

CONTEMPORARY TEACHING METHODS AND KNOWLEDGE ASSESSMENT METHODS IN HIGHER EDUCATION FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF STUDENTS

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Abstract:

In Slovenia, the Bologna reform of higher education began in 2004 with the adoption of the Higher Education Act. The first reformed study programmes at the Faculty of Education of the University of Maribor came to life in 2009. The main changes resulting from the Bologna process related to the adoption of the three-cycle structure of study programmes and the introduction of the credit system (ECTS). The changes also covered other study segments such as teaching and knowledge assessment methods. In addition to conventional methods, interactive methods, independent work, collaborative and other methods supplementing traditional forms are emphasised.

Our study focused on students' attitudes towards contemporary teaching and knowledge assessment methods. The sample comprised 55 students of the first-cycle study programmes of Preschool Education and of Fine Arts Education of the Faculty of Education of the University of Maribor in the 2015/16 academic year. A closed-type questionnaire was used. It has been established that students highly value teacher-directed learning, lectures and various forms of practical work. With regard to contemporary methods, they emphasise discussion, cooperative learning, and project work. Among the knowledge assessment methods, the greatest value is attributed to various written reports and the written exam. Students also attribute a high value to the assessment of student work folders or portfolios and to various types of assessment of active participation at lectures and in practical work.

Key words: assessment methods, Bologna reform, higher education didactics, teaching methods, university education.

INTRODUCTION

In Slovenia, the Bologna reform of higher education began in 2004 when the National Assembly adopted the Act Amending the Higher Education Act. The first amended programmes at the Faculty of Education of the University of Maribor came to life five years later, in 2009. The most important amendments were the introduction of the three-cycle higher education, the implementation of the ECTS credit system, a greater number of elective courses and more practical training. Course syllabi were updated, objectives modernised and competencies harmonised in line with the joint European guidelines. Changes also permeated other segments such as teaching and knowledge assessment methods. In line with the guidelines of the Bologna process and modern didactics, where the importance of formative assessment is emphasised (Marentič Požarnik and Peklaj, 2002) together with lifelong learning and problem-solving strategies (Biggs and Tang, 2007), interactive learning methods, independent student work, collaborative methods, project work and similar aspects have started being emphasised. When assessing students' knowledge, conventional methods (written and oral exam) are being increasingly joined by various reports, discussions, simulations, portfolios, analyses, summaries, reviews, debates and group discussions. Biggs and Tang (2007) classify assessment with regard to the type of knowledge being assessed, i.e. assessing declarative knowledge and assessing functional knowledge. Declarative knowledge is typically assessed by writing answers to set questions or in objective formats. When assessing functional know-

ledge, assessment tasks include critical incidents, projects, reflective journals, case studies, portfolios, etc. Teacher training programmes, and especially those including expressive courses (visual art education, music, drama, and puppet education), also assess creativity. In the programmes where our study was conducted (Preschool Education, Fine Arts Education), creative elements are an inherent part of several professional and didactic courses. Creativity dictates specific knowledge assessment methods.

“Creativity is not something ineffable and unassessable: it is involved in all subject areas, especially in higher years, and needs to be assessed. Creative thinking requires a sound knowledge base, but beyond that requires critical awareness or reflection and the ability to generate original ideas or products that address critical reflection on what is the case. Assessment needs therefore to be open ended, allowing students to spring their surprises on us, but they also need to be surprises that are assessed within parameters that each situation would define as relevant.” (Biggs and Tang, 2007, p. 244)

Our study focused on different knowledge assessment methods while it also covered a review of teaching methods, as these two segments are co-dependent. The different types of knowledge assessment (Figure 1) at least partially also dictate the teaching methods.

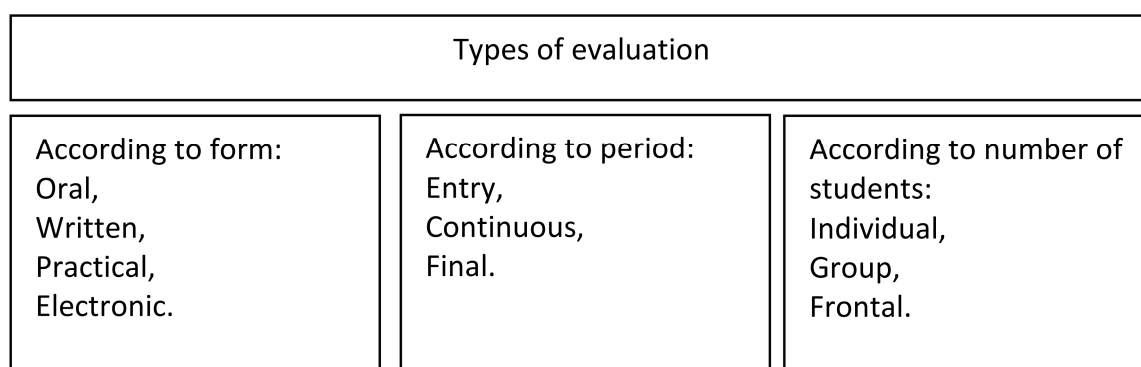


Figure 1. Types of evaluation (Đurišová et al. 2015, p. 2499)

Practical forms of assessment for example require the use of active and practical teaching methods, the preparation of project assignments and similar. Group assessment requires collaborative work methods, discussions and debates. Furthermore, the choice of the teaching methods and of assessment greatly influences the students and their approach to learning. Now it is widely accepted that assessment is probably the single biggest influence on how students approach their learning (Torres and Leite, 2014). The purpose of knowledge assessment within the framework of higher education teacher training programmes must not be mere numeric assessment and the ranking of students' knowledge but should support student learning (Biggs and Tang, 2007). It should provide students with feedback on satisfactory knowledge and where their knowledge was lacking and on how to use this information in future studies. “Evaluation is the systematic collection of data on the quality (appropriateness) of a process or product, usually with the aim of making decisions that lead to its improvement.” (Marentič Požarnik and Peklaj, 2002, p. 17)

Hounsell (1999/2009) classifies feedback into three groups: student-provided feedback, feedback provided by colleagues and experts and individual or group self-evaluation. Assessing students' knowledge has to be an active two-way process. Li and De Luca (2014) reviewed 37 empirical studies on assessment feedback published between 2000 and 2011 and report on different types of effective feedback. They mention personal comments and explanations, model answers, interactive cover sheets, etc. Students prefer timely, consistent, transparent and criteria-referenced assessment feedback. The evaluation of university education should be focused not only to find the progress of students in the course of study, but it

has to contribute to the development of abilities and skills necessary (evaluation is part of the everyday activity of human) for successful access to employment, lifelong education and personal success (Đurišová et al., 2015).

Active forms of evaluation should also act reversibly, i.e. they should help the higher education teacher to qualitatively upgrade their work. Furthermore, the quality of the pedagogical work of a future teacher also depends on the quality of the continuous evaluation of their own pedagogical work. High-quality education accustoms pre-service teachers to self-evaluation also by implementing these methods into the study process. Bognar and Bungić (2014) emphasise the importance of students' active cooperation in all segments of the learning process, i.e. also in the assessment of their knowledge. In order to do so, students have to be familiar with the methods enabling that. As emphasised by Martin (2009) in a paper focusing on the key aspects of teaching and learning in arts, humanities and social sciences, today's evaluation and assessment take different forms:

"Assessments now take a wide variety of forms, ranging from creative or practical work to illustrative and design work, discursive essays and theses, social science-style surveys and interpretation of data, performance and oral presentations conducted in groups or individually, online assessments and so on. Such forms of assessment also transform in their various modes, such as examinations, coursework, and formative or summative assessments." (Martin, 2009, p. 318)

Similar to Bognar and Bungić (2014), our study design also emphasise that evaluation is a collaborative and creative process of all participating stakeholders (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, cited by Bognar and Bungić, 2014). We believe that teaching and knowledge assessment methods in contemporary higher education programmes should facilitate creativity, innovations and dialogue. Students should be active creators of teaching methods and co-shapers of knowledge assessment methods. Understanding better how assessment works and how they can use assessment results to improve their own learning, additionally motivates the students (Fletcher et al., 2012). If we want future teachers to foster contemporary teaching methods and use contemporary knowledge assessment methods in their work in school, they have to learn about them already during their studies. This means that they do not learn about them only as content in pedagogical and didactic courses but that these contemporary approaches should be implemented in all study courses. When designing the study, we were led by a similar principle as Bognar and Bungić:

"We believe that it is especially important to improve and sustain the quality of studies for future teachers and educators. Higher education courses ought to be models for future teachers and educators according to which their own competences will be developed. Quality evaluation is very important for the quality of higher education or any other level of education. Unfortunately, it is still quite often conducted in a non-systematic and superficial manner." (Bognar and Bungić, 2014, p. 141).

METHOD

The main objective of our study was to establish students' attitudes towards teaching and knowledge assessment methods that are recommended by the guidelines of the Bologna reform of higher education. The purpose of the study was to utilise these findings to prepare recommendations for adapting teaching and assessment methods in the next revision of higher education syllabi.

The research hypothesis was expressed in the form of a fundamental research question.

We were interested to see which teaching and knowledge assessment methods the students find appropriate with regard to the nature of their study programme. We believe it

is important to know the students' viewpoints, as these allow us to adapt, change and improve the teaching methods and the quality of assessing students' knowledge. This has a positive effect on the students' attitudes towards studying.

The sample comprised 55 students of the Faculty of Education of the University of Maribor; of those 15 students of the final (fourth) year of the first-cycle study programme of Fine Arts Education and 40 students of the final (third) year of the first-cycle study programme of Preschool Education. The majority of the sample (96.36%) but also of the general student population in these two study programmes are female students. We have thus not considered the effect of gender on students' perception of assessing their work, even though it has been proven to exist (Tang et al., 2015).

We prepared a closed-ended questionnaire with two questions.

We developed the questionnaire ourselves on the basis of consideration of teaching and assessment methods that are recommended by the guidelines of the Bologna reform.

In the first question, we provided 23 foreseen higher education teaching methods and in the second 23 knowledge assessment methods. In both questions, the students had to mark five teaching and five knowledge assessment methods that they believe to be the most appropriate. The lists have been compiled on the basis of a collection of teaching and knowledge assessment methods that appear in the syllabi of the two study programmes and in the guidelines for the refurbishment of syllabi under the re-accreditation procedure at the Faculty of Education of the University of Maribor.

The review of the syllabi of both study programmes has shown that the teaching methods are not unified. The most common methods appear to be lectures, seminars and different types of practical classes, which is derived from the structure of contact hours in the syllabi. The teaching methods column in the syllabi provides different notes and descriptions (e.g. students will study resources individually and in teams; the problem-based method will be used; the case-study method, etc.). The types of knowledge assessment are more unified in the syllabi. The written (and sometimes the oral) exam, seminar paper, portfolio, implemented project and assessment of practical classes prevail, and in didactic courses sometimes also the demonstration lesson.

The respondents filled in the questionnaire in the last week of the winter semester, i.e. in January 2016. A limitation of the study is that the teaching and knowledge assessment methods greatly depend on the nature of the course. Individual courses are more theoretical in nature, others practice-oriented, and some are pedagogically or didactically designed. The respondents were asked to try and generalise the chosen teaching and knowledge assessment methods to all courses of their study programme. We chose final-year students due to their experience gained during their studies. We believe them to be competent in view of the subject of the study.

The collected data were statistically processed so that we obtained absolute and percentage frequencies of the received answers. The tables range them from the most frequent to the least frequent answer. The results were interpreted in terms of content. Finally, we used the established results to develop recommendations on how to improve the practical aspect, i.e. teaching at the higher education level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the first part, we were interested in the work methods that the students believe to be the most appropriate. Their answers are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' opinions on appropriate teaching methods in absolute and percentage frequencies.

Teaching methods	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i> %
lectures	52	94.54
work in project teams	32	58.18
cooperative learning	25	45.45
field excursions	22	40.00
team discussion	22	40.00
laboratory work	17	30.90
discussion	16	29.90
multimedia presentation	15	27.27
case studies	12	21.81
seminar work	11	20.00
individual theoretical and empirical research	8	14.54
seminar papers	8	14.54
frontal instruction	8	14.54
problem-based learning	7	12.72
(self-)reflection	6	10.90
individualised instruction	5	9.09
role playing	5	9.09
e-learning	3	5.45
simulations	1	1.81
individual assignments	1	1.81
individual presentations	1	1.81
working with text	0	0.00

n = 55

It has been established that students still find lectures to be the most important teaching method (94.54%). This was surprising, however students could choose five answers in the questionnaire, which allows us to conclude that they perceive lectures as the default teaching method, where specific factual and declarative knowledge is obtained (Biggs and Tang, 2007). They of course complement lectures with other methods. This is also confirmed by the next four most common methods ranked 2nd to 5th in Table 1. Lectures are followed by four interactive and diverse methods, where the two-way component of the teacher-student process is emphasised: work in project teams (58.18%), cooperative learning (45.45%), field excursions and team discussions (40.00% each). Unlike conventional lectures, these develop more functional knowledge, include students' presentations, public speaking, developing ideas within the framework of teamwork and similar. Conventional laboratory work was marked by 30.90% of students (rank 6), and this is again followed by interactive methods, e.g. discussion, multimedia presentations and case studies. Seminar work came in 10th and seminar papers 12th. E-learning was surprisingly mentioned by only 5.45%. The use of online classrooms is encouraged, developed and increasingly used at the University of Maribor. This year (as a test case), the Department of Preschool Education moved the entire organisational and professional work related to practical training online. The low ranking of e-learning

among students is especially surprising as different forms of e-learning enable the combination of the most appropriate didactic methods, aids and media formats (Duh, 2012; Herzog, 2008). Furthermore, e-learning using the Internet (Web 2.0 technologies, wiki-based activities, etc.) and communication technologies (ICT) facilitates students' activity and positively affects motivation (Waycott et al., 2010; Altanopoulou et al., 2015). One of the reasons for the low rank of e-learning is seen in the fact that teachers still do not know how to utilise all the potential possibilities offered by online learning environments. Discussions with students have shown that they greatly welcome the transfer of individual obligations online. A positive aspect that they mention is the simpler communication with teachers, faster and more updated entering of corrections in the written assignments and lower consumption of paper and print cartridges. A special chapter is the possibility of using e-learning methods in assessment, especially formative assessment (Baleni, 2015). Furthermore, the fact that two methods that emphasise individual work are ranked at the bottom of the scale and three of the top six methods are methods that emphasise teamwork (work in project teams, cooperative learning and team discussion) allows us to assume that students wish for more team-based methods.

In the second part, we were interested in the knowledge assessment methods that the students believe to be the most appropriate. Their answers are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Students' opinions on appropriate knowledge assessment methods in absolute and percentage frequencies.

Assessment methods	<i>f</i>	<i>f</i> %
Several exams (in smaller sets)	32	58.18
Student teaching/practical classes reports	29	52.72
Active participation at contact hours	26	47.27
Written exam	25	45.45
Assessment of activity during (laboratory) work	20	36.36
Portfolio	20	36.36
Written assignment in the form of a seminar paper	18	32.72
Fieldwork reports	15	27.27
Discussions led by students	14	25.45
Project work	13	23.63
Oral exam	10	18.18
Self-assessment, peer-assessment	7	12.72
Discussion	6	10.90
Exhibitions and posters	6	10.90
Photos and recordings	6	10.90
Summaries, reviews, opinions	5	9.09
Document analyses	5	9.09
Critical journal	4	9.09
Essays	3	5.45
Assignments involving design	2	3.63
Empirical or theoretical research	0	0.00

Searching for primary resources	0	0.00
Simulations	0	0.00

n = 55

It has been established that the currently prevailing assessment method, i.e. the written exam, is mentioned by less than one half of the students (45.45%). Similarly as established for lectures (Table 1), here we are also probably dealing with the opinion that the conventional format of an exam is still the most appropriate for a specific part of content. It is true however, that this is not as explicitly emphasised here as with lectures, as the format of the "conventional" exam is ranked fourth. With regard to knowledge assessment methods, students mostly emphasise several exams in smaller sets (preliminary exams), different student teaching/practical work reports and assessments on the basis of active participation at contact hours. It is interesting to note that the oral exam, which compared to the written exam represents a more direct and interactive form of cooperation between the teacher and the student, is ranked eleventh (18.18%). The second most prevailing knowledge assessment method, i.e. the written assignment in the form of a seminar paper, is ranked seventh (32.72%). Compared to the results in Table 1, where 20% of the respondents circled seminar work and 14.54% seminar papers, we can conclude that students are aware of the importance of seminar paper-type assignments in having their knowledge assessed, however they are less likely in favour of them as teaching methods. Similar as with the desire of students for interactive teamwork methods, which were established in Table 1, we again established the desire for a more formative assessment of their work (several exams, active participation at contact hours, continuous reports, etc.). Empirical and theoretical research and searching for primary resources can be found at the bottom of the list. We see the reason for this in the characteristics of the teacher training programmes in which the study was implemented or in students' expectations for the study programme to provide them with concrete and practical knowledge linked to their future profession, while they are less interested in research and office work. Simulations, which ranked at the bottom of the list, also include forms of micro-teaching, which is a common and rather well-accepted teaching method in both programmes (simulating classroom situations). We believe that the students might not have connected the term with this teaching method, which they know rather well and also use. It is also possible that they recognise simulations as appropriate teaching methods but less as something that should also be evaluated and assessed.

CONCLUSION

With regard to the appropriate teaching methods, we can conclude that students are aware of the importance of transferring knowledge through conventional lectures however, they have a strong desire for interactive, dynamic and diverse methods, project work, team discussions and other types of collaboration. Contemporary methods, for which was assumed that they will be close to students, e.g. problem-based learning, (self-)reflection and e-learning, ranked at the bottom of the table, and we conclude that students might not be sufficiently familiar with them in order to see them as important and useful in their studies. This is partially also due to the teachers not using these methods or not utilising their potential (e-learning environments).

With regard to appropriate knowledge assessment methods, we can conclude that students are aware of the importance of written exams and the grading of laboratory work as the prevailing assessment methods. They wish for dispersed knowledge assessment, several continuous assessments and the assessment of active participation at contact hours. One of

the reasons lies in the high student load during the semester examination periods. They have exams every day and have to prepare for assessment in various courses simultaneously. This was also emphasised in their comments immediately after the data collection. The students also emphasised that they wished for more continuous knowledge assessment.

In general, we can say that students want more formative assessment methods and less summative assessment, which can be linked to the results of the study implemented by Torres and Leite (2014). They studied the relationship between formative and summative assessment in a higher education study programme at the University of Porto and emphasised:

In this situation, which seems to be natural and typical of a transition context in higher education under the Bologna Process, there seems to be some difficulty in enacting some of the formative assessment methods, mainly the ones with more emancipatory character, and particularly when the number of students is too high. Although, considering the transnationality of the Bologna Process it should be noted that this transition could be emerging in most of the 47 countries, what would indicate that these study results might be similar in other nations and/or universities. (Torres and Leite, 2014)

In view of the study results, our experience in working with international students and the comments provided by national students spending individual semesters at international universities through the Erasmus scheme, we can also emphasise the following. Contemporary teaching and learning methods in higher education should place more emphasis on the active role of students and interactivity. Interactive teaching methods should be complemented with lectures, which are no longer the prevailing form of contact hours (fewer hours of lectures in the total number of contact hours was one of the requirements of the Bologna process reforming higher education and university programmes). While recognising the importance of continuous (formative) knowledge assessment and the assessment of students' activity, we believe that we should also accustom students to in-depth and study-concentrated learning. This is assessed during final (summative) assessments and exams. This is also why we have examination periods in our study calendars. While it is sensible to assess a specific part of content with continuous assessment (partial assignments, products prepared during practical work, active participation at contact hours, preliminary exams), it is also sensible to acquire other parts in more concise periods (study of literature, designing research papers). A just and fair assessment of the student's work should be derived from the sensible intertwining of continuous (formative) and final (summative) knowledge assessment.

Finally, we wish to emphasise that institutional change, which was brought to higher education by the Bologna reform, is the subject of numerous analyses and studies. Teaching and assessment methods are an important part of higher education didactics, which is continually subject to change and revision. Modern societies are characterised by dynamic and fast change, which is strongly reflected in the mindset, ideas and actions of young people. As the latter are increasingly becoming an important subject of higher education systems, continual studies of this process are a necessity and the findings of these studies the condition for maintaining a high-quality didactic relationship between teachers, students and the process itself.

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Suvremene nastavne metode i načini vrednovanja znanja u visokom obrazovanju sa stajališta studenata

Sažetak: Bolonjska reforma visokog obrazovanja u Sloveniji počela je 2004. godine donošenjem Zakona o visokom obrazovanju, a prvi reformirani programi na Pedagoškom fakultetu Sveučilišta u Mariboru pokrenuti su 2009. godine. Glavne promjene Bolonjskog procesa odnosile su se na usvajanje strukture studija 3. ciklusa i uvođenje kreditnog sustava (ECTS). Promjene su obuhvatile i druge segmente studija, kao što su metode učenja i načini vrjednovanja znanja studenata. Pored klasičnih metoda naglašavaju se interaktivne metode, samostalan rad, metode suradnje i drugo, što nadopunjuje tradicionalne oblike.

U provedenom istraživanju ispitivali smo stavove studenata prema suvremenim nastavnim metodama i načinima vrjednovanja njihovog znanja na uzorku od 55 studenata prvostupajskih programa Predškolskog odgoja i Likovne pedagogije na Pedagoškom fakultetu Sveučilišta u Mariboru u školskoj godini 2015./16. Upotrijebili smo anketni upitnik zatvorenog tipa. Utvrdili smo da visoko vrjednuju frontalne metode, predavanja i različite oblike vježbi, a od suvremenih metoda navode raspravu, suradničko učenje i rad na projektima. Kod načina vrednovanja maksimalnu vrijednost pripisuju različitim pismenim izvješćima i pismenom ispitu. Studenti visoko vrednuju i ocjenjivanje radnih mapa odnosno portfelja i različite oblike vrednovanja aktivnog sudjelovanja na predavanjima i vježbama.

Ključne riječi: bolonjska reforma, metode učenja, načini vrednovanja, sveučilišno obrazovanje, visokoškolska didaktika.

Moderne Lehr- und Prüfungsmethoden in der Hochschulbildung aus Sicht der Studenten

Zusammenfassung: In Slowenien begann die Bologna-Reform des Hochschulwesens im Jahr 2004 durch die Verabschiedung des slowenischen Gesetzes über das Hochschulwesen. Die ersten reformierten Programme an der Pädagogischen Fakultät der Universität Maribor wurden 2009 ins Leben gerufen. Die wichtigsten Änderungen, die sich aus dem Bologna-Prozess ergeben, sind die Einführung der drei Studienzyklen und des ECTS-Kreditsystems. Die Veränderungen griffen auch in andere Segmente des Bildungsprozesses ein, wie z.B. Lehr- und Prüfungsmethoden. Neben konventionellen Methoden werden interaktive Methoden, unabhängige Arbeit, kollaborative und andere Methoden hervorgehoben, die die traditionellen Formen ergänzen.

Unsere Studie untersucht die Einstellungen der Studenten gegenüber den modernen Lehr- und Prüfungsmethoden. Die Stichprobe umfasste 55 Studenten der ersten Studiengänge der Vorschulerziehung und der Kunstpädagogik an der Pädagogischen Fakultät der Universität Maribor im Studienjahr 2015/16. Ein Fragebogen mit geschlossenen Fragen wurde erstellt. Die Umfrage ergab, dass Studenten den frontalen Unterricht, Vorlesungen und unterschiedliche Formen von Übungen hoch bewerten. Unter den modernen Methoden betonen sie Diskussionen, kooperatives Lernen und Projektarbeit. Unter den Prüfungsmethoden wird der größte Wert auf verschiedene schriftliche Berichte und die schriftliche Prüfung gelegt. Die Studenten legen auch einen hohen Wert auf die Bewertung ihrer Arbeitsmappen oder Portfolios sowie auf verschiedene Arten der Bewertung der aktiven Teilnahme an Vorlesungen und der praktischen Arbeit.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Prüfungsmethoden, Bologna-Reform, Hochschuldidaktik, Lehrmethoden, Universitätsbildung