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Sink or Swim? Using Assessment Criteria To Help Students Reach Their Potential

Amanda Chapman, a.chapman@ucsm.ac.uk

Abstract

St Martin's College is a small higher education college that has effectively embraced the widening participation agenda. Many of our students are first generation higher education users and come from low socio-economic backgrounds. The culture and 'habitas' of an academic institution is one that is often unfamiliar and alien to them. Understanding assessment criteria is one of the many key skills that students have to acquire quickly. Knowing what is required is a vital step to producing assessments that showcase ability. However, the language often used in grade descriptors and marking criteria can be a barrier to some. This research attempts to address some of these issues using active research methods in a multi-disciplinary cross-college project. This paper looks at the results of a year of strategic interventions for a first-year economics group. A variety of interventions were used in both semesters including tuition with marking criteria and grade descriptors, the use of exemplars, feedback analysis and formative peer review analysis. These different approaches will be evaluated and a successful model to help students reach their potential will be proposed. This paper will be of interest to anyone who teaches first-year students from diverse backgrounds.

Introduction

This paper outlines the experience of one specific section of an action research project funded by an ILT 'Making a Difference Award' for developing students' understanding of assessment. This was a multi-disciplinary cross-College project that used a variety of strategic interventions in subjects such as Sports Studies, Education, Youth and Community Studies and Economics at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. These subject areas were chosen to capture as wide a variety of students as possible. For example, a specific route was chosen in Education to yield a high proportion of mature students; Youth and Community Studies was a postgraduate route that had to balance academic achievement with professional practice; Sports Studies had a high proportion of first generation HE students and Economics had an international dimension.

This paper will look at the theoretical concepts underpinning the project followed by an analysis of the interventions used in the Economics subject area. It will conclude with an outline of the methods that have now been embedded within the curriculum that help students gain a better understanding of assessment criteria and reach their potential.

Theoretical Underpinning

Tinto (1993) argues that social and academic integration are the two most important factors in the retention of students. For social integration many studies have found that when students gain a sense of belonging to an institution and a peer group, this will help enormously with progression. Read, Archer & Leathwood (2003) studied a group of non-traditional students at a post-92 university. They concluded that students chose institutions where they will encounter other people of the same age, ethnicity and class. Other studies (Hutchings & Archer, 2001, Reay et al, 2001) have reached the same

conclusion. This notion of a peer group and successful integration is one that is explored in this project through the use of a formative peer review analysis.

In terms of the academic integration, Thomas (2002) looks at the notion of 'institutional habitas' together with retention. Institutional habitas draws on Bourdieu's work on habitas referring to the norms and practices of social classes or groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The work on 'academic literacy' (Lea & Stierer, 2000) highlights the 'situated' nature of communities of practice so that not only are different institutions culturally nuanced in terms of distinct attitudes, values and traditions but departments and sections within each institution can be too. Due to modularisation this can lead to students having to become academically literate in more than one subject area. What Lea & Street (1998) term 'course switching'. As students switch between the numerous disciplines, different assumptions are made about the nature of writing and academic knowledge. Students are expected to learn the different demands of individual subject lecturers, a feat that is often needed within the first six to eight weeks of term.

Krause (2001) analysed the ways in which student's experiences during the writing process of their first major written assignment can contribute to their academic integration. This first assignment can become a *rite of passage* and, depending on the outcome, can be a door to integration or attrition. She writes:

Part of the adjustment process for novice first-year university essay writers involves becoming acquainted with the needs of the academic audience.....The marker's interaction with first-year students is another critical factor contributing to the quality of students' integration via the essay marking and feedback process.(2001, p163)

The first assignment therefore, is a vital step along the way of academic progression and national developments have encouraged universities to provide transparent assessment information. However, Rust et al (2003) highlight the tacit nature of assessment criteria and acknowledge the difficulty of transferring this knowledge to others. Lea & Steirer (2000) view academic writing as a 'contextualised social practice' where the rules are not made explicit to students. Due to the diverse nature and composition of the student body (especially at institutions such as St Martin's College) there is a need more than ever to make apparent exactly what is expected. So students are presented with a raft of information; grade descriptors, level descriptors, constructively aligned learning outcomes, programme specifications and assessment criteria. All these are presented in carefully constructed academic language and not necessarily designed for their target audience. Indeed, expressing all these in an appropriate language is difficult for any audience, not least a novice academic.

The main objective of this project was to enable students, using an action research approach, to improve their understanding of assessment criteria and hence boost performance. The research was coordinated by the Centre for the Development of Learning and Teaching at St Martin's so any clear outcomes could be written into policy documents for embedding across the curriculum.

The Project and Methodology

St Martin's College is a small College of Higher Education located in the North West of England with 7000 full-time equivalent students. The College offers courses in arts, humanities and social sciences and it is a major national and regional provider of both professional teacher education and non-medical health related education. The College's mission includes a strong regional focus and a concern to strengthen access, equality and opportunity.

The Institution has recently developed clear assessment protocols for staff and students. The protocols include making explicit links between learning outcomes and assessment tasks, assessment criteria and common grade descriptors. The latter is a series of statements, for each credit level, which describe what a student should demonstrate in order to achieve the various grades in the academic marking scale.

This project adopted an 'action research' methodology involving participative enquiry into teaching and learning practices by several tutors. It is an approach that offers a direct link between research and professional work without privileging theory over practice, as outlined by Sander (2004):

The practitioner now assumes responsibility, through personal agency and autonomy, in a democratic setting, for identifying problems, thinking of ways to solve them, carrying out the research, considering the data and using the outcomes to inform professional practice (p2).

Subject Group

The economics course group comprised approximately half Chinese students with the other half drawn from the UK and the rest of Europe. The majority of the UK students are first generation users of Higher Education. The group was also diverse in terms of gender, age and ability. The group consisted of seventeen students and met twice-weekly for a total of four hours enabling high levels of interaction between lecturer and student. A variety of strategic interventions were used and monitored to measure their success. If an intervention was seen as successful in semester one it was used again in semester two as reinforcement.

Assessments Used

The modules concerned here were Principles of Microeconomics in semester one and Principles of Macroeconomics in semester two. The assessment for microeconomics was split into two sections, the first section being a series of market mechanism related questions concerning concepts such as demand, supply, elasticity and pricing. The second section was an article analysis. The students had to find an appropriate article relating in some way to microeconomics and explain the economic concepts behind it. Examples of the articles students found include supermarket price wars, oil prices, smoking bans and footballer transfers. The assessment in semester two related to the UK economy. Students had to find and analyse statistics related to the previous year to give an up to date assessment of how the UK economy was performing.

Tuition with Assessment Criteria and Grade Descriptors

The College has produced transparent generic College-wide grade descriptors which are given to students in their student handbook during induction week. For this exercise they were given a copy of the grade descriptors to analyse and discuss. This led to discussions about general issues around grading and a very specific discussion regarding 'grades' and the different requirements between grades. Language is crucial here as the following extracts indicate:

For 60-69%

Student has met the Learning Outcomes of the assessment with evidence of relevant and sound acquisition of knowledge & understanding.

The work shows evidence of ability to analyse based on defined classifications, principles, theories or models.

Work shows evidence that the student has applied given tools/methods accurately to well defined practical contexts and/or problems. Although the work recognises inherent complexities in the area of study, some conclusions are reached on the basis of insufficient evidence.

And for 50-59%

Student has met the Learning Outcomes of the assessment with evidence of acquisition of knowledge of the subject.

The work is largely descriptive in nature with evidence of limited reasoning based on defined classifications, principles, theories or models.

Work shows some evidence that the student has applied given tools/methods accurately to well defined practical contexts and/or problems, including limited recognition of the inherent complexities in the area of study.

Taken from Guide to Good Assessment Practice, CDLT, p59

This was the first time any of the students had looked at these grade descriptors and proved a very useful exercise, just by very simply getting the students to think about grading and requirements.

St Martin's also produces level descriptors and these were also discussed with some useful insights into progression between levels. Again, the students had not read these before and were interested in the language and specific terminology used.

At Level 1 HE: (Year 1 undergraduate), students will be able to demonstrate that they have the ability: to apply a systematic approach to the acquisition of knowledge, underpinning concepts and principles and deploy a range of subject specific, cognitive and transferable skills; evaluate the appropriateness of different approaches to solving problems and communicate outcomes in a structured and clear manner; identify and discuss the relationship between personal and work place experience and findings from books and journals and other data drawn from the field of study.

At Level 2 HE: (Year 2 undergraduate), students will be able to demonstrate that they have the ability: to apply & evaluate key concepts and theories within and outside the context in which they were first studied; select appropriately from and deploy a range of subject-specific, cognitive & transferable skills & problem solving strategies to well defined problems in the field of study and in the generation of ideas

effectively communicate information and arguments in a variety of forms; accept responsibility for determining & achieving personal outcomes; reflect on personal and work place experience in the light of recent scholarship and current statutory regulations.

Taken from Guide to Good Assessment Practice, CDLT, p51

The students were then shown the specific assessment criteria for their first piece of written work. Again, at this stage, it was purely for discussion about requirements and advice.

The assessment criteria for the microeconomics assignment were as follows

- You demonstrate evidence of a sound knowledge of the topic and use the appropriate terminology accurately
- You show an ability to analyse the subject using the principles introduced during the module. You show some evidence of critical thinking about the topic
- You make use of relevant reading and reference it accurately using the Harvard system (see Students guide to referencing)
- Your essay structure helps make the argument and discussion clear and coherent

You will not be marked on your language for THIS assignment (you may be for others) but you should be aiming for a good standard of English with few grammatical errors or spelling mistakes.

For all of the students this is their first assessment at University so this session in the first semester was extremely valuable. However, this type of intervention is one I now use for all modules and at all levels. Further discussion with students at level two and three indicates that constant reinforcement seems to be the issue here with students benefiting from a repeat of this exercise every semester.

Use of Exemplars

The students were shown a sample of work from the previous year and asked to mark the work using the grade descriptors and the assessment criteria. These exemplars had been specifically selected to provide a range of pass grades. In groups of 3, the students discussed the assignments and attempted to grade them.

This exercise was a multi faceted task: the students found it extremely useful examining the sample. Indeed, for all but one of the students, this was the first time they had seen the standard of work required for higher education. The Chinese students particularly appreciated the activity; just seeing HE level work was identified as valuable.

This exercise was done in both semesters and the semester difference was interesting. In the first semester, all the students were particularly concerned with structure rather than content and noted how the assignments were presented, how many pages they contained and what the bibliography looked like. This reinforces Rust et al's view that students focus on 'visible' tangible criteria when assessing work, possibly because it is easier to assess than other aspects. In the second semester, when the students had done a number of pieces of coursework and received the feedback they were all much more discerning and analytical in their comments and concentrated on content, level of analysis and the types of references.

In terms of actually grading the assignments though, this was very disappointing with no correlation between the groups or semesters. It was a very hit and miss exercise, one group was accurate in their grade, two groups gave a higher grade and one gave a lower grade. Interestingly, the students were also asked to comment upon the work giving both positive and critical feedback. In most cases, this was similar to the feedback that the work had actually achieved, so the issue is not in recognizing and describing the work, it is attributing the precise mark that the students find difficult.

Self Assessment Sheet

There has been a lot of research into the area of self assessment and its capacity to enhance learning and achievement. (Boud, 1986, 2000, McDonald & Boud, 2003). As long as students are given the skills necessary to make judgments about their standard of work then the reflective nature of self assessment should help the students achieve their potential. As part of the normal cover sheet for assignments St Martin's has a small section for self assessment but it is often ignored by the students. As one of the strategic interventions for this project the students were given a self assessment sheet to hand in with their assignment that attempted to get them to analyse how they researched and completed their assessment and their expected mark. One of the interesting results is students' perception of grading, especially around the 50 – 60 % mark. One student expected to get 50 – 60 % for his assignment and thought that he deserved that mark because he had '*only a basic understanding with little essay writing experience*'. In general, the students appeared to privilege effort over actual attainment. For example, another thought he deserved the same grade because he had '*done a lot of research*'. Indeed that was a common theme amongst the students that felt they should get 60% or higher. Many of the comments were '*done a lot of research*', '*included lots of references*' and '*did plenty of background reading*'.

It is difficult to read any trends into the results of this exercise; it seems to again be very varied, especially in the first semester. In the second semester almost all of the students underestimated their actual grade, with some students extremely hesitant about their achievements. In the most extreme case this was 22 marks (estimated grade 40%, actual grade 62%). Clearly, more work needs to be done to equip the students with the skills to reflect and make more accurate judgments.

Feedback Review

In the era of subject reviews, discipline audit trails, periodic inspections and the like, all calling for samples of student work, getting work back to students is a complicated process. At level one though these pressures are reduced; feedback is especially important, indeed vital for students in their academic integration process to see how they are progressing. Sadler (1989) outlined three conditions that students need to fulfil to benefit properly from feedback. These are:

- possess a concept of the standard being aimed for
- compare the actual level of performance with that goal
- engage in action to close the gap.

Actually making the students summarise the feedback means that they cannot just give it a cursory glance and the changing of feedback into an action for the future could also potentially be beneficial. The intervention here was two fold. Firstly an immediate feedback analysis was carried out using feedback from their first economics assignment.

This addressed specific issues and resulted in the development of action plans. Halfway through the second semester the students were given a feedback analysis sheet. On this they had to summarise the feedback they had received from all subjects from the first semester. This was to reinforce the first feedback analysis and to try and create 'building blocks' between modules. This is to attempt to remove the negative aspects of modularisation where students think and act in separate boxes. This was a very successful exercise and one that was taken on board by the College as a whole. It is now embedded by the feedback analysis that students keep in their Personal Development Learning Portfolios.

Formative Peer Review Analysis

This was carried out in semester two when the coursework for the core economics module was due in. The students brought in their work-in-progress, paired up and used the assessment criteria and grade descriptors to give each other feedback. The author of the work then wrote themselves feedback based on these comments. This was a very successful exercise; the students were reflective, constructive and supportive. They took the exercise seriously and acted upon the comments made. No grades were formally given but the students made judgments based on the criteria. Language and academic integration are crucial here, this would only work in semester two when the students have had some time to get a feel for 'academic literacy'. The important aspects of this intervention are the relationships within the peer group and the fact that it is a formative exercise. Relations within the peer group are important here as trust is vital. This evaluation of each other's work and providing feedback is claimed to offer students an insight into what represents good and bad practice and exposes them to different approaches (Gibbs, 1999). In my study the lack of hierarchy and power relation in the groups enhanced this exercise with the students able to discuss their opinions more freely. Ritter (1998) argues that students may not want to participate in this kind of exercise due to reluctance to criticise their peers. Greenbank (2003) found that some of his students lacked motivation for the exercise and lacked the social network within the classroom to engage effectively in this kind of discussion. His study was at Edge Hill College, a similar institution to St Martin's and the results of his study echo many of ours. Many of these students are home-based and so do not have the opportunity to build relationships and academic peer groups outside of the classroom. It is crucial therefore to embed these activities in the curriculum and facilitate the process of social integration. The Chinese students in this study have an automatic peer group and help each other academically as well as socially.

Concluding Remarks

The interventions that have become embedded within my own curriculum and have proved to be the most useful to the students are:

- Reinforcement of grade descriptors and clear assessment criteria in every module booklet
- Use of exemplars
- Timetabled embedded feedback sessions within each module for coursework that is handed in and marked in time

One of the issues that has arisen from this work and is replicated across other studies is the importance of feedback sessions. One problem still remains though, and that is how

to get feedback to students for coursework handed in at the end of a module and for exams. For students that remain within the subject area, this is not too much of a problem although a feedback session here takes up contact time for another module. The issue is those students who, due to the nature of modularisation, only do one module and don't necessarily come into contact with the subject tutor again.

Another clear result is the difficulty that students find in assessing other work or in self assessment. This can only be achieved with practice so again time pressures may be an issue if time needs to be found in each module to allow students to acquire these skills. The importance of these though is paramount as this ability to reflect and make judgments is a crucial path to enhance learning and achievement.

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