

# Teaching Portfolio Extract

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## **Assessment Portfolio in Hi110:**

### **Assessment as a pedagogic tool in the survey history course**

The survey course is one of the staples of the of any university history programme. Covering a wide range of ground quickly, it lays out the big picture and establishes the context for more detailed specialist courses. It is essential for introducing students to periods and topics to which they have not previously been exposed.

Hi110, which I inherited in a reshuffle of teaching loads, is a classic survey. Titled 'An introduction to Irish History for Visiting students' it covered all of Irish history from Celtic Ireland to the present in 24 lectures. It was offered as an introductory survey for the many visiting students in UCC – mostly Americans but some Europeans and even the occasional African and Asian student. It was and still is an enormously popular course which runs in both semesters and drew in about 200 students in each year. It was deliberately timetabled into a 6 pm to 8 pm slot to avoid clashing with other courses.

The design of the lectures was not, in fact, particularly difficult. Breaking it into three main sections gave 8 hours on Celtic & Medieval Ireland (400AD – 1500 AD), 8 hours on Early Modern Ireland (1500 -1800) and 8 hours on Modern Ireland (1800-c1980). This design gave a useful balance. It covered the full scope of Irish History. At the same time, it provided a scale for the course in which 'zoomed in' as we came closer to the present day, providing a more detailed treatment of more recent events.

When I took over the course however, the assessment did not satisfy the course objectives. Of course, there was no real statement of course objectives apart from those implicit in the title. Assessment was by a single terminal essay of 6,000 words. Once I had run through the first few iterations, it became clear that this was unsatisfactory for several reasons. The practical manifestation of the problem was that each term I got 80 essays on the Vikings, and 20 on other

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topics. Almost none of the essays were on any topics from the last third of the course, the period after 1800. Not very surprisingly, attendance at lectures fell off in the last weeks of the course as students who had picked an essay title for one of those covered in the first weeks felt less inclined to attend.

Another practical problem was that while many of the students were taking the course on a 'pass-fail' basis, a fail was still a fail. The failure rate was not especially high, but it there was a significant failure rate. For some visiting students a failing, or getting a grade which would adversely affect their GPA back home was a serious issue. There were many reasons why a student could underperform on the 6,000 word essay. Many of the students had no prior knowledge of the subject matter. Most had no idea what was expected of them in a 6,000 word history essay, and tended to turn in long narratives with no argument. Many of the students were not history majors at their home universities – in fact, many were not even humanities or social science students at all but came from disciplines as diverse as marine biology or civil engineering. Many of the students were from universities where a 6,000 word essay was longer than any piece of writing which they had previously attempted. While I didn't wish to make the course too easy, it seemed to me that it should be possible to change the assessment to spread the failure risk.

I changed the assessment in two steps. The first was to remove the 6,000 word essay and replace it with three 2,000 word essays. The intent was that the students would submit the essays at different stages of the course – after about 5 weeks, 9 weeks and at the end – and the first batch of essays would be graded before the third essay was due, and generally before the second essay was due. This provided an opportunity to identify students who were having problems and give them early warning and feedback on how they needed to improve in the second and third essays. Additionally, this removed the problems which some students had had with managing the work involved in a the longer essay. While I did not keep explicit records, I do recall a number of students whose performance in their second and third essays showed a clear improvement as a result of feedback from the first essay. (I probably have the marks for the course somewhere, but it has been 5 years since I last taught it.)

This change to the assessment carried with it an improvement in the fit between assessment and objectives. The course is a survey, and the implicit objectives in a survey is that the students will engage, at some level, with the material across the full spectrum of the content. Clearly, the previously unbalanced selection of titles from those on offer had not been in keeping with this. Setting three short essays spaced through the course required producing three sets of essays titles,

and it was logical that the titles for each batch of essays drew on the lectures up to that point. Instead of doing one essay in great detail on one topic, students were now required to do one essay from each of the major sections of the course.

While the change from one long essay to three shorter essays was an improvement in the course, I still felt that it could be improved upon. From discussions with the students, I felt that some non-History students were having problems with reading. From grading the essays, I felt that some students really did need to do some explicit essay planning. Again, the non-Humanities students were a particular concern in this case, although I also felt I could do more to help students whose first language was not English to lay a better foundation for their essays. With both of these groups there was a similar problem which came back to an unfamiliarity with the normal discourse or rhetorical style of history as a discipline.

It was at this point that I began to reflect on how students read history, how historians structure their writing and how to bridge the gap between these two. This was to lead me, eventually to mindmapping as a tool. That is a separate story, and is detailed elsewhere. What I did in this course was to introduce three short coursework tasks. All three were 'rolled out' at the same time, although the discussion below includes both descriptions of the tasks and reflection on the results for each task.

The short version of that story is that I devised an exercise in which I required students to break down an article into a one page 'point' summary, distinguishing fact from argument. (illustration) This was a simple task, which was easy to explain in class with one or two overheads in the space of a few minutes. It made sense to schedule this exercise in the first few weeks of the course, so that the students would benefit from it before writing their first essay. It was possible to integrate this demonstration of the coursework task into the lectures by using an article related to the lecture topic of that day.

In Hi110, I encouraged students to base their short essays on a comparison of the arguments of 2 or 3 different historians on the essay topic. For most topics, there were a range of articles in the Departmental Offprint Library. (This has since closed for copyright reasons.) It was therefore easy to specify a suitable range of readings for each essay. Having designed the article analysis task, it seemed a logical and useful progression to introduce a second coursework task in which students were required to extract the interpretative points from 2-3 different readings and combine them into an essay plan .

For the essay plan exercise, I asked students to use their readings to produce three different one page essay plans for one of the essays on the course. The plans were each to be one page and one page only, and expressed in point form. Logistically, this exercise had to come after the submission of the first essay. Like the one page article analysis task, it was demonstrated in class using the lecture topic of the day. This was done as a chalk and talk exercise, rather than using overheads. Using the blackboard, it was possible to take the main points from 2-3 readings, and show how to throw them down as a rough plan, and then develop the structure in a number of different ideas. For the essay plan exercise, I advised the students to use one of the titles from the second set of short essay titles as their 'plan'. I acknowledged that they might have difficulty coming up with three different plans for their chosen essay, but made it clear that 2 good plans and one weak plan would still score good marks for the exercise. I did offer them the option of submitting three versions of the same plan, showing the progression of an essay plan from rough to finished, but in practice very students took that option. Students did say that they felt the exercise was useful, and helped them with their approach to essay writing. They acknowledged that most of them had never bothered planning essays prior to that. On the other hand, I do not recall seeing any significant improvement in essay performance as a result of this exercise.

I now had a partially revised assessment plan with three essays but only two coursework tasks. Symmetry seemed to demand a third coursework task to be done between the second and third essays. Fortunately, I had an idea. As part of the departments work in History & Computing, we taught a third year seminar using the 1901 census of population as a primary source. Now the students in Hi110 could not be expected to engage with this material in the same way as the Final Year seminar class, but it is an important primary historical source, and it proved simple to construct a simple, one page, problem set based on a small, single townland sample from the census. Since most humanities students are not very numerate, this was an opportunity not only to expose them to a primary source, but also to demonstrate how to see in a sample of a few families important aspects of Irish population history in the post-Famine period.

This then left an complete assessment plan with three essays and three coursework tasks. In order to accommodate all of this, I reduced the three essays from 2,000 words to 1,500 words. This left 4,500 words of essays and 5 pages of coursework – a one page article analysis, a three page essay plan and a one page problemset – which remained roughly equal to the original single 6,000 word essay.

Overall, I felt that the assessment in the course was now much better. It met a range of needs and, while it was hard to point to specific benefits from some of the parts of the new plan, it certainly produced better overall results. It saw students get feedback earlier. It helped make explicit the process of reading and writing in history.

Breaking the assessment into a range of smaller tasks made grading easier. Instead of being confronted with half a million words at the end of term, I had 6 smaller marking operations. Indeed the three short tasks, being under at 1, 3 and 1 page respectively, were very easy to grade. The three short essays were also easier to grade – by the time I came to the third essay, I had a reasonable idea of each student's general standard and what feedback I had given them on previous essays which meant that I had a good idea what I hoped to see in terms of improvement. That, of course, illustrates part of another benefit of the revised assessment plan – it increased the level of interaction with the students and meant that by the end of the course, at least of these brief visitors to UCC were more than a number in my little mark sheet.