

## Recommendations for Equitable Assessment and Grading Practices in Multi-Section Courses<sup>1</sup>

Assessment is a key aspect of instruction as there must be a method to evaluate students and produce data to identify their level of achievement. Assessment tasks are often determined by instructors but can be mandated by the faculty or university who have specific policies to be followed (Lingnan University, 2017). Assessment and grading can become complex when a course has a large class size that must be taught by several instructors who teach different sections and/or several teaching assistants (TAs) who often facilitate seminars with smaller groups of students (Glazer, 2014). These classes are referred to as multi-section courses since all students are not in one class together being assessed by the same person (Glazer, 2014). As a result, disparities can exist in assessment and grading practices when several instructors/TAs are involved with the same course. This brings forth the issue of how one ensures equitable treatment for all students in multi-section courses.

According to CUPFA (2015) “equitable treatment includes similar course content, similar evaluative exercises, and similar grading schemes” (p. 1). This does not necessarily mean that each student is treated the same but that comparable practices are utilized no matter the individual that is being assessed. As a result, it is important to review the literature to provide recommendations towards achieving equitable assessment and grading practices for multi-section courses. I will further outline potential limitations and implications for these recommendations including areas for further research within this topic.

### Background

Assessment can be identified based on the format such as qualitative assessment which includes written papers and essays and quantitative assessment usually in the form of math problems and lab reports (Knight, Allen, & Mitchell, 2012). Assessment can also be distinguished by when it is practiced such as formative assessment, which occurs throughout a course and is meant to provide students with feedback, versus summative assessment, which is focused on end of course learning outcomes (Lingnan University, 2017). Both are often included in a student’s final grade however formative might consist of lab reports and presentations and summative might be a final written exam or essay (Glazer, 2014).

As with all courses, there are several factors that must be strictly followed based on university and/or faculty policies. These would be found in the course syllabus, the faculty’s webpage, and the university’s academic calendar and would include plagiarism, grade conversions, late

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assignments (which can be up to the instructor), special needs, and accommodations (i.e., religious, medical). On the other hand, factors that are relevant to multi-section courses (and even all courses) and would often be at the discretion of the instructor(s), consist of the course outline, learning outcomes/objectives, marking criteria, textbook, exam format (if included), and any assignments (include labs, seminars, discussions etcetera) (Adams, n.d.; CUPFA, 2015).

### Recommendations

Research on assessment and grading within multi-section courses primarily focuses on large first-year undergraduate classes. After reviewing the literature and identifying recommendations within each study, I have divided the themes into three main categories of consistency (Glazer, 2014; Lingnan University, 2017; O’Neill, Birol, & Pollock, 2010, Preston & Holloway, 2006), consideration (Gladding, 2007; Lingnan University, 2017; Roth & Sandford Bernhardt, 2016), and collaboration (CUPFA, 2015; Knight et al., 2012; Perrin, Rusnak, Zha, Lewis, & Srinivasan, 2009) that are essential in ensuring that equitable assessment and grading practices are developed within multi-section courses (see Figure 1). This does not mean that every idea within each category must be fulfilled, as this will depend on the course and program, but it is important to evaluate and reflect on each. Consistency involves ensuring that procedures and practices are similar across all sections and are being effectively implemented by all stakeholders (supervisors, instructors, TAs etcetera). Consideration is important when discussing fairness for both the instructors/TAs who are administering and assessing the course material as well as for students who are being evaluated. Lastly, collaboration is an integral element for multi-section courses as all stakeholders must cooperate and work as a team to assure equitable assessment and grading practices.

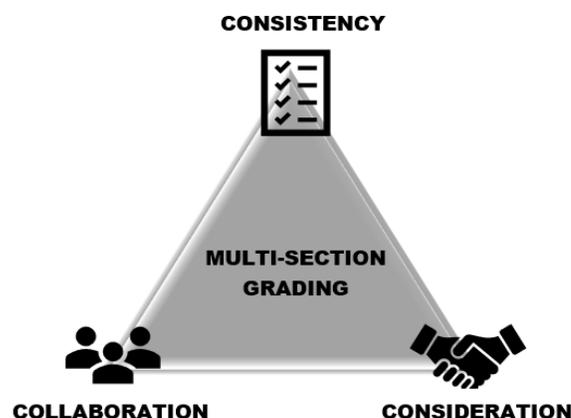


Figure 1. The 3 Cs for equitable assessment and grading practices in multi-section courses

#### **Consistency**

Review of the literature reveals that consistency is key for assessment and grading practices across multi-section courses. Consistency involves ensuring that all aspects of a course

are similar so that students are being assessed in an unbiased way. This can be accomplished by developing consistent learning outcomes across all sections (Lingnan University, 2017). These learning outcomes need to be communicated to all students at the beginning of a course and should be aligned with assessment tasks (Lingnan University, 2017; O'Neill et al., 2010). As well, all sections should be developed under one common course syllabus with standardized assessment tasks and course objectives (Perrin et al., 2009; Preston & Holloway, 2006). Glazer (2014) found that the inclusion of both formative and summative assessment tasks for a first-year chemistry class improved grading consistency across sections which advocates for the importance of both forms of assessment.

When evaluating assessment tasks, it is important to ensure consistency among instructors/TAs. This will allow students to feel confident that no matter who is grading their work, equitable practices are followed. Standardization of exam questions across all sections of a course are important for consistency as well as to ensure that exam questions reflect course objectives and material learned (O'Neill et al., 2010). For qualitative assessment tasks such as written essays, marking criteria should be standardized, provided to students well in advance, and aligned with learning outcomes (Lingnan University, 2017). Several studies have looked at the benefits of using marking rubrics with multi-section courses and found that they helped to reduce variability in grades (Knight et al., 2012), improve consistency in feedback (Glazer, 2014), and reduce marking time (Roth & Sanford-Bernhardt, 2016). Marking rubrics identify a specific set of criteria for evaluation and can be utilized across all subjects including essays; however, students must be made aware of the grading criteria prior to completion of the task.

### ***Consideration***

While consistency is essential, consideration involving fair practices for both instructors/TAs and students is also significant when discussing equitable assessment and grading. Gladding (2007) states that lectures and class material should be the same across all sections of a course. Although uniformity is important for student learning in multi-section courses, autonomy and choice for instructors/TAs is also noteworthy as they have their own areas of interest and specialisms that guide their learning and should be considered when developing assessment tasks. To promote teacher's academic freedom, O'Neill et al. (2010) suggest that a few learning outcomes can be tailored to the individual instructors, but these need to be clearly identified to students. Due to this, some questions on assessments could be personalised by the instructor but this opportunity would need to be available to all instructors of a course to ensure fairness.

Other recommendations centered around fairness are more specific to grading and the importance of consulting with all instructors/TAs before evaluating student work. One way is for individuals to each mark a set of samples separately and then compare to assess grading consistencies or lack thereof (Roth & Sanford Bernhardt, 2016). This would be relevant for courses with qualitative written responses such as English and social science courses. Another suggestion is to have one individual mark a specific set of questions on all exams/assignments

to help ensure accurate grading (Lingnan University, 2017). Rubrics, as previously mentioned, are also a good way to ensure fairness in grading across multi-sections, but it is important to consider instructor/TA effectiveness which would require discussions to assess accurate grading practices.

### ***Collaboration***

Collaboration among all stakeholders is pivotal in the effective organization and running of multi-section courses. Collaboration cannot be possible without effective communication and cooperation between all individuals and must be maintained throughout the entire course from start to finish (Perrin et al., 2009). First, this must involve routine meetings with all instructors/TAs (Preston & Holloway, 2006; Sundberg, 2002; Williams, 2017) as well as with directors/supervisors who oversee the course (Knight et al., 2012). These meetings should occur throughout the year and allow for input on aspects of course design including developing the course syllabus and learning outcomes as well as monitoring for consistent grading and evaluation of assessment tasks. Another important aspect of collaboration within assessment is that all instructors need to contribute to the creation and marking of assignments (exams, essays, projects, reports etc.) and need to be given sufficient time and opportunity to provide feedback and revision (CUPFA, 2015).

### ***Other Recommendations***

There are some recommendations within the literature that indirectly relate to assessment and grading but benefit the overall organization of multi-section courses. Perrin et al. (2009) suggest developing an administrative structure that involves appointing a director who would allocate course supervisors responsible for the monitoring of instructors/TAs for each section. This type of hierarchical structure can be very effective for large universities with several multi-section courses. Even if a director is not necessary, having a course supervisor or a head instructor can assist in effective communication.

O'Neill et al. (2010) recommend that a resource area should be created for all instructors/TAs which includes "instructors guide to learning outcomes, specific examples, active learning activities, clicker and exam question banks" (p. 19). By cooperating with all individuals responsible for each course and creating a common resource area, equitability will be fostered as well as the sharing of good practice. These resources would be available to instructors/TAs in all sections and would also help to ensure consistency amongst course material.

As well, many universities utilize an online learning management system (LMS) to organize and disseminate course material but it is usually up to the instructor(s) to decide on the level of usage for their course. Yalcin, Gardner, Anderson, Kirby-Straker, Wolvin, and Bederson (2015) found that using an LMS was beneficial for multi-section courses as online learning communities promoted instructor/TA interaction and each section could more easily be monitored by the course supervisor/head instructor.

**Limitations**

Developing equitable assessment and grading practices for multi-section courses also presents challenges including budget limitations, time management, staff turnover, training requirements, and technological advancements which must be considered when implementing any changes within a course (Glazer, 2014; Perrin et al., 2009). Challenges can arise with having a large class size and multiple instructors for each course regarding the time needed for effective training (Sundberg, 2002). This makes it difficult to implement similar grading practices across sections and if staff turnover is high, then new individuals must be trained frequently which requires resources and money (Lingnan University, 2017).

There is also a degree of bias that is present with subjective grading of essays and qualitative written responses with courses like English (Glazer, 2014). However, with implementing best practices such as by using rubrics and group marking practice, this subjectivity can be diminished as much as possible.

Grades are very important to students as they often dictate scholarships and admittance into further studies such as master's programs (Knight et al., 2012). Students may become frustrated if they feel that grades are being unevenly disseminated without any explanation for the differences (Knight et al., 2012). Therefore, equitability must be assessed across grade distributions and years to prevent preferential choice of one course/instructor over another (Glazer, 2014; Knight et al., 2012). Courses must be frequently assessed usually overseen by a supervisor to assure grade alignment is unbiased.

**Implications**

When considering implications regarding equitable assessment and grading practise in multi-section courses it is important to look at the impact of the recommendations described above in three areas consisting of practice, theory and future research.

***Practice***

Equitable assessment and grading practices promote positive student learning and are important for multi-section courses where several stakeholders are involved in the evaluation of student work. Equitable practices across all sections are vital to ensure impartiality and transparency (Lingnan University, 2017). Applying good practices involving multi-section grading will involve implementing recommendations based on the needs of the institution. This may result in modifications to individual courses/sections or possibly a university wide evaluation. Ultimately, the degree to changes that would be made to courses would be mandated by policies that must be followed (CUPFA, 2015).

***Theory***

Recommendations regarding multi-section grading have been centered on the 3Cs of consistency, consideration, and collaboration (see Figure 1). These three areas have been created based on the desire to ensure equitability across all sections of a course concerning the

assessment of tasks which will determine a student's overall grade. It is important to remember that recommendations need to be evaluated for their individual applicability. For example, an institution may assess that there is excellent collaboration between instructors/TAs but discover that there is no consistency or consideration between their assignments. As well, if it is determined that gaps exist within each category, suggestions may be implemented across all 3C's to improve equitable practices.

### **Future Research**

Research on assessment and grading in multi-section courses has focused on standardization across all sections; however, there are several areas requiring further study. Glazer (2014) noted that effective feedback was important for student learning but stated that many instructors struggle with providing feedback and this area needs to be explored. Instructors/TAs must balance using similar assessment methods with all students while still providing personalized feedback. Ultimately, assessment is only effective and relevant if it is used by the student and instructor to inform further practice (Glazer, 2014). Analyzing learning outcomes and identifying gaps/discrepancies between outcomes and grades is important for student success and universities need to develop procedures to assess their own courses (Jefferson College, 2009; O'Neill et al., 2010). Lastly, as technology continues to advance it is important to consider the impact on multi-section courses and the influence this may have on assessment and grading practices.

### **Conclusion**

Multi-section courses are unique in that they require extensive organization as they involve several instructors/TAs across many sections to assure successful implementation for positive student learning. Therefore, recommendations for consistency, consideration, and collaboration will help ensure equitable assessment and grading practices for all students within multi-section courses. Not all suggestions will be relevant for every course/program but thorough evaluation of each including identifying potential limitations will assist in employing the best recommendations for successful practice.

See also, the following annotated bibliography:

<https://researchsotl.wordpress.com/2018/06/28/multi-section-grading-practices/>

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