
CASE STUDY 11

Last Semester's Feedback... a Tool for this Semester

Discipline: Business
Student Numbers: Approximately 60 students



Dr Orna O'Brien

'Failure is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his successes' (Dewey, 1933, p. 206).

This case study explores the assessment on the module 'SBUS1005D Development Academic Competencies' and how students can be incentivised in a structured fashion to harness previous feedback to assist learning in the subsequent semester. Often the feedback from one semester, one year or one stage, can provide a huge learning opportunity for students and help them address reoccurring gaps in learning or academic skill. This feedback is often overlooked and an opportunity is missed to actively engage with previous learning in order to improve academic skills. The 5 ECTS module discussed in this case is designed as a level 7 module for mature business students returning to education. The module provides students with a toolbox to develop their academic skills and the assessment is predicated on several of the principles of universal design and inclusive assessment. For example, self-regulation is provided with the opportunity to vary methods for assessment and developing

individual academic voice. The assessment is designed to produce learners who are purposeful and motivated to engage with their own development. Finally the assignment aimed to aid in the development of resourceful and goal directed learners, who could identify development areas for themselves and work to actively improve these areas, thus attaining goals.

Student Cohort

These students are Year 1 students on the Diploma in Business Studies programme at the UCD Lochlann Quinn School of Business. This programme is designed to target mature students working full-time who intend to complete a third level business qualification on a part-time basis. There are approximately 60 students in the class. Students on the programme come with a mixed previous educational profile. Some students have already attained certificates and diplomas and are looking to strengthen their experience and knowledge with a degree. Others will not have engaged in formal education or learning in an academic environment. The programme has a flexible entry route allowing students to commence the programme once aged 23 years or over having demonstrated a suitable consideration of the programme at interview. In reviewing the programme outcomes, it was intended that the assessment for this module should enable learners who were motivated (to learn about their learning), resourceful (in how they managed the resources to enable their learning) and goal-directed (to identify and achieve clear learning objectives and reflect upon future learning opportunities), as per the CAST guidelines (2019).

Module Overview

A strength of this assessment is it can be used for any module on any programme as it encourages students to engage with assessment from their previous modules. As part of the assessment of this module, students are encouraged to review their assessment, the feedback and the grade which they received for three modules completed in the previous semester. The assignment is scheduled for the first three weeks of the semester, i.e. while last semester's curriculum is still fresh in students' minds. This early engagement also allows students to make the most of their learning and remedy past areas of weakness during the semester. Students will have undertaken a module entitled 'SBUS1003D Introducing Academic Competencies' in Semester 1 and this Semester 2 module SBUS1005D builds upon this student learning.

The SBUS1005D Developing Academic Competencies module learning outcomes were to:

- Reflect upon your learning experience to-date, assignment feedback received and areas where further development is needed.
- Identify your own learning style and its impact on your approach to learning.
- Locate, evaluate and critically assess relevant reading material on a wide variety of subject areas.
- Recognise the requirements of different types of continuous assessments.
- Apply analytical and critical thinking skills to your reading, academic writing and to your own study.

Students are introduced to the concept of reflective learning and the tools of academic writing as part of this module's content. This helps the students to understand the purpose and the theory behind the assessment exercise. Kolb's Learning Cycle (Kolb and Kolb 2005) and Honey and Mumford's Learner Typology(1986) are both addressed during the early sessions of this module so that students understand the need to 'review' a learning episode in order to learn. They are also introduced to reflective writing itself as part of the module and the work of Jenny Moon (2006). Students have the opportunity to strategically review their work and grades across their three Semester 1 modules, and attempt to establish a pattern across the work, in order to establish what skills might need to be improved or developed in Semester 2. Thus, an introduction to the concept of self-reflection underpins the assessment design.

Module Description

Worth 50% of the module grade, students were requested to review each of the assignments across their three semester 1 modules. They also had to review the feedback and grade for each assignment selected. They then had to identify the commonalities across the submissions and more importantly, what was required of them to respond to the patterns of constructive criticism in their work in semester 2. In addition to Kolb's Learning Cycle, the Learner Styles and Reflective Writing, students were also oriented to the principles of good essay writing, as essays were the main mode of assessment in Semester 1, and these principles provided a structure for this particular semester 2 assessment. Students could pick which assignments they drew on for this submission but were best served in drawing on all

submissions in order to really identify patterns. Students received a formative grade and written individual feedback on this 50% assignment.

The Universal Design for Learning principles (CAST, 2019) are particularly important where you are working with an adult audience with significant experiential learning. The assessment is uncomplicated to use and is flexible in so far as it allows students to select which feedback, and which elements of this feedback, to focus on. It is available to all, as all students will have completed assessment in semester 1.

ASSIGNMENT 1 (50%):

**Improving Assignment Technique: Reflecting on Learning and Feedback Part A:
Reflecting and Evaluating Feedback & Learning (Wordcount=1000 words)**

Review the assignment feedback you have received from each of the three Semester 1 modules, including both individual and general feedback. Take into consideration the additional materials and support you have received on researching and writing academic essays in the first block release weekend of Developing Academic Competencies as well as material from your Introduction to Academic Competencies module.

Write a review of the main strengths and weaknesses of your Semester 1 assignments. With these strengths and weaknesses in mind, identify three areas that you need to improve on and address how you aim to achieve these improvements in your future assignments. The following elements should be covered in Part A

Principles of Good Essay Writing Include:

- Have you answered the question asked?
- Does the structure of your assignments show evidence that you started with a clear essay plan?
- Have you drawn on relevant course material and referenced the source of material used?
- Have you gone beyond description?
- Have you used appropriate examples to illustrate key points made?
- Have you presented a coherent argument throughout the essay?

Figure 1 Assignment Specification



Figure 2: Sample of student profile photo

Outcome of module assessment

By ensuring that students must complete the assessment for this module, using their previous work, it actively promotes ongoing engagement with their academic skills development. There is often a sense that students receive a grade and feedback but may not review the work assessed in light of the feedback. The assessment of this module encourages students to habitually review their work across modules and to strategically think about how to develop their learning. This assessment directly draws on the third principle of Universal Design for Instruction (Burgstahler, 2015), i.e. it is simple for all to use. All students will have received feedback, if not certainly a grade for previous work. This activity requires them to re-engage with their work and establish how it could be improved.

While this assessment encourages active self-reflection and many students report adopting a more strategic approach to their programme learning as a result of this semester, there can be some early resistance. Reviewing previous work is not something which comes naturally to students. For this activity to be successful, the tutor needs ensure that the assessment in semester 1 is suitable for identifying patterns across their work. It is optimised when students have a number of similar types of assessments such as essay style assignments or presentations.

An advantage of the assessment is that it can be scheduled at any point in the semester, though it is ideally scheduled early on for students to benefit most from the assessment in their other modules and overall learning. It also allows for a scaffolded learning experience where by students feel their semester 1 assessment is directly informing their learning in semester 2. A further tip to assist with the introduction of

reflective writing is to show the samples of past reflective pieces (with prior student consent of course!). This gives students a sense of the personal but rigorous nature of this style of writing. Reflective writing is an acquired skill and some orientation to the key elements of it supports the students as they develop this skill.

Results

Approximately 60 students take this assignment each year. It forces learners to reengage with their prior work and question how it could be improved. From a learner's perspective, ensuring that students must complete the assessment for this module, using their previous work, it actively promotes ongoing engagement with their academic skills development. It can be perceived that learning across modules is unrelated and a missed opportunity to develop transferable skills. This module assessment encourages students to develop a model of learning which includes reflection on past work, focusing on continuous improvement and skill development. It helps prevent students making the same mistakes each semester by having to directly engage with the feedback process from the previous semester.

Those staff who might choose this approach as part of a module assessment, have an opportunity to present strong links across the different modules to allow for an integrative programme approach. It requires good planning by the team of module coordinators and programme staff. Choosing this assessment allows for useful conversations to happen between module coordinators and understanding modules, i.e. programme building blocks, to complement each other. This ultimately reinforces a programmatic approach and a greater synergy of assessment to facilitate students to attain programme goals and outcomes.

This exercise is a gentle introduction to the concept of reflective writing. At the degree stage of this programme, learning journals are used and students find the foundation of self-reflection from this module is very helpful at a later stage of the degree.

Recommendations

A programmatic approach which ensures that students have the space to undertake such activities is necessary. The assessment encourages the programme team to review the assessment from the first semester and to design this assessment

based on previous learning. This helps to foster a more collaborative approach to assessment design on the programme. There is evidence from the programme Student Fora meetings and module evaluations that students find self-reflection is a useful practice. It is a practice which students realise is in their interests but often do not prioritise it. It takes time and if it is not associated with an assessment weighting reward, it can be overlooked by time-starved students. As this module draws upon weighted assessment for this submission, it incentivises the practice for students. Ideally, the practice would be reinforced at each stage of the programme in order for the skill of reflection to be practiced.

While this assessment encourages active, self-reflection and many students report adopting a more strategic approach to their programme learning as a result of this semester, there can be some early resistance from students. Reflection takes students out of their comfort zone. It can force them to review some of the 'uglier' parts of their previous work. It can be useful but it is difficult! Reviewing previous work is not a popular practice among students. Sensitising them to the fact that self-reflection is challenging can be helpful for them. The assessment also needs to ensure that the assessment in semester 1 is suitable for identifying patterns across their work, if there is too much variety in the assessment modes it can be challenging for students.

Resources

- Burgstahler, S. (2015) *'Universal Design of Instruction (UDI): Definition, Principles, Guidelines, and Examples.'* USA: University of Washington. Available at: https://www.washington.edu/doit/sites/default/files/atoms/files/UD_Instruction_05_26_15.pdf (Accessed 20th February, 2019)
- Collins, K, Kendlin, V. and O'Brien, O. (2017) *'SBUS1005D Developing Academic Competencies Study Guide'*, UCD: UCD College of Business
- CAST (2019) *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2.*, Retrieved from <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>
- Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process.* Boston, MA: D.C. Heath & Co Publishers.
- Honey, P. and Mumford, A. (1986) *The Manual of Learning Styles*, Maidenhead: Peter Honey
- Kolb, A. and Kolb, D. (2005) *'Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education'*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 4(2), pp. 193-212.
- Moon, J. (2006), *Learning Journal: A Handbook for Academics, Students and Professional Development*, New York, RoutledgeFalmer
- O'Brien, O. and Dowling-Hetherington, L. (2013) *'The 'Build-Up' Approach to Academic Writing Skills Development: The Case for a Discipline-Driven Collaborative Design'*, *The All Ireland Journal for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, Winter