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Learning to write in higher education: students' perceptions of an intervention in developing understanding of assessment criteria.

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Abstract

This paper reports on the second phase of a project designed to improve students' understanding of assessment demands. In the first stage, level one students were involved in a range of activities culminating in peer marking. This peer assessment was, itself, marked by the tutors to encourage students to engage positively with the process. Stage two of the project investigated whether these various intervention activities had any long-term impact on Sports Studies students' approach to writing assignments. Interviews were conducted with six students who participated in stage one. For comparison purposes, a matched group of students from another vocationally-related course were also interviewed. The findings suggest that the peer assessment did encourage students to pay attention to assessment information. However, the students placed greater stress on the role of informal support, particularly verbal clarification of written guidance and feedback. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for practice.

Learning to write in higher education: students' perceptions of an intervention in developing understanding of assessment criteria.

Introduction

The significant growth in participation rates in UK higher education (HE) has stimulated a range of concerns regarding student success, failure and attrition. This concern is manifest in elements of both HE research activity and pedagogical innovation focusing on how to facilitate non-traditional students' experiences of the academic environment. The way students enter, experience and do or do not stay on their HE courses has been considered from a number of different theoretical stances. In this study we draw on the concepts of 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991, 1999), 'tacit' knowledge (Polanyi, reprinted 1998) and the Academic Literacies' approach (Lea and Street 2000). Together this body of literature provides the framework for the case study research reported here.

Lave and Wenger use the concept of 'communities of practice' and the notion of 'legitimate peripheral participation' to explain the process by which novices acquire the knowledge, skills and habits needed to become members of a community. Learning is conceived as a social practice situated in a specific context where informal learning is more important than formal instruction. Novices are inducted into the culture, language and practices of the community by (legitimate peripheral) participation in its processes, experiences and relationships. Although the context for Lave and Wenger's work was training in the workplace, their ideas have been adopted across a number of fields including education (Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson and Unwin, 2005). Northedge (2003a), for example, has applied Lave and Wenger's approach to the academic community claiming that each discipline forms its own discourse community:

‘an academic discipline is a discourse community of a particularly systematic and committed kind (or, more accurately, a constellation of overlapping communities, with somewhat blurred boundaries). It is a community that discourses primarily through writing, giving its discourse a very distinctive style – highly focused, analytical and critical (Olson, 1996). What we think of as ‘higher knowledge’ is what communities of academic specialists say to each other as they debate issues in papers, books and seminars.” (p19)

In other words, becoming a member of an academic community involves learning how to write in a specific way. Northedge supports the ideas of Clark and Ivanic (1997) who outline a need for students to develop an appropriate ‘voice’ through which to communicate their learning, otherwise their grades might be lower than expected. He argues that learning can only be recognised through using the discourse of the subject, even though it may be very different to the voices which are acceptable and familiar in students’ everyday discourse.

Implicit in Northedge’s model is the notion of the ‘tacit’ knowledge of communities of practice. O’Donovan et al (2004) employ this concept in their discussion of students’ acquisition of meaningful knowledge about what is expected in assessments. They define tacit knowledge ‘as that which is learnt experientially or in terms of its incommunicability – knowledge that cannot be easily articulated’ (p328) and suggest that HE teachers use such knowledge in their marking. Thus, O’Donovan et al argue that HE teachers need to use participative methods in order to help students learn the tacit knowledge associated with successful HE writing. They contend that teachers should make ‘use of transfer processes such as dialogue, observation, practice and imitation to share tacit understanding of assessment requirements’ (p332). In summary, this literature provides a useful framework for understanding student transition into HE

and makes a convincing case for teaching as the process of helping students learn to participate in the discourse of their new knowledge community (Northedge 2003a & 2003b).

However, there are aspects of academic communities of practice that create particular challenges for new entrants. Northedge (2003a) maintains that peripheral membership for new students differs from those joining other communities as they are not allowed the freedom to take a passive role. Even as complete novices, they are expected to speak, write and criticise in the new discourse. He contrasts this with everyday or work-based discourse groups where novices would be expected to hear, absorb, accept and obey but not necessarily participate in a generative way.

In addition, Northedge (2003a) makes the point that new students should only be expected to become a participant and adopt the specialist discourse of one well-defined subject community. Fuller et al's (2005) work indicates that it is easier to 'complete a swift journey to full participation' where the community of practice is 'relatively tightly bounded' (p58), yet in many HE programmes, students are faced with a potentially confusing range of different discourse communities (Somerville & Creme, 2005). For example, students often have to contend with diverse understandings of academic literacy within, as well as between, subject communities. In this regard, our work has been strongly influenced by the 'academic literacies' approach (Lea and Street 2000) with particular reference to the models of student writing that they have identified: *study skills, academic socialisation and academic literacies*. Whilst the emphasis on 'tacit knowledge transfer' in O'Donovan et al (2004) extends a view of student writing beyond the notion of 'technical' skills and transparent language, it appears to rest at the stage of *socialisation* where the culture, of which students need to become a part, is established and homogenous. The tacit knowledge which students need to acquire is taken as a given and not contested. In contrast, the *academic literacies* approach sees the

academic community as heterogeneous where writing is a ‘contextualised social practice’.

This theoretical approach adds a dimension to Lave and Wenger’s model in that it challenges the relatively stable nature of communities of practice. Indeed, Creme and Lea’s (2003) advice to students is to recognise that academic writing is not just subject-specific but module-specific and dependent on the ‘orientation of the course and the academic staff who designed it’ (p26). Support for idea that tutors mark differently can be found in many studies (for example: Orr, 2004; Price, 2005; Read, Francis and Robson, 2005).

Furthermore, students’ background and prior language experience will impact on this process of transition. Writing and learning cannot be separated as there is an integral relationship between writing and knowledge construction’ (Somerville and Creme 2005, p18). Assisting students to write is a key element of raising their achievement in learning and new groups of students may be particularly disadvantaged, because they do not bring with them the same tacit knowledge of the system as their privileged peers (Yorke & Longden 2004). Northedge (2003a) supports the view that assessment tasks are particularly challenging for students from backgrounds whose prior (and coexisting) discursive worlds may be very different from the academic community they have joined.

This stance is supported by Lillis (2001) who argues that ‘essayist literacy is the privileged literacy practice within society’ (p53) and that in order to be successful in higher education, students must learn the conventions of this form of literacy. However, some students do not bring with them the linguistic capital that makes the process easy. These researchers are part of a growing group of HE writers who draw on the work of Bourdieu (for example Thomas 2001) and notions of ‘habitus’ to explain how traditional students enjoy an unfair advantage in education, firmly rooted in social background.

Consequently, becoming a successful HE student, measured essentially through the capacity to write satisfactory assignments and examinations, is conceived here as a complex task and not open to simple tutor instruction or written advice. It involves the learning of tacit knowledge, new social practices and forms of expression and negotiating the meaning and demands of individual assignments with tutors and peers. A clear implication of this argument for tutors is the need to support actively students' entry into the academic community of practice through opportunities to *participate* in the assessment process (O'Donovan, Price & Rust, 2004, Elwood & Klenowski, 2002, Somerville & Crème 2005), not just as a writer but as a participant in all stages of assessment and marking. This imperative has, therefore, generated a range of teaching activities including use of marking exercises, discussion of exemplars and self and peer assessment. And whilst it is helpful for all students, it is particularly important for those least able to draw on existing social and cultural capital in adjusting to the demands of HE.

In this paper we examine these factors in the context of case study research about student writing. More specifically, this paper reports on the second phase of an action research project designed to raise the achievement of students with relatively low entry qualifications. Phase 1 of the project (reported elsewhere, 2004) investigated activities designed to help new students learn more effectively what is expected of them as HE learners within their subject discipline. Whilst the immediate outcomes of that project were generally positive, the second phase of the research was designed to explore whether there was any long-term impact of this intervention on the students' approach to writing tasks.

Data Collection

The aim of this two-phase study, conducted over two years, was to investigate the longer term impact of activities designed to improve students' ability to write assignments through increasing their understanding of assessment demands and criteria. Phase one of the research took place in Level 1 (first year of undergraduate study) of students' degree programme and included an evaluation of the impact, on student work, of opportunities to practice using assessment criteria and grade descriptors, together with peer marking including the compilation of written feedback. The outcomes of this research are reported elsewhere (2004). Phase two of the project follows up the impact of this earlier intervention one year on and, additionally, explores students' approaches to written assessment more generally.

The sample for this research consisted of six Sports Studies (SS) students who had participated in phase one of the research the previous year and six Business Management Studies (BMS) students. The students were contacted by their respective Programme Leaders and invited to participate in research about the process of completing written assessments so that it might inform future practice. However, they were not told that it was a follow up to the original research. These students were identified on the basis of their Level 1 academic performance such that, relative to their peers, they were in the top, the middle, or the bottom of their cohort which progressed into Level 2. The BMS students group acted as a quasi-control group because they had not been exposed to a formal intervention at Level 1 designed to raise awareness about the importance of marking criteria and grade descriptors. Ultimately, the sample consisted of four men and eight women aged between 19 and 23 years (mean of 20.3 years). The relatively small sample size reflects the qualitative and exploratory nature of this research.

All interviews were conducted by an interviewer not connected to either degree programme. The researchers thoroughly briefed the interviewer with regard to the nature of the project and the written work completed by the students. In accordance with standard ethical procedures, we asked participants to sign a consent form and provided contact details should they wish to clarify any issues about the project.

Using in depth interviews students were first asked to describe the processes involved in the completion of their most recently submitted written assignment.

Subsequent questions probed the sources of information and the additional support mechanisms used to complete their essay. Lastly, the interviewer reminded students about the Level 1 exercise and requested participants to give their view on the value of this exercise for subsequent work.

The interviews lasted between 12 and 35 minutes (average 20 minutes) and transcripts were made of each interview. As researchers we met regularly to review our interpretations to ensure consistency in the meanings we attached to the data. In order to make sense of our qualitative data, we began by reviewing the transcripts and identifying general themes, for example, support mechanisms. We subsequently explored these themes in more detail developing a second layer of categories where appropriate and reviewing our findings in the light of existing research evidence. We also examined relationships between themes, for example, we considered how students used their time to write their essay in relation to the number of hours spent in paid employment. Finally, to support the interpretation of the interview data, a small sample of module booklets and completed assignment coversheets from both SS and BMS were scrutinized.

Findings

The primary aim of this research was to investigate the long-term impact, if any, of the intervention carried out in Level 1, designed to promote student understanding of the assessment (and reported elsewhere, 2004). In this section we begin by discussing the impact of the Level 1 intervention, before examining the assessment process in relation to students' use of informal support mechanisms, use of feedback on previous assignments and students' perceptions of the factors that influence their performance.

The impact of the intervention activities during their first year

A key purpose of the intervention in Level 1 was to develop students' understanding of formal guidance provided to assist completion of assessments. This guidance included assignment titles and guidelines for assessment produced in module booklets; the latter presented in bullet point form and constituting the criteria used to mark students' work.

College grade descriptors served as the second formal guidance mechanism, comprising a written description of the level of work required for a 1st, 2i, 2ii, 3 or fail assignment at each level of undergraduate study. Students receive copies of these on registration.

When questioned about assessment guidelines and grade descriptors, eleven students said that they found the assessment guidelines helpful although the extent to which the students were able to articulate what it was they found helpful differed according to their degree programme. BMS students made very general statements such as "I find them helpful" or " I use them". In contrast, all six SS students were able to articulate to the interviewer much more precisely how they used the criteria. They mentioned using them as a checklist, helping them to plan, to make notes, as well as

providing a basic outline for their essay, highlighting key areas for inclusion. This suggests that SS students use the guidelines to a greater extent than BMS students.

This difference might be accounted for in two ways. First, closer examination of BMS and SS' module booklets revealed that the former offered more general comments, for example, 'A successful assignment will generate material from a variety of sources'. By comparison, the guidelines issued in SS module booklets contained more specific content information such as: 'A successful answer will outline the principles of training'. Additionally, SS module booklets contain a checklist of 'key concepts' which should be included in an essay.

The second factor which might account for the greater clarity of answers from SS students could be because SS students had taken part in a peer assessment exercise which required them to use *the guidelines for a successful answer* to mark work completed by their peers. The peer marking was itself tutor-marked as an incentive for the students to engage seriously with the process of writing feedback. To test the impact of this experience SS students were asked whether they remembered peer marking each others' posters and what impact, if any, it had had on the way they approached assignments.

All could remember the poster marking exercise, however, none remembered it with enthusiasm and half the group actively disliked the experience. Two felt it was not completely anonymous and two were not keen on the group work involved. Four of the six found the exercise difficult because of concerns over how others were marking, having to guess at the boundary criteria and having to mark people down because, although they had put in a lot of effort, they had not done what was required.

"It didn't seem fundamental to my course because it wasn't, it's not my job to mark 'cos I don't want to be a teacher overall, I want to be a coach. So I'm not

going to be marking people on that aspect but I can see where they're coming from in that them justifying how we get our marks and why we get our marks. So I thought that was quite beneficial in a way but it was just victimising our, against the students because everybody knew who marked everybody else's work and you wondered why you got this grade...But in other ways it made us realise what you had to do to get better grades overall... I think it's because of the poster exercise that made me look at the 'successful answer' (assessment criteria in the module handbook) in the first place" (male, low range, SS)

Nevertheless, as with the above student, five of the six students saw value in the activity including an understanding of how to mark, having the opportunity to see others' work, having to follow a marking scheme and referring to guidelines for a successful answer. Therefore, although the students claimed that the exercise had not influenced their subsequent writing, there is evidence from the data that they were more likely to have paid attention to the *guidelines for a successful answer* in the construction of their assignment.

Differences were also noted between the two groups of students in relation to the use of grade descriptors. In contrast to the assessment guidelines, it was the BMS students who reported making more use of them. All were aware that such grade descriptors existed and five out of six said that they made use of them. Two mentioned using them when they wanted to improve their grade from a 2ii to a 2i.

"I have read them a couple of times...when I really, really want to do well and I think what would make this better and I read it and think well is it all of those things, if it isn't there must be something that I could do to improve it" (female high score, BMS)

The reverse situation existed for SS students. None said they used them and only three were aware of them. The greater awareness shown by BMS students of the college grade descriptors is possibly because BMS module booklets contain summaries of the grade descriptors whereas SS booklets do not. This observation suggests that simply presenting students with information once, for example in a programme handbook, does not mean that they will make use of it. Having a summary of the grade descriptors alongside each assessment rubric appears to encourage students to make use of them.

There was also some evidence that providing students with assessment criteria turned their essay writing into a mechanistic exercise designed to earn marks rather than develop and express understanding of the topic:

"I get an A4 piece of paper for each piece of, 5, (assessment criteria) ...examine the texts and lift out from the texts and put it in whichever section I feel relevant, that's how I do it,....you're getting your five pieces of work, separate pieces of the question and you just string them all together and structure it" (male, high score, SS)

"If it is a short essay, if its like 2000 or maybe 1500, I'll use that (assessment criteria) as my plan, try to use it as my plan but in this one because it's so big, just make sure I got everything in" (female, high score, SS)

The tendency of SS students to rely solely on the information contained in the module booklet means that whilst they are likely to produce satisfactory levels of work because they meet the requirements for a successful answer, achievement beyond this may be limited. Price (2005) suggests that "criteria may limit the expectations of staff

and students about what could be achieved if only threshold standards are defined" (p219).

Moreover, although grade descriptors provide information regarding what is needed to achieve marks above threshold standards, Norton (2004) indicates that such detailed criteria can encourage a mechanistic, mark-oriented, tutor-dependent approach in students. She argues that this can work against students seriously engaging with the learning process. Likewise O'Donovan et al (2004) suggest that 'We must refrain from the temptation to give yet more and more explanatory detail' (p333) because the nature of the tacit knowledge we are seeking to transfer means it can only be learnt through 'practice, imitation and observation' (p331).

Informal Support Mechanisms

Certainly our sample did not appear to see written assessment information as a substitute for tutor support. The interviews revealed a strong emphasis amongst the respondents on the importance of informal support from tutors. Two thirds of the students stated that a factor which helped them improve performance was clarification of the assignment by the tutor with half of those specifically mentioning verbal clarification:

"I just need someone to say it to me in my sort of, my, I don't know if dialect's the word, the way I can understand, just break it down....only five minutes of my lecturer's time....I'll have it in my head then, I'll just go away and sit down and begin." (male, high score, SS)

Their stress on verbal clarification indicates that they were not just looking for further information but, almost, a translation into language that they could understand. In addition, the students indicated that this verbal cue-seeking enabled them to identify the particular expectations of individual tutors.

"I think most of the tutors should just really go over and just say what, what is expected of us because even though sometimes it is in the module guide, people, you know, *people interpret in different ways* (*our italics*) and unless they actually say it, and you know, 'cos you don't actually sometimes know what the essay is actually about, you just write about it putting things in, not actually really, I don't think, understanding what you're writing".

(Female, mid range, BMS)

The fact that students perceived informal verbal dialogue and communication by and with tutors as crucial in their understanding of both assessment tasks and feedback should not be seen as surprising given the body of literature which suggests that students experience difficulties interpreting tutor expectations because of the potential language gulf between students and tutors (Orr, 2004; Price, 2005; Read, Francis and Robson, 2005).

What emerges from this research is not, as Northedge (2003b) suggests, that tutors should reframe ideas for students within a specialist discourse, but that students want staff to reframe the specialist discourse in language they find familiar. They do see tutors as translators, but in the opposite direction to that conceived by Northedge, that is, tutors mediate between the language of the academic discipline and students' everyday language and understanding. This perhaps indicates that the most effective teachers at least in students' initial engagement with HE are those that can slip effortlessly from subject to 'everyday' discourse and back again.

Students' perception that dialogue with tutors impacts on their achievement is not unexpected. Certainly other research (Parmar and Trotter 2004) supports the view that students value sessions which are organised to allow questions and discussion as this is

where they ‘felt their learning was being cemented’ (p163). However, Rust et al (2005) point to the lack of evidence that smaller classes and greater opportunity for dialogue result in the speedier exchange of tacit knowledge. Nevertheless, these students appear to appreciate discussion yet have little structured access to dialogue with tutors.

Use of Feedback on previous assignments

One of the key concerns for tutors is trying to ensure that students use feedback given on assignments in the preparation of subsequent coursework. There are two specific concerns. One is to ensure that students understand what is written and the second is to encourage them to use it. Sampling examples of tutor feedback from a range of SS and BMS assignments revealed that tutors offered 50-125 words written feedback on a cover sheet in addition to the grade. Quantitatively more feedback was offered by SS tutors than by BMS tutors.

Nine students reported that feedback was helpful, although two SS students claimed not to use it, and two BMS students indicated that it was of variable quality or quantity. More specifically, students stated that feedback helped them to reference more effectively, improve the structure of their essays, use more sources, answer the question and increase their confidence. Interestingly, BMS students were better able to articulate the benefits of feedback. This observation is noteworthy because it raises questions about the way that feedback is given and its interpretation by students as the BMS students only receive approximately half the quantity of written feedback as compared with the SS students. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesise first, that less feedback helps the students to focus on one or two key areas, secondly, that BMS feedback is written in simpler language and lastly, that BMS feedback is providing students with very concrete actions, for example referencing protocols, using more sources of information, and linking paragraphs.

Overall students placed strong emphasis on the usefulness of verbal clarification of feedback.

"The feedback....I got the other day was quite good becausehe said what I did wrong, he actually went through it and pointed out in the essay the bits that, and I understood what he meant then.....When the lecturer is sat next to me and says right this is...it was better when he actually said to me – sat me down and said." (Female, high score, SS)

"I'd rather sit down with them and talk about which they are not always able to do....but I'd rather speak to them about it usually but they don't always have time....they can break it down a bit more" (Female, low score, SS)

This raises the question of how far students can digest and act on written feedback. Higgins (2000) argues that failure of communication in this respect has its roots, amongst other things, in the differing and often tacit discourses of academic disciplines from which students are frequently excluded. Furthermore, Ivanic et al (2000) make the point that one tutor's feedback may not apply to another tutor's work and thus students are less likely to pay it attention. These quotations regarding feedback suggest that the students, despite being in their second year, remain at least partially excluded from the subject discourse but have identified dialogue with tutors as a key aid in negotiating the meaning of feedback.

Nevertheless Northedge (2003a) views written feedback as essential to ensuring students' capacity to participate in the academic community. He makes the case that traditional exposition of subject matter is not sufficient in and of itself for learning to occur as the meaning making is probably taking place for the tutor in that situation, rather than

for the students. Likewise, student to student discussion may be too low level as they continue to use an ‘everyday’ discourse and are not obliged to practice using different language. He therefore, as with Ivanic et al (2000), stresses the importance of feedback which seeks to engage the student in some form of dialogue by the way it is written. However Ivanic et al suggest that this practice as an aim of feedback is ‘surprisingly rare’ and tutors rarely build in time for dialogue at a formative stage.

Lillis (2001) also stresses the importance of feedback, drawing on the notion of ‘addressivity’ to explain how a tutor’s response to writing in progress can help the student develop and clarify the meaning in their work: “are you trying to say.....” or “what is the point you are trying to make in this paragraph....”. In other words, the dialogue taking place with reference to an assignment can help the student develop the emergent meaning in their writing. These interviews support the need for dialogue as essential to understanding feedback but students seek it in a face-to-face form, challenging the notion that you can simulate interaction through questions in written feedback.

Finally, two other factors which might be thought to affect students’ capacity to comprehend feedback, gender and Level One performance had no impact. And perhaps more surprisingly, those students who performed better in their Level One modules did not report making more effective use of feedback than students who had performed less well.

Conclusions

To conclude, phase two of this research which examined the longer term impact of phase one – a level 1 intervention that used a range of activities to engage students in assessment of writing – produced mixed results. There is evidence that this process helped students to pay attention to formal assessment information and marking criteria

in a way that they would not have done otherwise. Nevertheless the negative reaction to the process suggests that more effort needs to be put into explaining the rationale for the activities to the students. The results also suggest that the work needs extending, possibly into later semesters, to assist students in raising their achievement beyond their initial performance.

The data indicates that assessment language is not seen as transparent by students and further contact with tutors is perceived as central to understanding what is expected. In drawing on the notion of learning as socially situated, these students appear to recognise, if only intuitively, that their learning is situated in a specific context and learning through informal dialogue is an important counterpart to formal teaching and instructions.

This presents a much greater challenge to tutors both in terms of recognising that they do have different expectations of students despite those outlined in assessment criteria and marking schemes, and secondly, in finding effective and time efficient ways to engage in dialogue with students in order to help them join the relevant academic ‘community of practice’. The growth in student class sizes has lead to tutor-student discussion being replaced by student-student discussion with the inherent drawback that debate stays within a non-academic discourse (Northedge 2003a). On the basis of the results reported here we believe that there are a number of implications for practitioners, namely that they should consider:

- Putting all relevant assessment information in module handbooks including assessment criteria and marking schemes so that students can read what is required to achieve both threshold and higher levels of performance

- Engaging students in activities which make them attend to the assessment information (marking criteria and grade descriptors) that is provided in module handbooks
- Providing the opportunity for dialogue about assignments both in the preparation stage and during feedback

Whilst the first suggestion requires some investment by course teams and residual concerns regarding consistency of interpretation of criteria, there are now well documented examples of successful practice in engaging students in assessment ‘training’ activities (Gibbs, 1999, O’Donovan et al, 2004). Somerville and Crème (2005) relate a successful experiment using free writing to assist students in developing their sense of voice and authority in writing.

The bigger challenge is providing the opportunity for close dialogue between students and tutors. Furthermore, ‘regular and meaningful contact with tutors’ (Zepke & Leach 2005, p50) has been linked to better student retention. However, as staffing levels are unlikely to support significant one-to-one dialogue in undergraduate courses, we need to seek an adequate substitute. In this regard, we may have something to learn from web-based student discussion. The act of writing encourages a greater level of formality, and on-line moderation offers staff the opportunity to reframe student comments in the language of the discipline, as advocated by Northedge (2003b).

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