

[P15] Using real-world forms to focus undergraduate learning

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SUMMARY

Sometimes students find it difficult to focus on precisely what is required of them. One way to help achieve a precise focus and to increase students' motivation is to require them to complete the kinds of detailed forms that practitioners use in their professional activities. Using such forms helps students focus their energies on providing only relevant information, address important aspects that might otherwise be forgotten, and occasionally process information in a way that gives it new significance. It also makes assessments of student learning more effective. Here I show how I have sourced, modified and trialled a variety of forms, in particular the British Ecological Society's *Expedition Grant Application Form*, the Field Studies Council's risk assessment for field work, and forms for environmental impact assessment for adventure activities. Forms will soon be available from the HEA-GEES Subject Centre for downloading.

RATIONALE

Filling in forms is part of everyday life. This is equally true in our professional lives, when we need to fill in forms to apply for funding, report on the successes of courses, assess and record risks, submit tenders, and so on. The most effective forms allow the originator to:

- obtain the desired information
- do so with a suitable level of detail

- do so in a way that saves time
- At the same time, well-designed forms help those completing them to:
 - focus their energies on providing only relevant information
 - address important areas that might otherwise have been forgotten
 - occasionally process the information in a way that gives it new significance
- do so in a way that saves time

The first list can just as easily be read as a wish list for tutors endeavouring to make their assessments of learning as effective as possible. The second list can be read as a set of guidelines for those devising worthwhile tasks for students. In other words, using forms should help tutors to set and assess student learning that is highly focussed. Many tutors use forms devised by themselves to foster and to assess undergraduate learning with conspicuous success (eg as worksheets or for student self-evaluation).

At UCC, we have concentrated on using the actual forms that practitioners themselves are required to complete as part of their professional activities. This has an additional benefit of increasing students' interest and motivation in the tasks. For example, I have used a modification of the NERC form *Application for a Small Project Grant* as the template that level 2 Environmental Science

undergraduates completed to propose and justify an innovative field project as a follow up to a residential field course. I use the British Ecological Society's *Expedition Grant Application* Form for level 2 Adventure Education undergraduates in the same way. In both cases, students are also provided in advance with instructions for applicants (only slightly modified from the ones actually provided in real life) and submitted forms are assessed using the published criteria of the organisations concerned (once again with only very minor modifications). Student feedback on use of these real-world tasks is consistently positive. They appreciate the challenge of the real-world task and revel in the need to provide answers to focussed questions that they admit they would forget or avoid addressing if writing an essay or a few paragraphs of prose. This need to focus on answering very specific questions in order to satisfy very specific criteria is something that other kinds of student tasks do not push so strongly. Furthermore, by using such structured, focussed tasks it is clear that tutors find it much easier to see if learning objectives have been met and to feed back to students.

At UCC, the real-world nature of the tasks is extended further. For example Adventure Education students form panels to assess previous grant applications and decide which merit funding, then afterwards compare their decisions with the criterion scores and the actual decisions of the real-life panel. They also peer review each other's proposals and give written feedback before submission.

OUTCOMES

Recently I have increased the use of real-world forms in learning and teaching activities by:

1) sourcing, modifying as necessary and testing appropriate forms for students to undertake:

- risk assessment of environmental field

experiments (for use by Adventure Education and Animal Science undergraduates)

- environmental impact assessment for specific outdoor activities (for use by Adventure Education undergraduates)
- risk assessment for those leading groups in the field as part of environmental education (for use by trainee teachers and Adventure Education undergraduates).

(These themes were selected because of their significance to current programmes at UCC, their relevance across the HEA-GEES spectrum, and their suitability for use with only minor modifications at Levels 0-4.)

2) trialling these with cohorts of students at UCC.

I am promoting the use of these and existing forms to the wider HE community by:

- making available freely downloadable forms, instructions for students, and instructions for tutors with permission of the source organisations. These should be available in due course from www.gees.ac.uk
- promoting the use of forms in general across disciplines in my own institution through activities of UCC's Centre for Learning and Teaching; this involves working with colleagues on diverse programmes at Foundation, undergraduate and taught Masters level, as well as HNC/HND courses at the Isle of Wight College (a partner FE college) to show how the approach can be translated.

While there are many ways in which the general literature on student assessment, motivation, realia etc is related to the theme, no worthwhile review draws together all these areas to underpin the approach described

here. Therefore, in parallel with this practical work, I am developing an overview of the rather disparate literature on this subject.

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