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Report on Work from October 2011 to August 2012 as University Learning Development Associate for Assessment and Feedback
Dr. Christopher Wiley, School of Arts

Introduction

From October 2011 to August 2012, I was seconded to the LDC as a Learning Development Associate (LDA) for one day per week. Unlike LDAs in previous years who were attached to specific Schools, this year we were assigned thematic strands upon which to focus cross-institutionally; mine was the rather broad area of assessment and feedback. Our main objectives in the role included writing a number of blog entries for the LDC's *Educational Vignettes* website (educationalvignettes.wordpress.com) to disseminate case studies of excellence and/or innovation drawn from across the University and relevant to our thematic strand, together with the pursuit of a "personal project" comprising original research in the area.

On at least two prior occasions, colleagues who have undertaken a year-long stint as an LDA have asked the pertinent question as to how much might realistically be achieved given just one day a week. For my part, I found myself framing the question slightly differently: as a full-time member of staff who was effectively trading a portion of my primary role as Senior Lecturer in Music (having been bought out of the teaching of one module) in order to pursue the LDA, how might my two areas of activity synergize rather than conflict with one another? As will become apparent below, while some of the ventures I undertook as an LDA were unrelated to Music, others enabled me to enhance and innovate my teaching in ways in which I might not otherwise have been sufficiently resourced to bring to fruition. In addition, the LDA role allowed me to maintain a close dialogue with the LDC throughout the year, which made possible my participation in some of the exciting projects currently being developed in other areas.

The following report endeavours not just to outline my various activities during my time as an LDA, but to demonstrate how they have interconnected across the academic year. I have also appended a full list of outputs associated with my LDA role.

Educational Vignettes Site

My blog entries for the *Educational Vignettes* site fall into three main categories. Firstly, reports on innovations I had made in my teaching across the past academic year, for the benefit of staff either contemplating the adoption of similar approaches in their own academic practice, or conducting research in the area. Secondly, reviews of conferences in which I had participated, including outline summaries of the paper presentations and workshop discussions. Finally, case studies of staff elsewhere in the University whose assessment or feedback practices were exemplary or innovative. In light of the contribution made by other staff to this last group of blog entries, I felt it only appropriate to elevate each to the level of co-

author. The figure of 20 entries was suggested for rough guidance at the start of the academic year; while my total output has been closer to 10, my postings were generally more substantial than the average blog entry in that a number either discussed several different papers (in the case of conference reviews) or more than one case study, collected into the same entry because I felt they were sufficiently related to belong together.

Several of my blog texts were originally developed for other purposes, for instance as reports to LDC colleagues on teaching innovations undertaken in various areas (see below) or as poster presentations for the Schools of Arts and Social Sciences Teaching and Learning Fête on 20 March 2012, at which I was invited to host a stall. Often these were not uploaded to the *Educational Vignettes* site until some time later in order to make way for more topical posts such as conference reviews, plus one post on innovation in assessment and feedback published to coincide with preparations for the institutional QAA review. Some of my texts were also kept back so as not to obstruct the interest being generated in the run-up to the Learning at City conference. However, this has had the felicitous consequence of maintaining activity on the *Educational Vignettes* site during the quieter summer period when other contributors have not been posting.

The *Educational Vignettes* site attracts thousands of views worldwide, particularly in the UK and US; but my case studies enabled a wide reach more locally within the University as well. Several of my texts were circulated around the Schools of Arts and Social Sciences via the conjoint Learning & Teaching Committee. Two of my entries were republished on the School of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences blog as guest posts, with another to appear on the School of Health Sciences blog. Other texts were sent to Academic Services and the Students' Union, and several have elicited further conversation with LDC colleagues. Any posts relevant to assessment and feedback have also been added to the LDC's Moodle "Assessment and Feedback Tool", which will imminently become live to all University teaching staff. Between them, then, my case studies have been distributed to the majority of the institution. A number have additionally prompted interesting comments online from, and dialogue with, other readers.

Personal Research Project on Assessment and Feedback

The main research project that I activated during my time as an LDA was entitled *"Divided by a Common Language? Evaluating Students' Understanding of the Vocabulary of Assessment and Feedback at a Single UK Higher Education Institution"*. In brief, it called into question whether the vocabulary deployed in the context of assessment and feedback practices is always understood to hold the same meaning for students as for staff, or whether they (like Britain and America, in the famous dictum attributed to G. B. Shaw) are inadvertently being divided by a common language. In today's rapidly changing educational context, academic practice is necessarily loaded with terminology, given the need to satisfy regulatory frameworks and to ensure accountability and robustness of process. Through consultations with student representatives across the University, I examined whether this terminology is always readily comprehensible, transparent, and accessible to its

purported target audience. The scope of my study was wide, encompassing vocabulary that may appear within marking criteria (for instance, the difference between “description” and “critical engagement”), the feedback itself (the value, if any, of ubiquitous phrases such as “you need to express yourself more clearly”), and within the wider context of assessment policy (such as students’ interpretation of words like “prompt” or “timely” in reference to return of feedback). In this respect, my project endeavoured also to assess the impact of recent emphases on matters such as the reduction of feedback turnaround times and the provision of grade-related marking criteria for every assessment. Ultimately, I proposed a series of recommendations, arising from the suggestions and narratives of my study participants, by which current practices may be further enhanced.

While some of the findings of my project might have been predicted, others were more unexpected. My interviewees unanimously acknowledged that to them, “feedback” comprises more than just the mark, but several also recognized the tendency for students to privilege the mark over the written commentary. Conversely, possibilities for feedback existing in contexts other than formal assessment (for instance, via dialogue in tutorial, questions answered over e-mail, or feedback received from peers in class) were only rarely mentioned. A number of participants suggested that, while timeliness of feedback is important for an interim assessment, this does not apply in the same way to assessments returned only after the end of the associated module. Several noted that the context of a given assessment should be borne in mind when determining whether feedback has been prompt, and that consideration of the nature of the assessment and the immediate usefulness of the feedback to the students are more helpful identifiers of timeliness than a one-size-fits-all rule. There was much evidence that the default feedback option, the formal written report, may not be the most effective means of nurturing student learning, and that dialogic feedback (of which, incidentally, I have been an advocate for some time) may be both more beneficial and the preference of the majority. Finally, there were some indications that, while students comprehend and engage with assessment criteria, their understanding as to what is required of them in assessments and at different levels of a given programme derives not just from the regulatory documentation, but also from their own and their peers’ experience of work at different stages of the degree.

Though a relatively modest project conducted as a case study of a single HEI, the implications of my findings are potentially wide-ranging. Were a greater emphasis to be placed on dialogic feedback, for instance, this would require changing an educational culture in which formal written feedback is currently privileged for being readily documented and easily monitored, rather than necessarily the most pedagogically advantageous mode of learning. My study also calls into question whether learning outcomes and assessment criteria remain fit for purpose, or whether the regulatory documentation merely codifies processes (and not always for the benefit of the students) that are essentially defined by current practices given that learning is inherently experiential. There is clearly great merit in maintaining open lines of dialogue with students, rather than simply assuming that we understand their needs and preferences necessarily: as noted, the interviews I conducted with

students did yield some unpredicted results, which were not entirely in alignment with current scholarly thinking on assessment and feedback.

The findings of my study were disseminated across the University at this year's Learning at City Conference on 13 June 2012, for which the theme was assessment and feedback; my presentation may be viewed online via the LDC Conference Catch Up (http://www.city.ac.uk/about/education/ldc/events/learning-at-city/learning@citycatchup).
I subsequently gave another version of my paper, to a more diverse audience, at the 19th International Conference on Learning which was held at Institute of Education, University of London on 14-16 August 2012, for which I should like to thank the LDC for the funding that made possible my attendance. I have recently written up my work as a journal article submitted to *The International Journal of Learning*.

Involvement with Other LDC Initiatives

1 Personal Response Systems

Since my attention was first drawn to the pedagogical value of Personal Response Systems (PRS) or "classroom clickers" back in 2008, I have been an advocate of this learning technology, presenting a paper on the subject at the inaugural Learning at City Conference and externally at Ravensbourne College, and even winning a University Learning and Teaching Award for Teaching Innovation. My most recent public appearance in this area was at the Turning Technologies User Conference at Aarhus University, Denmark on 19 June 2012, Turning Technologies being the company that manufactures the PRS. My paper, *"Using Electronic Voting Systems in the Arts and Humanities"*, argued for the largely unrecognized potential for PRS to enhance teaching in disciplines other than the sciences and business, drawing on examples from my own academic practice as well as research I had undertaken with music students on its effectiveness as a tool for learning. The conference, which I also reviewed for the *Educational Vignettes* site (links to which were subsequently posted on Turning Technologies' own site), drew delegates from across Europe and the US. My presentation was sufficiently well received that I was immediately invited to join Turning Technologies' Distinguished Educator programme, which recognizes excellent teachers who are both "power users" and advocates of the technology – thereby becoming their first Distinguished Educator from the arts and humanities. This role would seem to reflect well the University's unique focus on academic excellence for business and the professions, and I look forward to working with Turning Technologies on the programme in the near future.

(2) Mobile Devices, Lecture Capture, and Twitter

This year I have engaged in continuing dialogue with LDC staff over various aspects of projects currently being run to develop the use of mobile devices in teaching, as well as lecture capture. Having been loaned an iPad at the start of the year and been set the task of finding innovative ways of using it, for one of my modules I created a series of video podcasts summarizing each lecture in 8-10 minutes; these podcasts were embedded via Moodle as well as being pre-loaded onto the iPad so that students could refer to them before the associated lecture or during the break. Given my interest in developing such audiovisual resources, together with one experience of lecture capture back in March, for my final module of the year I used the iPad to

audio-record all lectures; these recordings were then uploaded to the University's streaming server for the benefit of students who were either absent or wished to listen for a second time. Finally, I experimented with the use of Twitter to support one of my modules, including the provision of a live feed to which both students and staff could contribute during the lecture itself via their mobile devices. There was much interest in this innovation during one of the discussion sessions at the recent International Conference on Learning, and the LDC's Ajmal Sultany also referred to my undertaking in a paper he presented at the International Association for Development of the Information Society (IADIS) Conference on Mobile Learning in Berlin in March of this year. Further details on many of my activities in these areas are to be found in postings on the *Educational Vignettes* site.

(3) The Learning Spaces Project

Another LDC venture that has particularly interested me this year is the Learning Spaces project, and I was delighted that in the Summer Term, I was able to book one of the rooms and to run a total of three classes conceived with the new space in mind, and which arguably would not have been possible in a traditional classroom. Between them, the classes covered a variety of different fields of study (study skills, popular music, and classical music) and types of teaching (tutorial, small-group, and lecture-based). One comprised a SWOT analysis and discursive time-management task; the second was a discussion class on the recent phenomenon of television talent discovery shows (*The X Factor* and so forth); the last was an interactive lecture on the classical – but nonetheless highly unconventional – ballet *The Rite of Spring*. In all classes, I garnered much constructive feedback from the students who participated, and who were evidently both excited and inspired by the new learning space. My experiences of this teaching have been documented in a text to be posted to the *Educational Vignettes* site as a case study, and shared with relevant staff at the LDC. In a related (albeit somewhat unexpected) endeavour, I also collected a Prize for Best Learning Spaces Design at the LDC Showcase in February, having submitted to the competition a design representing my ideal classroom.

Other Public Output

(1) Conference Participation

During my time as a Learning Development Associate, I participated in two conferences on themes of assessment and feedback in addition to the above. The first was the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG) seminar on "The efficiency and effectiveness of assessment in challenging times", held at Woburn House, Tavistock Square (the home of Universities UK) on 24 November 2011, at which, during one of the discussion sessions, I reported to the seminar some of the outcomes of my recent consultations with students to enhance feedback procedures. The second was University College London's "Innovation in Assessment" Day, one of several events supported by the Higher Education Academy this year on aspects of assessment and feedback, on 23 February 2012. Of the various questions I submitted for the speakers at the event, one – a provocative enquiry about whether there is a danger of too much innovation, or

innovation for innovation's sake – was chosen to open the panel discussion with which the day concluded. Both events were subsequently reviewed for the *Educational Vignettes* site, the former by myself and the latter by Neal Sumner (to which I contributed).

(2) Debate at the LDC Showcase

At the start of 2012, I was invited to participate in the first in a series of Learning and Teaching Debates presented by the LDC. This debate would open the LDC's annual Showcase event on 1 February 2012, and the motion was to be *"Assessment Practice in Higher Education relies largely on a limited range of methods that are not always fit for purpose"*. The motion was to be proposed by Professor Nigel Duncan (City Law School). I endeavoured to build a case for the opposition, arguing that assessment is an easy target for criticism and that the onslaught it has continually faced may not be entirely without foundation, but that the integrity of our degree awards hinges on our having absolute confidence in the processes by which they are evaluated; that in many cases, our assessment methods are effectively determined by professional accrediting bodies; and that common forms of assessments such as "projects" and "examinations" in reality embody a vast, and not always recognized, spectrum of very different possibilities. In the final vote, not unpredictably, the motion was supported by 70%-30%; I consoled myself with the thought that I had perhaps swayed a significant minority when the cards felt to have been rather stacked against me with a difficult motion to oppose. The debate was attended by some 60 staff and students from the University and led to much productive discussion about issues of assessment, not only when questions were taken from the floor during the event itself but also afterwards over coffee and cake.

(3) Future Projects

A number of the projects undertaken during my time as an LDA will continue to unfold over the following months. A paper developed from secondary research conducted for my personal project, entitled *"Standardized Module Evaluation for Teaching Excellence and Enhancement: Views of Students and Staff at a Single UK Higher Education Institution"*, has recently been accepted at the 17th Annual Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) Conference, Aston Business School, Birmingham, 15-16 November 2012, whose theme is "Excellence in Teaching: recognising, enhancing, evaluating, and achieving impact". As noted, I am also currently pursuing a publication opportunity connected with my personal project, and other opportunities to publish may present themselves in due course as well.

Reflections and Conclusions

Despite my initial misgivings about the limits as to what it might be realistic to achieve in one day a week in a ten-month placement, my time as an LDA has led ultimately to a significant institutional, national, and even international reach for my work. Much of my public output was single-authored which has placed a substantial burden on me as the only person taking these projects forward, but the results have included four conference papers, an in-progress journal article in addition to this report, and an increased profile for teaching and educational research across the institution and beyond. Evidently, my work in the LDA position has reciprocally enhanced my own academic practice in my primary role as Senior Lecturer in Music, as illustrated by my having received the Student Voice Award (for the second consecutive year) in June 2012.

However, my plans regarding the work I envisaged undertaking as an LDA did change somewhat during the course of the year. My initial intention was to write more *Educational Vignettes* case studies profiling other teaching staff across the institution, but many whom I approached did not seem sufficiently interested in being promoted in this manner and sometimes, unfortunately, my enquiries did not even receive a response. This may be a sign of the times given the many demands on academic staff in today's educational climate, coupled to an institutional strategy whose focus presently seems to fall more on research. Conversely, staff at the LDC were only too willing to share with me their current projects in areas that were often related to, but undoubtedly extended beyond, assessment and feedback. The irony is that, despite my concern that assessment and feedback was already a vast area in which to work, ultimately some of my activities stepped beyond its confines and I am grateful to the LDC for affording me this flexibility.

Notwithstanding the potential for tying together my two different roles in certain of my activities undertaken this year, the demands of taking on a fractional contract aside from my permanent position were such that I have sadly come to the decision not to reapply for the LDA post next year. However, I was delighted to have undertaken the role in 2011-12 and greatly appreciated the opportunity to work within the LDC and to learn more about their many fascinating projects presently in development. The experience will remain with me for some months yet, as I endeavour to bring to fruition the other public outputs – at least one additional conference paper and one journal article – that have been set up during my period as an LDA. Having been initiated into the world of blogging (I now write for three blogs including my personal site, christopherwiley.wordpress.com, and I will be rolling out edublogs to all students on the Bmus programme as of next year), I hope that I might also be welcome to develop further blog entries for the *Educational Vignettes* site in the future should the occasion arise.

Outputs

1 Journal Articles

Wiley, Christopher (forthcoming, 2013). “Divided by a Common Language? Evaluating Students’ Understanding of the Vocabulary of Assessment and Feedback at a Single UK Higher Education Institution”. Submitted to *The International Journal of Learning* in September 2012.

Wiley, Christopher (forthcoming, 2012). “Report on Work from October 2011 to August 2012 as University Learning Development Associate for Assessment and Feedback”. Submitted to *Learning at City Journal* in August 2012.

(2) Conference Papers

Wiley, Christopher (forthcoming, 2012). “Standardized Module Evaluation for Teaching Excellence and Enhancement: Views of Students and Staff at a Single UK Higher Education Institution”. Paper to be delivered at the 17th Annual SEDA Conference, Aston Business School, Birmingham, 15-16 November 2012.

Wiley, Christopher (2012). “Divided by a Common Language? Evaluating Students’ Understanding of the Vocabulary of Assessment and Feedback at a Single UK Higher Education Institution”. Paper delivered at the 19th International Conference on Learning, Institute of Education, University of London, 14-16 August 2012.

Wiley, Christopher (2012). “Using Electronic Voting Systems in the Arts and Humanities”. Paper delivered at the Turning Technologies User Conference 2012, Aarhus University, Denmark, 19 June 2012.

Wiley, Christopher (2012). “Divided by a Common Language? Evaluating Students’ Understanding of the Vocabulary of Assessment and Feedback at City University London”. Paper delivered at the Fourth Annual Learning at City Conference, City University London, 13 June 2012.

(3) Other Public Output

Invited guest-speaker for the inaugural University Learning and Teaching Debate, on “Assessment and Feedback”, City University London, 1 February 2012 (with Nigel Duncan).

Poster presentations at The Schools of Arts and Social Sciences Teaching and Learning Fête, City University London, 20 March 2012 (6 posters).

(4) Blog Entries

Wiley, Christopher (forthcoming, September 2012). “Bring Your Own Device: How Staff Are Responding To The Mobile Technologies Their Students Bring With Them To Class” (3 case studies).

Wiley, Christopher (forthcoming, September 2012). “Twitter in the University Classroom: Live-Tweeting During Lectures”.

Wiley, Christopher (forthcoming, September 2012). “The New Learning Space: Experiences of Three Different Classes”.

Wiley, Christopher (August 2012). “Personal Response Systems: Review of the Turning Technologies User Conference 2012, Aarhus University, Denmark” (8 papers). <http://educationalvignettes.wordpress.com/2012/08/17/personal-response-systems-review-of-the-turning-technologies-user-conference-2012-aarhus-university-denmark/ > (includes comments).

Wiley, Christopher and Turkoglu, Cengiz (August 2012). “Self- and Peer Assessment using Turnitin in SEMS”. <http://educationalvignettes.wordpress.com/2012/08/01/self-and-peer-assessment-using-turnitin-in-sems-cengiz-turkoglu/>. Reposted at <http://blogs.city.ac.uk/ted/2012/08/02/self-and-peer-assessment-using-turnitin/>.

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Wiley, Christopher and Aylmer, Mary (July 2012). “A Case Study of Interim Assessment in SEMS”. <http://educationalvignettes.wordpress.com/2012/07/31/a-case-study-of-interim-assessment-in-sems-mary-aylmer/>. Reposted at <http://blogs.city.ac.uk/ted/2012/08/10/a-case-study-of-interim-assessment-in-sems/>.

Wiley, Christopher (April 2012). “Innovation in Assessment and Feedback” (3 case studies). <http://educationalvignettes.wordpress.com/2012/04/20/innovation-in-assessment-and-feedback/> (includes comments).

Wiley, Christopher (February 2012). “Review: SACWG seminar, ‘The efficiency and effectiveness of assessment in challenging times’” (6 papers/workshops). <http://educationalvignettes.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/review-sacwg-seminar-the-efficiency-and-effectiveness-of-assessment-in-challenging-times/>.

Wiley, Christopher (December 2011). “Workshop on Assessment Feedback: Centre for Music Studies”. <http://educationalvignettes.wordpress.com/2011/12/30/workshop-on-assessment-feedback-centre-for-music-studies/> (includes comments).