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Developing staff assessment literacy skills

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Abstract

This paper outlines how an oral presentation was introduced into a Curriculum Development and Evaluation module on the MA Academic Practice Programme at City, University of London. The assessment required the participants to engage in designing their assessment criteria and undertake self and peer assessment. The assessment has provided an opportunity for participants to gain feedback on their own oral presentation skills as well as further developing their self-assessment skills and their peer assessment skills. The use of the assessment criteria designed by the participants enabled their performance to be awarded marks across the full range possible for this assessment. However, following the first cohort, a change in how the marks were allocated was made. This assessment has been in place for a number of cohorts and is seen to be appropriate for this module. There is, though, further analysis that could be undertaken in relation to the self and peer assessment marking as well as in the value of engaging in the design of the assessment criteria.

Introduction

This paper will discuss the assessment and feedback strategy for the Curriculum Development and Evaluation (level 7) module which is part of our MA Academic Practice Programme at City, University of London. When I took over the module, the assessment comprised a 3,000 word written reflection on a curriculum project. On reviewing the student evaluations of the module, there was mixed feedback about this assessment with some of the participants being able to use it to reflect on a project, but others who had very limited curriculum development experience finding this difficult - which led them to having to create a project for this assessment. I was keen to have an assessment that was authentic but also one that enabled the participants to be able to develop their own assessment literacy skills, with direct involvement in developing assessment criteria and their self-assessment skills. Additionally, the programme team also wanted to develop their peer assessment skills.

Evidence to support changing the assessment

Authentic assessment focuses participants' learning on appropriate knowledge and skills for their professional roles and for staff it is essential that they have a good understanding of assessment literacy to ensure the decisions they make about their assessment strategies for programmes are appropriate (Forsyth et al, 2015; Gulikers et al, 2004; Price et al, 2012; Wiggins 1990). At City, University of London, as with other higher education institutions, when presenting new modules and / or programmes for approval, colleagues are required to present these verbally to panels as well as provide appropriate paperwork. There was no oral presentation assessment within the MA Academic Practice programme at this time and in discussion with previous participants from the programme and the programme team, it was felt that this would be a good assessment for the participants on this programme. This would enable them to gain some feedback on their oral presentation skills which is very relevant to the participants of the programme, who are mostly lecturers and graduate teaching assistants.

The module concerned is about curriculum development, and assessment is an integral part of the development process, so engaging the participants with drafting their assessment criteria whilst on the module reinforced this message. Through the process of drafting their assessment criteria, the participants would be having conversations about the module learning outcomes, how the assessment was linked to these and what would be appropriate criteria, all of which would enhance their assessment literacy skills (Boud, 1992; Forsyth et al 2015; Price et al, 2015).

I wanted to include an element of self and peer assessment as well because, whilst there is also a self-assessment in the first module of the MA programme, this was the only module that included it and there was no peer assessment. Self-assessment skills empower the participant and enables them to assess their peers more objectively and can further increase their knowledge of the assessment processes (Clark, 1991; Hanrahan and Isaacs, 2001; Stefani 1994). Gaining peer assessment skills is also seen as important for future employment where assessing and feeding back to colleagues on their work is regarded as an essential skill (Wheater et al, 2005). Hanrahan and Issacs (2001) highlight further positive aspects which include that using self and peer assessment can provide greater insight into your own work and an ability to see this in the context of others' work, and be able to judge your performance alongside peers.

Assessment design and delivery

The assessment and feedback strategy amendment was discussed at the student liaison committee, amongst the programme team and with the external examiners, and was subsequently approved. To enable participants to focus on topics from the module that were most relevant to them and their roles, the oral presentation could be about any topic from the module. The module had four taught days in two blocks of two days and so, with this change, one of the days needed to be given over to the presentation, and the structure of the other days and the online content and activities were therefore reviewed. The three remaining days took place with one block of two days and then one single day a few weeks later. The assessment day was then a few weeks after that permitting some time so that topics any of the three teaching days could also inform the focus of the presentation if appropriate.

The activity for the participants to develop the assessment criteria was planned to take place on the second day of the module, which enabled them to be familiar with the key topics of the module. Additionally, all participants had previously undertaken the first module of the programme which had introduced them to the concept of constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003). This activity was undertaken in small groups of four - six participants with them reviewing the module learning outcomes and identifying appropriate criteria from these. Each group then presents their criteria to the other groups and all participants agree on one collated list of assessment criteria. In order to ensure there was time to reflect on these and make any final amendments, I added the criteria to a wiki on the module Moodle (VLE) site and participants had a two week period to comment and amend before the criteria were finalised and published for all. Whilst often minimal changes are made, there are usually some changes and clarifications. In relation to preparation for self and peer assessment, this had been covered in the first module of the programme where the participants do engage in self-assessment for their first assessment. Peer assessment is also used informally for some micro-teaching but the participants have a full day of the module focused on assessment and feedback practices.

The length of the oral presentation was agreed as being for 15 minutes maximum with an opportunity for questions from peers at the end. Participants all provide their presentations using Powerpoint. The module normally has 24 participants for each cohort, and so it would have not been practical to have the presentations in one room with all present. In discussion

with the programme team, we agreed that the most appropriate approach would be to have the participants in three groups with one of us in each room co-ordinating the assessment process. This enabled the lecturer in each room to assess their group and co-ordinate the peer review for each participant. This helps with the issue of anonymising the peer review which Langan et al (2008) raise as being one of the difficulties with oral presentations. The lecturer for each room collects these in and collates the peer review comments and marks so that one overall peer review is provided for each participant with an average mark being used. The participant then uploads their presentation and self-assessment after the presentations are completed. The marks for the module were discussed when the amendment was approved and it was decided that 40% of the mark would be awarded from the lecturer and 30% each from the self and peer assessment.

The presentations are moderated and sampled by the external examiner, so the submission of the presentation is essential. The moderator - who is also one of the teaching team - samples presentations on the day, but, by having all presentations submitted after the assessment day, any additional participant presentations can also be sampled where marks require this (such as for any borderline or fail grade works). The external examiners for the first few years sampled from the presentations and marking records but following a suggestion to also record the presentations which is now undertaken through Lecture Capture, the actual presentation can be listened to.

In the first year that this ran, the presentations went well and it seemed that engaging the participants in developing the actual assessment criteria had led to a better understanding of the requirements for the assessment. The pass mark for the module was 50% and the participants gained marks of 40% - 94% with all marks collated. The team reviewed this alongside the lecturer, self and peer review marks, and were satisfied that a full range of marks could be awarded including being able to pass and fail the assessment. We noted that, in the main, the peer review marks aligned with the lecturer mark (Langan et al, 2005), but that the self-assessments for around 50% of the cohort were very inflated and did not reflect the actual performance. This was discussed with the external examiners for the programme and it was agreed the assessment was both reliable and valid but that there should be an adjustment to the marks allocation so that a mark and feedback could be provided for the self-assessment as well. This led to a change for future cohorts whereby the marks were allocated as 30% each for the lecturer, self and peer assessments, with the remaining 10% allocated to assess and feedback on the participants' self-assessments. This change did enhance the consistency of the marks awarded. Despite the issue with the self-assessment, the involvement of participants in both self and peer assessment appeared to strengthen their understanding of the assessment criteria (Adachi, Hong-Meng Tai and Dawson, 2018; Kearney, 2013).

The module has now had eight cohorts with this assessment and feedback strategy, and feedback from students illustrates their positive views of this with comments such as *"I loved the fact the students had an active role in designing the assessment criteria"* and *"...the assessment pushes you to achieve although it is nerve wrecking"*. There are of course also some participants who do not like the assessment and *"feel it is not a real situation and they cannot present as well as they would like"* and they would prefer something written so they can *"ensure they do cover all aspects of the topic"*.

The presentations focus on a range of topics but often involve redesign of modules from programmes to include blended learning, or redesign of a module to change the assessment strategy to enhance constructive alignment within it. Some participants look at stakeholder engagement for designing programmes and others explore how using a curriculum model to underpin their development may enhance the process. Participants are able to use ongoing work and thus gain additional feedback on these activities which makes the assessment of use to them in their everyday practice.

Conclusion

This is a valuable assessment and is authentic, but I acknowledge that further analysis could be useful. For example, as the module leader, I have noted over the cohorts that it has been running that, whilst the module learning outcomes have not changed each year, there are some differences in the assessment criteria that the participants develop. Therefore, further analysis across cohorts could be undertaken to review if this is just in relation to wording or if specific aspects gain more focus than others. The programme team believe that through the module content and in particular the use of this assessment and feedback strategy, participants engage in activities that enable them to reflect on and justify their own assessment practices (Forsyth et al, 2015; Price et al, 2012). However, there has been no evaluation to investigate this and so this is another area where further analysis would provide helpful insight into the impact of this. Additionally, Langan et al (2005) explored peer assessment and found that they were fairly precise with their marks but did tend to over mark oral presentations compared to lecturers, and yet for most of our own cohorts we have experience of, this has not been the case. Langan et al (2008) also found that students undertaking self-assessment had given themselves a broader range of marks than their lecturers and I can see some similarities with our self-assessment. It would therefore be valuable to conduct an analysis of the marks over a series of cohorts.

Author biography

Pam Parker is a Professor of Educational Development at City, University of London and is Deputy Director of the Department of Learning Enhancement and Development. Pam started her career as a nurse and then moved to being a nurse lecturer prior to moving into educational development. Pam has many years experience of staff development activities focused on supporting staff to provide high quality education using contemporary pedagogical approaches. Pam is the programme director for the MA Academic Practice Programme and the PhD Professional Education Programme. She is a National Teaching Fellow, an HEA Principal Fellow and a Senior Fellow of SEDA.

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