

BLE Online Assessment and Feedback Case Study

Academic Blogging with Peer Feedback

Case study author and project lead: Lucia Guetcherian, Associate Lecturer in Criminology, Birkbeck

Summary / Purpose

To promote deep learning in the Psychology of Criminal Behaviour, a module of the Criminology and Criminal Justice Program (BSc and Cert. HE), the end-of-year exam was replaced with an academic blogging assignment. This assignment, in its four stages, is a process that imitates academic knowledge dissemination and sharing, which is a natural activity in academic circles. This mode of assessment goes beyond the traditional written essay or end-of-year exam. Academic blogging promotes and improves learner engagement and development through diagnostic and dialogic feedback. Learners will demonstrate transformative learning as they progress through the stages of the assignment, via research, collaboration, discussion in learner groups, drafting, peer feedback, and re-drafting a revised edition of previous work following scrutiny by peers.

The aim of this assignment is to enhance learner performance via diagnostic tutor feedback and peer information sharing in learner communities (groups). These inform learners about their progress and help to identify weaknesses and challenges that learners can address in order to construct new knowledge and improve their own performance. Using feedforward and feedback techniques, students are assessed formatively throughout the assignment except after final submission. The desired outcome is to enhance not only student confidence and competence in discipline specific knowledge but also to develop knowledge and skills that support employability.

The main objective is to encourage learners to focus on understanding the subject matter critically and interpretively throughout the module and beyond the university campus.

Implementation

The assignment specification, uploaded to Moodle as a pdf document, included: questions, step-by-step guidance throughout the stages of the assignment, reflection questions, and the marking criteria. The assignment requirements were also discussed with students in class in detail, and all questions were addressed.

To demonstrate how to read peer output critically and provide constructive feedback, 'Assessment Workshops' were set up during seminars, where students were given the opportunity to scrutinise some scripts and examine the marking criteria, with guidance from the seminar leader, and apply them in tailor designed classwork.

Collaboration was loosely monitored except when problems arose because of group dynamics or when students consistently failed to turn up to class. Every week, students were given opportunities to discuss the progress of their work or any challenges they faced.

At the end of the collaboration stage, draft blog posts were written and uploaded to a Moodle forum in which the posts were anonymised (except those written by seminar tutors). The forum was set up eight weeks in advance of the deadline to manage stress levels resulting from unfamiliar territory. At this point peer feedback began.

After two weeks of peer feedback and diagnostic tutor feedback (formative), students revised the blog posts, wrote a 1000 words reflective essay detailing their experience on this assignment, created an appendix with feedback provided to peers and submitted all three components as one document via Turnitin. The timeframe of two weeks for feedback turnaround and its dialogic nature throughout the two weeks kept the students engaged and focused on their tasks.

Evaluation

An analysis of the data indicates that learning in partnership with peers increased learner engagement and success. It worked to promote deep learning as all group members actively engaged in the process itself rather than the outcome of their learning. It also contributed to forming learner communities and constructing a learner identity. On the other hand, through dialogic feedback, partnerships between the lecturer and the learner increased student engagement with their learning process.

The reflective essay provided rich content for evaluation, where students had to feedback on their experience of the assignment. At first, students were quite apprehensive about this type of assignment but on completion, the vast majority of students enjoyed the different tasks very much and learned a great deal more

than they would have done in an exam or, to a lesser degree, an essay. Learners addressed questions on the impact of collaboration, feedback and mobility on deep learning, team support, best and worst features of the assignment, time management skills, technology navigations, independent research and employability skills.

The results were very encouraging. Learning through collaboration and discussion encouraged students to articulate their ideas and questions, and to challenge and respond to questions and ideas from seminar tutors and/or peers. Group discussions helped students build up their levels of discipline specific knowledge and understanding and enabled them to see ways of thinking and practicing criminology. Feedback generated by the draft blogpost helped learners to develop independent abilities to make judgments for themselves, cope with their studies, and understand their weaknesses and strengths in order to address them before summative assessment. The option to use of mobile technology to complete this assignment was very popular for learners, especially those with full time jobs. They were able to access the material, provide and receive feedback and complete their assessment while commuting.

To ensure that the language used in feedback was accessible to all, and all students and the lecturer had a common understanding of what was required in the assignment, assessment workshops were designed into seminar sessions.

Benefits and Challenges

Collaboration and active engagement with the content of the course yielded excellent results in deep learning and understanding, and in constructing new knowledge, which learners disseminated (via the draft blogpost) and received peer feedback.

Benefits (data gathered from reflective essays)

- Collaboration helped students improve their communication skills and helped them manage setting and achieving goals.
- Collaboration was enriched by the diversity of abilities and strengths per group, and weaknesses were addressed within the group.
- Giving and receiving feedback helped learners to examine one another's work and to learn about different academic writing styles. Moreover, students said that tutor feedback was very useful, especially that which contained details and explanations on how the draft blogpost could be enhanced.
- This assignment gave some learners an insight into potential future jobs whilst developing and practicing new writing skills.

- Having to work with others in a group encouraged learners to develop their critical thinking skills.
- Mobile technology, which allowed learners to complete the whole assignment via Moodle, was very popular among students.

Excerpts from student feedback:

- 1) 'Blog writing is one of the fastest growing skills required in many places of work but the assignment required collaboration and peer feedback which are crucial for being successful in a workplace environment'.
- 2) 'The blog requires a large amount of research, which is a core skill for many jobs and roles but crucially it requires full understanding of the topic'.
- 3) 'By requiring it to be written for laypeople, the assignment forced the writer to have fully understood the topic in question'.

Challenges (data gathered from reflective essays)

- In the first iteration, some students did not receive constructive feedback from their peers. As a result, they had to rely only on lecturer feedback. This problem was addressed by embedding Assessment Workshops within the syllabus.
- In the first iteration, learners worked in pairs but in some cases, learners dropped out of the program without informing their peers. This resulted in high levels of stress. In further iterations, learners worked in groups of 3 or 5 members, depending on the size of the cohort. This worked well because students felt more supported by their peers and had better opportunities of collaborating and discussing their progress.
- It took students a long time to understand what exactly the assignment entailed because they found the concept of collaboration and knowledge sharing alien to their hitherto modes of learning. An attitude change was fostered by addressing misconceptions during assessment workshops where the rules of academic knowledge dissemination and importance of sharing knowledge were explained, highlighting that knowledge sharing is not plagiarism when academic conventions are adhered to.
- Some students did not feel confident about navigating the stages of the assignment. In further iterations, to reduce stress, feedforward sessions were embedded in assessment workshops and a list of 'Frequently Asked Questions' was provided to students. In the future, the FAQs will be uploaded to Moodle.
- Formative tutor feedback at the draft blogpost stage is very demanding especially if the cohorts are large.

Take-Aways

1. Collaboration and peer feedback worked very well in developing student understanding of discipline-specific content and developing transferable skills.
2. Assessment Workshops are essential to manage stress levels and maintain high levels of motivation and learner buy-in.
3. The critical point is to ensure that student engagement with the feedback is transformative i.e. they use the feedback as “feedforward” to inform their future work.