Facing Uncertainty: SARS and an Innovation in Coursework Assessment

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The sudden arrival of SARS in Hong Kong in March 2003 affected academic, professional and daily activities in Hong Kong universities. The immediate effect was dramatic and unexpected. It appeared to have a disastrous impact on teaching and learning, since colleges and universities had to face the disruption or cancellation of classes, the abbreviation of the teaching of course content, and the practical constraints of only being able to talk to students while wearing a facemask. At the time of writing (June 2003), the SARS situation is one of uncertainty, medically and socially; it has also raised questions, educationally, about how we face uncertainty. One consequence is that SARS forced us to innovate—there are things which both students and teachers have now tackled which they had not previously in-

*This article was completed while the author was seconded to The Chinese University of Hong Kong between 2001–2003.

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tended to do under "normal" circumstances. A specific example of this is the use of the Internet for teaching and assessment. Using this example, this story will illustrate how university participants need to learn to face sudden changes and unexpected challenges. SARS may have taught us to face uncertainty.

This paper will look into some aspects of the impact of SARS on the change of coursework assessment methods and evaluate what aspects of learning have occurred for the teachers and learners involved. The following writing discusses this under three headings:

- a narrative account of the process of the change of coursework assessment;
- a reflection on the process and the change of coursework assessment; and
- some implications and concluding comments.

A Narrative Account of Changing Coursework Assessment

In late March 2003, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) advised all academic staff to use alternative assessment methods for examining students' learning for that term. Immediately I wrote a letter and sent it via e-mail to all 50 students on one of my courses on introductory discourse analysis about a change in the final exam of the course (which contributes 40% to the final course grade). The change was to a "take-home" exam with a date earlier than the previously arranged final exam date, but with a longer duration for the take-home exam period. The letter explained the details of the procedure, including choices offered to students. They could receive their exam paper on campus, or at home via e-mail or fax; and they could return their completed work via e-mail or fax. A sample exam paper was sent to the students with the e-mail letter so that they were informed of the format of this alternative "take-home" exam paper and could familiarize themselves with it as part of their exam preparation.

However, when students received this information, over 50% of the students e-mailed me and my teaching assistants—and a number of others

phoned us—to express their anxiety, doubts and uncertainty about the change. For several days, the number of daily e-mails on this issue from students increased up to a hundred. Their questions ranged over the details of the circumstances, about why they had to change, and what a "take-home exam" meant, to a range of "what if" queries about what would happen if someone copied the answers for the exam questions, or if a student requested someone else to write the answers for them, or if someone received "outside help", and what kind of checking system was available in order to have a fair assessment for every student, etc. The sheer number and force of these students' questions shocked me somewhat, especially the questions about copying and asking someone else to write the answers. In over twenty years of teaching experience in different countries of several regions of the globe I had never come across such questions from students so explicitly. The questions were particularly striking at a moment when all of us were critically concerned about the potentially deadly virus. I also believe that as CUHK students are extremely capable to answer the exam questions themselves, they hardly need to consider those kinds of "alternatives". But what leads them to doubt others and think about these questions is an interesting social and academic phenomenon.

On the positive side, some students also contacted me to offer suggestions for further alternative assessment methods. One particular student sent me a long e-mail explaining in detail the use of WebCT and CUForum in the university with details of IT staff names, contact addresses and telephone numbers. This student was fully informed of this because he used to work with them as an ITSC helper.[1] I was attracted to this alternative way of offering extra access to learning and assessment resources for our students. So I phoned Christina Keing in the ITSC inquiring about the use of WebCT. She was extremely helpful and precise in her explanation of its uses. Her professional manner gave me the confidence to make the decision to adopt it into the "take-home" exam for my course straight away. We only met up once in her office to have a look at the format and appearance of the exam paper on WebCT. We phoned each other a few times to fix the technical

matters and for me to view things from my office computer so that I was assured that students would be able to access the exam paper from anywhere. Soon the sample paper of the "take-home" exam was available on the WebCT of the university so that students could conduct their own trial run before the actual exam.

The next step I took was to write another long letter to the course students. This letter explained the reasons for the "take-home" exam again with more specific details, gave an introduction to WebCT, outlined the procedure of using it to access the exam paper and enter their answers, and told them that this idea was an initiative suggested by one of their fellow students. I particularly emphasized my understanding of their anxiety during the ever-changing but somewhat helpless situation of waiting during the SARS period. I encouraged them to take the situation in positive terms: they should face a new challenge in their life and experience something unexpected and unfamiliar from the normal university routine. I praised students who took the initiative to think about the opportunity positively. I also asked students to take responsibility for their own learning by reading our individual e-mail answers carefully and comprehend the instructions, not to be afraid to seek help but also to consider staff workloads, etc. This letter achieved a very useful effect: the number of daily e-mails and phone calls from students gradually declined, their questions became more precise, they appeared less anxious in their e-mails and phone calls and their questions were focused more on the course content.

Before the "take-home" exam date, over 20 students out of 50 course participants visited the WebCT. In the exam, 16 students (32%) used the traditional way to pick up the hard copy of the paper from an office and they wrote their answers by hand in the exam paper. However, 11 students (22%) used WebCT to receive the paper and to return their answers in this format; the rest used the e-mail system to receive and send papers. Those using WebCT and e-mails (68%) typed their answers, of course. Apparently, the majority of the students had readily adapted to the change.

Reflecting on the Process of Change

When I reflect on this event of changing the assessment method, the following aspects are worth mentioning. First, the content of the exam paper was broadly the same—it assessed students' knowledge and skills in relation to the course content with similar questions and tasks as in the previous (pre-SARS) course; students had been advised of this content and the kinds of tasks from the beginning of the course, following normal pedagogic practices. There were few initial questions about the content. On further thought, of course, the new formats of assessment would allow new types of tasks which may not be feasible in the sit-in written exam: more detailed analysis of case studies, data-handling or work with texts. Once students are familiar with new formats, as this group now is, all sorts of further innovations are possible and reasonable.

Second, I consider that the flood of queries may reflect how Hong Kong Chinese students, in general, are not required to engage in spontaneous teaching and learning activities; more usually, classroom pedagogic practices in schools and universities are fairly routine, although there are many small variations and initiatives within the broad parameters of the expectations of these routine practices. For example, when students are called upon to "perform" in class (i.e., to explain to the class a possible solution to a problem or to give a brief oral presentation) they are nearly always given advance notice or preparation time to do this (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). Spontaneity in student discussion is generally offset by advance thinking time or preparation time.

Hong Kong students are also observed to be cue-conscious in listening and talking informally with teachers (Watkins & Biggs, 1996, 2001), that is, students are highly alert to any hints, clues or "extra" information they may glean from teachers about exams or assessed work and may sometimes talk to teachers fairly explicitly to "fish" for relevant comments of this sort from teachers.

Putting these two points together—about students' perceived need for preparation and their observed cue-consciousness—may partially explain how students reacted to the unexpected change in the present case. Their numerous and repeated queries were often about points which had, in fact, been explained in the original e-mail which announced the change or were about aspects of the new assessment format which were actually exemplified in the accompanying sample paper. Strictly speaking, such questions were unnecessary if students had read this material. The sheer volume of questions may, additionally, suggest discomfort with uncertainty and unease about the unexpected change. Usually, of course, changes in assessment practices would be announced well in advance with assurances and explanations but this was not possible in the SARS context. On the other hand, once the situation was clear to the student group, many adapted readily to the WebCT format or used the e-mail system for the exam. There was no apparent negative effect on the quality of students' work when they used these innovative formats, so the *actual* change was seemingly much less of an issue than the perception of *suddenness* of the change and the need for *spontaneous participation* in new formats, and the latter was associated with unease and uncertainty.

When a proportion of the students were asked informally why they had so many questions and worries concerning an exam which was apparently quite similar to previous ones (except in format) they gave the reason that their training in exam-orientated education made them react like this. In order to achieve a higher mark in a new format, they believed they needed to clarify every point with the "authority", in this case, the teacher, because it was the teachers who worked out successful exam outcome strategies for students and had guided them through the exam system all their lives. They could only relate every point they knew about exams with an exam format that they were familiar with. This raises some serious questions concerning how the current Hong Kong educational system prepares students to face the inevitable uncertainty which exists in the real world, given that an educational system has a role, among other aims, to prepare students for life. If

the educational system produces professionals who can mainly follow the instructions and perform prepared, routine and regular tasks, then the system does not function well to bring out the potential a professional should possess in current societies where risk, uncertainty and the unexpected are among the major characteristics of contemporary life.

A third area of reflection is that those students' queries showed concern about exam malpractices and plagiarism, which shocked me at the time in its explicitness. The questions here may not reflect the likely practice of the questioners themselves—if someone were planning to engage in such malpractices they would be unlikely to raise the issues themselves as an initial query. However, they may reflect the questioners' perception of other students. The fact that so many students raised such queries suggests an air of mistrust or suspicion in the group as a whole (I have no reason to think this group is atypical in this respect) and, equally, that they sense the need for visibly fair competition (an explanation which fits the common perception that Chinese students are very competitive in exam situations). Still, the fact that this line of questioning was the *first response* to the announcement of assessment change may be an alarm bell and may be interpreted in the context of current international concern about student work plagiarized from the Internet or similar sources.

A fourth consideration is that staff participating in the change may face the uncertainty of what is involved. It appears that the e-version of this exam format requires more time for teachers, although it is very easy to set it up and the IT staff are very efficient and helpful. This is because teachers need time to download students' work (e.g., essay type answers) and print them out for marking (assuming that hard copies of marked work are needed for external examiners or for other purposes). Seemingly unimportant things need to be considered in advance, for example the requirement for students to name their files in an easy, systematic and uniform way when they save them so that teachers can identify them quickly. Even though I requested students to do this, half of them who handed in their e-version did not do so. When some of them were asked for reasons, they said mainly they did not

pay attention to these matters as such because these were not related to the marking system. They would be strictly correct with such a requirement if they knew that otherwise a mark would be deducted. Again, the exam-orientated education has this negative effect.

Some Implications and Conclusions

There are implications here about clarity and ambiguity in contexts of uncertainty. The students' queries indicate to me that they are uncomfortable with the unexpected, but not necessarily so with innovation. It seems they are used to specific exam formats and some students have an exam-preparation orientation such that any change gives them alarm: they felt the need to ask about every dot and comma and "what if" concerning the new exam format and associated procedures. There is an argument that if they fully understood principles of student learning and related assessment, for instance concerning plagiarism or exam malpractice, they would not need to ask "what if" questions. There is a stronger argument that in an uncertain world, where risk assessment is becoming a norm, we should actively teach students to face uncertainty and not to be dismayed by the unexpected. It is hard to see how they can learn this unless some uncertain situations arise. In this sense, SARS provided the need for an innovation and an opportunity to learn about uncertainty.

SARS has obviously affected us negatively in many ways; however, it has offered us an unexpected and unusual opportunity to react to life situations in a positive way and to introduce innovations. I would judge that the innovation in my coursework assessment was generally effective. There are things to be learned which cannot necessarily be learned in normal circumstances. The SARS event may also raise questions for us to reflect on and consider in our educational system: How we should train our students for their competence, independence, autonomous learning and how we should prepare them for life, including uncertainty.

Note

1.   See http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/wbt/ for an explanation of these online systems.

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