EVALUATING A STUDENT CENTRED APPROACH TO TEACHING AND LEARNING ON A POST-GRADUATE PROFESSIONAL MODULE

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Abstract

The paper explores the impact of embedding a student centred approach to teaching and learning on a post-graduate professional module with a mixed cohort in terms of previous academic experience and cultural background. It was the first module on the programme and student performance was assessed by summative examination. The student-centred approach was characterised by interactive discussion based delivery, group work and formative assessment and feedback on a weekly basis. In addition students were invited to undertake a mock exam as independent study and formative audio feedback was provided. Student views on the process were surveyed and responses were highly positive. As assessment data suggests that students who engage with the formative process do better at summative assessment, the next step for the tutors will be to explore ways of engaging the students who do not currently participate.

Keywords

student-centred learning, formative assessment, formative feedback

Biographies

Christine Daley and Shakiya Nisa are Senior Lecturers in Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour and Associate Members of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). Christine is Module Leader on the LMDP module. Her research interests include group assessment and teaching and supporting learning for students entering postgraduate professional study without undergraduate degrees. Shakiya's research interests are around teaching and learning, international HRM and the career prospects of under-represented groups at university. Shakiya has 10 years' experience as a HR practitioner.

1   Introduction

Leading, Managing and Developing People (LMDP) was the first module for students embarking on two courses accredited by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD); the Post-Graduate Certificate in HRM (PDHRM) and the Masters in HRM (MAHRM). The module provided students with an introduction to some of the key concepts involved in HRM and was designed into sixteen three hour sessions delivered over eight weeks with the last week (sessions 15 and 16) dedicated to revision and exam preparation. The examination was closed book with questions based on a pre-seen case study (issued in the first teaching session) and it took place approximately five weeks after delivery of the final teaching session.

2   Background

The aim of this student centred approach to delivery of LMDP was four fold. First, as the course was at post-graduate level, tutors were anxious to provide opportunities for students to initiate and develop critical thinking skills, termed here as *'the ability to think deeply about an issue, consider evidence for and against a proposition, and apply reasoning skills and logical inquiry to arrive at possible conclusions'* (Nargundkar, Samaddar and Mukhopadhyay, 2014, p.92).

Second, creating the appropriate environment for learning to take place was very important; for LMDP the tutors wanted to create an authentic learning experience. The tutors were aware of their pivotal role in this process as suggested by Baharudin, Munira and Mat, (2013) who identified teaching methodologies and the role of lecturer as crucial in making the class an inclusive forum for discussion and participation.

Third, it was intended that the approach would foster a community of experiential learning as defined by Kolb (1984, p.21) as '*a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition and behaviour'* where students and tutors (all tutors were previous or current HR practitioners as well as academics) could benefit from shared knowledge and experience.

Finally, students on a predecessor module People Management and Development (PMD) had requested more opportunity for practice and formative feedback prior to examination. The CIPD insisted on students taking an unseen element of assessment (examination) and therefore whilst tutors might focus on broader concepts of education and learning, 'assessment *is the curriculum, as far as the students are concerned. They'll learn what they think they'll be assessed on not what's in the curriculum, or what's been covered in class'* (Ramsden, 1992, quoted in Biggs, 2003, p4).

Activities and feedback focusing on the session topic and the exam case study formed a major part of every session, but in the last week students were presented with a mock exam in class. Working in tutor allocated groups they were assigned exam questions and allocated time in which to prepare detailed essay plans. Students were able to critique all of the plans and detailed constructive formative feedback was then

provided directly by tutors. This group element was constructively aligned to the next stage of the preparation process when students were invited to do the mock exam in their own time under exam type conditions. Students would then upload the exam into an assignment drop box, so that their tutors could provide formative, individual, audio feedback to aid further exam preparation.

3   Theoretical Framework

3.1   What is Student Centred Learning?

One outcome of the Bologna process was to shift the pedagogical focus of European higher education towards a more student-centred approach, (Hyland, Kennedy, and Ryan, 2006, cited in Nordruma, Evans, and Gustafsson, 2013). Turner (2006, p.6) defines student-centred learning (SCL) as a *broad teaching approach that encompasses replacing lectures with active learning, integrating self-paced learning programs and/or cooperative group situations, ultimately holding the student responsible for his own advances in education'*.

The SCL approach on LMDP was underpinned by the concept of constructive alignment *'a principle used for devising teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks, that directly addresses the learning outcomes intended in a way not typically achieved in traditional lectures, tutorial classes and examinations'* (Biggs and Tang, 2007, p105). Methods used were structured and exemplified the scaffolding approach to learning defined as *'providing appropriate support during the learning so that the learners are better able to bridge the gap between what they bring to the learning task, and where they need to be to achieve a deep level of learning'* (Sadler, 2007, p6).

Tutors relied on particular techniques including classroom activities, formative assessment and feedback. Formative assessments comprising previous exam questions (undertaken weekly with written feedback by email) and a mock exam (at module end with audio feedback by email) were devised with the intention of using assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning (Hounsell et al. 2008). The tutors had already used audio feedback successfully on other modules and published research suggested students rated it highly for being effective for recollection and understanding thus impacting positively on future performance. (Blackburn, Stroud and Taylor, 2014).

3.2   Cohort Characteristics

Cross (1981) identified three main inhibitors to adult participation in formal learning, named accordingly as situational, institutional and dispositional barriers. With respect to the cohort on LMDP, dispositional barriers which relate to relative attitudes and self–perceptions about oneself as a learner are the most relevant. Thus the tutors' intention in planning and developing the module was to divert focus from any negative attitudes

and self-perceptions (barriers to learning) by creating a learning environment that facilitated the development of positive attitude and self-perceptions (enablers to learning).

MacKeracher, Stuart & Potter,(2006 cited in Baharudin, S., Munira, M. & Mat, N. (2013).p.775) suggested that adult learners (PDHRM) required a SCL environment which meets needs for relevancy in content, recognition of prior learning and respect from others. Using and sharing experiences in problem analysis were of particular importance to this cohort, (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006, cited in O'Connor and Cordova, 2010).

Anderson et al (1998) stated that tutors should produce clear information on assessment for international students to help them understand what was expected of them. This was important for all cohorts but as students on MAHRM were predominantly non-native English speakers this was a key consideration.

Unfamiliarity with approach might also be coupled with different conceptual understanding, for example the notion of critical thinking is mainly featured in Western higher education and international students often struggle with this concept. Turner (2006) argues that definitions of critical thinking are often unclear, and *'emerge from cultural knowledge traditions rather than universal measures of higher learning'* (Turner, 2006, p6). Therefore at the outset it is important to determine student understanding of this and other important concepts.

3.3   An Authentic and Experiential Learning Experience

SCL activities including essay planning, critiquing each other's work, group work and group and individualised feed-forward with formative feedback were designed to create an authentic learning experience with a focus on *'real-world, complex problems and their solutions, using role-playing exercises, problem-based activities, case studies, and participation in virtual communities of practice.'* (Herrington et al, 2003, p.60).

Herrington et al (2003, p.62) suggest this approach to be valid in that '*students involved in authentic learning are motivated to persevere despite initial disorientation or frustration, as long as the exercise simulates what really counts—the social structure and culture that gives the discipline its meaning and relevance'.* The learning experience was further authenticated by making it experienced based. For those students with prior work experience in HR, classroom activities provided an opportunity to share subject based knowledge, expertise and experience that would then supplement and add grounding in reality to the discussion on the topic introduced by the tutor.   For all students, the outcome of this approach with its focus on discussion and group activity coupled with on-going formative assessment and feedback was that students were able to recognise and reflect on individual areas of weakness, in order to identify areas for learning and revision (including exam practice). This is consistent with Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) with its elements of concrete experience, observation and

reflection, leading to the forming of new abstract concepts and the ability to test those in new situations.

4   Methodology

The aim of this exploratory study was '*to discover what participants think is important about the research topic '*(Matthews & Ross, 2010, p476); to provide insights and understanding into some of the key issues the SCL approach adopted on the module. The collection of qualitative data was required in this study '*to uncover prevalent trends in thought and opinion'* (Bryman & Bell, 2007, 212). Therefore the on-line Survey Monkey tool was chosen as a means of gaining more detailed insight into the students' thoughts and opinions of the learning experience. The researchers hoped that the accessibility and guaranteed anonymity of respondent of this instrument would encourage a large number of students to participate in the survey. In addition, a quantitative data collection method was used in the form of a paper-based module evaluation survey *'to quantify data and generalise results from a sample to the population of interest'* (Saunders et al, 2009, p598).

5   Results

5.1   On-line Survey

Forty students were enrolled on the module and 22 responded to the online survey. This response rate of 55% compares favourably with the average response rate to online student surveys of 33% suggested by Nulty (2008) and suggests that data of meaning to the context might be extrapolated from the responses. The survey was completed by a cross –section of module students with 5 of the participants not possessing an undergraduate degree, 14 having completed an undergraduate degree and three having completed a Master's level qualification.

5.1.1   The Impact of Participating in Formative Activities on Engagement

Students were questioned on the impact of participating in module activities and formative feedback on their engagement with the module. Responses were almost universally positive with comments such as 'invaluable' ground-breaking and 'confidence-boosting'. Typical responses commented on the feedback enabling 'you *to benchmark where you were in relation to your critical analysis'* and providing *'reassurance that you are on the right tracks.'*

5.1.2 The Perspectives of Students Not Participating in Formative Activities

Students who did not participate in the optional exam-type activities and mock exam were asked what changes they would like to see in order to encourage participation in future. Only two respondents answered this question but both requested that the mock exam be undertaken in exam conditions in a class-room scenario rather than in the students' own time.

5.1.3 The Effect of Undertaking the Mock Exam on Learning

Writing a mock exam is an intellectually demanding and time consuming process for the tutor, therefore in order to determine worth, students were asked for their views on its impact on learning. Responses were universally positive with remarks focusing on the how the experience of mock exam and feedback helped improve time management, understanding of questions and level of response attained. As one respondent remarked ''*it validated my learning.'*

5.1.4 Simulating Exam Conditions

Students differed in their views of the appropriateness of undertaking the mock exam in their own time. Some were happy to simulate their own version of exam conditions and were keen to establish how much and of what quality they could write in three hours. Others adopted a semi-open book approach by referring to a couple of sources during their attempt and/or being more flexible with the timing. One small group of four students even initiated their own student centred approach to undertaking the mock exam by booking a library study room and communally planning responses to the exam questions before separating and completing the mock exam individually.

5.1.5 Views on Audio Feedback

Two questions asked if students felt audio feedback had been a useful tool in learning and exam preparation and whether it should be used for the same purpose on other modules. Enthusiastic adjectives such as 'tremendous', 'fantastic' 'excellent' along with more prosaic terms such as 'concise', 'clear', 'pragmatic' 'constructive' and 'personal' peppered the responses. A typical comment was *'the audio feedback was a great touch! It felt more personal and meant the feedback had a bigger impact as I could hear the tutors' thoughts and their tone of voice. It meant that I knew I was along the right track for the exam. I would like to see this type of feedback more.'*

Most respondents affirmed that they would welcome audio feedback on future modules with only one exception: *'I still prefer the written feedback as you can print and refer back to it which isn't possible with audio feedback (not without logging on and having the tablet or laptop to play it on)'.*

5.2   Paper-Based Survey

Thirty-five of 40 students on the module completed the module evaluation survey. This higher completion rate than for the on-line survey was accounted for by the fact that according to university regulations, module evaluations are undertaken in the last teaching session for the module and as this was a revision session, attendance was particularly high.

Thirty-three respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the module's purpose had been clear, that module content was relevant and appropriate and the module well organised. A similar majority responded in the same positive manner to questions on staff knowledge, communication and guidance. All respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the module. Responses to the general comments question on the module were complimentary and focused on the positive impact of the module experience and the formative feedback in particular.

6   Discussion and Conclusions

Students' positive views on the impact on their learning of participation in formative feedback were a gratifying payback to tutors. Effort spent in planning, preparation and feedback provision was effective and appreciated and thus worthwhile. Student perceptions were consistent with the view of feedback as *'one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement.'* (Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

The positive commentaries on the formative feedback process provided by the students who had engaged with it add validity and ensure its continuation for future cohorts, but what of the others? Despite reports from tutors on the previous positive impact of undertaking formative assessment on summative performance for the module, a minority of students on both cohorts did not participate in the weekly exam questions or the mock exam. Of the nine students who failed the summative examination, only two had undertaken the mock exam.

This suggests a need to further investigate reasons for non-participation in formative activities and gives rise to the wider issue of the student as autonomous learner with autonomous learning described as 'the learner's ability to acquire knowledge or skills of value independently by processes that he/she determines (Chene,1983 cited in MacCaskell and Taylor, 2010, p.351. A student's cultural background and previous educational experiences and the extent to which the situational, institutional, dispositional barriers (Cross, 1981) may inhibit learning have not been the focus of this study but this issue now commands further investigation.

One means of improving participation in the mock exam at least, would be to accede to the request of a small minority of students on the online survey and bring it into a class-room context. Talking this step would involve rearrangement of delivery schedule by tutors, but more significantly would it decrease the possibilities for not just student centred learning, but self-directed learning, as demonstrated by the group who on their own initiative worked collectively on their mock exam response?

Responses from LMDP students were consistent with research, in that audio feedback was valued for being '*primarily rooted in detail, clarity and affected influence*' (Blackburn, Stroud and Taylor, 2014, p.266). Tutors, who additionally valued its advantages of speed and relative ease of interpretation, were therefore encouraged to continue with the process. Although a small minority of students preferred written feedback to audio or wanted both, given time and other resource constraints it is likely that the tutors will take a utilitarian perspective and persist with the current approach.

Responses to the paper-based module evaluation survey suggest that students are more than satisfied with content, teaching and organisation for the module and other factors within the control of the tutor. One hundred per cent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with their experience of the module. Although the research instrument is crude in that allows for only rudimentary quantitative analysis, the results are undoubtedly encouraging.

7 Future Research

Although the tutors need to be utilitarian not just in their choice of feedback tool but also in the SCL learning strategy, their role in improving student performance commands a more differentiated approach. The data suggests that students who engage with the formative process do better at summative assessment, so why do some students not participate? Of the PDHRM students without previous higher education experience who failed the summative examination, only one had undertaken the weekly exam activities and mock exam. Further investigation is needed in to the barriers preventing engagement and thus learning amongst this group. Additionally, Frambach et al (2012) suggested that with exposure and cultural sensitivity from tutors, techniques embodied in SCL can be accepted and employed successfully by students from non-Western cultures, so is it a matter will be worthwhile to survey the perspectives of the international students in more detail on the methods employed in this module and on others on their course.

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