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Enhancing communication between academic staff and students to undergraduate degree level with a particular focus on assessment requirements

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University of Salford
Teaching and Learning Quality Improvement Scheme

Project title

Enhancing communication between academic staff and students at undergraduate degree level with a particular focus on assessment requirements.

School of Art and Design

Final report

27 April 2004

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Section 1: Introduction and background

Interest in this topic was prompted by an academic paper that looked at how students in Art and Design interpreted assessment requirements via social groups in the studio where they worked. Some initial work was done with students on the Design Studies degree here at Salford and throughout 2001/2 meetings were held with professors John Cowan and John Heywood, along with other interested colleagues from across the University.

The project was located in the School of Art and Design. Work started on it formally in October / November 2002 and continued through 2003. It was run across all the undergraduate programmes in the school.

The project aimed to contribute to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the School of Art and Design, opening debates around the subject of communicating with students effectively. Ultimately, it was proposed that improvements would be made suggesting ways in which this can be enhanced with a resultant improvement in the student experience, the assessment process and the assessable work itself. Students will be enabled to become more self aware of the assessment process and will become better learners.

Different ways of communicating with students have been examined including electronic ones. There are degree programmes at Salford that allow access to all course materials via the Web e.g. Business Information Systems. There is feedback from students showing that they would welcome means of communication such as text messaging via mobile phones. There are also existing software packages that allow group and interactive on-line communication, e.g. Blackboard, which has been used by Design Studies in level 2 for the work placement module.

Section 2: Aims and rationale

2.1: Project aims and objectives

The project aims:

To enhance communication between the staff and students with particular regard for the communication of assessment requirements. It will also look more broadly at how other information is given to students. This could include a wide range of course, school faculty or institution level material.

Objectives

To collect information from staff and students about the communication of work requirements - briefs, verbal briefings, notices, and so on.

To assess the effectiveness of these communications in consultation with the student representatives.

To identify appropriate ways of communicating with students using different formats including electronic means if these are identified as being desirable.

To test these within the School of Art and Design

The project has been informed by QAA Code of Practice Section 6, Assessment.

Section 3: Course/ programme details

Students from all undergraduate programmes in the School of Art and Design were involved with the project. These were: Design Studies, Fashion Design, Graphic Design, Product Design, Spatial Design, Sports Equipment Design, Three D digital Design and Visual Arts. All are located on the Adelphi Campus, except Visual Arts which is at Irwell Valley.

Web site: <http://www.artdes.salford.ac.uk/>

Section 4: Description with anecdotes, examples of events etc

At a very early stage in the project course documentation was collected from courses across the school. Module description forms (MS1s) for at least one module from each programme and curriculum area were obtained and these were found to be comprehensive, including Key Skill information and assessment criteria. At the time the work was done the student did not always see this information as MS1s were not routinely given to them. During the academic year 2002 – 03, the school introduced a form bringing together the information from the MS1 with the brief for the module, or part of module. This was the PA1. Those looked at had all information required by students for their assessment i.e.

assessable work, assessment criteria, date and place of hand in. Assessment feedback forms were also collected from every undergraduate course and these varied considerably from course to course and in fact one programme did not give written assessment feedback. The type of the feedback also varied from course to course, some courses giving detailed numerical marks and others only letter grades. Since the start of the academic year 2003-04 the school has introduced a standard feedback form (FB1) that operates in conjunction with the revised PA1, now a PA2.

See appendices for examples of PA2, FB form

The project team, having decided that a questionnaire would give the information required, piloted two, one with closed questions and one with open questions. The closed question questionnaire was one for which the results could be totalled up showing agreement or disagreement on a Lickert scale with a series of eight statements about assessment. It was planned to be given out to all level one and two students. The open ended questionnaire gave respondents the opportunity to express their opinions and feelings about the assessment process. Both were piloted on two courses. One of the team attended a staff development session on questionnaire design and the project team felt that this method would give the information wanted. Following the pilot, only minor changes were made and the distribution of the questionnaires went ahead to students and staff.

Copies of the 3 questionnaires are given in the appendix.

Section 5: Results and evaluation (how evaluated, outcomes of evaluation)

The questionnaires were distributed by the project's administrative assistant, herself a recent graduate of an Art and Design degree. It was felt that students would feel more comfortable with her than academic staff and would give more accurate answers. The results of questionnaires were analysed by the project admin assistant. The results of the closed question survey were collated numerically both by course and also as a total. The answers gained from the open ended questionnaire were collated by course as a series of phrases under each question. A good impression of the answers was easy to get from reading the collected replies.

5.1: Findings from the closed question questionnaire

The original plan was to give these to all L1 and L2 students. In the end it was possible to ask about a hundred level 1 degree programme students across the school. Courses included were:

Design Studies, Fashion Design, Graphic Design, Product Design including Sports Equipment Design, Spatial Design, Three D Digital Design, and Visual Arts.

Students were asked to agree or disagree with 8 statements about assessment using a five point Lickert scale. The results were broken down by course and also totalled across all replies.

The results are summarised below:

1.I understand how my work is assessed

A majority of students strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, 63 out of 130. However, 50 students strongly disagreed or disagreed with this, a rather more worrying finding.

2.Assessment is an important part of the learning process

The majority of students recognised this with all but 6 strongly agreeing or agreeing with it.

3. I usually know what sort of mark I will get for a piece of work

This statement aimed to assess to what extent the student him/herself can judge the quality of their own work. This statement was agreed with by 44, about a third of the respondents, not agreed or disagreed by, 34 and disagreed with by 22 students.

4. I am often surprised by the marks I get

This followed the theme of question 3. The results from it were not conclusive, 51 students neither agreeing or disagreeing.

5. The assessment process is easy to understand

Again, students were split over this with about half not agreeing or disagreeing. However 32 agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

6. I understand what makes a piece of work get a high or low mark

The results for this were very positive with the majority of students agreeing with the statement, 56 in all agreeing or strongly agreeing.

7. All the information about deadlines, work required is made clear on briefs

Again, 68, well over half of the respondents agreed with this statement, 23 neither disagreed or agreed with it, and 8 disagreeing with it. It seems that assessment requirements are made clear to students.

8. I am given useful feedback about my work.

The responses to this statement were generally positive: 47 students agreeing or strongly agreeing, 20 in the middle, and 23 disagreeing. Nine students strongly disagreed, mostly from the Graphics course, the one that was not giving written feedback at the time of the survey.

Overall, the project team felt that the responses to these questions were positive, indicating that the majority of students do understand the assessment requirements and processes. Detailed numerical analysis of the answers is given in the appendix.

5.2: Findings from the OPEN ENDED questionnaires

These questions were given to small groups of students with space to respond in writing to the following questions:

- 1. What do you think is the main purpose of assessment?**
- 2. Give a brief- 1 or 2 sentence summary of how you think your work is assessed.**
- 3. Do you understand the system of assessment criteria? Yes or No?**
- 4. Are you always sure that you know what you have been asked for?**
- 5. How do you tell whether work is good or bad?**
- 6. What do you expect as a result of being assessed?**
- 7. How are the results of assessment communicated to you?**

These questions gave a wide variety of responses as was expected. However, making judgements about findings from them was more difficult as it yielded a large quantity of very varied information. After reading these, the overall impression is one of a body of students who do understand assessment processes in a quite sophisticated way.

A representative selection of replies is given here:

1. What do you think is the main purpose of assessment?

To monitor the students standards and to measure improvement in performance (Graphic Design)

For us as students to know of our progress and weaknesses so we can learn from them (Product Design)

So that lecturers can see how you are doing and so you know how to improve your work (Spatial Design)

2. Give a brief 1 or 2 sentence summary of how you think your work is assessed.

According to the assessment criteria of each brief (Spatial Design)

Marked and graded by one lecturer, then cross marked by a second the average is then taken of the two (Design Studies)

Work is looked at compared to the brief and marked accordingly (Sports Equipment Design)

3. Do you understand the system of assessment criteria? Yes 50 No 27

4. Are you always sure that you know what you have been asked for?

Generally but usually have to check a few points with the tutor (Product Design)

No not always I feel more guidance can be given at times (Product Design)

No, the brief doesn't always agree with what we are told through a project (Product Design)

Sometimes it is unclear what a tutor wants (Spatial Design)

Sometimes I don't understand but I am too scared to ask (Spatial Design)

It can be quite vague in certain briefs (Spatial Design)

Yes-but if in doubt feel able to ask for clarification (Visual Arts)

5. How do you tell whether work is good or bad?

Guess - I know when its good (Product Design)

Teacher will tell you (Product Design)

On the mark received (Product Design)

The end grade (Graphic Design)

Tutor tells me (Product Design)

I always know how my work is going as I always evaluate myself (Graphic Design)

Generally by the mark it gets and relevant feedback (Spatial Design)

From grades and feedback given (Spatial Design)

Because of how you have performed on the assessment criteria, how you have answered the question (Spatial Design)

6. What do you expect as a result of being assessed?

Being able to assess whether your work is going to be of a high enough standard to complete the course (Graphic Design)

To learn where I have made mistakes and how not to repeat them, and how to successfully complete work (Product Design)

Receive feedback on work, how we could do better, what we have done correctly, good and bad points. (Spatial Design)

A clear view on the standard of my work and what I need to do to improve (Spatial Design)

Recognition and an idea of what I am achieving (Spatial Design)

7. How are the results of assessment communicated to you?

Verbally	32
Notice board	40
Written	30
Tutorial	31
Private	17
Group	19

This shows a lack of uniformity across the school but in 2003-4 standard procedures for giving feedback have been introduced including a written feedback form the FB1, see appendix.

5.3: Findings from the staff questionnaire

Staff across the school were given a very similar questionnaire with open ended questions. It was given to both full time and part time staff. The response rate was very low, only 9 being returned out of about 40 distributed. However, some answers were given in great depth thus giving more information that this low number implies. Those that were returned gave a large amount of interesting information. The replies indicate thoughtful and aware staff who understand the assessment processes that they use alongside some indications of subject tivity.

Tutor questionnaire.

1. What do you think is the main purpose of assessment?

To provide students with (formative function) a clear indication of their strengths, weaknesses and how they might improve their own performance and as a (summative function) – to judge students alongside peers according to standards set by the course programme.

To judge standards, and to help students learn where strengths and weaknesses lie so that they may improve.

Formative and summative to give encouragement to communicate value and achievement levels.

2. Give a brief 1 or 2 sentence summary of how you think you assess student work?

Against previously decided assessment criteria and knowledge of student performance obtained through tutorials etc. Submitted work is normally reviewed as a body of work at crit or similar and peer review is usually involved in some way.

I assess student work set against the school criteria and using the grade descriptions i.e. is it adequate/inadequate. Often come back to these to help me focus.

Set assessment in light of module content and criteria, develop ideal answer, Assess each piece of work by content against assessment criteria.

3. Do you think you understand the system of assessment criteria?

All answered that they did, a good response.

4. Are you always sure that you know what you have asked of your students?

No, sometimes I think I get confused and have to spend a long time working out a coherent assessment regime and work hard to make it clear.

Yes - care is taken to carefully define the quantity and nature of deliverables at the beginning of each module and/or project.

Yes, The brief should always include assessable work requirements, which are discussed fairly at the onset of the module. If these are periodically referenced through group and individual tutorials, weighting and time management should also be considered and understood by students.

5. How do you tell whether work is good or bad?

Experience, subject knowledge, checks against assessment criteria, peer review
- appropriate combinations of these depending on the nature of the work.

Experience, cross-reference of assessment criteria.

Using the 15 years or so of experience in the subject area helps instinct and listening to feedback from the external assessor who informs you to a national standard to set your judgment against of course criteria of the module brief project and whether objectives of the module were met. Also being visually aware and up to date in the subject area instantly knows whether work is of degree standard.

6. What do you expect as a result of carrying out assessment?

A clear overview of how each student has performed by task set and against criteria.

Students through assessment levels and feedback get direction and a measurement of progress. Similarly staff obtains a view of both individual students and a cohort's progress and levels of attainment and learning.

To be confident that I have given a full, fair and professional appraisal of a students submission.

7. How do you communicate the results of assessment to your students?

One to one feedback or written comments.

Written comments on work and assessment sheets, I also ask them to come to feedback tutorials-although often many don't.

In grade form and written feedback, students concerned about grade (marks in levels 1+2) are requested to make an appointment to discuss the issue. Sometimes students with good grades like to discuss feedback in more detail.

Report sheets

Through published mark sheets (standard School format) and individual written feedback notes. These are usually discussed briefly with each student and at length with under-achievers (if they are present for feedback - often not the case)

Collective tutorials

In timed feedback tutorials-students sign next to a time slot and attend. Always verbally in person never pinned on a wall. Some tutorials overrun whilst others are quick. Always make sure the student understands why they have attained the grade they did and always try to be positive and build when poor and reward for hard work.

Individual tutorials to follow suggestions

Written and oral feedback individually and in a group.

Constructive verbal feedback, which highlights achievement.

Formulate a learning plan to address areas of concern/weakness'

Marks and feedback, written and verbal.

Depends on the course. Some via individual tutorials and others by primary a mark summary sheet on course notice board.

Section 6: Developments (problems encountered, proposed changes)

During the life of the project a great many changes have been made to assessment procedures in the School of Art and Design. Common assessment criteria across the school have been developed, grade descriptors have been introduced as required by the university, the PA1 (now a PA2), a standard mark sheet and a standard feedback of assessment sheet have all been introduced. Assessment is now a much more controlled and uniform process than it was. The problems that this project set out to explore have been addressed very centrally by these procedures.

There were however problems that were not anticipated at the start of the project by the project team.

The primary difficulty was, ironically, actually communicating with and getting information from both staff and students. It was been more difficult than anticipated to get information about what is happening at a course level from staff.

It has been more difficult than anticipated to contact students. It was thought that students would be contacted through their University of Salford email but the names are not sorted by course, which is information that was specifically wanted for this project.

Students in the School of Art and Design are also very poor users of their University email, preferring a variety of free web based providers such as Hotmail and Yahoo. Pegasus is not a popular email package with students. It also

requires students to come into the University to log on. Remote access is available but few students seem to use this.

Direct contact with course staff and face to face meetings have proved the quickest and most user friendly way to gather the information.

Questionnaires were perhaps not the best way in which to gather the information. They gave a lot of information but in a hard to use form. Obtaining detailed results from the open ended questionnaire proved very difficult although it did give a lot of useful and interesting information.

6.1: Consideration of how the project has changed and developed from the original bid.

The results were not as dramatic as might have been expected. The use of questionnaires was probably too ambitious. There was difficulty in analysing the data collected. Would less information but more detailed have been better?

6.2: Transferability (how easy or difficult it was to introduce the new approach, what needs to be considered when implementing change)

New methods have been introduced independently of this project so like for like comparisons are not going to be possible.

Dissemination at School Staff development event April 2003

Section 7: Reflection, conclusion

Project did not work as expected. Did not reveal problems as expected. Would have been better to do in at least two parts – this project has highlighted that we did not define the outcomes clearly enough. Too general. Is the evidence too anecdotal? Was the questionnaire the correct method?

Perhaps the perceived problem was not as great as was initially thought. The overall picture is one of a school in which students and staff are relatively happy with the assessment process.

On the other hand no major problems with the assessment processes in the school were uncovered but there was evidence of a range of experiences and modes of feedback, now standardised. A useful further study would be to look at assessment one year on from the introduction of the standard documentation across the school.

Angharad Thomas, Margaret Nixon, 28 April, 2004

Section 8: Appendices: Standard documents and questionnaires

School of Art and Design

Standard brief form, PA2

Feedback form

Project questionnaires

Student open ended questions

Student closed questions

Staff open ended questions