Introduction

The chapter is focused at a practitioner level and describes how changes in assessment strategies are both possible on a very large module and also can lead to a better student experience; in particular how they can provide some valuable early formative feedback to students in preparation for their examinations.

**Key words:** Assessment, Feedback, Large student numbers

Objectives

The aim of the change was to overcome some of the issues that had been identified with assessment following the introduction of the Graduate Development Programme (GDP) into the Management and Organisational Behaviour Module at level 4 in the Business School. This programme aims to develop the skills of graduates and at level 4 was focused on group work and academic skills (Baker and French, 2009). The main objectives of the assessment changes were to spread the assessment burden throughout the whole 22 weeks of the module, and in particular to create an opportunity for different types of assessment experiences, to allow for the introduction of a research activity and to allow students to gain from some meaningful formative feedback early on in their first semester.
Rationale

The changes were introduced because it was felt that the students were being disadvantaged by the traditional assessment model. The following were key concerns:

- Students were used to a more regular assessment process and more regular feedback from staff than we were able to offer on this module. This perceived lack of formative feedback can be a factor in student disengagement. Baker (2006) argues that the anxiety caused by the transition into Higher Education increases the need for students to receive feedback on their progress from all sources. Students were excited and engaged at the start of the module but we risked losing these positive feelings as we had no provision for meaningful feedback during the first semester of the module.

- Trying to develop students as critical and self reflective learners through the GDP was difficult in this situation. Students need to be able to find out how they were doing as they progressed through what Baker (2006) describes as ‘studenthood’ (p172). At the same they needed to develop a range of skills, such as referencing or research based skills, which were not being developed in the traditional module format.

- The student body on the module was highly differentiated covering a wide range of programmes of study, social and ethnic backgrounds and learning experiences. As Race (2001) suggests, student diversity requires diversity in assessment.

- The traditional assessment programme placed a large burden on both students and staff over a relatively short period of time. To lighten this load there was a clear need to spread it over the whole year.

Context

The Management and Organisational Behaviour (MOB) module is delivered by staff in the Organisation Studies Department. It is an introductory course which considers how people and organisations interact. It represents a core module in all the programmes offered by the Business School with the exception of a small number of joint honours students. MOB also forms a core module in the management courses at a large affiliated institution in Gloucestershire and at a higher education institution in Malaysia. The module has nearly 1,100 students and 16 staff on the main campus and about 300 on the other sites, with four staff.
In October 2007, the university introduced the GDP as a compulsory element for first year students. The GDP is a university-wide common approach to student learning and experience that aims to develop a distinct ‘UWE Graduate’. It focuses on learning skills, personal development, employability and academic achievement. Level 4 students focus on the development of the skills and attitudes needed to be successful in higher education such as learning styles, academic writing, and working in groups. The Business School’s approach to implementing this initiative was to embed the delivery of GDP within the MOB module.

Description

Until September 2008, MOB had taken a traditional approach to assessment with variations on an assignment and/or learning journal usually submitted in March, and a final examination in the May assessment period. The weighting was heavily in favour of the exam which contributed between 60% and 70% of the assessment. The consequences of this were:

- The students were not formally assessed until almost the end of the second half of the academic year and thus had no means of monitoring their progress until almost the end of the module.

- The scale of the module and the demands of standardising and moderating meant that feedback on written work, which was full and constructive, could only be available four teaching weeks later.

- In addition, the timing of assessment was often determined by the need to take advantage of the university non-teaching weeks to give staff longer to mark the work. This could extend the feedback to six or seven weeks later.

- There was no obvious formative assessment allowing feedback on progress and the end loading of assessment might have a negative impact on engagement as students were unable to gauge whether they were successful on the course or not.

- More instrumental students would focus on the assessment in semester two and might undervalue the course during semester one.

From September 2008 the assessment policy was changed to include six separate yet linked activities, as follows:

- Two short writing tasks of 500 words (Race, 2008) were introduced in the first semester after four and eight weeks with the aim of students seeing the ‘assessment culture’ (Race, 2001). Each was worth 5% of the total assessment and was designed to give feedback on progress and to
prepare students for the January exam, a key aim of formative feedback (Juwah at al, 2004), by using the exam criteria as the basis for the feedback. The first assessment was handed in as students entered the lecture theatre in week four and feedback was given within about ten minutes of the start of the lecture. The students assessed their own work and the lecturer gave guidance as to the impact and importance of what they had or had not done. The assignment was read by their tutors and a comment made in time for the seminar the following week. The second assessment was peer assessed in seminars and students could expect two or three sets of feedback within the seminar time.

- These two short assessments formed the basis of personal interviews undertaken in week 11 by seminar tutors. Students were expected to bring a completed ‘feed forward’ sheet to the interview which acted as a review document of what the feedback meant to them and, more importantly, how they intended to use the feedback in their future learning both in this subject and across other modules (Gibbs and Simpson, 2002). The aim was to try and ensure the students were clear about the demands of the examination.

- The exam was moved to January from the traditional May assessment period and the marks were reduced to 30% of the total assessment for the module.

- A learning journal was submitted in mid February, worth 20% of the total assessment. This covered many of the GDP areas and some MOB topics, including referencing exercises, self reflection on learning styles and self motivation.

- A six week group project on any relevant MOB topic, worth 20% of the total assessment, acted as a research activity, aimed at developing graduate attributes (Land and Gordon, 2008) and was assessed by a group presentation in the last two weeks of semester two.

- An individual assignment worth 20% of the total, based on theorising the experience of the group activity, was submitted at the beginning of the May assessment period.

**Evaluation**

The changes were not systematically evaluated as the project was a work-in-progress designed as a fundamental change to the structure of assessment rather than as an experiment. However, experience of certain aspects has led to some
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minor detail review for the academic year starting in September 2009. These include focusing the group research project onto two topics, identifying ways in which the group aspect of the project can be assessed to create engagement over the last month of semester two and replacing the learning journal with a GDP activities portfolio.

Approximately 100 more students sat the exam in January than those following the traditional assessment schedule with the exam in May. This was felt to be a much better sign of engagement with the module. Unfortunately, more students failed the January exam than the 2007 May exam; perhaps because they were not mentally ready for an exam in the first twelve weeks of the module or thought it was not as important as it was. Overall the module pass rate fell following the first run of the module (before the referral exams). Yet more people gained a 40% + mark for the module (83% in the 2008 academic year compared to 80% in the 2007). Whether this was a cohort or module issue was difficult to assess as MOB was the only module that had a written exam paper at the January assessment and so no comparison with other large modules could be made.

Student satisfaction given in the module feedback remained excellent. However, detailed feedback was inconclusive as the short feedback courseworks in the first semester received both praise and criticism from students.

The students seemed more engaged as a body with the group research project and the assignment which followed than they had been in the past with just an assignment. Students submitted a range of research projects and staff identified some very good attempts to engage with this research activity, and some excellent presentations. Tutors reported that students were clearly engaged in the subject far more than in the past as the need to research and think about the topics required a much longer period of focus than in previous years.

Although there were now more assessment points in the year, there were no criticisms from students or staff about being over-assessed. Some students are used to more regular forms of assessment in their school or college experience anyway. Those students who were adult returners seemed to like the gentle easing in to assignment writing that the programme allowed. Staff spent less time marking throughout the year as many of the assessments were streamlined or done in class, helping considerably to balance the workload.

Discussions

A number of issues arose from the new assessment programme. Highly unexpectedly, some students were unprepared for the exam even though they were told about it regularly and the assessments were focused at preparing them for the
demands of the exam. Discussions after the exam with students who had done badly suggested that they just did not realise how difficult the exam was going to be. Despite the existence of a mock paper with examples of the style of question they could expect they did not practise and were not prepared. So why was this?

- There are some students who have already disengaged from the module, see there is an exam, sit it and fail

- Some students still expect an end of year exam despite all that is said to them in lectures. They think either there will another chance, or that they will make up for any poor performance in the later exam. This is clearly linked in with a perception and a presumption amongst those that have taken A Levels that they will be able to improve their results by resitting in the future. The end of year exam model is ingrained in to the psyche of students and of course, engrained into the University Assessment regulations, which have a default assumption of an end of year exam.

- There is a risk in being different from other modules in your assessment programme. As no other modules were setting written exams early, many students assumed that ours were unimportant or easy, despite the provision of a sample paper.

It is difficult being different. In our experience, students like the familiar, fear the unusual, and often see anything unexpected as threatening rather than as an opportunity to develop new skills or have new experiences.

Linked to the last point, is the issue of how students see self and peer assessment. In the eyes of some students only an assessment marked or read by a member of staff carries any worth, and this appeared in module feedback. Others relish the idea of peer assessment and enjoy seeing what other people have written as this allows them to gain a sense of how they are doing and receive feedback from a range of different people. Mature students did comment on the benefits of receiving feedback early on in their programmes before the “important” assessments started.

There is a need to explain to students not only what type of assessment will take place but why they are being assessed in the way that they are. If they understand the rationale behind why they have to do different assessments, then they are far more willing to accept their validity as assessment. In the first run through of the new assessment strategy the explanation of the rationale was given at the beginning of the lecture during which they received their first feedback. With the latest run of the module the whole assessment strategy is explained in more depth and is closely aligned with the learning theory looked at in the ‘learning in higher education’ topic of the module.
The attempt to create more space for engagement across the whole module and reduce student instrumentality does paradoxically create more opportunities for students to behave instrumentally. The coursework element of assessment was broken down into five different activities. Those students who are liable to act instrumentally could decide to opt out of some of the later activities if they thought they had already passed the module before the final activity. Students not completing all elements of the coursework could have implications for funding, following the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (HEFCE, 2009) definition of module completion and the importance of the final assignment, which came out after the start of the semester. For most modules this is a final exam and is often the most important part of the assessment programme. But for MOB the final assessment is a piece of coursework only worth 20% of the total assessment and thus there could be funding implications if students decided that they had passed the coursework element before the hand-in date.

However, there was little evidence of this as those students who failed to hand in the final assignment tended to have not engaged with any of the coursework. In addition, the timings of the final coursework were determined to ensure that results were not known before the submission of the final two pieces.

**Lessons Learned and Conclusion**

In our experience, we would highlight six key points to consider when developing opportunities for adding formative feedback:

1. Introduce small pieces of work which are easy to mark and which allow for quick feedback. Large student numbers and big modules make anything else difficult to manage and return within a short time.

2. Make the activities relevant to other larger pieces of assessment - in this case the exam- so that the relevance of the feedback can be seen immediately.

3. Make some marks available for these activities as an incentive for students to engage with formative feedback assignments. The aim is to make the process worth something without making it so important that anxiety levels rise. Give the marks for the production of the work and for engaging with the exercise rather than for the quality of the work – hence the small proportion of the total assessment mark. If marks are given for quality students tends to focus on the mark rather than the feedback and there could be moderation issues. A poor piece of work which provides the student with clear and rapid formative feedback can be a very powerful and
4. Try self and peer assessment as means of developing immediate feedback rather than formal feedback.

5. Inform students that the value and importance of feedback is more than the mark and that the most important aspect of feedback is what they do with it, not the feedback itself. Some students know what to do with feedback but many do not and thus continue making the same mistakes. There needs to be some mechanism by which the students can reflect on what they have learned from the exercise.

6. Explain to students that there are more ways to show what they know about a subject than by testing them with an exam. Of course, examinations still play an important role in the assessment of the module and are a requirement to meet the regulatory demands for controlled conditions assessment. Clearly explain the assessment rationale for the module and show how the January exam is used to test the students’ understandings of two topics in semester one, rather than the whole course. The later assessments are designed to test research, presentation skills and writing skills but above all they are aiming to see if the students are developing the ability to see and think like successful students of organisation studies.

In conclusion, assessment can improve the student experience and encourage greater engagement. Assessment needs to be tailored not only to the demands of the course but also the needs of the students. As the nature of the student body changes so should the assessment that they have to undertake.

References and URLs


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**Biography**

Graham Baker is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Organisation Studies in the Bristol Business School, University of the West of England. He is the module leader of the level 4 module Management and Organisational Behaviour and also leads a level 6 module in Organisational Leadership. His main areas of research are Learning and Teaching, and power and resistance in organisations. Before joining the University, he spent eighteen years teaching at a senior level in a variety of secondary schools.