Innovative Assessment Strategies in Economics: Empowering Diverse Learners through Co-Creation

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Context: Co-created assessments are embedded in EC1500, a first-year undergraduate economics course at University College Cork, tailored for students in BSc Food Marketing and Entrepreneurship. The course is marked by its diversity, engaging 50-60 students who come with different levels of economics understanding.

Learner Diversity: Teaching first-year economics presents significant challenges due to the diverse backgrounds of students (Ginty, 2016; Gilmartin, 2008). Diversity includes variations in students' prior exposure to economics, linguistic differences among international students, Disability Support registered students and geographical diversity from students across Ireland. Additionally, the unfamiliarity among students poses hurdles in community-building and teamwork. These differences necessitate a tailored educational approach to address student diversity effectively. Adopting a co-created assessment strategy, supported by the UDL principles, offers a pathway to overcome these challenges ensuring all students have access to an inclusive, equitable learning environment.

Rationale: Co-created assessments emphasise adaptable content delivery, varied engagement techniques, and multiple expression methods for students (CAST, 2018). Aiming to support the varied needs of students, it fosters a collaborative atmosphere that is crucial for engaging first-year students (Lawrence, 2001). Through this, EC1500 students have equal access to learning opportunities making it more inclusive and responsive to their individual needs.

Aim: Enhance student engagement by empowering them to actively participate in designing their assessments. This approach creates a supportive environment that encourages open dialogue and early involvement in the assessment process, fostering a sense of community and ownership while valuing students' unique learning preferences and needs. Moving beyond traditional assessment models, co-created assessments establish inclusive, flexible frameworks catering to diverse learning preferences of all students, including those from international backgrounds, with learning differences, or facing physical challenges. The goal is to refine assessment practices to better align with individual learning preferences, ensuring an equitable, engaging educational experience that aligns with the course learning outcomes.

Implementation:

Step 1: Awareness and Input: Emphasising how crucial student feedback is in making economics educational and relevant to real-world applications, I presented previous years' assessments (30% MCQ only|70% exam) and used a Socrative poll for YES/NO responses to gauge initial student reactions, then via discussions delved deeper into their reasons to better understand their preferences and concerns.

Step 2: Preference Gathering

Socrative poll asked about their continuous assessment preferences, offering choices like a 30% weight on MCQs or other assessment types. This highlighted lecturer dedication to participatory approaches, ensuring students' voices are heard in shaping a learning experience that meets their needs, creating an authentic learning experience for all.

Step 3: Collaborative Development

EC1500 students collectively designed their continuous assessments with module learning objectives in mind. Through in-class discussions and polls, students decided on assessment formats and timelines. Moving away from the traditional single 30% in-class test, diverse assessment types in line with UDL principles were introduced, including 10% MCQs, 10% newspaper critique/article reviews, and 10% WhatsApp video assignment. This collaborative design process resulted in more personalised, inclusive assessments.

Timeline:

This approach was launched in academic year 2021/2022, a change prompted by the flexibility needs highlighted by COVID-19. Since then, this approach has been applied, utilising digital platforms like Socrative and Mentimeter facilitating a democratic process, reinforcing the involvement of students in shaping their educational journey.

Outcomes:

1. Enhanced Student Engagement and Participation

2. Increased Flexibility in Assessment Methods provided students the freedom to select assessment types aligned with their learning preferences. This adaptability met the diverse needs of all students.

3. Assessment Strategy Diversification: Reducing traditional in-class tests from 30% to 10% signifies a shift towards fairer evaluation methods. McCoubrie (2004) acknowledges MCQs' efficiency but critiques their fairness, while Liu (2023) stresses the need for MCQs to serve educational goals and engage diverse learning levels.

4. Enhancement of Multiple Competencies: The revised assessments promote **active learning**, **analytical skills** through MCQs, **critical thinking** via article reviews, and **creativity** through video creation. Authentic engagement expressions enhanced.

5. Video-Based Learning Enhances Engagement: Guo (2014) and Brecht (2012) support the impact of video-based learning, especially short videos in increasing student participation and understanding. Petrovic (2019) highlights the value of

incorporating digital media, akin to students' everyday media use into learning. The students' WhatsApp videos here demonstrate comprehension of economics in daily activities like food or clothes shopping, rendering the study of economics more real and engaging.

6. **Critique-Based Assessment for Deeper Engagement:** Incorporating a 10% review of newspaper articles, for example, analysing global food supply and demand, into assessments has proven effective. Soep (2006) and Bahmani (2016) note that such critique-based assessments enhance motivation and promotes critical thinking by connecting theoretical concepts with practical, real-world situations. This method supports critical analysis and the practical application of economics to everyday events such as rising food prices. Tying new information to existing knowledge in a real-world context, promotes meaningful learning (Ivie,1998) and situated learning (Lave, 1991).

7. **Improved Accessibility and Inclusivity** accommodating students' varied backgrounds and abilities.

8. **Sense of Ownership and Self-Determination** when influencing their assessments

9. **Alignment with Learning Outcomes** while offering a more stimulating and approachable learning experience.

Impact:

Empowerment and Academic Integrity: Co-created assessments with EC1500 students displayed no evidence of misconduct. Rather, involving students in the design of their assessments cultivates a strong sense of ownership and engagement in their learning, consequently reducing the likelihood of academic dishonesty, such as contract cheating and unauthorised AI use (Keating, 2012; Slade, 2018; Aidan, 2021). These cooperative methods also improve students' comprehension of assessment standards and criteria (Aidan, 2021). **Student Feedback and Academic Achievement:** Figure 1 presents word cloud of student feedback:
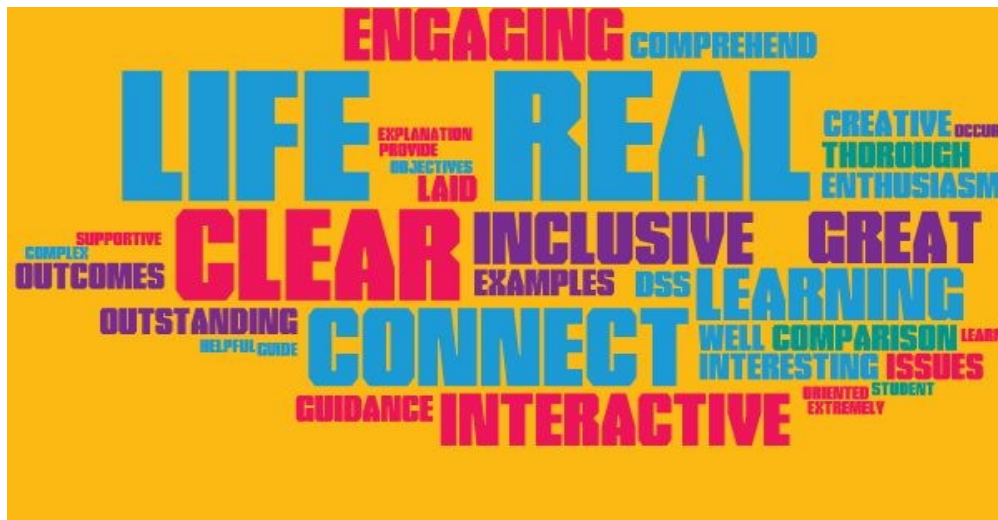
Figure 1 Word Cloud of student feedback

Enhancement of Fairness and Depth in Learning: The reduction in reliance on traditional MCQ assessments (from 30% to 10%) was welcomed by the EC1500 students. This is instrumental in promoting assessment practices that are meaningful and fair, ensuring assessments go beyond mere recall of facts to evaluate deeper understanding and critical thinking. Aligning assessments to different learning levels encourages comprehensive and fair evaluations of student learning.

Improved Academic Results through Video Learning: WhatsApp video assignments, achieving an average grade of 80%, demonstrate how video-based learning significantly enhances student performance. Engaging video content not only attracts student interest but also leads to higher academic success, proving that incorporating videos and interactive features in the curriculum improves engagement, understanding, and overall academic achievements. Figure 2 shows a collage of pictures taken from student videos.

Figure 2 Shows a Collage of Pictures taken from Student Videos.

Critical Thinking and Application Enhancement: Introducing newspaper article reviews improved students' critical thinking and their ability to link theory with real-world issues. With average grades of 70% this encourages and sharpens analytical abilities. This practice mirrors Bahmani's (2016) insights on the benefits of applying academic theories to practical scenarios, significantly enhancing critical thinking skills. These assessments do more than test understanding; they ready students for real-world challenges by fostering critical evaluation skills. Feedback is presented below:

"Some of our assignments were made more hands on and interesting and allowed for more thinking in an everyday environment which helped towards a better understanding of the topic. More of these assignments would be of great benefit as I personally learn more through doing and participating than just reading and learning off information".

"Assignments were made more hands on and interesting and allowed for more thinking in an everyday environment... more of these assignments would be of great benefit..."

"I found the video assignments interesting and playful".

Overall, the enhancement of multiple competencies led to feedback including:

"Much preferred this structure".
"Less pressure on you for the final exam"
"Allows for creativity"
"Able to learn in our own time".
"Video assessments interesting and playful"
"Can't go into Zara without thinking of economics".

Future Directions:

Co-Creation in Inclusive Assessments:

- **Curricular Expansion:** Spread co-created assessment methods to more subjects and programs, enhancing inclusivity and collaboration university wide.

- **Technology Integration:** Explore and incorporate emerging technologies and digital platforms supporting interactive and inclusive assessment methods.

- **Ongoing Research:** Conduct research to evaluate the impact of co-created assessments on student outcomes and satisfaction, informing future improvements.

- **Adaptation to Learning Environments:** Adjust co-created assessments to fit various learning contexts, ensuring inclusivity and engagement in all settings.

Reflections:

What Worked Well?

- Co-created assessments and methods like video-based learning and critique, significantly boosted student engagement, understanding, and critical thinking skills.

Biggest Challenges?

- Some lecturers hesitant to adopt inclusive assessments, wary of the increased grading workload.

- Inclusive assessments challenging with 100+ students due to grading time and resource constraints.

- Striking a balance between fair assessments and practical grading capabilities is a key challenge.

What Could Be Improved?

- Grading support, like teaching assistants, essential for handling diverse assessments.

- Encourage lecturers to publish innovative teaching practices enriching educational research.

- Introduce a "teaching track" for promotions, motivating lecturers to refine teaching methodologies.

- Use lecturers who support and engage in inclusive assessments to share best practices inspiring more lecturers to participate.

What Did You Learn?

- Inclusivity with student engagement is crucial; assessment practices must evolve to meet diverse student needs.

- The importance of feedback and ongoing refinement in developing effective and fair assessments.

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