

Feedback for success

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Abstract

The University of Southern Queensland's (USQ's) Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) is a bridging program designed to enable people to acquire essential prerequisite knowledge and skills required for success in undergraduate study. Students who successfully complete the program qualify for direct entry into specified undergraduate programs at the University of Southern Queensland. Students coming into the TPP bring with them a valuable range of skills and prior educational and life experiences however are often unsure, lacking in confidence and may have encountered learning hurdles in the past. Therefore encouraging and motivating these students is a crucial factor in enabling them to acquire the skills and knowledge they require to transition successfully. Assessment is an integral element of teaching and learning that should enhance learning. Feedback is an essential element in this loop as it has the potential to have a significant impact on students' learning.

Introduction

Assessment, whether formative or summative, as well as measuring or evaluating, should enhance learning. As an integral component of a coherent educational experience it is important that assessment is well designed, sets clear expectations, establishes a reasonable workload, and provides opportunities for students to self-monitor, rehearse, practise, and receive feedback (James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002). According to Boud (1998) assessment should be an integral part of instruction providing immediate feedback to both the learner and the instructor. Within the teaching and assessment loop, effective, timely feedback can make a significant contribution to student learning achievement.

Principles of assessment

Sound assessment practice is supported by the principles of validity, reliability, authenticity, fairness and flexibility. Validity and reliability must be considered whenever information about student achievement is collected (Cizek, 2009). Validity is generally considered the extent to which an instrument measures the behaviour or performance it is designed to measure thus enabling appropriate decisions to be made from the results (William, 2008). To be able to make legitimate inferences from responses assessment must also be reliable. Although no measurement is perfectly reliable William defines a reliable test as "one in which the scores that a student gets on different occasions, or with a slightly different set of questions on the test, or when someone else does the marking, does not change very much" (p. 128). In TPP there are regular markers' meetings before marking to discuss assessment strategies and criteria to ensure consistency and fairness. After the assessment is marked, graphs are made of the individual marker's works to identify any trends or irregularities. The process of moderation also assists in bringing individual judgements into line with general standards.

Assessment should be a fair measure of students' competence and should be carried out against pre-determined, clearly articulated criteria which should be available to all well before the assessment is undertaken. In TPP, all assessments for the semester and their criteria sheets are readily available in the Introductory Book which all students receive at the beginning of the semester.

The concept of authentic assessment can be defined as the selection of particular modes of assessment which "authentically allow a student to demonstrate (the) ability to perform tasks, solve problems or express knowledge in ways which simulate situations which are found in real life" (Hymes, Chafin, & Gondor, 1991, as cited in Burkill, Dunne, Filer, & Zandstra, 2009, p. 85). Also, research suggests that "...when learners are engaged in shaping and leading their own learning and education this can result in benefits for all learners, educators, the institution and the education system as a whole" (Walker & Logan, 2008, as cited in Burkill et al., 2009, p. 86). The course assessment in TPP provides students with the opportunity to test out the skills and knowledge that they will require as undergraduate students. For example the *Studying to Succeed* course implements a series of scaffolded assignments that contribute to the students' ability to write an academic essay.

Importance of feedback

To become life-long, independent learners, students require opportunities to develop the capacity to regulate their own learning from the outset. "One of the most valuable contributions anyone can make to another person's learning is constructive feedback" (Boud, 1991, as cited in Tang & Harrison, 2011, p. 584), and if, as Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles (2011, p. 227) contend, "students' perceptions of the university environment are formed early and remain stable for some time" the provision of academic support early in their learning experience is vital in assuring their successful transition into undergraduate study. One way lecturers can support students is through "meaningful, participative, formative assessment that introduces students to the process and content of academic student life" (p. 227). As Ramsden (1992, as cited in Tang & Harrison, 2011, p. 584) argues "it is impossible to overstate the role of effective feedback on students' progress" because after the work has been marked and "learners are provided with formative feedback, assessment becomes a learning opportunity" (Tang & Harrison, 2011, p. 584). Therefore as quality assessment is a vital component of the teaching and learning cycle, feedback, as part of the assessment and learning loop, contributes to the success of the learners, the lecturers and the program itself.

To optimise its value feedback should include specific advice for improvement, should not be difficult to interpret, and should acknowledge the student's achievements as well as identifying their shortcomings as the desire for specific advice for improvement is just as important to high achieving students as it is to less capable students (Sendziuk, 2009). This has been evidenced in the TPP when markers have been contacted by students asking for feedback about the few marks they felt they had "lost". According to Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 84) the most improvement in student learning takes place when students receive feedback that provides specific information about the task and "how to do it more effectively". Feedback in the form of modelling is provided where appropriate for the TPP student as this enables the student to actually 'see' how the task should be completed. Black and Wiliam (1998, as cited in Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 88) also suggest that "the provision of challenging assignments and extensive feedback lead to greater student engagement and higher achievement". Although there can be a range of issues with feedback, (including timing, frequency, quantity and quality of feedback), and contrary to popular opinion that suggests students do not value or use feedback to improve their work,

many students do use feedback to improve their results in future assignments and projects (Budge & Gopal, 2009, p. 74). The provision of relevant, consistent and integrated assessment with timely feedback that provides specific detail about the strengths and weaknesses of students' work has been empirically validated as contributing directly to improved student learning outcomes and as having a positive effect on student retention (Budge & Gopal, 2009; Kift & Moody, 2009; Sendziuk, 2009; Shortis & Burrows, 2009).

The timely provision of regular formative feedback to students early in their program of study "is motivating and aids learning, provides information to both students and teachers on progress and achievement, and allows for identification of students in need of extra development support" (Kift & Moody, 2009, p. 208). According to Harlen and Crick (2003, as cited in Nicol & McFarlane-Dick) frequent high-stakes assessment, where marks or grades are given, has a "negative impact on motivation for learning that militates against preparation for lifelong learning" (2006, p. 211). Therefore formative assessment that has a low grade value attached but includes comprehensive, specific, task and process related feedback is a more effective tool in building students' belief that they are capable of achieving their learning objectives. TPP courses implement this assessment practice (e.g. the production of the essay and the report in the *Studying to Succeed* course and the scaffolded assessments in the Mathematics courses). It is important that students understand that the feedback that is given is an evaluation, not of the person, but of the performance in context (Nicol & McFarlane-Dick, 2006). Course designers, examiners, lecturers and tutors need a coordinated approach to improving both how they provide feedback to students and how that feedback integrates into the learning process.

The language and tone used in feedback has a direct impact on the way students use, or even if they use it. TPP markers endeavour to use language that is accessible to the student because if the comments are written in language that makes sense to the lecturer but which students do not understand, or cannot interpret, the message can only be a one way transmission and the feedback will have no impact on their behaviour (Spiller, 2009). For the feedback to be useful, and used, it is important that a range of strategies are utilised to ensure that it is received and understood. Strategies such as setting aside time for decoding and discussing feedback comments after assignments have been returned can both increase understanding of the feedback and the students' understanding of the course learning goals (Spiller, 2009). Criteria sheets can be examined and discussed in class with the on campus students as well discussed on the online forum. Small group work in class can focus on aspects of the criteria sheet and the online forum can contain discussion and feedback on the criteria sheets. Encouraging peer dialogue is a useful strategy as students who have just learned something are often more able than teachers to explain the information to their classmates in a language and in a way that is accessible (Nicol & McFarlane – Dick, 2006). To be effective the tone of the feedback should be encouraging and not judgemental. This is particularly true with TPP students, as encouragement and motivation is as important to their success as providing them with access to knowledge.

Conclusion

The purpose of feedback is to provide information that enhances learning and assists learners in improving their future performance. As a crucial part of effective assessment processes feedback should be regular, timely and provide specific detail about the students' strengths and weaknesses. The language should be accessible and the tone encouraging so it enhances learning. Feedback is an integral part of the assessment process that can contribute significantly to the learners' success and the success of the program as a whole.

Questions

What measures can be implemented to ensure marking practice is consistent and fair?

How can we ensure that feedback is both accessible and useful in the assessment process?

Where and when and for whom is feedback most effective?

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