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TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDEDIG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSG UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dygu 1 | Teaching Cycle 1

Communities of Learners - Peer Review and Formative Assessment

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 rhan o’u datblygu proffesiynol ym Mhrifysgol Aberystwyth. Erys yn ei ddydd 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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This section of my portfolio offers an account of my first teaching cycle instigated and designed in response to some of the issues raised during the PGCTHE induction. The concepts of practice and variation, constructive alignment and learner-centred environments, which were briefly discussed earlier, have informed the design of this intervention. Alongside these theoretical concepts, this cycle is also a result of my own ideas relating to the value of a community-valued model of learning. Discussion and the sharing of ideas and experience are central to this teaching cycle. Discussion is an important component in experiential learning and it is through discussion, between peers and with the tutor, that much of the work of this intervention took place.

Context & Methodology

First year students writing their first assignment at undergraduate level are often confused and apprehensive. They generally fail to address the learning outcomes and assessment criteria (many are unaware of these elements of the module). I want to enable my students to inform their work by engaging with the assessment criteria (to view these elements as a blueprint for our expectations). In addition, there is no opportunity for students to practice their essay writing skills prior to the first summative assessment task. I wanted to design an activity that would give them an opportunity to practice and experiment with ways of structuring an essay and devise activities that will allow me to make a formative assessment of their essay planning skills, making provision for students to feed this evaluation into their assignments.

In order to address these issues, this teaching cycle focused on the part one, semester one core module for all literary studies and creative writing students, EN10320 ‘The Study of English’. The teaching intervention focused on two seminar groups totalling twenty-two students. Students were introduced to the part one assessment criteria and in groups would identify the elements that concern or confuse them as well as those that they are confident in their own ability to demonstrate and achieve. In a later session students devised essay plans working in small peer groups, responding to a model question provided by the tutor. As a result of this activity peer review took place in which the plans produced were evaluated against the assessment criteria and verbal feedback provided. During this process the tutor’s role would be to:
Monitor student’s understanding and application of the assessment criteria, and to redress this as necessary,

- Identify any specific or general problems relating to the devised plans,
- Provide formative assessment on the essay planning skills demonstrated and make use of this evaluation to inform planning for future sessions.

Rationale & Desired Outcomes

A key concern that this teaching cycle addresses is the acquisition of knowledge and understanding. Understanding, Biggs argues, is active and adaptive, linked to the ability to act upon rather than simply repeat knowledge. It is this notion of understanding that students need in order to successfully negotiate the terminology used in assessment criteria. In order to perform well against the assessment criteria associated with most summative assessment tasks, students are required to ‘address and integrate several domains of knowledge’ (Biggs: 43). But do students have access to the skills with which they could attain the level of understanding necessary to achieve knowledge integration? This is the precise issue that this teaching cycle aims to address.

Reflection is an important part of the learning process for literary studies students, who are expected to respond to feedback as a primary mode of improving the quality of their work, but students are rarely taught reflective practice. Bulpitt and Martin go on to identify a number of problems associated with establishing reflection as a tool for student-centred learning and assert that ‘The conditions necessary to bolster reflection were identified as support, time and space and a collaborative environment’ (Bulpitt & Martin: 208). Conversely, students are often expected to carry out reflection in their own time, independently and in isolation from either their tutors or the peers. This teaching cycle aims to bring reflection into the seminar environment in order to foster this approach as a learning tool that students can apply to their independent study. In this way students will learn the skills necessary for the process of reflection, a vital tool for enabling independent study and self-evaluation both of which are central to encounters with literary studies. The importance of a reflective environment to literary studies students is clear from the outcomes of this project. The ability of students to evaluate their own ideas and reflect upon their own progress was enhanced by the peer evaluation activities undertaken. These activities promoted and demonstrated the value of reflection and established a supportive environment, both amongst peers and with the tutor, in which such reflection could take place, often, directed by the students themselves. Research relating to formative assessment can be linked to these assertions regarding the role of the classroom...
environment in establishing reflection as a tool for learning. Bransford et. al., assert that establishing ‘community-centred learning’ is crucial for student development and engagement with learning beyond simply fulfilling the requirements of summative assessment. A central part of this approach to designing classroom environments is establishing formative assessment in order to ‘provide students with opportunities to revise and improve their thinking’ thus placing value on self-reflection and positioning formative assessment as a vital part of the learning process.¹⁹

Work carried out by Lindbolm-Ylänne, et. al. on the longer-term benefits to students of engaging with peer assessment and self-evaluation further indicates the value of these activities beyond those already established as valuable tools for learning within the context of higher education and the specific field of literary studies. Research notes that ‘it is beneficial for students’ learning to be involved in giving and receiving feedback because it enhances the development of skills required for professional responsibility, judgement and autonomy, and because it emphasizes the responsibility of the students in the learning and assessment processes’.¹⁰ Thus transferable skills, applicable to a broad range of career possibilities, are developed through students’ engagement with reflection and peer review in their learning activities.

The limited opportunities for practice and variation, outside of the confines of the summative assessment tasks, is a particular issue for the “Study of English” module because for many of students their first summative assessment task also produces the first evaluation of and feedback on their work at a very early stage in their undergraduate career. Providing opportunities for students to practice their skills, in a variety of contexts and situations and giving students the time to reflect on their learning allows students to develop what Fazey et. al. define as ‘adaptive expertise’. One of the aims of this teaching intervention is therefore to establish a pattern for providing such opportunities and hence enable students to improve their performance between summative assessment tasks. During the teaching intervention opportunities for practice and variation of essay planning skills were introduced in a way that would provide students with more occasions to reflect upon and improve their skills, to be more active in their approach to receiving and responding to feedback, to become “better learners.” In addition to providing opportunities for self-reflection, and increasing instances of practice, by encouraging students to engage with peer review activities this teaching cycle also presented students with more opportunities for variation and required them to

¹⁹ Bransford et. al, How People Learn, pp. 23-7.

consider how their peers may have perceived the same experience, thus further increasing the range of experiences they were required to engage with.

The desired outcomes for this teaching cycle respond to these issues by, enabling the integration of domains of knowledge, establishing reflective-learning practices, fostering formal and informal peer review and, creating opportunities for practice and variation. This teaching cycle aimed to:

- increase opportunities (whilst working within departmental and faculty guidelines) for practice and variation in essay planning activities;
- equip students with a clear knowledge and understanding of the assessment criteria for part one assignments;
- establish teaching activities that will allow students to begin developing the ability to address the assessment criteria in their own written work;
- foster self-assessment and evaluation as integral tools in the learning process, thereby realising the value placed upon student progression and development over the course of the module;
- encourage collaborative work and to establish good working practices for peer review exercises.

**Activities & Process**

Alongside the content required for the module activities were devised that aimed to develop students’ skills in the following areas: essay planning, understanding of the assessment criteria, peer review techniques.

During the first week students were informed that they would be required to prepare essay plans in small groups during weeks four and nine. As a group we discussed what a good plan might consist of and created a template of suggested elements which the students used as a basis for the planning activity in week four.

In week three the students worked directly with the assessment criteria in order to develop familiarity with the terminology and to establish a sense of what the criteria mean. This was a tutor-lead activity focusing on group discussion and self-evaluation. We also discussed the purpose of peer review and established some clear ground rules for the exercise taking place in the following week. To some extent the students were engaging in a form of peer review (by sharing and commenting on their ideas and interpretations of the primary texts) through weeks one to four, this activity was therefore an articulation of what was already established, but implicit, practice.
The activity was revised in order to reflect student progress and repeated in week 9, using an alternative planning model. This provided further opportunities for practicing skills and for receiving formative assessment prior to the submission of the second assessed essay required for this module.

In addition to these new activities, students following this module will have access to further opportunities for skills acquisition from existing provision such as the study skills lecture, content lectures and seminars and seminar work engaging with secondary material. All of these elements will inform the planning activities and peer review sessions.

Three key points during the process were identified as appropriate junctures for eliciting feedback from students. This feedback allowed me to revise the activity and will inform future developments. Feedback was sought:

- Immediately after the exercise (are things clearer / how confident are they in tackling their first assignment?)
- After submitting the first assignment (did the exercise actually help them when it came to writing their essays?)
- At the point of essay return (does their knowledge of the assessment criteria enable them to understand the rationale behind their summative mark?)

This final opportunity for feedback on the teaching cycle was particularly important. One of the objectives of this intervention was to enable students to identify their own areas for development, not only in response to the peer feedback and their reflections on the essay planning activity but also in response to the feedback received in relation to the first summative assessment task. Many students fail to treat the comments and advice generated by the first summative assessment as formative feedback, intended to help them in approaching the second assignment. So the feedback process designed to inform my own planning and learning design, acts as a model, by which students were encouraged to reflect on their own work in the light of “formative” feedback on “summative” assessment tasks. I will also provide verbal formative feedback to each group as they worked on and presented their plans.
Summary & Evaluation

Week 1: What makes a good plan?

As part of a whole group discussion students were asked how they thought a good essay should be structured and how to establish these elements at the planning stage. The students engaged well with this activity, which, in addition to establishing a list of key elements around which the future essay planning activities will be based, also functioned as a good ice-breaking activity during the first session. The students discussed their past practices, many confessed to having never actively planned an essay before, most had a good idea of what constituent parts a ‘good essay’ might be expected to contain. This exercise established a good set of core requirements around which their plans would be based, as well as bringing into play a range of evaluative terminology which the students will later encounter in the ‘assessment criteria activity’.

Week 3: Understanding the Assessment Criteria

Working in pairs the students were given copies of the part one assessment criteria and asked to discuss the meaning of the core areas identified in the criteria (knowledge / argument / relevance / terminology / expression / presentation). This led to a whole group discussion during which the core areas were discussed along with the differences between the various level indicators. The students were then asked to identify one strength and one weakness tied-into the assessment criteria, an area in which they were confident in their own ability to perform well and an area where they felt less certain in their abilities. These areas were jotted down on pieces of paper and handed to the tutor to be used to inform the next session (a summary of student responses is shown in table 1).

As a result of the activity the students gained confidence in their knowledge of the assessment criteria and could see clearly what was expected of them in the run-up to the submission of their first assignment. A number of students have requested specific help on the basis of this activity, both prior to and during the process of writing their first essay. This is an excellent outcome, students rarely ask tutors for support and advice prior to submitting an assignment, yet seeking advice on a specific element of their writing and analysis is the best approach for them to adopt. On reviewing the information gathered relating to the student’s perceived strengths and weaknesses I have tailored future sessions to address the most common areas of perceived weakness.

Week 4: Essay Planning
Working in small groups the students were asked to complete the essay planning grid, devised in week 1 (see appendix A), focusing on a model question and specific section of the text. Students were provided with a selection of extracts from secondary material that they had been asked to read in preparation for the session and had already discussed, ensuring comprehension and familiarity. Students were asked to present their plans to the rest of the group who in turn provided feedback in the form of comments and questions specifically relating to the first three core elements of the assessment criteria (knowledge / argument / relevance). At the end of the session the completed grids were collected in by the tutor so that packs containing all three versions could be distributed amongst all participants.

The essay planning activity allowed students to:

- Work collaboratively, with text, secondary material and assessment criteria
- Think about structuring an argument, selecting appropriate material, substantiating ideas;
- Identify potential problems, counter-arguments, contradictions and how to address and resolve these;
- Act upon tutor’s feedback and revise own practices accordingly;
- Reflect upon their own work in relation to the work carried out in other groups, providing an opportunity to revise their own ideas.

As a result of the activity the whole group entered into a discussion regarding the forthcoming essay deadline. A number of issues were resolved and the group discussed problems they perceived with the independent work they had completed to date or work they were intending embarking upon during the forthcoming week leading up to the deadline. In this respect, the activity allowed students to pre-empt potential problems with the work being carried out for summative assessment and provided them with an opportunity to address these problems. The essay planning activity was repeated in week nine using a revised grid building upon the first exercise and introducing new concepts, thus requiring students to engage with a broader range of material with a view to structuring more complex arguments.

**Feedback & Evaluation**

Immediately after the essay planning activity all students felt that they had gained confidence in their ability to meet the requirements of the assessment criteria and that some of their perceived weaknesses had been addressed by the exercise.
On completion of the first assignment student responses remained generally positive although there were also a significant number of students who felt that their essay structure could have been improved. These students were actively comparing their completed assignment with the suggested structures (outline and completed grids) produced during seminars and felt that their final product lacked one or more of the elements identified in these sessions. Some students chose not to make use of the models, either devising and working from their own plans or not planning their work. Some of these students were confident that their planning was effective, others were not.

During essay returns, the majority of students appeared to understand the rationale behind the summative mark awarded for their work and could link this to the assessment criteria. A significant number of students were able to identify problems in their own work and were alert to shortcomings and areas for improvement. Students were also able to identify the strengths of their work, although this type of discussion was less forthcoming, from the students, than negative observations.

Table 1: Student perceived strengths and weaknesses in response to work carried out with Part 1 assessment criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengths</strong></td>
<td><strong>Weaknesses</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysing the text</td>
<td>Terminology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td>Expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance / focus</td>
<td>Presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Focus / Relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good style</td>
<td>Coherent argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical views</td>
<td>Summarising material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Substantiation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall the project proved successful in providing opportunities for peer review and formative assessment relating to essay planning. The students engaged well with the activities and it was clear from the work submitted for this module that a number of the skills from these sessions were being actively applied. As a general observation, it seems that student anxiety was reduced in the run-up to the first submission deadline and student feedback suggests that they felt equipped to deal with the first assignment. The peer review element of this activity became something that the students claimed as their own and began applying to other contexts within the seminar framework. Students began questioning each other and engaging with ideas and suggestions in a more analytical fashion. This appropriation of the methods practiced during the essay planning activity was particularly marked when group presentations took place. Students began critically evaluating presentations, posing questions offering suggestions for alternative interpretations and acknowledging each other’s achievements.

In terms of student progression over time, there are some potential indicators of benefit to students from the activities undertaken over the course of this module. First, a preponderance of student marks improved between the two summative tasks undertaken and for which the two essay planning activities were tailored (59% of students achieved an increase in their marks). Second, there is, in comparison with the intake from the previous academic year, a more even spread of marks for each individual student. This indicates that their work, as well as improving from one task to the next, is also better informed in terms of the expected outcomes of the task, in other words, progression is less erratic for these students. Aside from regional variations in terms of the academic calibre of each cohort I would suggest two potential factors which have facilitated these improvements. First, the work carried out to ensure that the students have knowledge and understanding of the assessment criteria prior to undertaking the first assessment task has ensured that across both essays students are aware of and working towards the marker’s expectations. Second, the opportunities provided for formative assessment of their essay planning skills has enabled students to respond to this evaluation prior to the submission of work for summative
assessment and has encouraged students to view the first assignment as part of this formative assessment process (see tables 2 and 3 for data relating to summative assessment marks).

Those students who engaged with the whole module were the main beneficiaries in terms of improved progression. Irregular attendees who missed the various stages of the project found it difficult to engage fully with those sessions that they did attend, particularly those that built upon a previous stage in the process. Some students were resistant to altering their current practices and for this reason did not see the planning activity itself as a useful tool for their own work, and hence only engaged with the module content element of the essay planning activities.
Reflections & Future Practice

In relation to this particular module I have identified a number of implications relating to my teaching practice in future sessions:

- In order to resolve the problems encountered by students with irregular attendance, I will make further use of Blackboard to disseminate relevant information. Although this will not act as a substitute for first-hand engagement with the activities this will keep those students who cannot attend, but wish to participate, as informed as possible.

- I will emphasise links between the activities undertaken in this module and the assessment tasks students will undertake for later modules that require the submission of longer essays for assessment purposes, thus making the need for careful planning more acute. I doing so I aim to make explicit the relevance of these tasks to future modules and to all students, with the objective of making the purpose clear to those students who are persistent ‘non-planners’.

- The connection between the essay planning activities and other skills based elements of the module could be emphasised by establishing a more explicit link with the existing study skills lecture. In order to achieve this I will make use of the PowerPoint presentation (made available by the lecturer to all tutors and students via Blackboard) in relevant seminars in order to revisit and develop the concepts disseminated during the lecture session.

- I will investigate the possibility of formalising the formative assessment that during this cycle, was feedback to the students in the form of general observations to the whole group at the point of presentation and small group feedback during the design element of the activity. There are implications for offering formal student specific formative feedback on essay writing which will need addressing at departmental level.
In terms of my broader teaching practice there are opportunities for developing activities such as these in other teaching contexts at part one and part two. The ‘Study of English’ module was particularly appropriate to this intervention because there is less pressure on content coverage in this module (‘the Study of English’ is devised to bridge the gap between A-level and undergraduate study and as a result only four texts are studied in comparison to the standard eight to ten). However, similar, more contained, activities could be carried out in other part one modules in order to make provision for peer review and formative assessment. This is something that I will investigate further. Since the completion of this teaching cycle in January 2007 I have instigated similar activities in my option teaching at part two, particularly peer assessment of group presentations. There is a need for students at this level to engage more actively with the assessment criteria and this is something I intend addressing and developing in future teaching practice.