



## Chapter 4: Assessment digital smarts: Using short text assignment formats for enhancing student learning

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### Abstract

Lecturers and course designers need to be smart about assignment design. This is particularly so when time constraints of lecturer workload and students' other commitments impact on teaching and learning coverage of objectives in tertiary courses. By reconsidering assignment formats with a focus on assessment as another opportunity for learning, course designers and lecturers may be able to take advantage of affordances of technology and maximise student engagement with assignments for learning. This study describes some short text assignment types and reports on a case study using a survey of student perceptions of these formats in a third year fully online degree course. Students expressed approval of the variety and opportunities for creativity in these assignments and found them useful for their own learning and for future application in their contexts.

**Keywords:** assessment, online learning, tertiary, digital technologies, student experience

### Introduction

This chapter defines the use of 'digital smarts' as when lecturers and students use the affordances of digital technologies to work smarter. By smarter here I mean making best use of time and efforts for greatest outcomes. In this case, lecturers in particular might work smarter in design of assessment. As new approaches are being sought in tertiary education contexts to increase the manageability of assessment and ensure standards of learning for greater numbers of students, increased awareness of potential assessment options for effective use of lecturer and student time increases our choice in design decisions.

There have been significant changes in the tertiary education environment since the 1990s with a turn to economic determinism by western governments also influencing the education sector. The focus on strengthening the national economy in a global environment has resulted in an emphasis on efficiently meeting 'market' demands. In the United Kingdom (UK), "central government policy since the 1980s towards public services in the UK has been dominated by neo-liberal ideals about the perceived superiority of the free market as a means of providing public services most economically, effectively and efficiently" (Mather, Worrall, & Seifert, 2007, p. 109). In New Zealand, researchers have found that tertiary educators work in an increasingly competitive climate for public funding and research grants. There has also been an increase in numbers and diversity of students through more



relaxed access provisions, and increasing administrative demands, such as data collection and compliance costs (Paewai, Meyer, & Houston, 2007). Fewer academic staff are undertaking more and more work. With fewer lecturers staffing tertiary institutions, lecturers are teaching more students, working harder and working for longer (Mather et al., 2007). Mather et al. (2007) found that reforms in the tertiary sector underpinned by the notion of market forces have led to the “intensification and extensification” (p. 109) of lecturers’ work.

Evidence can be found in Mather et al.’s study (2007) that despite government and institution talk about raising quality, financial efficiencies are proving more of a priority in the implementation of policy. These authors found that the redesign of work practices that have moved the lecturing profession away from a craft system of production where lecturers, as subject specialists, had more autonomy over what was taught, towards a factory system of production where standardization in the form of modularization has taken place and subject specialists are expected to teach outside their specialism simply to fill up their timetables in order to keep costs down. (p. 122)

Recognition of new requirements for flexibility in a digital era is another factor contributing to lecturer workload. For example, Ryan, Tynan, Lamont-Mills and Hinton’s (2012) Australian study on tertiary institutions’ workload models proposed the development of models that acknowledge “the greater number of tasks associated with a blended pedagogy” (p. 10). Calculating workload is an issue in itself for universities with variations in what is valued. There are also variations in course type, learning design, class sizes, pedagogy and provision of support. Recognition of the increased number and types of tasks and the impact of new digital methods on lecturers’ time and experience of their work in workload models is often challenging. For more on workload issues, see Stephen Bright’s chapter in this book.

Lecturers must respond to changes in their work environment and expectations. However, Mather et al., (2007) showed that lecturers are struggling to cope with increased workload demands and that individual and collective acts of lecturer resistance have been ineffective in influencing these changes, resulting in increased feelings of alienation. Research also suggests that lecturers are prepared to put in time and effort beyond their institution’s contractual demands to maintain the quality of their work. For example, in Lazarsfeld Jensen and Morgan’s (2009) Western Australian study, all of the academics surveyed and interviewed worked during their weekends. This work is largely hidden. Lecturers in that study saw this hidden work as important for maintaining and improving teaching quality: “It was work academics felt was essential to meet their own standards of scholarship” (Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009, p. 63).

Workload issues have impacted on the intensity of lecturer workload, stress levels and negotiating work life–home life expectations (Chalmers, 1998) because the stakes are high. One example is the increased use of student appraisal data for staff evaluation and promotion (Barrow & Grant, 2012). In this context it is understandable that in seeking to work smarter not harder, lecturers involved in online course design consider alternatives for assessment in order to make the process more manageable and to enhance learning. Given demands on lecturer, and student, time using assessment digital smarts is being efficient with time while having more impact on learning.

The increased diversity in tertiary student populations has implications for demands on student time and on student expectations of the institution. Literature (such as Crisp, 2009; Mason & Rennie, 2008; Prensky, 2001) highlights the changing nature of tertiary students’ use of information communication technologies and the greater diversity of cultures, prior experiences and age ranges.



This diversity also includes an increasing range of competing demands for student focus, such as work and family commitments. There is also evidence that students have changing expectations of their institution regarding their study. Younger generations of tertiary students in particular are growing up in a society of constant rapid change, particularly in relation to the integration of digital and mobile devices into most aspects of life. Crisp (2009) presciently noted that “students will be expecting some form of interactivity and control over their use of the internet for learning and assessment” (p. xi). The technologies we use change how we think, how we learn and inevitably what we think and what we learn (Mason & Rennie, 2008; Prensky, 2001). Students with different cultural backgrounds and upbringings also bring variations in concepts of teaching and learning, understandings of the role of lecturers and learners and attitudes to class practices such as peer assessment (Mason & Rennie, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

Global education arrangements between countries and institutions see more international students studying on western education campuses. In England, Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, international students, and ethnic Chinese students in particular, have become an increasingly significant presence. In New Zealand for example, Ministry of Education statistics for 2008/2009 identified 95,537 international students enrolled for study. Chinese student enrolments comprised the highest number in these figures (22,917, 24%). Such figures continue to feature, even though overall international student numbers in New Zealand universities have fallen since 2004 despite ongoing growth in the global market for international students. International university student numbers fell 5.2% (980 students) in 2012 with the Chinese being New Zealand’s most important international education market (Education New Zealand, 2013). English-speaking universities generally have strong commitment to internationalisation and partnering with institutions in a variety of markets. In the increasingly high stakes, diverse and challenging environment of tertiary education for both lecturers and students, attention to assessment design can be one way of mitigating the impact of some of these forces.

## Assessment

Given the complexity of demands in the tertiary environment for both lecturers and the diverse student population, how can assessment be designed to effectively accommodate everyone’s needs to ensure relevant teaching and learning outcomes?

Assessment is complex because it serves multiple needs with one of these needs being further student learning. Carless (2007) explains that “one of the core problems is that assessment ... is about grading and about learning” (p. 11). Crisp (2009) also comments that assessments serve more than one purpose, suggesting that formal assignments “must encourage learning, provide feedback on learning to both the student and the lecturer and they need to document competency and skill development as well as allow students to be graded or ranked” (p. 1).

Assessment, therefore, aligns what is taught and what is important to be learned. Thus, assessment information should stimulate further learning (Earl, 2003). Traditionally tertiary educators have tended “to rely on a narrow range of assessment methods such as exams, tests, and essays” (Spiller, 2011, p. 11). For that reason, it seems obvious that assessment becomes less stimulating for both student and marker if the same things are done over and over again. When the same assignment format persists, fatigue is likely, especially for the marker. Gibbs and Simpson (2004–05) argue that



the design of assessment should, in the first instance, “support worthwhile learning” (p. 3). To this end these authors present 10 influences of assessment on the volume, focus and quality of study, and the third one of these refers to assessment tasks needing to be productive learning activities.

Students’ experiences of assessments are not separate from the learning experience (Earl & Giles, 2011; Mason & Rennie, 2008) for, as Boud and Associates (2010) suggested, assessment “is one of the most significant influences on students’ experience of higher education and all that they gain from it” (p. 1). The concept of ‘assessment *as* learning’ highlights the learning potential of an assignment. This concept focuses on students being involved in decision-making and reflection on their assessments (Earl, 2003). The assessment as learning concept underscores the point that students should be valued participants in their learning, and should anticipate receiving and acting on constructive feedback and feedforward. An ideal is that they can identify their own learning gaps and solve many of their learning needs by themselves, with peer help or with lecturer assistance.

All assessment implicates some kind of student learning (Mason & Rennie, 2008). Carless (2007) is even more specific when he emphasises that the most crucial aspects of assessment tasks is that they are learning tasks through his term “learning-oriented assessment”. Boud and Associates’ (2010) view resonates with that as they argue that “assessment tasks should be significant learning activities in themselves” (p. 2). Carless, Joughin and Mok (2006) position efficient assessment as occurring when the two functions of assessment overlap substantially. These two functions are (a) evaluation of student achievement for grading (or certification); and (b) learning.

There are calls for a reconsideration of assessment design in higher education for a number of reasons. Boud and Falchikov (2006), for example, highlighted that reconsidering assessment design in higher education is important not only for immediate learning requirements but also for “preparing students for the learning they will engage in throughout their lives” (p. 411). Assessment design for both immediate and life learning purposes, they proposed, should not be over-prescriptive but allow students to develop confidence in their own judgement. An example that might meet this requirement is when students exercise choice and decision-making over the development of their assignment responses and products to meet the assessment brief.

Boud and Falchikov also promote students’ consideration of context (perhaps developing assignment responses for an identified audience, for example) and that tasks reflect professional practice activities and also foster reflexivity (for example, students using their own experience to consider points made in literature and vice versa). Boud and Falchikov (2006) also suggest that assessment design to meet both immediate and longer term learning requirements provides an opportunity for students to appropriate assessment activities for their own ends, including being able to use submitted assignments or products in future work lives.

Applying this notion of assessment as further opportunities for student learning to tertiary online courses may increase the relevance, usefulness and manageability of assignments for students. Kendle and Northcote’s (2000) criteria to guide e-assessment design include the authenticity of the nature of the task (for more on authentic assignment tasks see Torrance, 1994), communication incorporated in tasks, a degree of student choice, encouragement of the appropriate and discriminatory use of online resources, and examination present viewpoints. Crisp (2009) specifically advocates for assignments to encourage students to interact with real world tools: “make use of new opportunities for students to access resources or use interactive tools in order to construct their response”

(p. 56). These authors are asking assessment designers to consider the process students use to develop



assignment as well as the submitted response. This study focuses on assessment design considerations of student processes and assignment products in a particular online course.

## Study context: Student assignment work in my online courses

The assignments in this course were designed to provide students with another learning task and a genuine opportunity for decision-making, and exercising responsibility in assessment. The aim was to increase the investment students had in assessment beyond requirements for a passing grade to more intrinsic motivations from learning relevance and usefulness. Use of a variety of formats over the number of assignments asked students to represent learning in different ways in order to capture the diversity of student strengths and provide a range of opportunities for them to demonstrate what they know and can do.

As online courses work well in module formats (Cong & Earl, 2011) so assessment as well as content tends to also be modularised. Content modularisation creates boundaries of content for both lecturers and students. A sense of a ‘fresh start’ when the next module begins is not uncommon and heralds another stage in the learning and the trajectory of the course. Modularisation also enables some ease in managing the quantity of online asynchronous discussion posts and helps maintain the quality of posted messages. It does so through new discussions in new sections. Modularising assignments also allows for a variety of formats to stimulate student interest and provide opportunities to demonstrate different strengths. The decision to design an assessment with a number of smaller components was for similar reasons. These include

- supporting students in using and/or developing effective time management
- providing students with a ‘fresh start’ sense with the closure of one module and the start of the next
- spreading the load so that students experiencing difficulties in one module still had other opportunities to achieve in the course
- allowing for a variety of assignments so that those with different strengths and interests had opportunities to show what they knew and could do
- enabling greater online marking ease for lecturers.

I use the term *short text formats* to refer to the types of assignments I use in my fully online courses, defining *short text formats* as assessment submissions of 800 words or less. For example, these assignments may include abstracts, posters, pamphlets, presentations, scenario planning, poems, reviews and letters (such as to a newspaper editor, the Ministry of Education, an individual, institution or company). Such assignments require students to present a variety of perspectives (for example, a single or multiple perspectives), an argument, synthesis or evaluation of specific information. Success in assignments with such limited word counts requires a demonstration of academic skills, mastery of content (knowledge, understanding and skills), and a recognition of how to target particular audiences.



Having students identify target audiences for their context and circumstances foreshadows authentic lifelong uses, and this links to the idea of motivation, deliberately providing opportunities for student choice and increasing relevance to students' prior experiences, interests and professional contexts. Previous work (Cong & Earl, 2011; Earl, 2012) raised a question about the extent to which students appreciated choices. However, deliberately including choices was a factor in this study offering students variety in their assignment work and counters the potential for plagiarism that occurs when assignments are of the standard essay type and on the same topics each year.

The use of digital technologies increases format options so that students can leverage their different strengths and interests to excel and use their creativity in achieving the requirements of the tasks. Students do not get tasks that might mean I am distracted by the technical aspects of the digital product they create. Care and effort evident in students' work is required, but impressive technical skills, unless an aspect of the marking criteria, can detract from the content. They may bias assessment towards assigning higher grades than would be otherwise warranted. If technical or presentation aspects are a requirement, then this is made clear in the assignment instructions and assessment criteria. The four assignments in this study, no matter the format they were presented, were assessed using the following criteria:

- Communication of content to identified audience
- High standard of writing (clarity in structure, flow, surface features etc)
- Link between theory and practice
- Critical thinking—analysis and synthesis, apparent level of understanding
- Evidence of thoughtful selection and integration (use) of references from a variety of sources.

Sometimes students have opportunities to share clean copies of their assignment work with their peers after marking, and this study context was no different, where they could share their Best Websites article (see below for details). This opportunity is voluntary but has benefits in increasing the audience for students' hard work, gaining positive peer recognition. For the lecturer, the benefit in this sharing is that it provides peers with comparative models that ultimately help them make sense of their assessment descriptive and evaluative feedback.

### **The assignments**

The assignments of interest were designed to encourage students to use their prior experiences and knowledge, seek additional material, exercise choice and make use of the affordances of technology. In one case, this was about access to further resources, software exploration and creation of specific products (magazine article, report and animation).

#### *The Self-evaluation assignment (reflection and evaluation)*

The Self-evaluation assignment required students to review and evaluate their participation and contribution in the online discussion by responding to questions targeting aspects of purposeful



community of inquiry and online presence. Students had previously been given formative and ungraded feedback after their first discussion as early guidance on expectations.

*The Best Websites for ... assignment (magazine article)*

In the style of Joanne Troutner's (2006) article "Best websites for virtual learning", the task required students to select a subject/curriculum area that interested them (for example, science, social studies, mathematics, visual art, written language, Spanish), then locate, evaluate and review the best websites for their choice, developing an article for an audience they had identified. Given that the majority of students in this paper were involved in initial teacher education, the target audience they selected was often New Zealand teachers or students at levels or contexts useful for their future careers as teachers. Their article needed to include screen shots and be formatted in columns after Troutner's model.

*The Report on Trends assignment (report)*

The Report on Trends assignment required students to review the trends identified in the previous three years *Horizon Reports*. The annual *Horizon Reports* are a collaboration between the New Media Consortium (NMC) and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI). Every year since 2004, these reports have identified and described six areas of emerging technology likely to have a significant impact on teaching, learning or creative expression in higher education within three adoption horizons: a year or less, two to three years, and four to five years. Each section of the report provides live Web links to examples and additional readings. After reviewing these reports, students developed their own report on a selected emerging technology to signal its relevance and impact on the New Zealand context and schools, identifying possible views of interested parties. Finally, they added a personal response including implications for their own professional practice.

*The Conversation about an eEducation Myth assignment (3 minute animated movie & script)*

Using an animated video-creating website, students developed a script and animation creating a 3 minute conversation between two or more characters that addressed one of the following myths about eLearning:

1. Online courses require less time than traditional face-to-face classes (as teacher or learner)
2. Online teachers are always online
3. Online courses have no sense of community
4. Online courses are all about reading and doing assignments.

Students were also required to submit an introduction including an explanation for the choice of myth and the scene and characters, plus the script and a link to the animation. At the time of the study, students were using Xtranormal to create the animated videos (Xtranormal now no longer exists).



## The case study context

The University of Waikato was the first university in New Zealand to connect to the Internet and programmes have been offered online since 1996. The Faculty of Education has a national reputation for pre-service and in-service teacher education. The course that was centre stage of my study reported here looks at aspects of eEducation and is called ‘Introduction to eEducation’ (PROF310). It is an optional course introducing undergraduate students to online teaching, learning, research and technologies. Most students are generally in the primary teacher education degree programme. The class sizes are generally relatively small. In 2012, the time of this study, there were 21 students. All class interaction takes place in Moodle, the learning management system used at the University of Waikato. Most of the activity is asynchronous and the course content and activity is divided into modules of 3 weeks (see Figure 1). Assignment work is aligned to each module and worth a percentage of the final grade (see Figure 1).

PROF310	Topic	Assessment	% of Final Grade
Module 1	Introduction to distance education and online learning	Self-evaluation of discussion (500 words)	10%
Module 2	Needs and opportunities for eLearners	Best Websites (2-page magazine article)	25%
Module 3	Teaching in distance, flexible and online environments	Report on Trend (using <i>Horizon Reports</i> ) 800 words	30%
Module 4	Implications for teachers, institutions and the future	Conversation about a Myth (animated movie using Xtranormal™)	35%

**Figure 1: Module information for PROF310, 2012**

In a pilot study (Earl, 2012), I proposed that one benefit of shorter word count assignment formats is that these submissions would be easier to read online. I expected that this would be more manageable for markers and reduce feedback time to students. In a later article (Earl, 2013), I focused on student perceptions of assessment design and feedback. The question reported on here is, what were students’ perceptions about these types of assignments regarding learning, usefulness and enjoyment?

A small case study (Yin, 2014) using a survey to gather participant responses was carried out in 2012. This case study highlighted the context dependent nature of the research and students’ perceptions of the phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), which were four types of short text assignments, and supports Yin’s (2014) argument that “the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). The survey elicited student responses to each of the



assignments. There was potential risk in me losing or compromising a critical stance (see Walsham, 2006) because I was also the lecturer of the course. On the other hand, being both researcher and lecturer enabled a more informed interpretation of the survey responses.

### Student survey

SurveyMonkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) provided the platform for surveying students at the end of the course, and after completion of all assignment work. The survey had two sections using a mixture of rating and short answer questions targeting opinions of the assessments. Students were asked to rank the assignments according to the degree they *liked*, *learned from* and found them *useful*. The four assignments were rated out of 5 with 1 as the highest rating. The second section asked students to identify what the pluses, minuses and issues were for each assignment when considering their experience of both process and product. Each of these sections offered options to make further comments. The survey was promoted as part of the university's routine appraisal processes, where responses to such anonymous surveys are collated and analysed by the centre responsible for course appraisal processes before being returned to lecturers.

## Findings and discussion: student perceptions of assignment work

There were no dropouts in this course and no students failed. The final results ranged from 53% to 86%. Thirteen students answered the survey, a response rate of 62%. Overall satisfaction with the quality of the course was given the highest possible rating, 1/5 by 92.3% (12) of respondents.

Next, I summarise the responses to each assignment and then look at each focus: the degree to which students *liked*, *learned from* and found *useful* each assignment. The overall following comment summarises student impressions of the assignments in this case: *Assignments were a fair judge of learning with each being so different.*

The **Self-evaluation task** did not generally rate very highly. Only 58.4% of participants gave this assignment a rating of 1 or 2 out of 5 when asked how they *liked* the assignment. Only 40% said they *learned from* this assignment by rating it 1 or 2 out of 5 and only 40% said they found it *useful* (also by rating this assignment 1 or 2 out of 5).

The **Best Websites article** (2 sides of an A4 page) was *liked* by 83.3% (10 rated it 1/5 for this aspect). This assignment also rated highly for *learned from* with 80% of respondents giving it a rating of 1/5, and 70% rated this assignment's *usefulness* at 1/5. All respondents gave this assignment either a 1 or 2 out of 5 for *liked*.

Only 33.3% of students rated their liking for the **Report on Trend** at a 1/5, with two-thirds (66.6%) giving it a 1 or 2 out of 5. However, 60% *learned from* this assignment, giving a rating of 1/5 for this aspect, and the same number found it *useful*. About 80% rated the trend report assignment as either 1 or 2 out of 5 for these aspects. The report was the most conventional of the assignments in this course.

The **Conversation** animation task was *liked* by 58.3% of respondents with a rating of 1/5, while 50% rated *learned from* and *usefulness* at 1/5. Combining ratings of 1/5 and 2/5, 83.3% *liked* this assignment and 70% *learned from* and found it *useful*.



Generally the ratings for each assignment were accompanied by 2–4 more negative student responses. These comments focused on suggestions that the assignment guidelines provided in the course outline were not clear enough. This response can be taken into account when I review the guidelines.

### *Student perceptions of how the assignments were liked*

Looking specifically at student perceptions of how they liked the assignments the Best Websites assignment again rated the highest and the Self-evaluation the lowest (see Figure 4).

Module/Assignment Rating: Liked	1 % (high)	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 % (low)
1: Self-evaluation of your discussion contributions (10%)	16.7%	41.7	16.7	25	0
2: Best Websites for... (magazine article) (25%)	83.3	16.7	0	0	0
3: Report on Trend in recent <i>Horizon Reports</i> . (30%)	33.3	33.3	16.7	16.7	0
4: Conversation on eEducation Myth (3 minute script and animation) (35%)	58.3	25	16.7	0	0

**Figure 4: Student ratings when asked how they liked the assignment.**

The opportunity and the incentive for students that is provided by assessment requirements to try something new can provide rewards for students in terms of engagement and enjoyment. Students commented that the Conversation assignment was ‘Enjoyable’ and ‘Fun fun’. Others commented:

- I loved creating my movie. It was fun.
- ... fun medium to use to debate topic.
- Excited making movies and using the program and having a resource like this that is easy to use.
- This assignment simply being different was a positive to these students:
- It was a different sort of assignment and I can see how it could be used in a classroom.
- Enjoy it; very different to any other assignment I have done!

However, the Report, a more conventional assignment also received positive comments for the type of assignment it was. For example, one response simply said: ‘Liked this style of assignment.’

### *Student perceptions of their learning from course assignments*

Looking specifically at student perceptions that they *learned from* the assignments the **Best Website** assignment rated the highest and the **Self-evaluation** the lowest (see Figure 2).



Module/Assignment	Rating				
	1 (high) %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 (low) %
1: Self-evaluation of your discussion contributions (10%)	20	2	4	20	0
2: Best Websites for... (magazine article) (25%)	80	1	1	0	0
3: Report on Trend in recent <i>Horizon Reports</i> (30%)	60	3	0	10	0
4: Conversation on eEducation Myth (3 minute script and animation) (35%)	50	2	3	0	0

**Figure 2: Student ratings when asked how much they learned from undertaking the assignment**

Students gained new awareness and information as a result of the research and development processes of assignment preparation in this course. Comments on the report assignment highlighted the importance of knowledge of specific online resources for themselves and other teachers e.g., *‘I am more informed about the trends of technology set to or already impacting on education’* and *‘The Horizon Reports are very important for teachers to be aware of’*.

Another student comment highlighted the learning from the development of the conversation animation assignment, identifying learning from *‘my thought process to produce the clip and the script’*. The transferability of this new knowledge into students’ other activities underscored the usefulness of the assignments: *‘The assignments were varied and challenging, yet on completion the knowledge learnt was able to be transferred into my classroom activities’*.

#### *Student perceptions of how the assignments were useful*

Looking specifically at student perceptions of how *useful* they found the assignments the **Best Websites** assignment again rated the highest and the **Self-evaluation** the lowest (see Figure 3). Comments highlighted both the process and the outcomes of the assignments as being of use.

Rating	1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %
Module and assignments	(high)				(low)
1: Self-evaluation of your discussion contributions (10%)	20	2	30	20	10
2: Best Websites for... (magazine article) (25%)	80	7	10	20	0



<b>3: Report on Trend in recent <i>Horizon Reports</i> (30%)</b>	0	6	30	0	10
<b>4: Conversation on eEducation Myth (3 minute script and animation) (35%)</b>	0	5	20	30	0

**Figure 3: Student ratings when asked how useful they found the assignment**

Comments such as ‘*I located some really good websites that I will use*’ and ‘*That it can actually be used when we go teaching*’ received regarding the Best Websites assignment emphasise the usefulness of familiarity with web content.

Familiarity with particular software (Xtranormal™ in the case of the Conversation animation assignment) was also highlighted as useful in student comments: ‘*Xtranormal movie making was beneficial and have already shared this knowledge, have thought of ways to incorporate into future lessons.*’ As the majority of the class in this study are initial teacher education students the usefulness for teaching and learning in their own classrooms was mentioned in many of the comments such as ‘*Just what you could do with students using this site*’ and ‘*How I can use it in lessons. I am going to purchase the educator account so I can use it in my classrooms*’. One student even commented on the usefulness of the idea of ‘*using an online movie making site to present an assignment*’.

Future usefulness of the submitted assignment product was a key point in student comments on the positives of the Best Websites assignment such as ‘*I have created a great resource to use with my learners and a template for further development*’ and ‘*I learnt how to use publisher and now have an amazing resource (mine and that of others) that will reduce the amount of time needed searching through many websites for resource*’.

Although the product of the Self-evaluation assignment was not mentioned in responses as useful, the process required by this assignment prompt was acknowledged in student comments as useful. Comments such as, ‘*Made me think of my expectations of the course*’, ‘*It allowed me to self reflect on my own contributions*’ and ‘*I was able to see where I needed to improve*’ indicate that consideration of their participation and contributions in discussion to date was useful in that this reflection benefited their approach to discussion participation during the rest of the course.

One student comment highlighted the link between assignments being useful and being liked:

Enjoyed the article writing [Best Website assignment] and once again able to share with cohorts, great idea for assignments for my students. The articles, extra readings were relevant and informative, once again I have been able to share. Of particular interest is the Horizon report. I used this for informing my CATA class on e-learning and technologies. A really enjoyable course.

Overall student responses to the four short text assignments in this course highlighted student appreciation of the variety and opportunity for creativity in the design of assessment for this course.



One comment highlighted in particular the influence that having variety and the opportunity for creativity in assignments had on this student's experience of learning: '*Creativity of the different types of assignments. Having variety in assignments rather than doing the same old assignments typical of courses makes for more exciting, engaging and meaningful learning.*'

It seems that students in this case would consider these assessment activities examples of Boud and Associates' (2010) and Carless's (2007) assessment tasks that are opportunities for further learning. In the Best Websites article development they explored the relevance and usefulness of a number of websites on a particular subject for use in their professional work. In the Report assignment students became familiar with the *Horizon Reports*, an annually produced online information resource. In the Conversation animation assignment students' learned animated movie making using Xtranormal™. These are examples of students being directed to make use of the affordances of technology to further their learning through the assessment design.

The results from this study also indicate that students can distinguish between assignments they liked and assignments they learned from. The Self-evaluation and Report on Trend assignments were rated more highly for *learned from* or *useful* than for *liking*; even when students didn't enjoy the assignments, they still appreciated their value. And the inverse was true for the two other assignments: both Best Websites and Conversation animation were rated lower for *learned from* or *useful* than for *liking*; students again clearly delineated between fun and function. Gibbs and Simpson (2004-05) also found research support for the view that students can distinguish between what will result in worthwhile learning and what an assessment requires. The students in this study demonstrated they could evaluate the worth of an assignment for an appreciation of the process of development, preparation and completion of the assignment, as well as satisfaction with the product achieved. The product being useful now or in the future was also a key factor for these students. Student awareness of a self-chosen target audience, and intentionally developing the content and presentation of the assignment for this audience, seems to add an extra dimension of meaning to an assignment over and above the marker as audience.

To accommodate diverse student groups (in experience, prior knowledge and culture), Spiller (2011) suggests that courses include a range of assessment tasks broad enough for cultural references, interests and examples to be used by individual students. This course specifically had four different types of assessment with a choice of context, content focus and audience specifically in the Best Websites article and the Conversation animation assignments.

Students appreciate a variety of assignment formats, particularly when formats include an opportunity for creativity (personal flair and input, decision-making and responsibility). Adding an element of creativity to assignments also gives students increased choice and responsibility for decisions in constructing their assignment response. Some respondents commented that more clarity around assignment instructions in the paper outline would be an improvement. These comments may reflect some students' lack of comfort with taking more responsibility for choices within assessment. The types of things that students had to decide for themselves included who would be the target audience for their submission, how many websites to review in their article in the space they had, and what information to include in a limited time, space or word count. There were also graphic design decisions as part of publishing in the case of the Report and the Best Websites article.

The Best Websites assignment rated the most highly across the board (consistent with course appraisal comments from previous years). This assignment was the only one where a forum space was



opened for students to share their assignments after the processes of marking and feedback were completed. Ten students volunteered to share a clean or modified copy of their assignment for others to make use of. I didn't predict this might be an influencing factor for students' ratings when developing the questions in this study but the opportunity to share may have contributed to students' positive ratings of this assignment in particular.

The findings of this study highlight aspects of assignment design that are appreciated by students, providing an informative basis for further research. They indicate that a larger more detailed study would be worthwhile. This case is likely to vary from cases in other studies because it was undertaken with undergraduate students from a 12-week fully online course with one lecturer who determined the curriculum and assessments. Online courses vary considerably in learning management systems, learning design and lecturer capability and pedagogy. Courses also vary in the degree of curriculum and assessment regulation, the role of the marker, required timeframe for return of marked assignments, and the format and content of returned feedback. Whatever the nature and parameters of an online course, findings in this study could encourage lecturers to consider their options for assessment design in order to provide opportunities for furthering student learning, student choice and exercising creativity.

## Concluding comments

Changing expectations of lecturers and students in the tertiary environment including use of mobile devices and increased use of standards in a global marketplace for education means lecturers and students are now operating in a different world and responding with changes to the way teaching and learning is conducted. With time constraints felt by everyone, maximising learning through assessment design can have significant benefits. The benefits for students can be in engagement with a variety of assignments, the opportunity to put more of their own experience and culture into an assignment as well as furthering their learning in relevant and appropriate ways for course requirements and for their futures.

This chapter describes examples of short text assignments used in a fully online course. The assignments in this study required students to explore online material (Best Websites article and Report on Trend), specific software (for publishing and animation), their own understandings (all assignments) and their contribution to class (Self-evaluation of discussion). Students were surveyed for their perceptions of how they *liked*, *learned from* and found *useful* each of the four assignments. Findings from this study are consistent with literature that argues that the assessment experience itself can promote valued learning. Students could differentiate assignments they learned from, found useful and liked in their ratings. Findings in this study also suggest that the focus for students when rating short text assignments seems to be an appreciation of a variety of formats, the opportunity for creativity and the learning and usefulness of activities and products for purposes beyond their study in this course.

The examples of short text assignment formats in this study were well received by students, providing opportunities as learning experiences and making use of the affordances of technology. It would seem consideration of short text assignment formats might have benefits for both lecturers and students in online courses. With greater awareness can come greater choice and this is true when designing effective assessment. Being digitally smart within the challenging tertiary education context



means continuing to explore assessment design options in order to enhance what students' value in their experience of learning.

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