Charting the territory: Assessment terrains in undergraduate education

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This paper explores potential sources of misalignment between lecturers' expectations of student learning and assessment and students' consequent attempts at engagement. Based on data from two research projects conducted at the regional 'Irwin' University, the authors chart the territory of undergraduate study in the context of increasing diversity, including many students who are the first in their families to attempt tertiary study. First there is an analysis of observable assessment practices typically undertaken as part of a three year program. Second lecturers' beliefs, knowledge and actions in relation to assessment are investigated and reported on. Their views on assessment are compared to students' reported experiences of assessment that lead to a sense of misengagement. Finally, the authors propose a set of non-negotiables that respond to student 'misengagement' and enhance alignment between the lecturers' and students' expectations of assessment.

Keywords: *mis-engagement, assessment conditions, non-negotiables*

Introduction

Picture the wary student traveller charting a course through three years of undergraduate education. With each new semester, the traveller confronts new sets of expectations, new ways of going about learning and demonstrating learning through methods of assessment that may consider students' learning style and be more or less authentic or formative. Along the same journey are the teachers, acting as guides through the landscape by developing content, learning activities and assessments that engage and interest them, and basing their practices and decisions on their knowledge and beliefs about learning and assessment.

The research reported here demonstrates that both students and lecturers would like their experiences of teaching, learning and assessment to be compatibly aligned but the evidence paints a somewhat different picture – one of misalignment. This paper highlights to some extent the nature of this misalignment, its potential causes and how they may be addressed to enhance student engagement. The assessment designs and practices that are chosen by university teachers often inhibit student engagement and may be a cause of students operating at a lower learning level than the student herself expects and/or desires.

The paper draws on findings from two research projects within the same institution to explore the potential sources of misalignment between lecturers' expectations of student learning and assessment and students' concurrent and consequent attempts at engagement within that framework. Three themes underpin the paper

1. Learning and assessment are two halves of the same walnut – they are not separate and cannot be thought of as different. One deeply affects the other.
2. Orientations to the task of learning can be the source of misalignment and misengagement. As the Centre for Studies in Higher Education (2002) identifies, assessment can be the last consideration for academic staff developing curriculum, yet it is the first consideration for students whose priority is to identify what they need to know or show to pass their course.
3. When actions are in conflict with beliefs, as Jack Whitehead (1989) notes, we are in a state of 'living contradiction'. The research reported here serves to highlight these contradictions as well as providing avenues for addressing them.

Research methods

This study draws on two recent research projects conducted at Irwin University. The principal research project, into assessment practice across three faculties at the University, has been a qualitative study based on two data collection methods, content analysis and semi-structured interviews. These in turn led to data collection in two phases. First, researchers conducted a textual analysis of course outlines regarding assessment practice, and secondly, they conducted an analysis of the emerging assessment profile through interviews with academic staff.   Prior to the textual analysis the researchers chose the most popular three year undergraduate program in each faculty and planned a study pathway that replicated a typical student journey, utilising core, and required courses and the most popular electives.

To begin the textual analysis, the researchers analysed every course outline from each of the programs, trying to get a sense of what a student would experience over 24 courses. The research scrutinised a total of 72 courses. A matrix was built around the number of assessment items, methods of assessment used, method of making judgments about student work (e.g. criteria-based or non-criteria based), the types of criteria most commonly used, item weighting, length of assessment items, graded and non-graded assessment. A second matrix was constructed mapping the graduate attributes across the same programs. These provided details of how often each attribute was being assessed and how this was being carried out. The second part of the textual analysis involved mapping of assessment items on a random set of course outlines selected from each of the three Faculties. Fifteen introductory (first year) courses and 30 advanced courses were selected for this process. The second matrix was also applied to map the graduate attributes alongside these courses.

The results from the textual analysis, as well as providing rich data for the study, served to inform the guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews conducted with self-selected course coordinators from each of the faculties. With permission gained from the Faculty Deans, staff either volunteered or were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview that lasted about forty-five minutes. Questions focused on three main areas: what academics know in terms of assessment, what they believe and what they do in their assessment practices. The questions probed staff perceptions about their knowledge of assessment practices and their beliefs about assessment practices in higher education, and findings from the research show that these have a profound influence on the assessment practices implemented by the University's academic staff.

Data have been analysed in a variety of methods. Simple quantitative methods were used to chart aspects of the assessment practices from the first two data collection phases, the content analysis. These are detailed in the findings that follow. Data analysis using coding and themes

were used to analyse the interviews, and these provided a 'thick description' of the rationales and understandings behind assessment practices at the University.

The second research project on which data has been drawn was a study of the perceptions of first year students about their study, focussing on those who have found engagement difficult. This study had two parts. First, a questionnaire was distributed among a large sample of first year students (*n*=450) to ascertain issues in their first year experience and to screen potential participants for the second stage of data collection which was a qualitative investigation through semi-structured interviews. A total of eight students participated in the interviews and provided rich data about their experiences. Data were analysed using the methods associated with 'grounded theory' and relied on constant questioning and constant comparison.

Findings and discussion – unearthing 'misalignment'

Across the three faculties investigated in the first study, data revealed that students were required to submit between 96 and 99 assessment tasks over the three year period of their respective program, an average of 4 tasks per course, and 16 per semester. Furthermore, several of these assessment tasks comprised multiple submissions. A course with four assessment tasks could have up to 10 submissions, some of low weighting (5-10%). Examinations were the most common assessment type, followed by assignments and essays. These made up over half of the assessments a student might experience in three years in any faculty. For one faculty, examinations were the three most popular categories – end-of-semester examination, mid-semester examination, practical examination. Of the other two faculties, one had end semester examinations as the most frequent assessment type and the other had assignments, essays, then 'tests' as the three most popular. In the tables (1-3) that follow, a comparison can be made that supports these findings. Each table identifies the number of times a particular assessment type is used within a three year program of study. . The vertical axis denotes how many times the assessment type is used across 24 courses. For each table, n indicates the total number of assessment tasks in that time. In the context of a new University in a state which has shunned examinations as a primary assessment tool since 1972, and with over 50% of students identifying as first-generational, it seems remarkable that the primacy of examinations still holds sway

Interestingly, interviews with course coordinators indicated that many of them disliked examinations. They felt they did not adequately account for student learning and worked against some students who might demonstrate their learning more appropriately through other, more authentic means. However, as is indicated in the comments included below, some felt that examinations were the only way to ensure student work was their own. In interview, university teachers did refer to examinations failing to address cheating, being likely to cause surface learning or 'cramming' for examinations and being responsible for a lack of feedback to students on their achievement in the examination; in addition several admitted to reluctance to assess using examination. Nevertheless these reasons were still not compelling enough to stop the widespread practice of centralised examinations at the university. For example, three university teachers commented in interview:

> Unfortunately, the only way you can really tell if the student's work is the student's, is with an invigilated exam.' (Interview 8)
> 'I'm still not convinced that exams will actually demonstrate the skills that I think (subject) students should have, and I hated my experiences as a student, I hate that you've only got 2 hours.' (Interview 10a)

'It [examination] plays to some people's strengths, it helps some people who are very good…at learning for 2 days and then forgetting it, when they'd replicated it or in an exam paper… I do think exams really aren't a great…context for learning…' (Interview 30)

Table 1: Assessment types encountered by students in Faculty One's program in a three year program
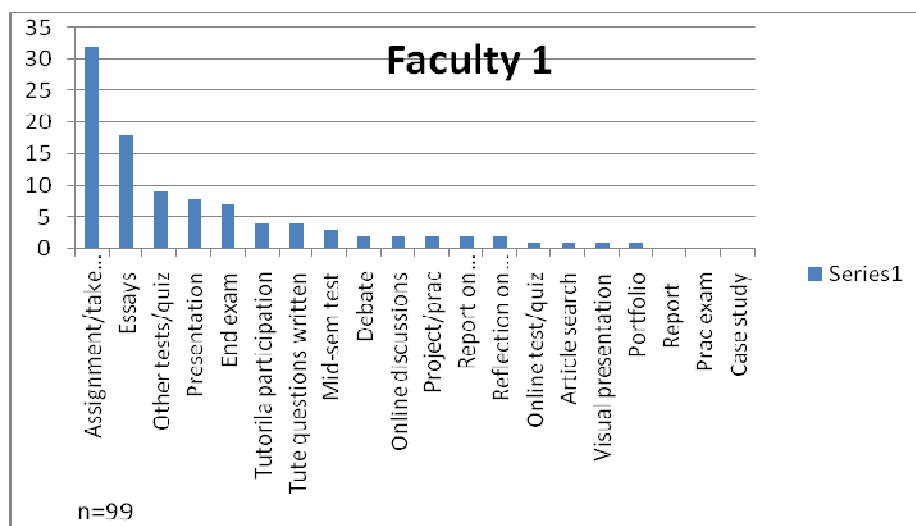

Table 2: Assessment types encountered by students in Faculty Two's program in a three year program
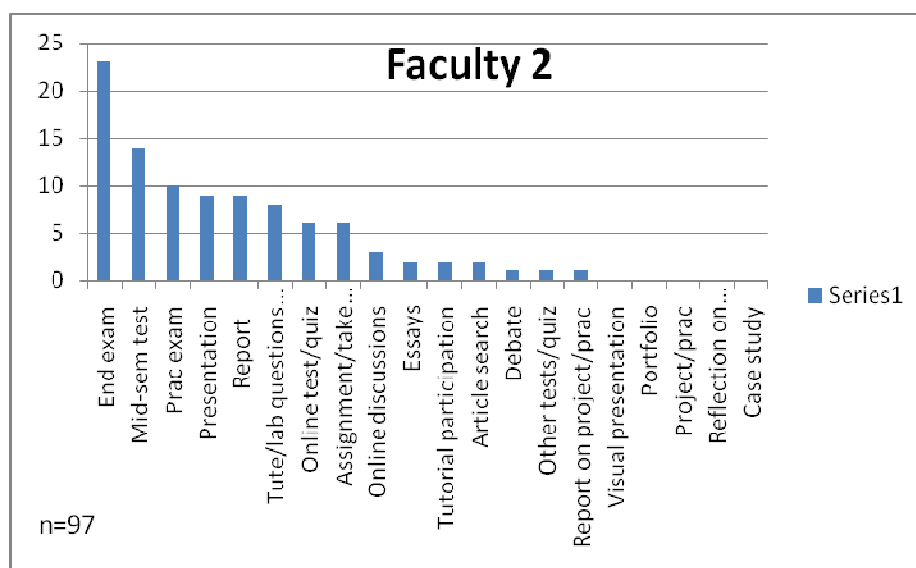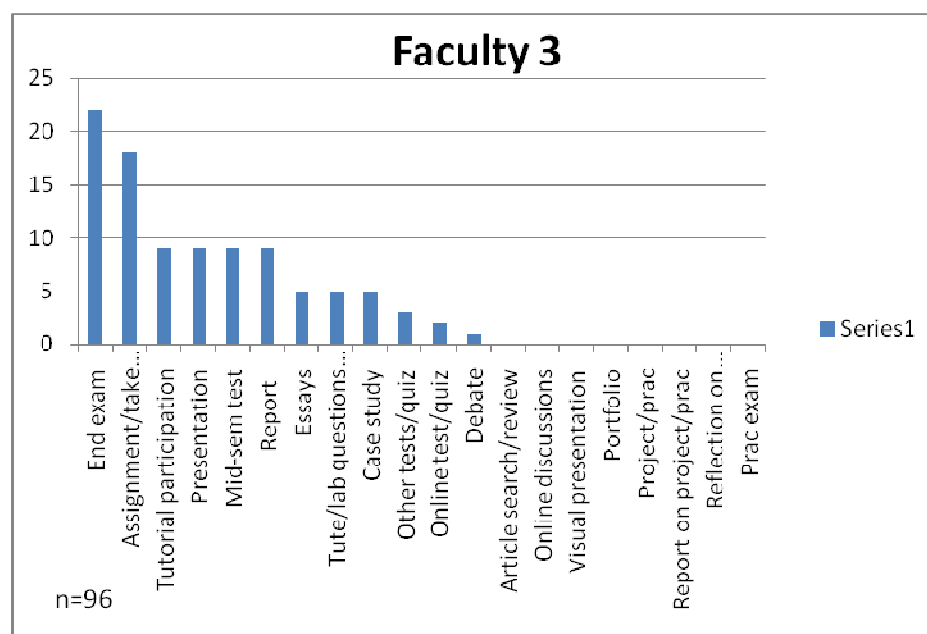
Table 3: Assessment types encountered by students in Faculty Three's program in a three year program

The findings reveal that there is a wide variety of assessment type evident across each faculty of the university as discussed above, although the vast majority of the assessment sits within one or two assessment types that are prevalent within the discipline. Assessment tasks that featured an aspect of student choice (typically a choice of subject in assignments) were present in half of the courses analysed. Group work assessment tasks featured in less than one third of the courses analysed. The tables do show the lack of frequency and lack of significance that these different tasks have. The practice of over-relying on a narrow range of assessment tasks leads to what Hounsell (2007) calls 'diminishing return' – each time the task type is utilised it becomes less valid and reliable as an assessment method because it advantages the same students continuously, whereas variety in assessment task type has been shown to enhance the educational outcomes for students from a diverse range of backgrounds (Brown, 2004). Such a cohort exists at Irwin University. Conversely, and at the other end of the spectrum, is the possibility of a university teacher implementing a more authentic assessment task – perhaps a visual presentation, portfolio or online activity that the research at Irwin University shows are rarely used more than once. Students learn to do this task that may develop skills and knowledge transferable beyond the University context but it has limited return in the assessment regime of the University because the skill of completing the task is not assessed again.

Authentic assessment is that which is completed in real life or life-like contexts. It is valued by students, who view it as challenging, and being able to demonstrate effectively what they have learnt (Centre for Studies in Higher Education 2002). Evidence of authentic assessment tasks was limited in the content analysis, even when utilising Mueller's (2006) defining attributes of traditional and authentic assessment. When asked about authentic tasks, some of the university teachers interviewed commented on meeting graduate attributes and increased student satisfaction when authentic assessment methods were utilised. However the majority of them did not use the term and only referred to the concept when heavily prompted.

The study also explored the issue of using criteria in assessment tasks for evidence of authenticity. Data revealed that in each faculty, the most commonly used criteria for assessment were presentation, referencing, understanding content, analysis and style. These criteria do not accurately reflect either the University's graduate attributes or even the learning outcomes identified in the courses analysed. Additionally, it was found that course coordinators used different words for similar criteria (eg. critical thinking/synthesis/drawing conclusions) and this lack of consistency made it difficult for students to build up a vocabulary for assessment activity. Criteria relating to higher order cognitive skills, such as evaluate, plan, predict, recommend or create, which require students to demonstrate what they can do as well as what they know, are almost non-existent in the list of criteria used to assess students. Even when a task asks students to authentically engage, they are seldom rewarded for it because it is not included as an assessable element of the task.

Rust (2002) cites feedback as an area that requires significant improvement in higher education if assessment is to support and positively influence student learning, rather than maintaining its traditional roles of judgement and ranking. In general, the university teachers in this study acknowledged the value of specific and timely feedback for student learning, but at the same time stated a difficulty in giving good feedback in a timely and effective way. Most were reluctant to read drafts for reasons of time and equity, although one respondent has a policy of students submitting twice so that they can take advantage of feedback. A second respondent utilised a person from a related industry to give feedback in order to enhance its authenticity. A third respondent highlighted the tutor's role in engaging with students in relation to assessment. It is largely through interaction with the tutor rather than the lecturer that students come to understand what is required in their assessment. This links to the oft-stated problem of not paying sessional staff adequately for marking, as giving good quality written feedback takes time. Interview data also revealed that University teachers did not understand the integral role of formative assessment in allowing them to gather information about what students know and can do, in order to make decisions about adjusting teaching activities to help students to achieve learning outcomes. Furthermore, no-one in the interviews made reference to the use of peer or self assessment as a method of feedback. Yet Chappius and Chappius (2008), Gibbs and Simpson (2004), Earl (2003) and others have shown that students are powerful instructional resources for one another when peer assessment is utilised in a formative feedback loop. Students can use feedback to improve, reflect on what they have learnt, think about how they learn and devise strategies that will help them to learn more. Students can use each other as resources rather than as competitive reference points. When formative assessment is used well, students and university teachers can identify for each individual their current practice, their learning goals and strategies for closing the gap. This would significantly reduce the extent of misalignment in teaching, learning and assessment at University. However, as the second study revealed, the opposite often occurs.

Misalignment leads to misengagement

The second research report referred to in this paper was concerned with the issue of student engagement among first year undergraduates at Irwin University. Data collected in national surveys over the last ten years have revealed much about the issue of student disengagement. Authors such as Krause (2005a & b) and James & McInnis (2001) have developed a wealth of material on the issue. Students now arrive at university with differences in their learning expectations (Darlaston-Jones, Pike, Cohen, Young, & Haunold, 2003) due perhaps to the prevalence of overzealous marketing in a competitive tertiary education market (James,

2002). Studies by Pargetter (2000) Peel, (2000) and Yorke (2000) report that students are unaware of the demands of independent and self-directed learning experienced at a tertiary level. The purpose of this local study was to explore in some depth the perceptions and attitudes of students at one regional university with a high level of first generation University students. Findings from the two steps of research developed a thick description (Tobin, 2006) of the issue and one new perspective in particular emerged. Students interviewed during the project revealed that they had clear goals and determination to succeed but stated that they were often frustrated by the certain practices within the University's teaching and learning programmes. In particular they referred to assessment practices in the University. The term 'disengagement' was clearly inappropriate to describe the approach and attitudes of these students and the authors of the report suggested that the term 'misengagement' better reflected the dissonance between students' expectations and the university teachers' practice. One detailed example of practice that led to the idea of misengagement follows. Two students both failing a course, highlight the frustration of not being allowed to view a mid-semester examination that they had failed, to ascertain their mistakes and take some action or seek advice to ensure that they would not fail again. The first said:

> I got 40% and it was a 45 or 47% pass rate - it wasn't 50 - and I just felt that I didn't know much in there. But because they don't give you exams back, you don't know what you went well on, and where you went wrong. They don't give them back, they don't show you anything. You have to go and see them, but because the head coordinator isn't here at the moment, I haven't seen him for a while. (2405)

The second said in response to the question:

> ***Did you get to keep your paper?***
> Well I didn't get to keep it, I sort of looked at it for 15 minutes in the tute. Yeah I felt angry that in the _____exam, because you didn't get them back. I hadn't even remembered the questions. You know, sure this is what you got, but you don't remember, you know, the questions, whatever that was.
> ***Was that something that would have never happened at school? You would have got your paper back; you'd be able to go over it, maybe you'd keep it.***
> And yeah they would like spend a lesson going over it, especially if you did as bad. (3007)

This refusal to hand back examination papers and give feedback was one issue among others raised by the students interviewed. They perceived that assessment was simply a summative process, for grading purposes, and gave no indication to the students of their progress. Feedback was clearly something that they yearned for, had experienced in schools and which they were prepared to accept, however bluntly it was put. Their perceptions raise questions about applying the term 'disengaged' to certain students because the research suggests that, in this regard, it is the teachers, through their assessment practices that are actually generating the 'uncoupling' with their subject.

Aligning expectations for enhanced engagement

The American Association for Higher Education (2005) states that assessment of student learning begins with educational values. Assessment then reflects the values that university teachers hold with regard to student learning. Part of the research process discussed here was to uncover beliefs and values that university teachers at Irwin University hold – either tacitly or explicitly and how these might affect the consequent practices related to both learning and assessment. The document analysis and consequent interview process provided a rich source of information that showed in general while university teachers are cognisant of many of the issues raised in the assessment literature they are not always confident or in a position to

effect change at the level required. Some interviews highlighted university teachers as being in a state of 'living contradiction' (Whitehead 1989) Research interviews with University teachers revealed that some were cognisant of such a contradiction but expressed uncertainty about how to address it.

There are many areas in which academic staff can enhance alignment between their own expectations and the aspirations of students. This is especially dependent on the university teacher's knowledge and beliefs in relation to assessment. By and large, university teachers do not purposefully use assessment punitively even though it can be perceived as such by students. If we accept that each party is genuinely trying to engage in productive learning, the source of misalignment is evident in the studies: the students' orientation to assessment is often at cross-purposes to that of the university teacher.

In drawing together the findings and themes raised in the two research projects the authors have developed a list of 'non-negotiables'. The communication of these non-negotiables they have found useful in workshops developing university teachers' approaches to assessment. These are:

- The need to commit to, and develop, a range of formative assessment practices, including feedback, self and peer assessment
- A focus on developing a real sense of alignment between aims, teaching and learning, and assessment and between teachers' and students' expectations
- A commitment to fostering authentic contexts for learning and assessment
- A commitment to transparency in assessment processes
- Stressing the primacy of assessment *as* learning, rather than *of* learning

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