisher's formatting)

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INCORPORATING GROUP COURSEWORK AS AN ASSESSMENT COMPONENT INTO ONLINE AND TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES

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Abstract

Despite the many advantages of online learning programmes in university curricula, such programmes can present challenges, particularly in terms of assessment of group coursework and participation in discussion fora. The author's experiences suggest ways to mitigate the "free rider" problem often accompanying group coursework, in which a few motivated students perform the bulk of the work. This can be achieved by requiring a shorter, individual submission separately from each student, in order to better judge the relative contribution to the whole. Participation in online discussions can also be incentivised by making this element a meaningful part of the overall summative assessment. Lastly, both attendance and learning, whether online or face to face, can be motivated by including in each session a brief quiz, to be done individually or in groups, which again counts towards the overall assessment, and encourages students to participate, and further reinforces learning.

Key words: education, technology, online, distance education

1 Introduction

The rapid spread and acceptance of online learning programmes in university curricula, aided by technological advantages, demonstrate their effectiveness (Gaytan & MacEwen, 2007). Despite their advantages of accessibility and asynchronicity, this medium nonetheless has its limitations. Remote learning necessarily attenuates the immediacy of dialogue and debate which can occur in a classroom, and problems of participation and assessment inevitably arise (Arend, 2007). Online programmes can deliver content in an effective and compelling way, but it can be challenging to judge the progress that students are making, in terms of assessment and monitoring (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013). This is true not only for evaluating the absorption of content, but also for building and reinforcing important workplace skills, such as teamwork and presentation capabilities, which makes group coursework an important component of the overall assessment. In a classroom setting, group coursework can be relatively easy to evaluate, especially when supplemented by face to face presentations. The remote nature of online learning exacerbates problems of assessing group coursework, in that it can aggravate the "free rider" problem, where a few students in the group contribute the bulk of the effort. These achieving students are also usually most active in contributing to online discussion fora, which can be an effective substitute for in-class discussion, except for those that make little or no online contribution. Active participation can also prove patchy in a face to face setting, not only in dialogue engagement, but also simply in terms of regular attendance (Beebe et al., 2010). How can such problems be addressed, in order to optimise the learning process for students and have them get the most out of their educational programmes, leading to career success?

2. Problem Formulation

In early teaching experiences of university finance programmes, both online and face to face, the author consistently encountered problems of participation and assessment, resulting in relatively high failure rates. A good part of this was due to lack of participation by many students, whether it was lack of attendance in person or meagre contribution to online or face to face discussions, if any at all. In the finance modules taught, which are also intended to improve employability and workplace skills, group coursework, often accompanied by group presentations, is an important component, in order to reinforce teamwork and presentation capabilities. While students were meant to record their relative contribution to group coursework on an honour system, wherein most cases resulted in practically equal contributions being reported, it became obvious in the course of presentations that a few students were clearly carrying the load. Thus it became inequitable to award the same grade to all of the members of the same group, and sometimes also resulted in complaints from the achieving students that they were doing most of the work, and that their non-achieving members should be penalised.

We thus define two problems to be addressed:

- 1) lack of class participation, whether in person or online.
- 2) inequitable contribution to group coursework, where all members are meant to receive the same grade, based on assumption of equal input, but where relative work done varies considerably.

Both of these problems contribute to higher failure rates and to student dissatisfaction.

3. Problem Solution

The author, having experienced these problems in initial teaching experiences, experimented with methods to mitigate these shortcomings, which proved to have some efficacy.

In the first year of teaching corporate finance, in both face to face and online postgrad formats, encompassing a cohort of around 40 students, failure rate was relatively high at about 35%. The summative assessment for the face to face programme was broken down as follows:

- 1) unseen final exam 50%
- 2) group coursework 30%
- 3) individual assignments submitted throughout the term 20%

The online format differed in that an unseen final exam is impractical, thus the following breakdown was adopted:

- 1) Individual economics assignment 30%
- 2) Individual finance assignment 30%
- 3) Group finance assignment/coursework 40%

One major issue with both formats was gauging the equality of contribution to the group coursework, especially in the more remote online framework. This approach suffered from dual drawbacks, firstly that most of the work was carried out by relatively few group members, and secondly that the overall quality of the submission was dragged down by the insufficient participation of the “free riders.” The other main shortcoming was the quality and quantity of participation by students, in both face to face classroom interaction (even down to attendance) and online (in terms of frequency of postings to online discussions).

In the second year of experience, in the same modules, the author introduced some refinements to address these problems. We begin with the face to face module:

Instead of assigning three to four financial exercises to be submitted over the course of the year, the author took advice from his department and implemented a short (lasting no longer

than around 30 minutes) weekly quiz to be taken by the students for each session that met during the module. The module structure benefited from both lecture and seminar (one and a half hours each) following each other immediately on the same day of the week. Over the course of ten weeks, ten quizzes were administered, wherein students could accumulate a maximum of 20 points. These quizzes thus contributed 20% to the overall grade, just as the assignments done in the previous year contributed the same amount. The process of giving the quizzes in class each week; however, resulted in much better attendance than was experienced in the prior year, as the students were motivated to boost their overall grade by participating in the quiz. Each quiz, consisting of a single question relating to the topic, covered that week or the week before, then was worth a maximum of 2 marks, allowing students to accumulate a total maximum of 20 points in this way. Depending on how well the question was answered, sometimes zero marks would be granted, or one mark, or two marks maximum. The quiz papers also served very effectively as an attendance register, as students were required to record their names and student numbers on the one-page quiz papers. This system also made the papers relatively easy and quick to grade, given the single question nature of the quiz, and the clarity of a correct answer. The quiz papers, collected immediately after the quiz administration, then served the author to input the names of the attending students into the university electronic attendance system, as well as recording their grades.

Initially the quiz was given at the very start of the hour and a half long seminar, (which was then followed after a brief break by the hour and a half long lecture). The material from the lecture was then tested in the following week's quiz. After a while, however, the author noticed that not all of the students taking the quiz and attending the seminar turned up for the following lecture, as there was no second mandatory assignment to incentivise them to do so. Accordingly, the author switched tactics and began alternating the timing of the quiz, sometimes at the very beginning of the seminar, and sometimes at the very beginning of the succeeding lecture, in order to keep the students off balance and engaged throughout. While 100% attendance was not always achieved, this procedure dramatically improved regular attendance over the prior year, by up to 50%, and also helped to reinforce concepts regularly over the course of the module.

The author also discovered, helped by external observation, that having each student perform the quiz individually was not necessarily helping weaker students. As the module wore on, the author experimented with having the students undertake the quiz in groups, whereby stronger students could help the weaker ones. While this had the disadvantage of a lack of independent assessment, the author believes that this was well outweighed by the benefits of weaker students having their understanding reinforced by working with the stronger students. In any case, each quiz paper was graded separately. The accumulation of points for this assessment component was also impressive, helping the ultimate pass rates for the overall module.

The same principle has been applied to the online finance module, wherein regular posting (at least on a weekly basis) of quality comments in the discussion fora is made a meaningful part of the overall assessment (counting for up to 15% of the total). Given the large number of online participants, the cohort was structured into 5-7 individual groups or syndicates, which facilitated the use of more than one online tutor. The realisation that regular posting would be additive to the overall grade also resulted in more frequent and higher quality online comments from student participants, relative to the prior year's experience.

In terms of group coursework, the face to face format is relatively easier to judge than in the online module. This is partly due to the requirement that students, again divided into groups, make a joint presentation on their topic in front of the rest of the class. Under this system, it becomes apparent which members of the group are the leaders and which are the followers. While the group coursework attracts 30% of the overall assessment, there is also a

requirement that each group member submit a version of their contribution to the group effort, allowing the tutor to judge relative weight of contribution. In the corporate finance group coursework, each group is required to examine a particular industry in terms of corporate finance best practice, incorporating governance, financial structure, risk management and optimal cost of capital. Each member of the group, (which ranges from 3-5 students per group), focuses on a particular company in that industry, and each is required to submit his or her own individual analysis in addition to the overall group coursework. This facilitates assessment of the contribution of each individual group member to the overall group submission. As a result, this year, much greater consistency has been achieved in the group contributions than in the prior year, and complaints about “free riders” have dropped dramatically. This also enhances overall performance and results in higher pass rates.

Again, the same principle is applied to the online format, with the difference that a group presentation has not yet been implemented, but this is in the planning stages, given the technological capabilities of online education. Whereas in the previous year there was only a single group submission, which made evaluation of individual contribution very difficult, this year there is a requirement for shorter individual submissions to be made. This has also resulted in better means of evaluating individual contributions, and higher overall quality of group submissions, with minimal complaint about “free riders.” The online finance module has much the same content as the face to face version, so that students, divided into groups, can examine a particular industry on a group basis and analyse individually a company participating in that industry. The group effort reflects observations and conclusions across the industry, based on the individual inputs, resulting in a more robust submission (Robles & Braathen, 2002).

Conclusion

The observations and consequent refinements made to online and in person finance modules illustrate the relative simplicity with which improvements can be made to existing modules, in order to improve learning outcomes and pass rates. The face to face experience can in many cases be transferred effectively to the online environment, in terms of the majority of the assessment. In both cases, the refinements contribute to higher pass rates, better learning outcomes, and enhanced student satisfaction.

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