

**Original Research**

**An Alternative to Traditional Assessment: The Debate Showcase**

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**Abstract**

Recent debates indicate that there is a lack of focus on ontological transformation within university study due to an over-reliance on a tick-box approach to skill acquisition (Wilson et al., 2013, p. 1223). This paper discusses a recent initiative undertaken at a tertiary pathways institution focused on the utilisation of an alternative productive process to assess student learning. This alternative assessment approach was designed to better engage a specific student cohort that differs significantly from ‘conventional student bodies’ both socio-economically and educationally. It has been noted that many students within the cohort do not have the ‘assumed cultural capital’ (Delvin, 2011) that facilitates success in a traditional tertiary environment. This paper focuses on how a debate assessment was modified using the concept of spiral curriculum (Bruner, 1960, as cited in Takaya, 2008) to better align with the specific needs of the cohort and course outcomes. The concept was used as a scaffolding approach linked to real-life experience to help students make better sense of the key unit content. This paper argues that the showcase was generally successful, by shifting focus from a previously adversarial learning approach to a reflective and ultimately transformative learning experience.

**Keywords:** Transformative Learning; Student Voice; Code-switching; Engaging Assessment; Spiral Curriculum

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ISSN: 2091-0118 (Print) / 2091-2560 (Online)

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Journal homepage: <http://www.kusoed.edu.np/journal/index.php/je>



Published by Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal.

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## **Introduction – A Pedagogical Challenge to Innovation**

The pedagogical challenges faced particularly by the non-traditional cohort of first year university students in our academic pathways programme has provided the catalyst for academic teaching staff to continually search for innovative approaches to assessment while maintaining a strong focus on academic rigour. The introduction section provides an overview of the student cohort and the institute through which the academic pathways programme is delivered.

### **A. Student Diversity**

With a plethora of digital resources and pedagogical tools available in higher education, there is a drive among teaching professionals to adopt engaging classroom environments and assessment tasks. Furthermore, there is also an increasing participation and diversity in the Australian higher education sector. Concurrent to increased participation, a ‘new managerialism’ has emerged in recent decades ‘transforming public services through private and market forces’ (David, 2004, p. 105), and within this neo-liberal context, broad notions of public choice and efficiency have subordinated supposedly tangential goals of access and equity (Maddison & Denniss, 2013). The wider neo-liberal international policy context seems to have direct implications on many elements of higher education in Australia, raising issues concerning the delivery of quality teaching and learning for those without the assumed cultural and economic capital (Connell, 2013).

Across the board in higher education, academics are challenged to seek out and consider new innovative ways to enhance the learning experience of students in multiple contexts, which include both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups of learners. According to Briggs and Tang (2011), learners learn best when they are trusted to make decisions and take responsibility (p. 92). One way in which this can be achieved is through learning instructors adopting a non-conventional approach to assessment design which accommodates for greater levels of authenticity and harnessing a wider variety of student skills.

The realisation of a growing disparity in higher education has led the Australian government to develop initiatives to improve the educational outcome of marginalised groups. As a result of widening participation policies, there is an increased push to increase the number of low SES students to study alongside the conventional students

(Devlin, 2013). However, increasing the entry numbers does not simply help students to complete their degrees, and it has been acknowledged that ‘access without success is an empty phrase’ (International Association of Universities, 2008, as cited in Devlin, 2013, p. 939). Hence, the increasing pressure of delivering curriculum to diverse student bodies in terms of abilities, social class and background has become increasing pedagogical challenge for educators. The recent debates indicate that the heightened demand of diverse mass participation in higher education and the shift in the expectation of graduate attributes has not always achieved the desired results. During recent years, there has developed an interest in a ‘tick box approach to skill acquisition from university study rather than an ontological transformation’ (Wilson et al., 2013, p. 1223).

Within the field of adult education, university teachers have been challenged to think deeper about the purpose, nature and indicators of good teaching and assessment and how to employ greater coherence to learning design. For example, in a process termed *constructive alignment*, Biggs (1996, p. 360) emphasised that teachers should firstly consider ‘performances of understanding’ they expect to see from students and, once clarified, these ‘performance objectives’ then can be broken down and ordered hierarchically. Constructively aligned curriculum is found when ‘the intended [learning] outcomes specify the *activity* that students should engage if they are to achieve the intended outcome as well as the content the activity refers to’ (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 97). In other words, learning activities and assessment tasks are developed to provide a suitable context for students to meaningfully engage with and to provide evidence of having met various learning objectives (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Traditional university assessments usually enter the institution after internalising transmissive modes of learning where the learner is assessed on a capacity to retain, recall or understand the teacher’s knowledge (Trigwell, Prosser, & Taylor, 1994). This style of traditional assessment caters for some students. However, arguments are emerging about its limitations. Increasingly though, universities in Australia are shifting more towards a student-centred approach, whereby that curriculum development and design must be guided by a core interest to *facilitate* and *enable* student learning.

For institutions that cater to student diversity, the commitment to enhancing student-focused learning is not just a marketing strategy, but for many becomes a social

justice imperative. Considering the increasing participation of students from non-traditional backgrounds, Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, and Grinstead (2008) note that “higher education not only needs to address the widening of access to university but it needs to get to grips with what goes on inside the hallowed grounds” (p.176). Students from non-traditional backgrounds include a range of students who might be mature aged students, students from Non-English-Speaking Backgrounds (NESB), students from low Socio- Economic Backgrounds (low-SES), students with low ATAR (Australian Tertiary Academic Ranking) and first-in-family student joining the university. Indeed, there is an ongoing concern that rapid rise in higher education is not necessarily resulting into effective outcomes in terms of social justice, professional ethics and citizenship (Sharma, 2008; Wilson et al., 2013). This paper focuses on how these challenges could be seen as opportunity for pedagogical innovations, specifically by utilising an ongoing reflective action research process. By applying Bruner’s (1960, as cited in Takaya, 2008) concept of spiral curriculum, an alternative productive process to assess learning in a pathways institution was developed and employed to design the new assessment structure and examine its suitability. The case study is presented below. Prior to exploring the case study, the following section provides the context and the setting to help inform a revised approach to learning, which was eventually adopted through the assessment design.

## **B. The Institute and the Cohort**

*The College* is an academic pathways institute catering for foundation and diploma level (1st year) university students who do not meet the requisite entry requirements to Western Sydney University (WSU). WSU was established as a fourth-generation university, focusing on providing educational opportunities and other associated services to the Greater Sydney Region. The College is committed in developing preparatory units and scaffolding tasks to qualify students to progress into second year of the university with skills and capacities on par with continuing university students. Both authors in this paper teach within the Social Science and Psychology curriculum area, which provides mirrored versions of eight core university units in the School of Social Science and Psychology at WSU.

A significant number of students enrolled in the pathways institute are first-in-family and approximately 33 per cent of students studying within the Social Science

and Psychology programme are categorised as being of low SES. While significant social, cultural and economic diversity exists, the majority share a similar experience of not having the ‘assumed cultural capital’ (Devlin, 2013) that facilitates success in a traditional tertiary environment. Assumed cultural capital can be defined in this context as the internalised knowledge and familiarity of tertiary education requirements which are usually acquired through past personal experiences through their association with family and friends. The problem is that the majority of the students from low socio-economic backgrounds have other disadvantages of being the first in the family to attend the university; hence they lack the cultural capital of cultural codes. Margolis et al. (2001, as cited in Devlin, 2013, p. 5) describe these cultural and social resources students hold as ‘particular types of knowledge, ways of speaking, styles, meanings, dispositions and world views’ that correspond with specific social cues and contexts. Students from linguistically diverse or lower socio-economic backgrounds can experience difficulty embracing the dominant cultural codes that facilitate success in tertiary education. As explained by Morton (2014, p. 279), ‘not only do they have to navigate differences in modes of address, language, and dress codes, but switch dispositions to ones that are often foreign, and in conflict with the dispositions and values central to their homes’. As a result, those unable to switch between codes find it hard to integrate into the university system alongside conventional students, falling into the category of a ‘second group’. These students feel confronted with the new culture, which is assumed to be ‘entry knowledge’ affecting their actual capacity, hindering their success and achievement at university (Devlin, 2013).

### **Towards a Transformative Approach to Learning and Assessment**

Given the issues our students face integrating into dominant academic culture, applying a student focused strategy has become a central element of the teaching programme. However, within this general philosophical orientation, a diversity of teaching and learning approaches tend to be employed across the curriculum area. It is often a point of discussion at *The College* that as students progress from their first to third terms of study, a notable shift in learning strategies tends to be employed as student capacities and learning objectives change. In students’ first term of study, teachers prioritise the facilitation of principally *developmental* and *nurturing* learning environments, which evolves over the 12-16 month course to one that adequately prepares students to pressures they will likely face following the transition to second

year study. Rather than ‘weaning off’ the students from being the centre of the learning process, the focus rests instead on working with students to enhance their capacity and interest in thinking creatively, reflectively and critically about core social science concepts and major issues impacting on the world. Other programmes at the university have similarly advocated unique approaches to learning design. For example, *The Academy* at WSU has endeavoured to operationalise in its curriculum a radical vision for graduates centring on the notion of the *Citizen Scholar* and change agents (Kourtis & Arvanitakis, 2016).

The commitment to creating alternative, emancipatory learning experiences to diverse student cohorts has been the focus of higher education research. While Kourtis and Avantikas (2016) take their inspiration from Gramsci’s notion of the *organic intellectual*, comparisons can be highlighted in Mezirow’s (1997) re-interpretation of the works of Habermas and other social theorists in articulating his notion of *transformative learning*. While this concept has undergone considerable iterations and revisions since its original inception (Kitchenham, 2008), Mezirow provides a synthesised definition:

Transformative learning is defined as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mind sets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating open, reflective and emotionally able to change. (Mezirow, 2006, p. 26)

Opening up new frames of reference are particularly pertinent to first-in-family university students or students who enter university without clear intrinsic motivations for learning. Many students enter their studies at The College having being acculturated to engage in surface learning behaviours that position academic study as discrete from their wider role in society (Trigwell et al., 1994). From this context, learning to think independently represents a significant, and often visceral, challenge to first year students. Mezirow (1997, 1998) highlighted that key to transformative learning rests on students growing ability to become ‘critically reflective of assumptions and participating in discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values and feelings’. It is argued here that efforts to operationalise a transformative learning framework need to move beyond just how classes are taught, whereby transformative objectives become embedded into the curriculum structure and assessment design. The recent rapid growth

in the concept of transformative learning has resulted in some confusion with differing interpretations, reflecting a tension between individual and societal change (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). However, increasingly Mezirow's conceptual framework is being applied in modifying assessments in innovative ways. The study explored below attempts to apply this approach to acknowledge the different skills sets, capacities and modes of learning of the students.

## **Methodology**

This section provides a context and overview of the action research approach that underpinned the curriculum review and development initiative. An iterative, collaborative and solution-focused process was considered ideal to help provide a practical and relevant method to identify the problem, to locate an alternative assessment task to evaluate student performance incorporating transformative learning approaches, and to critically evaluate the impact of these assessment changes with reference to various sources of relevant data. The context, method and tools utilised as part of this action research process are highlighted below.

### **A. Setting up a Context for Assessment Renewal**

This case study was conceptualised, implemented and evaluated as an applied action research to improve and refine the pedagogical actions (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) within The College's broader curriculum development project. The following sections outline the process whereby a teaching team facilitated transformative learning through constructively aligned teaching and assessment (Biggs, 1996; Biggs & Tang, 2011). Of particular interest to the teaching team was how, through redevelopment of an assessment task, the learner might be afforded greater autonomy to explore course content creatively in a real-world setting. Through this process, students were invited to reflect upon, interrogate and ultimately exhibit what they found to be insightful and important. In doing so, a task that was previously aberrant to students' preferred learning styles was transformed into one that facilitated collaborative learning in ways that celebrated their creative achievements and diverse capacities.

### **B. Identifying the Problem – Teaching Cultural Geographies to Pathways Students**

The teaching team has been grappling with the considerable challenge of delivering a second year urban planning/cultural geographies unit to students in their third and

final term of their Diploma. Up to this stage in their learning, students were presented with various opportunities to exhibit higher level graduate attributes that include an ability to ‘bring knowledge to life through responsible engagement and appreciation of diversity in an evolving world’. However, the unit was somewhat unique in the Diploma in that three of the five unit learning outcomes corresponded with more complex end of the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, this being the ability to *analyse and evaluate* conceptual knowledge (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956; Krathwohl, 2002):

- describe key paradigmatic shifts within cultural planning, cultural and social geography and cultural studies.
- critically evaluate and analyse cultural products.
- analyse representations of place and culture.
- analyse policies and programmes for contemporary place management.
- identify and describe key theories of identity and place.

The above listed learning objectives were further developed to align with a key focus of the unit which is that *the analysis and assessment advances a politics of difference, anti-racist, social justice perspective*. This social justice orientation has long been considered critical to the effective delivery of the unit and has informed a range of teaching practices employed.

In application, the experience of the teaching team has been that students have always engaged with the unit content quite well. However, there has been ongoing concern expressed by the students about the two assessments – ‘debate’ and ‘major essay’. Students have historically found the tasks complex and the structure of the assessments to be confusing, forming a barrier to being able to effectively analyse and reflect upon their conceptual understanding. Despite this unit being positioned an end of their Diploma degree, several students were generally ill-equipped in conveying their academic arguments through traditional means. In response, various strategies were employed such as creating additional resources, and scaffolding the requirements of a traditional academic debate or essay and in applying ‘feed forward’ strategies to better support student improvement and reduce the cultural or disciplinary barriers to their learning. However, the continuity of a conventional debate assignment (as a minor task

worth 10%) remained constant point of dissatisfaction not only to the students but also to the teachers.

The adversarial structure of the conventional debate proved problematic and tangential to expected unit outcomes. For a majority of the students, the debate became highly stressful task and the conceptual and pedagogical purpose of the debate was often undermined due to the time-pressure imposed by the task. Hence, they turned the debate into exercises of aggression (sometimes even as entertainment) rather than focusing on the depth and complexity of argument. Each SFU showed concern about the assessment task. Some of the explicit comments in the section for ‘Needs Improvement’ were:

No debates (2010, T3)

No debate and essay were due too closely together.... (2011, T3)

Better debate topics (2012, T3)

Time management with assignments ... (2014, T3)

### **C. The Curriculum Development Framework**

In late 2016, the teaching team was awarded Curriculum Review and Development funding. Three core aims formed the scope of the project, which included: [1] to utilise student and staff feedback to improve assessment tasks, with specific focus on incorporating an applied fieldwork component; [2] to enhance the use of appropriate blended learning strategies within the course, and; [3] to map out and revise the weekly content structure in alignment with unit learning outcomes. Both the major essay and debate assessments were revised through the curriculum review project, and changes to the debate were designed so as to contribute to the achievement of all three objectives. To further ensure consistency between the mirror units delivered at The College and WSU, the teaching team met with the university unit coordinator to obtain approval for the planned amendments to assessment tasks.

### **D. Data and Method of Analysis**

The teaching team worked to modify the debate task through an applied action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Springer, 2007) process similar to Bruner’s (1960, as cited in Takaya, 2008) concept of spiral curriculum. It was a useful planning tool to ensure constructive alignment in ways suitable to the student cohort. In this instance,

the teaching team developed a scaffolding approach linked to the real-life experience to help students make better sense of the subject matter and purpose of assessment, while aligning the task between the critical and reflective elements of the unit learning objective. Both quantitative and qualitative data was incorporated into this action research process to revise assessment task. For example, quantitative data particularly in the form of assessment marks and student feedback on unit (SFU) survey results helped to explore relevant indicators of student experience, engagement and success, while setting up a framework for ongoing evaluation and review. Content analysis of qualitative student feedback data was carried out by eliciting core themes in the ‘best aspect’ and ‘needs improvement’ of the questionnaire (Krippendorff, 2013; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This information was used to triangulate the quantitative data analysis.

Six years of the SFU questionnaire results were provided by the ‘Office of Quality and Performance’ for analysis. This data was also cross-referenced in relation to Student Feedback on Teacher (SFT) questionnaire data for the unit from 2010 to 2016. Similarly, unit result breakdown of each assessment for unit (2010-2016) was received from the ‘Academic Programs Administration’. As Figure 1 reveals, the unit has historically rated highly among enrolled students which has been trending upwards from 2010 (term 3) to 2015 (term 3). However, an examination of individual categories showed that assessment activities were on average lower in comparison to students’ overall unit experience (4.09 and 4.33 respectively). It was further noted that assessment guidelines were on average higher than the tasks themselves (4.13) although there were greater variances in ratings for this category of the SFU questionnaire. These findings served to reinforce interest within the teaching team to review the unit assessment tasks.

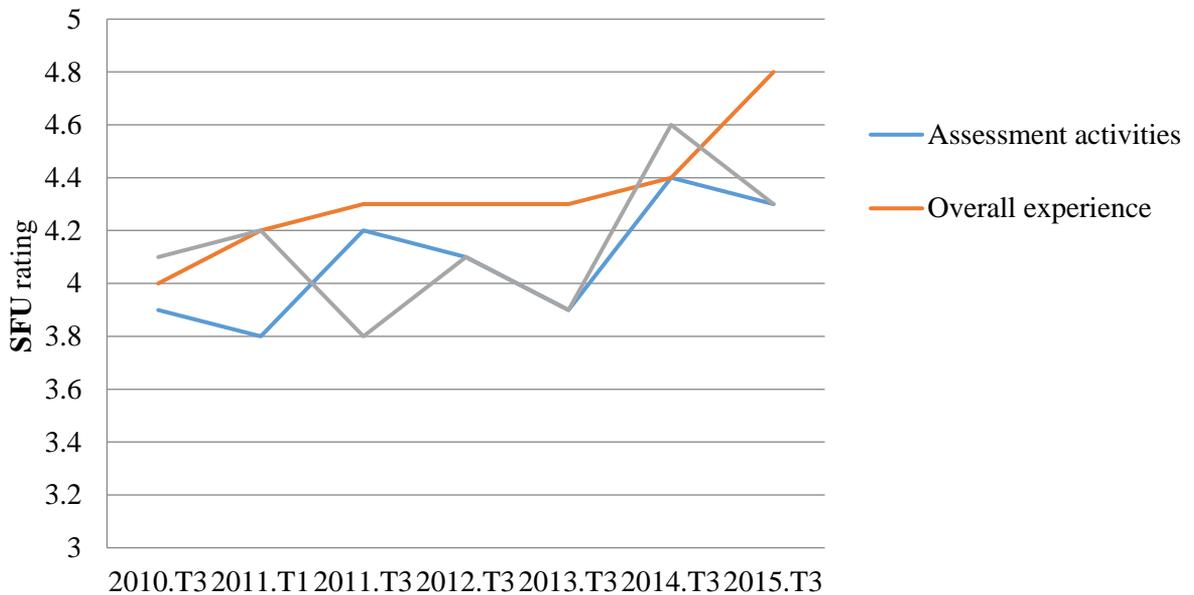


Figure 1. Assessment activities, assessment guidelines and overall experience.

The alternative approach to traditional debate – outlined below – was modified as ‘Debate and Showcase’ and conducted in the last week of Term 3, 2016-17. Various members of the faculty were invited to attend the ‘Debate and Showcase’ as guests, which served to reinforce the celebratory element of the assessment (i.e. as the pinnacle of student’s achievement in their Diploma Course) and provide a ‘peer lens’ to assist with the ongoing evaluation of the unit (Brookfield, 1998). According to the testimonials of faculty members, the ‘Debate and Showcase’ was considered highly successful. However, teachers were concerned that students were not able to reflect on this final assessment in their SFU questionnaires, which were collected in the preceding weeks (week 10 to 11 of the term). Therefore, the teachers informally recorded some verbal transcripts of students’ feedback. Since there were unanimously positive responses and potentially influenced by the presence of teaching staff, students enrolled in the head teacher’s tutorials were requested to email through their testimonials for the purpose of academic evaluation after marks were released. Out of fifteen students in the evaluation sample, a total of seven students provided their written evaluation (or 47% of the selected sample population). Formal and informal meeting and discussion notes of the teaching team were also used to supplement this qualitative data.

### **E. Preliminary Research Analysis: From ‘Debate’ to ‘Debate and Showcase’**

The revised assessment was structured around students undertaking a field visit to a locality of interest in Sydney and subsequently developing a multi-media reflection piece presenting the relevant theoretical arguments on a contemporary debate about ‘public space’ (as explained in section F). This audio/visual presentation was facilitated by small groups of students as a ‘debate showcase’ event in the last week of the term.

Historically, the performance in the assessment task among Standard Diploma in Social Science students over the years 2010 to 2016 (shown in Figure below) indicates the difficulty students had compared to the revised approach to the assessment. Through initial analysis, the overall average score in the assessment initially did not show noticeable variation. However, the average score calculated by excluding all NS (Non Submission) or AF (Absent Fail) – grades attributed to students who dropped out or deferred their studies without officially withdrawing their enrolment - provided the actual reflection of the marks scored.

The graph below shows marked improvement in the average mark achieved in 2016 for ‘Debate and Showcase’. The average score in all years preceding the implementation of the ‘Debate and Showcase’ years ranged from Pass (50 – 64%) to low/mid Credit (65 – 74%). Variations in these results can be attributed to cohort size, assessment feedback strategies and revisions made to previous assessment guidelines. Notably, the implementation of the new assessment in 2016 is correlated with a higher average score of 77%, which for the first time entered the Distinction (75 – 84%) range. Each of the four teaching members at different campuses consistently expressed that the quality of assessments was outstanding. Invited guests from senior management and other faculty members, who attended the ‘Debate and Showcase’, also provided positive feedback about the students’ performance and depth of conceptual analysis.

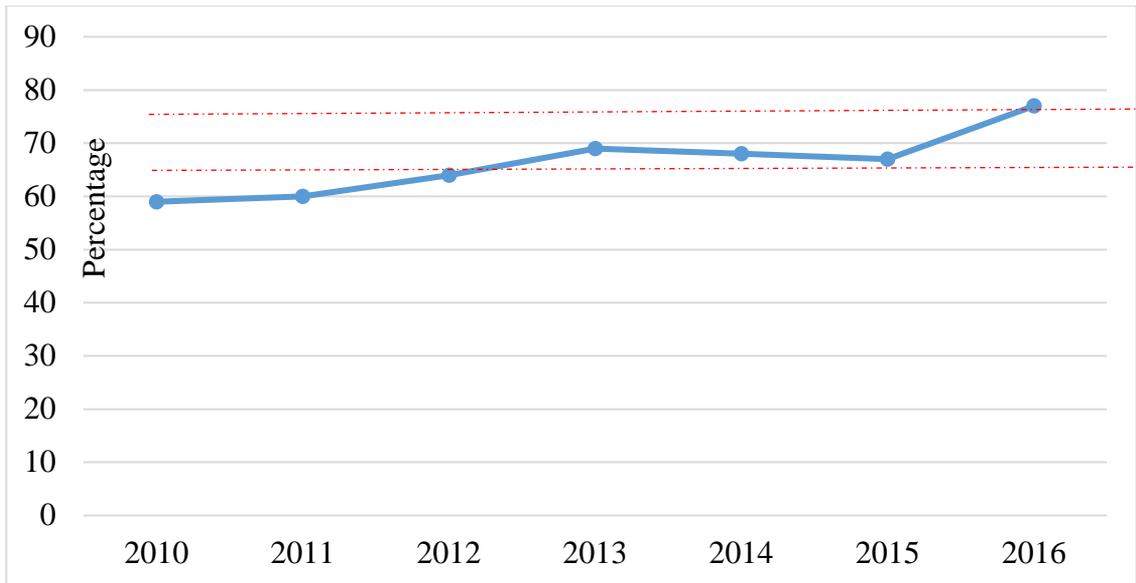


Figure 2. Average score in the assessment 'Debate' from 2010 to 2016.

## F. Blended Learning and Field Work

The unit focuses on the theoretical underpinnings and practical application of 'place-making' using the concepts of 'creative city' and 'social justice' as analytical tools used in the professions of urban planning and advocacy. However, the assessments (approved for the pathways institute) did not include the practical component for student engagement. To rectify this gap, in 2014 a tutorial activity known as 'design workshop' was introduced. This design workshop allowed students to work outside the classroom as a 'pop-up' creative showcase. The workshop was received well by students, and overall that year the results indicate that students performed well in all three campuses. Unfortunately, logistical and risk management issues were raised following an organisational restructure, resulting in this initiative no longer being considered feasible. Rather than continuing to pursue this activity, it was deemed more desirable for students to explore ways these concepts were implemented at a wider regional level.

Aside from the design workshop, one assessment task that students purported to enjoy in the unit is the 'student-led seminar'. The assessment provided students with a considerable voice to lead the class discussion and facilitate learning activities in small

groups. Students are required to apply components of blended-learning to engage the audience, which tended to enhance their enthusiasm in the seminar topics. The success of this assessment structure and the ‘design workshop’ implemented in 2014 formed the basis of developing an alternative engaging approach to the ‘Debate’ assessment. The alternative approach explored how students could absorb knowledge by critical engagement, and most importantly focusing on the construction of student voices (Yannuzi & Martin, 2014).

In contrast, the method of training ‘conventional students’ into the discipline has been implemented so as to force-fit stock-standard learning methods to non-traditional student cohorts (Psacharopoulos & Tassoulas, 2004). A significant proportion of students within these cohorts do not necessarily have the assumed ‘academic cultural capital’ that facilitates success, are unable to thrive in certain high-stress learning environments (Joëls, Pu, Wiegert, Oitzl, & Krugers, 2006), and many fear the perceived or real implications of ‘failure’. The fear of failing in a high-stress task may serve to explain why many students exhibited adaptive responses to the task (Michou, Vansteenkiste, Mouratidis, & Lens, 2014), which in our experience led to enhanced aggression or ambivalence. The constant resistance from the students defeated the learning outcomes of the task.

Under the revised assessment plan, students were provided with an opportunity to conduct a field visit to explore the contested concept of public space. During the field visits, students were to compile photographs and video footage as data, which would be converted into a short narrative video to support their arguments. Instead of a conventional debate, students were asked to share their debate contribution and showcase a video in the final teaching week. This was designed to allow students to articulate the argument using the multi-media and to promote enhanced student engagement through building a supportive and less stress-inducing environment

Six creative precincts within the inner Sydney region were identified (as shown below in Table 1) and Week 11 tutorial time was designated for their field visit.

Table 1

*Selected Creative Precincts in Sydney (Unit 700055, T1.2017, Learning Guide)*

<b>Precincts</b>	<b>Highlights of the area</b>	<b>Insightful checklist</b>
Walsh Bay	Dance, theatre, creative professionals	It is important to <i>investigate 'beyond the obvious'</i> to look for 'creative class clues'... like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• business names/logos (pointing to hidden business in office buildings),</li> <li>• average price of coffee/lunch (as indicator of disposable income and average daily spend),</li> <li>• design of buildings (aged/history) as attractive for/to creatives, local upcoming events, festivals, openings etc.</li> </ul>
Holt Street and Crown Street, Surry Hills	creative professionals, media professionals, local businesses	
King Street, Newtown	local businesses, creative professionals, graffiti	
Carriageworks, Eveleigh	regional creative asset, adaptive reuse of building	
Oxford Street - Hyde Park to UNSW Art and Design Chippendale	main street, cheap spaces for rent, local businesses, gayborhood galleries, creative professionals	

To minimise confusion and anxiety about the task, considerable planning went into wording the assessment description and additional guidelines. In week 6, students were provided with their debate topic and the readings. In addition, students were provided with guidelines which required that they explore the impact of sides of academic arguments with relation to the topic. Content from specific weeks' readings, lectures and tutorials were identified as relevant, although students were also invited to incorporate wider ideas and literature where relevant. Students were formed into 6 groups for field work, and when creating videos were encouraged to use tools at their existing disposal such as 'snap chat', 'periscope' and 'spark video'.

The key concept of the unit about 'place-making' through participatory planning (Cilliers & Timmermans, 2014) was used as an exemplary practice by applying the technique in designing this assessment task. The students were treated as local level experts in designing the assessment tool, whereby providing a diverse group of students the opportunities to participate and have full control over tools and analytical

techniques that would better facilitate successful completion of the task (Kaur, Noman, & Nordin, 2016). This also took away the potential stress of focusing on the method of creating the content, instead of requiring students to consider the quality of content as expressed by one of the students in her testimonial.

This kind of debate that we also had put the responsibility in our hands (as a group), and allowed us to take responsibility in how we wanted to present and what content we wanted in it. The way the debate was set out let each group present their argument and have the other groups, see what would have been like to visit each area. It took the pressure off of us... Doing this kind of research and field work helped me see the area I studied through the eyes of an urban planner, it helped me understand why design changes happen during urban growth. (Student G)

### **Key Findings: Strengthening Students' Capacities as Active Learners: From 'Students as Victims' to 'Students as Agents'**

The revised assessment structure was overall guided by a 'code-switching' process which acknowledged students' 'reservoir of life-skills', sought to build their agency and confidence, and to acknowledge their capability both individually and within a team context. Students enrolled in the academic pathways programme often expressed that they feel intimidated in this new academic culture, and possess lower levels of resilience to potential barriers to their learning due to lack of assumed academic cultural capital. Moreover, many tend not to seek help especially if they come from a self-reliant culture, where asking questions in class can be synonymous to loss of face (Watson, 1999). Therefore, the students' actual capacity can be undermined or obscured by an unwillingness to build upon their existing knowledge and skills. Indeed, to assume that individual 'skill and will' could flourish naturally in a tertiary environment is clearly wishful thinking, and when students do not perform at the requisite level all too often a 'victim blaming' response may emerge within the teaching context (Delvin, 2013). Moreover, this view also assumes the absence of social class and cultural differences (Greenbank, 2006), which reflects the tendency of academic culture to overlook the fact that there now exist disparities in cultural capital among students. These factors may very well lead to further exclusion of non-traditional students and hinder their success in academia.

‘Code-switching’ is thus suggested as a pragmatic practice of adapting to achieve, which means students should value what they already possess and understand the value of the alternative. Being aware and cognisant of the presence of more than one culture is essential in bridging this gap of cultural capital and shifting away from focusing on a deficit mode of assessment and feedback (Delvin, 2013). The spiral curriculum approach to constructive alignment has been shown to assist in moving away from the ‘deficit mode’ of learning (Delvin, 2013), by enhancing the life experience of students as a major focal point of learning. The method used in this case study helped reframe students’ biographical narratives and capitalise their marginal position as positive attributes while encouraging an emerging intrinsic interest in scholarly learning.

The development of student agency is of critical importance to this process of change (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2004). Students were encouraged to reflect on their existing reservoir of skills relating to digital technology and also their life experiences (as collaborative learners, socially conscious citizens, and everyday readers of cultural landscapes, carers and workers). Most students from low socio-economic and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds tend to maintain major family responsibilities and face wider economic and social pressures on a day-to-day basis, while endeavouring to remain committed to continue and excel in their studies (Crozier et al., 2008). Success in striking this balance in itself can be considered a significant achievement. Scaffolding tasks in the classroom combined preparatory work on their assessments with activities designed to connect students’ personal life experience to theoretical debates. In other words, the learning environment was intentionally shaped to assist students’ capacity to applying complex theoretical knowledge to real life situations in meaningful ways.

Building students’ agency is important by acknowledging their capability, which creates a buffer to understand the academic culture. The process of code-switching functioned as an important element in student success. As outlined by Priest (2009), code-switching enables students to recognise the value of their own discourse and understand the value of alternate discourse (academic cultural code) rather than adopting it passively. This process went beyond collaborative learning in that the teaching team focused on “creating an environment that is supportive and open to self-reflection” (Moore, 2005, p. 83), and provided students with a range of opportunities to enter new social and cultural environments as ‘emerging experts’.

At a basic level, the outcomes were the development of new skills and techniques student could take into their second year of study. Also noted in the following testimonials was the relevance and comprehension of the task itself:

The field work was engaging and team work skills were developed.

The relevance of this unit to real world experiences. Also How interactive the assessments are real world experiences.

The unit...very clear understanding of what we are doing for the rest of term.

Assignments are very clear for everyone.

(Student testimonials and SFT excerpts 2016, T3)

However, it was further observed that the new approach to the assessment enabled a deeper sense of professionalism among social science students, including the awareness of social justice, professional ethics and citizenship. Students' enhanced confidence was palpable through their impassioned arguments about the meaning and applied purpose of public space, and some verbally communicated that they found the experience personally empowering. Moreover, one student expressed in a testimonial how the 'Showcase and Debate' assisted in understanding concepts:

I got so much out of this assignment, i think that this is one of the most enjoyable tasks to do out of this whole term including the rest of the units i am in, it made me grasp the concept so much better. (Student A)

Students also found the assessment to be a creative exercise and appeared open to non-confrontational interaction with other groups. Students were more engaged with the arguments presented by their classmates:

I think that this is much better than a traditional style of debate, I also really enjoyed putting together the video and viewing the other groups...if you can keep anything for future students please keep that! It was awesome and different. (Student C)

Empowering students to choose the tools and techniques to create their assessment helped in connecting with student's personal interest. They also felt that they had engaged in deeper reflection of the debate topics based on their own experiences living in another region of Sydney. Engaging in such applied learning, according to these students, was preferable to more conventional debate formats:

The Debate and Showcase was a great experience. I enjoyed going to an area that I haven't been before, it was great to explore the area and see how different it was in comparison to Western suburbs. From this assessment I learned a lot about how public space is used to different people, and the readings for this was very interesting to read. It was interesting to see different scholars point of views of public space. I think that it is better than having a traditional debate, only because you get to argue both sides of the point. (Student D)

The debate and showcase assessment was very enjoyable... I personally agree that debate and showcase is better then [than] a traditional style of debate. (Student F)

Students also reflected that the assessment task led to wider understanding of the unit itself, which was seen through the framework of creative learning:

The debate and showcase was an excellent way to be able to put all that we had learnt throughout the term, into practice. We had the opportunity to visit a place that we may not have necessarily visited otherwise. It was a much more creative way of presenting a debate... We had a lot of fun together making the video. Thanks for the opportunity it summed the unit up perfectly. (Student E)

The video component ensured critical reflection on learning by requiring them to present both applied visual data with the central themes and concepts explored through the unit all in a concise narrative format. It was apparent that within class groups a collaborative and mutually supportive atmosphere was being fostered, to the point where tech-savvy students from 'competing' fieldwork groups actively provided assistance to others in creating the videos and in one class students have set up an area where party food was shared to celebrate the occasion. Academic and senior management staff invited to attend noted that all groups critically explored debate topics at a deeper level compared to previous years. Some groups had also successfully integrated their own fieldwork experiences (i.e. talking to local people and reflecting personally on experiencing a unique cultural space) into the video narrative. Teachers commented on how listening to the debates a learning process was for them, even though most had visited the specified inner Sydney locations themselves.

It has been established that teaching can go beyond developing knowledge and skills if students' experiences are effectively organised understand the construction of the social world and how this could be potentially transformed (Yannuzzi & Martin,

2014). In this case, more than one student reflected on how the very activity of travelling to a new public space and applying a critical social scientific lens became a significant emotional and empowering process that enabled her to better grasp the unit concepts that she had previously experienced as opaque. For example, the process facilitated the ability of some students to connect with and experience Iveson's (2003) concept as a third way of looking at 'public space' – one of the key concepts in the unit. Iveson (2003) argues that carving out an exclusive public space for marginalised community contributes to social inclusiveness, as the marginalised group may never enjoy the space without such intervention. The assessment as a mandatory task proved to be providing a similar opportunity to students, who have felt excluded and insecure in society. The empowering opportunity provided by the assessment task was aptly expressed by a student, who herself was a recent humanitarian arrival to Australia and had experienced exclusion and isolation elsewhere in Sydney:

My reflection about the assignment of debate and showcase is that it is one of the most important assignment which is valuable to explore different place. I personally believe that it is helpful, ...I have never been to Newtown as being a Muslim girl wearing scarf ...I wasn't really feeling comfortable of going ...I have faced racism. My experience in Newtown is that I really like the place I feel the sense of connection there, the people there wasn't like that sees you as different... I feel really welcomed there... I feel connected. I went to Newtown for my assignment of debate and showcase ... I want to go there to hang out with my friends and take my mom for shopping. [This is] One [of] the assignments that I enjoyed the most.  
(Student B)

The assessment also achieved a broader ontological goal through its focus on construction and production of student voice (Yannuzzi & Martin, 2014).

I liked the creativity it brought within individuals of the unit.

Teacher had unique way of engaging with the class.

The class discussion and activities that took place. Hearing about stories from classmates based on the subject. (SFU &SFT, T3, 2016)

Throughout the term, students actively participated on twitter for sharing resources and discussion (#wsucsg). The interaction through twitter with the experts in the subject area provided wider professional experience to the students, and resulted in deeper

commitment to the unit’s content and purpose. Endorsement of students’ class activities and acknowledgement of student tweets by widely respected and acclaimed individuals and institutes within the field of urban planning and cultural geographies helped to empowered the students to experience their engagement with academic ideas and expert positions as a ‘reciprocal relationship’ rather than a unidirectional and static one (Yannuzzi & Martin, 2014). After the ‘Debate and Showcase’, several student groups tweeted the videos they created as part of their assessment. One of the videos was liked and retweeted by the respective local council, a local community organisation and a consultancy firm. The social media evidently gave voice to the students and teaching practice for wider application. The field visit and the video as part of the assessment were recognised as powerful tools by the organisers of Resilient Sydney (hosted by Sydney of Sydney Council and Parramatta Council as part of 100 Resilient Cities, pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation). The Subject Lead (head teacher) was subsequently invited to participate and contribute in the workshop of Resilient Sydney on 15th February 2017, through which the field work component of the ‘Debate and Showcase’ was discussed elaborately to be adopted as one of the possible strategies for social cohesion in Sydney.

Students’ active participation and engagement resulted in an overall improvement in the grades in 2016 compared to the other years as well (see Figure 3). The year had significantly higher percentages of D (Distinction) grades, the result also went beyond the usual curve with a higher percentage of C (Credit) compared to P (Pass).

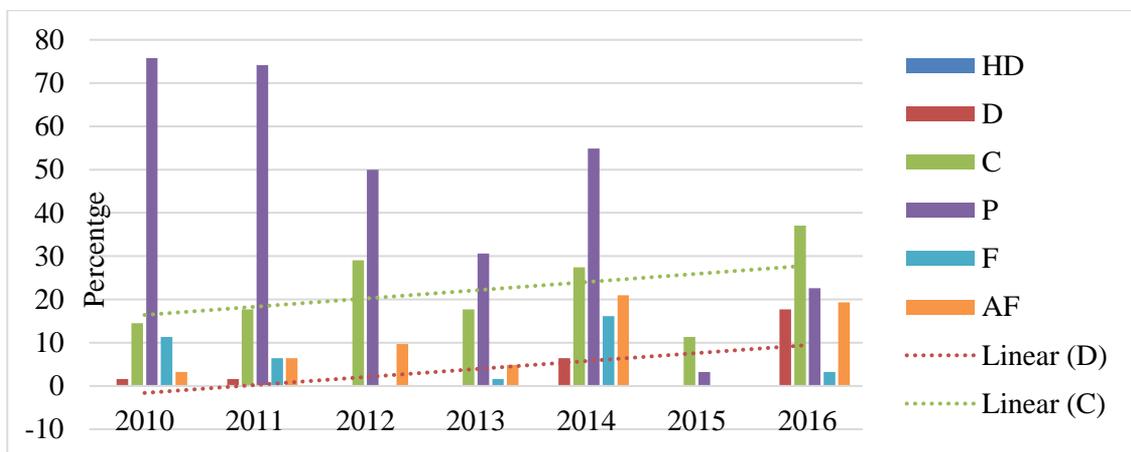


Figure 3. Distribution of overall grades.

While the change in assessment structure of traditional debate has been the focus of this paper, it should be noted that all other assessments were either scaffolded further or new supportive resources were developed, which contributed in achieving a better result in 2016 compared to previous years.

### **One Size Does Not Fit All**

It is also important to acknowledge that such modification of assessment does not necessarily suit all the students in the cohort. Homogeneity amongst the student should not be assumed simply because they are enrolled in an alternative ‘academic pathway’. As explained earlier, the majority of students enrolled at The College do not have assumed academic and cultural capital. However, some students hold considerable cultural capital and these students have their own expectations that tertiary educational institutions will be operating through the traditional method of assessment. As expressed by one student enrolled in the unit, it could be a disappointment to find that there has been an alteration away from the traditional assessment method:

I feel very happy with how the presentation went. Yes i [I] said presentation because in no way was that a debate at all, and i am throughly [thoroughly] appalled at the way this 'debate' was carried out. The board and staff need to stop catering to the emotional demands of students. Students need to harden up and get things done the way they are supposed to be done. I wish we had an actually debate (10 mins) with a 5 min video just to keep the attention. (Student H)

### **Conclusion**

As universities and colleges around the world seek to expand and democratise access, it is incumbent upon institutions and individual educators to ensure their learning strategies cater for the needs of diverse student cohorts (Crozier et al., 2008). Indeed, the infusion of market forces within the higher education sector during this era of neoliberalism has led to the call for greater ‘invention’ in ensuring the ideals of quality learning and equity are upheld (Connell, 2013). The case study presented in this paper has attempted to respond to this call, despite its modest scope. Through the example of applying spiral curriculum approaches to reviewing and redeveloping the ‘Debate’ assessment task, the teaching team at our academic pathways institute were able to creatively redesign the task in a way that recognised the needs and unique capacities of the specific student cohort. An important element of this process was in

the way the concept of *constructive alignment* (Biggs & Tang, 2011) was employed as spiral curriculum (Takaya, 2008) to ensure that the redesigned assessment task addressed – in this case, more accurately – the desired outcomes at a course and programme level. Our efforts to revise the learning material and assessment steered away from a Procrustean approach to learning which assumes non-traditional students are expected to *fit the mould* set through traditional assessment design. Rather, a tool was developed that opened up the role of the student to be engaged, reflective and authoritative in their approach to learning.

Data gathered through various feedback channels revealed that some students had developed new skills relevant to their professional trajectories, and that core course concepts were better understood. Given the issues identified with previous debates held in class, these indicate a positive step in better aligning the assessment to unit and course outcomes. However, many students identified much broader benefits. These ranged from the ‘Showcase’ representing the culmination of their new knowledge, to apply greater creativity and reflexivity to their learning, and for one student, the task itself serving as a catalyst for personal empowerment. The diversity of learning outcomes students reported was simply astonishing to the teaching team.

This case study shows that the objectives of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2006) are possible at the undergraduate level, even in first-year Diploma level programmes. Central to facilitating learning strategies that cater to students of diverse backgrounds and capacities is the presence of student ‘voice’ (Yannuzzi & Martin, 2014). To provide student voice as a ‘reciprocal relationship’ in teaching and learning, a ‘code-switching’ process was adopted to overcome the traditional deficit mode of assessment design (Devlin, 2013). Through the ‘Debate and Showcase’ the teacher’s role went beyond just assessing students to *learning from them*; supporting the notion that the classroom can resemble a co-constructivist ‘community of learners’ (Carnell, 2007). This mode of learning recognises the strengths and additional capacities that ‘conventional’ students do not necessarily possess, and serves to celebrate difference and collaborative learning in a non-confrontational setting. Ultimately, this task has enhanced the potential of students within the ‘second group’ to think independently and critically in their journey to being future agents of positive change.

Even though this case study highlighted the success story of the constructive alignment of the debate assessment, it is important to acknowledge that some students may well retain a preference for traditional assessment styles. While this paper only briefly touched upon some emerging issues with regard to the proposed alternative approach, we maintain that potential for disaffection among some students within a diverse cohort should not be ignored. More generally, the wider role of alternative assessment approaches, its varying forms, and potential benefits offered remains largely contested within the higher education context, and we argue that this field would benefit from further practitioner and research interests.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This timeframe dated back to the first time the unit was taught at The College.

<sup>2</sup> A higher Fail Non-Submission (FNS) rate in 2016 was attributed to changes in university policy whereby all assessment tasks were enforced as 'mandatory'.

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution and support provided by John O'Callaghan from JOC Consultancy to identify the creative precincts for the students' field work. John also initiated the use of social media (twitter) in teaching this unit.

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