Adapting assessments on a university access course to facilitate great reflection and engagement

Discipline:	Interdisciplinary
Student numbers:	74 – 29 in group featured in this case study

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Introduction and Context

The course featured in this case study is a University Access course. Access Courses are preparatory programmes designed for learners, who for social, economic or educational reasons have not yet realised their full educational potential, but who aspire to continue their education at Third Level. Access courses are primarily aimed at adults who have been away from formal education for a number of years and who aim to improve their skills, confidence and knowledge to access a third level programme. They also familiarise students with the structure and requirements of third level education. The mature students who participate in this process are a target of the Irish National Access Plan, as mature students are under-represented in Higher Education (Higher Education Authority, 2015).

The First Steps to Higher Education module introduces students to practices in higher education, including college life and activities. It aims to build confidence and self-esteem by encouraging students to reflect critically on their emerging student identity. The module in this case study is the first of three core modules which teach effective study skills and practices for higher education. It is consequently the first step towards engaging students with university culture and structures. Among the topics covered are managing student learning; reading skills; note-taking; memory techniques; essay writing; referencing; sourcing academic literature and preparing for examinations (McNaught, 2012). The module is delivered in a small group setting with an emphasis on student participation.

The key skill that the module addresses is the introduction of critical thinking and reflection (Morgan, 2012). This process is reinforced through the assessments. This case study describes changes that have been made to the module assessment to reinforce learning and facilitate greater reflection.


Figure 1: Three students on University Access course

Redevelopment and Redesign

The university access course has been offered in UCD for over twenty-five years. It has been redesigned and mainstreamed in the last year and is now an interdisciplinary course across the Colleges of Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities. In the redesign of the course, there were several changes made to the teaching of study skills. One of the challenges in teaching Study Skills has been around the assessment. In the previous design, students were required to write a 1500 word essay at the end of each semester. The assignment was a summary of the key aspects of a journal they were prompted to keep throughout the semester. They were asked to re-read their journal entries and identify key themes and observations in them. The process required a level of reflection and capacity for distilling narrative.

The one essay submission for the Study Skills module was problematic on many levels. As there was just one submission, students tended to defer or delay engaging in the writing process. There was limited evidence of students journaling regularly and then summarising their key observations. Instead, students tended to delay writing the journal and recognised that it was only worth 10% of their semester's marks. Consequently, the submissions varied in effort and quality. Many of them were well written and persuasive pieces of writing. Some were imaginative and creative. However, too many students relied on the He said/She said method and regurgitated lecture notes – writing them like a Captain's Log. It was also evident that students did not spend enough time on the assignment or the process to allow them move from descriptive writing in to a more dialogic or critical reflection.
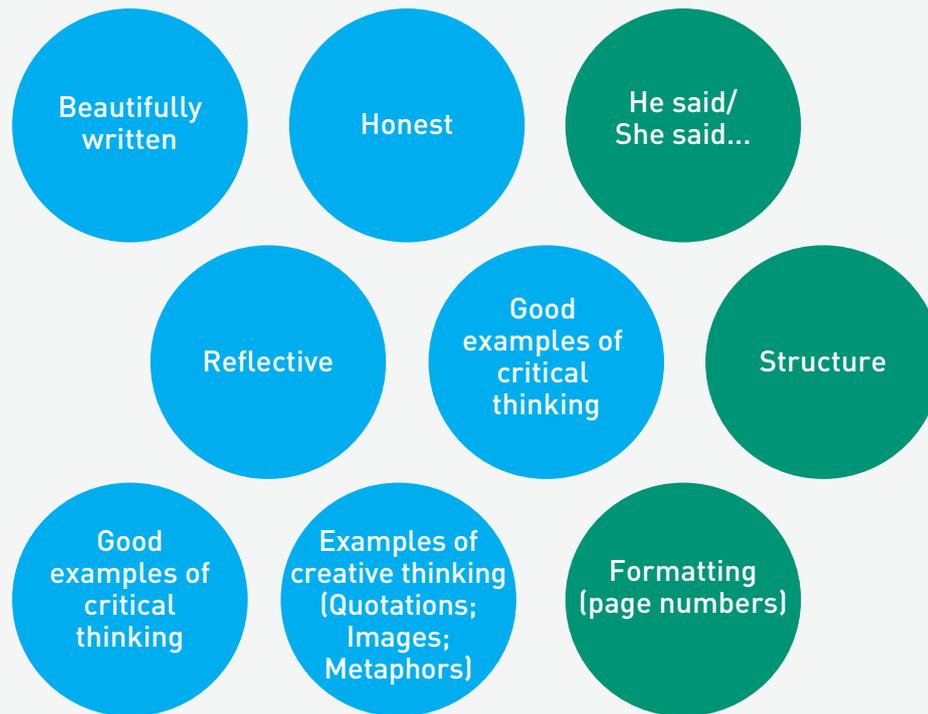
Figure 2: General feedback to previous cohort on former version of learning journal assessment

The redesign of the course included a redesign of the Study Skills modules. The redesign was a collaborative process and included colleagues from Arts, Social Science and Access & Lifelong Learning. The consensus was that Study Skills should be core modules, and that the assessments should be inclusive and engaging.

It was also felt that the assessments should be simple and intuitive and build incrementally. Four assignments of 500 words were incorporated in to the module design and were developed to reflect what students were covering in class. The redesign of the module coincided with the launch of the new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Brightspace in UCD. The access programme was an early adopter and therefore migrated to using Brightspace (from Blackboard) for this module. There were several features of the new VLE that facilitated inclusive assessment and feedback. One of these was the Rubric facility. For each of the assignments a Rubric was designed and posted. The Rubric can be designed for several criteria and levels. Advice on how to develop the criteria and how to capture the reflection was given by the UCD Teaching and Learning Centre. The Hatton and Smith types of reflection were adapted for the university access context (Rivera, 2017). These types of reflection were further defined as:

Descriptive writing: This is a description of events or literature reports. There is no discussion beyond description. The writing is considered not to show evidence of reflection

Descriptive reflective: There is basically description of events but shows some evidence of deeper consideration in relatively descriptive language. There is no real evidence of the notion of alternative viewpoints in use.
Dialogic reflection: This writing suggests there is a 'stepping back' from the events and actions which leads to different level of discourse. There is a sense of 'mulling about', discourse with self and an exploration of the role of self in events and actions. There is consideration of the qualities of judgements and possible alternatives for explaining and hypothesising. The reflection is analytical or integrative, linking factors and perspectives.

Critical reflection: This form of reflection, in addition, shows evidence that the learner is aware that actions and events may be 'located within and explicable by multiple perspectives, but are located in and influenced by multiple and socio–political contexts'

Figure 3: Levels of Reflection, modified from Hatton & Smith 1995 (O'Neill, 2018)

Descriptive reflection was set as a 'Pass' where students confine themselves to describing events without demonstrating evidence of reflection. A higher level of 'Excellent' was established to offer students an opportunity to receive more expansive feedback – and to reward them for their additional efforts.
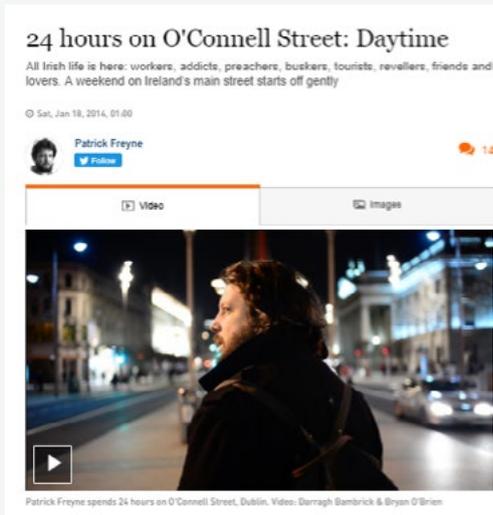
The first was an exercise in considering the student's learning approach at university. They were prompted to think about an effective learning experience they had in the past and to consider what they did that was effective in supporting this learning and they could adapt this skill to aid their learning in Higher Education. For this first assignment they were shown a sample submission and given a template to help them structure the assignment.

As an illustration, for the first assignment the criteria were identified as Presentation, Quality of Writing and Argument, Interpretation & Analysis. The rubric can be pre-populated with feedback comments that match the criteria outlined. Consequently,

feedback can be offered electronically and efficiently. Feedback comments can be adapted, or a selection of comments can be used in generating feedback. As the feedback is posted online, students can access it easily and promptly. The online feedback is also sustainable as no trees are sacrificed, and the administrative burden of collating, copying and storing feedback is eliminated.

Assignment 1 (Week 2).	
Deadline:	Friday 5th October at 5pm via Brightspace
Title:	My Learning Approach at University (500 words)
Consider your learning approach at university. Think about an effective learning experience you had in the past. Consider what you did that was effective in supporting your learning and how you can use this skill to aid your learning in Higher Education. Structure this assignment by providing an introduction, two paragraphs and a conclusion.	
Introduction Paragraph	— A general statement about learning approaches. — Provide a definition of a learning approach and mention a learning model you are familiar with. — Say what you are going to discuss in the essay.
Paragraph 2: Learning Approach 1	— Explain how you came to understand your preferred leaning style
Paragraph 3: Learning approach 2	— Discuss how your chosen approach may be helpful when learning. — Provide examples.
Conclusion Paragraph	— Summarise the information in the two main paragraphs. — Conclude by saying how your approach to learning would best aid your learning in higher education.

Figure 4: Template used for first assignment to prompt and guide Figure 5: Material for 2nd assignment

24 hours on O'Connell Street: Daytime

All Irish life is here: workers, addicts, preachers, buskers, tourists, revellers, friends and lovers. A weekend on Ireland's main street starts off gently

Sat, Jan 18, 2014, 01:00

Patrick Freyne

Patrick Freyne spends 24 hours on O'Connell Street, Dublin. Video: Darragh Bambrick & Bryan O'Brien

The second assignment was designed around students reading a piece and responding to it. An Irish Times newspaper article was used. Students were asked to focus on one aspect of the piece and write about what they would like to change, and the impact those changes would have. The second piece was therefore a move from Descriptive Writing on to more Descriptive reflective. The submissions for the second assignment demonstrated a move from narration to more critical engagement.

Students asked specific questions about their feedback and sought affirmation from their approach. The online feedback gave great confidence and students were reassured and positive about the process.

The subsequent two assignments were further enhancements, with students becoming increasingly reflective in their responses and autonomous in their execution of the assignment. They displayed little concern about completing the assignments and were positive about assessment in their feedback.

Universally Designed Assessment & Feedback

This case study illustrates the benefits of being transparent in designing an assessment. The use of the rubric, and the ease of sharing the criteria and levels for the assignment facilitate students to prepare an appropriate submission. The online feedback available on the VLE based on the shared rubric worked well. The layout of the assignments were intuitive and simple and fostered early and full engagement. In the group of 29, every student submitted for every assignment on time. This level of submission was unprecedented

Criteria	Excellent	
Presentation Add Feedback	— Well laid out — Consistent format — Adheres to presentation guidelines	✓
Quality of Writing	— Writing is clear, fluent and accurate — There is a subtle/ sophisticated use of appropriate language — Good use of vocabulary — Flowing style — Appropriate use of language — Easy to read	✓

Feedback

This was a well written assignment that conveys authority and conf You use language in an appropriate and clever style. Your use of vocabulary and expression is excellent. I like how your writing is fluent and easy to read.

Figure 6: Sample Rubric used to give feedback and indicates positive engagement with the process.

Figure 7: Group in University Access course

Figure 8: Students engaging in University Access course

Student Feedback

Students were invited to give anonymised feedback on completion of the module. One of the questions related to the assessments. Of the smaller group in this case study, students gave a score of 4.89 (out of 5) when asked if the assessments were relevant to the work of the module. The modular feedback indicated that the change to assessment was viewed positively. The process was designed to be as non-threatening as possible, as students reacted positively to this.

> 'The class was very informal which helped us to settle in and enjoy the experience. No question was deemed as stupid, which obviously helped to break down the barriers. Their [sic] was great interaction between the students and the facilitator/teacher'. [Student feedback]

The online feedback option clearly worked well. It was clear to see who had read their feedback and then it was easy to follow up with those who hadn't. Many of the students shared their positive comments and celebrated their achievements.

> 'The positive reinforcement approach was, well and truly, used to incredible affect during the course of this module. The well paced and achievable assignments were also very helpful.' [Student Feedback]

In the modular feedback at the end of the semester, students referred specifically to the feedback:

> 'teaching was excellent … The feedback on essays was amazing. Detailed, honest and really encouraged me to dig deeper. The pace of the lecture was perfect at a good pace, not too fast and not too slow. The assigned essays encouraged me to go back over aspects of the course that I might have missed the first time around. For example - writing an essay about essay writing encouraged me to go over the previous lectures to read over the process and points we discussed in class. I have retained more of that information as a result.' [Student Feedback]

When asked what the three aspects of the module that most helped in their learning, it was noted: 'The encouragement from [the lecturer]. The content have me great knowledge . The assignments helped me get used to writing. Really enjoyed this module. [The lecturer] is a credit to UCD.' Another cited 'The emphasis on reflection and appropriate planning'.

Recommendations

The redesign of the assessment to develop simple and intuitive materials was a positive enhancement of the course. The use of plain English is an inclusive and positive step towards access and inclusion. In addition, the migration to the new VLE offers many new enhancements to feedback and engagement. The process is sustainable and user friendly and allows teaching staff to give feedback promptly, efficiently and to great effect.

References

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