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Assessment: case studies, experience and practice from higher education

Peter Schwartz & Graham Webb (eds)

What are the practical difficulties faced when introducing computer-based testing for the first time? Does the software work? Might the computer crash before saving the test results? Is the response time fast enough? Is it feasible to allow tests to be taken at any time during the term, given the human propensity to leave things to the last minute? These are issues addressed in the first case study on assessment in this book of case studies edited by Peter Schwartz and Graham Webb.

This book presents a selection of such case studies about various issues in assessment. Higher education practitioners from a variety of disciplines, practising in universities in the UK, USA, Australia and New Zealand have contributed. Despite the diversity of countries and disciplines, I found myself relating to many of the situations raised in the book, albeit perhaps experiencing slightly different manifestations. Though written by different people, each case study description has the same structure. The issues raised in a case study are described first, such as the issue of managing difficulties arising from replacing pencil and paper tests with computer-based tests for campus-wide assessment. The context of the case is then explained; for example the type of institution, the number of students and their backgrounds and the technology being used. The case is then described in detail with a reflective break whenever an action has to be taken or some decision made. At this point, questions are asked to invite the reader to think about what they would do in this circumstance, such as *What steps would you recommend taking to improve the performance of the computer-testing programme? What do you think was actually done?* Each case ends with a case reporter's discussion that examines the success of the assessment and analyses the lessons that have been learned from the experience. Thus the book encourages active participation by the reader and is ideal for stimulating discussion if used by a group.

The case studies are grouped into themes. The first case study was part of a section on using Information Technology to help cope with large classes. Other themes included reflective assessment techniques, perhaps using journals, portfolios or peer-assessment, the development of assessment that addresses the needs of the individual student, and general problems in implementing assessment. An interesting section looked at the practice of institution-wide assessment in the US. The aim of such assessment is to document and improve educational effectiveness. It may focus on general educational aims, such as critical thinking or information literacy, or on the actual discipline studied, with the aim of improving the curriculum or teaching. Such assessment appears to be closely related to what we would call quality assurance in a UK context.

I found this book interesting and useful for several reasons. The detailed description of the case studies enabled a more in-depth analysis than is often found in books that focus on the assessment strategies themselves. This book does not, nor does it claim to, give a comprehensive picture of the different types of assessment and how to use them effectively. Other books that capably fulfil this role include Knight (1995) and Brown *et al*. (1997). What this book of case studies did particularly well was to provide an appreciation of the wide range of factors that influence the success of a particular strategy. These include the personalities of the people involved, the culture and sensibilities of people who might be asked to alter their approach to teaching, the support or otherwise of management in an institution and the perceptiveness and open-mindedness of those involved when responding to certain situations — all these factors had an effect in different case studies. Some of the situations were messy, with people resigning at critical moments and objectives not being achieved after years of effort. Such all too common occurrences are not usually described in books about pedagogy that aim to give advice and ideas about assessment.

The encouragement to reflect was a particular strength of this book and hence would allow it to be used as a starting point for small group study and discussion about assessment. It would be a valuable text in an action learning group. I would imagine that this book would be useful for new lecturers in opening their eyes to the complexity and breadth of the problems that might arise in implementing what might appear to be a relatively simple assessment strategy such as computer-based assessment. For more experienced lecturers, the opportunity to compare situations in different higher education institutions and to see different approaches to assessment is invaluable. Despite the diversity of the case studies in discipline

and context, I invariably found something of relevance. For all those involved with assessment, the committed and thoughtful approach of all the case study reporters is an inspiration.

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