

The eight-minute milestone: from assessment to learning in 500 seconds

Jenna Price

Journalism, Information and Media Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
University of Technology Sydney, jenna.price@uts.edu.au

This paper examines an innovative approach to assessment in an advanced practical journalism subject. The approach involved moving away from the traditional lecture–tutorial format towards a highly practice-based structure, underpinned by encouragement of student reflexivity through the use of reflective journals. Students also received intensive eight-minute feedback sessions with their tutor. Tutors reported that after the feedback sessions students were better able to act on the feedback received and to develop their group work skills. This aligns with the Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) thesis that supporting and developing learner self-regulation requires both the delivery of high-quality feedback and effective teacher and peer dialogue. Rust, O’Donovan and Price (2005, p. 234) reported that feedback can be unhelpful when it “comes too long after the work has been done, when the students are no longer interested and have moved on”. Students in this course were given feedback on two occasions during the assessment process, to enable them to act on it before submitting their assignment. The familiarity of their work to tutors by the time of submission also meant that tutors self-reported reduced post-assignment marking time. Students said that the eight-minute session gave them enough time to obtain constructive feedback in the subject. The approach was well accepted by students (as illustrated by the subject satisfaction rating, which was in the upper range for a subject offered for the first time) and, according to tutors, improved the quality of their assignments. This approach could also be applied to other selected subjects.

Keywords: innovation; sustainable

Theme: innovative assessment: opportunities and challenges

Introduction

Moving away from the traditional lecture–tutorial format towards a highly practice-based structure, the approach reported here was underpinned by encouragement of student reflexivity through the use of reflective journals. A significant change was the introduction of intensive eight-minute feedback sessions with tutors. Students in this course were given feedback on two occasions during the assessment process, to enable them to act on it before submitting their assignment and tutors reported that after the feedback sessions students were better able to act on the feedback received and to develop their group work skills.

Background literature

Lea, Stephenson and Troy, (cited in Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006) identify the core assumptions of student-centred learning as “active engagement in learning and learner responsibility for the management of learning” (Lea et al., cited in Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 200). This study attempts to achieve that goal. Boud and Falchikov (2005) observe that both formative and summative assessment look for immediate outcomes. Boud has long been an advocate of practice-based learning (for example, 1985) and the use of reflection. Fish’s (1998) argument that the

student (or, as she says, the “artist”) should be willing to learn to think like an expert practitioner also informed this study, particularly her notion of student “drafts” in their move towards expertise.

The study

This study applied an innovative approach to assessment in a new advanced journalism subject, ‘Storytelling, Narrative and Features’. The changes involved moving away from traditional assessment practices by altering the delivery of the subject from lecture–tutorial format to a series of masterclasses delivered in block mode. Each student also met with a tutor each week, for just eight minutes each. There were three tutors, all industry professionals: one in video journalism, one in radio journalism and one in text journalism. Each student met with each tutor on three occasions to discuss their work. In the best-case scenario, the student delivered a draft of their assessment before each meeting so that the tutor could review their work before meeting with them. At the end of each session, all the students came together for a 20-minute group meeting to discuss common issues.

The students had already been taught advanced skills in reviewing the work of their peers, from the first semester of their first year. In this advanced subject, held in the first semester of their second year, they were taught to pitch their story ideas – a necessary attribute for journalists – to a tutor acting as an executive producer or editor, in the same way they would in the journalism profession. They were also required to take on board the feedback delivered by the tutors over several weeks, to produce near–professional standard work in audio, video and text. The subject also scaffolded other graduate attributes of journalism students, such as the ability to manage journalism projects, to apply journalistic knowledge and skills and to work collaboratively. Team work between reporters and their executive producer or editor is a crucial skill for professional journalism practice.

Evaluation and evidence of effectiveness

Student responses to the study were gathered through the student feedback surveys conducted by the university, and also through interviews with selected students. Tutor responses were gathered through interviews and by email.

The tutors reported that after the intensive feedback sessions the students were better able to act on feedback and to develop their group work skills. This aligns with the Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) thesis that supporting and developing learner self-regulation requires both the delivery of high-quality feedback and effective teacher and peer dialogue. Rust, O’Donovan and Price (2005, p. 234) report that feedback can be unhelpful when it “comes too long after the work has been done, when the students are no longer interested and have moved on”. Students in this course were given feedback on two occasions during the course, to enable them to act on it before submitting their assignment. The familiarity of their work to tutors by the time of submission also meant that tutors self-reported reduced post-assignment marking time.

In the student feedback surveys, the students gave an average rating of 4.1 out of 5 when asked to respond to the statement: “I received constructive feedback when needed.” That rating is 10 per cent higher than the average rating for the same question across other subjects in the program. Significantly, 84 per cent of students giving a valid response to this feedback question provided a positive response, leaving just 16 per cent neutral or dissatisfied, which is less than half that across the university generally.

The unique style of feedback provided to students in this subject led to a significantly lower dissatisfaction rating for the subject overall, the satisfaction rating for the subject was 3.91, compared to the wider average of 3.50. The students and tutors also provided qualitative feedback in the form of comments, which were generally positive, despite the reduced face-to-face time spent in large group activities. Student's comments included the following:

Well done. I feel like my journalistic abilities matured a lot this semester – I feel a lot more autonomous as a journalist – in each of the mediums too! ... The 8 minute session was perfectly adequate for me – I think the lack of contact hours made us all a bit more autonomous as journalists anyway.

I think the course structure – particularly the professional facilitation with journalists and the one-on-one tutorials – was extremely beneficial. It was as if we were being treated as a working journalist in the newsroom, and I think that made all of us step up to the plate and improve our skills. It was exciting being challenged by the new technology and the massive breadth of the stories.

Students said that the eight-minute sessions gave them enough time to obtain constructive feedback in the subject. The approach was well accepted by students (as illustrated by the overall subject satisfaction rating, which was in the upper range for a subject offered for the first time) and, according to tutors, improved the quality of their assignments. This approach could also be applied to other selected subjects.

References

- Boud, D. & Falchikov, N. (2005). Redesigning assessment for learning beyond higher education. In Brew, A. & Asmar, C. (Eds). *Higher Education in a changing world. Research and Development in Higher Education*, 28. Proceedings of the 2005 HERDSA Annual Conference. Sydney Australia 3 - 6 July..
- Boud, D., Keogh, R. & Walker, D. (1985). *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. London: Kogan Page.
- Fish D. (1998). *Appreciating practice in the caring professions: Refocusing professional development and practitioner research*. Oxford: Butterworth Heineman.
- Gibbs, G. & Simpson, C. (2004–2005). Does your assessment support your students' learning? Retrieved November 23, 2010, at <http://www.artsonline.tki.org.nz/documents/GrahamGibbAssessmentLearning.pdf>.
- Nicol, D. & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), 199-218.
- Rust, C., O'Donovan, B. & Price, M. (2005). A social constructivist assessment process model: How the research literature shows us this could be best practice. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(3), 231-240.