Providing choice and autonomy in student assessment - What happened next?

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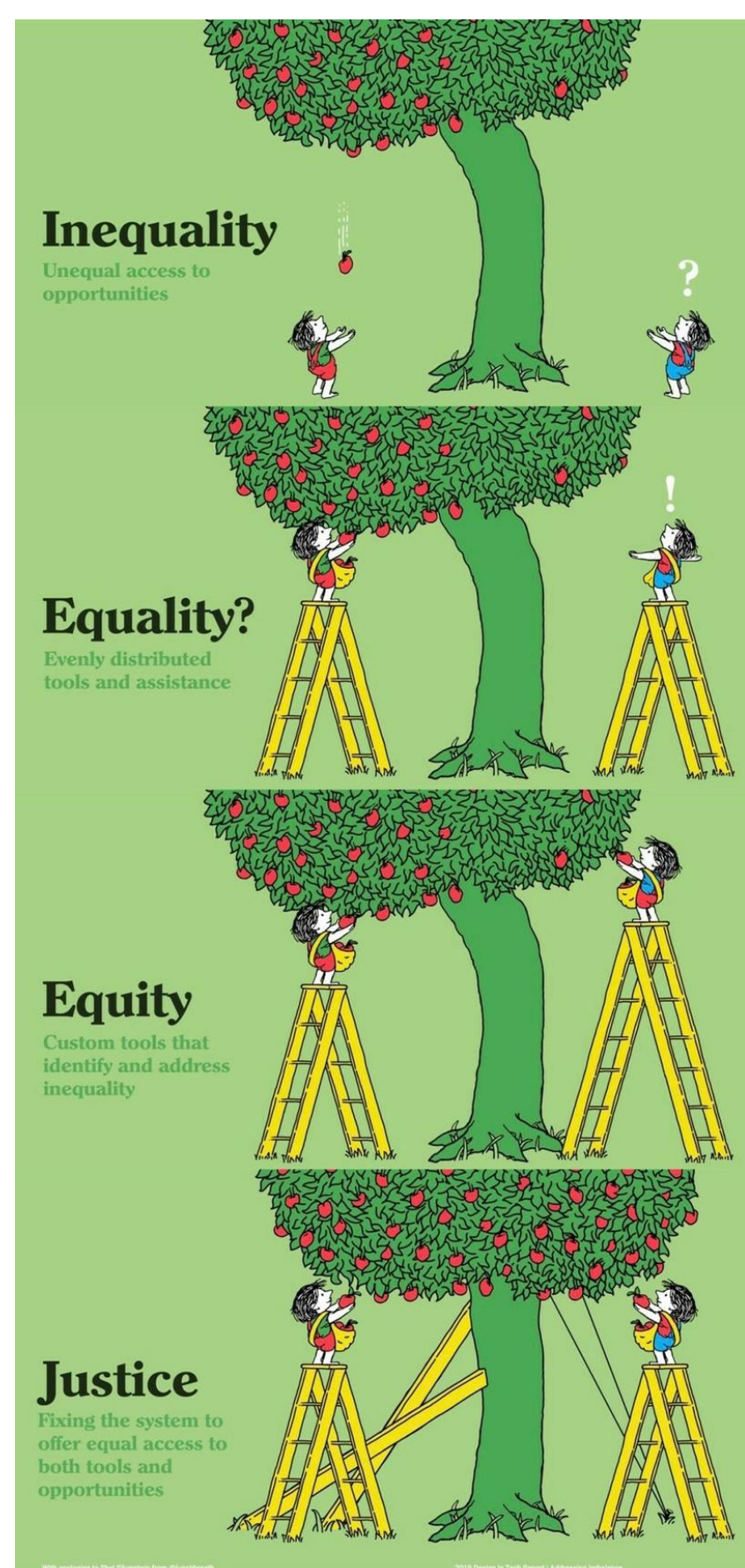
Introduction

Assessments frame how students learn and what they achieve, so it is essential that all learners are given the opportunity to demonstrate their learning. By offering students the freedom to choose how they evidence their knowledge and understanding, we can create a more inclusive, caring and motivational learning environment.

This review recounts how this approach was adopted in a 120+ student Level 6 problem-based coursework module in ENGIN and how students reacted.

Pedagogical reasoning

'Every student should have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their achievement and potential' (CU 2022), which is sometimes referred to as 'justice' but how can this be implemented?. Guidance from the Universal Design for Learning (CAST 2018) and Freire (1998) provide a good approach to embracing educational equality and equity (see Figure 1) and the promotion of the 'pedagogy of care' around inclusivity within programmes and modules.

Inclusivity can be a problematic term (Bali 2016), implying change to allow outliers to join in rather than acknowledging that some learners can be denied access to educational opportunities.

My context of care revolves around that stated by Bali (2020a;b) who defined that '*this is the difference between caring for ALL students versus caring for EVERY student*'.

Inequality
Unequal access to opportunities

Equality?
Evenly distributed tools and assistance

Equity
Custom tools that identify and address inequality

Justice
Fixing the system to offer equal access to both tools and opportunities

To adopt this 'pedagogy of care' approach into my module assessment strategy, I used guidance provided by the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach (CAST 2018), EAT (2016) (Equity, Agency and Transparency) principles and TESTA (2015a;b) (Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment) tools.

From this, I created a range of diverse but customized assessment methods for **EVERY** student while still satisfying the same module learning outcomes (LOs).

Figure 1 Equality, equity and justice (Bali 2020b).

Implementation

The traditional submission format for this module was a technical report, with guidance being provided via a clear marking scheme and detailed assessment level criteria, linking the content, teaching activities and LOs.

What became obvious was that the existing assessment design would easily support a variety of submission formats. So, students were provided with a choice of flexible assessment options to choose from for their submission:

- ❖ Presentations
- ❖ Videos
- ❖ Storyboards
- ❖ Digital simulations
- ❖ Make models
- ❖ Technical written report.

Students could also suggest their own formats albeit a discussion concerning meeting the LOs was highlighted.

To support students, weekly workshops provided opportunities for them to ask questions and self-assess their work against the marking scheme and assessment criteria to ensure they stayed focussed, engaged and motivated.

Results

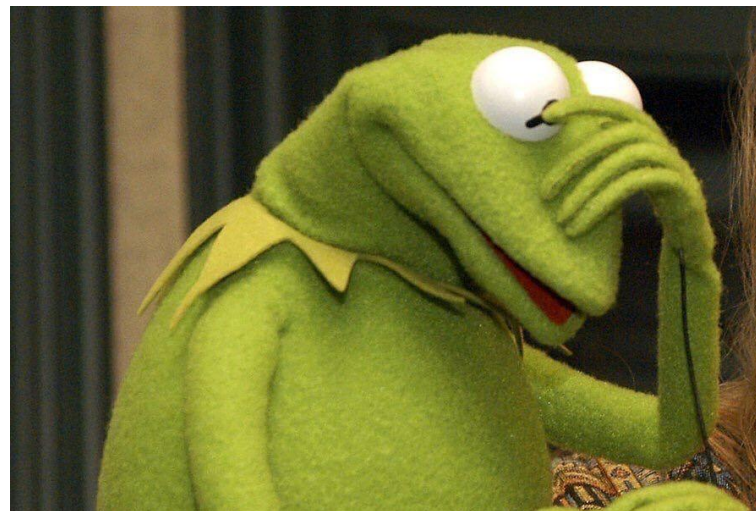The initial student response was complete silence and not the fist-pumping, high-fives I expected (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Oh no, what have I done?

Most students just reacted with 'just tell me what to do'.

However, after a few weeks of discussions, coaching and mentoring, students began to understand the reasoning behind the flexible submission format.

18% of students chose to submit video presentations, which was less than I expected but still significant. The remaining students provided a technical report.

Student comments from module enhancement included 'Assignment has allowed and encouraged creativity and developing skills'; 'good coursework scenario' and 'great freedom regarding coursework submission and details'. Importantly, students felt liberated that a barrier to their learning and achievement had been removed.

Module enhancement scores for '*Overall performance*' and '*Support for my assessment*' were **4.59/5** and **4.58/5** respectively, up by 0.5 points from previous years. The module average stayed relatively static around 64% , which is comparable to the previous 4 years ($\pm$2%).

Conclusions

Don't be afraid of trying flexible assessment formats. Students will need extra support and reassurance, since it introduces uncertainly and some confusion. Next time, I will engage students earlier to propose their own assessment formats that align to their strengths and potential. Remember, the level of choice and autonomy in submission formats vary depending on the age and maturity of the students, the subject matter, and the overall learning objectives. Nonetheless, incorporating these strategies should lead to more engaged and self-directed learners. Let's see what happens this year...

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