A UQ Assessment Brief on “Improving students’ learning by developing their understanding of assessment criteria and processes”

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Abstract
This paper reports the findings of a two-year research project focused on developing students’ understanding of assessment criteria and the assessment process through a structured intervention involving both tacit and explicit knowledge transfer methods. The nature of the intervention is explained in detail, and the outcomes are analysed and discussed. The conclusions drawn from the evidence are that student learning can be improved significantly through such an intervention, and that this improvement may last over time and be transferable, at least within similar contexts. This work is a development within a longer and ongoing research project into criterion-referenced assessment tools and processes which has been undertaken in the pursuit of a conceptually sound and functional assessment framework that would promote and encourage common standards of assessment; that project is also summarised.

This project aimed to improve the performance of students in a UK Business school by enhancing their ability to assess their own work and that of others against given marking criteria. A common assessment grid containing 35 criteria and accompanying descriptions of performance or standards had been developed for use within the school (See Business Assessment Criteria grid at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id347_assessment_grid.rtf). Academics could select from the grid those criteria relevant to particular assessment tasks.

The literature discussed in the paper acknowledges some of the issues associated with the introduction of standards and the application of criterion-referenced assessment, particularly the lack of match between published criteria and those actually employed when making judgements about student work. The project team therefore decided to supplement task criteria with assessment processes which facilitated the transfer of tacit as well as explicit knowledge – tacit knowledge being considered as that which we know but find it extremely difficult to express.

The intervention involved students in:

- the assessment of sample assignments using criteria and standards grids provided
• participation in optional 90-minute workshops to discuss and receive feedback on the assessment of the sample assignments completed earlier and to achieve greater consistency of judgement through small group moderation processes
• submission (three weeks later) of the completed assignment along with a completed self-assessment sheet (the same as that used in the workshop and to be used by tutors in marking and providing feedback).

The intervention was conducted twice in successive years in exactly the same way and quantitative and qualitative data collected to enable comparisons between students who had participated in the optional workshops and those who had not.

After a discussion of some methodological issues such as participant self selection, data contamination from exemplars, norm-referencing in marking, and student self-assessment, findings of the investigation were reported as:

• students who participated in the workshop subsequently achieved significantly better results in their assessed coursework
• one year later, participants of the first cohort of the study were still showing significantly better results than the non-participants
• disappointingly, non-participants initially appeared more accurate in using the criteria and standards grid to predict the final grade assigned by the tutor/marker
• non-participants in the workshop were more likely to overestimate their grade, especially male students
• students found it easier to apply ‘visible’ criteria such as structure, presentation and referencing than ‘invisible’ criteria such as analysis, evaluation etc
• students reported that the workshop had contributed ‘a lot’ to their understanding of marking criteria and assignment requirements
• tutors reported that the standard of assignments was higher than that of previous years.

The paper concludes by questioning the assumption that all aspects of assessment standards can be articulated and made explicit, for example through detailed criteria and standards grids. It also questions the ‘connoisseurship’ assumption that underpins traditional assessment models as providing students with inadequate support in developing their learning. Evidence from this relatively simple intervention suggests that an assessment approach that combines socialisation processes such as the use of exemplars, marking practice and the opportunity for dialogue between staff and students with the provision of verbal explications of assessment criteria contributes to improved performance of participants, improved performance of a whole cohort, long-term effects and increased accuracy in self-assessment.

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