

“Please answer each question clearly in the space provided...”: Using real-world forms to focus undergraduate learning

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Here I report on a project in which we have made use of real-world forms to focus undergraduate learning. In the spirit of the project, this short report is presented in that very format. The format forces me to attempt to provide focussed answers to straightforward questions!

State clearly the intended outcomes of your project

To source, modify as necessary and test appropriate forms for students to undertake (1) risk assessment for those leading groups in the field as part of environmental education; (2) risk assessment of environmental field experiments; (3) environmental impact assessment for specific outdoor activities.

To promote the use of these and other existing resources to the wider HE community, with freely downloadable forms, instructions for students and instructions for tutors made available with permission of the source organisations.

Provide a brief rationale

Filling in forms is part of everyday life. This is equally true in our professional lives, when we need to fill in forms to apply for funding, report on the successes of courses, assess and record risks, submit tenders, and so on. The most effective forms allow the originator to

- obtain the desired information
- do so with a suitable level of detail
- do so in a way that saves time

At the same time, well-designed forms help those completing them to

- focus their energies on providing only relevant information
- address important areas that might otherwise have been forgotten
- occasionally process the information in a way that gives it new significance
- do so in a way that saves time

The first list can just as easily be read as a wish list for tutors endeavouring to make their assessments of learning as effective as possible. The second list can be read as a set of guidelines for those devising worthwhile tasks for students. In other words, using forms should help tutors to set and assess student learning that is highly focussed. Many tutors use forms devised by themselves to foster and to assess undergraduate learning with conspicuous success (eg as worksheets or for student self-evaluation).

Outline the methodology used

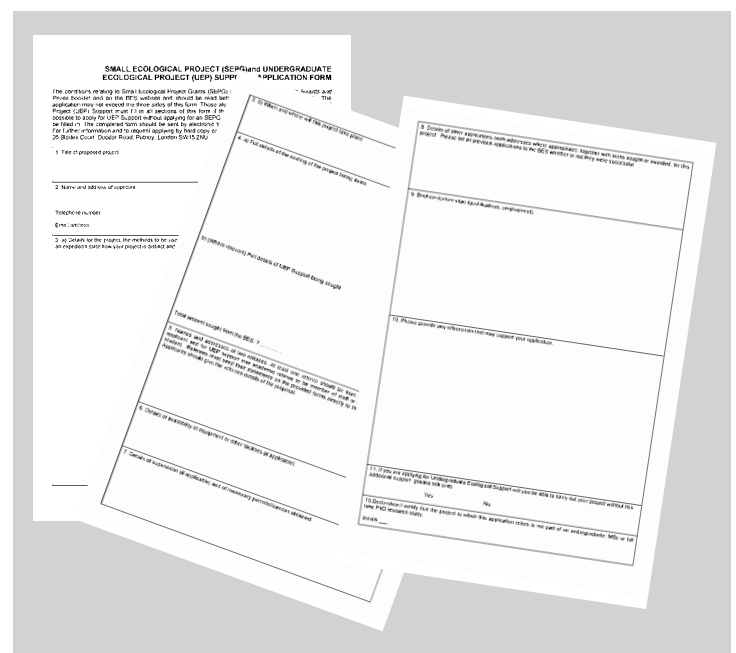
In Chichester, we have concentrated on using the actual forms that practitioners themselves are required to complete as part of their professional activities. This has an additional benefit of increasing students' interest and motivation in the tasks. For example, I have used a modification of the NERC form Application for a Small Project Grant as the template that level 2 Environmental Science undergraduates completed to propose and justify an innovative field project as a follow up to a residential field course. I use the British Ecological Society's Expedition

Grant Application Form for level 2 Adventure Education undergraduates in the same way. In both cases, students are also provided in advance with instructions for applicants (only slightly modified from the ones actually provided in real life) and submitted forms are assessed using the published criteria of the organisations concerned (once again with only very minor modifications). Student feedback on use of these real-world tasks is consistently positive. They appreciate the challenge of the real-world task and revel in the need to provide answers to focussed questions that they admit they would forget or avoid addressing if writing an essay or a few paragraphs of prose. This need to focus on answering very specific questions in order to satisfy very specific criteria is something that other kinds of student tasks do not push so strongly. Furthermore, by using such structured, focussed tasks it is clear that tutors find it much easier to see if learning objectives have been met and to feed back to students.

At Chichester, the real-world nature of the tasks is extended further. For example Adventure Education students form panels to assess previous grant applications and decide which merit funding, then afterwards compare their decisions with the criterion scores and the actual decisions of the real-life panel. They also peer review each other's proposals and give written feedback before submission.

What are its actual outcomes?

Forms have been sourced, modified as necessary and tested with adventure education undergraduates at level 3 [for outcome (1)] and at level 2 [for outcomes (2) and (3)].



Student feedback on use of these real-world tasks is consistently positive. They appreciate the challenge of the real-world task and revel in the need to provide answers to focussed questions

What evidence have you that students benefit from the outputs of the project?

Student feedback highlights increased confidence in carrying out the tasks because they have a much clearer understanding of the tutor's expectations, and because there is clearer guidance, through the structure of the form, on exactly what thinking needs to be done. There is also increased motivation if the task is similar to something they would expect to do for real sometime in the future. The expedition grant proposal is highly motivating because of the nature of the task. The risk assessment forms are valued because they simplify a process that can otherwise seem vague.

What advice can you offer those adopting a similar approach?

- (1) When adapting forms, minimise any changes from the original. Some students source the originals on the internet and are confused if there are inconsistencies in, for examples, guidance on formatting or on what particular sections need to cover.

- (2) Provide electronic versions of the forms to allow students to complete them as they would in the real world.
- (3) Insist that students follow the instructions precisely. If the task is completion of a grant application, apply the same penalties that would be applied in real life if instructions are not followed.
- (4) Beware! The right task can be highly motivating for students so that they put far too much time into it!

What resources are available for use by others?

Downloadable forms, instructions for students and instructions for tutors will be available shortly from the HEA-GEES website or from the author on request. As well as the forms listed above, I will also provide the NERC form and the BES' Expedition Grant Application Form.

Who funded your work?

This project was funded by GEES Subject Centre Small Scale Project Funding.

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GEES Subject Centre

Funding for small scale projects

The GEES Subject Centre has an annual programme of funding to support small-scale learning and teaching projects, normally be in the range £2,000 - £5,000. The funding is awarded by open competition to projects that will enhance student learning and/or enrich the learning and teaching research literature in one or more of the above three disciplines.

- * The funding may provide one-off or pump priming support for developing learning and teaching (student) resources, staff development resources, and/or research into learning and teaching.
- * Individuals or groups may bid for funding in one or more of the three disciplines (geography, earth and environmental sciences).
- * The projects may address any level of higher education including Foundation Degrees, Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate (Masters). Community/outreach-related projects are also considered.

For details of projects funded in previous years, please see

<http://www.gees.ac.uk/projtheme/projtheme.htm>

The next round of funding, for projects running 2007-2008 will be advertised shortly after Easter 2007

