



Title: Continuous assessment – Time and effort well spent for students and teachers?

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Abstract

Background and purpose

Continuous assessment has been used for many years in higher education. However, as more and more teachers are using it in their courses, the risk of over-burdening students is increasing. Moreover, implementing continuous assessment may also increase teachers' already large workload.

Even though many teachers at KTH claim they have continuous assessment in their courses, only very few have implemented truly *continuous assessment* (which in this context are courses with assessment tasks arranged during the duration of the course, which – if passed – yield a pass on the course without the student taking part in any final assessment *concluding* the course).

Most courses at KTH employ what we call *hybrid assessment* (courses with assessment tasks during the course that contributes to the score of the final assessment concluding the course). The contribution to the score of the final assessment is most often realized by some kind of bonus system, where achievements during the course yields points/merit added to the final assessment. There are however many different ways of implementing hybrid assessment and it does not need to be bonus-based at all.

Some courses at KTH are fashioned with *final assessment* (courses that lack assessment tasks during the course altogether, and only has one summative assessment task concluding the course). Although seen as the most resource-efficient way to assess students, this kind of approach may lead to surface-oriented learning which most university courses are trying to avoid as the knowledge is likely to be forgotten after some time.

Arranging courses with continuous and hybrid assessment naturally takes more teacher resources as

compared to final assessment courses. In this paper, we investigate a selection of courses employing continuous assessment, hybrid assessment, and final assessment. We compare pass rate, achievement rate, and teacher assessment workload in courses using the three categories of assessment.

Work in progress

We interview teachers, and utilize course evaluations to find students' views of the different categories of assessment. We discuss what it would mean to KTH, its teachers, and its students if only one or two of the assessment categories were used throughout all KTH courses and programs.

Results and observations

From evaluations of courses employing continuous assessment, a vast majority of the students express appreciation for the opportunity to pass the course before any final concluding assessment. One of the reasons given is that it reduces students' anxiety of failing the course. Some students further state that having already passed the course at the time of the final assessment, allowed them the possibility to explore aspects of the course that really intrigued them. On the other hand, students lacking an interest in the course subject area stated that they stopped participating and stopped studying in the course once a passing grade had been achieved. According to course evaluation data, this was mostly done in order to prioritize other parallel courses.

In courses using hybrid assessment, students are spending more time on their studies as compared to students in courses using final assessment. Students still need to pass a final assessment, but the hybrid assessment forces/encourages students to study to a greater extent. From course evaluations we have found that the amount of bonus points/merits given for passing assessment during the course may influence how students approach assessment. One way of encouraging students to participate in assessment tasks not directly yielding a pass on the course, is to show the students evidence of past students' performance. This type of motivation is useful, but not as effective as the awards offered in continuous assessment.

As is well known from literature, spending more time-on-task promotes both learning in general, as well as a deep-learning oriented approach. Therefore continuous and hybrid assessment should be promoted.

Being dependent on a final assessment to pass a course may cause unnecessary anxiety among students, an anxiety that is likely not to contribute to increased learning, and possibly leading to surface-oriented learning approaches.

Take-home message

Continuous or hybrid assessment use more teacher resources, but in turn creates better learning environments for students and, more importantly, an increase in student learning.