



Original article

More Effective Assessment: Using Student Presentations with Vietnamese University Students

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Abstract: Assessment effectiveness is an important topic for all educators. This study considers how assessment can be made more effective by addressing plagiarism by students in international undergraduate programs in Vietnam. The study included a change in assessment away from written reports and towards student presentations. 107 Vietnamese students, across two semesters, studying a BTEC HND business management subject in an international program at a large government-run university were assigned to give weekly group presentations rather than write 3,000 word reports. The first semester results indicate that this change practically eliminated plagiarism and improved student learning (measured by grades) by 33%. The second semester added local language tutorial sessions and improved student learning by 70% from the pre-study levels. Additionally, students reported greater satisfaction with the new assessment design.

Keywords: University students; plagiarism reduction; Vietnam; assessment.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Educators have the responsibility to design effective assessments. To be effective, assessments should be interesting to students. They should also target the learning the students were expected to gain. If students are not interested, plagiarism will increase as

students lack motivation to complete the assessment tasks. If the assessment evaluates what students have not learned, then students are more likely to plagiarize out of fear of failure. Therefore, one assessment can be seen as more effective when plagiarism on that assessment is lower than on another.

Plagiarism as a topic has been heavily studied across many different cultures. While in the US and UK repeated charges of plagiarism can result in a student being expelled from a university, in Vietnam punishments have not been as extreme.

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Some authors argue that plagiarism accusations must be considered through a cultural lens. After all, they claim, in a Confucian culture, which teaches students to memorize and recite, we should not expect the same standards for citation (Sowden, 2005). When students travel overseas (from East to West) and are faced with a charge of plagiarism, they may claim that plagiarism is completely different in their home country because memorization and learning by rote is the standard. When they repeat the words of others, the students claim, they are not required to cite the original author (Devlin and Gray, 2007).

While this could be true in some Asian cultures, it is certainly untrue in others, perhaps most. For example, in both China (Liu, 2005) and Vietnam (Ha, 2006), students are required to include attribution and failure to do so is broadly condemned, at least as strongly as it is in the US and UK.

1.2. Background of this study

This study includes approximately 54 students per semester (107 students in total, aged 19 to 23, all Vietnamese) studying a subject entitled Working with and Leading People (WLP) which covers hiring, leadership, teamwork, and staff development.

1.3. Plagiarism punishment

If a student is caught plagiarizing (which is often caught through the use of TurnItIn), the punishment is generally to fail the assessment, requiring the student to rework with their grade being limited to pass. Only one rework attempt is allowed and failing to achieve a passing grade upon rework (including plagiarizing on the rework) will require the student to retake the module. In this subject, there are four possible grades a student can achieve. In descending order, they are: Distinction, Merit, Pass, and Fail.

Even for repeated plagiarism, there is no penalty on the student other than either being required to rework their assessment or failing the module, depending on whether the

plagiarism was on the first submission or the rework, respectively.

1.4. The Program

The program under investigation is part of one of the large national Vietnamese universities (45,000 students overall). This program has approximately 300 students studying at any one time.

One major difference between this program and a local program in the same university is that, in this program, all lectures and assessments are in English. There are both Vietnamese and foreign lecturers but all speak to the students in English. Additionally, the entrance requirements are less government-controlled in this program than in a local program and the fees for this program are approximately eight times as high as studying in the local program. Upon completion of the program, a student will receive a bachelor degree from a fully accredited UK university.

There are many other differences in this program, such as lecturers are generally free to devise whatever assessments they deem appropriate while, in the local program, governmental regulations require at least 50% of the total assessments to be as an exam (decision 43/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT, 2007), regardless of the subject.

In this program, most modules (including WLP prior to this study) are delivered with two 2-hour lectures per week for 13 weeks. Students will usually be required to complete a 3,000 word report half way through the 13 weeks and then a second 3,000 report will be due about one week after the final lecture day. These reports are often individual reports; however, again, lecturers are left relatively free in assessment design.

While some research claims that Vietnamese students in Vietnam are much more likely to plagiarize than western students studying in the west (Do Ba et al., 2016), the specific settings of TurnItIn, which can significantly change the reported similarity index (which has generally been used to

measure plagiarism), were often unspecified or varied preventing reliable comparisons between studies. Other studies on the topic have found that ethnicity is not correlated to plagiarism (Martin, Rao and Sloan, 2011).

2. Problem being explored

When students are faced with writing a large report that is due in several weeks, they may not see the benefits of focusing during a lecture. These students may wait until the day or so before the submission deadline to begin writing their report (Devlin and Gray, 2007). These students also may have four 3,000 word reports due, often within the same week (from four different subject), and they are writing in a second language. Since feeling overloaded is known to increase the likelihood of students plagiarizing (Devlin and Gray, 2007), some plagiarism should be expected (but not tolerated). To be clear, this problem is not a legal one (Fallis, 2007) but rather it is about student learning. Students who copy-and-paste are not learning the content.

Students can plagiarize not just from online sources but also from other students (Owens and White, 2013). If Student A copies from Student B, and Student B is from a previous semester, the result is the same as if Student A plagiarized from a public source. It is often easily caught (with or without TurnItIn), even if the student changes the content slightly, because the assignments are different every semester. An answer from a previous semester will not make sense in the context of the current assessment; though this may not be obvious to students who have not learned the subtleties of the subject.

In such a situation, the marker might give a minimum passing grade to represent the poor quality of the student's work (lack of application of appropriate theories, apparent misunderstanding of the current context, etc.) but there are plenty of students who consider a passing grade as success. This goes directly

against the goal of pushing students to achieve more in their academic career but at least it does not award high marks to poorly worded assignments, which researchers have recommended against (Owens and White, 2013).

3. Solutions

Solutions can be difficult to find as the literature has been found to be more problem-oriented than solution-oriented (Wette, 2010).

While we could look at this problem and blame the student for being unethical, having weak character, or other negative attributes, none of that blaming is going to help the students to learn and our focus must be on student learning (Webster, 2009). Researchers have addressed the issue that we, as teachers, are not enforcers but educators and that education can be a much better solution than punishment (Devlin, 2006; Pecorari and Petric, 2014). We educators cannot control the students. We can, however, control the design of our assessments. Therefore, it seems reasonable to look at this as a problem with the effectiveness of student assessment. How can undergraduate students be expected to write 12,000 words, in one week, in a second language, while maintaining an acceptable quality?

Since students who plagiarize are learning less than those who do not, there is, perhaps, a greater worry about lower-performing students. Students who are less interested in adapting to a new set of rules are more likely to plagiarize (Shafaei et al., 2016). This is a greater challenge in a program like the one under investigation given that these students are studying in a foreign language while remaining within their native culture and thus may be less motivated to adjust to a different set of standards at the university.

Some research has shown a connection where countries that rank high in Transparency International's CPI have students who are more accepting of plagiarism (Magnus et al., 2002).

Considering that Vietnam ranks 113 out of 176 on this index (Transparency International, 2016), there is support for the expectation that students here are more accepting of plagiarism. While some may expect this, it does not mean it should be allowed. As teachers, our job remains to educate our students.

Teaching (for example, teaching students how to write properly) has also been shown to reduce plagiarism (Obeid and Hill, 2017); however, it does not eliminate it. Therefore, interventions focused on teaching students how to research and how to reference properly may be a partial solution but not a complete one. Clearly something more is needed.

3.1. Discarded solutions

TurnItIn can help detect plagiarism and, along with strong penalties, may create a deterrent. However some students, instead of seeing this as a reason to do the work required, may spend their time and effort focusing on defeating such control systems (Owens and White, 2013). The problem with the students' solutions to the problem of plagiarism detection is that they do not increase student learning in the proper direction.

Plagiarism detection systems, like TurnItIn, might only make students more aware of how closely they are being watched without actually improving their academic values of integrity (Ledwith and Rísquez, 2008). Therefore, through enforcement we might be lowering plagiarism during their studies but when these students enter the workforce, they may still end up plagiarizing their work, causing difficulty for their employers.

3.2. Potential solution

Students generally view plagiarism as a less serious form of academic misconduct (Pritchett, 2010) than do teachers and this is true even in Asian cultures (Chen and Chou, 2017). Combining this with the proverb "it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness" it would seem that we, as educators, should take the

responsibility for the problem and redesign the assessments to discourage plagiarism as much as possible.

Considering that time constraints are a major motivator towards student plagiarism (Hutcheson, 2009), part of the solution could be to change away from having students write two large reports and move toward more frequent, and smaller, assessments.

Student presentations have been recommended as a way to reduce plagiarism (Sowden, 2005), although there has been no research done on this topic within the Southeast Asian context. Some researchers have recommended using oral presentations in combination with written reports (Hutcheson, 2009) but the current research will consider simply using group presentations in place of written reports. The presentations are to be formal, similar to what is often delivered in the workplace (including slides with appropriate graphics, etc.).

Traditionally, classes for this subject have met twice per week for two hours each session. The delivery method was lectures intermixed with activities (active-learning) to give time for students to practice the application of theories covered in the lecture. Adding student presentations for this experiment would require a significant reduction of lecture content, introducing a concern about students being exposed to less information.

4. Methodology

Action research has the goal of changing an existing system while generating new understanding from it (Tharenou, 2007). One of the most important aspects of action research is its connection to real life practice (Maxwell, 2012) and is key to improving a teacher's professional practice (Green, 2009). The challenge being researched here is how to improve student learning as evidenced by both lower incidents of plagiarism and higher average grades. The treatment in this research will be to change the teaching and assessment practice and

compare the results of the average of the three semesters prior to the treatment to the results of students experiencing the treatment.

4.1. Semester 1

Weekly presentations were added in place of reports: 50% of lecture content was removed and one session per week was reallocated to group presentations. Although important content was being removed, there is an old adage in education: It is better to teach less but to teach it better.

In the first three weeks, students worked in pairs chosen randomly. Care was taken to try to pair students with someone of the same gender. However, this was not always possible. Each student pair was given five minutes to deliver their presentation each week. The students were given clear questions to answer. They were also encouraged to show their creativity but then reminded if they were unsure, they could simply go back to the questions in the assessment brief.

Each student pair was allowed to choose their dream job (any job to which they sincerely aspire) to research for the hiring process.

Each student pair was put into one of four class groups. Groups 1 and 3 would attend the first workshop hour (7:45-8:45) while groups 2 and 4 would be in the second hour (8:45-9:45). One week, the lecturer would assess groups 1 and 2 while the tutor would assess groups 3 and 4 (there were no tutorial classes during the fall semester but the person who would become the tutor in the spring semester did act as an assessor in the first semester). The next week, the lecturer would assess groups 3 and 4 and the tutor would assess groups 1 and 2. This alternation would continue each week to reduce any bias in marking.

Starting in week four, student pairs were combined (and presentation time increased to eight minutes per group). Most students were now in teams of four with a few in teams of two or three. The combination ignored gender (two females could be paired with a two males) and was done specifically to match high performing

students with lower performing students. Performance data was available from the assessment of the first three weeks of presentations.

4.2. Semester 2

For the first three presentations, each student pair was allowed to choose a different position from a medium-sized hotel (e.g., receptionist, housekeeping, etc.) to research the hiring process. As no student chose any job from a hotel in the previous semester, this should also reduce students depending on the work from previous students.

Optional 90 minute weekly tutorial classes were added. There were two tutorial sessions per week and students were assigned into one tutorial session or the other. Attendance records were not kept for these sessions but the tutor estimates approximately 50% of the students assigned to a tutorial came. While lectures and workshops were 100% in English, the tutorial classes were in Vietnamese. The tutorials were not a simple repetition of the lecture but often did include a 20-30 minute revision of the most important lecture points. The focus of the tutorials was to ensure students knew exactly what was expected of them and to start them thinking about their upcoming presentations (for example, what content they would deliver on which slides, how to do research, etc.).

The tutor is a lecturer from a local program at the same university and is an experienced educator. The tutor is also one of the two markers during the assessed workshops and, therefore, is well aware of the marking standards.

4.3. Measurements

Evaluation will be made using the percentage of students achieving each of the four possible grades: Distinction, Merit, Pass, and Fail and then comparing the percentages from the average of the three semesters before this study to each of the two semesters under investigation. We will convert the four grades into numbers, to aid calculations.

Table 1. Conversion of grades into numerical values

| | Value |
|-------------|-------|
| Distinction | 3 |
| Merit | 2 |
| Pass | 1 |
| Fail | 0 |

4.4. Hypotheses

H1: Changing from high-stakes written reports towards low-stakes weekly group presentations will reduce plagiarism.

H2: Changing from high-stakes reports towards low-stakes weekly group presentations will increase student learning as measured by final grades.

5. Findings

Prior to the new assessment structure, the results were fairly consistent across semesters with the following representing the averages

Table 2. Averages for three semesters prior to treatment

| Individual Reports | Students | Percent |
|---------------------------|----------|---------|
| Distinction (3) | 4 | 6% |
| Merit (2) | 12 | 18% |
| Pass (1) | 44 | 68% |
| Fail / plagiarized (0) | 1 | 1.5% |
| Fail / other reasons* (0) | 5 | 7.5% |
| Total students | 65 | |

* other reasons generally include plagiarism on the first submission and then submitting insufficient work in the rework submission.

Table 3. Additional statistics for semesters prior to treatment

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| Mean | 1.21 |
| Standard deviation | 0.67 |

The following data is for the first semester with the new design, where there were assessed workshop presentations but no tutorial classes.

Table 4. Performance of students in first semester

| Group Presentations | Students | Percentage |
|---------------------------|----------|------------|
| Distinction (3) | 11 | 20% |
| Merit (2) | 12 | 22% |
| Pass (1) | 30 | 56% |
| Fail / plagiarized (0) | 0 | 0% |
| Fail / other reasons* (0) | 1 | 2% |
| Total students | 54 | |

* Other reasons included a single student who did not present for the majority of the presentations.

Table 5. Additional statistics for first semester

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| Mean | 1.61 |
| Standard deviation | 0.83 |

The following data is for the second semester where the tutorial sessions were added.

Table 6. Performance of students in second semester

| Presentations with Tutorial | Students | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|----------|------------|
| Distinction (3) | 16 | 30% |
| Merit (2) | 24 | 45% |
| Pass (1) | 13 | 25% |
| Fail / plagiarized (0) | 0 | 0% |
| Fail / other reasons (0) | 0 | 0% |
| Total students | 53 | |

Table 7. Additional statistics for second semester

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| Mean | 2.06 |
| Standard deviation | 0.74 |

The average number of students who plagiarized at all dropped from six to zero. The number of students who failed for plagiarism dropped from one to zero. H1 is supported.

The average grade of students increased from 1.21 to 1.61 and 2.06 for the first and second semesters, respectively. H2 is supported.

6. Discussion

The first semester showed a sharp increase of the number of Distinction and Merit grades and a decrease in the number of Pass and Fail grades. The mean increased by 33% and the number of students who failed was reduced to a single student. No students had any significant plagiarism in their work.

The second semester showed an even stronger improvement in student performance, which should be expected given the additional attention they were given and the additional support available in their native language. The mean increased 70% from the base-case (pre-study) and increased 28% from the previous treatment (without the tutorial classes). Again, no students had any significant plagiarism in their work.

In the new system, plagiarism becomes impractical and, indeed, we saw no meaningful plagiarism. Interestingly, two students who had previously failed for plagiarism (pre-treatment)

did pass on the first attempt under the new system.

With student presentations, there are additional benefits of students building confidence and improving their English speaking skills. While there is a cost of students getting less experience writing in English there are many other modules which still focus on writing large reports. This does indicate that consideration must be given program-wide to ensure a balance of student skills are being developed.

While the average number of students is lower with the new system, it must be considered that the first semester of this study was divided into two classes, therefore the average size of each class for the first semester was 27, not 54. The second semester of the new format was a single class of 53 students. This pattern has been consistent for years (the fall semester has two smaller classes while the spring semester has a single larger class).

While student satisfaction was not formally measured before or after the change in structure, an in-class poll (before grades were released) did show students were very happy with the new structure.

In the old structure, students very rarely did the weekly required reading outside of class and there was no meaningful penalty for this. With the new structure, students were, in effect, assessed on their weekly research. Therefore, the additional effort from the students, which was witnessed, should be expected.

When asked at the end of the semester, but before grades were distributed, students indicated they liked having weekly presentations instead of two large reports. Some students also indicated that having weekly feedback was helpful. Several students also commented that they liked the additional pressure they felt with this new structure (most other modules follow the traditional structure). Lastly, students felt that they learned significantly more in the new structure.

7. Conclusions and recommendations for further study

It seems clear that assessing students by presentation is an effective technique to discourage plagiarism while also increasing student engagement, enjoyment, and most important, student learning.

The addition of tutorial classes in the local language further improved student performance in a meaningful way.

All students were given immediate feedback at the time of their presentation and in a follow up email sent a few days later. It could also be informative to know if the quantity of feedback has any meaningful impact on student performance.

Given that the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) requires local program students to be assessed at least 50% by exam, experiments should be conducted with local program students to see if student learning could be improved by giving educators greater control over their assessments. Since part of the reason for a time-constrained exam is to ensure authenticity, student presentations might be able to fulfill the requirements of MOET without adding to student pressures with such a high-stakes assessment as a 50% final exam.

Given the small sample size included in this study, the results cannot be generalized to a larger population. Therefore, it would be useful to perform similar studies across larger sample sizes.

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