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Abstract

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Authentic Assessment – Key to learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to show how assessment can be used to enhance the motivation and autonomous learning expected of today's students and graduates. As feedback is an integral part of assessment and learning, this chapter will also highlight examples of good practice in feedback.

Anonymous feedback from students and graduates indicates that authentic assessments are highly valued. The recommendations are to design academically rigorous and relevant assignments which evaluate skills and the application of knowledge as well as knowledge itself, and to give feedback which helps students develop reflective competence. These recommendations can be applied in any business school discipline.

Introduction

One of the distinctive characteristics of the millennial generation is the desire for continuous feedback on their performance (Meister and Willyerd 2010). As Wilson and Gerber (2008) note, millennial students have grown up with video games where they constantly receive feedback and rewards for achievement, and they continue to seek feedback both in their studies and the workplace. However Wilson and Gerber also note that many of these students are prone to over-estimate their own performance. They need guidance to help them accurately self-assess. This chapter explores the issues of assessment and feedback and proposes approaches which can be used effectively with a wide range of adult learners. The chapter begins with a discussion of the aims and objectives, followed by a description of the context in which the example assessment tasks are used. The chapter then discusses the approaches we have found useful both in design and conduct of assessment and in feedback, and includes a discussion of student feedback on assessment and feedback. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the applicability of the approaches outlined to other discipline areas.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this chapter is to illustrate how the use of authentic assessment can both engage millennial students in the learning process and assure that learning has taken place. Feedback is an integral part of assessment and will also be discussed. The specific objectives of this chapter are:

- Explore the role of authentic assessment in creating a dynamic learning environment in a business school context
- Illustrate a variety of authentic linked assignments
- Outline good practice in feedback
- Show how authentic assignments and good feedback are valued by students

Class Profile

Sydney Business School (University of Wollongong, Australia) has offered a Master of Business Coaching since 2008. Class sizes are typically 15-20 students, to ensure adequate time for skills development. Students include full-time external coaches, internal coaches and managers. MBA students also take coaching subjects as electives. They are usually the younger students in the class, although all have work experience and meet the same entry criteria as students taking the coaching masters itself, including attending a selection interview.

Students on this course learn about coaching theory and develop coaching skills through a variety of activities and authentic assessments. Lecturers role model coaching skills such as active listening, powerful questioning and constructive feedback in their interactions with students. In fact, students have suggested re-naming the role of lecturer as 'learning coach'.

The delivery format is based on intensive face to face workshops, typically two days at a time, on a Friday-Saturday. The intensive format allows time to explore topics in depth but has an even greater benefit in allowing time for informal peer learning, with students sharing their insights and expertise as well as developing rapport. Between face to face workshops, students practice and reflect on their skills, read and prepare assignments, and have 24-hour access to a wide range of resources on an eLearning platform. The spaced format helps reinforce learning, encourages reflection and highlights the link between theory and practice as well as allowing time for trust, relationships and respect to develop.

Approach

Link with adult learning theories

Underpinning all coaching theory is the theory of adult learning, according to Cox, Bachkirova et al. (2010). In particular, they highlight the relevance of andragogy (Knowles, Holton III et al. 2005), transformative learning (Mezirow 1991) and experiential learning (Kolb 1984). McCarthy (2010a) also includes reflective learning, based on Schoen (1983). There is congruence between the content of the course and the way we deliver the course. In respecting our students as adults, we seek to design assessment tasks which challenge and motivate them, bearing in mind Price, Carroll et al.'s (2011) principle that assessment is central to the learning experience and indeed, for many students, assessment guides the focus of their learning.

Assessment design

Our assessments are designed not only to assess students' learning but to encourage student learning, in other words assessments are not only intended to assess the standard which students have reached but form an integral part of the curriculum and learning experience. We do this by creating assignments which are relevant both to the course content and to the workplace. We incorporate reflection in each assignment to ensure that students not only engage critically with the theory but understand how it applies in their own practice. Flint and Johnson (2011) note that "if students do not see the relevance of a task, they get frustrated and annoyed" (p.74).

In keeping with the philosophy of coaching, lecturers encourage students to take ownership of their own learning and to use each assignment to develop and grow, for example by concluding assignments with an action plan with three to five SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable,

Relevant and Time-based) goals, specifying which areas of their skills the students plan to improve, how they will do this, by when, and crucially how they will know they have achieved this. For example, if a student has a goal to improve their listening skills, how will they know that they have indeed achieved that goal? This requires students to consider in depth what exactly they mean by 'good listening skills'. These assignments are rigorous in academic terms, requiring students to research peer-reviewed academic research as well as exploring professional competency frameworks. They require critical analysis as well as reflective writing. Importantly, they constantly challenge the students to consider the relevance of what they have learned for their own personal and professional growth.

Authentic assignments

An authentic assignment is one which is similar to a task in the real world. In this sense, the most obvious assessment task for a business coach is to be assessed on their coaching. This is something which students both fear and relish. One of the graduates noted that it was far more confronting than an exam, as normally no one sees how we coach.

Another assignment asks students to coach each other in an online medium of their choice, whether an elearning platform such as Blackboard, by email, telephone, videoconferencing/Skype, or even SMS. This enables students to experience firsthand the challenges of virtual coaching mentioned in the literature (McCarthy 2010b). It also heightens their self-awareness as they reflect in their assignment on the impact of, for example, not being able to see body language, if they are coaching by email or telephone.

In another assignment, students adopt the role of a coach, giving a sales presentation to potential clients. This allows students to demonstrate their ability to articulate the nature of coaching to non-specialist audiences. The ability to adapt their communication skills to different audiences and purposes is an important skill, as coaching is an emerging profession and graduates need to be able to explain what it is, whether within their own organisation or to other organisations.

Rather than a lecturer explaining everything to the class, students facilitate the rest of the class in learning about a coaching related topic, for instance how to calculate the return on investment of coaching or how to coach people from different generations or cultures. The students work in groups and put huge effort into their workshops, often dressing up, using props and even giving promotional gifts to the audience. It is said that we learn best when we teach others and certainly the students learn a great deal when they do these assignments, not only about the topic itself, but also about how to work in a group and how to facilitate a group session. The students later reflect on the processes they have used and this helps consolidate their learning and to consider how they would improve the process if doing something similar again. The variety of approaches in these workshops is greater than most individual lecturers could adopt and this is always a memorable aspect of the course.

Rather than an essay on codes of conduct, the assignment on our course requires students to identify common elements in codes for business coaches, and then to create their own code with examples of how they would use it. This requires the students to develop research and analytical skills so that they can synthesise and assess the value of what they find in the academic and professional literature, reflective skills so that they can decide what applies in their own context, creative skills to develop something original that they themselves can use and ethical reasoning so

that they can illustrate their code with examples of how they would apply it. This intertwining of academic skills and real world contexts leading to the production of something which the students can use in their professional lives, is an example of how assignments can be worthwhile and motivating, not merely something required to pass a subject. This is particularly important for the millennials who value real and relevant communication in all aspects of their lives (Partridge and Hallam 2006).

The key to designing authentic assessment tasks is a thorough understanding of the work context in which our students operate and to constantly update ourselves on what is happening in their world. The assignments we set enable students to develop and demonstrate higher-order thinking skills, as they relate what they have learned to specific contexts (Gartenlaub 1999), rather than writing only about generic theory.

An added advantage of authentic assessments is that many are conducted in class, which creates a dynamic social learning environment, where students learn from each other, again responding to the millennials' desire for social interaction and entertainment (Partridge and Hallam 2006). An added bonus is that there is no question about who has actually completed the assignment, unlike essays which could be purchased by unethical students.

Self-assessment and Reflection

In completing authentic assessment tasks, students learn to see the relevance of research to their work and they also learn how to evaluate the quality of their own work and that of the research they are reading. Boud and Falchikov (2007) argue that self-assessment is a vital first step in students identifying the gap between their current knowledge and skills and their goal. They note that being able to assess one's own work accurately is not only cognitive but also requires reflexivity and commitment. This commitment is fostered through relevant assignments. Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) suggest that when students self-assess, they are in effect giving themselves feedback. Crisp (2011) sees diagnostic assessments as a way of promoting an attitude of self-regulation in students, noting that such assessments could be done through self or peer assessment. Learners who are self-regulated are more effective learners, according to (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006).

Feedback

Timely constructive feedback to and from peers and lecturers helps keep people motivated and improves their self-awareness. Formative feedback is given at draft and practice stages, so that students build both competence and confidence. As students go through the process of becoming 'conscious competent' or 'reflective competent', feedback is important to help them calibrate their own judgement and gain confidence in their self-assessments. However the literature suggests that students often do not find feedback helpful or motivating, while staff are frustrated when students seem to ignore the feedback they have received (Burke 2009; Price, Handley et al. 2010). Research into the type of feedback students do find useful includes being told where they had not met the requirements and suggestions of what to work on for the future (Walker 2009).

Our experience is different to this typical experience, perhaps because feedback is an integral part of the coaching process. In the admissions interview, all students are asked about their conception of feedback, and about their experience of giving and receiving feedback. They come to the course with an expectation of giving and receiving feedback, and of being expected to reflect on the feedback and choose how to address it. In the assessment on identifying good practice in listening mentioned

above, the students' actual listening is not assessed by the lecturer. However students receive feedback from their peers which they reflect upon and compare with their self-assessment, before deciding on how they plan to improve. This assignment is the first of a series of linked tasks which the students undertake before being assessed conducting a coaching session. Later tasks include:

- students coach someone outside the class for a minimum of five sessions and are assessed on their reflections
- students observe professional coaches coaching, compare what they see with what they have learned from the theory, and reflect on how they can apply what they have learned to their own practice.

In each of these assignments, students reflect on what they have learned and update their learning and skills development plans. By developing their own set of evidence-based standards for good practice, students create an assessment framework which they own and which is powerful because they have developed it themselves, based on their review of the academic and professional literature. By coaching people outside the class (after doing some practice sessions in class), they have an opportunity to discover their own natural coaching approach, before they observe others coaching or before they are assessed demonstrating their coaching skills directly. The linking of assignments is recommended by Meyers and Nulty (2009) and Boyle and Mitchell (2011), not least because when feedback from one assignment is relevant to the next assignment, relevance motivates students to learn from the feedback.

Another example of linked assignments is the research project which all students complete as part of their program. Rather than having only one report to submit at the end of the subject, students submit three pieces of work:

- Research proposal incorporating a literature review and proposed methodology and including an application for ethics approval. This proposal is presented in class for peer feedback as well as for feedback by the lecturer. Marks are given two days later than the feedback comments to encourage a focus on learning rather than marks.
- Presentation of draft findings to peers and a panel of academics
- Final research report including closing ethics report.

All the topics are related to coaching but students each choose a topic they feel passionate about. They help each other define their research questions, piloting questionnaires and practising interview skills. They share resources and give feedback to each other on their research proposals and draft findings. This mutually supportive environment using coaching skills such as listening and questioning is far from the solitary journey experienced by many research students. Although new to research, by helping other students to understand what is required, students become more competent at defining their own questions and choosing and defending their methodology. Feedback on each of these tasks informs the next stage and also gives the students confidence that they are on the right track. Monaco and Martin (2007) suggest that feedback helps millennials to construct their sense of self by indicating where they are academically. Carless (2009) suggests that incorporating self-assessment helps students understand the feedback they receive. It also helps them develop confidence in their own judgement. The final assessment task is not a huge dissertation but the length of many journal articles, 5000 words. Students are encouraged to submit their work for publication in journals or conferences and several have done so. The project also equips students with the skills to conduct ethical research post graduation and allows them to see the value in doing research and sharing their findings. Some have also enrolled in research degrees.

The constructive use of peer feedback contributes to a supportive interactive learning environment, where students learn from observing others. Feedback helps students make sense of their experience, and this in turn engages students in their learning (Hoover, Giambatista et al. 2010). Prior to our students giving each other feedback, we collectively review good practice in feedback as outlined in the coaching literature and highlight the connections between coaching and education. For example, the principle that feedback should be about behaviours, not comments about the person, is both a tenet of coaching feedback as defined by e.g. Parsloe and Leedham (2009) and also one of the conditions for assessment to support learning identified by Gibbs and Simpson (2004). Having developed a shared understanding of feedback, and framing the giving and receiving of feedback within the context of course learning outcomes, students are well positioned to give specific and constructive feedback. Feedback helps identify blind spots and heightens awareness, the starting point for students to improve their performance. Students value the feedback they receive from peers because it is given in a positive spirit, with their interests at heart.

The timing of feedback is important, especially where assignments build on what has been learned in previous assignments. This is only possible where students receive the feedback in time to address in their next assignment. This also encourages the lecturer to give 'feedforward', in other words suggestions which will help the student improve their performance in future, rather than criticism of what they have already done. This future focus is in keeping with a coaching approach (McDowall, 2010).

We define detailed grading guidelines or rubrics for each assessment task, spelling out key elements such as what is meant by an original contribution or critical analysis or what we are looking for in a demonstration of coaching skills. These rubrics help us articulate what we are looking for and help the students understand our expectations. For example, a High Distinction for the Critical Analysis criterion of an assignment on codes of conduct requires the student to demonstrate a deep understanding of purpose and types of codes of conduct, to identify appropriate elements of a code of conduct for a code of conduct for a business coach, to justify the selection with reference to theory and experience, to carefully and thoroughly evaluate information from all relevant perspectives, and to include an insightful conclusion which is clearly linked to concepts developed in the paper. In another assignment, a High Distinction is earned for the criterion Research Depth if students support their arguments throughout by evidence from relevant recent references, including journal articles from a wide range of sources, cites all references correctly in-text using the Harvard system of referencing and correctly in the list of references, and overall, demonstrates outstanding insight and understanding in applying the relevant academic research to their personal reflection. Sharing an understanding between lecturer and student of what is expected makes it easier for the students to address and easier for them to understand the feedback when they receive it. Using the same or similar rubrics when the same criterion is used in different assignments helps students develop their understanding of what is needed and to learn from the feedback, in other words, not only are the assignments linked but the rubrics are also. As Boyle and Mitchell (2011) note, unless students understand the rubrics, not only will they not be able to write assignments to match the rubrics, they will also be unable to understand the feedback referencing those rubrics.

Student Feedback

Since our course began, we have been gathering data both at the end of each subject and following up with students who have graduated. All surveys are anonymous. End of subject surveys are

conducted by the University centrally and we believe they are positively affected by the students' enjoyment of the transformative learning experience, i.e. the scores are typically very high. We therefore also use post graduation surveys on Survey Monkey, sending a link to all graduates. The response rate for the 2012 post graduation survey was 51.2%, n= 22. Key findings relating to assessments are summarised in Table 1.

Question	Responses
Q1 Usefulness of assessments	Students rated a variety of different assignments as useful, with the top rated assignments those related to individual coaching skills, coaching sessions, reports, observation of coaching sessions, reflective components in assignments, and presentations.
Q2 Most important outcomes of assessments	Highest ratings were given to the following outcomes: Something I can use in real life, helps me reflect and grow, encourages me to explore topics in depth, encourages me to explore a wider variety of information sources, gives me the opportunity to work with my fellow students, gives me the opportunity to develop my coaching skills, gives me the opportunity to develop my academic skills, gives me confidence that I am doing well.
Q3 Attributes of effective assignments	Students rated the following attributes as most important: Assessment task is meaningful, similar to a real world task, has clear task instructions, marking criteria are communicated in advance, and feedback is specific, constructive and timely.

Table 1 Responses to questions relating to assessment

As can be seen from Q1, students value a variety of assignments but particularly value relevant and practical assessments where they can see for themselves how their skills are developing and where they still have room to improve. Tying in theory with reflection helps students see the value of theory and they valued reflective components in their assignments more than purely reflective journals. Traditional forms of assessments such as exams were valued by some students but not to the same extent as more authentic assessments. This was confirmed by the responses to Q2 where students particularly valued assessments related to real life, which helped them reflect and grow. Similarly in Q3, students rated most highly meaningful assessment tasks similar to real world tasks, with clear instructions and marking criteria communicated in advance. Timely, specific and constructive feedback was also important. A later question asked students on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is 'I do not use any of the skills or knowledge I gained on the course' to 10 is 'I use all the skills and knowledge I gained on this course', 45% responded 8, 35% responded 9, 10% responded 10 out of 10, with the remaining 10% responding 5. This indicates a good match between the aims of the course in developing skills and knowledge and the outcomes achieved by students, i.e. the real world relevance which we strive to achieve both in in-class activities and assessment tasks does indeed result in the students gaining knowledge and skills which they can apply in real life.

Conclusion

A similar approach could be applied in many management disciplines where there are skills as well as theory to be learned, e.g. strategy, marketing, human resource management. The relatively recent focus on graduate attributes or transferable generic skills has highlighted the need for students to develop employment relevant skills such as communication or teamwork, as well as learn about discipline specific theory, and functional or technical skills such as how to write a

business plan, draft a budget, or select staff for an overseas assignment. Assigning aspects of the course for students to present ensures students have a deep understanding of that element as people learn more when they teach others. As noted above, the different styles of the presenting students and the effort they put into it results in an engaging learning experience for everyone. Involving practitioners in deciding on the skills to be assessed as well as on the assessment panel also increases the relevance of the curriculum and the motivation of the students. Examples range from entrepreneurship students making proposals to venture capitalists to accountants presenting expert witness testimony in court to MBA students facing up to stakeholders following revelations of an environmental disaster or use of child labour in their supply chain. Encouraging self-assessment, reflection, peer feedback and taking responsibility for one's own learning are applicable in all business school contexts.

Unfortunately, many university courses have become divorced from skills development, or have concentrated primarily on academic skills (Bennis and O'Toole 2005). Balancing theory with practice helps students understand theory better as they see how it can be applied, which in turn motivates them to learn more. Furthermore skills development is expected by business school accreditation bodies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and Equis. AACSB advises that graduates need to be equipped with problem-solving, cooperative and functional skills, and prepared for lifelong learning (AACSB 2012). Similarly Equis (2012) expects graduates to develop general skills such as communication and critical analysis, and management skills such as teamwork, project management and presentation skills.

Relevance helps students' engagement and motivation to learn. Including not only analytical and evaluation skills but self-assessment and reflection skills also ensure that students graduate as reflective practitioners, equipped for continuing professional development. Boud and Falchikov (2005) argue that contributing to lifelong learning is often seen as an elusive goal for universities. Integrating learning activities and developing assessment tasks which foster skills development as well as acquisition of knowledge are key to achieving this goal. Authentic tasks also increase motivation, engagement and retention, creating an interactive learning environment where students learn from each other as well as from their lecturer and readings. To ensure such assessments are also rigorous in academic terms and consistently and fairly evaluated requires the lecturer to articulate clearly what is required at different levels of performance and to ensure students understand these requirements. Linking assessment tasks so that feedback can be used in later assignments is valuable in ensuring that students pay attention to feedback, particularly where the feedback is specific, constructive and timely. While it may not yet be common to hear students say that they enjoyed an assessment task or found a task worthwhile, that is often the experience of students on our course.

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