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WILMA W TEVIOTDALE

**TEACHING INTERVENTION
FINAL REPORT**

26 MAY 2009

TEACHING INTERVENTION

Improving Students' Understanding and Performance in Essay-style courseworks

WHO AM I?

I am Wilma Teviotdale, Head of Accountancy, at the University of Huddersfield. This teaching intervention formed part of the work under a Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) project in Formative Assessment. It is designed to inform Higher Education (HE) tutors on practical classroom-based approaches to improve student performance.

AIMS

I aimed to investigate how to achieve:

- a greater student understanding of essay style coursework requirements and particularly accompanying assessment criteria
- better performance on essay style coursework
- an understanding of whether students transfer this greater understanding to other courseworks.

Specific research questions addressed:

- Would development of a dialogue between tutor and students assist a greater understanding of assessment criteria in essays set?
- Would the use of peer and self assessment help this process of improving understanding of assessment criteria?
- Would active engagement of students in reviewing past exemplars of student essays help this process of understanding assessment criteria?
- Would a greater understanding of assessment criteria improve performance?
- Would students be able to 'feed forward' into future courseworks from past experience and demonstrate a reflection on their work to improve performance?

SCOPE

I undertook this intervention with Accountancy undergraduate students on:

- two honours level modules with an eight-week common teaching period in term 1. The modules were Advanced Corporate Reporting (ACR) and Evaluating Corporate Reports (ECR)
- a discursive area covering accounting theories underpinning practices in accounting
- 66 students, most of whom took part in the first stages of the process; the full process of intervention was carried out on ECR module with 18 students. .

WHAT I HAVE FOUND SO FAR

- Improvements in student performance
- Greater engagement and understanding of assessment criteria by students
- Greater willingness to engage in formative assessment exercises with tutor/student dialogue
- Difficulties with student reflection for future learning

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

As a Head of Department, I have been on the receiving end of comments from tutors that final year UG Accountancy students had not performed well in essay-style assignments. This added to my own experience and was despite:

- detailed assessment criteria being provided in courseworks, and
- guidance on levels of performance with exemplars of student work.

External examiners were still commenting on a 'long tail of poorly performing students' and relatively poor powers of self expression in essays.

As part of the TQEF project, I chose two final year UG honours level to be included. One was assessed entirely by two pieces of coursework (18 students on ECR) and the other (48 students on ACR) had an almost identical first coursework followed by an end of year exam.

What does the research literature say about this area?

I used the literature on formative assessment and feedback to inform my intervention. These authors often use constructivist models of learning dealing with cognitive and social development (Fry et al, 2009). This involves a process of changing the way knowledge is held by students so that learning does take place. This also links to deep and surface approaches to learning by students and evidence that tutors who adopt a student focus in their teaching strategies are more likely to help students achieve deeper learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999, as cited in Fry et al, 2009).

Work by Black and Wiliam (1998) indicated that formative assessment 'works' though their studies were not based primarily in HE. I was very keen to discover what practically-based studies in HE had shown. I found that Oxford Brookes University has a Centre of Excellence for Teaching and Learning (CETL) based on Assessment in HE where various studies have taken place.

Rust et al (2003), at Oxford Brookes CETL, concluded from their two-year research project that:

- students' learning can be significantly improved by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and process
- this improvement may last over time and be transferable within similar contexts.

This project was based on the use of a criterion-referenced assessment grid though the authors found that there needed to be a dialogue between staff and students to improve understanding and so performance. Hence these authors were adopting a student focused approach to encourage learning. This supported our experience in a final year undergraduate (UG) modules in Accountancy where the production of a detailed assessment criteria grid as part of coursework assignments did not mean that students actively engaged with it.

I was interested to see from Rust et al (2003) how tutor intervention was designed to engage students. Over a three week period, they used:

- sample courseworks,
- peer assessment individually and then in groups with tutor-led dialogue at appropriate points

I noted that this was based on the summative coursework. (This would not be possible with this intervention as our university would view this as directing the students overmuch and could lead to issues of plagiarism.)

Tutors then provided annotated and marked versions of the samples used by the students followed by discussion to help students understand the tutor view. Data were collected to gauge student views on the effectiveness of the workshops. This intervention also required students to submit a self-assessment sheet with their courseworks though the authors made no clear claims for any demonstration of more accuracy in students' ability to self-assess.

I also found the work of O'Donovan et al (2004) useful. They concluded that:

- both explicit and tacit knowledge transfer processes are required to deliver meaningful knowledge.

They provided a spectrum of explicit and tacit processes as a model to support the transfer of knowledge both pre- and post-submission of summatively assessed student work. This included the use of exemplars and marking practice towards the tacit end of the spectrum and written learning outcomes and written marking criteria at the explicit end of the spectrum. Again, tutor-student dialogue was central.

I found a review of existing research literature by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006). They presented seven principles of good feedback practice which support students taking charge of their own learning, which included:

- clarifying good performance
- facilitating self assessment, and
- encouraging teacher and peer dialogue.

I was also interested to find out if staff and student views on the process were significant influencers. Bevan et al's (2008) work on feedback considered staff and student views and concluded that:

- students value comments which are personalized and part of a partnership with staff.
- staff should be providing targeted comments for improvement as part of a 'feed forward' process to help students transfer their knowledge.

Again, I found a constructivist approach with the student-tutor dialogue being an essential feature.

THE INTERVENTION: PROCESSES AND STRATEGIES

My intention was to put in place processes which would **engage** students with the assessment criteria and exemplars of student work. My strategy was to have a 'captive audience' and hold tutor-led sessions in scheduled classes and have peer and self assessment to encourage student engagement. A clear dialogue between student and tutor was essential to this process.

How did I develop the student-tutor dialogue?

I scheduled the teaching intervention in the final year UG modules in Accountancy into the module handbook. Weekly two-hour seminars with groups of 15 – 25 students were timetabled.

The intervention was scheduled to start in week 6 of term 1, based on the previous year's coursework.

The students were provided with:

- the previous year's assignment with requirements and specific assessment criteria
- an anonymous sample coursework from the previous year with no indication of the standard of the work
- a blank mark sheet with the specific assessment criteria related to the assignment.

I led a discussion of the previous year's assignment and assessment criteria to arrive at a shared understanding of the requirements and standards. This helped the transfer of explicit knowledge (O'Donovan, 2004). I then gave students time to read individually the coursework to make an initial assessment of the standard of the work. Students then split into self-chosen groups to arrive at an agreed grade. These were then discussed with the whole seminar group. The formal mark and feedback for the anonymous coursework sample was then distributed to the seminar group and discussed by the tutor to add further explanation for the mark actually awarded. This helped reinforce explicit knowledge and develop tacit knowledge (O'Donovan, 2004).

How did this 'feed forward' into subsequent work?

Towards the end of the seminar, I gave out the coursework for this academic year. This was on a different topic. Students were taken through a similar process with a tutor-led discussion of the requirements and specific assessment criteria. This work was not due until week 4 of teaching in term 2. I gave an opportunity to submit one page of A4 essay plan to tutors for feedback at the end of week 1 of teaching in term 2; less than 20% of students took this option. A discussion board forum set up in Blackboard for any student queries was not well used and did not add significantly to student-tutor dialogue.

What the students thought at this stage

This first questionnaire (74% response rate; see Appendix 1 for questionnaire) was distributed to students on both modules to capture views on effectiveness of this approach to understanding assessment requirements and criteria.

Responses by students on both modules showed:

- a high level of participation in the formative assessment activity
- an increased level of confidence in understanding how to answer an essay-style coursework
- an increased understanding of what tutors expectations
- the discussion of assessment criteria was found useful
- formative assessment found to be helpful to learning
- the formative assessment was a useful experience overall.

When asked what they had learnt from the formative activity, students reported 'helped you understand assessment criteria'; and 'helped you understand what a tutor expects from a coursework' as the most popular responses.

How I encouraged student engagement with feedback and 'feed forward'

I and fellow tutors provided marked work to students within three weeks of submission; this was on the standard feedback and mark sheets containing the specific assessment criteria discussed with students.

The common teaching period for the two modules had been completed and the majority of the students were now on the ACR module. There was no time in their schedule to hold a detailed feedback session so this only took place for the students on the coursework only module, ECR. They were provided with a specific scheduled session the week following the return of marked work to assist engagement with the feedback and provide further opportunity to 'feed forward' to the next coursework.

During this session:

- the tutor gave students an opportunity to read their feedback sheets then presented generic feedback on strengths and weakness in student work
- students were given the opportunity to discuss the feedback with their peers
- students were then asked to write a short reflective piece on the feedback they have received to help engagement and particularly asked them to identify what they will use in the next coursework due April 2009.

What the students thought at this follow-up stage

A second questionnaire (55% response rate; see Appendix 2 for questionnaire) was distributed to students on ECR to capture their views on effectiveness, particularly re the 'feed forward' aspect (Bevan et al, 2008).

Responses by students on ECR showed:

- a high level of engagement with the feedback session
- high level of satisfaction with summative assessment mark and how explained
- tutor-led feedback session found helpful to support understanding of individual written feedback
- peer group discussion found helpful in understanding individual feedback
- reflective statement found helpful in 'feeding forward' to next coursework
- confidence levels for next coursework showed mixed results

ENQUIRY METHODS

Honours level modules were chosen due to the necessity for critical evaluation in essay-style assignments. There were a total of 66 students in the earlier part of the activity dealing with the first assignment in the common teaching period; a total of 18 students were in the second part of the activity dealing with feedback on the first summative assessment and 'feed forward' to their second coursework.

Student views were captured via two questionnaires (structure and findings in Appendices 1 and 2). The teaching intervention was designed in the light of the relevant literature identified above; the questionnaires were designed to capture students' views on aspects of the intervention to determine their views on effectiveness.

Effectiveness was also considered against overall coursework grades compared to the previous year to determine any increase.

MAIN FINDINGS

Positive outcomes – with some ‘buts’

Student performance – an apparent improvement in summative marks on the first coursework (66 students) to 56.3% average (last year - 47%) though there would be other influencing variables.

Student engagement with feedback – the structured process forced engagement with positive student views on improved levels of understanding.

Feed forward – some evidence of sustaining marks from first coursework (average of 55.8%) to second coursework (average mark of 54.8%) for the 18 ECR students. It must be noted that the second coursework was of a different nature in requiring the analysis of a public limited company’s financial statements in addition to discussion of more theoretical issues and their practical implementation. Comparison to last year’s marks would not be valid as only six students took ECR.

Clear support for personalized student-tutor dialogue.

Generally, I found it encouraging that the students viewed the teaching intervention positively, understanding the beneficial purpose and actively engaging.

Areas for further work

My review of the reflective statements following summative assessment feedback (50% response to this activity) showed a low level of understanding of what lessons they had learnt for the second summative assignment. At this stage the students were aware of the second coursework topic. Reflection is a skill which needs further development **before** this level.

It would have been useful to hold some focus group meetings with students to follow up particular aspects from questionnaires and obtain more depth. However, the timing of this work ending after summative assessments are complete means it is has not been possible to locate a random selection of students.

CONCLUSIONS

There is evidence of improved performance and increased confidence levels in students in undertaking essay-style courseworks particularly re understanding assessment criteria, from tutor-led sessions scheduled in the curriculum delivery. Group peer assessment and discussions were found supportive of this process. There is weaker support for ‘feed forward’ to subsequent summative coursework.

Students were generally pleased with the process and this may help improve scores in the National Student Satisfaction Survey section on Assessment and Feedback.

I found this intervention a very useful exercise in ‘trying out’ various authors’ approaches and models of learning in the formative assessment area. There are some clear messages of how to engage students with feedback in a meaningful way. Some tutors’

views that students will not engage with feedback are not upheld if the process becomes part of the teaching and learning strategy.

I believe that much more work has to go into helping students learn how to reflect on their work for future improvements to take place. This would address stages in Kolb's Learning Cycle (Fry et al, 2009) and assist an improved level of understanding to occur to support student learning.

FURTHER READING

The following references are suggested as readings helpful to designing similar teaching interventions:

Bevan, R., Badge, J., Cann, A., Willmott, C. and Scott, J. (2008) Seeing Eye-to-Eye? Staff and Student Views on Feedback, *Bioscience Education e-Journal*, 12.

Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1998) Assessment and classroom learning, *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 7-68.

Fry, H., Ketteridge, S., Marshall, S.(2009) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, New York and London: Routledge

Nicol, D.J. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006) Formative Assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 199-218.

O'Donovan, B., Price, M., and Rust, C. (2001) The Student Experience of Criterion-Referenced Assessment (Through the Introduction of a Common Criteria Assessment Grid), *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 38(1), 74-85.

O'Donovan, B., Price, M., and Rust, C. (2004) Know what I mean? Enhancing student understanding of assessment standards and criteria, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 9(3), 325 – 335.

Rust, C., Price, M., and O'Donovan, B. (2003) Improving Students' Learning by Developing their Understanding of Assessment Criteria and Processes, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 28(2), 147-164.

Website of particular note:

www.reap.ac.uk This is the website for the work of Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) referred to above. It has some practical examples in a range of disciplines for re-engineering assessment practices.

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APPENDIX 1 – FIRST QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS

49 respondents (out of 66 students)

Section A

Q1. Did you complete this formative activity?

100% (49/49) said 'yes' 0% said 'no'

Q2. Why didn't you complete this formative assessment activity? (Tick as many as apply)

100% (49/49) said not applicable to all of the following- 'I didn't think I need to', 'I didn't know we had a formative assessment, 'I didn't think it was important' and 'other'.

Q3. Before completing this formative activity how confident were you in your understanding of how to answer an essay type question? (1= Not confident at all, 10= Extremely confident. Please circle one)

55.1% (27/49) rated their confidence level between 6-10, 44.9% (22/49) rated their confidence level between 1-5.

Q4. After completing this formative activity how confident were you in your understanding of how to answer an essay type question? (1= Not confident at all, 10= Extremely confident. Please circle one)

93.9% (46/49) rated their confidence level between 6-10, 6.1% (3/49) rated their confidence level between 1-5.

Q5. Do you feel that by completing this formative activity it has provided you with a better understanding of what a tutor expects from an answer to an essay type question? (Please tick one box)

83.7% (41/49) said 'yes', 6.1% (3/49) said 'no' and 10.2% (5/49) said 'not sure'.

Q6. Did you find discussing assessment criteria useful? (Please tick one box)

91.8% (41/49) said 'yes', 2.0% (1/49) said 'no' and 6.1% (3/49) said 'not sure'.

Q7. How would you rate the feedback provided in the formative assessment session?

(Please tick one box. 5 = Excellent, 1 = poor).

16.3% (8/49) rated the feedback as 'excellent', 51.0% (25/49) rated the feedback as 'good', 30.6% (15/49) rated the feedback as 'neutral', 2.0% (1/49) rated the feedback as 'satisfactory'.

Q8. Do you feel that this formative activity has helped you in your learning? (Please tick one box)

73.5% (36/49) said 'yes', 2.0% (1/49) said 'no' and 24.5% (12/49) said 'not sure'

Q9. What did you feel you learnt from completing this formative activity? (Tick as many as apply)

42.9% (21/49) said 'helped you to understand how to construct an essay, 73.5% (36/49) said 'helped you understand assessment criteria', 51.0% (25/49) said 'helped you understand what content was required', 75.5% (37/49) said 'helped you understand what a tutor expects from a coursework', 20.4% (10/49) said 'helped improve your group work skills', 36.7% (18/49) said 'helped improve your critical thinking' and 2.0% (1/49) said 'other'.

Q10. Overall, did you find completing this formative assessment activity a useful experience? (1= Not useful at all, 10= Extremely useful, Please circle one)

85.7% (42/49) rated their experience between 6-10, 14.3% (7/49) rated their experience between 1-5.

Q11. Did you experience any barriers/problems when completing this formative assessment activity? (Tick as many as apply)

10.2% (5/49) said 'language' was a barrier/problem, 32.7% (16/49) said 'not enough time' was a barrier/ problem, 2.0% (1/49) said 'difficulty with group members' was a barrier/problem and 8.2% (4/49) said 'other'.

APPENDIX 2 – SECOND QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS
10 respondents (out of 18 students)

Section A

Q1. Did you attend the summative assessment feedback session?
90% (9/10) said 'yes'; 10% (1/10) said 'no'

Q2. If not, why not? (*Tick as many as apply*)
The one respondent who said 'no' to Q1 did not respond to this question. Options were:

- did not think it could help me understand the feedback received
 - I was embarrassed with my result
 - I did not complete the summative piece of work
 - I did not think it would help with my next assignment for this module
 - no time
 - other (*please specify*)
-

Q3. Did you consider that your result from your summative essay assignment was a fair reflection of the work you submitted? (*Please tick one box*)
90% (9/10) said 'yes, 10% (1/10) said 'no'

The one respondent who said 'no' commented:
"Thought answered questions well enough to obtain a better mark than given"

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Q4. Did you read the feedback you received in conjunction with your mark? (*Please tick one box*)
90% (9/10) said 'yes', 10% (1/10) said 'no'
The 'no' respondent did not provide any explanation.

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Q5. Did this feedback help explain your mark? (*Please tick one box*)
90% (9/10) said 'yes', 10% (1/10) 'no', 0% said 'not sure'

Q6. Did the tutor-led session on the feedback for the summative essay assignment help you understand your individual feedback?
100% (10/10) said 'yes', 0% (0/10) said 'no'

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- Q7. How would you rate the feedback provided by the tutor?
(Please tick one box. 5 = Excellent, 1 = poor).
 10% (1/10) rated '5', 60% (6/10) rated '4', 30% (3/10) rated '3', no students rated '2' or '1'

- Q8. Did you find the group discussion during the feedback session helped you understand your individual feedback? **(Please tick one box)**
 70% (7/10) said 'yes', 30% (3/10) said 'no'

- Q9. Did you complete the reflective statement during the feedback session or soon afterwards for submission to tutor? **(Please tick one box)**
 100% (10/10) said 'yes'

- Q10. Did you find the feedback session useful for 'feed forward' to your next assignment for this module? **(Please tick one box)**
 90% (9/10) said 'yes', 10% (1/10) said 'no'

- Q11. After obtaining and discussing the feedback on your summative assignment, how confident are you in your ability to undertake the next summative assignment on this module.
(1= Not confident at all, 10= Extremely confident, Please circle one)
 10% (1/10) rated '1', 0% rated '2', 0% rated '3', 10% (1/10) rated '4', 10% (1/10) rated '5', 10% (1/10) rated '6', 0% rated '7', 50% (5/10) rated '8', 0% rated '9', 0% rated '10', one student did not respond.
- Q12. Overall, how useful an experience did you find the feedback session in helping you understand your level of performance? **(1= Not useful at all, 10= Extremely useful, Please circle one)**
 10% (1/10) rated '1', 0% rated '2', 0% rated '3', 0% rated '4', 10% (1/10) rated '5', 10% (1/10) rated '6', 0% rated '7', 40% (4/10) rated '8', 0% rated '9', 0% rated '10'
- Q13. Did you experience any barriers/problems during the feedback session **(Tick as many as apply)**
 20% (2/10) cited 'Language'
 0% cited 'Not enough time'
 10% (1/10) cited 'Difficulty with other group members '
 70% (7/10) cited 'No barriers/problems'

0% cited 'Other (*please specify*)'

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Section B. Your views

Any other comments, relating to the summative feedback session on this module

No comments were provided by respondents.

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REFLECTIVE STATEMENT

I found that the timing is the essence of how to conduct such enquiries. It is difficult to capture student views at the 'right' point so that valid responses are obtained at key points in teaching interventions. Given the purpose of this intervention, it would have been useful to have had longer to gather all the data – though this will be done but not reported on here. Student attitudes to formative assessment and feedback, the 'psychology' of this is difficult to establish and appreciate. From the second questionnaire, there was clearly one student who did not consider that this 'worked' though reasons were not forthcoming.

Linking the intervention to the research literature was a good experience as it gave underpinning and practical support. Also having the feedback from other authors on what they had difficulty with to avoid some 'pitfalls'.

Questionnaire design (and timing) is key; feedback on this aspect would be particularly useful as full details of authors' questionnaires is not always apparent from what is published.

I found it is very difficult to establish whether 'feed forward' is actually happening. I can capture some views from questionnaires but determining whether students are actually making use of the feedback in future courseworks, even within the same module, is far from certain. This would require a much more detailed analysis of courseworks, perhaps even by individual student. Feedback on this aspect would be particularly welcome.

Marking criteria	Marks available	Your mark
Clear identification of inquiry objectives and rationale for the inquiry	10	7
Demonstration of appropriate support based on an analysis of relevant literature	25	18
Selection of an appropriate method of inquiry and data analysis	25	17
Findings supported by appropriate analysis of the data	20	13
Reasoned justification for practical implications and/or future research	10	6
Good presentation and clarity of expression	10	6
Total marks	100	67