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Assessment for transformation: adopting a humanist approach to assessment and feedback on a BA Education course.

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Abstract

This chapter discusses how a BA Education course team has adopted a humanist ethos and relational pedagogy in an effort to mitigate against the impact of the stresses and disappointments that assessments and feedback can cause. It notes how incidences of poor mental health are rising amongst the student population and outlines how this ethos and subsequent research has led to research-informed changes to practice and the design of, and feedback given to, assessments.

Key changes discussed are the use of the key 5 indicators of academic buoyancy, relational and affirmative pedagogy, variety of assessment modes and flexibility of assessment focus and response.

It provides a student witness statement and argues that the changes made and the approach taken help to empower students, by providing them with a wide range of skills and also the ability to critique and to deal with stress. It is argued that this is transformative and will enable them to better cope with not only the course itself, but also their future and place them in a strong position for employment.

Introduction

Assessment holds a variety of roles within learning and teaching and is integral to every student's experience at University. This chapter presents the approach employed by the teaching team of a BA Education course aimed at helping students to manage assessments and their wellbeing in relation to assessment. This chapter includes:

- The contextual influences on the team's design of assessment activities;
- Key principles underpinning the course;
- The ethos, pedagogical approach and assessment design of the course;
- Student experience - including a BA Education student case study;
- The development of a student toolkit for their assessment activities and for the future.

Context

Research indicates that students, alongside individuals in general, are showing an increase in levels of poor mental health. While the Department for Education (DfE 2019, 2020) identifies a mixed picture of positive and negative experiences, other surveys report a trend of lowering rates of life satisfaction during the last decade (Children's Society, 2021; Prince's Trust, 2021). Indeed, the Office for Students reports an increase in the percentage of the undergraduate student population who have disclosed a mental health condition from 0.7 per cent in 2010/11 to 4.2 per cent in 2019/20, a greater increase than for any other disability (OfS, 2021). This could partly be caused by concerns young people have about societal injustices and worries about their future in a rapidly changing and potentially vulnerable world. One example of this is the Coronavirus pandemic that impacted upon individuals across the planet (Children's Society, 2020); other research highlighted young people's heightening concerns about employment opportunities and identified raised levels of anxiety (Children's Society, 2021; Prince's Trust, 2021).

In amongst this, assessment and feedback form part of the academic experience of all students and are highly influential in shaping the learning behaviours and activities of students (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Within Higher Education (HE) assessment is an activity which is frequently reported negatively in surveys, such as the National Student Survey (NSS) (MacKay *et al.*, 2019), and maybe a factor within the learning environment that impacts on stress (Tharani *et al.*, 2017) owing to issues such as worrying about the risk of failure or a disappointing grade (Hull *et al.*, 2019). For tutors and students, this is concerning because of the potential additional negative influence this anxiety has on learning and wellbeing (Hull *et al.*, 2019).

Key Principles underpinning the course

Given this context, one might reflect on the role of Higher Education and take one of three responses:

1. That it is not the responsibility of HE to attempt to address mental health and wellbeing concerns, as the domain of HE is simply that of academic study
2. That HE should endeavour to do no harm and as such should check that practices and expectations are not causing unreasonable stress and exacerbating the mental health of students
3. That HE should actively seek to support student health and wellbeing and look to structure practices to help optimise student resilience

Questions to consider:
Which of the above would be your perspective and why?

As a course team of education practitioners, we firmly believe that education and health are inexorably linked and that to optimise learning students need to feel comfortable, relaxed, healthy and happy. Theories, such as Maslow's Hierarchy (1943), show us that it is likely to be hard to concentrate and focus on learning if there are challenges to physical and/or mental health which are distracting. Studies into resilience (see Ahmed Shafi *et al.*, 2020) indicate that a student's ability to cope can be reduced if the systems around them (ie the university, tutors, assessment practices) are causing too many risks (stresses) and are threatening the systems that protect them. As a consequence, the course team feels a responsibility to take perspective 3 above and actively look at course practices to explore approaches to supporting student wellbeing and optimising resilience.

In response to this, we have adopted a humanist approach to our work. By this we mean one that follows a Rogerian approach (see Rogers, 1979) that aims to view and treat students as individuals with their own unique stories, feelings and sets of challenges. As Rogers suggests, to achieve this it is important to develop a 'growth-promoting climate' based on relationships that are genuine and real and that adopt a stance of unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding (ibid). Rogers argues that this helps learners 'develop more self-understanding, more self-confidence, more ability to choose ... behaviours. They learn more significantly, they have more freedom to be and become.' (Rogers, 1979: 7)

For us, this means analysing behaviours and processes at an individual and course level to see if they could be aligned more closely with this ethos. An example of this is, as mentioned above, the assessment process. While assessment is an integral part of the HE experience, as both a formative and summative evaluation of progress and performance, studies of student anxiety show that it is stressful and that the grade and feedback received can add disappointment which can threaten academic buoyancy and ability to cope and move forward (ahmed Shafi *et al.*, 2017). Middleton *et al* (2020) revealed five factors (the Key 5) that could add protection for students and help them recover from such disappointments:

- (i) an internal locus of control;
- (ii) assessment literacy;
- (iii) being forward looking;
- (iv) being improvement focused and;
- (v) being action orientated.

So, whilst we are not in a position to abandon assessments we can actively consider their design and the feedback method and explore ways to make the process more supportive. We can also consider how we prepare students and help them help themselves to be better equipped in managing them.

A further example of action that can be taken to mitigate against stresses that might threaten student mental health is illustrated by ahmed Shafi *et al.* (forthcoming) which argues that at times of challenge students found relationships with course teams and tutors a major source of support and protection. This highlights the need for a course approach that provides a sense of belonging and offers meaningful relationships and pathways of support.

This underpinning course ethos and the research findings have led us to make changes to our practice which we believe contribute to the health and wellbeing of our students, better enable them to actualise (see Rogers, 1979 and Maslow, 1943) and hopefully lead to a stronger, richer and transformative learning experience (see Mezirow, 1997).

Questions to consider:
How stressful do you find assessments and what do you find helps you manage any stress?
How important do you feel it is to have a close relationship with your tutors and fellow students?
How aware are you of the underpinning values and ethos of your course/course team and are they important to you?

The practice of our BA Education course

This section discusses some of the ways our BA Education course has developed its approach with this in mind and outlines some key areas of practice.

Course Ethos

Underpinning our humanist approach to practice on the course is an ethos of relational pedagogy with Hickey and Riddle (2021) emphasising that informal relationships between learner and educator can serve as pedagogical activators. As a team we have explicitly talked about this and an action-research approach to developing practice within the course has both prompted and enabled in-depth discussions and research-informed practice.

This ethos begins with induction; a significant amount of time and focus is spent on building relationships between students and the teaching team including a residential trip in the early part of the first year of study. Lecturers operate an open-door policy and learn all the students' names early in the term, knowing them and treating them as individuals. These core foundations, supported by a Personal Tutor system, help to maintain positive informal relationships.

Pedagogical approach

The skills, preferences, interests and contexts of our students are diverse and continue to develop both with the arrival of new students and as continuing students widen their experiences. We believe that this diversity not only enhances the learning opportunities within the course but that it should be positively developed within the curriculum. This reflects an affirmative approach, which links closely with the empathic nature of our humanist ethos (Watson, 2002).

As such our course teaching has moved away from a model of knowledge and content delivery, via a format of lectures, to all sessions being run as 'seminars' with individual and group activities spread throughout the sessions and student contributions and questions encouraged and facilitated. This approach enables students to explore and develop their own interests, thereby co-constructing the learning process and learning from the interests of peers. This affirmative, active learning approach, supports students' development as critical participants. For example, in a recent session on the topic of creating inclusive learning environments, a student discussed their experience of discussing staff development with the head of their setting, whilst another student brought their experience of working with families of children at risk of exclusion. These opportunities for the sharing of diverse experiences broaden students', and lecturers', perspectives relating to how education could work and contribute to an improving educational experience. Furthermore, the affirmative nature of the co-creation of learning experiences within safe learning spaces helps our students to develop confidence to communicate their own views and experiences. Therefore, in their assessment tasks they are more confident to express their own views, explore and share their ideas and develop original ideas within the pieces they submit, without feeling constrained to include pre-determined ideas in order to meet assessment criteria.

Design of assessment

In line with the ethos and teaching approach outlined, our design of assessment tasks does not follow a standard model. In recognition of the diverse skills and experiences of our students, and more specifically the range of skills which could be used to communicate understanding of theories and the development of new ideas, we offer a range of assessment modes within the course.

Example assessment modes used:

- Standard essays
- Timed essays
- Reflective pieces
- Discussion fora
- Presentations
- Web-site creation
- Recorded discussions
- Portfolio
- Posters
- Micro-teaching
- Expanded bibliography
- Dissertation

This range of assessments provides the opportunity for our diverse student group to experience success in their assessments whilst developing future employability skills. Group work is included across assessments and offers the opportunity for students to learn from, and support, each other.

Across all of the assessment formats, choice is an important element with open questions and titles enabling students to pursue and develop their own particular interests making links to their experiences and knowledge.

Questions to consider:
What are your thoughts about the range of assessments you have experienced?
Are there some that you feel are more supportive/helpful for your learning?

Design of assessment feedback

Action research helped us identify a number of factors which could support students' emotional responses to assessment feedback, which led to changes in our approach. For example, as a way of leading students towards a position of metacognitive strength in relation to managing the impact of assessment feedback, we include direct teaching about the Key 5 (ahmed Shafi *et al.*, 2018) supporting their development.

The feedback process has also been redesigned to incorporate the Key 5. The feedback sheet has been reorganised to provide clear grading descriptors against each criterion identifying "Strengths" as the first comments, followed by "Recommendations". In order to promote an internal locus of control and to be improvement focused, the feedback sheet prompts students to record "Student devised action points". Assessments are followed up in Personal Tutor meetings where students are asked to summarise their chosen feedforward actions in response to comments provided, thereby providing important relational interactions within the process (Middleton *et al.*, 2020).

Student Experience

The value of a holistic approach focusing on student wellbeing alongside their academic selves underpinned by the active development of relationships, appears to have had impact on the trajectory of the journey that students take whilst studying with us. The testimony within Table 1 is an illustrative case study exploring the potentially transformative experience for some of our students resulting from the course ethos, pedagogy and assessment structure. Student A arrived unable to deliver an assessed presentation in front of her peers. On graduating and moving on to

employment she now leads training with large groups of staff within a secondary school, organising events alongside providing individual support for vulnerable learners within her setting. She attributes this transformation to her experiences throughout the course and the interpersonal support and flexible approach of the course team. The importance of 'being known' and an ongoing informal person-centred approach to interaction and feedback with our students, not just as a member of a wider group but on an individual level, appears key in this particular circumstance. On the basis of these informal, implicit processes, the links to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) and the idea that collaboration supports learning which in turn leads to an internalisation of skills and psychological tools (Shabani *et al.*, 2010) is apparent. In her previous educational

I started my university journey as a mature student with very little traditional education and I was filled with extreme anxiety, I wasn't particularly academic at the time and was unsure how I would cope with the assessments. Hearing that there would be group projects, presentations, exams and essays completely filled me with dread. The thought of having so many different forms of assessment was nerve wracking, mainly because I hadn't experienced it before.

While at first, I found this all very daunting, in the end it was the best way in supporting me develop not only academically but also personally. My lecturers were incredibly supportive from day one. The day I found out the date of my first presentation I had a major panic attack and couldn't imagine standing in front of a group of people talking. I spoke with my lecturers and came up with a plan of action to support me with my anxiety. Over the course of three years with the support of my lecturers I slowly built up from presenting in front of two lecturers, to a room full of peers and lecturers. The feedback process was also incredibly helpful, especially for someone with anxiety. They provided brilliant running feedback, areas of strength and areas in which you could improve on next time. They also allowed the time and space to discuss any points that you might have been unsure of. Five years later I can speak to secondary school pupils in assemblies about the journey I have been on.

It was the ethos of the team and the approach to assessments that supported me in this achievement. If the course hadn't offered a variety of assessments, I wouldn't have tackled my fear of presentations. This is only one example of how the ethos of the course and the approach to assessments helped me beyond measure both academically and personally.

experience Student A frequently shut down, entering into the freeze response as a result of challenge from outside of her ZPD which, in turn, had a detrimental impact on both self-efficacy and skill development. Instead, a combination of an awareness of Student A's history, alongside an explicit consideration of her future (Shabani *et al.*, 2010), allowed us to work with her to gradually re-define her self-concept to optimise opportunities for success and development. Our assessment design process was integral to supporting this process through the utilisation of the Key 5 skills in order to support both personal development and academic development.

Table 1 - Student A

Student Toolkit

Within our assessment design process our aim is not only to provide summative evidence towards a final degree classification, but also to empower our students with a varied 'toolkit' which can support them entering employment. As discussed previously, the course pedagogical practice has been developed in line with the belief that in order to be able to access learning students need to feel emotionally safe and secure (Beard *et al.*, 2007). Although more traditional approaches to assessment within a HE environment (such as essay writing) are included within module assessments our other modes of assessment (detailed above) have an equal contribution to make to the final awards that students achieve. A number of these assessment modes raise the anxiety levels of the students due to the novel experience for the student and/or falling outside of their comfort zone. This anxiety is often linked to concerns about expectations and student self-efficacy linked to their ability to meet these expectations. However, Pajares (1996) advocates that to promote self-efficacy challenging and meaningful tasks need to be provided for students thus creating a cycle which can be efficacy enhancing, but can also result in students feeling more vulnerable due to being taken outside of their comfort zone. Optimistically there is evidence that students are more likely to have a positive view on their future performance based on feedback which includes clear actions for future work (Hull *et al.*, 2019), thus reinforcing the Key 5 approach. In addition to this, assessments such as presentations which have a group-work focus and opportunities to work in collaboration with others have been shown to promote academic self-efficacy (*ibid*).

The assessment design process discussed earlier in this chapter therefore aims to create a 'toolkit' for the students whereby they develop a range of skills, (such as website design and the ability to present either individually or as a team) alongside agency and a belief in their ability to make a positive difference. These assessments are challenging for a number of students, but the impact on their self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy in overcoming these challenges enables them to develop a sense of agency and control over future capabilities. Our aim through this process is to empower our students to develop a more critical perspective of the world, and in particular, education. We then encourage them to use their 'toolkit' which includes a range of skills enhanced by knowledge and understanding of empirical evidence-based practice as a backdrop to becoming effective future educators.

Questions to consider:

How might you respond to feedback to support you positively with developing your own toolkit?

Conclusion

The planning of assessments needs to consider the socio-cultural context (MacKay *et al.*, 2019) as well as the purpose of the assessment activity. The importance of considering both of these dimensions is highlighted by the context of increased prevalence of poor mental health together with concerns about how the learning environment within HE may affect student wellbeing. Our varied assessments and assessment design have the potential to have a positive impact on student self-efficacy in line with the humanistic course ethos; however, in addition to this they also provide additional skills and experience which can be drawn upon within the workplace in educational practice. The pedagogical approach of the course team aims to support students in their development into future skilled and flexible educators who will work within a variety of settings and contexts linked to education. We are therefore mindful of the varied skills that would be of benefit to our students to enhance their employability. However, in an increasingly competitive market, skills alone do not suffice; personal attributes alongside a belief in themselves and their ability to communicate both skills and attributes to future employers is key. In this way, the elements of relationships between students and course teams and humanist practices developed provide protections for students to mitigate the stresses associated with assessment and aim to transform the quality of the assessment experience for students, the richness of the learning opportunity and support the students in developing autonomy and criticality and the ability to deal with the challenges of the course, and of life and employment more generally.

Word Count: 3278 (inc tables)

Recommended Reading

Ahmed-Shafi, A., Middleton, T., Millican, R., Templeton., S. (2020) *Reconsidering Resilience in Education: An exploration using the Dynamic Interactive Model of Resilience*. Switzerland: Springer Nature.

This book explores current understandings of the concept of resilience and the movement from ideas around resilience being a 'fixed character trait' to something that is much more dynamic and influenced by context. It goes on to explore resilience in a range of educational fields and settings including how assessment and feedback can be used to enhance student resilience.

Barrow, C. & Westrup, R. (2019) *Writing Skills for Education Students*. London: Bloomsbury Academic
This book provides a useful overview to support your development as a writer within the field of Education. It gives you a step-by-step approach to planning and structuring your writing alongside tips for the variety of written assessments you might come across during your studies.

Middleton, T., Ahmed Shafi, A., Millican, R. & Templeton, S. (2020) Developing effective assessment feedback: academic buoyancy and the relational dimensions of feedback, *Teaching in Higher Education*, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2020.1777397

This paper presents research into developing effective feedback drawing on the notion of academic buoyancy, the key 5 and the role of relationships and dialogue. It provides further insight into concepts and ideas discussed in this paper.

Quinlan, K. M. (2016) "How Emotion Matters in Four Key Relationships in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education," *College Teaching*, 64(3), pp. 101–111.

This paper examines the role of emotions and relationships with teaching and learning. It argues that consideration of these elements are enriching to student development. It explores four key relationships; students' relationship with the subject, with their teacher, with their peers and with their developing self.

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