Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0468

(Re-)evaluating teaching practices in post-coronial higher education – what do students want?

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Abstract: The global pandemic forced educators around the world to make radical changes to teaching delivery and supporting students' learning in higher education. As we return to in-person teaching it is apposite to re-evaluate technology-agnostic teaching practices and ensure we return to those which serve staff and students well in synchronous sessions, whether online, in-person or both. We present results from student-led surveys of student opinions on teaching and learning. The surveys revealed that students have a stronger preference for developing discipline-specific skills rather than transferable skills. We also asked students for their opinions on a broad range of teaching practices, such as peer assessment and utilisation of checklists/prompts. Unsurprisingly, students want staff to more frequently use teaching practices students find helpful – namely providing students with strategies for learning and enabling students to explain their understanding. Insights from these surveys can help inform decisions about teaching and learning in post-coronial higher education.

Paper: The global pandemic forced educators around the world to make radical changes to teaching delivery and supporting students' learning in higher education (HE). Given national and international restrictions on movement, HE pivoted towards online delivery and embraced learning technologies. Staff (Marasi, Jones & Parker, 2020) and student (Lomer & Palmer, 2021) satisfaction with online learning has been investigated elsewhere (Eringfeld, 2021).

As we return to in-person teaching, our attention now shifts from technical issues of teaching and learning (Noetel et al, 2021) to the core teaching practices we utilise in our synchronous sessions, whether online, in-person or both. Consequently, it is apposite to re-evaluate our teaching practices and ensure we return to those which serve staff and students well.

One lens for evaluating teaching practices is student opinion. This is especially true in the context of the National Student Survey (NSS) in the United Kingdom, where satisfaction with teaching is a key driver to overall student satisfaction (Bell & Brooks, 2018) and measures of student satisfaction often drive institutional priorities (Buckley, 2020).

Consequently, we conducted a series of surveys designed to elicit student opinion on: programme learning outcomes, the usefulness of teaching practices, and how frequently staff should use a variety of teaching practices. Of particular interest were teaching practices associated with increasing students' awareness and regulation of their own learning. Examples of such teaching practices include peer and self assessment, explicit teaching of Bloom's taxonomy, think alouds, and

asking students what they already know about a topic before it is taught (i.e. activation of prior knowledge).

The online surveys employed Likert-type scales and were conducted at our institution during the 2020-21 academic year. Results are presented from a total of 178 responses elicited from students on the Biomedical and Biological Sciences programmes (including Biology, Zoology, Genetics, Medical Genetics and Biochemistry), across all three years of undergraduate study. The study and surveys were approved by the institution's Research Ethics Committee.

We found that, out of 15 programme learning outcomes, students had a stronger preference for developing discipline-specific skills rather than transferable skills. For example, 88% strongly agreed they should learn how to reference scientific papers, while only 29% strongly agreed they should learn to negotiate and overcome conflict, and 32% thought they should develop motivation and resilience.

In separate surveys students were asked for their opinions on 20 different teaching practices in terms of a) their usefulness and b) how frequently each practice should be used. Students' preferences were strongly positively correlated (r_s = .67, p = .001, two-tailed) such that the methods students wanted to encounter most often were those which were perceived to be most useful. These teaching practices develop strategies for learning, such as encouraging the use of checklists or prompts, explaining how to separate key issues from less important information, and staff talking though their thinking while solving a problem (i.e. "think aloud"). Other desirable practices which were perceived as useful centred on students explaining their understanding of the subject, for example by using conceptests. Conversely, a minority of students wanted to engage with self- or peer-assessment; these practices were perceived as useful by only ~12% of respondents.

In addition, there was a group of "marmite" practices which were broadly viewed as less helpful yet approximately 20% of students wanted them to be used in every teaching session while another ~20% never wanted to be exposed to them. These practices included asking students what they already know about a topic before it is taught and explaining material which can be easily found in a text book.

Overall, these surveys reveal students' focus on developing strategies that will enable them to perform well in their degree subject. We do not know what role the pandemic has played in focusing students' attention in this way, nor why students eschew practices, such as peer and self-assessment, which have been shown to promote deep approaches to learning (Nieminen, Asikainen & Rämö, 2021). Semi-structured interviews are planned which will explore students' preferences and rationale in greater depth.

Undoubtedly, student opinion is only one aspect of decision making in approaches to teaching and learning in a post-coronial era. However, this is, to the best of our knowledge, the first attempt to capture student opinion on a broad range of technology-agnostic teaching practices. Our results can help inform decision making by managers and teaching academics alike and have potential implications for increasing student satisfaction with teaching in HE.

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