

Alternative assessment as a tool in support of teaching and learning (some preliminary findings)¹

Steven Van Tittelboom
Department of Language and Communication
Ghent University
Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 136
B9000 Gent, Belgium

steven.vantittelboom@ugent.be

ABSTRACT: Internetbased assessment is used to support learning in the on-line course, “English for Law Students”, offered at Ghent University. This paper sketches the experiences of the course team and students. It meets a need – expressed by the European Commission – for the analysis of innovative practice and pilot projects. Overall, the complex processes associated with formative assessment in the learning society are contrasted with the equally complex processes associated with summative assessment in the learning economy. A more extensive evaluation and dissemination document will be prepared in 2004.

Background

Activities undertaken by the language centre of Ghent University within the framework of IBA are largely centred around alternative assessment practises in the on-line course “English for Law Students”. This is an English language course which aims to improve the reading and writing skills of undergraduate students at the Faculty of Law. This on-line course is delivered in a virtual learning environment designed at the language centre. “English for Law Students” was developed and organised during the first half of the EU-funded project -Internetbased Assessment - that is the focus of this symposium.

The course integrates interactive exercises with automatic feedback and direct links to reference materials (grammars and dictionaries), which students can consult at their convenience, and assignments which are carried out in small groups (5-8 students) in an on-line discussion forum. Forum work involves peer assessment. In addition, all students have a personal space in the environment where they are asked to perform certain assignments and self-assessment tasks. Tutors monitor and guide the learning process and give feedback on assignments and assessment activities but avoid frequent interventions as the course is largely student-driven.

The course has a modular structure and consists of 5 modules. Each module lasts for three weeks. In the first two weeks, students independently work their way through units of interactive exercises supported by programmed feedback and reference materials. They are also required to start working on a number of assignments which need to be carried out in groups in the on-line discussion forum. In the third week of each module there is a traditional face-to-face class session which is tutor-driven and which serves as a consolidation stage.

¹ Paper presented as part of a symposium on ‘elearning and etesting: Explorations in the reconciliation of the learning society and the audit society’ held at the European Conference for Educational Research, Hamburg, 17-20 September, 2003. The work reported in this paper has been partly funded through the EU Minerva programme for development work in the realms of ICT and distance education (project 91894-CP-I-2001-SE-MINERVA-M).

The course is not part of the Law curriculum. It is an optional course for which the students receive no credits. The course combines formative assessment and summative assessment. At the end of the course, the students submit a final assignment which is marked. In addition, there is a formal final test. Students who successfully complete the course are entitled to a certificate. It has been suggested that the course could be added to the Law curriculum. However, as yet there are no concrete plans in response to this proposal.

Formative Course Assessment

The course includes three formative assessment practices. Students prepare *Statements of Relevance*; they engage in *interactive exercises*; and they participate in *peer assessment*.

Statements of Relevance

Each week students are invited to reflect on their own learning experience and record their reflections in short statements of about 100 words. The students are thoroughly briefed beforehand on the purpose and ideas behind the Statements of Relevance. To help them get started, they are presented with a number of questions which they can ask themselves. These questions are repeated throughout the course by the tutors so as to keep the students on track. However, students are entirely free to explore and investigate other topics as long as these pertain directly to their own learning experience. Some examples of questions which are given as prompts:

- How can I reflect upon my own learning process and assess myself?
- Which goals can I set myself?
- What have I learnt this week? (knowledge, skills, strategies)
- How will I benefit from this?
- Did I encounter any difficulties?
- How did I try to overcome these difficulties? Did I succeed or not?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses in English? How can I enhance my weak points?
- Have I made any progress?
- How do I learn a language? Does this tell me anything about my learning style?

Preparing Statements of Relevance is an exercise in introspection. This is not marked. Instead, the statements are read by the tutor and, where relevant, commented upon.

Interactive exercises

Students read reference materials, do multiple choice, matching, gap-filling etc. and receive programmed feedback messages after each answer (immediate feedback) or at the end of the exercise (delayed feedback). The feedback is customised, which means that there is different feedback for different answers given by the student. Feedback both guides and follows students as they make their way on the learning trail. The students assess themselves on the basis of the feedback and the score indications they receive.

Peer-assessment of forum activities

Students are asked to assess and give constructive comments on the contributions made by their group members.

Summative Course Assessment

Statements of Relevance

At the end of the course, students have to submit a final Statement of Relevance (1250-1750 words) discussing and summarising the reflections they have recorded throughout the course. This final statement is assessed by the tutor in terms of its grammar, vocabulary, structure, style and register.

Interactive exercises

The scores earned by the students are not tracked or retained. Nevertheless, the final test assesses whether students have achieved the objectives covered in the interactive exercises.

Peer-assessment of forum activities

The quality of the comments is not directly marked but tutor assessment of the students' activities is incorporated in their final score for the course.

Reflections

Outcomes of the Ghent experience with Internet-based alternative assessment are described below. These findings, of course, are provisional. They are included in this paper to meet a need – expressed by the European Commission - for the analysis of innovative practice and pilot projects, for the comparative analysis of e-learning in Europe; and for the identification of critical issues concerning future policy for the pedagogical use of ICT (EC call for e-learning proposals, DG EAC/61/03, 19th July, 2003).

The insights discussed below are the product of internal evaluations in Ghent. They are an attempt to meet the need for shared expertise and know-how in the field of Internet-based assessment. Through dissemination activities like this European symposium, isolated islands of practice may ultimately be transformed into extended communities of practice. Good and bad experiences with assessment can be communicated with other practitioners in the field. Ultimately, this exchange might be able to sow the seeds of a code of practice for internet-based assessment in Higher Education.

Self-assessment in “Statements of Relevance”

Strengths

1. Students are invited to take more responsibility for their own learning. This can intensify and deepen the learning experience.
2. Through reflective learning, students become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses with respect to the language they are learning and their learning behaviour in general.
3. Students assess themselves in view of the course objectives. They remain focused and appear to have a greater chance of achieving the objectives.

4. Students can voice their needs and concerns and as such help to shape the course.
5. The tutors receive feedback from the students throughout the course (and not merely at the end), which makes it possible to constantly improve and adjust the course and the methods applied.
6. Assessment becomes an integral and meaningful part of the course and the learning process. It is no longer something which comes at the end of the course and stands apart from the actual learning process.
7. The emphasis is on personal development in the students' further academic and professional careers and not on the final mark they receive at the end of the course.
8. Self-assessment and peer-assessment can reduce the assessment burden of the tutor. There is more time for well-targeted feedback in support of learning.

Weaknesses

1. There is a tense relationship between the formative assessment (self and peer-assessment) and summative assessment practices (final test and final assignment). Towards the end of the course, the students were distracted from their objectives and real needs by the final test and their final score.
2. Self-assessment may conflict with the teaching and learning methods which in the past were promoted and fostered at secondary schools and universities in Belgium: students absorb, internalise and reproduce the knowledge presented to them by an expert teacher.
3. Promoting and establishing a new learning and assessment culture takes time, which is a precious resource.
4. The skill of self-assessment is slowly acquired. Few students manage to acquire it during a single course. (see Fig.1)

Select the statement which best reflects your experience with writing the statements of relevance.

- 1: I did not succeed in evaluating my own performance**
- 2: I found it very difficult to assess my own performance**
- 3: Evaluating myself was difficult at first but I got the hang of it**
- 4: I had no problem at all to assess my own performance**

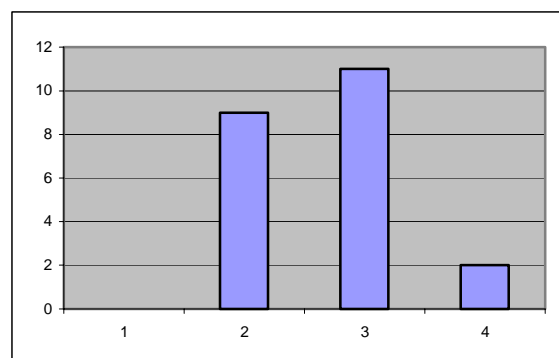


Fig. 1: Self-assessment as a learning process

5. Psychological resistance to self and peer-evaluation. These types of assessment are new to many undergraduate law students at Ghent University. Many students are not used to assessment by any other person than the expert. (see Fig. 2)

I liked assessing my own performance in the SoRs.

- 1: I strongly disagree**
- 2: I disagree**
- 3: No opinion**
- 4: I agree**
- 5: I strongly agree**

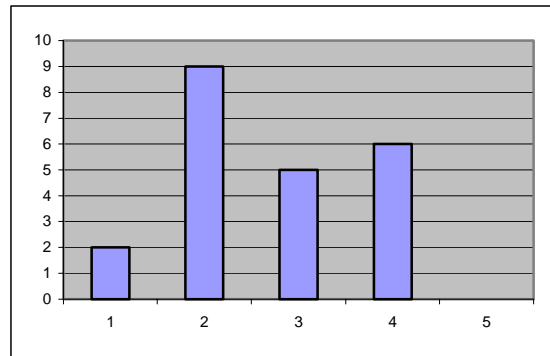


Fig. 2: Psychological resistance to self-assessment

6. Many students feel powerless. They do not know how to deal with self-assessment. There is thus a strong need for guidance. (step-by-step instructions, checklists, examples,...) (see Fig. 3)

I have learnt a lot about my own learning experience, my strengths and weaknesses from my weekly SoRs.

- 1: I strongly disagree
- 2: I disagree
- 3: No opinion
- 4: I agree
- 5: I strongly agree

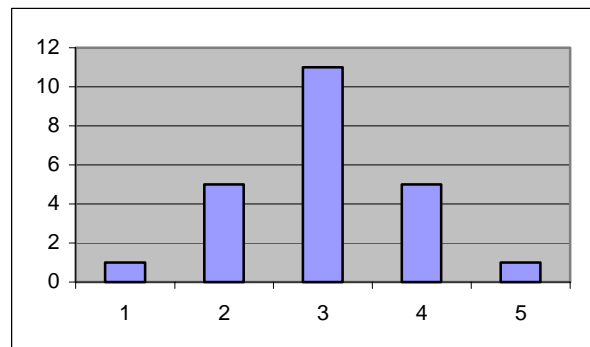


Fig. 3: Sense of powerlessness

7. Time management problems: the tutors may be overwhelmed by the tasks of monitoring, reading and responding to the texts submitted by the students. Similarly, assessment activities add to the already heavy workload of law undergraduates.

Self-assessment in on-line interactive exercises

Strengths

1. Students, especially the ones who are shy and more reserved, enjoy doing exercises at their own pace and receiving feedback messages without the risk of losing face and being corrected by an expert teacher in a formal institutional setting.
2. Students receive more individual feedback than they would get in a traditional class session.
3. Feedback encourages and guides the student and supports learning.
4. Self-assessment reduces the assessment burden of the tutor.
5. Encouragement and promotion of self-directed learning (linked to the reduction of contact hours) is set out as one of the institutional objectives of Ghent University.

Weaknesses

1. There is no possibility for direct intervention while the students are doing the interactive exercises. Feedback needs to be carefully considered and planned beforehand.
2. This type of learning and assessment is particularly suited for mature and self-directed learners. Many undergraduates cannot yet handle the freedom implied in self-assessment.

3. Tutors receive no direct feedback on the content of the exercises. The following questions remain unanswered: Is an exercise well-received? Is it challenging enough? Is it too difficult? Does it serve its purpose?

Peer-assessment in forum activities

Strengths

1. Students feel that their messages are read, receive direct feedback on their work and may be stimulated by this.
2. Students learn to look at problems from different angles as they are confronted with many different views and perspectives.
3. Low-stakes assessment allows students to perform in a more relaxed and natural way.
4. Assessment becomes an integral and meaningful part of the course.
5. Peer-assessment reduces the assessment burden of the tutor.

Weaknesses

1. Students can feel awkward about evaluating and commenting on the work of their peers.
2. Students need to be explicitly instructed on what to assess. (step-by-step instructions, checklists,...)

Further work

As noted, this paper is a preliminary report. The points listed above will be further explored and documented; and the products of these activities will be disseminated during the last year of the project (2004).