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Using Formative Feedback to Support a Blended Learning Programme

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Abstract

Formative feedback has been well documented as a means of promoting and engaging learning. Indeed, for effective feedback the timely nature of feedback is essential. This project outlines the development of formative assessment as integral part of a blended learning programme. Using the existing BA Visual Art Programme (Sherkin Island), this project developed, used and evaluated innovative student feedback mechanisms. The project focused on the development of formative feedback for first year modules on the programme with special emphasis placed upon the written elements of the course. The BA in Visual Arts is a majority practice based programme in Fine Art with Painting, Drawing, Sculpture and Multi Media. The cohort on the course is mainly adult mature learners returning to higher education or attending higher education for the first time. The Critical Theory module, which is predominantly text based, poses therefore a challenge for these students; typically a percentage of students present with anxiety around written aspects to the programme and, in addition, there are a certain number of students with dyslexia. This project outlines how the introduction of formative feedback could be used to allay the fears around assessment and in particular the assessment of the written elements to the Critical Theory Modules.

Keywords: assessment criteria, formative assessment, peer assessment, feedback, feedback grid, timely nature of feedback

Introduction

This project aimed to introduce students and staff on the programme to formative assessment as a means of enhancing student learning and engagement. The project aimed also to explore different aspects of feedback. The hope was that through the use of structured formative feedback the students would have a better understanding of what was being assessed and therefore gain an insight into assessment as part and parcel of the learning process and not something which is often perceived as distinct from the learning process. In Fine Art teaching students and staff are well accustomed to the use of “crits” as a mechanism of learning and the extension to Critical Theory was, it was felt, a natural progression. The BA in Visual Arts is delivered in a blended learning format with either face to face seminars or webinars held every six weeks. The Critical Theory modules are delivered principally through virtual seminars and focus on contemporary critical theory with a particular emphasis on French Theory, i.e. post-structuralist philosophers, semiotics and postmodernist critical/literary theory. This represents a challenge to any student studying contemporary art.

Outline of the Project

In order to focus on the assessment of Critical Theory it was decided to start by looking at assessment in general and then to explore particular methods of feedback in relation to Critical Theory. To this end it was necessary to explore all aspects of assessment and to gain a clear understanding of what was being assessed, how and when.

It was decided to treat assessment as a specific part of the student induction process and “assessment” was presented during the student induction of the new first year cohort. In September 2010 we met with the students during induction to present our research project to the students and staff teaching on the course. The format of the presentation was a short introduction to assessment

in higher education and then a group discussion around any issues that they might have in relation to assessment. The students were then presented with the assessment schedule for Critical Theory and the feedback process.

The second step in October 2010 was a weekend workshop organised around assessment with students from the first and third year of the programme and some members of staff teaching on the programme. The session was facilitated by Dr Jen Harvey. The weekend was structured around assessment of the programme in general. The students were given the opportunity to discuss assessment and the feedback grid. The discussion was very lively and a number of interesting issues were raised, in particular, around peer assessment and group assessment. There was a certain resistance to the idea of assessing each other's work; the comment was *Who am I to assess other students? That is your job (as teachers, that is what you are paid for)*. The group members were set a particular task (to construct a temporary piece of art at a specific location on the island); they then had to assess each other's participation in the group activity and then to assess each group's work. The overall group was asked to develop a mechanism of assessment and feedback for the evaluation of each smaller group. The School of Art, Design and Printing uses a specific feedback sheet and in the end the overall group developed a similar one (see Appendix C). The weekend workshop gave real clarity for staff and students about the terms and criteria used to assess the students work; this proved to be very beneficial throughout the year.

After the workshop, Dr Noel Fitzpatrick during his seminars on Critical Theory discussed the assessment of the Critical Theory module with the students at the end of October. This module is a 10 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) year long module and offered the opportunity to explore feedback in the first and in the second semester. The module had the following assessment schedule.

- 1) Week 6 (Formative Assessment)
 - a. Feedback within 2 weeks
- 2) Week 15 (First Semester Assignment)
 - a. Feedback within 3 weeks
- 3) Week 6 (Formative Assessment)
 - a. Feedback within 2 weeks
- 4) Week 15 (Second Semester Assignment)
 - a. Feedback within 4 weeks

Each term on the assessment form – research, analysis/development, evaluation/structure and presentation – was discussed with the group during the live link ups. It was decided to give the students the opportunity to avail of formative assessment, once in the first semester and once in the second. The students were given the opportunity to submit 500 words for formative assessment on Week 6 of the semester; 16 of the 19 students submitted the formative feedback assignment. The assignments were not graded but were given feedback under the headings of the assessment form. The students were given this feedback within two weeks of the submission date. The students received annotated feedback in the form of an email. The email contained a general comment about the work while the attached Word file contained detailed feedback embedded in the assignment. At the next session, in Week 8, Dr Noel Fitzpatrick gave overall feedback to the group about the assignments.

For the first formative assessment feedback the main problems of the assignments were under the research and presentation headings; in short the students had not engaged enough with the primary and secondary readings and had not referenced the material correctly. The students then submitted the final assignment for the first semester. There was a marked improvement in the performance, and the students had incorporated to a large extent the feedback comments given. However, three

students did not submit for the final assessment nor for the formative assessment. In the second semester the process was repeated. In the second semester the material covered in the live link ups was felt by the students to be much more challenging. The number of students availing of the formative feedback was slightly lower, 15 and the number of students who did not submit a final assessment was higher, 6. These students were referred and were to submit in September 2011. However, it was decided to meet with these students in June. We teamed with the students to discuss the assignment of the second semester and general feedback was given on the students' work submitted. In the second semester the areas where the group needed improvement were found to be in analysis/development and structure/evaluation. The major issues were that the overall logic of the assignment needed to set much more clearly, and also that there was a lack of evaluation of the resources used.

Lessons Learned

The introduction of formative feedback has been successful from a number of points of view. It has enabled the staff and students to come to a common understanding of the assessment criteria. The students who chose to avail of the formative feedback clearly benefited. However, there is a certain disappointment in relation to the students who did not engage with the process, all of whom were referred over the summer. Within the group of students referred two clearly have major writing difficulties. It had been hoped that the process of formative feedback would have enabled the students to gain confidence in the assessment process; however, this was not the case. It also became clear that the formative feedback process itself was very time consuming for the tutors; the use of a grid of comments would have been more efficient and effective. This is particularly true in relation to the early feedback in first and second year where a lot of the comments are generic. The use of a grid would have also ensured the timely nature of the feedback.

The evaluation of the project took place through a number of meetings with the students at the beginning and at the end of the year. There was general agreement amongst the students that workshop on assessment and formative feedback forms were very useful. However, they also mentioned the need to explore other methods of assignments, for example a learning portfolio or aural/recorded submission. A paper will be submitted to the next Learning Innovation Network (LIN) conference on the general findings of the project.

Recommendations

The scale of the project was too small to lead to general recommendations for the Institute. Nonetheless, there are a number of aspects that could be considered for generalisation.

- 1) The presentation of assessment as part of the induction programme
- 2) Specific workshops on assessment to be held with the students and staff
- 3) The use of formative assessment grids for feedback
- 4) The use of a template of comments for student feedback

Future Developments

Further developments would be the establishment of templates for feedback for staff teaching the same modules. For example in Critical Theory there are a large number of students, and formative feedback in a timely manner is challenging considering the volume of work to be corrected.

Further Reading

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