

Using Assessment Criteria to Support Student Learning

Katherine Harrington and James Elander
Psychology Department
London Metropolitan University

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Context

Since 1998, a skills module for level 1 BSc Psychology students at City campus (formerly London Guildhall University) has been an important part of the department's strategy to improve students' baseline and study skills. The discipline-based skills module combines generic and subject-specific skills teaching, links skills provision with the personal tutor system, and includes practical exercises to promote deep learning and improve study skills. One of the exercises involved familiarising students with the Psychology assessment criteria, and this work led to a project to develop tailored resources based on assessment criteria to support students and improve the quality of assessment.

In 2002, the department led a consortium of four institutions to develop a bid under phase four of HEFCE's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL4). *Assessment Plus*, the resulting two-year project, builds directly on the experience of helping students engage with assessment criteria that is part of the skills module.

Rationale

With widening participation, undergraduates have increasingly variable baseline skills, and generic skills are part of the benchmark standards for teaching in Psychology, so a skills module was incorporated in the level 1 Psychology curriculum. The department also had a number of more specific concerns about student performance in Psychology, which led to the decision to adopt a discipline-based rather than generic skills model. For example, we wished to consolidate the Psychology induction programme, increase the effectiveness of the personal tutor system, increase Psychology student awareness of Learning Development Unit services, and promote greater participation in seminar work in Psychology. Even more specifically, we wished to increase students' awareness and understanding of the department's assessment criteria for Psychology assignments, and it was this aim that was extended and developed in *Assessment Plus*, which explores a range of ways in which assessment criteria can be used to support student learning.

The idea that assessment criteria can be used in an active way to help students learn developed from the work of Lin Norton and colleagues at Liverpool Hope and Chris Rust and Colleagues at Oxford Brooks. Research on essay writing had shown that many students believe markers will be impressed by aspects of the work that are not in the assessment criteria (Norton *et al*, 1996a; 1996b; 1999), and that students misunderstand how markers will apply the criteria (Longhurst & Norton, 1997). It was recommended that tutors should explain what is meant by the qualities set out in the criteria (Norton, 1990). O'Donovan *et al* (2000) showed that merely presenting assessment criteria to students had little impact on student performance, and suggested that several further steps were needed, including seminars focusing on the criteria. Subsequent interventions using assessment criteria have helped develop students' understanding of the criteria and have led to improvements in student performance (Price *et al*, 2001; Rust *et al*, 2003).

The skills module

The module involved eleven weekly small-group sessions in the autumn semester of level 1, with workshops led by Learning Development Unit (LDU) study skills tutors and tutorials led by students' personal tutors in Psychology on alternate weeks. The workshops with LDU skills tutors covered study skills, independent learning, essay writing, revision and examination techniques, and were designed to encourage students to appreciate the value of generic skills. The tutorials with Psychology tutors were designed to cement relationships between students and personal tutors and encourage students to make more, and more appropriate, use of the personal tutor system. They were also designed to make explicit links between generic skills and the level 1 Psychology programme, and to support student learning and achievement across the Psychology programme. To achieve this, specific practical exercises were designed for the tutorials, together with reading from a discipline-based core text for the unit (Heffernan, 1997).

Two of those exercises focused on the departmental assessment criteria which specified in much greater detail than before the standards expected at each grade band for each of seven aspects of students' work, resulting in a matrix of grade descriptions (Elander, 2002). The approach was similar to Price and Rust's 'common criteria assessment grid' (Price & Rust, 1999), and the exercises on assessment in the skills module were similar to those described by Price and colleagues (Price *et al*, 2001; Rust *et al*, 2003). One exercise focused on what the assessment criteria really mean (including the meanings of criteria such as 'addressing the question,' 'critical evaluation' and 'development of argument'), and what markers look for in students' work when they make judgements based on those criteria. Specimen essays on topics relevant to level 1 Psychology teaching were then given to students, along with the assessment criteria, and students were asked to mark the essays themselves, using the criteria. The second exercise focused on how the assessment criteria applied to the essays, what students saw as the strengths and weaknesses of the essays, and how those points could be applied to students' own work.

Outcomes and further development

The student response to the module was encouraging but by no means unanimously positive (see Elander, submitted, for a full description of the module evaluation). The aspects that students most valued were the workshops and tutorials on essay writing, and many students would have liked even more time devoted to aspects of essay writing. Students appreciated the opportunities the tutorials provided for group discussion, social networking, and talking about problems they were experiencing. Some students suggested that the skills elements should be more closely related to their work in other Psychology modules, and that tutorials should continue in the spring semester.

The response of the Psychology tutors was also mixed but broadly positive. Some would have liked more time devoted to Psychology topics within their own areas of expertise, including those for which students were concurrently preparing assignments for other modules, so that generic skills would be dealt with in a more implicit way. Some tutors found that considerable time was spent on issues raised by students that were not in the module syllabus but led to relevant and useful discussions. They asked for more flexibility in delivering the module's learning outcome, which was that students should "have developed as independent learners with a skill base appropriate to the demands of the Psychology programme".

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation led to a number of changes during the first years of the module's operation, including more integration of skills teaching with the level 1 Psychology programme and more flexibility for Psychology tutors to adapt the programme of exercises. Proposals for further changes are now being considered as part of the undergraduate programme development. These include increasing the role of Psychology tutors and reducing that of the LDU tutors, extending the module over both level 1 semesters, and linking the skills module with level 1 research methods modules, which all serve the closer integration of skills teaching with the rest of the Psychology programme.

Assessment Plus should be able to feed back into the further development of this module and others like it, for it will develop workshop protocols and materials which focus on the use of core assessment criteria to support student learning and achievement. For example, there will be a students' guide to assessment that explains what is meant by criteria such as 'critical analysis' and 'development of argument', with examples of what markers look for as evidence that those criteria have been met. Other aspects of the project focus on assessment from the perspective of markers, using research about how markers make judgements (e.g., Elander & Hardman, 2002) to develop ways to support markers in their application of assessment criteria.

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Biographical note

Katherine Harrington has a Higher Education Teaching Certificate and a doctorate in Victorian Studies from Keele University; in February 2003, she joined the Psychology Department as the Project Co-ordinator for *Assessment Plus*.

[email: k.harrington@londonmet.ac.uk]

James Elander is a health psychologist who joined London Guildhall University in 1998 and is the Psychology Department's Teaching and Learning Facilitator.

[email: j.elanders@londonmet.ac.uk]