

Freedom and Flexibility in a Final Project: The Unessay

Abstract

The unessay was developed by Daniel Paul O'Donnell as a way to move beyond the constraints of a traditional essay in order to allow students to focus on what interests and excites them (both in terms of content as well as format). In this session, I will discuss using the unessay as the final project in an introductory organizational behaviour course. I will highlight how students engaged with the assignment, along with the variety of topics and formats used. I will also discuss the challenges of an assignment like this, for students and faculty alike.

Keywords: unessay, flexibility, assessment

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As management education intensifies its focus on innovation and collaboration, it is important to understand how these concepts play out in all aspects of the learning environment, including assessment. In this session, I will focus on a successful assessment innovation: the use of the “unessay” as the final assessment in an organizational behaviour class. This learner-centred approach to assessment also involves a significant level of collaboration between professors and students, which further enriches the learning experience of all involved.

The unessay was developed by Daniel Paul O’Donnell, an English professor, as a way to move beyond the constraints of a traditional essay in order to allow students to focus on what interests and excites them. Unessays have been used mainly by professors in the humanities (e.g. Sullivan, 2015) but other areas like computer science (e.g. Aycock, Wright, et al., 2019) and the natural sciences (e.g. Jakopak, Monteith, & Merkle, 2019) have started to integrate the unessay as a final assessment. The unessay represents freedom and flexibility for students because it has no set format or approach. Students choose their own topics, present it in the way they choose, and are evaluated based on how compelling and effective they are while maintaining the accuracy and rigour that is necessary in an academic setting. The unessay, in its most natural form, is not something typically seen in management education, although there are certainly examples of other assessments that can allow for freedom and flexibility.

My decision to adopt the unessay in my organizational behaviour classes was spurred by my desire to take a more innovative and experimental approach to teaching and learning, one that gives students agency to explore and express their own learning.¹ Rather than having them deliver what I wanted, they could deliver what they wanted; in this way, I was able to meet them

¹ This learner-centred, critical pedagogy approach was developed through a course I took at the Digital Pedagogy Lab.

where they were (and not vice versa). Through their unessays, students are able to demonstrate insight and in-depth understanding of the topics on which they focus. The unessays are expected to show critical engagement with course content, and demonstrate that time and effort was dedicated to create work that is compelling and effective. The format of the unessay must complement the topic of the essay and contribute to its ability to illuminate the chosen topic. The beauty of the unessay is that students can make their own decisions about how to best present their content, which can certainly include a traditional essay format. If this is the format in which students are most comfortable, they are certainly able to tackle their unessay this way.

In the proposed session, in addition to explaining the concept of the unessay itself, I will share the diversity of the unessays that have been submitted by students (including art, dance, and music – see Appendix 1) to demonstrate how students are able to achieve the goal of being compelling and effective. I will also share the “nuts and bolts” of the process, including the important collaborative aspects of proposal submission and evaluation. Next, I will highlight the successes and challenges that are faced when implementing an assessment that involves this much freedom and flexibility. While some students are energized by a project like this, others can be paralyzed by the lack of structure. As this assessment is designed to meet students where they are (as noted above), it is critical to support students who are not comfortable with the ambiguity inherent in the unessay. Finally, the session will end with a broader discussion about other ways to build a learner-centred, flexible approach to assessment.

The goal for this session will be for participants to understand and consider how they might use the unessay in their own courses, and the takeaways will revolve around how an assessment like the unessay can lead to meaningful outcomes for students and faculty alike. It will be an encouragement for participants to take a critical, learner-centred, and experimental

approach, one that can deviate from assessment norms in compelling, effective, and rigorous ways.

References

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Appendix 1: Unessay Example

