ASSESSMENT METHODS

Some potential pitfalls in grading computer-produced examination scripts

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The ubiquity of computers in the contemporary world is inevitably leading to calls from students to be able to type their examination answers on computers. A number of U.S. law schools now permit computer-generated examination scripts and Bond University, Australia, has done so since its foundation eleven years ago. There are now a number of software packages that overcome the security problems attendant on students writing their exam scripts on their own computers by creating a sealed, discrete section of the computer's hard drive on which the examination answer must be written. At Bond, security problems are overcome by providing non-networked computers with clean hard drives for students wishing to use them for examinations. This can be managed only because a small proportion of students seek to type their examination answers.

The potential major issue is the difficulty of grading typed and handwritten exam scripts consistently. Unless all students produce their exam answers on computers, which is highly unlikely, the difficulty of producing comparable grades should not be overlooked.

Faculty are accustomed to grading assignments produced on a computer with the benefit of spell-check, grammar-check and, most of all, adequate time for their preparation. Computer-produced examination answers look like assignments, that is they are typed with sub-headings and good spelling. All the hallmarks of traditional exam answers, namely, poor spelling and structure and near-illegible writing, are absent. The risk is that if it looks like a duck and sounds like a duck, faculty will assess it as a duck, i.e. subconsciously faculty will expect more of a com-

puter-generated exam script than a handwritten one because the former looks like an assignment.

A typed script removes most of the uncertainty in interpreting an exam answer. Grading of a typical, hand-written script involves guesses by the faculty member. Many words and phrases are unintelligible and examiners tend automatically to fill in the gaps while reading. Particularly late at night when attempting to read script number 187, it is easy to assume a sentence says what it should. There may be an indecipherable hieroglyphic in the handwritten script but, as the sentence makes sense without it, the student gets the credit for the issue. However, if script number 187 is typed, the hieroglyphic will be revealed as the student's mangled attempt to write 'not', and the student will forfeit the marks for that issue.

How often, in marking handwritten examination scripts, is student ignorance hidden by poor writing? How often do law faculty resolve ambiguities in our students' favour? How often will students who produce their examination scripts on a computer suffer when being graded against their cursive cousins?

The impression of the majority of faculty in the author's law school is that the results of students who produce their examination answers on computer accord generally with the faculty's expectations but there is a significant minority of faculty who believe able students using computers tend to receive lower grades. What is clear is that, for reasons no one can divine, a higher proportion of the less able students choose to produce their examination scripts on computer. However, as the proportion of students who elect to use a computer is usually small, around five percent, we are precluded from undertaking a meaningful statistical analysis of their results.

Research reveals that schoolteachers tend to give higher marks to assessment written in good handwriting, whereas handwriting quality does not appear to influence marks given by university

teachers. One suggested reason is that, unlike schoolteachers, university teachers do not feel obliged or inclined to penalise poor handwriting. Such research is now required for computer-produced exam answers.

As law schools begin in greater numbers to permit the use of computers in writing examination scripts, a unique opportunity will arise to test: (1) whether there is a general difference in ability between students who choose to produce examination scripts on computer relative to those who write their scripts; and (2) whether the results on computer-generated scripts suggest there are discrepancies in the marking standards applied to such scripts by faculty. As such testing will need to be on students who commence their degrees writing their answers and shift to computers during the degree, the time to test these hypotheses is probably near.

Assessment to promote learning

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In investigating alleged over-assessment in higher education, it is argued that an excess of one form of assessment over another limits student learning. The power of assessment to influence student behaviour has perhaps never been so obvious. In fact, the assessment on a course may well have a greater influence on students than any teaching. Students to a greater or lesser extent will take a strategic approach to assessment, looking at ways to enhance marks. The strategic approach may well be used by certain students to secure a first class degree. But, more importantly, strategic learners include students keen to gain a lower class degree, but who otherwise have little interest in learning.

Given its power to influence student behaviour, assessment should be geared to beneficial aims. In particular, the assessment should promote the form of learning desired. Given this, it is important to consider what is the assessment