
Using a Digital Storybook as Assessment for Learning to Motivate Students in an Enabling and Pathways to University Program

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Date of publication (dd/mm/yyyy): 28/10/2020

Abstract – The enabling and pathways education sector is significantly important as it provides access to higher education studies for many disadvantaged and marginalised students. Many of these students are unable to access higher education studies due to their low socio-economic backgrounds, English as a second language, having to care for children and adults, and other similar reasons. Often these students can feel under valued which affects their self-esteem and confidence to engage with the challenges of higher education studies. Assessments play an important role in engaging students to learn, as well as helping them developing confidence and self-esteem for higher education studies. Most assessments in higher education tends to focus too much on the content testing and little emphasis on how it can be used to develop other important skills and attitudes for long term success .This paper discusses an assessment for learning called a Digital Storybook that was used in an enabling computing studies subject instead of an examination. Evaluation data for this study was collected first at the end of a semester of studies and then again about 3 to 4 years after the students had completed their studies and were in various workplaces. The results clearly showed that not only was the digital storybook an effective assessment to develop current learning needs, it was also significant in develop long term attitudes post their studies.

Keywords – Alternative Assessment, Attitudes, Emotional Engagement, Digital Storytelling, Enabling Education.

I. BACKGROUND

Students in most enabling and pathway programs in Australia aspire to attend and acquire a University qualification (NAEEA). These students, due to various reasons were unable to gain direct entry into a university study program. Some of these reasons include lower socio-economic backgrounds, societal and community expectations, outside school responsibilities for work and care, and many more.

Students in these enabling and pathway programs also often struggle with motivations to engage effectively with their formal, structured learning environments. Higher education learning is often criticised for being overly rigid to accommodate the diversity of the learning needs that presents in a typical enabling and pathways classroom.

Regardless of the struggles and challenges that enabling and pathways students pose, all students have their own strengths and weaknesses. Successful learning environments should aim to first and foremost, recognise their student’s strengths and help them nurture that, while recognising their weaknesses and help students develop these for successful, long term study and careers.

II. ASSESSMENTS FOR LEARNING

Assessments play an important role in all educational ecosystems. Within enabling education they are crucial to inform the students and educators about the suitability of that student pursue further higher education studies, or even alternate work or education pathways. Assessments in enabling education also, perhaps more

significantly, provide the student with the self-confidence and ‘grit’ capabilities to undertake challenging tasks (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

Most traditional assessment of learning tend to expect students to learn some content and then the assessments ‘test’ their ability to recall what they have learnt. This form of assessment tends to create more anxiety about the assessments that often inherently hinders students’ performance (Anisa & Miranda, 2011; Myyry & Joutsenvirta, 2015). By their very design, assessments of learning tests student’s ability to remember rather than what they can do with the knowledge.

Assessments for learning, as opposed to assessment of learning, involves students engaging in the assessments which helps them learn skills, knowledge and attitudes needed while working on the assessments (Anand, 2017; Boud, 2000; Carless, 2009; Phillip, Margaret, David, Matt, Elizabeth, Sue, & Gordon, 2013). These types of assessments are more appropriate for students in an enabling program as it is likely to not cause undue stress when completing an assessment task. For example, it is widely recognised the level of stress that is put on students when preparing for an examination not to mention the actual task of doing an examination.

Assessments for learning engages students in effortful and challenging learning experiences that enable students to learn from those experiences (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Nguyen & Walker, 2016). Appropriate guidance is provided along the way to ensure students are on track, although depending on the type of assessment, students may be allowed to go off tangent to explore their own interests within the scope of the topics or learning program. With appropriate guidance and support, assessments for learning therefore tend to cause less anxiety and stress as students settle into their work and can see clearly that they can access support at different stages as they engage with the assessment task.

Assessments for learning tasks are more complex and therefore sometimes more challenging to design. Teachers also need to be ‘brave’ enough to let go of some control and allow students to explore and ‘play’ to their own strengths and weaknesses. Often this is harder to do and perhaps that is why it is not used as widely as it should.

III. DIGITAL STORYBOOK AS AN ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Majority of assessment instrument used in higher education tends to be examinations, essays, report, presentations and the like. Many of these continue to be used due to the ease of deploying them, and because many educators are familiar with it themselves (Anand & Latt, 2015; Bearman, Dawson, Bennett, Hall, Molloy, Boud, & Joughin, 2017). Although there is interest in the literature about alternate forms of assessments, there is not enough evaluation of the validity of these to confidently validate the course and subject learning outcomes.

A digital storybook is an extension of storytelling (McDrury, 2003). Storytelling as assessments is when students provide a reflective narrative about a topic. This narrative is informed by appropriate research, personal experiences and even experimentation (Price, 2012). The important aspect of storytelling is that students provide the narrative as they see it from their own perspective. Storytelling can be applied in any discipline where you want students to engage in a topic as a reflective exercise. Because students engage in storytelling from their own personal perspective, it often is a lot more meaningful and engaging for them, and consequently for the marker as well.

A digital storybook allows students to use various digital tools to compose their reflective story. They are all-

-owed to utilise numerous online and offline multimedia resources to create highly engaging digital artefacts that explain concepts or ideas in a reflective way.

With most higher education students being more and more computer aware, whether through use of mobile phones, touch screen devices, or laptops and desktops, as well as using the Internet for various social, entertainment and research purposes, it is fair to expect them to be able to construct reasonably good quality digital artefacts, without too much support from educators (Kesharwani, 2020). Notwithstanding this background, it is good practice to provide students with exemplars (Handley & Williams, 2011).

A digital storybook, as assessment for learning, is particularly relevant for students in an enabling program. These students often struggle to transition to higher education studies and can sometimes suffer from anxiety and stress around assessment requirements. By encouraging them to ‘compose’ a digital artefact, using any technology tools they may be familiar with, and on a topic that they are passionate about is very likely to generate considerable engagement with the assessment task, and because they are more likely to be emotionally engaged in the task they are less likely to suffer from assessment related anxiety and stress (Anand, 2014; Gargiulo, 2013). Furthermore, because the students are engaging in a ‘personal’ storytelling exercise, they are more likely to remember the assessment for a long time.

Ensuring enabling students are engaged in their studies as early as possible is very important. One of the ways in which this can be done is by recognising their prior knowledge and skills and encouraging them to share that through an assessable task. One of the criticisms of an enabling information technology subject in an enabling program has always been about how it is relevant to ‘their field of studies in the future’ if the future course is not IT related, and even if it is, an enable IT subject will not be able to provide sufficient content in that area. Many of these criticisms are justified as an enabling program is designed to prepare students for further higher education studies, and not necessarily develop expertise in specific content areas.

A digital storybook in an enabling IT subject was designed to allow students to:

1. Describe the area of study and/or work that they wish to get in to after studying the enabling course.
2. Describe how IT is used in that area currently.
3. Identify and explain how any emerging technologies can help improve how work is done in that area.
4. Identify the IT skills they need to develop in order to work effectively in their chosen field.

The students could use any software tools they were familiar with as well as any already existing resources from the Internet.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Evaluating the impact of teaching and learning initiatives on students’ short-term and long-term learning is often problematic (Joughin, 2009). Although many courses use student achievements in various forms of assessments to measure student achievement of course learning outcomes, these instruments may not indicate the true learning gains for students, especially for students in enabling and pathways education (Stobart, 2003). Many courses, especially in enabling and pathway education programs, design their courses around development of relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes for current and future studies, as well as for long-term work and life success. For enabling programs, the focus on developing appropriate attitudes is extremely

important as many students in these programs often come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and often struggle with self-confidence and 'imposter syndrome' (Housel, 2019). Courses therefore need to ensure that the development of appropriate attitudes for successful studies and long-term work/life experiences is essential.

Assessment tools can provide a reasonable picture about how students have developed the prescribed knowledge and skills, but may not be sufficient to inform whether they were able to develop appropriate attitudes for short and long term success. To develop sustainable attitudes, students need to be emotionally engaged in a learning activity and should be able to draw on their own prior experiences (Richardson, Griffin, Zaki, Stephenson, Yan, Curry, Noble, Hogan, Skipper, & Devlin, 2018). Even if the assessments are designed to provide a good picture about students learning goals, they may only provide information about short term learning goals. To evaluate long-term learning, post study evaluations needs to be conducted.

Previous research has indicated that student perceptions about their learning can be a powerful indicator about the actual learning (Campbell, Smith, Boulton-Lewis, Brownlee, Burnett, Carrington, & Purdie, 2001; Deslauriers, McCarty, Miller, Callaghan, & Kestin, 2019). When students perceive that they are learning or that they have learnt something, it often correlates well with their assessment scores. This is because student perceptions are related to their self-efficacy and confidence about a course of study (Schunk & Pajares, 2010).

A. Research Questions:

The research questions that guided this evaluative study were:

1. How did the students perceive the impact of the digital storybook on their confidence to engage in higher education studies?
2. What was the students' perception about the long-term impact of the digital storybook on their studies and work post studies?

The impact of this assessment on student's confidence and long term influence was evaluated in two ways. First it was extremely important to know that by working on this assessment the students were able to gain the short-term learning objectives of the course, as well as their own perceptions about the effectiveness of the assessment on supporting their learning. Second, it was also important to understand how the students perceived the influence of the assessment on their long term studies and work, and this was done a few years after the students had completed their studies and when they were in further studies and/or work settings.

This study used a mixed method approach using anonymous online surveys. Two sets of surveys were conducted at different times of their studies. The first survey was conducted while the students were still studying, but at the end of their study semester. The second survey was conducted with the same students once they had completed their studies or were in the final stages of their higher education studies. All the students were contacted via their social media accounts, and anonymous google forms was used to collect data from the students. The questionnaires included closed questions and open questions to seek students' perception about their experiences with the digital storybook as assessment for learning. No personal information about the students was collected, and it was not possible to track students' feedback.

B. End of Study Semester Survey

87 students were surveyed using both closed and open-ended questions about their study experiences in the c-

-course in regard to the digital storybook assessment. The open-ended questions were particularly designed to seek student perceptions about the way in which the digital storybook assessment contributed to their learning in the course and how it influences their confidence to undertake higher education studies.

C. Post Study Survey

These students were also contacted about 3 or 4 years after their studies in the course and undertaking the digital storybook assessment. This post studies survey was sent to 25 students and 14 students responded to the online survey. This post studies survey also included open and closed ended questions and were designed to seek feedback about student perceptions about the influence of just the digital storybook on their long term attitudes towards studies and work. Studies have shown that attitudes tend to have the most significant impact on long term success than short term knowledge and skills acquisition.

D. Analysis

Due to the comparatively small number of responses/feedback (86 in the first survey and 14 in the second post-study survey) it was possible to do a simple analysis using Microsoft Excel and code the open-ended answers using manual perusal of data.

V. RESULTS

A. End of Semester Survey

The end of semester survey was designed seek students' perceptions about if the digital storybook as an assessment for learning helped students during their study that semester. Apart from the accredited outcomes in the form of final grades, student perceptions provide a more insightful understanding about the various learning and teaching initiatives, including assessments on their learning. The results (Figure 1) clearly indicate that the student perceptions about the digital storybook as assessment for learning is very positive. They indicate that the digital storybook was extremely positive learning experience for both short term learning outcomes and long-term attitudes for study and work.

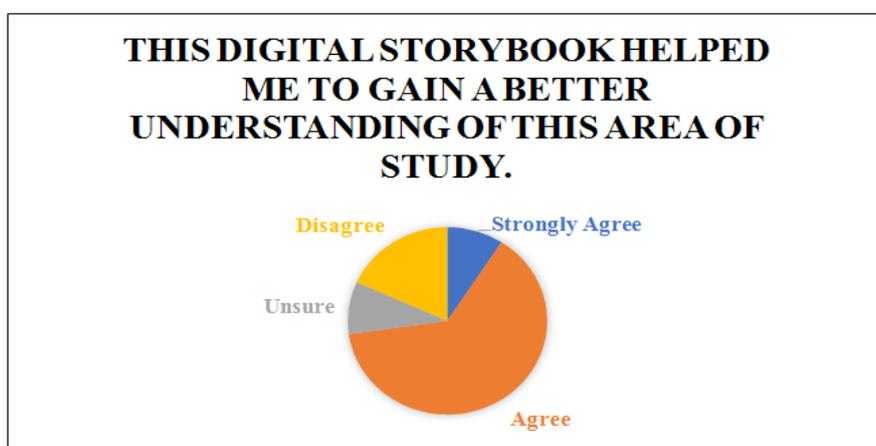


Fig. 1. Student perception about the digital storybook.

They students felt that the digital storybook as an assessment for learning enabled them to gain a better understanding about their broad field of studies and exposed them to ideas and concepts way beyond the scope of the subject being studied. These sentiments are captured in comments like the following:

“Get to learn things about technology that we didn’t know before” Student feedback/subject evaluation

“How the assessments will be useful in other fields”

“The teacher is fantastic and genuinely cares about students and their learning. Interesting assignments”

Student feedback/subject evaluation

“Learning the new material we can manage and use in future technological experiences”

“Learning new things I didn’t know”

Student feedback/subject evaluation

This end of semester also sought students’ perceptions about some core learning strategies for short- and long-term higher education success. The table 1 below presents the feedback from students about these.

Table 1. Study skills.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Investigate new ideas	40.23% 35	48.28% 42	9.20% 8	2.30% 2	0.00% 0	87
Communicate with others	50.57% 44	43.68% 38	5.75% 5	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	87
Acknowledge the work of others	44.71% 38	47.06% 40	7.06% 6	1.18% 1	0.00% 0	85
Find and evaluate information	37.93% 33	50.57% 44	10.34% 9	1.15% 1	0.00% 0	87
Work with others	56.98% 49	36.05% 31	6.98% 6	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	86
Think critically or analytically	35.63% 31	47.13% 41	13.79% 12	2.30% 2	1.15% 1	87
Increase my awareness of ethical issues	40.23% 35	48.28% 42	6.90% 6	3.45% 3	1.15% 1	87
Value how other people think	44.83% 39	50.57% 44	3.45% 3	1.15% 1	0.00% 0	87
Improve my problem-solving skills	40.23% 35	44.83% 39	12.64% 11	2.30% 2	0.00% 0	87
Find connections between the different subject areas in my area of study	40.23% 35	44.83% 39	12.64% 11	2.30% 2	0.00% 0	87

Post-study Survey

For this study it was extremely important to also seek feedback form the students after they had completed their studies to see if they still thought that the digital storybook as an assessment for learning was useful in their

studies, and if it had any influence in their study success.

The results from the post-study survey is even more encouraging. Given one of the significant aims of the digital storybook assessment was to develop appropriate attitudes and confidence in students for further studies and work, all the students who responded to the survey commented that they found the assessment extremely valuable and many cases commented that this type of assessment should be used more widely in higher education. A number of students went on to comment that they still had a copy of their digital storybook, as they were very proud of the work they did.

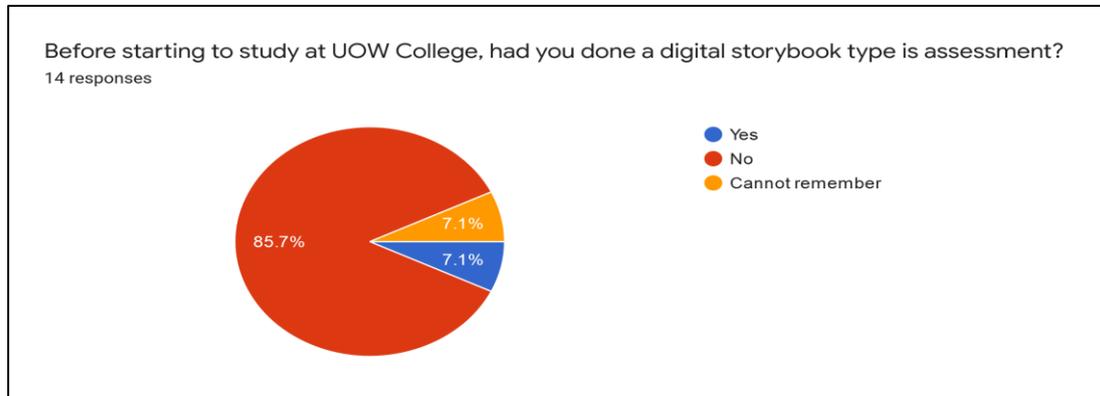


Fig. 3. Previous experience with digital storybook.

As the above graph (Figure 2) indicates that most of the students surveyed had not experienced a digital storybook as an assessment or learning activities prior to undertaking it in this subject. Despite that most students felt that the digital storybook was a useful assessment, and helped them learn. Many of the following comments captures that sentiment:

Looking back to when you were studying at UOW College, what did you think about the digital storybook?

“The digital storybook was one of the assessments that I really enjoyed. It enabled students with a lack of knowledge of computing (like me) to get easily familiar with utilising software program.”

“it was fun, I shared it with other people, and also still have a copy”

“It was super interesting to me. Thanks to <tutor name> for giving me such a valuable and exciting assignment like this!”

“I had a great time working on the digital storybook”

“It was very interesting”

“It was helpful to think and research about what course field i am planning to do. Moreover, it was a opportunity for me to learn how to create storytelling video.”

“I really enjoyed it, I was able to be very creative”

“I had a good time with it, I was able to apply my interests to this assignment.”

“It was a good activity to engage students and encourage them to research more on what they want to study. I may have spent a lot more time on it than I should have because I wanted to make a better video than the one I did in high school.”

“It was a fun way to present an idea and sharing knowledge, it also pushed me to develop my computer skills and my creativity.”

“Great”

“Thought it was a good interactive program that allowed the author to engage with the audience more than a standard presentation.”

“exciting type of assignment, I had never done anything like it before, but found it was easy to do

I personally think digital Storybooks enable students to use a much more effective and interactive method to demonstrate their understanding. It is also beneficial as it is not time consuming.”

Students often remember their performance in assessments, and learning activities, that they enjoyed. Although we did not seek explicit feedback about if they enjoyed doing the digital storybook as an assessment for learning, when asked to recall their own performance most (just under 93%) indicated that they performed well, and the other (just over 7%) indicated that they were about average, and no student indicated that they did poorly. This indicates that they still remember the assessment, and their own performance in that assessment even after about 3 to 5 years later. This result is displayed in the figure 4 below:

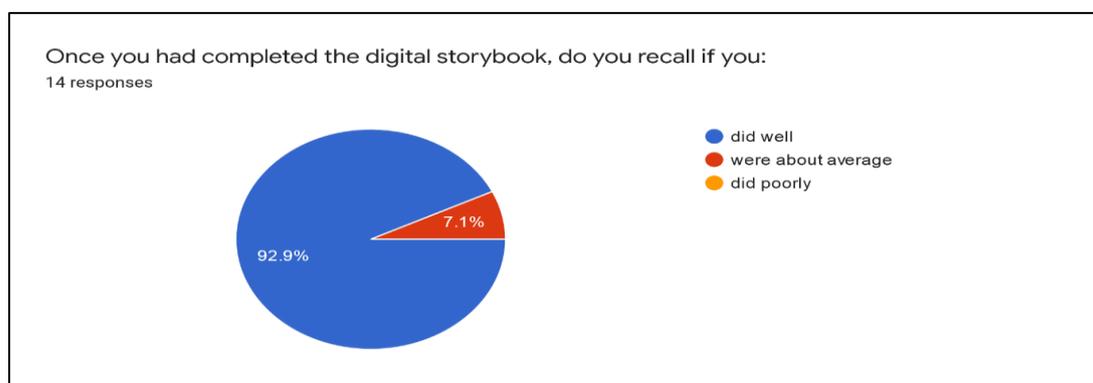


Fig. 4. Performance in the assessment.

We also wanted to know if the students had undertaken any similar assessment during their other higher education studies, and most students did not experience any similar assessment.

These sentiments are captioned in the comments below:

If you went on to study at a university, do you recall doing any similar assessments in any of your university subjects/courses?

“I and our group members took a video for our PPT (nursing). At that time, I edited the video by using a software that I used for the digital storybook.”

“yes, somewhat similar assignment”

“I don't think I could find any other interesting assignment like this in my uni life.”

“yes some subjects had similar type of assignments, I was good I did this earlier as I had an idea about what to do”

“Yes”

“Yes, during the current semester in a subject called cross-cultural management we were required to make a group bonding video where all group members meet and share aspects of each culture we represent. I used my previous knowledge of digital storytelling to do this assignment.”

“Yes in some subjects we had to do some that were a bit like it, I was able to think about what I did before.”

“Yes in some subjects they used similar type of assessments, but most were still very boring written style. I was able to use my skills from the digital storybook in other assignments”

“The closest would be a software tutorial video for Human-Computer Interaction, or several paragraphs about a well-known security attack.”

“We didn’t do anything like this in my Science degree.”

“No really”

“Yes, I have done similar assignments.”

“not much, although some had a bit like it , not exactly as exciting”

“I have done a similar method within my 200 level subjects.”

We also asked students what their perception of the digital storybook was now that they have completed their studies. Once again most students indicated that they enjoyed and learnt a lot from that assessment. Some of the comments below captures these sentiments:

Now that you have finished your studies, what do you think about the Digital Storybook as an assessment?

“I still reckon that the digital storybook is a great assessment for students. By doing this assessment, students can not only treasure their memories in a video, but also share their stories with others.

Very interesting and very engaging”

“Personally, I still feel really glad that I have given a chance to make it!”

“It was really fun, it was challenging at first but then i figured out what to do so was good. I enjoyed it a lot, I still have a copy of that assignment.”

“Quite helpful! The skills can be used in not only University time but also my working”

“It made me think of different aspects of my study field and what digital skills i require earlier. Later on, i focused to enhance and develop these skills.”

“It was very good, I can still remember doing that, and enjoyed it”

“It was very useful and interesting, I enjoyed it, and maybe that is why I did so well in it”

“The topic of this assessment was necessary, especially for students who are about to go to uni. The method (a video) may be more suitable for students aiming to study Creative Arts majors.”

“It was the most entertaining task that I have done! I actually enjoyed doing it, most of the assessments given us at UoW College were reports to write and the digital story book was a fun way to express what we know and learned.”

“Its was great”

“Happy as it well, I got good feedback and results.”

“I really enjoyed that assignment, it was a joy, would have liked to do that in more subjects”

“I feel like it is more competitive and complicated due to being a more independent type of learning compared to UOW College where teachers help students case-by-case if possible.”

Another indicator of a good assessment is if the students who have completed that would like to see that type of assessment used more widely in higher education. As the figure 5 below indicates, most students would like to see more university teacher use this type of assessment for learning.

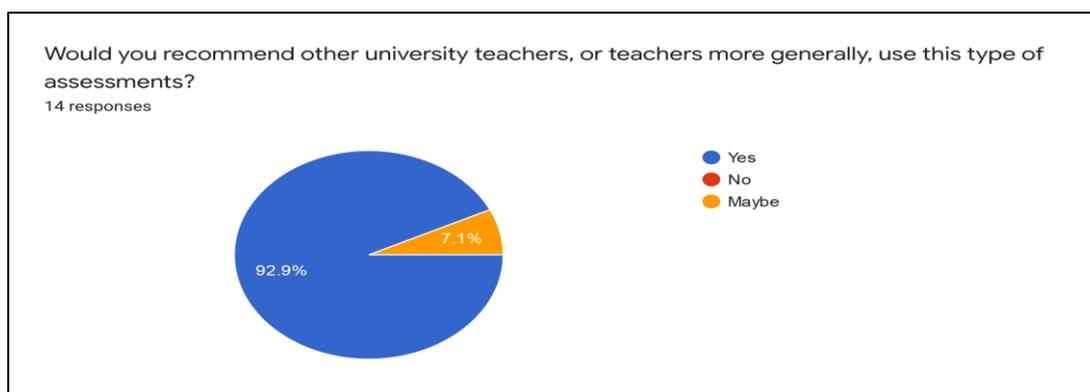


Fig. 5. Recommendation for widespread use.

VI. DISCUSSION

Assessments play a very important role in students learning. For students in an enabling program it's even more important to ensure the assessments not only develop students' current skills and knowledge, but also appropriate attitudes, confidence and self-esteem to succeed in their higher education studies and beyond.

Although many studies seek to get students feedback about the way in which students experienced their studies, including various teaching and learning activities and assessments, not many studies compare student experiences with students when they are still students and when they have completed their studies. This study tried to understand the impact of just one assessment item on students both while they were still students as well as after they had completed their studies.

Perceptions are powerful indicators of how students felt about their assessment experiences. It is through perceptions that students develop self confidence and self-esteem, and that is why this study focussed on getting a better insight about students' perceptions.

Not many assessments on their own are able to ignite the emotional connections to leaning that and assessment for learning like the digital storybook does. This assessment did not focus on specific content related knowledge testing, rather on a wholistic approach to develop appropriate technical and attitudinal competencies for current and long-term success. The results for students clearly indicates that the students were able to connect with the assessment as intended, and that it had a long term impact on their learning and attitudes to learning, not only while they were still enrolled but even after they had completed their studies and in various workplaces.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study outlines an assessment for learning known as a digital storybook in a first session enabling education program at an Australian university. Student feedback on their perceptions about the assessment was gained at two instances: the first one was at the end of a study semester right after they had completed study this subject, the second one was about 3 or 4 years afterwards, when the students had completed their studies, and many of them were in various workplaces around Australia and other parts of the world.

The results indicate that the assessment had a significant long-term positive impact on the students attitudes and confidence to study, and even in the workplaces. Many assessments in universities still tend to be traditional examination and essay/report writing type. It is unlikely that many students would engage with these traditional assessments in the same way as they engaged in the digital storybook assessment.

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