Developing effective assignment feedback for an interprofessional learning module—An action research project

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SUMMARY

Background: The first year interprofessional learning module at University Campus Suffolk (UCS) is delivered to 300 students and the students' assignments are marked by 20 members of staff from different health and social care professions. We were keen to find a way to reduce any inconsistencies and work with both staff and students to ensure that the essay and subsequent feedback were useful for all involved.
Aims: The aims of the project were to evaluate the current marking process and feedback sheets used for year one inter-professional learning (IPL) marking, and to develop an appropriate marking tool and feedback sheet that would enable markers to provide more consistent feedback to the students.
Methods: Participatory action research was used with both students and staff members being involved. Focus group and questions were used to ascertain views about the assignment feedback.
Conclusions: The feedback from this action learning project helped us to enhance the feedback for students. There was also an increase in engagement with the assessment and feedback process amongst both staff and students.

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Introduction

Feedback is an essential component in the learning process for a student (Weaver, 2006), however students often are dissatisfied with the feedback that they receive (Hounsell et al., 2008). Within the literature there is general agreement that high quality feedback to students on their assessments is important and is of benefit to their future learning. Feedback is not just about providing a reflection on the value of work completed, but requires the need to feed-forward into future work (Blair et al., 2013). Evans (2013) undertook a thematic analysis of the research evidence on assessment feedback in higher education from 2000 to 2012 and within this review the key principles of effective feedback practice were identified:

1. Feedback is on-going and an integral part of assessment
2. Assessment feedback guidance is explicit
3. Greater emphasis is placed on feed forward compared to feedback activities
4. Students are engaged in and with the process
5. The technicalities of feedback are attended to in order to support learning
6. Training in assessment feedback/forward is an integral part of assessment design

However, whilst these key principles are those which academic staff strive to achieve in providing feedback to students, it is recognised that feedback can be quite variable (Lizzio and Wilson, 2008). In addition, there appears to be a lack of research that has focussed on students' perceptions of feedback (Poulos and Mahony, 2008).

Poulos and Mahony (2008) considered the effectiveness of feedback from the students' perspective and their thematic analysis identified three key dimensions; perceptions of feedback (meaning of feedback; delivery of feedback; feedback that relates to criteria; grades and marks), impact of feedback (timeliness; significance), and credibility of feedback (perceptions of lecturer). Similar results were found in studies undertaken by Lizzio and Wilson (2008) and Rae and Cochrane (2008).

Interestingly when considering the key principles identified by Evans (2013) and the research that has considered students' perceptions, there is a great deal of similarity between what academic staff are providing and what students are looking for. However, from the limited research which has looked at the student's perceptions there is still a gap between theory and reality.

Variability of feedback is all to evident when feedback is being provided on assessment undertaken as part of an interprofessional learning module, whereby academic staff from a range of different professional programmes are providing feedback to students. In such circumstances the variability of feedback is all too apparent for the student. Therefore this research was undertaken to consider the perspectives of both the academic staff and the students of the feedback provided for an interprofessional learning module offered at University Campus Suffolk (UCS).

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At UCS the pre-registration interprofessional learning (IPL) consists of three modules; one in each year. The students involved in IPL are; adult, mental health and child health nurses, midwives, operating department practitioners, social workers, diagnostic and therapeutic radiographers.

The first year module IPL—The Professional Person looks at the transition that students make to become professionals (Stern and Papadallis, 2006). Students study together in interprofessional groups. Three themes are studied during the module. Those of the person as a 'professional', the person within a 'team', and putting care into context, with the service user as central to interprofessional care delivery. For this module the students submit a 2000 word essay entitled 'An evaluation of a specific area of communication that I consider I need to develop as part of my professional role within an Interprofessional team'. Due to the number of students completing the module (300), this essay is marked by 20 different lecturers and there is therefore some variation in the feedback that students receive.

Identifying the Problem

As discussed, assessment and feedback are frequently issues that students cite as being problematic as reported in the various feedback mechanism used within higher education, for example the National Student Survey results, internal surveys and module evaluations. Within the IPL programme, over 30 academic members of staff from a range of disciplines contribute to the marking and provision of feedback to the students, with 20 staff marking the year one IPL module. This resulted not only in some concern about the quality and consistency of the feedback to the students, but also as to whether the feedback was in fact useful for the students and that they were able to use it to feed forward. Feed forward is an important part of the process as it allows students to work on aspects required for future assessments (Blair et al., 2013; Withey, 2013). Feed forward provides an outline of the next steps a student needs to take.

It was therefore decided that it would be valuable to undertake a piece of action research to gather views from the key people involved in the IPL module—the academic staff and the students. The aims and objectives for this study were developed as follows:

Aims

1. To evaluate the current marking process and feedback sheets used for year one IPL marking
2. To develop an appropriate marking tool and feedback sheet that will enable markers to provide more consistent feedback to the students.

Research Methodology

Participatory action research (PAR) was the methodology selected for this study as it uses a collaborative approach to effecting change in a specific context (Parkin, 2009). PAR takes a practical approach to bringing about change and its strengths lie in its ability to generate solutions to practical problems, empowering the participants to engage in the process to develop and implement changes derived from solving a specific problem, which they have identified (Meyer, 2000).

PAR in essence uses a simple model, which is cyclical in nature (see Fig. 1) with the cycle having four stages, which are labelled slightly differently depending on the proponent, but typically they are called Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect (O'Leary, 2004). PAR promotes a culture of information and knowledge sharing, and all participants' views are considered (Thiollent, 2011).

This was a six month study (January–July 2012) and all of the participants were involved in all four stages of the cycle.
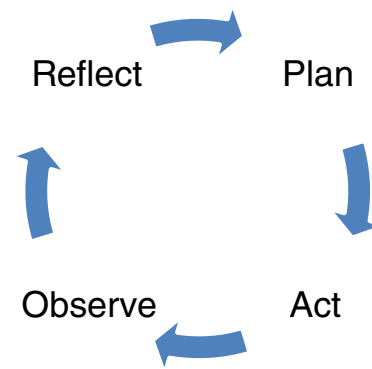

Fig. 1. Action research cycle.

Ethical Considerations

This PAR formed part of programme evaluation at UCS. Ethical approval was obtained to carry out the project from the UCS ethics committee.

The authors carried out the action research and issues of confidentiality and anonymity were agreed with all participants before the study commenced. All of the staff were sent a participant information sheet about the project, some student essays and questions to consider, and they were invited to take part. The student representatives were sent a participant information sheet about the project and some questions to consider.

PAR Stage 1—Plan

This stage of the PAR involved planning the PAR so that participants were identified and invited to participate.

Data Collection

When undertaking PAR it is crucial that the key stakeholders are involved and invited to participate in the study, these being academic staff that were involved in the marking of the first year IPL module and students who had completed the first year module and has thus received feedback from the teaching team. All of the markers (19) and student representatives (18) were invited to participate via email. These participants were selected so that there was an action research group that contained all of the stakeholders, both staff and students and so that all of the professional groups undertaking IPL at UCS were represented.

The methods used to collect data in this study were a focus group and the student essays.

PAR Stage 2—Act

This stage of the PAR involved acting on the plans and sending out information for the participants to respond and contribute to.

Student Essays

19 staff members (as one from the original 20 markers had left UCS) who had marked the first year IPL assignment in the academic year 2012–2013 were invited to take part in the project. All of the staff were sent an information sheet about the project, five pieces of first year IPL work to review (essays) and some questions to consider when reviewing the work (see Fig. 2).

18 student representatives from the cohorts studying the module last academic year were also invited to participate to represent their student group. All of the students were sent an information sheet about the project, and some questions to consider (see Fig. 3).