Choosing Appropriate Assessment Methods: A Reflection

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Abstract

As an integral part of the learning process, assessment plays a crucial role in improving the quality of student learning. From my experience, on the one hand, an appropriate assessment not only provides students with an opportunity to learn, but also helps the tutor to assess learning outcomes and prepares learners to enter the workplace; in my view, on the other hand, inappropriate assessment is where students take a superficial approach to learning and as a result exit the university without developing the abilities and attributes that the employer or the university values in them. Hence, use of appropriate assessments and also feedback are vital, not only for enhancing students' learning experience but also for ensuring that they gain deeper conceptual understanding.

This reflection focuses on my experience of working with students on a Research Methods course within a Higher Education institution based outside of the United Kingdom. In order to assess the knowledge, ability, and skills which my students gained from the course, a range of conventional assessment methods such as exams and quizzes was used. In my view, whilst exams allow students to store large amounts of information in their heads and reinforce useful skills, I believe they are not suitable for all courses and age groups: such assessments may not necessarily challenge and motivate the students to demonstrate their intellectual process and may not add significant value to student learning. Consequently, after becoming the course coordinator, I decided to change the assessment practice.

As a first step towards devising the new assessment plan, I discussed with my colleagues the idea of reviewing and designing efficient assessment practice. As Brown, Bull and Pendlebury (1997) suggest, this was an important exercise, as I wanted to design not only educationally successful assessment, but also assessment that would be efficient and workable for the students. Moreover, from my experience, I have noted that students prioritise what to learn and how much time to spend learning in accordance with the type of the assessment. Hence, as a fundamental step towards designing a new assessment, I took note of the type of the course, the level of learning, learning outcomes, important aspects, transferable skills and competencies that students are expected to gain from the course.

Once I had designed the new assessment, using appropriate language and terminology, I gave the students clear information about the aims and objectives of the course and how it would add value both to the courses they might choose for the next stage of the programme and to the programme itself; they were made fully aware of what they must demonstrate to achieve a successful pass, how the marks would be awarded and what they should be able to do upon completion. As Rownstree (1987) points out, making the assessment transparent is important, as it helps students to assess their strengths and weaknesses, improves the chances of learning and consequently leads to much deeper levels of learning.

In order to cover the course objectives and outcomes, to evaluate the effectiveness of my teaching and to identify areas for further improvement, I introduced two forms of summative assessment: students are expected to present a brief PowerPoint outline of proposed

research and also a concise and coherent summary of the same in the form of a research proposal. The new assessments are in addition to such existing formative assessment methods as group discussions, debates and other learning tasks. My assessment design not only meets the diverse needs of assessment, such as conforming to university-wide standards, but also allows me to address student workload and time pressure.

The shift in approach that I have directed has been towards learning outcomes and more proactive engagement by students with their learning (one of the Boud seven propositions in Assessment Reform 2020). I had classroom conversations with students about the proposed assessment methodology to ensure their better understanding of its duration and structure, as well as of the value of each course component to the final assessment. Furthermore, by means of the university's generic assessment chart, I made clear to them how each part of the assessment would be evaluated. Formative assessments not only provide constructive critical feedback to students on their performance, but also serve as a pointer to more effective tutor intervention in the future. Despite the fact that research suggests that students view formative feedback as a guide to improving their work, rather than as an attempt to control them (Duncan, 2007), the exact channels through which this influences their summative assessments have remained unclear to me.

In the case of the first summative assessment, i.e. the oral presentation, I gave the students verbal, one-to-one, in-class feedback on such aspects as areas for development, strengths, engagement of the audience, delivery, communication and handling of questions, along with an opportunity for individual student self-reflection on her/his presentation. I also provided an opportunity for peer feedback and critical reflection. In line with the view of Chamberlain, Dison and Button (1998), I noted that providing students with specific, meaningful and timely feedback had a positive impact on their achievement and enhanced their learning (Ramsden, 1992). However, as it was clear that lack of experience in reflection limited their ability to look back and make sense of what they had learned, I took the timely opportunity to remind them of the need for reference to the assessment criteria to make the best use of feedback. For future cohorts, I have as a consequence decided to use reflective journals that demonstrate their critical thinking and analysis.

In the case of the second summative assessment, i.e. the research proposal, I gave feedback in three stages: in the first, generic feedback to the whole class on various aspects of research objectives and questions, literature review, methodology and structure of the work; in the second, specific feedback to each student through the student learning management system; in the third, one-to-one discussion to develop a better understanding of the feedback given, as I discovered that some learners could misinterpret the feedback, however well-given and well-meaning, and consequently be demotivated and demoralised.

Over the years, I have seen that, while students have a thirst for feedback (Hyland, 2005), they may not look at it (Hounsell, 1987) and even when they do, they may not use it (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). Whilst the response to feedback is subject to the student's personal characteristics, there was some evidence that regular and timely feedback given during formative assessments and presentations led to implementation in their research proposal. For instance, a few students who received consistent feedback on referencing got it right in their proposal. Most of the students who were struggling with the literature review were able to revise substantially and reorganise it in their subsequent proposals. Whilst I have given

guidance on how in the future to use feedback received during the course, I shall fully understand its effect on their subsequent work (dissertation) in the next term.

In contrast to the view of Gibbs, Simpson and Macdonald (2003), that change in assessment may demotivate students in their learning, my experience has been that fundamental assessment changes are worth the effort. Both my formal and informal discussions with students indicate increased student satisfaction, greater quality and quantity of learning, deeper understanding of research philosophies, methods and techniques and wider background knowledge about research. What was evident from the new assessment was that students not only developed a keen understanding of the key course concepts (such as epistemology, ontology and research strategy) and learning outcomes, but were also able to apply the concepts to their research proposals.

A new form of assessment has therefore helped to counter a superficial approach to learning (Biggs and Tang, 2007) and limited the likelihood of reproduction of material. Nevertheless, a few students did struggle with assessments, in such different ways as defining specific research objectives and research questions, choosing appropriate data collection and analysis techniques, acknowledging and referencing the sources in the right manner. Strategies such as the use of peer-assisted learning (Topping and Ehly, 1998) and demonstrating a sample of research proposals have helped me to address their concerns. Overall, a new form of assessment has promoted students' deeper learning.

For future cohorts, I would like to develop my assessment practice in three ways: first, though I have used the university's generic mark scheme, I believe the use of task-specific assessment rubrics for summative assessment practices would have been more effective (This, I believe, would not only ease my work by setting course-specific assessment criteria for anticipated levels of learner performance, but would also help students to take responsibility for their own learning.); second, I'd like to encourage students' active participation in sharing and discussing feedback, by setting time aside for the purpose; third, in order to develop students' capacity for looking back and making sense of what they have learned, I'd like to include a few opportunities for reflection.

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