

Should students be allowed to “play to their strengths” with flexible assessment?

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What motivates and engages students is changing: educators must adapt to meet the needs of their students (Ahlfeld *et al.*, 2005). Heightened motivation to learn comes from active personal commitment, and a key motivator to learn is choice, which creates feelings of autonomy and satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Biggs (1996) advocates for student choice as an adjunct to constructive alignment, while Rust (2002) suggests that learner-centred assessment strategies lag far behind other changes in teaching methods. Assessment dominates students' attitudes towards learning (Cook, 2001), and causes significant anxiety, which can have negative effects on motivation and engagement in learning activities (Gibbs, 1992).

Flexible assessment addresses many of these concerns. It is known that students experience a sense of increased ownership and engagement (Caitlin *et al.*, 1999) and therefore increased responsibility for their learning when offered involvement in assessment processes (Ackerman *et al.*, 1997; Bickham *et al.*, 2001). Many tertiary educators already offer flexible assessment *via* internal choice in exam questions. Flexible assessment can also be interpreted as students choosing: which or how many tasks to complete (Cook 2001), when to complete them, or even crafting their own assessment criteria (Caitlin *et al.*, 1999).

This project explores the implementation of a different type of flexible assessment. Students were invited to “play to their strengths” by electing to more heavily weight tasks at which they believed they could perform strongly. Almost all students agreed that this was an appropriate “power” for students to have: increased ownership and responsibility were positive influences on their desire to put increased effort into assessment tasks. However, not all students elected to adjust their assessment; some did not want the responsibility in case they caused themselves to be disadvantaged, suggesting that the maturity and self-confidence of the learner is an important consideration when offering this type of flexibility to students.

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