Peer assisted teaching scheme and Participative Action Learning-Action Research: A winning combination
Leone Cameron

Abstract

This study evolved as the third cycle of a specific action research project to improve teaching skills and the student experience. The overall aim was to promote deeper, work-relevant learning through implementing a new method of assessment (data from the previous action research cycles indicated that the former assessment task promoted rote and surface learning). The study, supported by a peer assisted teaching scheme, combined participative action learning–action research (PALAR) and to change an assessment piece from a traditional multi-choice test to an innovative work integrated learning audio recording task that tested application of theory to a simulated real-world task. Domestic and international students (119) in an international marketing course collaborated in teams to develop skills in radio interviewing. Student responses to the change were assessed quantitatively (a specific question in the formal student feedback instrument) and qualitatively (open-ended questionnaires and a focus group). Of the 88 respondents to the specific question, 60% thought the task was moderately, very or extremely important to their learning. Major themes from the NVivo® qualitative analysis were teamwork, engagement and communication; creative and deeper learning experiences; practical and work-related assessment; and enjoyable and fun learning. Further action research cycle adaptations of the assessment will increase engagement and deepen learning.
Keywords

Work integrated learning (WIL); Participative Action Learning Action Research (PALAR); assessment; international marketing

Introduction

The need for innovation in and adaption of pioneering methods of assessment has been intensified in regional universities by economic challenges, declining government support and the continuing boom in student numbers (Byrne, 2011; Bokor, 2012). Many academics are reluctant to leave the comfort of their multi-choice tests that are supplied as support materials by publishers to lighten the workload of academics. In addition, the pressure in Australian academic communities to publish or perish has continued to increase, and marking budgets continue to decline (Lewin, 2013). These factors have led to a decreased appetite for investing time in innovative curriculum design, including development of creative assessments and marking strategies. According to Becker and Johnston (1999), cost, consistency and content are the three major factors to consider regarding assessment in terms of students, academics and the administration within universities. These ‘three Cs’ of assessment have apparently contributed to a paucity of opportunities for developing expertise in assessment, and made it difficult for those staff wishing to further their academic career as both teacher as assessor and researcher. Further ‘Cs’ identified by Lewin (2013) include concerns for assignment content and marking consistency.

Many forces affect an increasingly diverse cohort of students entering our academic institutions. One outcome is an even greater need for skills that improve employability upon graduation (Dale and Povey, 2009). Thus, academics are under pressure to develop new teaching methods, including those that enable learner-generated content that contributes to long-term employability in a global context. Adjusting assessment methods is a key part of this approach and must keep abreast of specific work conditions such as those within the ‘tourism and hospitality sector …preparing
students for the global workplace’ (Vasconcelos, Balula and Almeida, 2013).

Through a specific action research project to enhance teaching skills, this project developed in response to a desire to provide a sea change in terms of assessment tasks.

**Assessment and measures of learning**

Measurement of students’ success in terms of assessment must be systematic, valid and reliable. However, student learning is frequently measured in written form, which is not always the best measure of comprehension and knowledge attainment (Smith and Lovat, 2003). These researchers suggest other methods such as observation, completed tasks and talking with others, while Guy (1999) suggests that learning techniques and measurement of scholarship must account for the socio-cultural experiences and backgrounds of learners. Notwithstanding this however, the success of student assessment in multi-cultural classes may be enhanced with PALAR contributing appreciably to the opportunity of self-directed input into assessment outcomes. Berrett (2012) found that assessments should challenge students by demanding analysis, re-contextualisation of information, and reflection on their own opinions, which includes being able to provide contradictory arguments and is ideally supported by the action learning process.

Ramsden (2007) suggests that as academics we need an approach that does not try to change our students; rather, educators must build quality into the created learning experience, which attempts to change the way students experience learning and build their perceptions of the learning event (e.g. an assignment or test). In addition, Steffe and Gale (1995) suggest students construct knowledge and reach meaning through both individual and collective experiences. This is complimented by the PALAR methodology which seeks to ‘appreciate, question and seek answers from new angles.’ (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 2).
Assessment through multi-choice questions

The efficacy of multi-choice questions (MCQs) as an assessment tool has long been a source of contention (see Berk, 1998, cited in Williams, 2006). Multi-choice questions are designed to enable students to identify the most appropriate answers relevant to the question whilst determining students’ progress (Colgan, 2006). However, Biggs and Tang (2007, 203) criticise MCQ for enabling students to attain a pass grade by applying ‘identification’, one of the least challenging cognitive processes. In this context, it could be asserted that some instances of MCQ assessment do not give students the opportunity to demonstrate the higher levels of learning according to Bloom’s (1956) hierarchy of learning processes: evaluation, synthesis, analysis, application, comprehension and knowledge.

MCQ results can also be distorted by academics applying penalties to discourage guessing (Biggs and Tang, 2007). In terms of multicultural teaching, MCQs have been criticised for producing discriminatory results for international students for whom English is a second language (Paxton, 2000); in an Iranian study, such students showed positive attitudes toward alternative assessment practices (Sadeghi and Khonbi, 2014). More generally, comprehension and linguistic skills can also affect MCQ results (Williams, 2006). When fervently applied, this method of measuring acquired knowledge can be seen as an enemy of developing deeper understanding (Gardener, 1993).

Participative action learning-action research (PALAR) and assessment

Gatfield (1999, p. 372) confirms that assessments that involve peers can be good for the group and can reinforce engagement and cooperation among both domestic and international students. One such approach to assessment practices is to design them to support the PALAR model. O’Connor, Smith, Crane, Brough, Shaw, Franz and Larkin (2013, 125) found participative action research significant in the ‘explicit invitation to students to explore and develop their understandings’. The PALAR methodology is also a
particularly effective framework in the development and growth of practitioners’ teaching and learning praxis. Zuber-Skerritt (2009, p. 9) endorses the PALAR practice as an investigative approach that is ‘effective in unpredictable and changeable situations’.

In the PALAR model, the assessment tasks must consider the power and control issues of group learning, and must acknowledge, if not reward, the collaborative process (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 1999; Keppell, Au, Ma, and Chan, 2006). A PALAR cross-cultural team activity enables interstudent power and control to be expressed through the verbal assessment developed for this project. Boud et.al. (1999) and Keppell et. al. (2006) also contend that assessment in terms of peer learning, such as that implemented in this study using PALAR teams, must promote positive practices. To achieve this, unambiguous assessment standards must be clearly communicated to students (Sadler, 2010).

Deep learning and assessment measures

The key to good assessment is to recognise the difference between memorising (or surface learning) and developing deeper understanding, known also as ‘deep learning’ (Bourner, 2003). Bourner (2003) suggests assessments that require students to develop understanding can encourage deeper learning. In terms of deeper learning however, Vahalia, Subramaniam, Marks and De Souza (1995) suggest that MCQs are sometimes poorly written, and lead to assessment of recall rather than deeper learning. Biggs and Tang (2007) put forward the argument that well designed assessments force learners to higher levels of achievement and deeper learning. To further enhance deeper learning, Reiter-Palmon and Robinson (2009) and Harvey and Chia-Yu Kou (2013) suggest that a clearly defined and shared problem promotes deeper engagement and learning. Many of the holistic characteristics of assessment for learning (AFL) proposed by McDowell, Wakelin, Montgomery and King (2011) including support through peer interaction, are authentic and relevant to job readiness, and as such, they contribute to deeper learning by
fostering student autonomy and independence while also giving power and control. The assignment and assessment tasks developed for this project specifically aimed to develop and measure deep learning.

**Work integrated learning (WIL)**

In terms of a future focused on life and work (Boud and Falchikov, 2007), assessment with a long-term emphasis on contextualised participation and practice is desirable. This is the philosophy underpinning work integrated learning (WIL) and the associated assessment. In WIL, students engage in specifically designed activities that apply disciplinary knowledge and skills in a real-world context. Such activities are integral to students at undergraduate level and must not only benefit graduating scholars but also the industries and the professions in which they will eventually serve (Smith, 2012). While there are numerous types of WIL experiences, this project used the ‘industry–professional component tier’, that is, applying theory to work practice, one of the forms of WIL used by our university (USC, 2014). WIL must be assessed in the classroom, provide evidence of graduate goal achievement, and demonstrate its transferability to the workplace (Daugherty, 2011; WIL-QUT, 2014). It is imperative that these activities, including assessment tasks, provide authentic, real-world, deep learning experiences. Such experiences are valued by global organisations and can position regional universities to provide workplace-ready graduates, a major selling point in a competitive global education market. Reflective practice, as part of the WIL assessment process, has been identified as promoting not only deeper learning, but also lifelong learning (Sykes and Dean, 2012).

**The project**

**Previous cycles of the project**

The project to implement an innovative assessment task formed part of a program that began in June 2013, when the author became
part of a Peer Assisted Teaching Scheme (PATS). This program, originating in 2009 with Associate Professor Angela Carbone, now Director, Education Excellence Office at Monash University, was supported by the Australian Government’s Office for Learning and Teaching. In that project, Carbone (2014) found that levels of student satisfaction increased when participants engaged in the PAT’s scheme. The PATS project was originally offered at the University of the Sunshine Coast in 2012 to ‘inform and equip academics with skills and strategies to reinvigorate their teaching’. This was done by pairing academics who had sought assistance through participation in the PATS program with mentors recognised for their teaching excellence, and a collaborative PATS team.

The combination of PATS with cross-cultural participative action learning action research (PALAR) activities, from an academic perspective, enabled the broadening of the learning experience. Similarly, Singh (2008, 241) found that applying PALAR to interactive oral assessments led to ‘improved learning of content for learners’ through both their peers and assessors.

Initially, a participative action learning action research (PALAR) methodology (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) had been used to assist in modifying an International Marketing class in the School of Business (through two action research cycles), with a view to improving student satisfaction within the course. The class was composed of both domestic and international students from a wide variety of majors. The two PALAR cycles were used to reinvigorate the learning experiences of both the domestic and international students. Students in the first PALAR cycle had experienced relationship marketing strategies that had increased engagement through cross-cultural relationship building (Cameron and Allen, 2013); in the second PALAR cycle, blended learning strategies were used to accelerate development of communications both inside and outside the classroom (Cameron, 2012; Cameron, 2013). In addition, WIL had been successfully integrated into these cycles, enabling students from diverse backgrounds to be challenged to creatively solve problems for regional businesses.
The PATS project offered a further exciting opportunity for a third PALAR cycle, complete with peer support. At this point, we intended to use PALAR to further enhance the opportunity for both domestic and visiting international students to build relationships as the mixed PALAR teams developed joint ownership of the assessment task. The PATS mentoring process had questioned the value of the traditional MCQ tests that were part of the formal assessment. These tests were conducted in class in weeks 5 and 13 of semester. The MCQ tests had been viewed as a reasonably quick and easy form of assessment with which to reduce marking load and allow more time for research and other activities. However, the MCQ process had made the students passive participants in the education process: previously collected data suggested that deep learning was not promoted by the MCQ test and students had a tendency to rote learn theory rather than developing a sense of meaning that is promoted through questioning opportunities. While the previous PALAR cycles had resulted in changes to many aspects of the course, including support ‘tools’ and communication methods (Cameron, 2012; Cameron, 2013), the course methods of assessment had never been evaluated for relevance and effectiveness. Following reflection on the first two cycles, a review of assessment tasks was completed, which supported a decision to move from the MCQ test in Week 5 to an innovative new assessment to which none of the students had previously been exposed.

**Project goal**

The goal of the project was to provide students with an assessment that promoted learning through PALAR, enabling students to have the power to control their own learning, which in turn, promoted deeper, work-relevant learning experiences through the implementation of a new method of appraisal. Simultaneously, we wished to extend the benefits of relationship building (including cross-cultural relationships) gained from the previous cycles.
Project design

In this third PALAR cycle, we implemented the new method of assessment and examined the students’ responses to the change. The student cohort included 119 domestic and international students from a variety of major studies: international business, tourism, leisure and events, marketing, engineering and communications. Of these, 41 were visiting study-abroad students.

The new test was developed around a mock radio station recording. This audio sound file was made available to all students by both email and the university’s online platform, BlackBoard. Students were required to listen to the audio recording and then invited to respond to the mock radio announcer’s questions. Students were charged with responding to the questions in the professional consulting role of an international marketer.

To continue improving the cross-cultural learning experience developed in the previous PALAR cycles, the students were allocated to PALAR research teams consisting of both domestic and visiting international students to work on producing their individual assignments. Questions posed in the pre-recorded radio interview focused on key theoretical topics covered in the first four weeks of the semester. As part of their audio response, students were also required to provide their own opinions, judgements and outlooks on social issues and the relevance of the theory.

Before recording their audio responses, the teams of students were taught about the benefits of PALAR and encouraged to research together using Revans’ (1980) action learning equation, L=P+Q (i.e. learning equals programmed knowledge [found in textbooks] plus questioning (the learner questions the programmed knowledge)] as the basis of developing deeper knowledge. This process adds depth of understanding to their theoretical answers. Simultaneously, the action learning questioning between team members from differing cultures helped each student to develop their own opinions for expression in their individual audio responses to the questions posed. Thus, the exercise provided further opportunities for cross-cultural communication and
engagement with the topic, while adding a further array of multicultural views to the learning experience. After completing the cooperative research, students were then required to assist one another to record an MP3 audio file of each student’s responses, including their own personal opinions. Responses to the pre-recorded questions could either be cut and pasted into the original radio interview or separately recorded as a file of their responses only.

Before beginning the task, all students were provided with a copy of the marking guide and given a comprehensive tutorial workshop in which the assignment task was analysed and discussed in terms of the key points from the marking criteria developed specifically for this assessment task. The criteria assessed students’ skills in critical application of discipline knowledge and theoretical concepts, skills in critical analysis of a number of aspects of the interview topic, and their professionalism and communication and technical skills (Appendix 1).

All students were provided with three opportunities through which they were encouraged to give feedback about the new assessment task: (1) a standard Student Feedback on Teaching (SFT) survey instrument, which included a specific question about the audio assessment and also invited open-ended comments, was administered; (2) they were given a formal, open-ended questionnaire; (3) students were invited to join a focus group to discuss the assessment.

The SFT question was ‘To what extent have the WIL assessment activities been important to your learning experience?’ Responses to the question were provided on a seven-point Likert Scale: extremely important; very important; moderately important; neutral; slightly important; low importance; and not at all important. The individual responses in each Likert category were totalled and expressed as percentages of the total number of responses.

The questionnaire was developed with regard to information gathered in the previous PALAR cycle and in specific response to informal student discussions and feedback that occurred during
the semester with a focus on identifying the benefits of the new verbal assessment task and its contributions to work integrated learning.

The informal focus group discussions were conducted at the end of semester in each of the final tutorials; between five and seven student volunteers share comments and ideas for the benefit of future students.

The qualitative comments from the questionnaires, focus groups and SFT were transcribed, coded, and organised into themes (nodes). They were then analysed with NVivo 10® software (QSR International Pty. Ltd., Asia Pacific Sales Office and Head Office, Doncaster Victoria, http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx), which produced interrelated themes and frequencies of the themes (Mason, 2002). This method of analysis is particularly popular in evolving disciplines such as ‘media and cultural studies’ to understand and interpret qualitative data, with ‘unrivalled capacity … [and] compelling arguments’ about how things (e.g. innovative assessments) have worked ‘in [a] particular context.’ (Mason, 2002, p. 1–2).

Results and discussion

Overall, both the quantitative and qualitative results showed that a majority of students viewed the new assessment task very positively.

Quantitative results

Eighty-eight of the one hundred and nineteen students (73.9%) responded to the question about the new assessment. Of these, 28% stated that the task was very important or extremely important and a further 33% thought the task moderately important to their learning (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Responses to the specific question on the new assignment in the Student Feedback on Teaching (SFT) survey.

Qualitative results

The qualitative results were derived from the comments of the open ended survey with 90 of the possible 119 students responding. The four principal themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis of student responses were very positive towards the new assessment (Figure 2).
1. **PALAR teamwork, engagement and communication**

The NVivo analysis identified eleven coding themes; any responses less than two percent have been disregarded with only the four key themes displaying significant outcomes as presented in Figure 2 above. These themes highlighted that nineteen percent of respondents commented on the benefits of the PALAR teamwork, with engagement and communication as beneficial outcomes of the assessment. These factors enabled international students to improve their English language and communication skills. One student noted that their “Communication skills and public speaking skills” had been improved with the support of domestic students who, no doubt, also benefited from cross-cultural communication opportunities provided by engagement in the PALAR teams. The new assessment provided the student with learning experiences that improved English language skills while simultaneously providing better preparation for the workplace.

Another student expressed the benefits of the engagement and teamwork: “Working in teams whose members come from
different cultural backgrounds … adapting principles to incorporate cultural awareness in the radio segment was new and interesting”. Guy (1999) pointed out the importance of the socio-cultural backgrounds of students’ to their learning experience. Another student expressed the synergy of the PALAR process by noting “I had many different personalities in my team and I was able to work with everyone with a common goal …to entertain other people was a highlight.” This comment reflects a key aspect of PALAR, that is, the team members share the crucial aspects of the assignment in order to collaboratively solve problems (Lamont, 2008). It also reinforces the findings of McDowell et. al. (2011, p. 762) who’s work into assessment for learning (AFL) found that peer learning such as that found in PALAR can ‘increase and extend student participation’ and it also identified that ‘students taking a deep approach may be more likely to engage in peer learning’.

The assessment also encouraged both domestic and international students to seek to share, explore and reflect upon the theory, and to afford deeper meaning to the knowledge gained through the experience; this aligns with the work of Larkin and Beatson (2014) and is reflected by one student who suggested they experienced “Greater awareness, consideration, teamwork … and real world experience”.

2. Creative and deeper learning experience

This second theme identified by 27% of respondents indicates that students experienced ‘learning through assessment’ (McDowell et. al., 2011). However, they also reflected upon the challenges of the project. For example, one student expressed the benefits of the assessment in terms of creativity and deeper learning: “Careful analysis needed to be made of international markets — making sure you fully understand all aspects … for example … justify selling luxury items when also studying the theory of sustainability.” This student’s reflections support the proposition that the students’ WIL experiences promoted reflective practice, which reinforces both creativity and a deeper learning experience in accordance with the findings of Sykes and Dean (2012).
Similarly, another student commented, ‘The project developed a deeper level of understanding”. This statement reinforces Ramsden’s (2007) recommendation that ‘academics need to find approaches that create change in the way students experience learning and build their perceptions of the learning event’ (45)’. Further, such comments reflect the deeper learning students gained through questioning theoretical (programmed) knowledge (Revans, 1982, 1984) and sharing their personal reflections, positions and stance on the theory. This greater level of awareness aligns with the experiences of Bourner (2003), who identified that assessments that enlarge understanding can encourage deeper learning. Thus the WIL ‘radio interview’ provided an innovative way of increasing engagement and encouraging creativity by permitting students to express their own voice, simultaneously promoting deeper thinking skills.

The success of this action learning process evolved as students worked together to research and prepare. This illustrates the ‘reflection-in-action’ recommended by Schön (1987) that is, the process enabled students to shape what they were going to say in their verbal assessment while engaging in PALAR teams to find creative solutions to the questions posed.

3. Practical and work-related assessment

Students were aware of the contribution of the WIL verbal assessment to building work-ready skills. Twenty-four percent of respondents nominated the practical and work related qualities of the new assessment as benefits. Students found the replacement of the MCQ test with the verbal radio interview “A refreshing change from other assessment[s] taken since being at university … it felt more practical than the usual exam or business report”. Another student’s comment reinforced the importance of this experience: “the PR radio was a cool way of assessment – preparing us for the ‘real world’ “. Singh (2008) recommended alignment of assessment and oral assessment in ‘bridg[ing] the gap’ between classroom and the ‘real world’ (p. 246).
4. Enjoyable and fun learning

The most frequently cited theme (30% of respondents) was that the assessment was enjoyable and made learning an experience filled with fun. For example, “I enjoyed completing the radio interview … I found it easier to learn using this technique” and “verbal test was interesting and a good idea”. This comment confirms the findings of Singh (2008, p. 241), whose work with verbal assessment found the ‘interactive nature of the oral assessments led to improved learning of content for learners from their peers and assessors’. The enjoyment and fun came through also in more general comments with one student suggesting a “Big thank you. This was my favourite assessment this semester … I loved this activity and other creative things in the lecture and tute”. From an international students’ perspective came comments such as “I enjoyed the Aussie style of this activity” and “It was hands on and gave me a real world feel - the variations in assessment”.

Negative responses to the new assessment task

The introduction of this new and innovative WIL assessment task project has been warmly accepted by many students, as the previous quantitative and qualitative data indicates. This appears to be in line with the assessment for learning approach recommended to encourage deeper learning by McDowell et. al. (2011). Notwithstanding this, research by Williams and Kane (2008) into assessment found this to be an area in which students express their highest level of dissatisfaction. Thirty-one per cent appeared resistant to the assessment change – this may have been as a result of there being forces outside of their comfort zone. Fortunately, of the small number that did not readily adapt, one of them suggested that ‘The radio interview was really only appropriate for those going thought [sic] to be marketers – not everyone doing the course will do so”. Notwithstanding this however, these generic work-integrated skills developed by such activities are transferrable to other workplace activities. Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000) suggest that WIL can provide graduates with major professional benefits. Contrary to this student’s comment, the work of McDonnell and Curtis (2014)
suggests that: students who have the opportunity to gain a greater shared understanding through assessment can improve collaboration and develop their ability to challenge and question - a highly sought after work-ready skill for any career.

A second student found fault with the marks allocated for knowledge and communication skills, stating “I feel I could have received a higher grade on this task based on my knowledge rather than being marked on the way I speak into a tape recorder”. In designing this WIL assessment piece, marks were allocated to reward both application of theory and work ready communication technology skills evenly (see Appendix 1). Patrick et al. (2008) validated this method of measuring WIL, suggesting that assessment must be shaped to fit the needs of business — in this case, PALAR enhances student skills of power and control over delivering a radio interview — while ensuring understanding of programmed knowledge (Revans, 1982) and its contribution to lifelong learning.

A third student complained that it was “Pointless doing the task as it require[d] enormous amounts of information in five minutes with full structured speech which is almost impossible”. Time constraints are an important part of workplace situations; thus their incorporation in this WIL experience helped to ensure its relevance to future real-world encounters (Swart, 2012).

**Benefits of the PATS program**

In terms of the author’s professional development, the peer assisted teaching support (PATS) program provided its own form of participative action learning process. The PATS project aimed to improve teaching praxis and increase quality learning experiences for students while adding to current research into higher education teaching and situational learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). From a practitioner perspective, limited challenges were experienced with regard to socio-cultural conflict and technology issues, all being surmountable and aligned with Carbone, Ross, Phelan, Lindsay, Drew, Stoney and Cottman (2014, p. 16) who declared the contribution of PATS to an ‘alignment between teacher’s efforts …
and student satisfaction with courses’. Consultation with mentor and peers regarding the proposed changes in the assessment design from an MCQ test to a WIL radio broadcast assessment provided the opportunity for academic reflection and sharing of ‘ideas in a non-threatening, friendly and relaxed environment’ (Carbone, 2014). The PATS mentor provided support and ideas for the development of the new assessment item. While the project was not without difficulties for the practitioner / researcher, the outstanding success of this aspect of the action learning project has been reflected in student feedback on the course, such as the “Big Thank You” mentioned earlier. Thus, the PATS mentoring project provided supportive opportunities that enabled innovation and provision of a quality experience for all.

Limitations of the findings

Some seminal works have criticised action research methodology regarding the contingency of the research findings: low control of the environment and personal over-involvement (Kock, McQueen and Scott, 1997). While more recently Nolen and Putten (2007, p. 406) have pointed to the ethical principles, for example the need for ‘informed consent, participant autonomy and the coercive potential of action research’. However, in this third cycle of action research, the triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative results added weight to the findings. This, it is pointed out, is highly desirable for validation of long-term observation of effects (Jick, 1979) and concurs with Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, and Zuber-Skerritt (1990) and is reinforced by Whitehead (2009). In addition, Brannick and Coghlan (2007) make a strong case as to the benefits of such ‘insider research’. Robustness was also added to the project by the direction, support and affirmation through the PATS scheme, and as stated by Carbone et. al. (2014)

Work integrated learning (WIL) combined with action research promotes intellectual advancement in a participant’s role, as well as providing practical application, cutting-edge engagement and the opportunity for personal reflection on the social process: ‘a social system can be more deeply understood if the researcher is part of the … system being studied’, leading to ‘information
exchange … commitment … and … organisational development’ (Kock McQueen and Scott, 1997 4; Fox, 1990;). A New Zealand study Kahu, Stephens, Leach and Zepke (2013) also found a direct positive relationship between WIL, supportive learning environments (SLE) such as PALAR and student satisfaction.

Lomax (2002, 130) considers researching one’s practice as the ultimate expression of what it is to be professional: ‘This is in line with those ideals that see action research as a social process and not simply a research method … The new professionalism is premised on a process of continuous professional development … [leading to] an evidence-based profession’ (our emphasis). Zuber-Skerritt (1982, 15) in her early work, established advantages of the framework: ‘Through systematic, controlled action research/action learning, higher education teachers can become more professional, more interested in pedagogical aspects of higher education and more motivated to integrate their research and teaching interests in a holistic way. In a much more recent work Zuber-Skerritt (2012, 5) suggests that educators much foster ‘creative problem-solving’ and ‘ignite a flame’ for learning – rather than being instructors. She further suggests that this, in turn, can lead to greater job satisfaction, better academic programmes, improvement of student learning and practitioners’ insights and contributions to the advancement of knowledge in higher education.’

Conclusion

Adaptation and innovation are at the heart of an educational institution’s survival. Universities need to encourage creativity and innovation in all aspects of curriculum design to provide students with quality learning experiences. Swart (2012) also suggests that universities must embed information that can be applied in a work context into all their endeavours, including assessment. This project utilised WIL to help produce work-ready graduates who can respond in a timely manner to the demands of global business.

As demonstrated above, many students’ creativity was stimulated by giving them the opportunity to share their opinions and be heard, although this process was challenging for others. PALAR
contributed appreciably to the opportunity of self-directed input into fair assessment outcomes. However, in line with the work of Steffe and Gale (1995), participation in the PALAR experience enabled most students to construct knowledge and reach meaning through not only cross-cultural experiences but also the combination of both personal and cooperative understanding.

In addition, the findings provide evidence of the success of an approach based on ‘assessment for learning’ (McDowell et al., 2011) and the ‘peer-assisted teaching programme’ (Carbone et al., 2014). The third cycle of our project demonstrated the effective outcomes of PALAR as recommended by Zuber-Skerrit (2011). Replacing the Week 5 MCQ test with an innovative audio assessment gave students the opportunity to express their creativity and engage in deeper learning. The one socio-cultural project provided both domestic and international students in the PALAR teams a fair opportunity to successfully combine individual and cross-cultural characteristics to build relationships of respect and trust while solving a work-integrated learning challenge facing not only tourism and hospitality students but also all those entering the global workplace. The students demonstrated increased engagement through their ability to shift their learning to a deeper level at which shared opinions promoted greater understanding — a feature missing from the previous MCQ assessment.

The new assessment also encouraged creative cooperation, innovation and use of students’ skills, and provided the opportunity for students to find and express their own voice. Their voice, in the form of feedback, contributed further to possible future task improvements. As a direct result of this project, feedback to students on this assignment has evolved into a verbal format that complements the students’ efforts in their verbal assessment submissions, as recommended by Hennessy and Forrester (2014).

The combination of the work integrated learning and participatory action learning–action research approaches to course redesign, supported by the peer mentor scheme, provided a sound
foundation for improving both the learning and the teaching experience in this course. Future action research cycles should consider the feedback provided in this third cycle to further adapt this assessment task for increased engagement and deeper learning.

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References


**Biography**

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Appendix 1. Marking criteria for the radio interview assessment task

1. Interview response has demonstrated critical application of discipline knowledge and theoretical concepts of international marketing

2. Response demonstrated extensive knowledge in relation to critical analysis & impacts of global population trends upon global markets

3. Response demonstrated extensive knowledge in relation to critical analysis & impacts of cultural differences upon international marketing

4. Response demonstrated critical analysis and impacts with respect to strategic future market opportunities and challenges

5. Voice was clear and easy to understand. No vocal fillers used (eg. ‘like’, ‘um’)

6. Opened with a compelling attention getter & and closed with an effective summary response to questions

7. Responses were very professional and demonstrated creative and original responses with a highly confident verbal presence that was clear and effective in getting the message across to a general audience.

8. Use of recording equipment: demonstrated a high level of professionalism.

Source: Measuring and analysing the responses to the new assessment – developed for this project