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Teaching and Professional Development Fellowship 2005 – 06

A benchmark for the basis of a shared assessment vocabulary making clear what feedback statements mean to Cultural Studies students

Final Project Report and Evaluation

Introduction

This report seeks to evaluate the progress made as a result of the Teaching and Professional Development Fellowship sabbatical. It will consider the ways in which the original project plan has developed and been realised, will discuss the main findings from the research and ways in which these have informed its final realisation and will further establish future developments that are envisaged as a result of the project.

Project Description

The project began with 4 aims that interlinked into a larger project whose target was to allow students to use their Feedback more successfully:

1. To allow time to look at the way in which students currently understand and use their Cultural Studies Feedback.
2. To allow students space and give supporting materials for an element of self-assessment, where students are able to evaluate their own written work as their tutors do and to understand more fully the reasons why marks are given.
3. To provide benchmarking information that illustrates how different learning outcomes are met at different degree classifications – thus increasing the transparency of the assessment process for staff and students and to promote parity across markers and courses.
4. To create a shared vocabulary of assessment between staff and students which helps to increase or reinforce an understanding of the feedback given to students and the appropriate responses to that feedback in future work.

Project Evaluation

1. Researching the ways in which students use feedback – Data Gathering.

Methodology: Interviews with 1st year students from a range of educational backgrounds.

For tutors and students alike, the implementation of standards of good practice around assessment, are fundamental to the teaching and learning experience and central to student progression. For practical reasons, I made the decision to initially target the project towards students in their first year, in-line with the University's current emphasis on the First Year Experience. This was particularly appropriate in Cultural Studies as all year one undergraduate students undertake the unit 'Introduction to Cultural Studies' before the content of their classes becomes diversified and course specific. Thus the outcomes of the project would be relevant to all year one students.

The project commenced in the summer term with a number of interviews with students who had just received their first pieces of Cultural Studies Feedback. Our processes of Feedback were also discussed with team members and a database of most commonly used feedback phrases was gathered from archived feedback forms. The Interviews revealed a number of interesting issues that later informed the shape of the project:

- Students often had problems understanding the reasoning behind the mark that they received. They felt that they had *'worked really hard but only got 52'*, and were dispirited because their efforts did not seem to be rewarded. Despite the very clear publication of the learning outcomes that they will be assessed against summatively, students sometimes had difficulty understanding what would constitute a good Cultural Studies essay, where they should concentrate their energies for a good assessment outcome and also how they would tangibly meet such a learning outcome.
- Students were shown examples of commonly used feedback phrases from archived work and their own feedback was discussed. For International students very commonly used phrases such as 'too much historical narrative' or 'too journalistic a style' caused particular problems. For others, such phrases were understood, but for students from very traditional academic backgrounds knowing what appropriate action to take as a result of feedback was still an issue. For example, one student was told in her feedback that her conclusion was weak, but she did not feel that she knew what a strong conclusion should be like.
- Many students expressed a desire for the opportunity to discuss the feedback with the tutor or to have some input beyond the piece of paper on which it was written.

- A number of myths of unknown origin seem to circulate amongst students with regard to what we look for when we assess them – they feel that certain words or phrases equal marks, or that there is no room for their own ideas in essay writing.
- In some cases interview data reminded us of the need to regularly reinforce best practices around feedback: legibility, quantity and quality of feedback, directing feedback to areas in need of development, and to give effective and constructive feedback at both ends of the assessment spectrum: Referral and 1st class honours.

The information gathered from this first part of the project seemed to indicate that this project needed to address issues of academic literacy, to prepare students for and assimilate them into a particular form of education or subject area, as well as the language of assessment. Also considering that issues around the technicalities of writing and responses to feedback were inextricably linked in the experience of our students. What was perhaps the most important emergent theme was that students feel passive and disempowered within the current assessment process.

2. To allow students an opportunity to self-assess.

The first aim of the project beyond initial data-gathering was to create ways for students to become more active in the assessment process and to understand its role in their future academic development. This had to be done within the limitations of teaching structure and student numbers. Strategies of target setting are used by teachers in post 11 education as a way of emphasising areas of progression for pupils and more action based methods of presenting such strategies have been suggested for Post 16 education. Via activities students find their way towards solutions that allow them to develop and improve. Assessment feedback if correctly seen as part of a progressive development is a staging post for such reflection. From the outset, I wanted to avoid producing long paper based documents for students and staff to read or rather dry, limiting and wordy benchmarking matrices that produced an impersonal feedback experience for students – all issues identified within my project plan. A more active, accessible, online resource, which followed notions of academic literacy and target setting, suggested itself as a more appropriate approach.

3. Benchmarking

One of the first documents produced as part of the fellowship, in discussion with colleagues, was a paper, which translated the QAA benchmarking criteria for degree classifications into an explanation of what this would mean against learning outcomes for the First year unit 'Introduction to Cultural Studies'. This was a useful initial process for the Fellowship project and as a document has a place within the Departmental handbook and perhaps for students, but ultimately I was unhappy that it seemed to embody many of the pitfalls that I hoped to avoid and about which I had expressed concern at the proposal stage, being primarily text based, descriptive and passive.

I felt that students needed more *illustration* of such information and again this process led to a more activity based solution for the project.

4. Shared vocabulary

The largest potential problem when creating a shared vocabulary is that this becomes limited and impersonal, and this was the hazard that I most hoped could be avoided in this project. Nor did I want the kinds of language that staff use on a day to day basis to be an 'exclusive club' to which students do not have access. As Fiona English, writing on academic literacies notes, Giving feedback against written assessment "*revolves around notions of 'structure', 'analysis' or 'argument' as if these were self-explanatory terms whereas they are, in fact, determined by the specific practices of a specific disciplinary community.*"³ – Ultimately, our aim is to make students a part of that community and as such the onus is on us to help them to understand such terminology, rather than to limit it or change it. Thus the shared vocabulary that this fellowship project created was not a set of words but in fact an online resource that should become part of a dialogic process between staff and students. Online resources have increasingly become a way in which members of the Cultural Studies team augment the classroom experience and this project seemed to be a way to consolidate and build upon current provisions.

The project ultimately therefore took existing ideas around the links between assessment and academic literacy and produced online materials that allowed students opportunities to develop their understanding of Cultural Studies, their technical writing skills and their understanding of feedback.

The last part of my sabbatical was spent gathering together existing materials for which thanks must be extended to many of my colleagues in the Cultural Studies Department, in particular Clare Lomas and Geraldine Biddle-Perry, and in creating others that helped to explain and demonstrate the kinds of feedback we consistently give to our first-year students. The appropriateness of a more visual approach to the learning environment for Art and Design students generally has long been acknowledged, and is essential if we are to make our resources as accessible as possible to *all* of our students. To this end I wanted to explore the potential to go beyond the limitations of a basic blackboard site, allowing a more 3 dimensional and visual site, with a familiar web format, that allowed more inter-activity. At the very end of my sabbatical, I attended a training course to allow me to use software packages to create this virtual shared language. The intention is that these materials, alongside taught sessions, will be useful to aid student's performance both prior to hand-in and after the feedback stage.

Professional Development and Dissemination

At a very simple level, my sabbatical afforded me the opportunity to take time to produce a larger body of teaching and learning materials in a format that was new to me, that addressed the needs of our students, that went beyond one individual piece of teaching, or an individual tutor and that took a more visual approach to such

materials. In this I developed my own IT skills, and was able to act as a conduit by which many of the recent strategies of blended and online learning undertaken within the department could be brought together in one place to be accessed by a wider audience of students.

As such the benefits extend beyond myself as an individual to the Department as a whole. It has allowed us to reflect firstly on what we do well in terms of assessment and feedback and what we should work towards improving. It has been an opportunity to remind ourselves of best practice and findings from the research stages of the project will be formally presented to the Department in the pre-term Cultural Studies meeting in September.

The materials produced as a result of the project have included items that should enhance the student experience of Cultural Studies generally, for example a glossary of Key Terms in Cultural Studies, essay writing guides and examples of different ways to approach writing structure and style. In this we have also had time and opportunity to address the Diversity of our students and along with the more visual approaches that have underpinned the results of the project, sound is also being used in the presentation of materials.

The project has also been of interest to staff teaching in similar subjects at Central St Martins and has led to discussions about other ways in which we could use online resources to provide support for students around the subject area. We have begun to look at the possibility of targeting appropriate support in Cultural Studies and essay writing at specific groups of students, for example, International students. This has led to the formulation of plans for future projects, some in tandem with CSM to build a significant body of online resources to support independent learning. We intend to submit bids for funding this academic year to support this process.

At present, the project has primarily been focused on educational development and the production of practical solutions rather than Pedagogical research. The majority of the sabbatical period was spent researching student's needs and making the materials to respond to them. As the training to make these materials live came at the end of the sabbatical period, work during the Autumn term 2006/7 will bring the project to fruition and make the resources live in time for the first Cultural Studies feedback of the year in January. Here a more formal and academic assessment of the outcomes of the project will be possible. At this later stage, data will be used to more formally disseminate the findings of the project via pedagogical journals and more formal research outcomes.

I am also acting as a Cascade partner on a large inter-institutional project looking at assessment with the Business school at Oxford Brookes University⁴. This project allows interaction between a range of disparate Institutions and subject areas and results of my Fellowship project will play a part within this project. Further, Cascade partners are asked to undertake initiatives, which directly contribute to the research data, giving the opportunity to continue to develop and disseminate my fellowship work. Ultimately the findings of this larger project will be disseminated widely, in a

range of formats and contribute to current thinking around pedagogy, feedback and assessment.

1 See Cope, B. & M. Kalantzis (eds) (1993). *The Powers of Literacy: A genre approach to teaching writing*. London: Falmer Press.

Crème, P. & M Lea (1997) *Writing at University*, Buckingham: Open University Press

Lea, M. & Street, B. V. (1998). Student Writing and Staff Feedback in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach. *Studies in Higher Education* 23(2):157-72.

2 See Horsfall, M (1999) Target setting for 16 plus. www.chalkface.com and www.iop.kcl.ac.uk/iopweb/blob/downloads/locator/1_619_Initial_Target_Setting.doc

3 <http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/goodpractice.aspx?resourceid=62>

4 See www.business.brookes.ac.uk/learningandteaching/engstudassfeedbkindex.html