'I must be finished: I've reached the word count': engaging students with assessment criteria.

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Abstract: This paper will outline research carried out with year two ITE undergraduates. They undertake a module with twelve assessment criteria which can appear impenetrable to the students. The research explored students' response to these criteria and then audited their understanding of the specific assessment criteria. Activities were then designed to address those criteria, which the students did not understand, and to enable them to access them. These activities included 'marking' examples of written work, practising referencing, reflecting upon research, evaluating exemplar answers, constructing answers to key questions and working with a partner. Students evaluated the activities stating usefulness and preferences. There was an additional focus on setting and returning tasks in electronic form. Consideration is given in detail to these and the response of the students to these. The results of this research are discussed and evaluated. This research is relevant to any countries in which assessment of students' work is carried out.

Keywords: assessment; formative assessment; student engagement; e-learning; feedback.

Introduction

Assessment is at the heart of university based education and it drives, or can appear to drive the student experience and the students' learning. This view is supported by Race (2009) and Rust who contends that 'assessment methods and systems influence student behaviour, and ultimately student learning' (2002:145). Engaging students with assessment increases understanding, maximises achievement and adds credibility to results which impact upon many (Sadler 2009). Rust et al maintain that students' learning 'can be improved significantly' (2003:147) through developing their understanding of assessment criteria. O'Donovan et al (2004) support this view when they argue that the process needs to be explicit and involve an actual transfer of knowledge. The piece of research presented in this paper aimed to focus on engaging students with assessment criteria, developing their knowledge and enhancing their progress.

Background to the research

In their second year of an undergraduate initial teacher training course, 44 key stage 2/3 students were faced with a double module, which included and assessed Core Curriculum English, Maths, Science and Educational and Professional Studies. The module is taught in the first semester but is not assessed until after the students have completed a school experience in a secondary school after the second semester. It is therefore approximately five months after taught sessions that the students submit a five thousand word written assignment. There is an additional complication in that the specific assessment criteria for this module are twelve criteria which can appear to be impenetrable to the students. An example of one of the criteria is:

'*demonstrate an analytical understanding of current legal requirements, national policies and guidance on assessment and inclusion and how these relate to the roles of colleagues with specific responsibilities, including those with responsibility for learners with special educational needs and disabilities and other individual learning needs*'. Changes could not be made to the assessment criteria without affecting the entire programme and, as a re-

validation was scheduled to occur in the following year, it was anticipated that major changes would be made then.

At a session at the May SEDA (Staff and Educational Development) conference, Race (2009) put forward the idea that if module outcomes cannot be changed then it is necessary to find a way to work with or around them; this idea led to this piece of action research. The research therefore focussed on facilitating students' access to, and engagement with, the twelve specific outcomes by which their module would be assessed.

Literature review

Sadler flags up the definition of assessment as an issue when he states that terms can be used 'loosely' (2007:388), with meanings not being clarified or their context stated. Many who are involved in assessment agree that it is vital and important and agree it must be timely, but fail to ascertain exactly what is meant by assessment. Assessment can have several meanings, with students sometimes perceiving a meaning which is different to that of tutors and senior management and it is important to establish whether it is 'assessment *for* learning or assessment *of* learning' (JISC: 2010:4). Assessment *for* learning is formative and designed to inform or enhance learning, whereas assessment *of* learning is summative and informing grades or results. It is argued that assessment is part of the learning process (Castle: 2009) and therefore assessment must be transparent so that students know what markers are looking for; this links to having explicit assessment criteria and clear feedback. For the purposes of this research, I define assessment as the piece of work which is assessed at the end of a module and proves that the student meets the required standard. These can take several forms and the focus for this piece of research is a five thousand word 'report on inclusive learning, teaching and assessment evidencing critical evaluation of reading and research and analysis of policy and practice within an educational setting'. The intention was to encourage the students' engagement with assessment *for* learning to enhance their success in the module. I define effective assessment and feedback as practice that equips learners to perform

to their best advantage and to make good progress without adding to the assessment burden on academic staff. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004: 121) identified seven principles of good feedback practice when they explored how higher education could make assessment more effective in promoting student learning. They allude to using self assessment, dialogue, and delivery of high quality information, all of which shape teaching. Their seven principles were found to be a useful tool to aid the discussion of the results which is set out below.

One method by which the students would be encouraged to engage with the assessment criteria was through regular written feedback. This was an integral part of this study. It is vital that students read and make the most of feedback and this is most likely to happen if it is at the right time, is personal and in a format which is accessible to them as this is most likely to encourage engagement and enhance their success through improved results. Hepplestone *et al* believe that e-learning meets these needs, especially when their study found that 'students liked linking feedback and grades to original assessment criteria as it enables them to identify their strengths and weaknesses at a glance' (2010:16). Race (2009) lists several versions of feedback which can be provided, including e-mailing directly to students, building an overall collection of general feedback comments, model answers and feedback in a lecture. Each one of these methods was used in the study to suit individual students' preferred learning styles and to increase their engagement.

During the research the students undertook many tasks, designed to engage them with the assessment criteria, with e-learning being a feature of several of them. E-learning is commonly defined by many as electronic learning but it can also mean enhanced learning which I saw as a crucial aspect of this research. For the purposes of this research the JISC definition of 'technology enhanced learning' was adopted as it 'emphasises how technology adds value to learning by enabling: connectivity to information and to others; 24/7

access; greater choice over the time, place and pace of study and rapid feedback on formative assessments' (JISC, 2009b). This was important for this study as it meant that the students could choose whether or not to engage, and if they did so, at a time and place of their choosing, choosing also when to access and respond to the feedback provided. This echoes Gibbs' (2009) findings in relation to feedback needing to be timely and occurring in a way that students can act upon it. However, it can be argued that fast feedback is expensive. There was no extra cost in feedback being provided electronically, although the cost of staff time was recognised. Generic feedback can be of value and in this instance was conveyed through the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Moodle, whereby common errors from the previous years' submissions were recorded as a list on the VLE, with the intention that these were used as a 'what not to do' list to bring about greater success.

The research aimed to engage students with the assessment criteria in order to maximise their success. This involved linking the assessment criteria to specific tasks and providing feedback throughout the module. Sadler (2010) suggests that whilst giving detailed feedback is now common practice in higher education, it often has little impact. This piece of action research was designed to maximise the response of the students to feedback.

The research

I took an action research approach 'in order to find answers to questions and solutions to problems that they [teaching staff] ask and face at work every day and which address specific issues, needs and concerns' (Sharp, 2009:56). Sadler suggests that action research is appropriate for teachers as they can use it to 'enhance their professional practice' and 'work with insights gained to improve the quality of student learning' (2004:1). The intention of the research was to engage students with the assessment criteria of the module to enhance their understanding of the criteria and subsequent results in the module for the assessed work. It was intended that the results of the research

would inform the teaching of those students in other subjects in semester two and in their next academic year.

The students had a main subject of English, ICT or Science and were second year students on a key stage 2/3 route into teaching. They had successfully completed a primary placement and would be undertaking a school experience in a secondary school in the second semester. For this module they were taught in two groups: ICT and English/Science mixed. The group sizes were between 20 and 25. They were taught Core English (where this research was located) for nine sessions, each lasting one hour and fifteen minutes in consecutive weeks in the first semester.

	Female	Male
English	11	1
ICT	12	5
Science	13	2
Total enrolled on module	36	8

Table 1. indicating gender balance of participants

The institution in which the research was carried out requires all research proposals to be scrutinised and approved by the Research Ethics Committee. This research was approved by the panel.

Data collection
At the start of the module the planned project was explained to the students and they were asked if they consented to take part. All students consented to participate, however not all were at all taught sessions. It was explained that if they chose not to, it would not affect their studies within the module and that they could still participate in activities. It was made clear that they could

withdraw at any time. All tutors who taught on the module were made aware of the project and permission was sought from the programme leader.

A questionnaire was chosen as the primary tool for data collection as the module was of a short (taught) duration and it was deemed vital that responses and analysis could be collected and acted upon after the first taught session and before the second session the following week. The questionnaire was distributed to all students as all had consented to take part. This questionnaire consisted of a mix of open and closed questions and was designed to ascertain what the students did with assessment criteria, when, why and how. Students were asked when they would like to receive feedback and which activities would help them to understand the assessment criteria. The students were audited in relation to the 12 assessment criteria and whether they understood them fully, partly or not at all. These results dictated which criterion would be made a priority. The responses will be discussed in the results and analysis section.

The institution has a practice of mid module review and the students were asked to respond in table groups of four to six, collate their responses on the sheet given, and to give their opinion as to which of the activities carried out to date were of most use. These responses were used to refine planned activities for the second part of the module. The responses will be discussed in that section.

Tasks set for the students
A range of activities were used to engage the students with the resulting criteria, these included writing in response to a question, 'marking' an answer, analysis of directed reading, 'e-tasks' and analysing previous answers. These are discussed in more detail below.

Castle (2009:28) suggests that 'talking about your study is a really good way to cement it in your mind', hence all tasks were explicitly designed to be

undertaken with a partner or group. Feedback from the students in relation to this is discussed. The students could submit the e-tasks as a pair if they chose to, but none chose to do so.

Directed reflective readings were used, selected from the reading list for the module, and were carefully chosen so that there was something for the students to debate or discuss. They were distributed and time in taught sessions was allocated so that the students could annotate them and discuss their thoughts and findings. These were annotated with questions to give the students direction to the reflection. The students, in pairs, then read the texts and responded to the annotated questions, either orally, or in writing according to their preference. Exemplar answers from students who had taken the module the previous year were shared and the current students considered these in relation to specific assessment criteria, which they were also working to, which were supplied by the tutor.

The students were provided with a sample answer which was just adequate and asked to mark it against specific assessment criteria which were the ones the students were working towards. These were 'broken down' into lists and/or chunks to aid access. For example '*organise and articulate opinions and arguments in written and verbal form, in relation to the core curriculum, learning contexts and learner needs and begin to develop skills of reflection, through experience, personal reading and shared discourse*' became: 'can you find and mark evidence of the following in the text: an opinion; reference to the core curriculum; reference to a pupil in a school setting; the pupil as an individual; the opinion of the writer; reference to research and evidence that thoughts and ideas have been discussed with others?'

In another session the students were asked to jointly produce a paragraph of writing addressing a specific assessment criterion. This was formatively assessed by the tutor during the taught session by marking, with written and

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oral feedback being provided during the session. It was assessed against specific assessment criteria which the students were working towards.

During the second half of the module the tasks were repeated with the addition of an option to submit electronically. In this task the students were presented, via direct e-mail, with eight questions, of which they could answer two, each one of which related directly to one of the assessment criteria. Support was given in the form of sentence starters, tips of what to refer to and guidance was given in relation to the type and number of references required. The students could complete the task with a writing friend, or on their own. Feedback was returned via e-mail within a maximum of 24 hours after submission. This task was timed to suit the tutor's availability. Often written feedback is only provided at the end of an assessed piece of work, and students frequently only then look at the mark awarded rather than paying attention to the detail provided (Baume 2009). The tasks outlined above were designed to provide formative feedback in relation to progress against each chosen outcome and also writing style in relation to this. These tasks were possible due to the relatively low number of students in each session: as one group had 17 students in it, with the other having 27.

Data analysis

There were 38 respondents (all did give their permission to participate but not all were present at each point) and so data analysis was carried out manually, i.e. an analysis programme was not used. The results were quantified and recorded and this was shared with the students via the VLE, Moodle, prior to the second taught session (Race 2009; Hartley et al, 2011). Data collected was stored securely and destroyed after the completion of this report.

Results

The students had been asked to indicate, at mid point review in the module, the collective views of their group of 4-6 students, responding to four questions: 'what we have enjoyed, what we would like more of, what we would

change and what we would like less of'. The results were collated and analysed.

At mid point in the module, it was noted that the research project appeared to be achieving its intended aims and that students were engaging with the assessment criteria. Their comment that 'everything is relevant and it's well worth coming to the lectures' was very encouraging. Certain responses would stand deeper scrutiny, for example which aspects of 'guidance' were enjoyed and what the students meant by being 'taken seriously'. Evidence that they engaged with the criteria is reflected in the marks achieved which are discussed in the next section.

In response to 'what they would change' responses included having time in lectures to practise writing and more time on individual tasks. This contradicts their preference, stated at mid point review, for group work and tasks. They indicated that they would like more models of past examples, which is interesting, as practice at the institution is to avoid this to minimise potential plagiarism. Arguably, increased detection systems would help here, which are increasingly being put in place as the institution moves to electronic submission of all assignments. This suggests that some systems impede rather than enhance learning.

At the mid point of the module the students were also audited in relation to each type of task, to establish preferences to inform the planned teaching for the second half of the module. Whilst the usual contradictions were evident with students asking for more, or less of the same task, the responses indicated that all activities had been of value. All were deemed to be useful/really useful. However, several of the comments were of concern to the tutor as they illustrated that either some skills were not being transferred or that assumed learning had not taken place. For example, their comment 'shows how to set it out' was of concern as the students had each received a guide showing this; and the comment 'importance of good referencing':

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accurate referencing is on the cover sheet, initially completed by the students which provides feedback on all assignments.

The task most enjoyed by all was the 'e-task' as it gave a chance to 'improve work with relevant feedback'. Interestingly, none explicitly said it was because they were working on their own, although that emerges as a point in response to the next question, discussed below.

Almost half (20/44 students) took part in the submission of the e-task, with the non respondents claiming that time was limited or they 'didn't get round to it'. Race (2009) suggests that students are strategic and only participate if it counts towards final achievement and this was supported by the comment 'Might have been better as directed, or mandatory task', a view supported by Gibbs (2010). The fact that students commented that they enjoyed 'everything as it is specifically relevant to the assignment' indicates this strategic view.

It can be argued that the tasks were 'authentic academic tasks' (JISC 2009a:4): they were carried out during taught sessions, then they were assessed and feedback was provided; they were directly linked to the assessment criteria, and therefore may have encouraged participation and positive feedback. Sanderson suggests that 'students feel switched off from learning when…they are passive recipients of curricula and strategies in which they have no say.' (2009: 4) The student responses that the 'chance to improve work with relevant feedback' and that it was 'extremely useful because it gave an idea of level expected' suggest that they had an active role.

There was no negative feedback at all in response to any of the tasks. However, most surprising, and quite disheartening to read, was the comment, in relation to the reflective reading task, that was 'good to realise that it is ok to criticise literature' which indicated that more work needed to be done here. This has been addressed in subsequent sessions.

Discussion

These students will progress to the next year of their study and so feedback received and skills developed will be of future benefit to both the students and the tutor. It was also anticipated that the students would apply the skills developed in their other studies, although discussion above indicates that this does not always happen.

	Fail	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
2009-2010	1	8	3	12	7
2008-2009	2	4	12	5	7
2007-2008	5	7	6	10	5

Table 2. Indicating results 2007-2010

Analysis of these results has to be undertaken in the knowledge that each of these groups is a different cohort. The numbers submitting are similar enough to allow comparison with 33 submissions in 2007-08, 30 in 2008-09 and 31 submissions in 2009-10. It is noted that although there were 44 students registered on the module only 31 submitted work by the final submission date. Some of the students had withdrawn from the module, others applied for mitigating circumstances and recovered the work at a later point as permitted by the regulations.

Initial analysis indicates that there appears to be a reducing number of fails: only 1 in 2009-10, 2 in 2008-09 and 5 in the previous year. This may be explained as the students having become more engaged with the assessment criteria, understanding it and specifically addressing it, as the project intended, or it could be due to other factors unknown at the time of writing.

The number of students receiving marks in the 40-49% band was reasonably consistent with previous years with 8 in 2009-10, 4 in 2008-09 and 7 in 2007-

08. Interestingly, there was a decline or dip in the 50-59% band with only 3 achieving a mark in that category for 2009-10, compared to 12 in the previous year and 6 in 2008-09. This could potentially be explained as there was a slightly higher overall number of students achieving a mark of 60% or above: 19 in 2009-10 compared to 12 in 2008-09 and 15 in 2007-08. This apparent increase in achievement of higher marks could be attributed to students' engagement with the criteria, or may be due to other factors. However, when the marks of 50% and above are compared, then this potential trend is not apparent: in 2009-10 22 students achieved a mark of 50% or above, with 22 students in that band in 2008-09 and 21 in 2007-8: a very similar result.

When plotted on a graph it appears that the 'bell curve' may be potentially making a shift to the right. This is only tentatively apparent and an analysis of the 2010-11 marks would be needed.
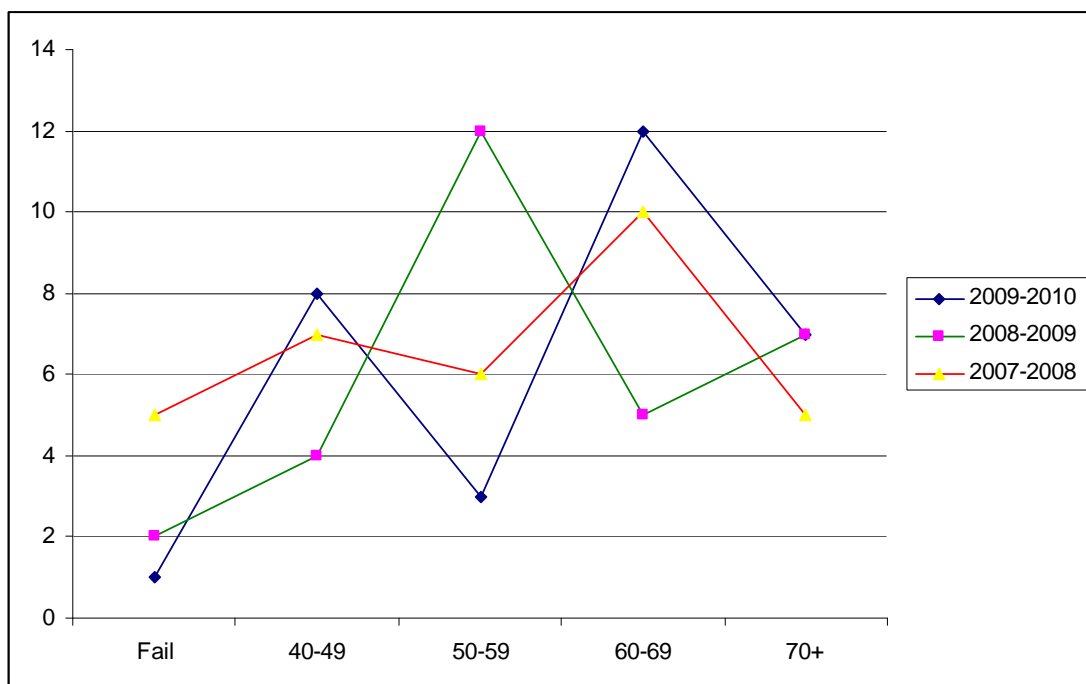

Table 3. Illustrating module results by % band

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Anecdotally, the results of these students in their year three Core Curriculum English module indicate that the results match the normal, or typical bell curve model with the results above not being mirrored. This could be the result of a number of factors including different staff with a different approach, differing curriculum and a different assessment task, which was a one thousand word assignment in relation to reading.

The students' response to this research project was enthusiastic with these responses being detailed below. Their comments can be matched against each of Nicol and Mcfarlane-Dick's (2004) seven principles of good feedback practice:

- The first principle: 'facilitates the development of self assessment (reflection) in learning' was facilitated by reflective reading tasks with the students commenting that it 'shows us what we are good and bad at and how not to write';
- The second principle which 'encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning' again was met through the planned use of readings designed to encourage reflection with the students remarking that it was good to share their own knowledge, thereby acknowledging that they do possess ideas worth sharing;
- The students felt that the third principle which 'Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)' was met through seeing samples of work by previous students, with them commenting that they were useful as good examples, illustrated expectations and the level of work expected;
- The fourth principle which 'Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance' was addressed through linking teaching strategies to theorists in one of the directed writing tasks and also through reflective reading, whereby the students felt that these tasks built on prior knowledge, formed a basis for research, linked theory to assignment and highlighted common mistakes to avoid. Reflective reading

featured again, along with the opportunity to undertake the electronic tasks, when the students felt that these provided useful immediate feedback and a chance to improve work with relevant feedback …

- and illustrated principle five: 'Delivers high quality information to students about their learning;

- Principle six which 'Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem' received a response from the students that it 'Shows what we are good at and increased our confidence', this was in response to the reflective reading tasks;

- Principle 7 'Provides information to teachers that can be used to shape the teaching' clearly links to the future and information was gathered in relation to this at midpoint review of the module.

Conclusion: where research leads next and impact on practice

The intention of the research was to engage the students with the assessment criteria with the aim of enhancing success: this appears to have been met for this cohort of students. The tasks used in sessions had varying degrees of success as illustrated by student comments.

I have drawn on the findings of the project in order to adapt my teaching of other groups. Reflective reading has been used more in sessions taught to other groups with direction given in the form of annotations as in this study. The response to this from students has been very positive. Successive students have responded enthusiastically to any form of paired work, including writing tasks. E-tasks have also been used as an option: however, no students chose to engage with these, which implies that they needs to be securely embedded within modules and taught sessions, rather than an additional and optional task. There was an intention to begin to 'engage in fundamental reform … to clarify fundamentals' before leading to a 'consistent change in practice' (Sadler, 2007: 392). I have changed my practice in relation to engaging students with assessment criteria. There are no results available

yet which can be directly attributed to my change in practice but the response in sessions from students has been positive.

McDowell, in her keynote address at the EARLI Conference in September 2010, remarked that, whilst there is a lot of research being done about assessment, very little has a positive impact. This very small-scale action research project has, apparently, had an impact in one year at least, and this may be due to what Gibbs identifies as 'the quality of student engagement in learning tasks' (2010: 5).

When the students' responses were analysed, as discussed in the results, it was encouraging to find that each of Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2004: 3) principles were met. Their final point 'Provides information to teachers that can be used to shape the teaching' clearly links to the future and information was gathered in relation to this at midpoint review of the module which will inform future practice. If there is to be a wider impact on practice the research must be shared with staff within the institution, and this is scheduled to occur via the annual teaching and learning conference. It has been shared at three conferences with positive responses and interest.

When asked at the end of the sessions 'what they would like less of' (as is the practice at the institution) the overwhelming response from the students in this module was 'everything is relevant and it's well worth coming to lectures.' This implies a positive impact on practice.

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