

# Is online Patchwork Text Assessment a panacea for assessment practices in higher education?

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*Although assessment is acknowledged as being of central importance to the student learning experience, assessment practices have been consistently highlighted as one of the weakest features by the Quality Assurance Agency and identified by many as a crisis within higher education. This paper explores the use of Patchwork Text Assessment within a level 6 undergraduate psychology module and considers the potential of this method for enhancing the learning experiences of psychology undergraduates, facilitating the process of self-reflection and allowing students to make explicit the nature of their learning 'journey'.*

**Keywords:** *Formative assessment; patchwork text assessment; e-portfolios; student learning; reflection.*

**A**SSESSMENT is at the heart of the student learning experience (Brown & Knight, 1994), however, assessment practices have been consistently highlighted as one of the weakest features by the Quality Assurance Agency (Rust, O'Donovan & Price, 2005) and identified by many as an inherent crisis within higher education (Knight, 2002; Linn, 2000; Shay, 2008).

However, the study of assessment practices cannot be isolated from the study of student learning, particularly the way in which students approach their learning (Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2005). Student approaches to learning (SAL) research originated with the pioneering work of Marton and Säljö (1976, 1997) and was subsequently developed by Biggs (2003) who suggested that students either adopt a deep or surface learning approach. According to Biggs, Kember and Leung (2001) deep learning is characterised by a focus on underlying meaning and an attempt to integrate ideas. In contrast, a surface approach often focuses on rote learning strategies with little emphasis on understanding. For these students, their purpose is not to understand but to memorise a series of facts and study to the test. This is perhaps not surprising given the controversial testing culture that is now a characteristic aspect of the secondary and further education

systems in the UK. However, such an approach to learning is largely incompatible with the aims of higher education. So, what are the implications of this? Firstly, an assessment process ought to encourage appropriate learning activity and emphasise time 'spent on task' (Gibbs, 2010). For example, assessment tasks that are designed to focus students' effort and attention across the course, rather than on one specific week within the module. In this way, learning is viewed as a process through which students 'make sense' of their learning over time; this is a direct contrast to the assessment practices that have typically dominated UK higher education. Brockbank and McGill (2007) suggest that traditional assessments, such as the essay, exam or multiple-choice test, do not document the relationship between the learner, tutor and course material nor does it account for the gradual nature of learning. The latter point is important as degree programmes typically assess product, making a judgement about the outcome (e.g. allocation of a grade or percentage mark) and process objectives. Whilst tutors may be familiar with assessing product and outcomes, finding ways to define and assess process may be more problematic. Higher education institutions (HEIs) endeavour to develop students' ability to engage in self-reflection, a

generic skill listed in the subject benchmark statement for psychology (QAA, 2010). Yet, how do students make explicit the nature of their learning journey and become reflective learners? One way of achieving this is through the use of formative assessment tasks.

Formative assessment places emphasis on learning as a process rather than as a measurement exercise, and is regarded by some as the panacea to many of the challenges associated with traditional models of assessment. Rather than grading learning outcomes, effective formative assessment provides essential feedback to students about where they are in terms of their learning; it identifies the gap in knowledge, showing students what they need to do to improve (Black & William, 1998). In this way formative assessment enables students to progress in their education. Advocates of formative assessment claim it is assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning; because formative assessments are not graded, they provide an opportunity for students to take chances and even make mistakes from which they can learn with no penalty attached. Formative assessment may also enable students to pace their learning, ensuring adequate time to reflect upon their understanding and synthesise knowledge prior to being assessed (QAA, 2011; Rust, 2002).

### **Patchwork Text Assessment**

Patchwork Text Assessment (PTA) provides an innovative approach to formative assessment. Using PTA students are required to build up a portfolio of short pieces of work (patches) across a module or course. Feedback is given on these formative pieces as they are produced, and the student is encouraged to modify their work in response to comments from peers and teachers. The final piece of work produced at the end of the module for summative assessment is a composite text which includes the students' patches, 'stitched' together by a reflective, unifying commentary which allows students to produce a personal synthesis of their learning progression across the module.

Traditionally, PTA may have taken the form of a paper-based portfolio; however, developments in technology to support learning and teaching have enabled creativity in the design of the portfolio. One contemporary example is PebblePad, an online portfolio system, or e-portfolio, which places control firmly in the hands of the learner whilst still allowing for authentic and reliable assessment by the teacher, thereby providing a unique interface for student assessment. Using an exemplar from current practice at the University of Worcester, this paper investigates the potential which undertaking PTA using PebblePAD has to enhance the learning experiences of psychology undergraduates, through the exploration of student perception's of this assessment mode

### **Online PTA within a level 6 module**

Educational psychology is a 15 credit level 6 optional module within the BSc Psychology programme at University of Worcester. The module aims to enhance the assessment process by using PTA to develop a range of skills and understandings of educational psychology. Students use PebblePAD to construct an e-portfolio that consists of three formal assignments each with a corresponding formative task completed at a specified set point in the module (see Table 1).

Each formative task is designed to support the assignment to which it is linked. Students receive detailed feedback on their tasks via PebblePAD and during timetabled lectures. At the end of the module, students submit their final portfolio of assignments and associated tasks along with a reflective summary. The summary enables the students to reflect upon issues covered in the module, making the link between learning outcomes and assessment tasks explicit (see Figure 1).

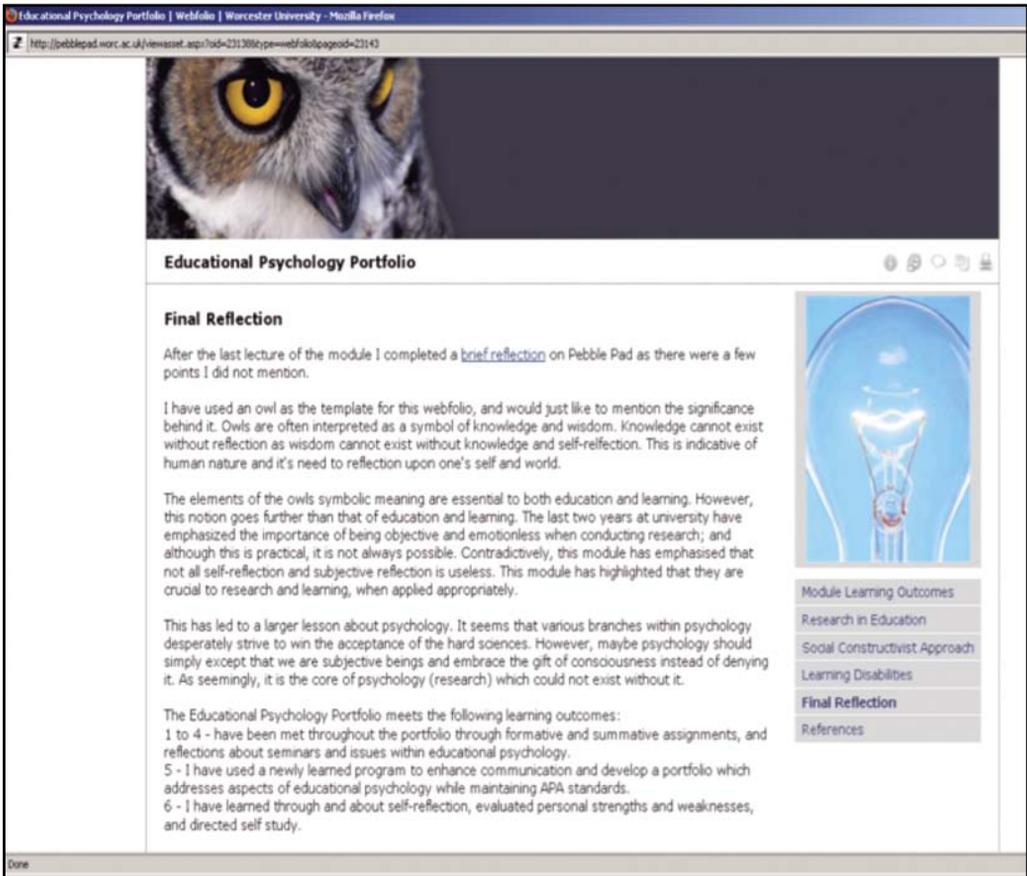
### **Student evaluation**

Students were encouraged to feedback on the module, through end of module evaluation and student led focus groups. The module was well received by students:

Table 1: Example assignment.

<p><b>Task 1</b> What four parenting styles did Baumrind propose and which is likely to be the most effective for supporting children's development? How do aspects of families such as divorce, ethnicity and socioeconomic status affect children's development and education? In what ways can school-family links be fostered to support development?</p> <p><b>Assignment 1</b> Awareness of the contribution parents can make to the learning process is increasingly applied in schools. Design a web-page for parents which explains the different ways in which their involvement can enhance the teaching and learning process in the classroom.</p>
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Figure 1: Example of a reflective summary.



*'Wonderful way to assess a module – using PebblePad as a format for assessment has been great as the assessments are continual, smaller and more manageable, and the whole module felt important rather than just one aspect of the module as is the case for other modules.'*

*'Writing on one topic isn't exactly showing that you've understood the whole module; it's showing that you've understood one really small portion of the module. It forces you to engage with each lecture and not just the ones that are relevant to the assignment or the exam.'*

Regular assessment tasks enabled students to not only engage with course material but also provided time to make sense of their learning (Rust, 2002). Students also acknowledged that continual assessment tasks encouraged them to engage with their course as a whole and not focus only on those lectures that were relevant to their assignment. As a result, students were not able to select which lectures they were attentive to and which they could ignore, but were encouraged to integrate knowledge across the module and develop both the breadth and depth of understanding necessary to elicit effective learning.

*'You're able to actually engage with it; well you have to engage with it in order to do the assessment. It's not a case of right, you're going to write a generic essay that will mean absolutely nothing to you, you actually have to think about what you're writing in order to make it make sense to other people who are reading it and commenting on it there and then so it makes you think a bit more about what you're writing about as opposed to just spewing out what's expected.'*

Students perceived this assessment method as enabling them to engage with their learning. The public domain of the assessment emphasised the need for the students to reflect upon and gain an in-depth understanding in order to be able to convey what they had written in a coherent way to their peers. Formative assessment tasks such as these have been suggested to promote intrinsic motivation and encourage student effort and interest through the creation of

tasks that are fun and meaningful to the student (McDowell & Sambell, 2000; Rust, 2000).

*'I think it's interesting to hear other people's points of view because you might write about a subject and – things you might not have even thought about- people will comment on your blog and it will give you more ideas and more feedback. You actually learn more I think.'*

*'It helps you think about things from a different perspective and then use those ideas, other people's ideas, and apply them to your own work.'*

The above extract is consistent with a Piagetian perspective on learning and exemplifies the potential of PTA to not only promote exposure to alternative perspectives (Shifter & Simon, 1992) but to encourage the student to accommodate new ideas and perspectives shared by their peers and assimilate these into their own. Peer interaction has been identified as instrumental in this process; it is an important factor in the development of sophisticated approaches to learning which encourage students to actively seek out alternative perspectives that advance their knowledge and the integration of new ideas (Berk, 2007).

Students also emphasised the benefit of PTA in enabling them to apply their psychological knowledge to real world contexts:

*'It also forces you to apply your psychological knowledge to actual situations whereas before you would just write about theory and critique it and that's it done whereas the tasks encouraged you to think about how it fits in with life and stuff.'*

These authentic tasks were perceived positively by students and represented the kind of activities that they may encounter in 'real life'. There is a clear distinction made between knowing that and knowing how, that is, the difference between simply knowing about a topic, and being able to apply that knowledge. This is consistent with a deep approach to learning, characterised by a focus on underlying meaning and the ability to integrate and apply knowledge (Biggs, Leung & Kember, 2001). Rust (2002)

suggests that students may become intrinsically motivated and develop a deep approach to learning if the assessment is perceived to have real world relevance.

### **Impact of online PTA on student performance**

Developing an understanding of students' perceptions of assessment practices is important when exploring the relationship between assessment strategies and student learning (Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2005) however, it is equally important to consider student performance. Data available for the 2009/2010 academic year indicated that 68 per cent of the cohort achieved at least a B grade (equivalent to upper second class). Whilst this level of student attainment may represent a self-selecting group of high performing students, it may also reflect student response to the assessment method. Despite changes to the teaching team and an increase in class size, data available for the following academic year (2010/11) also suggested a positive role for online PTA within this module. Student satisfaction remained high; 100 per cent of students agreed that feedback was helpful and allowed them to enhance their learning, 91 per cent agreed that the module developed skills, and 64 per cent of the cohort achieved at least a B grade. This suggests that the mode of assessment may enhance student learning.

### **Conclusion**

The use of online PTA may have multiple benefits to the student including encouraging active engagement with course material, enhancing intrinsic motivation and facilitating reflection. Such forms of assessment can also have a positive effect on student learning if they relate to authentic 'real world' tasks and encourage the application of psychological knowledge. Modes of assessment such as PTA that incorporate formative tasks may, therefore, help address some of the challenges of current assessment practices within higher education, facilitating the process of self-reflection and allowing the student to make explicit the nature of their learning 'journey'.

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