A Wikied Assessment Strategy

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OVERVIEW

This case study describes the assessment strategy used on a module as part of a postgraduate certificate in academic practice for tutors at HE level. The module has a focus on making the links between pedagogies and practice.

Two apparently opposing factors influenced the design of the assessment strategy. Firstly, since the participants were all academic staff (albeit with varying degrees of experience of teaching) an important aspect was to draw on participants' own experiences and to develop the notion of collaborative learning and a community of practice (Lave and Wenger). Secondly, the nature of the subject matter, which involves extensive reading, and the geographical spread of the twenty or so participants suggested more of a distance-learning emphasis. A third factor, encouraging participants to think creatively about the assessment strategies they use for their students and their relevance to students' needs, provided a sub-plot to the strategy implemented. The assessment strategy implemented combined the development of a collaborative Wiki with an analysis of critical incidents drawn from participants' own practice.

Keywords
Great designs for assessment, Education, Wiki, Critical Incidents, Collaborative learning, Community of Practice

THE CLASS

The class involved 26 participants[1] involved in teaching at the University or in one of its partner institutions (the first cohort involved a significant proportion of osteopaths studying at a distance from the main university campus). The module was taught over one semester (15 weeks) and supported by readings from contemporary literature on a range of subjects and three workshop sessions. It is the last module participants study having just completed a module on assessment.

We decided on a blended learning approach to module delivery with a mixture of face-to-face workshops and guided on-line learning and discussions. This was to take into account the nature of the subject material, the geographical spread of the participants and the fact that some of them were not full-time academic staff and had professional commitments making attendance at workshops difficult. This strategy also supported the need to help participants develop their skills in a digital age – making the module on-line would encourage participants to overcome any barriers they had to using technology.

DESCRIPTION - A COLLABORATIVE BLENDED ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

The approved assessment strategy for the module involved two elements. Firstly participants had to review the teaching of their subject, identify the core characteristics

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[2] As those involved in the course are themselves academics, the term participants is used to indicate then and differentiate them form the module tutors and their students.

and relate this to theory. Secondly, they had to discuss critical incidents from their own teaching practices and relate these to learning theories. The precise mechanism for achieving these goals were not stated leaving the module team with some scope to develop an explicit strategy in a world which had moved on since the original specification had been written. We decided on two elements to the assessment: A Wiki and a critical incident analysis. Both emphasised collaborative working.

The Wiki

The University had just upgraded its virtual learning environment (Blackboard) to provide enhanced capability. One of the extra tools available through this upgrade was a Wiki. Essentially a Wiki allows anyone who has access to amend web pages, upload material, and make links between pages and to material available through the internet. Thus it provides a potential tool for collaborative on-line working and the module team decided to experiment with its use.

Participants were asked to develop their own pages that discussed the teaching of their subject and to relate these to theories of student learning by linking to appropriate external web pages. In developing the Wiki, participants were encouraged to link to the pages of others as well so that, as it evolved, the Wiki became its own resource for their learning.

In designing the development of the Wiki we were aware that there was a need to phase its development (setting deadlines for the completion of each phase) otherwise participants, in the manner of most students, would leave the work to the last minute and hence not be able to link internally or to read others' offerings and work collaboratively on its development – i.e. there was a danger that it would become just a series of rushed personalised and linked pages not a truly interwoven resource for learning. A four phase process was developed.

The aim of the **first phase** was to get participants on-line and familiar with the technology. Their task was to develop their home page, identify the core characteristics of teaching their subject (as a bulleted list), and link this from the Wiki home page. For some this was a challenge whilst others found this a fairly natural process. We found that fairly extensive workshop time was required to develop these skills and, particularly for some, their confidence in the technology. Those who were away from the University and unable to attend the workshops also required additional guidance and support. It became apparent that, as well as IT skills, the capability of the home PC of the participant could be a barrier to effective interaction with the Wiki.

The **second phase** asked participants to develop their initial site to make links to appropriate external resources on their teaching (through for example the appropriate HE Academy Subject Centre resources) and to start to make linkage to theories (the on-line reading part of the course had by now introduced this material).

In the **third phase**, they were required to read other participants' offerings and make appropriate links to their own growing area. Furthermore they had to develop their site to include and illustrate their own, personal, philosophy of teaching and learning.
The **final phase** was an opportunity to hone and refine their own areas in the light of their developing knowledge and to help and support others in the development of their sites through appropriate commentary.

There was a tight deadline of four weeks for each phase with the final site going off-line at a fixed time at the end of the course – the submission date. Students were then assessed on the development of their site, its demonstration of the teaching of their subject and of underlying theories and principles.

The critical incident analysis

The purpose of the critical incident analysis was to encourage participants to be able to make the link between their own experiences as tutors and what's known about how students learn. They were asked to identify two incidents from their teaching which they wished to explore from a more theoretical perspective to try and understand why things happened and/or how they could approach things differently in the future. Examples might include a particular incident that happened in a classroom or a particular approach to teaching (on-line, enquiry-based, case study etc). One of these incidents they would work on themselves whilst the other they would share with one of the other participants so that they could work collaboratively on critiquing the incident and relating it to theory. Essentially this was a co-tutoring exercise which recognises that the best way to learn is to have to teach others. Participants identified the incidents they wished to explore and then were paired by the module tutors for the co-tutoring exercise. Pairs worked on-line either through email or the VLE, and also (where possible) arranged meetings to discuss their mutual issues. At the end each participant submitted a 1000 word report on each of the three incidents: their own personal unshared incident, their shared one and also that of their partner.

RATIONALE

We have found the theoretical framework provided by David Nicol and Debra Macfarlane-Dick and the associated seven principles of good feedback practice useful in framing our considerations of good assessment practices.

Facilitates the development of self-assessment

As a University we are keen to develop students as self-regulated learners (see Schunk and Zimmerman). As professional teachers being inducted into a community of practice (Lave and Wenger) it is important that participants have the opportunity to develop the ability to critique the effectiveness of their teaching practices and the work they are producing for assessment. Thus self-assessment is an important skill. Within the assessment strategy for this module both elements were included. The Wiki is an evolving structure where tutors and fellow participants can legitimately and openly enter and comment. Participants can see the differing approaches of others and amend and adapt their areas in response. The critical incident element involves each participant commenting on others' draft work and, in turn, having their work commented on. They can then use the feedback received to enhance their own writing.

Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning

Teacher and peer dialogue is central to the approach taken for both elements of the assessment. The tutors were able to go into the Wiki and comment on the developing and evolving materials (the Wiki includes a comment tool enabling comments on each page), suggesting links and providing formative feedback. Dialogue between participants is at the heart of the shared critical incident analysis.

Helps clarify what good performance is

None of the tutors had been involved in the development of a Wiki before so although we had a mental map (or possibly mental maps) of what it might look like we had no concrete examples. Explaining our ideas to participants was thus difficult. As the Wiki developed we were able to highlight pages and styles which we felt represented good practice for others to copy or adapt should they so wish.
Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
The structured nature of the Wiki, with its distinct phases, was designed to encourage and support participants in moving from a blank piece of paper towards their developed ideas and constructs around their teaching practices. The work could be seen to develop and

evolve and this emphasised process as participants' experiences and knowledge (through their reading and other activities) evolved.

Delivers high quality information to students about their learning

Students received direct and immediate feedback on the developing work either from the tutors or from other participants and their co-tutor in the case of the shared critical incident. In working with colleagues, participants were able to refine and develop their own abilities to give positive and constructive criticism.

Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem

Even though the participants were mature adults with a wealth of subject experience and expertise it was clear that a significant minority of the group had severe motivational beliefs about their ability to engage with and use the technology and to learn outside of their subject area. On one occasion where there were problems with the technology, some students assumed, incorrectly, that it was their lack of expertise that was preventing them from being able to access the materials and undertake the necessary work. Much tutor time initially was spent on reassurance and one-to-one guidance and support. As participants became more comfortable with the technology then their confidence increased and they began to talk in the Wiki about how they could use the technology to augment their own teaching.

Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the learning

The nature of the collaborative approach utilised in this module involves tutors actively engaging with participants as part of the learning process. Thus there is direct interaction with the participants and their evolving work; feedback can be provided and the tutors can directly observe how their instructions are being interpreted and misinterpreted by the students. This was the first time the module had been run in this format so it was a learning experience for all involved and the direct observation of the learning process will enable the tutors to adapt and refine the guidance for future operation.

EVALUATION AND SUMMARY

This case study has illustrated our attempt to apply Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's notions of effective assessment practice to the assessment design of one module. We have found the framework to mirror our own beliefs and values and to provide clarity and structure to our assessment design.

At the time of writing this case study the module is still in operation and hence a detailed analysis of participants and tutors views on its operation is not yet possible. Our initial impressions are:

- That IT skills and confidence can be a barrier to such approaches – but that participants can learn to overcome such barriers and this is an important element in the educational process.

- The amount of work involved in developing a Wiki and undertaking critical incident analysis should not be underestimated (we may look to reduce the number of critical incidents but increase the word length for the analysis).

- We need to consider whether the critical incidents should be paired or are better completed in small groups. Also whether participants should be allowed to self-select the groups for such work.

- That, with proper support, collaborative on-line working as described in this case study can be an effective strategy.

- Whether the assessments could be more closely linked with one critical incident being developed through the Wiki

- That the overall approach has been very effective for the target group given their size and nature. (There would be clear issues about tutor engagement and operation in moving from small student numbers to large student numbers in terms of the development of the Wiki although large groups could be split into smaller groups and greater tutor experience would enable greater modelling and revised guidance.)

Overall we believe that this has been an example of effective assessment design for the development of collaborative on-line learning amongst professionals and we are keen to gather feedback as we review and revise our approach.

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