REDUCING AND DIVERSIFYING ASSESSMENT IN 1ST YEAR SOCIAL SCIENCE: CASE STUDY FROM UCD ASSESSMENT REDESIGN PROJECT

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Name of Module: SPOL10010 Introduction to Theories and Concepts.

1st Year Assessment Redesign Goal

The changes made to the above module were done as part of UCD's Assessment Redesign project. The overall aim of the project was the Redesign and development of assessments that encourage active, high quality student learning (effectiveness) whilst also being most time-efficient for staff and students (efficiency). Nine assessment principle had under-pinned the project (See Table 1).

Table 1. 1st Year *Assessment Redesign* Principles

- Regular low stakes assessment with feedback (assessment FOR Learning)
- In class student peer review of learning (assessment FOR Learning)
- Well-structured collaborative learning and assessment
- Effective sequencing of module learning and assessment activities
- Active/task-based learning using authentic assessments
- Reduce student assessment workload within and across modules
- Create space in the curriculum for inducting learners into the key discipline/subject concepts
- Develop a strategic approach to the selection of assessment methods, i.e. mapping assessments to 'core' learning outcomes for the stage
- Implement a range of approaches to streamline assessment workload for staff and students

Description of Original and Redesign ed Module in Applied Social Sciences: 'Introduction to Theories and Concepts'.

In this core 5 credit 1st year module in the BSc in Social Science, students are expected to be able to a) Outline the principles of welfare, b) Explain the concepts necessary for analysing social policy and c) Use these concepts to analyse examples of social policy. There are approximately 210 students in the module.

As part of my involvement in the Assessment Redesign project, I have Redesign ed the assessment of this module. Last year (2011/2012), students submitted a 1000 word essay at week six (40%) and at the end of the semester students did a one hour exam (60%). Students attended two tutorials, one in the first half of the semester and one in the second half of semester. However these tutorials were in removed for financial reasons.

Rationale for improving the 'Effectiveness' of new assessment based on assessment principles:

- As part of the Assessment Redesign project, I completed an exercise that mapped the assessments to the programme outcomes4, 5. As an outcome of this exercise, it was highlighted that there was an overemphasis on the written examination format in the programme. There was concern that students were under pressure competing essays for both Sociology and Social Policy at the same time, when they were only in UCD a relatively short time. In addition, this exercise highlighted that there were very few assessments in Stage 1 that encouraged students to visually/graphically represent their understanding. For this reason, I decided to use a concept map3 which was identified as an alternative to the traditional written examination (Principle 5: Active/task-based learning using authentic assessments). This module centres on key concepts in social policy so the concept map seemed like a very appropriate learning tool as it enables students develop links between the concepts presented (see Figure 1). This is an important outcome of our programme.
- Given that students would be less familiar with participation in the development and sharing of concept maps, and that in the first year we wanted to encourage more assessment FOR learning opportunities (see Figure 1), this assessment received low-stakes grades (20%) (Principles 1 and 2). Students received full 20% for attendance.
- Developing a sense of identity in social science was also highlighted as a gap in stage one of the programme. It was envisaged that concept maps undertaken as part of an in-class group discussion would encourage first-year students to develop more dialogue with me around the role and activities related to social policy and social science. In addition, this activity allowed students to learn from each other and begin to recognise their peers as a useful resource (Principles 3: Well-structured collaborative learning and assessment)
- The change has enhanced the sequencing of activities of the module (Principle 4).

Rationale for improving the 'Efficiency' of new assessment based on assessment principles:

- The timing of the essay was moved to the end of the semester and this reduced the number of essays at the mid-semester as demanded in other parallel modules.
- From the staff perceptive, I shifted my time to the use of more classroom small group teaching with students instead of spending time correcting essays during the semester. This changed my workload emphasis. In addition, students had more interaction with other students, more interaction with me and are able to develop an important link with the School from an early date in their first semester in University. I feel this shift in workload is a more valuable use of my time. (Principle.9 Implement a range of approaches to streamline assessment workload for staff and students)

Therefore, the following changes were made to this module. This year (2012-2013) students attended a tutorial, facilitated by me (8 x 25 students), in the first half of the semester where they engaged in creating an in-class group concept map[3] of their understanding of the material. Students were encouraged in the tutorial to share, contrast and compare their interpretation of the concept map with other students[7]. Concept maps articulate the interconnection of concepts in a graphical manner[3.] Students were given 20% for participation in this activity, completed by week 7. In addition, at the end of the semester students complete a 1000 word essay (80%) on week 12. I have removed the end-of-semester written examination.

Findings

INITIAL FINDINGS/OBSERVATIONS ON EFFECTIVENESS

Student engagement and attendance (i.e. nearly 95%) in the concept-map tutorial session was very positive. Students developed different skills in presenting, giving a visual overview and being able to compare and contrast other group's interconnection of concepts, as one student noted:

I found it useful to encourage our own independent thinking around the ideas that had been presented and explained in the lectures - it's helpful in developing an understanding of the concepts to think for ourselves about how they are inter-related.

This activity allowed students to get some feedback on their learning in class, by judging how their own interpretations compared to other students. This type of peer feedback is not easily gained in an individual essay or examination context. A significant outcome of this type of more interactive assessment (20% for participation) was that students became more familiar with each other and they listened to the different rich experiences, this in turn should add to their wider understanding of social science. It appeared to improve the sociability and sense of identity with the programme and it also gave me a stronger understanding of the students, their backgrounds and their view. This was supported by the comments of the students, for example:

I found the tutorial very beneficial and I felt like I got to know my class mates and the lecturer in a more intimate surrounding. I felt like I did participate and that I enjoyed giving my opinion on matters.

I went out of the tutorial knowing more of my classmates which I would have not got to know if it was not for the class.
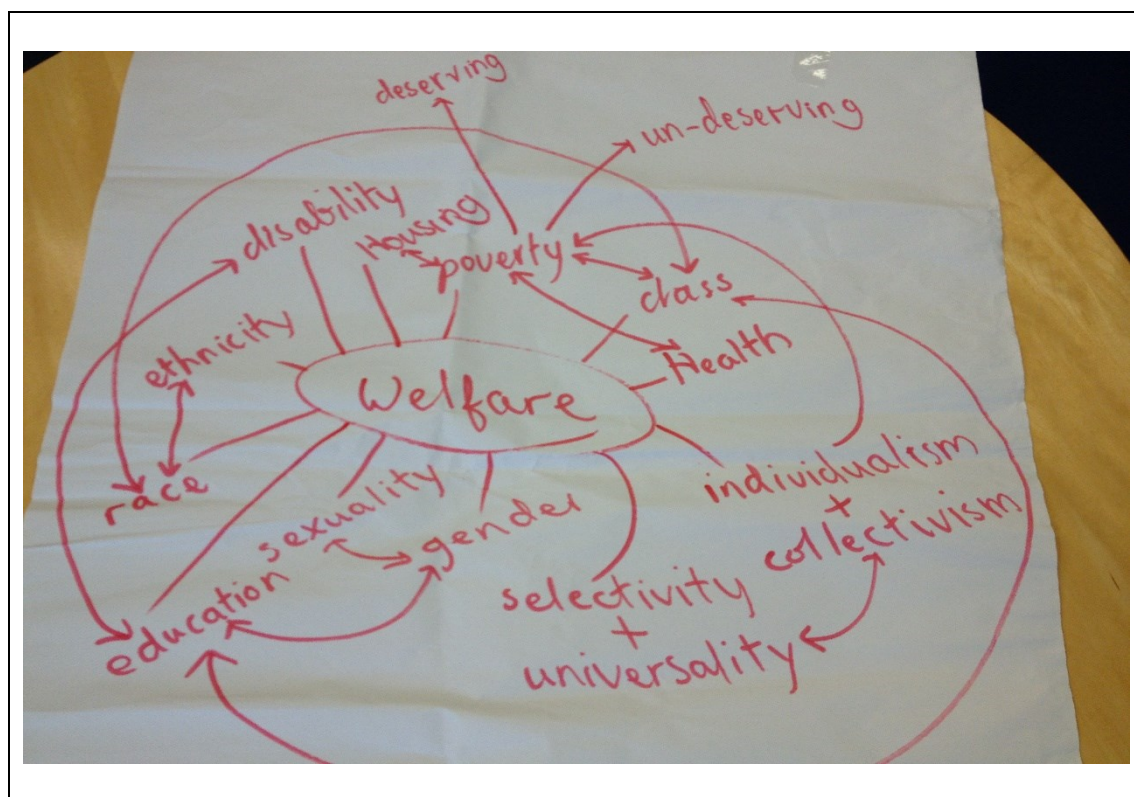

Figure 1: An example of one of the In-Class Group Concept Maps (Assessed for participation)

In the tutorial sessions, I described how the concept maps could be a useful tool in structuring their next and final assignment, i.e. the end of semester essay. There was therefore more connectivity between the module's two assignments.

INITIAL FINDINGS/OBSERVATIONS ON EFFICIENCY

In exploring the difference in my time between the assessment approaches this year and last year, this year's assessment demonstrated an overall reduction in my time involved in assessment. In particular, the correction time associated with 210 students (approximately 42 hours) was replaced by more in-class inactive feedback opportunities for students (8 tutorial hours), at an earlier time in the module (See Table 2). There was an overall reduction in my assessment time by approximately 32 hours.

The students' workload for assessment in the mid-semester was incorporated into class time, at a time when they had other module assessment demands. One student noted that: *What I found was extremely beneficial of the tutorial was that it took a certain amount of pressure off me as a first year student as I wasn't obliged to submit a mid-term assignment/essay. I was extremely busy during this time with other assignments due not to mention exams I had to sit within the course of social science.*

Student workload at the end of the semester may well have been similar, i.e. essay versus examination preparation time. This will need to be explored further with the students.
Table 2: Approximation of Staff Workload for Assessment Tasks in both years

Assessment Tasks	Time 1 (Hours) (Module 2011-2012)		Time 2 (Hours) (Module 2012-2013)	
	1000 word Essay (week 7) 40%	1 hour examination 60%	In-Class development of Concept map (week 7) (20%)	1000 word essay (end of semester) (80%)
Setting assessment	2	2	4	2
Feedback to students (Assessment FOR Learning)	10	2	8 (tutorials)	10
Correction time	42	40	-	42
Assessment Administration by lecturer.	2	1	1	2
Sub-total	56	45	13	56
Overall total	101 hours		69 hours	
Reduction on Hours between Time 1 and Time 2	32 hours			

Overall conclusion

This quite simple change has given the students: more diversity in how they are assessed; allowed more dialogue around the identity of being a social science student; was more sociable and it should reduce some of the examination pressure at the end of the semester. It was a reduction in and a better use of my time with students.

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