Reconceptualising Assessment and Feedback to Promote Student Wellbeing

Presentation by
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1. Context – student wellbeing challenges

- Number of students disclosing a mental health condition has tripled since 2007/08 (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015)

- Students report significantly lower levels of mental wellbeing than the general population - more so for minority groups (Ferguson, 2017)

- HE sector is experiencing a ‘mental health crisis’ (The Guardian, August 2018)

- 20% Australian students experiencing a mental health issue (Carter et al. 2017) and a fifth of Canadian post-secondary students identifying as depressed, anxious or battling other mental health issues (Pang, 2017)
2. Student learning & wellbeing

• To enhance student wellbeing in HE, we need to work more closely with the emotional realm of learning

• Consider how we can support students and their emotions in learning

• We offer an example of success in working towards this, based in assessment practice (see Hill & West, 2019 – Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education)
3. Assessment and wellbeing – discovering positive links

• AY 2015-2016 - new assessment approach implemented on a second year geography module in a British university

• Aimed to improve student learning experience through dialogic feed-forward assessment

• Focus was initially cognitive:
  • Did the approach assert a positive influence on the student learning experience?
  • Did it enhance student performance and raise NSS scores related to feedback?

(Hill & West, 2019)
Module teaching and assessment structure

Supporting Lectures

Students choose essay from selection

Students write draft essay

Students submit draft and attend ‘feed-forward’ meeting

Students reflect on meeting and essay – grading their work

Students complete and submit final essay

Assessment discourse

Feedforward discourse

Essay marking Seminar (peer assessment)

25% module assessment

75% module assessment
Qualitative case study approach

- Individual semi-structured interviews … two consecutive year 2 cohorts at end of module (2015-16 and 2016-17) … analysed thematically via grounded theory

- \( n = 44 \times 30 \text{ mins} \), 61% response rate: male = 45% female = 55%

- Group semi-structured interviews with level 3 students (2016-2018) elucidating post-assignment behaviours and skills of self-efficacy and self-regulation

- Essay performance data pre- and post-assessment intervention (inferential stats)

- Answers to NSS feedback questions (asked in the interviews)
Results - Enhanced learning experience

• **Conversation** compelled students to **engage critically** with their work:

> ‘When I have had drafts handed back to me and it’s just written over, either I don’t understand what they are trying to say, or it’s not clear enough. I can ask you questions if we’re talking to each other about it, it’s easier to see things … It’s definitely better to talk about it’

> ‘I’ve had it before where you get electronic feedback and you might not be sure what some of the comments mean … being able to discuss it is important. You get that progress and can discuss how you can change it as opposed to just saying this is wrong’
### Results - Enhanced student performance

<table>
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<th>Band (%)</th>
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<th>2012-2013 (%)</th>
<th>2015-2016 (%)</th>
<th>2016-2017 (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number (n)</td>
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<td>37</td>
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Significantly higher marks 2015-17 v 2011-13 (p = <0.0001)

Average Ecology mark 4.5% higher than average mark for other second year optional modules (p = 0.01)

* Did not have a meeting
The emergence of the affective realm

• Inherently emotional experience for students of receiving assessment feedback

• Clear evolution in emotions over the feed-forward process:
  
  apprehensive, scared, disappointed, upset, ashamed

  ↓

  enjoyment, satisfaction, enthusiasm, motivation

• For some, the meetings were cathartic, reducing their anxiety as they ‘came clean’ with their level of progress - regained in-task self-efficacy
Students noted that the individualised nature of the meeting made them feel valued:

‘I definitely felt like you cared about what I was getting’

Consciously encountering and talking through emotions in a collaborative manner supported a personalised and inclusive learning experience.

‘Generic comments can be good … but you never know whether they are applicable to you or not. So getting personalised feedback is really useful’
• Students reported altered behaviour post-meeting, within-task and with respect to other second year work:

‘It’s altered the way I approach other modules, like essay plans for exams’

• In third year, students self-avowed to increased self-efficacy, believing more strongly in their capabilities to accomplish assignments:

‘I definitely had a deeper understanding of the assessment process – not only planning for and writing an essay but being able to self-critique and understand my flaws’
Hill et al. (2016): borderland spaces of learning

Dare to discover all that you can become
4. Conclusions

- Faculty should not divorce the affective realm of learning from the cognitive as wellbeing issues rise into sharp focus in HE.

- Consciously uniting these two realms allows learning to be tackled holistically, supporting students to develop positive emotions and resilient academic behaviours.

- We recognise this may not be easy for faculty and, as such, we offer some practical advice …
5. Implications for practice

- Relate to students in ways that are hospitable and attuned to them as individuals
- Adopt active student-centred and social pedagogic approaches such as group work and inquiry-based learning
- Work with Educational Developers who can support you to work positively with the emotional aspects of learning / assessment
• Embed student-teacher assessment dialogue early in the curriculum and increase peer feedback in later years e.g.
  - year 2: teachers meet students individually to answer specific questions following peer-to-peer discussion
  - year 3: peer-to-peer mentoring supported by optional group / individual teacher meetings

• Use assessment approaches to support students to focus on the processes of learning and self-development (student-centred, constructivist)

• How committed / able are we, within current resource constraints, to re-conceptualise assessment & feedback?
References


Thank you for listening

Questions?

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