SYLWER: O ganlyniad i newidiadau yng nyfodion portffolio’r TUAAU, nid oes gan bob cylch dysgu a lwythir i CADAIR yr un nodweddiwn. Mae’n bwysig bod y cyfholoedd dysgu hyn yn cael eu defnyddio fel adnoddau yn unig, ac nid fel canllawiau i’r hyn sydd ei angen i fodloni gofynion y TUAAU. Os oes gennych ymholiadau, cysylltwch â thestaff@aber.ac.uk.

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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSU UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 2 | Teaching Cycle 2

Supporting Independent Learning

Mae’r Cylch Dysgu hwn o’r portffolio TUAAU wedi'i gyflwyno i CADAIR gyda chaniatâd yr awdur uchod. Adnodd i’w ddefnyddio gan ymgeiswyr y TUAAU yn y dyfodol a staff eraill ydyw, fel ran o’u datblygu prifysigol ym Mhrifysgol Aberystwyth. Erys yn eiddo i’r awdur a Phrifysgol Aberystwyth. Os hoffech dyfynnu’r gwaith hwn neu gyfeirio ato, cysylltwch â’r awdur. Ceir y manylion cyswllt yn http://www.aber.ac.uk/cy/directory/.

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Introduction

Redesigning a teaching module within Higher Education requires careful consideration of the nature of student learning, how it will encourage deep learning of students, and the balance of different types of learning across the module. Ideally, module design takes account of a clear notion of what students should be able to achieve upon completion of the module. To support deep learning, assessment should be explicitly linked to these learning objectives, and should measure the extent to which students have succeeded in meeting these objectives.

Linking assessment to objectives is recognized in the academic literature on teaching and learning as being key to enhancing the quality of student learning (Ramsden, 1992, 181-190). Through a process of ‘constructive alignment’ – aligning the content, process and the assessment of learning, to the stated learning objectives – students better understand the learning goals of the module, providing a clearer set of criteria for performance measurement (Biggs, 2002, 2003).

This Teaching Cycle outlines one way in which assessment can be designed in order to achieve the aims and objectives of a new module within the School of Management and Business at Aberystwyth University. A Year 2 module, 'Corporate Governance, Ethics and Regulation', was re-designed and offered to second and third year undergraduate students for two successive academic years, before undergoing further changes from a 10 credit module to a 20 credit module as part of a School-wide
adoption of a 20-credit standard size for all Part Two modules. Moving to a 20-credit standard also provided an opportunity to update the content of some of these modules, make them more closely fit the QAA benchmark guidelines, and improve both balance between semesters and opportunities for progression through the scheme. The changes conform with the Learning and Teaching Strategy's aims of simplifying choices and improving progression by rationalizing the core content of schemes and adopting the 20-credit standard. These changes were consistent with similar modifications being made in other changes being proposed by the School in line with the Learning and Teaching Strategy. This Teaching Cycle covered implementation of a formative assessment exercise on the two deliveries of the module before adaptation to a 20 credit module.

This Teaching Cycle focuses on the design and implementation of one of the forms of assessment for the module, namely a 1,500 word essay worth 20% of the marks for the module. The design of the assessment was informed by the main learning objective for the module, namely to enable students to apply general theories and concepts of corporate governance to the study and analysis of real cases in corporate governance as a result of a sound appreciation of the theoretical concepts underlying the subject. Outlined in this Teaching Cycle is a model of student-centred assessment that encourages students to develop independent thinking, enabling them to apply prior knowledge to a new conceptual and empirical context. The model of assessment set out was designed to promote deeper understanding of the theoretical and conceptual issues.

Having briefly outlined the institutional context within which the re-design of the module took place, we proceed to outline the principles of teaching and learning that informed the process of designing one aspect of the assessment for this module. The process of providing continuous feedback for students is then summarized. An evaluation of the design and implementation of the task over two years is then given, together with an outline of the modifications made as a result of student feedback during this Teaching Cycle. Some of the advantages and disadvantages of this application of the principles of constructive alignment will be summarized in the conclusion.
Fostering independent learning

Independent learning is part of an ongoing, lifelong process of education that stimulates greater thoughtfulness and reflection, and promotes the continuing growth of students' analytical capabilities and powers. In contrast to rote learning of facts and skills, this approach to learning encourages students to create meaning for themselves, based on their understanding of why and how new knowledge is related to their own experiences, interests and needs.

During this process, independent learners develop the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills needed to make responsible decisions and take actions dealing with their own learning. Independent learning is fostered by creating the opportunities and experiences which encourage student motivation, curiosity, self-confidence, self-reliance and positive self-concept. It is based on student understanding of their own interests and a valuing of learning for its own sake.

Kesten (1987, p. 3), defines independent learning as follows:

"Independent learning is that learning in which the learner, in conjunction with relevant others, can make the decisions necessary to meet the learner's own learning needs."

Independent learning takes different forms for different students and the process varies according to the subject matter, students' interests, and individual abilities. Independent learning involves the teacher and learner in an interactive process that encourages students' intellectual development and their capacity for independent and reflective judgment. Ideally, independent learning is fostered by a school environment which is sensitive, flexible, and responsive to the needs of students. This helps encourage a strong sense of purpose and motivation on the part of students, and assists in making full use of the resources of the school as well as to provide the lecturer with a guide to modification to subject delivery where necessary.

In addition, today's students increasingly demand an active role in their own learning. Especially business students frequently prefer to work with relevant, involving and challenging cases - cases that are tailored to their learning objectives and provide a
for stimulating discussion. Cases enable students to put themselves in the place of actual decision makers. This offers the opportunity for students to analyze situations, develop alternatives, choose plans of action and implementation, and communicate and defend their findings in small groups and in class. Cases thus can be used to test the understanding of theory, to connect theory with application, and to develop theoretical insights. Cases typically enable students to learn by doing. A continuing stream of new cases (or innovative interpretations of previous cases) is necessary to stay abreast of current developments. This particularly applies to a fast moving field such as corporate governance where reflection of current events is paramount to an understanding of the dynamic nature of the subject, in addition to a sound review of historic cases to enable a thorough understanding of the involved theoretical concepts.

The challenges of undergraduate teaching in the School of Management and Business.

The School of Management and Business at Aberystwyth University is one of the largest Schools of the University. With a full-time teaching staff of approximately 20 academics, one of the biggest attractions for undergraduate students is the wide range of modules and degree schemes that are offered at undergraduate level covering, amongst others, such disciplines as Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, International Trade, Industrial Organization, Econometrics, Financial Economics, Choice Behaviour, Labour Economics, and Corporate Governance. With some 800 undergraduate students, the challenges for teaching staff are those of dealing with large numbers of students from very different educational backgrounds, with significantly different academic abilities, and vastly divergent intellectual interests.

Faced with such environmental variables, the challenge for teaching staff includes ensuring student intellectual engagement with academic debates, particularly in the context of large group teaching, and the adaptation of teaching material to the needs of as broad a student body as possible, without compromising academic quality, rigour, and the achievement of learning objectives. This forms an important external constraint that conditions the process of module design and delivery, which must be kept in mind when attempting to re-design and implement an invigorated module that
meets relevant teaching and learning objectives, and simultaneously exposes students to the exercises of a Teaching Cycle.

In early 2006 I was asked to re-design and deliver an existing undergraduate module for second and third year students. The module should appeal to as broad a range of undergraduates as possible, whilst being linked closely to my own research interests in corporate governance. As a result, I re-designed the existing 10 credit module of 12 hours of lectures, complemented by five one-hour tutorials. This re-design included a re-write of the syllabus, an update of the taught material, selection of new case studies, a selection of new essay questions, a reformulation of learning outcomes, and a consideration of formal assessment methods to reflect current teaching and learning research. Assessment of the module would continue to be composed of one 1,500 word essay (20% of mark) and a 1.5-hour exam at the end of the module (80%). The first cohort I taught on this module comprised of some 80 students, with some 110 in the subsequent year.

The broad learning objectives of the module were formulated and listed in the Module Outline as follows, with more specific learning outcomes formulated for each lecture (see Appendix 1 for Key Skills in support of these Learning Outcomes):

On completion of this module, students should be able to:

- Be able to critically examine the practical effects of a regulatory approach
- Critically analyse and evaluate the role of monitors and gatekeepers
- Have the skills to analyse and critically interpret the merits of different regulatory models
- Analyse and explain the role of audit in corporate governance
- Define and discuss the function of the board of directors
- Critically interpret the importance of various control mechanisms of corporate governance
- Evaluate the effectiveness of board committees and external audits in the minimization of agency costs
- Identify and critically assess the value of ethics and codes of conduct
• Critically illustrate and discuss the development of the corporate governance paradigm
• Demonstrate a critical evaluation of corporate social responsibility

These learning outcomes were formulated in order to encourage students to engage with the academic literature on corporate governance, and apply the theoretical and conceptual ideas introduced in lectures to real life cases as they evolved around them.

Case studies were used extensively to link theory with practice and to demonstrate to students the value of theoretical concepts and academic research for the comprehension of governance events surrounding them. An understanding of the significance of real life cases also highlighted the relevance to their own situation. Assessment for this module, therefore, was designed to measure student understanding of the theoretical and conceptual approaches to studying corporate governance and the agency problems that arise from the separation of ownership and control (including concepts such as the divergence of interests between principal and agent, transactions costs, monitoring, and incomplete contracts), and their ability to apply these theories and concepts to understand empirical examples of corporate governance.

**Designing assessment to meet learning objectives.**

In order to assess student success in meeting the learning objectives outlined above, it was decided that the essay aspect of the assessment of the module should be designed in such a way as to provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate their ability to apply theoretical and conceptual tools for the analysis of corporate governance to the study and understanding of the subject. The essay questions were therefore formulated as follows:

Choose **one** of the topics below and conduct a critical review. You are required to apply appropriate theories, provide relevant practical examples, and, most importantly, support any assumptions you make. Demonstrate (and indicate through appropriate referencing) that you have conducted in-depth research and reading on the topic you chose.

---

1 These questions undergo regular review and modification to reflect current events and developments in research on corporate governance. The particular questions shown here were given in 2006/07.
a. Corporate governance is neither regional nor parochial in nature. It is of global provenance. Analyse and comment on this statement.

b. Future corporate governance codes and laws need to ensure that they add value. Critically comment. Provide supporting arguments for the selected issues.

c. Corporate governance failures indicate systemic problems. Do you agree/disagree? Critically discuss and support your argument with an analysis of relevant examples.

d. Discuss one case of corporate governance failure of your choice and analyse the main reasons for the breakdown in monitoring.

This formulation of essay questions differed from earlier implementations of this module in several ways. Firstly, it gave students considerably more scope to focus their essay on a topic of their choice, rather than presenting them with a narrow pre-defined notion upon which to focus. Secondly, the essay question encouraged students to collect and analyse a broad range of academic literature, rather than rely exclusively on textbook sources as is traditionally the case in most essay questions at this level. Thirdly, instructions to students explicitly required them to use some of the theoretical and conceptual approaches discussed in lectures and seminars in the analysis of presented case studies.

The theoretical and conceptual tools to be employed and the interpretations drawn from the task were left open, with the onus on the students to determine how the former could be usefully applied to a study of this type. Assessment was designed specifically to meet the learning objectives set out for the module, as set out above. A strong emphasis was placed on independent interpretation and care was taken to convey the importance of own analysis for the subsequent assessment re the quality of the work.

In addition to being driven by principles of constructive alignment (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), this formulation of essay question and expectations was chosen for the following reasons. Firstly, given the heterogeneous background and interests of the students taking this module, the range and formulation of essay questions gave students considerable scope to choose a topic of particular interest to them. This, it was hoped, would foster greater student engagement with the task and result in greater success in meeting the requirements of the essay.
Secondly, giving students a wider choice was also motivated by the findings of a growing body of research on the nature and quality of student learning. Recent developments in the understanding of how learning takes place emphasise the importance of active learning in promoting student understanding and deep learning (Entwistle, 1996). Teaching practices that lead to the transformation of factual knowledge into applicable knowledge often involve activities and tasks that encourage students to construct their own meanings of new situations.

Biggs (2003) refers to this kind of knowledge as 'functioning knowledge', where students are required to 'perform their understanding, not just tell us about it'. Key to achieving this is the engagement of the student in the transformation of knowledge. The terminology of 'student-centred learning' has been used to describe methods of teaching that emphasize that students have full responsibility over their own learning, and that students are fully involved in the process of acquiring, processing and assessing information (Brandes and Ginnis, 1991).

The essay questions outlined above strive to meet these criteria by requiring students to apply theories and concepts acquired in lectures and seminars to questions relevant to the subject and current case observations. Moreover, by giving students a free choice in the selection of case studies, the task can be related directly to student interests. Finally, successful completion of the assessed task requires students to take the initiative in researching and analysing the specific topic, thus placing the onus for demonstrating deeper understanding of theoretical and conceptual frameworks on the individual student.

**Facilitating student learning through formative assessment**

The essay questions were designed to assess the ability of students to apply theoretical and conceptual skills for analysing governance issues to a particular topic of their choice. The final assessment took place once students have completed the task and submitted the written work to the School for marking by the module coordinator. Measuring student learning can take several forms and can take place at different junctions during the teaching and learning process. While summative assessment has traditionally been the most widely utilized mechanism for evaluating a student’s performance, there is a growing body of research that emphasizes the importance of
Formative assessment aids learning by generating feedback that is of benefit to students and to the lecturer, and is an essential tool to enhance student performance. For the student, formative assessment of performance, in class or on assignments, enables students to reassess their understanding and skills, and build more powerful ideas and capabilities (Juwah et al., 2004, p.3). Such modes of assessment may also be a way of encouraging student interest and commitment, as well as pose an intellectual challenge (Ramsden, 1992).

In this particular application, the fact that the essay questions do not follow the traditional School essay format familiar to students, but challenged students to explore their wider intellectual potential, meant that it was even more important to provide additional support for students carrying out that task, in order to give them the guidance and confidence to successfully meet the requirements and expectations of the task. For the lecturer, formative feedback can lead to the realignment of teaching in response to learners' needs (Juwah et al, 2004). In this particular case, this second advantage of formative feedback was particularly important given that this was an 'inherited' module in need of updating and re-design, and also in view of the anticipated expansion of the 10 credit module to 20 credits in subsequent years (implemented in academic year 2008/09).

Acquiring student feedback is essential in order to identify and address issues related to various aspects of the task (instructions, support and guidance during research and analysis, outlining the assessment criteria). The use of feedback in module re-design and modification is discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section. This approach to assessment centres on formative assessment and feedback in-class and the main characteristics of classroom assessment have been summarized in Table 1 as follows:
### Table 1: Value of formative assessment and feedback in classroom assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Learner-centred</td>
<td>The focus of classroom assessment is to encourage learning. While some adjustments may need to be made in the instruction, the focus of the effort should be made on developing the students thinking and learning skills/strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Teacher-directed</td>
<td>Classroom assessment respects the autonomy, the academic freedom and the professional judgment of the instructor. The lecturer gauges what to assess, how to assess, and how to respond. It is left to the lecturer whether or not to share the results with the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Mutually beneficial</td>
<td>Classroom assessment reinforces the information for the students and they become more skilled at self-assessment. Likewise, lecturers strengthen their own teaching skills as they gain new insight into what they do that is effective or not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Formative</td>
<td>Classroom assessments are not meant to be summative nor are they meant to be graded. They are almost always anonymous. The aim is to improve learning to help students succeed on graded evaluations and beyond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Context-specific</td>
<td>Each group of students varies depending on many factors such as the background experience they bring to their learning, their motivation, personality and group dynamics. Therefore, the use of classroom assessment is based on the instructor's professional judgment. Only the instructor knows how best to assess the students. Whatever the instructor decides to assess, the assessment must be context specific.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Ongoing</td>
<td>Classroom assessment is a cycle of soliciting information and providing feedback to the students on how to improve their learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Rooted in good teaching practices</td>
<td>Classroom assessment is additional systematic feedback that instructors already do informally: ask questions, react to the audience's questions, monitor body language and facial expressions, etc. Classroom assessment reinforces new material for students and shows where the gaps are before they become a serious impediment to performance on summative evaluations. Lastly, the instructor is teaching students techniques for self-assessment which they can adapt to future learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several different mechanisms for providing formative feedback were put in place and are summarized below in Table 2. These mechanisms were informed by Juwah et
at.'s (2004) principles of good feedback practice. According to these principles, good feedback should

1. Facilitate self-assessment
2. Encourage teacher-student dialogue around learning
3. Clarify what good performance is
4. Provide opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
5. Provide high quality information to students about their learning
6. Encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem, and
7. Produce information to the lecturer that can be used to help shape the teaching

Accordingly, the following stages of formative feedback were initially set out as follows:

Table 2: Stages of formative assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Milestone</th>
<th>Formative assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Stage 1 - Introduction to task, outline of requirements and assessment criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The essay questions, elements to be included in the essay and assessment criteria were conveyed to students at the beginning of the module. An oral presentation by the lecturer was followed by the opportunity to discuss possible ideas with peers and ask questions in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Stage 2 - Evaluation of sample coursework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students were given sample essays that had attempted to answer similar essay questions, or, where appropriate, were provided with sample journal articles. They were also given copies of the Student Handbook outlining guidelines for essay writing and reference style. Students were asked to read these papers in small groups and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. The seminar then discussed each written piece and evaluated these against School assessment criteria. This enabled students to develop a sense of understanding of expectations and standards for assessment of their own work, and to get an immediate response to perceived difficulties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Stage 3 - 5 minute in-seminar presentation of preliminary research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students presented the main findings of their work to the seminar group, upon which both the lecturer and peers posed questions. Based on this feedback, students were encouraged to reflect upon their research, and identify areas for improvement or modification of their work in advance of the deadline for submission.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Week 6 | Submission of essay
---|---
Week 7 | Stage 4 - lecturer feedback on written essay and group discussion

After the submission of the coursework, written feedback was returned to students in seminars, and the opportunity was provided to discuss this with their peers and the lecturer. Clarifications on the comments and mark were given where requested. In addition, one-to-one feedback was provided, where requested, during regular office hours.

Evaluation and Reflection: Improving assessment criteria and support

The module was first taught by me during the academic year 2006/07. The teaching cycle was first introduced in 2007/08, and again implemented, in modified form (see discussion later in text) during the academic year 2007/08. In general, student feedback for this module was highly positive, with students particularly expressing appreciation of the advice available during the module, the transparency of the criteria used for assessment, and comments from the lecturer on submitted coursework. Particularly interesting were student responses to a specific questionnaire students were asked to complete upon submitting their essays, and which asked students to evaluate different aspects of the assessed task.

Questionnaire design reflected widely applied standard practice in educational research (Cohen and Manion, 1994), with the inclusion of a number of tick box questions, followed by a space for students to provide more qualitative comments if they so desired. Of the 80 students registered for the module in 2006/07, 49 responded; of the 110 students registered in 2007/08, 87 responded.

In both years, students were satisfied with the nature of the essay questions, and in particular, they appeared to appreciate the opportunity to focus their essay on a topic of their choice. While some students noted a preference for more structured and pre-defined questions following a standard format, this section amounted to 15% in 2006/07 and declined to 10% in 2007/08. Several students noted that this was a refreshing change from the essay question format set by the majority of undergraduate modules within the School of Management and Business.
However, even though students seemed to be satisfied overall with the formulation of the essay questions, there was an underlying sentiment that the instructions given to students about the nature of the assessment task, the various elements to be included in the essay, and the nature of the material that students were required to analyse, could benefit from further clarification. In 2006/07, while about 65% of the students expressed an understanding of the nature of the task they had to complete after study of the module outline, about 25% felt that students would benefit from further elaboration on instructions and expectations.

In particular, students noted that the use of academic journal material might need to be explained in more detail. Some suggestions indicated potential benefit from demonstrating how to use selected articles as an illustration of how such material could be used and applied to analyse and answer a question. Following this feedback, more detailed guidelines about what students should include in their essay, how journal articles can be used, kinds of case studies that could be adopted, and the different kinds of research resources that would be suitable for collection of material were provided in 2007/08. The value of such clarification and the provision of more detailed instructions is illustrated by student responses to this question in 2007/08, with about 85% stating that the (re-designed) instructions were sufficiently clear, and only a small minority of 7% continuing to perceive room for further explanation.

A similar need to refine the process of supporting students in carrying out the assessed task was suggested with regard to the role of the lecturer at different stages in the process. In 2006/07, even though the large majority were satisfied with the advice and support provided, some few students continued to feel that insufficient guidance was given during the coursework task. Areas of particular uncertainty identified by students was the nature of the analysis that students would be expected to apply to the essays, and the kind of research that was expected of them based on the materials.

Hence, for 2007/08, the supporting role of the module coordinator was strengthened by introducing an additional stage of formative assessment designed to provide students more specific feedback on their preliminary research proposal, give additional suggestions for reading, and to provide broader guidelines for analysis. Students were asked to prepare a 300-word abstract of their idea for the essays, and include a preliminary indication of the possible sources for analysis. In the seminar,
these abstracts were discussed with their peers, and then handed to the lecturer, who made suggestions as to improvements and changes. The revised process of formative assessment is provided in Table 3 below. The added value of this modification designed to support students in the completion of the assessed task is illustrated by the fact of much higher student satisfaction with the level of support provided, in 2007/08.

Table 3: Stages for formative assessment - as revised for 2007/08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Milestone</th>
<th>Formative assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week I</td>
<td>Stage I - Introduction to task, outline of requirements and assessment criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The essay questions, elements to be included in the essay and assessment criteria were conveyed to students at the beginning of the module. An oral presentation by the lecturer was followed by the opportunity to discuss possible ideas with peers and ask Questions in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Stage 2 - Evaluation of sample coursework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students were given sample essays that had attempted to answer similar essay questions, or, where appropriate, were provided with sample journal articles. They were also given copies of the Student Handbook outlining guidelines for essay writing and reference style. Students were asked to read these papers in small groups and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. The seminar then discussed each written piece and evaluated these against School assessment criteria. This enabled students to develop a sense of understanding of expectations and standards for assessment of their own work, and to get an immediate response to perceived difficulties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Stage 3 - Submission and discussion of 300 word abstract of proposed research piece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students prepared a 300 word abstract outlining their chosen topic, and summarise the main sources for their analysis. Students discussed their ideas with their peers in small groups of 2 or 3 students, for feedback on strengths and weaknesses of their proposal. Abstracts were subsequently collected, and commented upon by the lecturer during the next seminar session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 6</td>
<td>Stage 4 - 5 minute in-seminar presentation of preliminary research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students presented the main findings of their work to the seminar group, upon which both the lecturer and peers posed questions. Based on this feedback, students were encouraged to reflect upon their research, and identify areas for improvement or modification of their work in advance of the deadline for submission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 7</td>
<td>Submission of essay</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Week 8 | Stage 5 - lecturer feedback on written essay and group discussion
---|---

After the submission of the coursework, written feedback was returned to students in seminars, and the opportunity was provided to discuss this with their peers and the lecturer. Clarifications on the comments and mark were given where requested. In addition, one-to-one feedback was provided, where requested, during regular office hours.

Students were asked about the usefulness of presenting their essay topic and related research to their seminar group, and while some 70% of students found this useful the first time the module ran, in the second year, this had risen to 82% of students. It is arguable that, as a result of the clarification of what was expected of students, individuals felt more comfortable presenting their ideas to peers and the lecturer in seminars. It was evident from student presentations that they had a much clearer understanding of the task at hand, and were able to orally communicate the progress they had made towards meeting the objectives of the assessment.

Similarly, responses and suggestions for improvement for peers also demonstrated a high understanding of the nature of the task, and resulted in a constructive debate that was beneficial to all seminar participants. Engaging peers in the process of formative assessment in this way emerged as a highly productive way of supporting individuals in the essay-preparation stage, and reinforces the findings of other studies that have demonstrated the value-added of peer-group assessment for student learning (Boud et al., 1999; Biggs, 2003).

**Conclusions**

This teaching cycle has provided an overview of how the principles of constructive alignment was applied in the design of assessment for a re-designed module within the School of Management and Business at Aberystwyth University. In addition to seeking to enhance the quality of student learning and improving the student experience, the specific design of the assessment sought to accommodate the wide diversity of interest and background of the student body, and set out to encourage students in their development as independent learners.
The findings of this Teaching Cycle suggest that giving students the opportunity to tailor their assessed work to their own specific interests may significantly improve student motivation to carry out assessed work, and heighten student engagement with the learning process. Encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning in such a way shifts responsibility for learning onto the student, with the lecturer assuming the role of facilitator and guide to direct student learning at different stages during the learning process. Moreover, the careful alignment of assessment with module learning outcomes provides a clear framework within which learning can take place. In addition, students are enabled to monitor their own progress through regular feedback from the lecturer and peers, and can formulate strategies for closing the gap between given performance and expected performance. As most modules complement lectures with small group seminars these techniques can be applied to modules of varying sizes.

The model of assessment outlined in this Teaching Cycle may be particularly relevant to large and diverse departments such as the School of Management and Business at Aberystwyth University, where students have a vast range of interests and knowledge that they bring to each individual module. Allowing students some scope in focusing their analysis on a subject of own choice may encourage them to make linkages - theoretical, conceptual and empirical - across different subject areas and sub-disciplines within the School of Management and Business. Encouraging students to work in such a way not only provides greater coherence across a single degree scheme, but can also encourage students to make new cognitive associations between different areas of knowledge, thus resulting in deep understanding and learning. Such skills not only make individuals better students with Management and Business, but are also essential skills for post-University success.

This Teaching Cycle also demonstrates that students will more likely succeed in becoming self-reflective and independent learners if the context within which learning takes place is carefully designed, continuously monitored and appropriately assessed. Illustrated is the importance of clear and detailed instructions to students on the learning objectives of the task, the value of formative assessment and feedback, the criteria used for summative assessment, and the expectations in terms of assignment content, structure and analysis. Insufficiently clarity of aspects of assessment or
expected performance may lead to confusion and disengagement if students from the learning process.

Thus, careful design of learning objectives and assessment, as well as continued monitoring by the lecturer, are essential prerequisites for deep learning to take place. This will require greater time investment and effort on the part of the lecturer, and with the increasing pressures placed upon academic staff in Higher Education, undertaking such tasks may be viewed as an additional burden, especially if there is insufficient institutional support for the development of the necessary skills and time allocation for the task. However, the benefits for student learning have the potential to far outweigh the costs of creating an environment conducive to a quality learning experience and to the encouragement of deep learning and should be supported.
References


Appendix 1 - Key Skills in support of module Learning Outcomes.

The Learning Outcomes of this module were supported by the development and assessment of the following Key Skills (Table 4):

Table 4: Module Learning Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Problem Solving: Treated in lectures and applied in tutorials.</td>
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<td>2. Research Skills: Obtaining, selecting, assimilating information from a</td>
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<tr>
<td>variety of sources for use in tutorials, essay preparation and production</td>
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<tr>
<td>and expanding on lecture material.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Communication: Tutorial class discussion and production and presentation of group assignments.</td>
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<td>4. Improving own learning and performance: In preparation for, attending</td>
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<tr>
<td>and participating in and reflecting on tutorial classes. Preparing and</td>
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<tr>
<td>producing essay and eventual assessment in examination.</td>
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<td>5. Team work: Group oriented tutorial tasks.</td>
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<td>6. Information technology: Appropriate accessing of the internet for</td>
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<td>reference material, and use of word-processing skills in essay production.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Application of number: Treatment of numerical problems in tutorial</td>
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<tr>
<td>exercises, and appropriate examination question.</td>
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<td>8. Personal development and career planning: Development of various</td>
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<td>personal and interpersonal skills, generally transferable in career terms,</td>
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<tr>
<td>including initiative, independence and self-awareness - in addition to</td>
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<tr>
<td>skills 1-7 above.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Subject Specific Skills Issues of impact of governance policy and</td>
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<tr>
<td>governance legislation treated in lectures and tutorials.</td>
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