Addressing Transition to University by using Collaboration in Assessment (0317)

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Introduction

The importance of ensuring a smooth transition from secondary to higher education is well documented, as it can have an impact on the retention of students and an effect on learning. Students in post-1992 institutions are more likely to be from working class backgrounds, live at home for cultural and economic reasons, have time-consuming part-time jobs and are concerned that they will fit in (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003).

We believe that the transition to university can be eased by creating a learning environment in which students have a sense of belonging. This is best achieved by adopting pedagogic practices in which students are active participants. We feel that it is important to foster engagement as early as possible in the University career of a student and that this is more likely to be achieved by focusing on an assessment.

In this paper we present a collaborative approach to assessment used on a first year module. Unlike most other forms of collaborative assessment where the students participate in the marking of the assessment (Falchikov, 2005), and are thus involved late in the academic year, students collaborate in the development of the assessment early in the first academic year.

Learning Environment

It is recognised that "*belonging and engagement are essential to retention and success in higher education* " (University Alliance, 2014). As Tinto (2009) states:

"involvement or what is now commonly referred as engagement is a condition for student success. The more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate. At no time does involvement matter more than in the critical first year of university study when student success is still so much in question and nowhere it is more important than in the classrooms of that year for it is there that success is constructed, one class at a time".

There is a duality of issues here: the need to provide a supporting learning environment while also fostering the transition of students into independent learners. A balance has to be achieved between supplying overly structured supportive learning environments which promote less autonomy and allowing student participation in the learning design which can be overwhelming during the transition process.

When transitioning to higher education students struggle with the move away from prescriptive learning to self-directed knowledge acquisition (Weadon and Baker, 2014; Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011; O'Shea, 2014). The size of lecture groups and the anonymity of the teaching methods are also a problem for many new students (Hughes and Smail, 2013; Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009). In contrast, Pampaka, Williams and Hutcheson (2012) found that many new students felt positive about the need for independent learning and the opportunity to study subjects in depth,

even though they found it challenging. What they did find difficult however, was the lack of time available to ask questions of teaching staff and for clarification of problem areas.

The new Business School at the authors' university has teaching spaces that are radically different to those they were replacing. That is, instead of a dichotomy of large, fixed and tiered rooms, and small flat and flexible rooms, we now have flat and flexible rooms ranging from a capacity of 40 to 120. This has enabled a move from large lecture / small tutorial delivery, to a block delivery where a more interactive and inclusive pedagogy may be practiced. This in turn has enabled more interactive and inclusive approaches to assessment.

Collaboration in Assessment

On a first year undergraduate maths and IS module we have introduced an assessment on data analysis in which the students produce the data to be analysed. In groups of ten, students develop a set of ten questions, which with the aid of Google docs, they pitch to their peers and the class tutor. Each question is either accepted for inclusion in the final questionnaire, rejected or modified before inclusion.

The questionnaire is then completed by the students in the class, and they then produce a set of statements that they could confirm to be true or false using descriptive statistical techniques. The students were encouraged to pitch their statements to the class.

Not only did this approach encourage engagement, it also enabled multiple feedback opportunities from multiple sources. That is, feedback from group members when developing questions, feedback from their peers and class tutors when pitching the questions and when describing their statements.

Working in groups within a class setting enabled a sense of belonging while avoiding the potential problems commonly associated with out-of-class group-work. Student involvement in both the design and creation of the questionnaire and generation of the data achieved early engagement and buy in.

Outcomes

Student feedback that was collected through a focus group and survey was extremely positive and student performance on this assessment was better than on the other components of assessment for this module. Students acknowledged the advantages of, and their preference for performing collaborative group activities, but only within the class setting.

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