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Short Case Study: The First Year Experience: Students' Perceptions on Assessment

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Abstract

This case study reports on the results of a pilot study with first year students in the Department of Social Sciences in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Ireland. It discussed the findings in relation to student perceptions on the assessment process for first years.

Keywords

Assessment, feedback, first year experience, self-perception, motivation

Introduction

The functions of assessment are to certify achievement, influence learning by providing a message to students about what is valued and influence learning through the provision of feedback (Knight, 2001). Crooks (1988) listed feedback on performance through diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses, clarification of misconceptions and identification of difficulties as the most important functions of assessment. In the practice of learning and teaching, it is often assumed that assessment practices fulfil these functions. Thus students are not routinely consulted about the degree to which the experience of assessment provides them with feedback about achievement, corrects their misconceptions, or influences their learning. This project was designed to provide initial data about first year students' views of assessment practice in the Department of Social Sciences in a HEI in Ireland.

Rationale

One of the most prevalent views of assessment currently is represented by the notion of 'assessment as a tool for learning' (Dochy and McDowell, 1997). In the past, assessment was seen as a mean to determine grades, to find out to what extent students reached the

intended objectives. Today, there is a realisation that the potential benefits of assessing are much wider and impinge on in all stages of the learning process. Therefore, the new assessment culture strongly emphasises the integration of instruction and assessment to align learning and instruction more with the assessment (Biggs, 1999). A study by van de Watering *et al.* (2005) was designed to elicit insight in students' actual preferences and perception on assessment and the effects of it on the performance on the different formats in the assessment. They reported that students prefer traditional written assessment and questions, as closed as possible, assessing a mix of cognitive processes.

Research Study

Data was collected during February of the 2004-2005 academic year. This time of the year was chosen as students would have submitted and received feedback on a variety of assignments. First year students in selected subjects were surveyed by the principal investigator. Students were asked to complete a questionnaire in which they indicated the types of assessment they had completed. Their views on experiences about the purpose of assessment, purpose and understanding of feedback, feelings about grades and preparation for assignments were measured using a five point Likert scale. They were also asked to indicate how statements reflected their approach to written assignments on a three point scale and their feedback format experiences and preferences. The limitations of such a structured format of data collection are acknowledged, but participants were also given the opportunity to express additional views at the end of the questionnaire. Data collection resulted in 102 valid surveys.

Discussion of Findings

Types of Assessment

Students reported having experienced a range of assessments including reflective journals, essays, in-class tests, oral presentations, projects, case studies and role plays. They also reported that class participation was assessed in some subjects. The findings presented here therefore refer to a range of assessment experiences and are not limited to traditional examination experiences.

Purpose of Assessment

Students were asked to indicate their agreement with statements referring to the purposes of student assessment for both the student and the lecturer. Analysis showed that students did see the value of assessment in guiding their own learning. 'Helps me find out what I know and don't know,' was agreed with by 87.3% of participants. The majority of participants (84.3%) also saw assessment as a way to link theory and practice, an essential function in the vocationally based courses from which participants were drawn. Slightly fewer students (75.5%) agreed that 'assessment guides my learning'.

Students were also asked to identify the purposes of assessment for lecturers. Their responses indicated perceptions that lecturers use assessment to evaluate student knowledge (81.4%), evaluate their own teaching practice (75.5%) and rank students (44.1%).

In addition participants indicated appreciation of different forms of assessment in developing necessary skills, both academic and practice related, for example:

- 50% agreed that role play aided in understanding people
- 84.3% agreed that reflective diaries help thinking about practice
- 81.4% agreed that essays helped improve writing skills
- 88.2% agreed that projects were useful in learning research skills

Examination of additional comments indicated that students valued assessment that required deeper, as opposed to surface, approaches to learning.

I feel that it is more favourable to do continuous assessment rather than exams because it develops people better as they have to research and gain extra valuable knowledge from it rather than a test of memory. Also learning journals are very beneficial.

The worst form of assessment is having to recite material from memory, which we do for one of the subjects.

Purpose of Feedback

Students also provided information about their perceptions of the purposes of feedback on completed and marked assessments. Table 1 details students' responses to questions about the purposes of feedback.

Purpose	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Check understanding of course material	81.4%	12.7%	5.9%
Help students improve their work	99.0%	1.0%	0.0%
To explain the grade	83.3%	14.7%	2.0%

Table 1 Students ideas about feedback

As can be seen from Table 1, students agreed that feedback helps them check their understanding, improve their work and explain marks. While 75.5% of participants reported that they compared marks to feedback, some also experienced discrepancies between the numerical mark they received and the feedback they received.

I feel lecturers should consult students about their grades not just tell them the grade. Recently I got some assignments back and the comments were 'excellent, good conclusion, good reflections etc.' Nothing bad was written on it, but I only received 50%. I can't understand why it was so bad if all the comments were so positive.

In this case, it seems the student is not aware that under the DIT marking regulations, a mark of 50% is actually not a 'bad' grade. This finding draws attention to the importance of informing students about marking and assessment criteria. This seems more important given that nearly a quarter of the students surveyed indicated that they would not approach the lecturer for clarification of feedback.

I think it would be helpful if lecturers took specific time to speak with all their students to discuss exam results etc. At present lecturers leave it up to the student to come forward. This doesn't work because students who haven't done well are less likely to come forward to speak to their lecturer.

Understanding of Feedback

If assessment is to meet the aim of guiding student learning and assisting students to improve their performance the feedback on such assessment must obviously be clear to those students. Participant reports indicated that this cohort of first year undergraduates had difficulty in understanding the feedback received, with only 4.9% strongly agreeing with the statement ‘I always understand the feedback on assignments’. 39.2% agreed somewhat, 49% disagreed somewhat and 3.9% strongly disagreed. Studies (e.g. Elwood and Klenowski, 2002 and O’Donovan, Price and Rust, 2004) demonstrate that the vocabulary used in expressing marking criteria and feedback does not necessarily have common meaning for both assessors and students.

Feedback Format

Participants were asked to indicate the ways in which they had received feedback on their performance in assessment and to rank their preferences of formats. The majority (64.7%) of students surveyed indicated that they had received feedback in a combination of verbal and written formats. This is stated as the most preferred format with 81.4% ranking it as their first choice. A strong preference for verbal feedback being given in a one-to-one situation with the assessor was evident, with 92.2% of students indicating this. However the feasibility of lecturers and students being able to meet in this way for each piece of work submitted in the day-to-day existence of a busy academic department is doubtful, further indicating the need for explicit marking criteria and feedback and shared understanding between students and assessors.

Experiences of being Graded

James (1995, p. 463) argues that assessment and grading is a social practice consisting of a technical conception, shared by tutors and students where grades are seen as objective and rational “judgements of worth of academic products against shared criteria”. However the experience of grades and distinctions between grades, are interpreted by students as “partially constitutive of personal worth”.

Students in this study were asked about the impact of grades on their self-efficacy as learners. Students reported experiencing the following:

- Comparing the grade to effort put into the assignment
- Self-perception (pride and inadequacy) was affected by grades
- A good grade had more effect on the students' self-perception than a poor grade
- A good grade had a greater effect on 'making me work harder' than a poor grade ($p = 0.02$)

Of particular significance is the experience of students who feel that they have put a lot of effort into assignments but then achieve a lower than expected grade, perhaps because of lack of understanding around expectations and grading. As one participant stated:

I feel I put the work in but don't get the grade I am looking for which makes me feel angry and annoyed, because a lot of work and research has gone into an essay.

Preparation for Assignments

Student anxiety about requirements for assignments is well documented, for example Murphy and Fleming (1998) and Merrill (2001). Indeed, Krause (2000, p. 150) suggests that "becoming accustomed to new forms of assessment and grading may present sufficient academic difficulty for students that they consider leaving." Table 2 shows the level of agreement and disagreement of students with statements related to preparation for assignments.

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Lecturers explain essay titles	55.3%	44.7%	0.0%
Lecturers explain what is required in assignments	61.7%	38.3%	0.0%
I am confident about what is required in assignments	57.4%	38.3%	4.3%

Table 2 Preparation for Assignments

As the data in Table 2 shows, just over half the students reported being prepared and feeling confident about what was expected of them. The statements below reflect student perception of preparation for assignments.

Lecturers need to be much clearer when giving out essay titles indicating what they want. I think past pupil essays/sample essay should be given out to give a better insight to what is expected.

We need more feedback, guidelines and instructions on assignments.

Methods of writing and assessing reflective journals could be clarified.

Approaches to Writing Assignments

Torrance, Thomas & Robinson (2000), from a longitudinal study of student essay writing strategies, found that for inexperienced writers, a minimal drafting strategy in which the student doesn't plan and do multiple drafts, is associated with the poorest results. The self-reports of these first year students show the utilisation of such strategies:

- 22.5% described spending time planning as 'very me'
- 31.4% consistently wrote a plan first
- 18.6% consistently did several drafts
- 23.5% worked consistently over a time period
- 43.1% consistently check writing against title

The format of the data collection method did not allow exploration of why such strategies were used, though examination of these results in the context of the student comments, given below, reveals confusion and lack of guidance with regard to expectations for assignments, it could be concluded that these strategies are due to lack of knowledge.

The first years in my course are expected to know everything, when in reality we haven't been informed. Our lecturers get annoyed at us for not knowing things. It isn't our fault why should we be blamed for something we have no control over.

Upon entering the course first years were expected to automatically know such things as essay layout etc. and it appears to have been forgotten that we came

from secondary school where layout and formats were different. To save lecturers getting annoyed they might want to explain this clearly.

Conclusion

The findings of the pilot study indicate that confusion exists among first year students with regard to expectations for assignments, understanding of feedback. Unsophisticated writing strategies are also evident, which could be related to this confusion about expectations and marking. A study conducted by Smith, Campbell and Brooker (1999) suggests a relationship between understanding of assessment criteria and the complexity of essays produced by students. Effects on self-perception and motivation are also reported. Ecclestone's (2004) study in colleges of further education, indicates that preparation for assignments and understanding of expectations and marking criteria allow students to gain procedural autonomy and thus feelings of safety and comfort in the academic setting. Therefore it is proposed that further research is needed to investigate the impact of participation by first year students in workshops designed to impart both assignment preparation skills and knowledge of marking criteria on both their academic success and self-perception in third-level education. Data collection has been extended to include 2nd and final year students and these data will provide a more complete picture of student perceptions and experiences of assessment.

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