To act, or not to act, upon feedback

A case study in Academic Development

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Background

This case study reports on a recent module evaluation of the Engaging and Enhancing Student Learning (EESL) module. This module forms part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) at the University of Salford and is offered mainly to new academics and other professionals who support learning.

The EESL module aims to introduce participants to teaching and learning in HE, and is aligned with the UK Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF). It is delivered over 10 weeks, including eight face-to-face workshops and two online weekly seminars. Active, collaborative and technology-enhanced learning are coupled with more creative and experimental approaches. The development of reflective skills is enabled through peer, mentor and tutor observations and feedback conversations and reflective accounts. Participants are invited to experiment in a safe environment and within a learning community with ideas and concepts, to challenge their own beliefs linked to teaching and learning in HE, and to begin shaping their teaching philosophy and academic identity.

Reviewing feedback is part of our continuous evaluation and enhancement process and this case study reports on how learners' feedback has been used to develop an EESL module further.

Collecting Feedback

Feedback by participants was drawn from a variety of sources and media:

a. Requisite: An electronic survey was distributed early on in the study. This was only completed by a small number of participants and therefore provided limited information. Two student representatives were appointed and met with the Programme Team once during the module to discuss any concerns and feedback.

At the end of the module, a generic Module Evaluation Questionnaire (MEQ) was distributed. This MEQ had not been tailored to this specific module and some questions were therefore less relevant. However, the final more open questions included in the MEQ, allowed participants to share any additional thoughts on the module and many used this opportunity. A mixture of positive and more critical comments were gathered through the MEQ which therefore provided a richer and more complete picture of how participants experienced the module.

b. Additonal: The module team encouraged an open dialogue throughout the module to enable participants to freely and openly contribute their views about their experience on the module. Many participants contacted the module team via email, face-to-face at the end of

sessions or during tutorials. Others responded on the public reflective blog the module team kept. Some participants commented in the VLE about the sessions and in their portfolios. Also, an informal focus group meeting was organised half-way through the module which enabled the module team to engage in a discussion about the module and collect data that represented the group more generally. The module team also used this meeting as an opportunity to share and discuss some of their ideas for future improvement of this module with the participants. The key points of this meeting were shared within the wiki available in the Online Programme Space with the cohort and participants who didn't attend the meeting were asked to add their thoughts and feedback, though this did not happen.

Overall, participants commented positively on the multi-disciplinary character of the programme, and the active, collaborative, varied and creative teaching approaches used. Participants felt that the use of the learning technologies was modelled well and found the formative feedback they received throughout the module very helpful for their learning. Issues identified by participants include the blended structure of the module, the limited guided engagement with the literature, the portfolio system used. Also, a small number of participants felt that the creative delivery was inappropriate.

Analysing Feedback

All feedback received from participants about the module itself and their experience were recorded in a shared file. The module team regularly discussed and reflected on common themes identified in feedback, the progress of the module and participants' engagement and learning. Feedback received by participants confirmed in most cases the observations and reflections of the module team who made small adjustments to the module where necessary and introduced a number of changes for the next cohort, but they felt that it would have been beneficial if some of the more critical comments raised in the MEQ were brought to their attention earlier on.

Reflecting on the feedback collection process used, it became clear that it was perhaps too complicated. While it enabled the gathering of feedback through a variety of sources, a more strategic approach was needed to collect feedback at more strategic points during the module so that a richer picture of participants' experience as individuals and as a whole group could be composed. It is also important not to over-research participants which can make people less willing to share their views which might have been the case on this module.

Thoughts on improving the feedback process further

The module team recognised the need to develop a more effective strategy to gather feedback from participants and enable less satisfied participants to come forward earlier so that issues could be discussed openly and resolved collaboratively. The following are therefore currently being explored:

- The personal tutoring system could be used to enable participants to share concerns in a constructive and confidential manner. However, it might still be challenging to engage the un-engaged.

- A systematic approach to capturing feedback more holistically during the module could be developed, bringing together the different sources in a spreadsheet for analysis. This

process would help the module team to identify emerging patterns quicker and become more responsive.

- The MEQ could be tailored to this specific module so that responses provide more useful data during the module evaluation process.

- An open cohort discussion could be introduced half-way through the programme, instead of the focus group meeting and questionnaire. This would provide a more complete picture of the variation of the whole cohort's experience. Participants should also be able to anonymously share their more critical comments during this discussion if they wish to do so.

Evaluation is an ongoing process and a partnership between learners and tutors. Therefore the module team is prepared and willing to keep an open dialogue with participants, reflect on their practice in order to enhance this module for future participants and offer an engaging and stimulating learning experience and refine feedback approaches used on an ongoing basis to make it more effective and meaningful.

Putting lessons learnt into practice

Feedback, the module team's reflections and evaluation as well as evidence included in participants' portfolios show that the teaching and learning strategies used in this module paid off by-and-large.

The chosen approach enabled the module team as well as the participants to experiment with, and immerse themselves in, a variety of high- low- and no-tech teaching and learning situations. It also gave them the opportunity to explore more creative teaching and learning approaches that had an impact on participants, their practice and stimulated change and in many cases a shift in their beliefs about teaching and learning in HE.

To act, or not to act, upon feedback? The decision on this was, in each case, a result of the module team's analysis of feedback received from participants the discussion with the PGCAP Programme Leader. Engaging participants in discussions about future enhancement opportunities was beneficial to create a sense of shared ownership and responsibility linked to the module.

Changes so far introduced include:

- Restructuring the blended module

- Introduction of a portfolio training session

- Trialling alternative portfolio system

- Introduction of weekly online reading tasks

The module will be reviewed again with the second cohort and feedback collection methods are also under review.

The approaches used within this module and the recent changes implemented are transferable to similar modules and programmes within academic development and teacher education. Also the lessons learnt might be useful for other blended postgraduate modules in different disciplines.

Further information

If you would like to find out more about the PGCAP programme at the University of Salford, please access http://www.ldu.salford.ac.uk/html/pgcert/intro.html

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