

Starting small in assessment change: short in-class written responses

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This paper is focused on an innovation which involved students being assessed on short written responses to an issue to be addressed in the following classroom session. The innovation was evaluated through a student survey; individual and focus-group interviews with participants; and the analysis of a critical friend. Positive findings included promoting student preparation and reflection; and enabling the teacher to understand students' prior knowledge before the next session. Challenges included some student misperceptions about the assessment innovation and the difficulty of assessing the short responses efficiently and reliably. The analysis suggests that starting small is a useful principle for assessment change. The discussion also brings out some wider issues of incentives and barriers for assessment innovation, and sketches some related future research directions.

Keywords: Innovative assessment; assessment change; short written responses

Introduction

Assessment is sometimes believed to be one of the most conservative aspects of higher education pedagogy (Gibbs, 2006a). The high-stakes nature of assessment may make it particularly resistant to changes (Deneen and Boud, 2014). Concerns about quality assurance, widespread distrust and limited incentives to change can lead to stagnation in assessment (Norton, Norton and Shannon, 2013). There are, however, imperatives for assessment change: to enhance the

student experience; to encourage assessment for learning; and to respond to the needs and interests of increasingly diverse student populations (Bevitt, 2015).

The main aim of this small-scale exploratory paper is to analyze an assessment innovation which included weekly short in-class written responses counting for 10% of the module assessment. In a previous case study of a university history teacher, this method of weekly written responses appeared to carry a number of benefits (Carless, 2015). At the first available opportunity, we carried out this strategy in a similar way in our own teaching. This paper reports on that experience and makes some additional observations about assessment change. The contributions of the paper are to explore both a specific assessment innovation in context and discuss some wider issues in assessment change, including the value of “starting small”.

Framing assessment innovation

For the purposes of this paper, we use the terms change and innovation interchangeably to refer to assessment practices which are different or perceived differently to what has gone before. We recognize that what is innovative to some stakeholders may be commonplace to others; and what is new in one context may be standard practice in another. The framing of the paper is developed in two interlinked stages. The first more general concept is innovative assessment and the second more specific element is short personal responses.

Innovative assessment

We discuss innovative assessment first in relation to teachers’ perspectives and then from the student point of view. For teachers, the main incentives for assessment change may arise from aspirations to enhance the student experience and dissatisfaction with what has gone before

(Price et al., 2011). Changes are also sometimes stimulated by technological developments or the need to counteract student malpractice, including plagiarism (Bevitt, 2015).

From the teacher perspective, there are a number of barriers to assessment change. First, there may be limited incentives for change. Innovative assessment is often perceived as risky in that it challenges the status quo or existing regimes (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery 2013). Innovation tends to increase workload which intensifies pressures on over-worked staff, not least in view of the priority of producing research outputs (Gibbs, 2006a). Assessment innovations which are most attractive to teachers are those which can make their work more efficient (Race, 1999). An important aspiration is to generate student time on task without incurring additional teacher time on marking (Gibbs, 2006b).

The impact of innovative assessment on students is an under-explored topic (Bevitt, 2015). Students seem to welcome alternative assessment which seems fair; relates to the real world; and gauges what they perceive as genuine learning (McDowell and Sambell, 1999). Students are sometimes reported to be unreceptive to assessment change but a number of students may relish some variety compared to what they have done before. Variety in assessment may carry positive implications for developing a range of skills although the novelty of an assessment approach may present a barrier to student understanding of its requirements (Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddett, 2009).

From the student point of view, major assessment changes may provoke uncertainty or anxiety. Students are often wary of assessment approaches which are unfamiliar or where outcomes might be less predictable and prompt concerns of low grades or even failure (Gibbs, 2006a). Prior experiences of assessment methods shape the way students perceive and interpret the current task (Bevitt, 2015). For innovation to thrive there needs to be trust between participants

(Carless, 2009). This often depends on how effectively the rationale is shared with them; and how convincingly potential student benefits are articulated (Gibbs, 2006b).

Short personal response tasks

Probably the most well-known written short personal response task is the one-minute paper popularized by Angelo and Cross (1993) by which students respond briefly in class to two questions addressing the most significant thing they have learnt; and what remaining unanswered issues arise. There are a number of variations including different prompts, implementation online and with grading elements. There are several advantages to these kinds of techniques which are generally perceived to derive healthy benefits for a modest investment of time and effort: they enhance student reflection and self-evaluation; they provide feedback about student ongoing learning; and students appreciate that their instructors value their opinions (Stead, 2005). There are challenges, however. One-minute papers should not be overused lest they become repetitive (Angelo and Cross, 1993). From the student point of view, there is an incentive problem (Kwan, 2011) and as students are generally strategic and assessment-driven there is a danger that students disengage from tasks that do not involve assessment weighting. Accordingly, Kwan prefers regular in-class assessed quizzes rather than one-minute papers.

Short writing tasks in a psychology course involved students briefly analyzing a concept in a way that would deepen their understanding of it through active processing of lecture material. These were completed in-class, counted for a small percentage of the overall grade and were found to produce benefits for learning and retention (Gingerich et al., 2014). In the context of a history undergraduate module ten short paragraph-length written tasks, counting for 20% of the course grade, were integrated within tutorials (Frost, de Pont and Brailsford, 2012). Students

identified a number of benefits, including reading in depth, reflection, preparedness and expressing opinions. Challenges to this strategy arose from the increased marking workload for staff and a small number of students criticized the repetitive nature of the writing tasks (Frost et al., 2012).

The history teacher in an earlier study (Carless, 2015) who utilized weekly short written responses saw the rationale as being mainly fourfold: encouraging active student participation; enabling the student voice to be heard; informing the teaching of the following session; and encouraging regular class attendance. Students responded positively although they perceived a lack of clarity about how their responses were graded (Carless, 2015). Despite being highly technologically adept, the history teacher favored the raw immediacy of in-class handwritten responses.

Technology can, however, be usefully harnessed to elicit student responses within or outside regular taught sessions. In-class electronic voting systems are often used to increase student participation and facilitate interaction e.g. Voelkel and Bennett (2013). Learning management systems (LMSs) can also be used to collect student responses, for example, Holmes (2015) found that changing from a conventional single in-class test to continuous online tests was a significant factor in promoting student engagement in an undergraduate geography module. Similarly, students are often encouraged to interact around module issues on the LMS and they are more motivated to do so when these contributions count towards their module assessment. These processes may lead to a variety of learning outcomes, for example, an online discussion component worth 15% of the module assessment involved students utilizing strategies such as building on the ideas of others and posing questions to the group (Lai, 2012).

Summary

To sum up, assessment change involves a complex interplay between participants' motivations, perceptions and experiences; and the characteristics of a specific innovation. A key driver for assessment change is to enhance the student learning experience without generating excessive additional staff workload. The literature suggests that personal response tasks and their assessment have various advantages for a modest investment of resources. The implementation of short written responses in class represents the focus of our paper.

Method

Teaching and assessment context

We taught a module on English Language Curriculum and Assessment which is part of a Master of Education programme. It involved ten evening classes of two and half hours spread between mid-September and early December. There were 28 participants: 22 part-time students from Hong Kong who had teaching jobs in primary or secondary schools during the day-time; and six full-time students from mainland China. The main focus of the module is on issues related to pedagogy, curriculum and assessment in English language teaching. The first author was the teacher of the course. The second author, a doctoral candidate from mainland China specializing in assessment innovation, was the teaching assistant and also acted as critical friend.

The first author had taught or co-taught the module for the previous eight years using a module assessment of a single 3,000 word essay on a curriculum topic of the students' own choice. Advantages of this assessment task were that it integrated well with teachers' working lives and permitted an extended discussion of the chosen topic. The assignment was typically written up and completed during the school Christmas break based on received wisdom amongst staff that

students had more time available during their vacation. Experience and related reflections suggested that assessment through a single task did, however, entail various limitations: student problems were mainly evident only at the end; writing of the assignment was concentrated after the teaching of the module was completed; and there was relatively weak alignment between course content and assessment. In addition, we wanted to create a more interactive classroom atmosphere with increased encouragement for students to express their thoughts.

Accordingly, there was motivation for change and the assessment was modified into three interlinked components (see Table 1). This revised assessment involved a participation grade of 25%, divided into 10% for ten short personal written response tasks completed in class; and 15% for regular verbal classroom participation assessed through judging the quality of students' contributions against pre-set criteria derived from the literature on assessing participation (Dancer and Kamvounias, 2005; Rocca, 2010). There was an oral presentation on a curriculum topic of participants' own choice (25% weighting). The final module assignment involved students submitting a written treatment of the same topic as their oral presentation (50% weighting).

Table 1. Overview of module assessment

Participation (25%)	Short weekly personal written response tasks (10%) Ten short weekly personal written response tasks are to be completed in class. You are asked to use 20-30 words to state your opinion on a topic which is to be addressed in the following class.
	Regular classroom participation (15%) Regular classroom participation refers to the effectiveness in which you communicate relevant ideas during plenary and small group discussions.
Oral presentation (25%)	The last four classes will include oral presentations not exceeding 10 minutes duration. The oral presentation will involve your analysis and recommendations on an aspect of the English language curriculum of your choice.
Written	The written assignment of 1,000-1,200 words is on the same topic as the oral

assignment (50%)	presentation. It involves: an introduction to the topic and its challenges; a brief literature review of key relevant sources; and some analysis and recommendations.
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The focus of this paper is on the short written responses. Each week students were provided with a slip of paper with a question (see Table 2) which pertained to the following session and were invited to respond in 20-30 words. Students completed their answer at a time of their choice during the class or the 15 minute break and then placed it in a collection box provided. The stated criteria for good performance focused on adopting a clear response to the issue with justifications and/or evidence of perceptive reflection. The teaching assistant classified the answers to inform the teaching of the next session.

Table 2. Short written response questions

Question 1. A memorable school experience	As a student, what is your most powerful memory from the English language curriculum in the secondary school you attended?
Question 2. Communicative language teaching	In your opinion, what is communicative language teaching?
Question 3. Task-based language teaching	What do you see as the main aims of task-based language teaching?
Question 4. Oral presentation topic	For your course assignment, which topic related to the English language curriculum do you want to work on and why?
Question 5. Purpose of assessment	What do you think is the main purpose of assessment?
Question 6. Assessment for learning	What Assessment for Learning strategy might be useful in your teaching context and why?
Question 7. Assessment change	What is the most useful change to your assessment practice you could make and why?
Question 8. Language Arts	In your opinion, what is “Language Arts” and why is it important for the English language curriculum?
Question 9. Technology and language learning	In your opinion, what is the most effective use of technology for language learning and why?
Question 10. Reflection	What is the most useful thing you learnt, experienced or explored on this course? Briefly explain your answer.

Data collection

Data were collected to address the main research question: what are students' perceptions of the purposes, benefits and challenges in using short written responses as part of a module assessment strategy? There were three main forms of data collection. The first was an open-ended written survey completed by all participants in the penultimate session of the course. Participants were asked what they perceived as the main purpose of regular short written responses; what they found useful about them; and how their implementation could be improved.

To supplement the written data, focus group and individual interviews were also carried out. It was decided that a combination of focus group and individual interviews might be most fruitful in illuminating the issues. The second author carried out two focus group interviews with the full-time students from the mainland (partly because their availability as full-time students made a focus group feasible). The first author carried out individual interviews with five part-time students in the early evening or on Saturdays. The interviews were focused at two levels: firstly and principally on participants' perceptions of the strengths and limitations of using short written responses. A second subsidiary focus was to gauge informants' orientations towards assessment change, and the specific module assessment of three integrated components. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The third form of data collection involved the second author as critical friend. She provided formal written analysis at two stages: first at the end of the module before data collection she provided her own detailed critique of the short written response innovation. Second, she

developed her critique further and adjusted certain elements in light of the student data from the survey and interviews.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed inductively to identify, categorize and explore main themes. First, the second author carried out inductive coding of the data from the survey and interviews. Initial analysis yielded codes and code relationships which were explored further through iterative comparative analysis between the different data sources. Refinement of codes was developed through negotiation between the two researchers as they explored the student data in more detail. The codes were classified into four main categories in relation to the innovation of short written responses: students' perceptions of purposes; their perceptions of benefits; their identification of challenges and alternative modes of implementation; and the theme of assessment change. To provide an example of the coding and categorizing, under the category of assessment change the main codes were potential benefits; potential challenges; affective responses; and workload. The trustworthiness of interpretations was mainly developed through the interactions between the two authors which brought reflexivity into the process.

Limitations

A first limitation is the small-scale nature of the study spanning a single implementation of a module. Secondly, as is common in this kind of research, there is a lack of evidence on the effectiveness of the innovation beyond the level of perceptions. There is a danger that students may report more positive perceptions of an innovation than they really believe. Both authors endeavored to act as devils' advocates during interviews and invite critical comments from informants. A third limitation is that the teacher innovator is also seeking to evaluate the

innovation which requires a degree of reflexivity. Two elements were helpful in relation to this issue: first, the innovation was invented by a third party (the history teacher, Carless 2015) so the authors were genuinely curious and open-minded about its feasibility; and second, the analysis of the critical friend was helpful in exploring strengths and weaknesses of the innovation.

Findings

The findings are organized according to the main themes from the coding and categorizing procedures outlined above. Four sub-sections cover perceived purposes and benefits of short written responses; challenges and possible alternatives; student perspectives on assessment change; and the issue of workload.

Perceived purposes and benefits

The first question of the open-ended survey asked students their understanding of purposes of short written responses. Some representative quotations illustrating their perspectives are as follows:

The questions pave the way for learning the next topic

It lets us know the upcoming topic so that we can do some preparation

The questions stimulate our thinking and encourage us to reflect.

Taking all the data on this topic into account, we infer that short written responses stimulate students to reflect on prior learning and experience; and enable the teacher to engage with students' thoughts on a topic. The cognitive aspect of reflection was the most frequently occurring term mentioned by students. Turning to the views of the critical friend, she believed that short written responses were both a means of enhancing student-teacher communication and

an assessment strategy which prompted students to identify a gap between “where they are and where they are going”.

In terms of what was useful about short written responses, three main codes were ‘preparation’, ‘conciseness’ and ‘follow-up’ (also referred to by participants as ‘feedback’). Thirteen students highlighted a benefit of motivating them to prepare before coming to class. This was reported as being because the question aroused their interest, stimulated their curiosity or prompted them to perceive deficiencies of knowledge or understanding. In the interviews, we probed the extent to which students actually acted on the intention to prepare and some did report behavioral preparation actions, such as carrying out Google searches or other prior reading, whereas others reported being too busy because of more urgent tasks in their workplace.

A number of students mentioned a benefit of short written responses in promoting communication skills:

It is a good training for concise communication

In view of the word limit, we have to think of the most important thing we want to say.

Although a few students wanted to have more space to write longer answers, the general trend in the data was that the idea of short responses was perceived as reasonable in view of the aim of promoting concise, focused communication.

Students also commented on the short 5-10 minute follow-ups conducted near the beginning of the next class. In this stage, the teacher showed a pi-chart prepared by the teaching assistant which categorized and summarized student responses, including a few selected quotations. This follow-up was viewed positively by students:

If your answer is appreciated by the teacher, you will feel a sense of achievement

We can effectively learn a wide range of opinions about the topic

I like the graphs which show the trends in the responses. Maybe you could add the names of respondents with selected interesting comments and invite them to elaborate.

In view of the workload implications, responses were not annotated or given back to students. A small number of students did mention that they could not remember their response and would have liked them to be returned. A simple strategy would be for students to photograph their response with their iPhones before submission. Pragmatically, we decided that annotating the short written responses would entail too much marking load. From a learning and feedback perspective we should acknowledge, however, that it would probably have been better to mark and return student answers.

To sum up, the main purposes of short written responses were perceived as the communication they facilitated between teacher and students; and the promotion of related student reflections. A main stated benefit was the potential to stimulate student thinking or preparation before coming to class.

Challenges and possible alternatives

We asked participants how the implementation of short written responses could be improved. Some challenges and possible alternative means of implementation were reported. We discuss three issues: clarity of expectations and reliability of grading; student use of Internet; and use of LMS as an alternative.

Although it was explained in the first session of the course, some students expressed uncertainty about whether the short written responses were graded, the weighting and the criteria. The critical friend expressed some surprise at students' uncertainties given that the requirements had been articulated at the outset and reiterated in the written documentation. On further reflection, however, she believed that this illustrated teacher-student perception gaps and although teachers may believe they have communicated assessment guidelines transparently, students may experience some information overload, particularly in an opening session of a course.

The general consensus from both the survey and the interview data was that students did not seem to find the grading of their short written responses fully transparent or convincing but given that the weighting of this part was relatively low and that its main purpose was to inform teaching and learning, they did not appear to have serious concerns. Two quotations sum up student viewpoints:

Grading must be a bit challenging, but the aim is to engage students

How grades are awarded is a bit questionable but for 10% weighting it is reasonable.

The critical friend pointed out that the brevity of individual responses makes grading them difficult individually, but when ten responses are viewed cumulatively at the end of the module, it is possible to differentiate insightful from mediocre contributions.

The second issue relates to the expectations of students completing their response independently without recourse to the Internet. It was stated at the outset that students should answer based on their own personal feelings or knowledge. In the interviews, however, students reported using their iPhones themselves or observing others doing so during the 15 minute class break to search for information related to the question. Three selected quotations:

Some students search on their iPhones during the break and use Wikipedia to help with answers. Some of them are worrying about finding a model answer. If it was a more personal question this could be avoided or reduced

Why not look at your iPhone? I certainly did. It's not a test and the teacher didn't give us an idea that it is a test

The teacher should articulate the purpose of sharing personal experiences rather than responding with a standard answer.

We infer two implications. The first is that questions which require original answers or personal responses may generally be preferable to those with a more factual orientation (see Table 2 for the full list of weekly questions). The second is to reinforce the need for frequent communication about processes and expectations in assessment innovation. It is insufficient to state the rationale and guidelines at the outset without regular reinforcements and reminders. Indeed, the second quotation above suggests a perception that the teacher has not clearly stated a position on the use of iPhones, exemplifying the need for sustained communication.

The third issue relates to the alternative of using LMS rather than writing responses in-class. Three students expressed in the open-ended survey that they would prefer to submit the short written responses via LMS. A key point was that a discussion forum using the LMS would allow participants to see and respond to others' views. The majority of students, however, expressed benefits of doing it in class:

Hard copy in class is better than online because then we would probably write a lot and the conciseness would be lost

In class is fine. The limited time makes it more personal and genuine. At home we would have no mood for it

One of the reasons we like this strategy is because it is done in class and is not like homework which would be burdensome.

The main point seems to be that writing in class promotes conciseness and is less of a time or workload burden than doing it outside class.

The key message for assessment innovation from this sub-section is to reinforce the desirability for sustained communication about purposes, processes and expected behaviors.

Assessment change

In the interviews, we sought to understand students' perspectives on assessment change. We begin with four quotations which illustrate some of the main views expressed.

Innovative assessment needs to be important and valuable. The teacher has to persuade the students that it is worth doing

I welcome assessment change but I may become annoyed if it is too difficult

I think it is good to innovate in assessment and for me 100% on one assessment can be unfair. But some participants may feel uncomfortable in facing new things

If we believe the teacher is professional, we think the assessment is likely to be fair and reliable. The quality of the teacher convinces us of his or her judgment.

The first quotation emphasizes the point that a teacher innovator needs to convince students of the value of an assessment innovation. The second student appears positive about assessment change as long as it is not too challenging. The third comment reiterates the limitations of single

one-off assessments, whilst acknowledging that innovation may prompt some student discomfort. The final quotation suggests the issue of student trust in the teacher: an important pre-requisite for acceptance of an innovation. A general inference we draw from these data and the entire corpus of interviews is that the students do not seem to welcome or reject innovative assessment per se rather it depends on the characteristics of the innovation; how persuasively it is communicated; and their appraisal of the teacher-innovator. The critical friend further proposed a principle of “starting small” in assessment change. She perceives that the modest scale of short written responses indicates that faculty management, administrators or students are unlikely to be strongly resistant; and other potential teacher implementers may find implementation relatively user-friendly.

Students also made some additional comments about the overall assessment strategy for the module:

I really like the coherence between the oral presentation and the essay because it consolidates it all

I like the links between the parts of the assignment because I can use some feedback from the teacher or my classmates

For those courses with one big essay at the end, sometimes we were physically present in class but not truly engaged, in this class contribution and engagement was better.

The first two quotations relate to the issue of coherence and the perception that the linkages between the assignments were helpful. From the third quotation, we infer a focus on the issue of student engagement. This relates to the regular active participation which was stimulated by the assessment strategy for the course.

To sum up, students seemed positive about this particular assessment change with the regular participation in a coherent module assessment being an important factor in its acceptance.

Workload

This sub-section is of a somewhat different nature because it draws less on student perceptions and more on those of the co-authors. It addresses a pertinent issue raised in the literature review concerning the extent to which an assessment innovation increases teacher workload. In previous iterations of the module, the marking load involved grading 25-30 assignments of around 3,000 words in length. This was a relatively time-consuming task and was also not particularly satisfying: it was too late to solve any identified problems and as it was a single end of semester task, any feedback provided risked being of limited use to students.

The innovation reported here involved some shift in assessment from end of module to during its implementation. There was also some transfer of work from the teacher to the teaching assistant in that she played a major role in classifying the student short written responses and assisting in their grading. As critical friend, she perceived this to be an interesting but time-consuming task which might be an inhibiting factor for frequent or widespread use of the innovation.

The main end-of-semester marking was the 1000 word written assignments. Through their relative brevity, they were much easier to mark. More importantly, they were more satisfying to engage with because of familiarity with the students as individuals developed from engaging with their oral presentations and assessing their participation over the course of the module. Two propositions emerge. First, it is probably generally advantageous to use assessment methods which enable us to understand students as individuals and monitor their progress over time. Second, there are trade-offs between time spent and perceptions of being involved in meaningful

marking: perhaps teachers are willing to invest a bit more time if there are some perceived or experienced benefits to what they are doing. Greater teacher satisfaction was one of the by-products of the revised approach to the course.

Turning to the student perspective on workload, none of the students mentioned workload in the open-ended survey. We pursued this issue in the interviews and three main perceptions emerged. First, students seemed to perceive that in comparison with other courses in their programme, the workload for this module was not larger or smaller instead it was spread more evenly across the semester. Second, initial concerns about needing to do different kinds of assessment task were allayed due to the linkages between the tasks: this was generally viewed as being workload efficient. Third, there was less work at the end of the module so there was less pressure before the final deadline. To sum up, the workload implications of the assessment innovation seemed roughly neutral and we return to this issue below.

Discussion

A main finding was that short written responses stimulated some student reflection and preparation for class; and promoted academic communication between students and the teacher. These findings reiterate the value of short written responses in analogous ways to the points made in Stead (2005). By posing different short written questions each week, the current case avoided the repetitiveness problem reported by Angelo and Cross (1993) and Frost et al., (2012) in relation to weekly questions of a similar nature. Furthermore, by awarding assessment weighting for the short written responses we also catered for the issue of student hesitation to commit to non-assessed work in similar ways to Kwan (2011). In sum, we believe that grading short written responses can be a useful part of a coherent module assessment strategy.

In a similar vein to the points made by Price et al., (2011), teacher motivation for assessment change emanated in this case from dissatisfaction with previous implementation and a desire to enhance the student learning experience. A further driver for change was having observed successful implementation of short written responses in an undergraduate history class (Carless, 2015). This resonates with an insight from the diffusion of innovation literature that changes which are visible and observable are more likely to be adopted by end-users than those that are more rhetorical in nature (cf. Rogers, 2003). A possible repercussion is that developmental activities which increase visibility of promising assessment practice carry potential to stimulate others to change. For example, at departmental, programme or institutional levels innovative practice can be shared and may act as a catalyst for further refinements or changes.

Short written responses can be elicited in-class, online or through some combination of the two. In-class is more immediate, less time-consuming and may appeal to part-time students with substantial work commitments. Whether students can or should use the Internet to assist with in-class responses is a debatable issue. It was our original intention that they should use their own independent thinking but accessing information via iPhones is such a natural act that seeking to proscribe it may be counter-productive. Online responses permit easy storage, may encourage more considered comments and provide opportunities for students to build cumulatively on views of others. Students are not always motivated, however, to compose online responses outside class and this may be particularly the case for part-time students. Choice between in-class or online written contributions is likely to depend on the mode of course delivery and the particular goals a teacher hopes to achieve.

In relation to the aspiration of Gibbs (2006b) to generate student time on task without increasing teacher time on marking, the innovation seemed partially successful. Students were engaged

regularly and contributed their thoughts each week so they were more actively and persistently engaged than in previous iterations of the module. There was some shift of teacher assessment workload from end of module to during its progress which is a positive feature; and the involvement of a teaching assistant transferred some of the work of classifying short written responses away from the teacher. Without the support of a teaching assistant, however, the innovation might represent some increase in teacher workload unless further economies were achieved elsewhere.

The analysis also provides implications for assessment innovation. We suggest that using assessed short written responses is unlikely to prompt strong resistance from students because they count for a relatively small amount of assessment weighting. We also infer that students appear relatively open to small-scale assessment innovation if the rationale is clear and they can identify benefits in terms of cognitive gains from reflection, or affective factors such as satisfaction or motivation. Small-scale assessment renewal may mitigate some of the challenges noted in the literature review, such as risk (Sambell et al., 2013); trust (Carless, 2009); or student worries about failure (Gibbs, 2006a). Small-scale change, if perceived as successful, could later be expanded: for example in the current case future implementation might involve an increased weighting for short written responses. Our experience also reiterates the need for frequent and clear communication about expectations and processes in all assessment but particularly when change is carried out. In fact, being overly explicit is probably a virtue. Frequent and sincere communication can also enhance trust between participants, an important consideration.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed an assessment change highlighting the use of short written responses as part of a module assessment. The main advantages of the in-class writing tasks were that they promoted communication between students and the teacher; and that they encouraged student reflection and pre-class preparation. A challenge was assessing them efficiently and reliably which reinforces concerns about workload; and tensions between the learning and grading elements of assessment. The use of short written responses as part of an overall assessment task design is worth further exploration.

The analysis has also been contextualized within the wider theme of innovative assessment and has touched on a variety of issues, including teacher motivation for assessment renewal; the value of small-scale change; communication of innovation; and student responses. The interplay of these issues invites further research. Finally, trust or distrust merits further scrutiny in terms of facilitating or inhibiting assessment innovation (cf. Carless, 2009).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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