The assessment arms race and its fallout: the case for slow scholarship

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Part 1: An Assessment Arms Race

Part 2: The Case for Slow Scholarship

The New Zealand Experiment

PART 1 The Assessment arms race

1984-1996 Radical reform of 'mass' higher education
1997   The introduction of:

- Semesters
- Modules
- New assessment policy

Not questioned for 17 years

Roger
Douglas

Ruth
Richardson

Graeme
Fogelberg

When all learning is connected to a grade that counts

- What are the impacts on student learning experiences?

- What are the impacts on teaching?

Which then led to the question:

- What can be done to ensure a more *worthwhile* educational experience?
- Pilot: 6 students and 6 lecturers
- Main study: 46 students and 16 lecturers

An important distinction

Summative assessment that carries a grade that counts towards passing a module (paper) and the award of a degree, and is perceived as high stakes by students

In contrast to:

Formative assessment that consists of feedback comments and/or a grade, but the grade does not count towards a module (paper) or degree

Students' experiences

1. Students were being assessed constantly and so had no time to do work required of them outside core graded-curriculum activities.
2. All students regularly missed teaching sessions in order to cope with assessment loads.
3. Students who had high expectation for their grades felt they were always working at sub-optimal levels.
4. Students were stressed by the lack of co-ordination of assessment tasks.
5. Students expressed a preference for having many small internal graded assessments and said large assessments were too risky.
6. None wanted to revert to a final examination carrying 100% of the marks.

How many assessments?

Graded assessments for students in 2nd and 3rd year of study

Course type	Number of students	Average number graded assessments per week	Range of graded assessments per week
Science	16	1.44	0.5-3.5
Humanities	15	0.98	0.5-3.0
Professional subjects	15	0.68	0.0-2.0

Field notebook observations

NOTES:
Evidence that students who are constantly graded in a competitive environment tend not to take risks

Not wanting to be wrong suppresses creativity

No one likes to be assessed anyway

Lecturers' experiences

1. Lecturers did not know how many assessments each student was required to do.

2. They were reluctant to reduce the number of assessments, despite experiencing high marking loads. The reason given was that students would then spend all their efforts on tasks that carried marks in other modules.

3. Lecturers felt that they were under student pressure to give marks for any submitted course work, even when they thought this might not be appropriate.

4. It was recognized that overall grades might not reflect overall performance when small marks were given for tasks.

5. Non-graded forms of assessment (i.e. formative assessment) were not considered.

Field notebook observations

NOTES:

Although both pilot and main study showed no formative assessment, this is not strictly true as formative is (sometimes?) done

Many innovative practices

What is very rare is formative assessment that is distant from a grade

Graduate profile

Hostile to nearly all 'attributes' required for university study

- Critical thinking

- Life-long learning

- Self-motivation (self-directed study and ability to work independently)

What about reading for a degree?

Reading for a degree

How often students went beyond the syllabus for study and learning in relation to their academic goals

Academic Goal	Discipline	Students	How often do you go 'beyond the syllabus'?		
			Often	*Sometimes*	*Never*
Top Marks	Science	6	1	0	5
	Humanities	7	1	1	5
	Professional	8	0	0	8
Mid-range	Science	5	0	0	5
	Humanities	6	0	1	5
	Professional	7	0	0	7
Passing	Science	5	0	0	5
	Humanities	2	0	0	2
	Professional	0	0	0	0
Total		46	2	2	42

Field notebook observations

NOTES:

Fragmentation and miniaturization of knowledge in micro-modules

Students as "tourists in the classroom"

There are never winners in an arms race

Student learning

Students were asked what type of assessment they learned most from (n=45 with one student unclassified)

Size of grade	Type of assessment students learned most from	Approach to learning required	Number of students
Larger	Inquiry task, research project, applied project, work related project	Deep	39
Smaller	Short answer, frequent tests	Surface	6

Policy failure and success

Radical change and then 17 years of policy (none) compliance

New Policy (2014)

1. Lack of agreement and opposition to change
2. Restored freedom and scholarly judgment
3. Opened doors for long term change
4. New forms when new courses proposed

Two principles:
Assessment drives learning
Curriculum drives assessment

Breaking the grading habit

What can be done to ensure a more **worthwhile** educational experience?

Change the **curriculum** - change the **assessment**

1. Fewer graded assessments
2. Assess only the important aims for learning
3. Integrated assessment
4. Creating spaces for formative purposes

PART 2 The Case for Slow Scholarship

Ecology example: 'research from day one'

Curriculum and **assessment** changes:

- Focused database searching and literature reviews
- Formulating authentic research questions
- Designing experiments and field studies
- Learning new methods and analytical techniques
- Writing grant applications
- Giving seminars
- Presenting a conference poster
- Writing research reports and journal articles
- Attending conferences, seminars, lectures
- Being a peer reviewer

Slow scholarship through authentic research
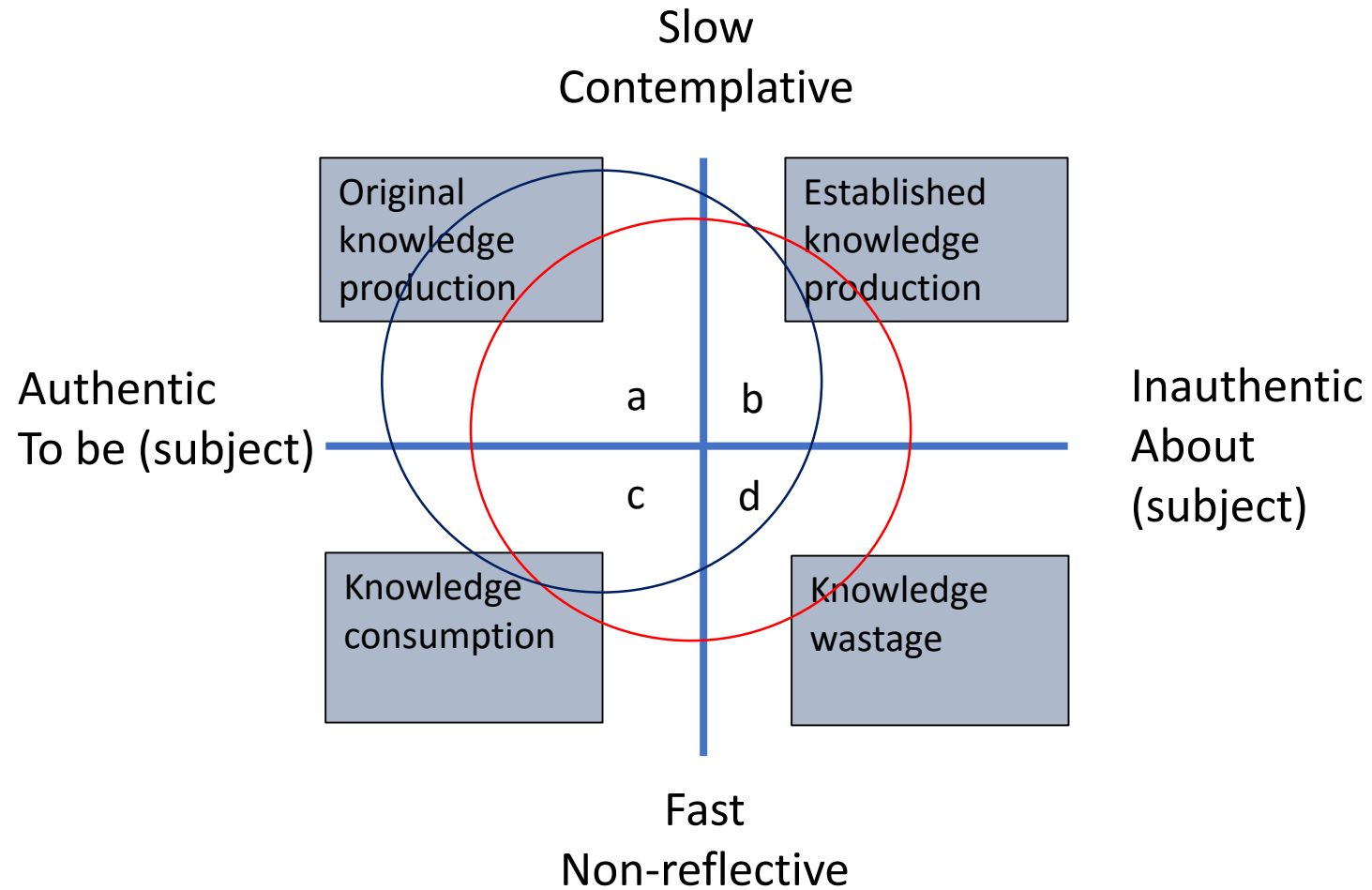
Slow scholarship concepts

| Slow		Fast
Knowledge producers	against	Knowledge consumers
Deliberative thinking	blended with	Routine thinking
Authentic learning	against	Inauthentic learning
Authentic academic practice	blended with	Inauthentic academic practice
Critic and conscience of society	no alternative	none

Ecology: two courses

24 WEEKS

ECOL 212
- Three-day field course
- Write a grant proposal
- The proposal is subject to double blind student and teacher peer review (4 weeks)
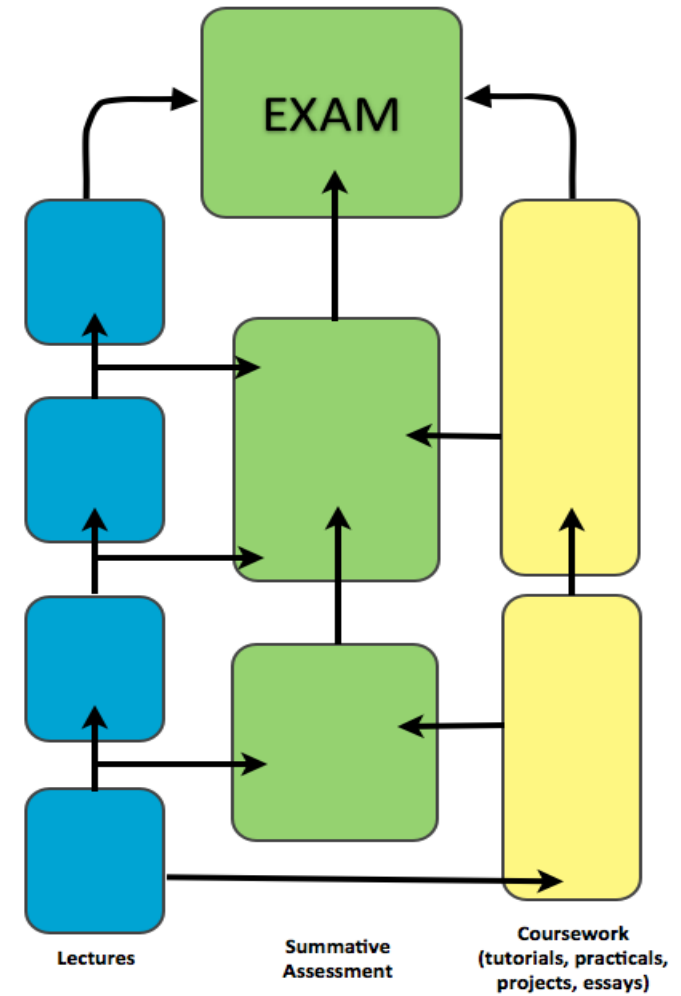- Rebuttal
- Re-drafts

ECOL313
- Carry out the research (seven days in the field)
- Present research at a symposium (peer feedback given)
- Write research report

(option for outstanding work to be published as a journal article)

Changes to assessment
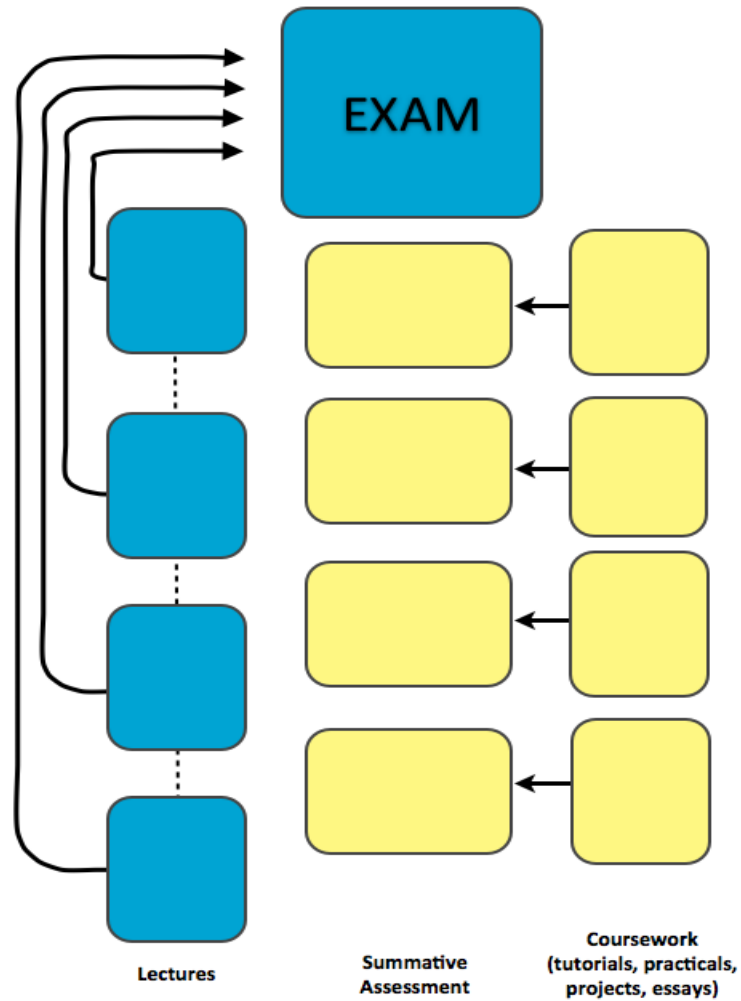
Dislocated Assessment

Integrated Assessment

New research on integration

Integration teaching strategy	Value Proposition	Summative grading
1) Between modules and years	Slow learning	Fewer grading points
2) Contingent on prior work	Emphasis on formative feedback	Fewer grading points
3) Re-assess internal coursework in examination	Assessment to strengthen learning	Indicative grades only for coursework
4) Combining knowledge from different teaching modes	Assessing broad knowledge area	Fewer but larger assignments
5) Only assess what is really important	Parsimony	Fewer grading points
6) Assess drafts of work	Emphasis on rehearsal and feedback	Use of indicative grades and formative assessment
7) Assess complex performance	Professional judgment	Fewer grading points

A focus on peer review

- Various forms of formative (only) peer review

- Developing peer review skills over three/four years

- Scaffolding and long term training in assessing others' work

- Insight into one's own work – self assessment

Review comments received from peers

Student Peer Reviews

		Review comments			Rebuttal actions			
		% of comments addressed (n=231)	% of comments ignored (n=60)	Assigned codes to addressed comments	Accepted	Partially accepted	Rejected	No clear action
Referential	Editorial	20	23	47	39	0	6	2
	Organisation	6	12	13	10	0	1	2
	Content	77	75	179	143	5	15	16
Directive	Suggestion	31	12	71	54	3	11	3
	Question	17	18	39	32	2	0	5
	Instruction	9	3	21	20	0	0	1
Expressive	Praise	6	7	14	10	0	3	1
	Criticism	24	5	56	49	3	2	2
	Opinion	2	0	5	5	0	0	0
	Total			445	362	13	38	32

Summary

- Radical change to education system gave rise to an assessment arms race based on ideas of constant reward and control

- Current practices impact on graduate attributes (from day 1)

- Institutional change through POLICY difficult

- New assessment GUIDE from 2014

- Curriculum is the key to change: ecology embraces slow scholarship (through student research) and so opts out of the assessment arms race