

The Crust of the Matter: Lessons in Assessment Design from The Great British Bake Off (GBBO)

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Abstract

Popular culture has inspired diverse educational work and research (Guy, 2007, Fink & Foote, 2007, Wright & Sandlin, 2009, Johnson, 2018, Heffernan et al, 2018). This project examines how the Great British Bake Off (GBBO) might prompt us to rethink assessment design in higher education. Influenced by qualitative TV content analysis, we used directed content theory analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2015) to examine the 2018 series of the GBBO, which comprises of ten one-hour episodes. These GBBO episodes were broken down into their performance challenges and were analyzed using Boud and associates' (2010) Assessment 2020: Seven Propositions for Assessment Reform in Higher Education. The analysis reveals that the design of the GBBO is in line with of six out of the seven propositions that Boud et al. propose for assessment reform in higher education. In short, there is much we could apply to current assessment design, including making assessment central, modelling assessment and using open assessment feedback to produce sustainable learners and responsible partners in assessment.

Introduction

The type of assessments designed by instructors for productive learning is a subject of much debate. Despite advancements made in educational technologies, assessment strategies in higher education appear to largely focus on assessments as isolated events, measuring episodic learning. Instructors tend to deploy exams, quizzes, and traditional papers to provide some measure of student learning. At times, these assessments have been referred to as “disposable assessments”(Wiley, 2017), thrown away and forgotten soon after the assessments are completed. Perhaps we need to locate more sources of pedagogical inspiration for assessment design — possibly what Wiley refers to as renewable assessments that provide real-world relevance and productive learning.

Reality television (TV) shows have become a staple in popular culture. In spite of the bad rap they receive, we found the performance challenges in The Great British Bake Off (GBBO) Netflix series thought-provoking and deserving of a nuanced discussion, particularly on its implications for the design of assessments in higher education. In fact, popular culture has inspired diverse educational work and research (Guy, 2007, Fink & Foote, 2007, Wright & Sandlin, 2009, Johnson, 2018, Heffernan et al, 2018). So what can popular culture, in the form of the GBBO, teach us about adult learning and assessment?

About The Great British Bake Off

Despite assessment in education being contentious, watching others being tested makes for good viewing. In the past eight years, the world (Ensor, 2013) has been taken by storm by competitive culinary reality shows in which amateurs, professionals and even celebrities have their skills and knowledge continuously tested over a

number of weeks with progressively difficult challenges. One show which has received a lot of media attention is The Great British Bake Off (GBBO) (Conlan, 2015).

The GBBO first aired in the UK in 2010 and is said to have been inspired by the idea of baking competitions at village fêtes (Higgins, 2015). In the hour-long show, twelve home bakers compete against each other by completing three different challenges: the Signature Challenge, the Technical Challenge, and the Showstopper.

The Signature bake tests the contestants' creativity and ability by requiring them to prepare one of their tried-and-tested favourite recipes. Bakers present their signature bakes to the judges and receive verbal feedback about the appearance and taste.

In the Technical Challenge, the bakers are put to the test by being given the same recipe on the spot. Here, the playing level is uneven, as some of the contestants might not even have heard of the bake they must prepare, while others may be well acquainted with either the technique required or the bake itself. The bake is blind tested by the judges, then compared against the others (in a think-aloud manner in front of all the contestants), and ranked from worst to best.

The final challenge is the Showstopper. This is where the participants are "able to showcase their depth of skill and talent" (Love Productions, 2019). Here, the judges are looking at the contestants' demonstration of a combination of creativity, technical skill, taste and aesthetics. Again, like the Signature bake, the judges give oral feedback to each contestant when judging the showstopper.

After the challenges are completed, the judges deliberate over all the contestants and what they have achieved throughout the three challenges. They decide which baker stand out as a star baker and who does not perform well enough and will need to be eliminated.

About Assessment

Are there insights that learning professionals could implement from this popular show into their educational practice? Initially, when watching the GBBO with current assessment trends in mind, e.g. collaborative problem-solving (Von Davier et al, 2017), peer assessment (Liu & Carless, 2006), self-assessment (Boud & Falchikov, 2007) and learning-oriented assessment (Carless, 2007), it may seem that the show's assessment design is behind the times: the contestants perform alone; the tidbits of feedback they receive while working come from the judges as they pass by; the focus seems to be on the end product, which only the judges evaluate; the contestants are judged against each other and ranked based on their end product in a type of norm-referencing test (Gipps, 2002). On further observation, there appears to be more to this initial view of the GBBO assessment design than meets the eye.

Methods

Inspired by qualitative TV content analysis, we used directed content theory analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2015) to examine the 2018 series of GBBO. This series comprised of ten one-hour episodes.

We used Boud et al's (2010) *Seven Propositions for Assessment Reform in Higher Education* to code the three different challenges in each episode. Although Boud et al's (ibid) call for assessment reform originates from the Australian higher education context, we argue that the underlying principles of his propositions are borderless.

Table 1. Qualitative Codes (based on Boud et al's Seven propositions for assessment reform in higher education)

- #1 assessment used to engage students in learning that is productive
- #2 feedback is used to actively improve student learning
- #3 students and teachers become responsible partners in learning and assessment
- #4 students are inducted into the assessment practices and cultures of higher education
- #5 assessment for learning is placed at the center of subject and program design
- #6 assessment for learning is a focus for staff and institutional development
- #7 assessment provides inclusive and trustworthy representation of student

Findings

Table 2. Summary of Findings GBBO Overall Design		
<p><i>#5 Assessment for learning is placed at the center of subject and program.</i> The program is centered around three challenges: the Signature Challenge, the Technical Challenge and the Showstopper Challenge. Feedback is given <i>during</i> and <i>after</i> each challenge to help the contestants learn and develop their knowledge and skills.</p> <p><i>#1 Assessment is used to engage students in learning that is productive.</i> This show is all about learning that is productive. Every challenge aims at contestants being able to produce something. This is an example of experiential learning.</p> <p><i>#2 Feedback is used to actively improve student learning.</i> Contestants are exposed to feedback about their own work but also to the strengths and weaknesses of other people’s work.</p>		
Signature Challenge	Technical Challenge	Showstopper Challenge
<p><i>#7 Assessment provides inclusive and trustworthy representations of student achievement.</i> Contestants demonstrate the knowledge and abilities they bring with them in this competition. Assessment is based on totality of outcomes.</p> <p><i>#2 Feedback is used to actively improve student learning.</i> This challenge enables the judges to assess later performances ipsatively (Hughes, 2017): comparing the progress of contestants based on their initial contribution (this challenge) and the feedback they have received throughout to later challenges (the showstopper).</p>	<p><i>#4 Introduced into the assessment practice.</i> This identical technical challenge is assessed blindly. Contestants are present during the assessment, where the judges openly discuss and evaluate each contestant’s product. This can help develop contestants’ evaluative judgement as the assessment process is modelled for them, thus helping them to become critical evaluators of their own work and the work of others. In this sense, the GBBO approach contributes to assessment for learning beyond a given course (sustainable assessment).</p>	<p><i>#3 Assesseees and assessors become responsible partners in learning and assessment.</i> Taking in feedback from the judges, contestants build their own critical thinking abilities and are able to independently judge their own work and the work of other contestants.</p>

Six out of seven of Boud and associates’ (2010) propositions for assessment reform in higher education could be inferred from qualitatively examining the structure and content of series 9 of the GBBO.

The GBBO is centered around three challenges (or assessments), namely the Signature Challenge, the Technical Challenge and the Showstopper Challenge (proposition #5: assessment for learning is placed at the center of ...program design). The challenges are not ‘add-ons’ but are considered significant and embedded into the program from the very start.

Throughout the three challenges of the show, proposition #1 is evident: assessment is used to engage students in learning that is productive. The challenges are designed to focus on contestants’ learning, which is not hampered by any conferment of grades. In addition, the assessed challenges are recognized as learning activities which require contestants to engage in appropriate tasks (i.e. baking products), all of which are significant learning activities in and of themselves. The baking challenges are organized in an interlinked sequence where challenges increase in difficulty (technical knowledge and skills).

Contestants are inducted into the assessment practice and culture (proposition #4) of culinary arts, not only through carefully structured assessments which aid them in making a successful transition, but also through the use of the Signature Challenge. This Challenge is an assessment practice which responds to the diverse expectations and experiences of those entering the competition. Contestants typically bring their existing unique backgrounds, experiences and prior research on the Challenge problem to connect with their new learning activities, in the process

making new knowledge connections to existing schema. Through formative and summative feedback at this initial stage, rules and expectations around what is needed for success is made accessible to contestants.

In the Technical Challenge, the contestants are given a task from a professional baker. Identical, minimal instructions are provided on the spot. The completed product is assessed blindly and openly by expert judges in front of all, and ranked from worst to best. This could also be inferred as inducting participants into the assessment practice (proposition #4) of culinary arts. This feedback is used to actively improve “student” learning (proposition #2) by being clear and timely in helping them improve on the final task, with the hope of improving the quality of their learning and work.

In fact, it should be noted that proposition #2, where feedback is used to actively improve student learning, occurs at all three stages of each episode. During each challenge, students receive informal feedback during their baking – not in the form of marks or grades – about how to improve the quality of their work.

Throughout each episode, the viewer can clearly see how assessor and assessee become responsible partners in learning and assessment, as per proposition #3. Taking in feedback from the judges, contestants build their own critical thinking abilities and are able to independently judge their own work and the work of other contestants. This is particularly evident after the open judging during the Technical Challenge.

At the end of each episode, one contestant is awarded the “Star Baker” while another is eliminated. This is based on the totality of outcomes from the three challenges. Poor or good isolated performances do not determine the overall achievement of a contestant in both the single episodes and the whole series. This is in line with Boud and associates (2010) proposition #7: assessment provides inclusive and trustworthy representation of student achievement.

Implications of Study

A study of the GBBO series behooves us to consider the following questions as we design assessments for learning in our own practice:

- How will you challenge students technically as well as creatively?
- How will you evaluate student learning along different dimensions and as a whole?
- How will you integrate feedback into formative assessments at different junctures?
- What would a signature challenge for your learners look like? A technical challenge? Or a showstopper challenge?

Finally, is the following GBBO formula a recipe for meaningful and engaging assessment for learning?

Meaningful engaging assessment = productive learning + learning community + game-like components + connect with prior knowledge + open feedback

Conclusion

The focus of this discussion is to examine how the GBBO might inspire us to rethink how we design assessments in higher education. The GBBO analysis, using Boud et al’s (2010) assessment reform propositions, reveals that there’s much to learn from and apply to current assessment design, including the openness to learning with others, making assessments sustainable, and beating one’s own personal best.

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