

Research Brief

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Subject area/year level/class that you will be working with for this action research: 12ENF

What is your RESEARCH QUESTION?

To what extent does using differentiated means of assessment improve outcomes in my 12ENF class?

Introduction:

What led you to this AREA OF STUDY? (300-500 words)

(e.g. the history/genesis- what have you noticed, worried about, hoped to try or wondered? How does this apply to your classroom?)

I have recently taken on the teacher in charge of foundation English role, as such I am teaching two foundation classes and have completed two SPAR reports for these pathways. Through this I have gained an understanding of how 'at risk' many students in our pathway are. There were 25% of the current 12ENF cohort (in 11ENF) who achieved only one assessment (or fewer) over the course of the year. There were four students who gained no English credits in 2019 that are now in our 12ENF course. There were 18 credits made available to the students.

As such I think it is important to support those students in as many ways as is reasonably possible to ensure their success and achievement. I have identified that written assessments can often be challenging for these boys and believe this could be a positive place to target and thus improve outcomes.

The flexibility of NCEA assessments is such that oral or verbal submissions are a relevant and acceptable way of submitting the internal. I think a lot of our boys struggle with writing sentences but when questions are posed they can verbalise responses with greater confidence.

My class was 20 students large at the start of my research (initially 25, reduced

due to school leavers, expulsion, timetabling etc). 3 out of 20 students are NON-priority learners. Of those three, one is English second language and speaks Korean at home. Another has recently received a concussion in rugby that has impacted his learning. Regardless, 17 students are either: Maori, Pasifika, International, Learner Support or ELL students, some are even “double dippers” – having a learning need and another category. This means they are priority learners for SPARs but also have additional needs for supports or learning backgrounds that have not built to learning success. As such, anything that can be done to support them is something I am interested in and want to do.

At this stage I would only want to focus on offering one other alternative way to access/submit work, but as this grows students could submit in a greater more differentiated manner.

What does RESEARCH tell us about this topic? (500-800 words)

A synopsis of 4-6 key readings, (reference properly from the start). This section can evolve as you read more literature. What does the research say about why/how your research focus relates to boys specifically?)

Most readings indicate the immense benefits of differentiation throughout the learning process, not just to improve the outcomes for low ability or special education learners, but all learners in a classroom environment (King-Spears, 2008).

Tomlinson notes that there has been a substantive shift towards the acceptance of differentiation, partly due to a sense of accountability on behalf of the teacher but also being “less naïve” and “more tech-savvy” (2014). When teachers become more reflective then change occurs and this is where the use of differentiation has become more common place.

There are downsides or potential flaws to the use of differentiation, largely from a practical perspective – due to the range of different skill sets but also student preference (Whipp, P., Taggart, A., & Jackson, B. (2014). Maclellan suggests that in situations of higher education, a range of assessment options is not plausible due to a wider scope and risk of non-assessed criteria being the focused and thus key assessment focuses being missed or not appropriately assessed (2010). However, these concerns are less valid under the scope of NCEA assessments as long as they key learning outcomes are what is being assessed rather than the manner they are being presented.

In the Literature Review of Boys Education it is suggested that learning environments which do not acknowledge or reflect 'real life' skills often result in a loss of interest for boys. Therefore by framing the assessment as an opportunity to show their ability to reflect understanding and explore their thoughts, our boys students may find greater validity and relevance to the close viewing assessment (Cuttance & Thompson, 2008). It can be hard for students who struggle with the subject to see validity in it, especially when "practical English skills" such as writing a CV or speech aren't really things that are actively assessed. Framing this as "show me your thoughts" may be more effective. Such research concepts are further reflected in an Australian review into student engagement, and whilst incorporating "real-world" elements to the assessment is not always plausible, there is suggestion that adjusting teaching and assessing in different ways allows for further cognitive engagement for all students (Pedler, Yeigh & Hudson, 2020).

METHODS: How did you investigate your question? (300-500 words)

(brief narrative description of your action/procedures. What action did you take and how? Include who your participants are and how you collected data.)

In the lead up to the assessment I have structured the practice work in a manner that reflects the summative assessment. Due to time constraints we were unable to produce an exact practice replica of the paragraph or verbal discussion which may impact the final form. This has been influenced by time restrictions due to covid.

I have allowed two weeks for the initial preparation of the assessment – viewing the scene, discussing it and writing detailed notes. These notes will form their report, discussion or can be assessed in a stand alone manner if they are sufficiently detailed. The notes are color coordinated with the sentence starters for the report. This means that even if students do not chose to verbally submit, they will still have structured and supported education methods.

I have booked the Centre for Excellence to allow for an appropriate space to perform discussions whilst students work on their reports. Our classroom space is a commerce room on the top floor, as such there are no areas where students could easily sit outside and rehearse through responses with a partner.

I have accessed 2019 data from the same assessment at level one, so this will be useful for some forms of comparison.

Over the course of the assessment I produced further resources to assist and scaffold. This included specific questions for students to answer, how to translate their grid/notes into responses and video (aural) explanations so that students who do not always succeed with reading instructions would feel aptly supported.

Ethical Considerations (100-200 words)

(How much time was involved for participants? During school? After school? How did you ensure anonymity for participants in your reporting? How did you obtain permission? (to participate, interview, take photos, videos)

The time allotted for this assessment is in line with traditional assessments for a foundation class. Students are being offered time in class to verbally discuss their work, rather than restricting it to out of class time. This should hopefully encourage more boys to participate in this manner. I have chosen not to use a recorded option as this may add another layer of complication for the students. As the success of this research will be revealed through observation and results, there is no need to identify students by name.

I will alert students prior to the discussion that their work will be recorded. This is partly to fulfil evidence requirements for NCEA but also for my own research and reflections. They will be informed of this and if they feel uncomfortable I will look at alternative means. There will be no need to video or photograph the students for my action research.

What did you discover? (1000-1500 words)

(FINDINGS - through analysis of your interviews, observations, pre-post surveys etc. you should uncover recurring themes and describe them)

Ultimately alternative means of assessment were well-received but were not necessarily employed in the way I had first intended. Just the knowledge that they had the choice was well-received by the students, it was something that forced them to think about which way they would succeed best and actively engage in the internal just that bit more.

Something I noted was the level of agency that came with students who opted to verbally submit. The absence of "typical" exemplars and a new way of delivering the information meant they had to think about what they would

need to effectively show their ideas in that way and therefore ask for it. Students wanted the “run sheet” of questions they could be asked in order to show their understanding. I made these questions and colour-coded them to match the booklet (I use the same colour patterns in all exemplars, grids, note-writing tables, essay paragraphs, sentence starters and internal sentence starters). Then I had to think about what the exemplar would look like – if they were verbally submitting then a written answer may not be as effective, so I made a screencasted video where I used the same questions they had and the same grid/notes they had. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-232x4aU8o>)

Four students opted to verbally submit. Of those four students, two students were able to do this during class time and ultimately one student verbally submitted, whilst the other ended up writing answers to the questions in such a detailed way that a verbal submission no longer seemed necessary and I used this avenue as his submission instead – so it created a whole new method. Had we not gone into lockdown, I would have had the other two students verbally submit, however attendance/absences have proved difficult and as a result I have not been able to gain submissions from those students.

With my class I think some of the reluctance to do a different options stemmed from the unknown – they may not be confident with essay writing but they are at least familiar with that. I think a way of building this confidence would be building non-assessed opportunities to verbally express themselves. This could go for any other “assessment style” option – get them used to doing that sort of format in non-high stakes scenarios. If this was to be further applied this could be a consideration for junior classes, particularly the lower bands which feed into the foundation pathway (the class/es in focus here).

Another consideration is the processing speed required to articulate ideas verbally after being prompted by a question. This is a class that generally benefits from having time to read back through the information and formulate their ideas, rather than being asked on the spot – unless the topic in question is more ‘surface’ based. As such, regardless of the notes and preparation, verbal assessment may not be as suitable. This is why I believe I did not have uptake from the second language learners in the class, who often prefer translating instructions, writing notes, translating their own responses and then editing. Verbal submissions do not benefit these students – once again this comes down to providing options for learners, rather than

expecting all learners to follow one style or format.

Whilst the intention was to offer one alternate means of assessment, I found with my changed mentality towards assessment there were actually a couple of different ways submissions were finally made. There was the typical essay which is normally the standard method of assessment in the English program, one student submitted verbally, one student wrote answers to questions, one student I was able to assess his understanding through his partial essay and detailed notes, and another wrote out his notes in detail and dictated his answers which I recorded.

Ultimately through this process I have been forced to rearrange my thought process from “getting them through these steps to write the essay and achieve” into more of the arguably intended process with NCEA assessments which is “what do I want them to learn and know” and “how can I get them to show this knowledge?” Focusing less on the final product and more on the learning outcome I was able to relax on this process and considering the difficulties of this learning time due to post-lockdown stresses I think the results were fairly successful all things considered. Looking beyond “success” in terms of academic results, I think it also improved the general experience as the students had made their choice and I was slightly less stressed by it. This cohort is never going to be the most diligent or hardworking necessarily, but having that involvement in how it would look, scaffolding it and showing them that how they were choosing to work was “correct” and acceptable in the eyes of the assessment did change the approach towards it.

I think for some of them by this stage in their learning career they have been “wrong”, failed or not achieved more than they have necessarily achieved; or they have felt wary and lacked confidence academically. Either way, their attitudes towards the subject and assessments as a whole is tentative – it's not going too far to view it as a trauma of sorts. So, I think it is important that we look at how we are easing that pressure from the outset of assessment. I assumed perhaps that note-taking would be simple, but I could have slowed down that process even more. If students filled in their notes in a vague manner and I tried to assist or correct, they often felt stupid or didn't want to try again. If even this initial stage is viewed as difficult, then articulating that understanding in a detailed way is going to be even more difficult.

I had a discussion with the student who completed the verbal submission to just ask how he found it. He said he preferred it because it “felt like less work”

(which was a slightly amusing response) but when I asked him to explain that a bit more he said it did feel more straightforward and he just had to focus on doing the most important parts. I think it is important to think about whether this is a negative – as they may just do the “bare minimum” to achieve – which is a deficit way of thinking. However, this alternative means of assessment does not limit them to only achievement, in theory and when done effectively they can still succeed and gain a range of grades. Also, for some of the students in my cohort, gaining an achieved is still an impressive result.

It ultimately comes down to providing options to ensure that students have accessibility to a range of grades. This doesn't come down to just giving them scaffolds or A/M/E exemplars, but giving them range in terms of how they reflect their understanding and giving them the tools, options and resources to do that.

PUTTING FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE (1000-1500+ words) *implications for future practice and/or study*

This process has shown me that we need to actively seek out opportunities to alter and change our way of thinking and the form our assessments take. It can be too easy to find the negatives, limitations or difficulties, but it is worth it to pursue beyond this.

Scaffolds and exemplars are essential to the success of alternative means of assessment. Whilst this is a risk for teachers (and their results), it often feels riskier for the students who are equally worried about results, confidence and trying new things. To create a sense of comfort and security for them and encourage taking on new opportunities, their needs to be scaffolds and supports in place to make them comfortable.

Naturally, this increases workload for teachers which is a valid concern. I am looking at this not only from a classroom teacher perspective but also that of a course leader. As such I am happy personally to spend time creating resources with the knowledge these will be easily adapted or used by the other staff members. I see this as an investment of time, an investment in student opportunities.

Linked in with this adapted resource, I create separate booklets based on which assessment option students took. That way they didn't have

unnecessary or distracting information. I think how assessments are “packaged” and presented to students is important. I really enjoy having everything in one big booklet, but I need to reflect and think about things from a student’s perspective and as such, this can be overwhelming. If students are not confident readers, 40 pages of words is definitely too many. I split the information booklet (including the texts) from their answer booklet. This also makes it easier on a practical level as they can have the two booklets next to each other and more easily copy down evidence and refer to the texts during the answer process.

I now want to look at how this could be introduced throughout my course but also with consideration for the 11ENF program and even the wider school. It can be easy to look at this as something for low ability learners, but I think it is an untapped resource for a range of students. If it is something introduced at junior levels, then it seems less “scary” or as much of a risk with higher stake assessments. It really is just an extension of UDL beyond the parameters of classroom instruction and learning.

With consideration for the junior program this could be the opportunity to ‘shake up’ our means of assessment and introduce skills that are utilised in senior English assessments such as the close-viewing report and connections report. Doing aspects of these assessments in the junior program and introducing verbal or ‘question/answer’ components rather than solely essay based responses could open up the horizons here.

Implementation of this assessment style will also be impacted by future changes to assessment as a whole under NCEA. There are proposed changes and I would have to adapt accordingly. However, with the fewer credits and assessments proposed, there would be more preparation and formative work which may open easier avenues for verbal or alternative means of assessment.

I am a “go hard or go home” kind of person – all or nothing – so the resources I made might be “overkill” or too much for some teachers to consider, but I think my role as a course leader has made this essential and really a big motivator. I want to encourage change and reconsideration of approaches, this can only be done in a supportive environment, so this is my job to do this. Yes, it was “extra” work, but I am passionate about it and my students deserve it.

Following this assessment and a second lock down, I altered the next assessment that took place – 2.7 connections. This time I offered “question and answer” booklets, as opposed to verbal submission. One student did ask about verbal submission as he did it the previous time, which is interesting to note. Submission rates were slightly lower because of the influences of lockdown, absences, motivation, multiple assessments going on and school trips. However, the students who answered the questions in full in their booklet did achieve. I believe that had there been more “typical” circumstances, the students who did not achieve due to wider influences would have achieved using this method. It did make the work more “chunked” and manageable. This style still allows them to hit the learning objectives at the core of the assessment and the success criteria of the achievement standard itself. If I had more time I would have students type their responses in this format to allow for reflection and improvement, but once again I have asked myself about the priority of the assessment and that is to show their understanding and so I have not become caught up in the minor details regarding presentation.

Ultimately this is something that I plan to pursue again, particularly with 12ENF as I have already made the resources that will assist with easier implementation. I think the success I have found is not so much with verbal submission, but with shorter question and answer responses. This is something I plan to develop and look into more.

Something I plan to do more of is introduce skills associated with answering questions and how to answer questions well. I think low-risk opportunities to improve these skills will assist with confidence and ability when it comes to the usage of them in high stakes assessment later

This has shown me that we should not be dismissive of alternative assessment styles or the potential workload attached to introduce them.