Focusing Feedback to Better Engage First Year Students

Helen Cameron

HRISS – University of South Australia

Introduction

‣ As academics we now struggle to achieve conditions that make our first year students' learning accessible, relevant and engaging

In this presentation, I discuss

‣ some results from recent surveys with first year students about their experiences with feedback and

‣ strategies for improving students' & tutors' understanding of assessment & grading processes & standards.

General trends in uni students' commitment & engagement

- Diversity - especially in students' educational backgrounds – is now the norm in reference to both skills for and attitudes towards learning

- In particular, many students arrive with unclear expectations about academic standards and struggle to meet the demands they encounter in their first year of study

- As well, other competing demands on student's time leads to 'zero tolerance for delay' (Oblinger 2003 P.36) impacting on their willingness to engage in their learning .

General trends in uni students' readiness for tertiary study

- In 2008, one student wrote of their struggle to get up to speed, '*I have never owned a computer, and I am also learning how to use one as well as research and complete assignments by due dates*',

- Another student wrote, '*I was really scared about starting university as I've been out of school for five years, but you guys have helped to ease us all into uni life and academic work very smoothly.*

General trends cont…

- Financial pressure too means that many students' minds are 'on their next part-time job rather than on *the pleasures of learning*' (Ramsden 2003 p.4) and growing students' commitment to study has become a serious challenge

- Consequently, many students need help in developing effective learning patterns, including how to understand assessment standards & to value and seek feedback

- As well, with student engagement not able to be taken for granted, students' approaches to their learning needs to be much more carefully & deliberately cultured than in the past

Fostering student engagement

- **Step 2010** is our University's project to guide planning and activities in teaching and learning for at least the next five years
- The new Framework encapsulates the core concept of experiential learning as a means of increasing student engagement
- The University has committed $4.7million to realising this aim over the next two years – this is the website for this developing project:
- http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learn/generic-corporate1/?PATH=/Resources/tlfrwk/Step2010/&default=Welcome.htm

Results from the Surveys

The 2007 survey included around 100 of our first year students and the following are some salient results:

- 70% declared tutors as their primary source of support in preparing academic work

- The vast majority (70%) saw tutors as the best source of written or face-to-face feedback

- When they were asked, *'What helped you to keep going with your study when it seemed too hard?'* 45% of students' saw their families as most important, 30% friends outside and inside university & 20% their tutors

- A low usage pattern persisted for university supports – e.g. Learning Connection and Library – in reference to feedback on academic work & other types of support

Changing the Culture of Library & IT Use

- To target lack of familiarity with IT and library resources, Library and Learning Connection staff gave two lectures to first year students as part of the lecture program in year 1 courses.
- In the *2008 survey*, between 80% and 90% of students mentioned these lectures by library and Learning Connection staff as really helping them to find literature and to write their first paper. In 2008, a student wrote, '*I have found using the Databases through the library difficult. The staff in the library are a fantastic help though*'.
- This 2008 results is a very different one than gained in earlier surveys of our students about educational support services and indicates the success of this tactic.

More survey results about supportive tutors

▸ *In the 2008 survey* tutors were seen as friendly and helpful by 90% of students.

▸ Over 85% saw knowing how to contact their tutor as really important, suggesting the problem noted by White (2006) about hard-to-contact tutors has been addressed.

▸ A student wrote *'I feel very comfortable and confident in my tutorials because my tutor is approachable and supportive'* and another said , *'My tutor has been a really good as he is really helpful and easy to talk to'*.

▸ Many other expressed similar thoughts about the helpful and supportive nature of tutorials and their enjoyment of these experiences.

Tutorials remain the primary sites for learning @ then support

▸ It is significant that results in all surveys (2003, 2007, 2008) show students' *first & most important* experience with **assessment and feedback** is in **tutorials** and **with their tutors**

▸ Tutors need to assess **students' work with consistency and fairness & offer constructive feedback**, work on **building students' individual commitment** and actively nurture their **engagement – a big ask**

▸ **Class sizes and time pressure** & **good learning processes** often *compete for time and space* in the class setting. **All this underlines the importance of effective support for tutors**

Assisting tutors to Appreciate the vital place of Consequential Feedback

- *Tutors appreciation of the nature of consequential feedback assists in the **effectiveness and efficiency** of the whole feedback process.*
- *Consequential* feedback (Orrell 2006) occurs **at points that assist students to improve their work,** before more final assessment occurs.
- Consequential feedback is **clear, focused** on what students **have done well**, what **needs improvement** and **how to achieve this**
- *Other feedback on sudden death final exams or other assessment occurring at **the end of or after a course,** is usually **both ineffective & an inefficient use of tutors' time***
- **Consequential feedback** also *extends & deepens the tutor/student relationship* into 'dialogue rather than one-way communication' (Ramsden 2003, p.187).

Strategies for making feedback 'consequential'

- **Structure course assessment timetables** – so that early feedback can be *consequentially related* to *later assessment tasks (Orrell, 2006)*
- **Make clear (to tutors and students) how much feedback** will occur on student's work before submission and assessment occurs
- **Provide models of useful feedback phrases** for tutors to accompany assessment activities
- Ensure that all effective feedback focuses on what students **did well**, what they **can improve** – and **how to go about this** – framed around components of the assessment activity

General processes for supporting consequential feedback

- Courses need to be organised so there is opportunity for students *to learn from feedback* on assessments and **not to be handed back papers with no chance to discuss the feedback**
- Students need **direct encouragement** to discuss *learning styles, grade standards,* **and** *how to use feedback* – so *learning about learning* becomes part of the class content – **peer assessment** *may help here*
- **If tutorial space is at a premium,** structure1.5 **hrs tuts** in rooms **booked for 2 hours** for example to provide **space for students & tutors to discuss feedback**

Assessment Consistency Issues

- A key challenge with multiple tutors in large courses, is that of providing **consistent guidelines for feedback/grading** students' work
- James et al (2002, p.31) say that 'developing criteria, guides, exemplars & models; discussing & refining them' with students & staff is costly but is good practice.
- The *assess/assist* **dilemma** may mean tutors' feelings (positive or negative) about students can impact on **consistency and impartiality** in assessment.
- So transparency in monitoring assessment & grade standards and spread is needed **without imposing bell-shaped curves that compromise** *criterion based* **assessment.**

Strategies to support clear assessment criteria

▸ ***Clarify assessment criteria , grading standards*** *at the course onset with students & tutors*

▸ *Distribute* **clear and simple assessment criteria–** *to both students & tutors*

▸ **Peer assessment** *can be used to* **help students** *understand* **grade standards and effective feedback**

▸ *Meet with tutors* **during assessment** *to* **monitor assessment and grading standards** *according to* **agreed assignment criteria**

Peer Assessment as a Strategy

- Van den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot (2006) suggest **Peer Assessment (PA)** saves marking time but that it can also engender **professional qualities** in students

- More importantly however, it can also **assist students to be clearer** about **criteria & grading standards** and the value of **feedback**

- The success of PA depends on students' understanding of **criteria, grade standards** & how to **differentiate between opinion and evidence**

- This means **actively preparing students for PA** – by teaching about **grade standards, assessment criteria** and **how to formulate clear and useful feedback**

Summary & conclusion

- In current circumstances we need to direct **personal, professional and material resources** towards the provision of *positive and engaged assessment and learning experiences* for all students through supporting tutors
- Orrell (2006, p.454) points out that 'Institutional procedures and practices are required to support **constructive, non-defensive teaching reform** and **collaborative action** by teaching groups.'
- But Ramsden (2003, p.253) says. 'It is up to us as teachers to **take control of improving university teaching**, especially by **listening respectfully to our students** about how we can help them to learn.'
- As a start then, let's work at *helping students to better understand* **grade standards** *&* **assessment criteria** *but most importantly let's ensure* **feedback is** *consequential.*
- *Thanks for listening – Helen*

References for PPT

Brown G, Bull J & Pendlebury M (1997) *Assessing Student Learning in Higher Education*, Routledge, London.

James, R, McInnis, C & Devlin, M (2002) *Assessing Learning in Australian Universities* , Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

Oblinger, D (2003) 'Boomers, Gen-Xers & Millineals' EDUCAUSE Review, July/Aug, pp.37-47

Orrell, J (2006) 'Feedback on learning achievement: rhetoric & reality' *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol.11, No.4 pp. 441-456

Ramsden, P (2003) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, Routledge Falmer, London

Van den Berg, I., Admiraal, W & Pilot, A (2006) 'Designing student peer assessment in higher education: analysis of written and oral peer feedback', *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol.11, No.2 pp.135-147