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Assessment for confidence: Exploring the impact that low stakes assessment design has on student retention

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Abstract

This article explores student achievement and confidence in a university Business School. The research is centred on creating innovative assessments during the key transition year focusing on creating **Assessment for Confidence**. This aims to eliminate barriers to success, improve student engagement with their Community Of Practice and therefore increase student retention.

This study consisted of longitudinal practitioner action research over four years within the University of Cumbria Business School identifying students' perceptions of their barriers to learning. The research identified study skills, academic language, socialisation and traditional formal assessment as the main barriers to student achievement. Key conclusions were that early low-stakes assessment designed for improving confidence was an excellent vehicle for increasing student engagement and retention.

Keywords: student retention, assessment, confidence, communities of practice, higher education, low stakes.

Introduction:

Current academic thinking such as Yorke (2008) highlights that one of the most important areas for academics, researchers and policy makers, within the first-year student experience arena, is to successfully manage the transition to higher education. This is especially crucial when dealing with the increasing widening participation nature of the student body, and addresses the vital issues of retention and student engagement. Studies have indicated that student retention rates show huge disparities across UK universities, especially in those with a large intake of non-traditional entrants (Bennett & Kane, 2009). These students are encouraged to apply to and enter higher education within the UK; however they encounter a mixed response from institutions in terms of available support and willingness to engage with transitional activities (Chapman, Parmar & Trotter, 2007).

Research (Tinto, 1993, Yorke, 2001) has shown that the critical point in the academic year for student attrition is when the first formal assessment is due for submission. Creating a context where this assessment anxiety is lessened, and students form tighter bonds with their course and peers, can help to overcome this main barrier to continued engagement.

This article reports on a longitudinal action-research based study completed at the University of Cumbria Business School. The research focuses on how assessment practices can be redesigned to develop academic confidence. It outlines the interventions within business and management students' core first module assessment, and the analysis of the impact this had on student retention, self-efficacy and academic confidence (Bandura 1995).

We argue that the new concept of **Assessment for Confidence** can offer an alternative assessment strategy to the formative and summative models that are traditionally used.

Methodology

This research was carried out over four years using an action- research based methodology. This approach was chosen because we wanted to explore why students are not engaging effectively with their learning, and what we as practitioners can do to alter this phenomenon rather than describing what has happened. Thus the research required a less rigid and more contextual basis from which to work that enabled changes to the focus or direction of the research whilst still undertaking it.

Action research is described by McKernan as: '*a form of professional development for the reflective practitioner*' (1996:vi). However, action research is more than just a continuous development tool for practitioners and has been an important part of business and management research and consulting since the 1940s.

The research took a spiral process rather than an iterative one as it was felt that there were many potential areas to improve and that each one would benefit greatly and scaffold from the previous intervention results as proposed by McNiff (2005). The Reid and Barrington Continuous Development Spiral (1999:73) was used as a basis for the interventions. It argues that students start at the point where there is a need for new knowledge and skills. They are apprehensive at first but the successful achievement of their learning goals leads to greater confidence and the ability to work at a higher level. Each successful achievement of a learning goal decreases the apprehension until there is no apprehension, only enthusiasm for learning. See Fig 1

Fig 1 in here

This model provides a useful platform of competencies with the focus being on gaining confidence. Self-efficacy and independence are achieved as the learner moves up the spiral. Students would traditionally move up the spiral throughout their studies, as they learn and develop from each assessment, but this is not always easy and there are potential barriers to overcome before some students can develop. Non-traditional students may face more of these barriers before they can achieve success in their learning goals.

Exploring what these barriers are from a student perspective formed the initial phase of our research. During routine first semester personal tutoring meetings, students were asked to discuss any problems or barriers they had experienced in completing their first assessments. Amongst their comments were:

Sometimes I've no idea what the lecturers mean. They have their own language.

I haven't written an essay for years, I don't know where to start

I'm not living on campus so don't really know anyone yet, it's all a bit daunting at the moment.

The main potential barriers to student development identified by the students can be grouped into four main categories: study skills, socialisation, academic language and formal academic assessment. A critical analysis of the literature within management education and pedagogy informed our research, and was subsequently utilised to create the new assessment design.

Literature Review

Study Skills

Many university teaching and learning strategies are based upon a deficit/gap analysis approach to student needs (Meer & Hurford 2007). This identifies a student who looks to develop their academic skills as being somehow less than they should be. However, the preparedness for academic learning naturally relies on prior education levels. A better understanding of the legacy left by this prior educational experience may help with transition (Dooley, 2004). In addition, research by Fee, Greenan and Wall (2010) concluded that a prevailing attitude of lecturers is that skills deficiencies are a student's problem and not theirs.

For many new university students the size of first-year classes may be a surprise as would the speed of content and delivery. Much of the research on skills development has focused on individual subject areas (Holman, 1995; Booth, 2001; Pitts, 2005) although similarities exist across the subject areas, with aspects of the first year a challenge to all students (Cottrell, 2001)

Socialisation

Yorke (1999) researched students who left higher education early and found that their integration into the institution was dependent on both their academic experiences and their social experience. Students need to feel a sense of belonging to an institution and feel that they fit in both academically and socially. For non-traditional students this

process of socialisation may be more problematic. To accept these students into higher education without any tailored support would be a travesty of both the social justice of higher education, and more importantly, the self-confidence and belief of the student themselves. Many of the support mechanisms adopted by institutions to help attract and retain non-traditional students also help the traditional students who themselves are often ill equipped to cope with university education (Rhode & Nevill, 2004).

Academic success is a vital component in student integration and retention. If the students are not equipped with the necessary tools and skills to ensure success then provision needs to be made at the institutional level to provide them with those skills.

Academic Language

Students may struggle with information overload. Academic staff need to ensure that students are given the 'right' amount of written information. If students are struggling to understand what is required, we may need to utilise techniques and exercises to help them. The solution is not just to give them more information but to help them engage with the information they already have and present it in a format that gradually introduces them to academic language, as the discourse itself can be a significant barrier (Channock, 2000; Fung, 2006; Walker, 2009). One study by Williams (2005) experimented with a large cohort of students and their lecturers asking each to define a variety of assessment task verbs such as 'analyse' or 'critically discuss' and found significant differences in their understanding, especially across the disciplines.

In order to develop these skills Price (2005) discussed developing communities of practice between academic staff to ensure consistency of marking and transparency between disciplines. Students also need the opportunity and exposure to the academic language through integration into the community of practice. Opportunity to experiment is also necessary through formative assessment. Practice and engagement with written work is crucial for understanding the discourse, as is a gradual approach to developing these skills. However the use of formative assessment within universities is declining as economic factors influence the time and resources that academics have to engage in non-summative work.

Formal Academic Assessment

The assessment process is at the 'heart of the student experience' (Brown & Knight, 1984) and is therefore a key area that students focus on. To ensure transparency in the process most assessments now come with grade criteria, a marking matrix and level descriptors. This transfer of this explicit knowledge is useful, however the language used within these documents can be a further barrier (Meer & Chapman, 2013).

Lea and Stierer (2000) developed the concept of academic literacies and argued that these need to be absorbed over a period of time and cannot be taught. This tacit knowledge that students need to learn by practising is much harder to transfer, especially if the opportunity for practice and discovery is limited in the course structure. Orr (2004) argued that the lack of academic cultural capital that non-traditional students often have means that more work on tacit knowledge is needed. Workshops around assessment criteria and using criteria to mark with peer assessment have been successful (Rust et al, 2003; O'Donovan et al, 2004; Price, 2007; O'Donovan, 2008) as has the use of exemplars (Norton et al, 2004; Chapman & Bloxham, 2004). All these techniques enable students to understand expectations and level criteria.

The Interventions:

In order to address the barriers that the students highlighted and the issue of retention as discussed within the literature review, the students' first assignment within their core first semester module was nominated for this **Assessment for Confidence** approach. It was felt that students 'coasted' until the first assessment was due, and then had a *critical moment* (Morgan & Nutt, 2006). From the module statistics it was clear that the majority of students who withdrew stopped engaging around the time of the first assessment. This was November as this was a year-long module. This relatively late first assessment meant that the students went through the first eight weeks without having to prove themselves. By the time of the summative assessment they felt they were so far behind that they couldn't catch up.

Using the Reid and Barrington spiral (Fig 1) a simple, low-stakes task is set; if successful, the students gain an early 'Win'. This gives them the confidence and efficacy to go on to more complex assessments. This initial IT competency task only contributed 20% of their overall module mark. The 'low stakes' are important as it gives them the chance to practise and gain academic literacy without the fear generated by a high-stakes assessment (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). The assessment was designed with Sadler's (1989, 1998) proposal that a feedback loop must exist for students to benefit. The students firstly need to have a goal or target; then they need to be able to compare their performance with said goal; finally they need to engage in an action that closes the gap.

These changes developed over four years of tutor and student feedback (an action research approach), with each iteration building on the previous year.

- The first iteration was developed to improve confidence. This involved bringing forward the assessment deadline to much earlier in their learning (week four) than had been tried before. The assessment itself also changed

from a traditional content-based assignment to a process-based one. So the students are given the task and a template. They have to reproduce the answer using the detailed guidelines thereby demonstrating that they can follow instructions and produce a high quality business report.

- The second iteration was to improve self-efficacy and feedback. This involved the development of a self-assessment grid and a seven-day marking turnaround deadline. The self-assessment was to provide a measure of self-awareness and efficacy and to link to Sadler's feedback loop. Self-assessment is the student's identification of their ability; the quick feedback from the lecturer identifies the gaps of both ability and of understanding the criteria. This was followed up by an optional one-to-one tutorial to allow the feedback to become dialogical (McDowell et al, 2008; Nicol, 2010).
- The third and last iteration included lecturer and student co-created marking criteria to encourage engagement and understanding. In order to develop learning, feedback was given in both a written format and via oral tutorials embedded into class contact time. This was a step-up from the previous iteration as it was felt to be so useful that it needed to be compulsory not optional. Whilst the written feedback can be taken away, digested and compared to others, the oral one to one feedback gives an opportunity for dialogue. The feedback fed into a voluntary non-capped resubmission opportunity, offered to all students to improve their grade. This focuses and locates the feedback on a draft assessment and means that the feedback immediately becomes feed-forward.

Results and Discussion

The three changes to this assessment led to a gradual development of the **Assessment for Confidence** concept with the opportunity for the researchers to reflect upon and refine each intervention. In each year the students filled out a Module Evaluation Questionnaire (MEQ) and their comments together with the lecturer's reflections and analysis fed into the next iteration.

The first iteration brought the assessment earlier in the academic year. This engaged students with the assessment as early as possible and provide a 'low stakes' opportunity leading to student success. The students appreciated the early deadline and said:

Good to get stuck in to some work straight away

Nice to get an assignment out of the way

The assessment itself was also changed from a content-based to a process based one in order to test and evaluate students' ability to fulfil assessment requirements rather

than testing students' knowledge or academic writing skills. This removed any anxiety that the students might have felt with their first higher education assessment, raising confidence and self-esteem.

The second iteration brought in a student self-assessment grid which enabled them to engage in the process of marking and evaluation and a seven-day feedback deadline to ensure the immediacy and value of the feedback. The self-assessment grid enables the student to begin the process of acquiring academic literacy skills, familiarising themselves with academic language and participate in their community of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al, 2002; Lea, 2005). The seven-day feedback was particularly beneficial. The students said:

Feedback was informative and useful for the future

Feedback was given on a personal level

The lecturer's approach meant that you knew what you were doing and why you were doing it.

The final iteration brought in a co-created marking criteria which transformed the criterion from a lecturer-owned document to a lecturer/student shared communication. The re-draft opportunity offered within this final iteration meant that the feedback fed forward into greater learning success. This was included to 'nudge' the behaviour of students towards *utilising* their feedback rather than simply reading it, an active approach rather than passive. Student comments were:

Feedback on assessments was honest

Good feedback on assignments which I have thoroughly benefitted from

Help with assessments when you needed it

Feedback on assignments is always quick. Comments are helpful and explanatory so we can learn and improve.

Covic and Jones (2008) found that students viewed a resubmission opportunity as a safety net. In our study over 90% of the students took the opportunity to resubmit and improve their mark, even if a high-achieving mark had been given in the first place. In the 'Continuous Development Spiral' Reid and Barrington (1997) argued that learning and development are linked to a lessening of apprehension and increased confidence. This is achieved through a developing spiral of testing activities, feedback, and then further activities with each one building upon the success of the previous one. In this way, students can apply the learning gained on this assessment to other modules and gain from 'transferable feedback'.

Students said:

I knew I was going to get a good mark on the re-done one and I've started the essay for (Tutor Name) class already because I know what to do now

The feedback on this assignment can help with the next one

In terms of socialisation, the sense of belonging and 'becoming' a student is often linked to assessment. Once a new student has completed an assessment/feedback cycle they feel more settled in. Having this assessment so early in the transition period means that the process of 'belonging' to both academia and a particular institution/programme is at the forefront of their first year experience. An early assessment also foregrounds study skills and introduces academic literacy in terms of language, marking criteria and assessment practices. The low-stakes aspect of this assessment is also crucial as it allows the student to accumulate grades slowly, across the year. This process-based approach also allowed for high marks if the instructions were followed correctly. This confidence-building is crucial for retention and progression across other modules in the programme.

One student said:

I didn't ever think I could get a first, do you think I could get another one?
I bet I could!

This goes deeper than simply building confidence, progressing into self-belief and personal aspirations. This sense of self-awareness and self-efficacy is paramount for success (Bandura, 1995).

These changes also had a significant impact on retention. Over the four years of analysis, retention improved from a 15% attrition rate to just over 5%. The university itself had student retention as a high priority and so there were several university-wide retention initiatives taking place during the time of this study. However the Business School retention was still higher than the university average.

Conclusions

This research has demonstrated that an early low-stakes assessment strategy addresses student concerns and anxieties around their abilities. It introduces them to their community of practice and raises both their expectations and confidence. Designing assessment that overcomes the potential barriers to self-development did have a significant impact upon academic literacy through the Continuous Development Spiral. This spiral approach enables a scaffolded perspective on student skills and self-efficacy.

The final iteration offers a model for **Assessment for Confidence**

- Early (within four weeks of starting a course)
- Low-stakes (10-20% of overall mark is suggested)

- Simplified task
- Quick turnaround for marking
- Written and oral feedback given
- Self-assessment form for the students
- Opportunity for re-draft

These seven aspects of the **Assessment for Confidence** approach led to a direct improvement in retention as those students who traditionally would leave around the first assessment point had tasted success earlier on in the semester. This leads to self-belief and raised expectations, especially crucial in universities that have embraced the widening-participation agenda and have a large percentage of non-traditional students.

Further research

This action-research project highlights a significant area for student experience and the transition to university. National Student Survey statistics indicate that one of the major areas for concern for institutions in the UK is assessment and feedback. This project has shown that by making adjustments in the assessment design and schedule can have clear benefits for retention and progression. One of the areas within these iterations was co-created marking criteria. This has been extended to other modules with successful outcomes. Further research in this area is on-going.

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