Improving student performance through enhanced feedback

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A B S T R A C T

A first year core marketing module (300 students) suffered from a lack of engagement by students outside of the 'lecture' environment, limited opportunity for formative feedback, poor student evaluation of feedback and weak achievement in summative assessment.

A number of changes were made to a first year core marketing module to see if an increase in formative feedback, facilitated by increased student engagement would increase achievement. These included; removing the 'lecture' content and replacing it with narrated Powerpoint presentations on-line; requiring students to prepare 6 discussion papers in advance of teaching sessions which were then peer reviewed, discussed in class and an anonymised sample being lecturer reviewed in detail and posted on-line; teaching sessions also utilised a series of quizzes based on 'lecture' content, which were done as group activities along with a series of other group tasks that involved apply knowledge and presenting results that were then responded to by staff.

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1. Introduction

Despite extensive evaluations of research into the impact of formative assessment on achievement (Black & William, 1998), Dunn and Mulvenon (2009) argue that the lack of current research into the various forms of formative evaluation means that a potential opportunity for achievement enhancement may be being missed. Formative feedback improves student performance (Gibbs, 2003), particularly where the feedback is given without an associated grade (Gibbs, 2010), because it is acted upon whereas summative feedback may be overlooked (Taras, 2008: p. 390). Formative feedback works best where it is frequent and the students have the opportunity to review the comments in order to improve summative submissions (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). However, opportunities for increasing the amount and quality of formative feedback may be constrained by the need to impart information and the potential for non-engagement by students with the material.

2. Context 1

A first year core business course module in marketing suffered from poor results with more than 50% achieving only C or D and 15% failing. It was also clear in delivery that students were not engaging with material between taught sessions and therefore not preparing adequately for seminars, which also led to very poor attendance. Consequently this limited the intended positive impact of this material in preparing students for summative assessment and, whilst the overall marks given in module evaluations were satisfactory, produced negative comments regarding the usefulness of the seminar contributions. In order to address this, the teaching team decided to focus on engagement and to reinforce this with a formal attendance policy.

It is clear that the notion of engagement is significant in relation to student achievement (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Yakovlev & Kinney, 2008), not only just the amount of time spent on each task but also the way those tasks are then integrated

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into the learning environment (Salamonson, Sharon, & Everett, 2009). Carini et al. (2006) argue that student engagement is one of the strongest predictors of achievement and also has a positive impact on the development of critical skills. Salamonson et al. (2009: p. 129) clearly identifies time spent on directed study outside of the classroom as being a strong positive predictor of academic achievement. 'Time on task' is identified of one of the guiding principles of good practice in Higher Education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and providing a number of tasks for students to undertake during the teaching period helps them to manage their own time and provides more opportunity for feedback (Nicol, 2009). In order to improve engagement the students were required to submit a written, anonymised discussion paper prior to 6 of the standard teaching sessions which in turn covered all the topics addressed in the second assessment. Nicol (2009: p. 49) also proposes that giving students greater choice in assessment as part of a process of encouraging greater engagement and consequently the decision was made to offer the students the choice of either a written report or exam for the second, end of module assessment.

Attendance is not necessarily a good indicator of motivation (Durden & Ellis, 2003) but does seem to have a statistically significant positive impact on academic achievement (Chen & Lin, 2008; Collett, Gyles, & Hrasky, 2007; Halpern, 2007; Moore, 2006; Moore, Armstrong, & Pearson, 2008: p. 17; Stanca, 2006; Yakovlev & Kinney, 2008). Although there has been some research suggesting a neutral (Martins & Walker, 2006) or negative (Schmidt, 1983) effect. Chen and Lin (2008: p. 225) quantify the positive impact of attendance on exam performance as between 9 and 18% and go on to say that the more a student attends the more he or she gains. Bowen, Price, Lloyd, and Thomas (2005: p. 376) note the importance of attendance and the need for a robust monitoring and action system. In order to ensure that the teaching session inputs and thus the impact of enhanced feedback was as uniform as possible across the groups for the purposes of evaluating success, it was clear that attendance would need to be reinforced. Consequently a policy was introduced requiring students to communicate reasons for absence 24 h before or after the relevant teaching session. In order to enforce this, all absent students were emailed immediately after each teaching session. The penalty for failure to follow the procedure was that three such occurrences would be considered a withdrawal from the module and therefore no summative marks would be considered.

A change in physical location of the Business School also lent itself to a re-evaluation of the teaching format and so a decision was made to change from a mass lecture followed by small seminar session to a simple 3 h teaching session, divided into an interactive lecture and a discussion paper. It had been noted that one of the areas of drop off in attendance was between lecture and seminar with students deciding that the seminars did not present sufficient learning value to warrant their presence. The discussion papers were intended to make the seminar session more useful by requiring students to prepare anonymised written answers in advance of attendance, to have the opportunity to review and discuss their own and other students work and to give and receive peer feedback on this work as well as tutor comment.

According to Lim and Rodger (2010: p. 576) lecturers are often faced with the problem of how to provide formative feedback to large groups with limited teaching teams and short periods of time between input and assessment. Lecturers often deal with large groups and a standard semester may only be 12 weeks long. One proposal for overcoming the large numbers was the use of peer assessment (Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shannon, 2011: p. 675), however students express concern about other students' ability to make appropriate judgements of their work. Topping (2005: p. 640) notes that whilst peer assessment can assist in the development of self-critical faculties it can also demand skills that students do not feel they have, or do not feel able to apply and as a consequence the quality and quantity of the feedback can be very limited, with often generic or only positive comments being offered which provide limited scope for improvement. Boud and Falchikov (2006: p. 204) suggest that lecturers need to help their students develop the skills for self-evaluation in order to improve their use of formative feedback and thus to be able to provide credible feedback to their classmates.

Gibbs (2003: p. 125) argues that it is essential for students to be set work which is not necessarily formally marked in order to encourage a sufficient level of engagement. He goes on to say that giving the students the opportunity to assess examples of good and bad work improves the amount and value of their own studying and supports the use of peer feedback as one method of achieving this. Hassanien (2007: p. 137) identifies a number of benefits inherent in group work, including exchanging information leading to greater breadth and depth of knowledge as well as a shared experience which reduces concerns relating to assessment. Van den Berg, Admiraal, and Pilot (2006: p. 34) see evidence that students appreciate peer feedback as providing useful assistance in preparation for assessments.

2.1. Method

The students completed two evaluations of the new format focussing on the importance of the assessment choice and the helpfulness of the discussion papers. They also completed the standard University Module Evaluation, which specifically mentions the usefulness of feedback. The results for both summative assessments and the overall module scores were then compared across years.

2.2. Results and discussion

2.2.1. Attendance

The overall level of attendance was 89% and there was no drop in numbers between the first and second half of the teaching session. There were very few 'unauthorised' absences from class and most of those were made up from students who had withdrawn from the module for various reasons. Students responded well to follow-up emails and anecdotal evidence