Promoting retention through a second chance at assessment

Andrea Parks
Dino Murtic
Anthea Fudge
Tristan King
UniSA College, University of South Australia

Abstract

This initiative aimed to encourage continued engagement amongst students who had failed a critical assignment in a core course in an enabling program. Students were invited to resubmit the assignment on a Pass/Fail basis and the outcomes from two iterations of the exercise suggest that there is merit in this approach.

Enabling programs prepare students for all aspects of university study in a supportive learning community. One of UniSA College's core courses is "University Studies" which introduces the context and culture of tertiary learning, and develops academic reading, writing and research skills, as a basis for future university study. In this course, three core assignments are used to scaffold skills which culminate in the submission of a final research essay.

The first assignment is an annotated bibliography that demonstrates skill in researching scholarly articles and then referencing, summarising, and paraphrasing information related to the students' selected research topics. A significant number of students who fail the second assessment end up failing the course, although it is not fully understood why. While learning outcomes are attached to academic competencies that are directly evaluated with assessment feedback, essential skills – like time management and asking for help – are not. The deficiency in these skills may only be revealed by failure of the assignment. However, there is a myriad of other, unrelated reasons why a student may or may not have been able to meet the requirements of the assessment.

In looking for ways to promote success and address the flagging engagement of students who had failed Assessment Two, consideration was given to specific solutions that would support these students. Students who experience failure of an assignment may feel embarrassment and anxious about the outcomes (Shields, 2015). Further, students attach significant meaning to their grades and feedback (Potter & Parkinson, 2010). Students may be struggling with the application of the new skills required to complete the assignment. Equally, they may lack essential skills such as time management, and may struggle with asking for help. They may simply not know the extent to which they needed assistance until it was too late to change the outcome.

The solution proffered was to invite students to resubmit the assignment on a Pass/Fail basis. This opportunity to re-submit had the potential to enhance the students' self-efficacy (Potter & Parkinson, 2010). This approach would also offer students a second chance to further develop academic skill (Wu & Dilena, 2011) and to reflect on essential skills that may have prevented them from passing the assignment. This grading scale would prevent other students from being disadvantaged. This was a very low-cost initiative that only required extra time for Course

Coordinators to identify students who failed the course, and to send an email to the students. Additional time was afforded to tutors for grading the resubmitted assignment, which was also minimal.

In second iteration of this initiative, we extended the opportunity to 1) all who submitted and failed; and 2) all those who were granted an extension based on extenuating circumstance but who did not submit. In the first iteration of re-submissions, most of the students who resubmitted did not confer with their tutor or connect to support before resubmitting. Consequently, for the second round, we changed the conditions, recognising that students would benefit from personalised feedback (Nash et al., 2013). Students from this group were thus required to confer with their tutor about the feedback before resubmitting.

As an emerging initiative, this approach offered a solution for students who had the potential to impact student learning and course outcomes. While this approach seemed to benefit a small number of students, such an initiative could be further developed to provide greater measurable impact and a richer understanding of the students' experience in the context of this key assessment.

Questions

1. What is happening for students who submit and fail their first written assignment?
2. In what ways can face-to-face feedback be delivered effectively to large cohorts?
3. Does this process disadvantage other students?
4. What innovative approaches could be trialed in this space?

References

Nash, G., Liebergreen, M., Turley, J., Crimmins, G., Bond, R., Oprescu, F., & Dunn, P. (2013, July 7-10). *The impact of First Feedback Face-to face (FFF) on first year students' meanings, perceptions and attitudes towards assessment feedback* [Conference Paper]. 16th International First Year in Higher Education Conference, Wellington, New Zealand. https://unistars.org/past_papers/papers13/fyhe13_proceedings.pdf.

Potter, A., & Parkinson, A.L. (2010, June 27-30). *First year at risk intervention pilot project: An intervention to support first year students experiencing early assessment failure* [Conference Paper]. 13th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Adelaide, Australia. https://unistars.org/past_papers/papers10/index.html.

Shields, S. (2015) 'My work is bleeding': exploring students' emotional responses to first-year assignment feedback. *Teaching in Higher Education, 20(*6), 614-624. DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2015.1052786.

Wu, R. & Dilena, M. (2011). Promoting feedback through second chance assessment: the Hong Kong experience. *The Law Teacher, 45*(2), 181-193, DOI: 10.1080/03069400.2011.578881.