

THE 6th Journal

**Full reports of
Action Research
Projects**

Foreword:

The 2005/6 academic year was a highly successful one for practitioner research in the college. Five member of staff carried out projects in diverse areas, and each of these have sparked interest and curiosity among other colleagues about strategies which can be used to improve learner's motivation and to engage them in the learning process. These projects have been written up in a format which seeks to ground the ideas in some background theory but also in a personalised way which hopefully other teachers will find accessible and will be able to relate to their own practice. If, having read the reports, you are inspired to find out more, I am sure that the relevant members of staff would be happy to speak about their projects. Alternatively, you may have an idea for a project yourself, which you can talk to me about.

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Formative Assessment: Getting Back into the Box

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INTRODUCTION

Aims:

- To maximise the quality of support and the overall experience of the course
- To gain a much better understanding of what benefits students from their perspective
- To target feedback more personally, accommodating individual students' learning needs
- To raise self esteem through positive, productive feedback
- To involve the students as a much more powerful peer resource in raising student achievement
- To be very ambitious in combining the College's single corporate objective with a previously low achieving cohort –
- Use the “freedom” offered by 100% coursework to encourage every student to achieve an overall distinction – the highest award possible for this course
- To improve students' organisation skills and foster greater independent learning.
- Improve the role of assessment to promoting learning and achievement

Setting the scene

The project focussed on two groups of One Year Media Students on the level 2 OCR Nationals Media course.

This cohort represents the first group of students beginning a course that is 100% coursework assessed. The possibilities therefore for maximising potential to its fullest, using close and on going tutor/student communication, was very exciting.

Previous experience has made clear that some of the most pressing issues facing this group is crushingly low self esteem, often caused by some or all of the following :

- Academic “failure” at GCSE
- Unhappy school experience
- Low levels of support at home
- Lack of positive role models
- Very poor literacy skills

Added to this is the dilemma that a large majority of the students when asked, had never considered doing / positively did not want to do, a one year Media Course – and nevertheless found themselves on one, as it represented the best choice out of a limited set of alternatives.

Naturally this made for quite a challenging start to the beginning of a new year.

Classroom resources

Useful resources included access to mini DV video cameras for recording student video diaries. This combined with technician support ensured students could undertake the diaries more freely and openly. It was also used to record me supporting practical production lessons (eg portraiture practical) so that I could more objectively consider how language was used to motivate and support students. I movie editing software was used to import, arrange and view in a manageable way, student video diaries.

Theoretical background

What is formative assessment?

FA centres on the ways in which pupils are told what is expected of them, how well they are doing, and how their efforts are praised

- Black and William emphasise the importance of Formative assessment's role as a diagnostic tool – i.e. it should offer up opportunities for improving both teaching and methods of assessing the quality of learning. To this end it could be a particularly powerful tool in helping low-achieving students (1)

The crucial point is that assessments become formative when the information is used to adapt teaching and learning to meet student needs.

The research indicates that improving learning through assessment depends on five deceptively simple factors

- *The provision of effective feedback to pupils*
- *The active involvement of pupils in their own learning*
- *Adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment*
- *A recognition of the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial influences on learning*
- *The need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve (2)*

Additionally, feedback given as part of formative assessment helps learners become aware:

- of any gaps that exist between their desired goal and their current knowledge, understanding, or skill and guides them through actions necessary to obtain the goal (3)

The most helpful type of feedback concentrates on giving specific suggestions for improvement encouraging students to focus their attention thoughtfully on the task rather than on simply getting the right answer. This type of feedback is critical for lower achieving students because it emphasizes that they can improve as a result of effort rather than be doomed to low achievement due to some presumed lack of innate ability.

METHODS

Data Gathering

Method 1 : Focus group findings

Formative assessment focus group (James, Ed & Stuart)

Background : The group were given an overview of what is involved in formative assessment and the nature of the project. The first group were chosen for their willingness to be critical – this could then be used as a springboard for future sessions.

Wednesday 1st March

1. What comments would you make on the subject of how I assess you as we progress towards the final grading of a Unit?

It's good and helpful but when don't understand – you need to stop

Sometimes there can be too much at the same time when people are further ahead or behind – they need to be managed more individually.

There needs to be more flexibility in what I'm assessing at a particular time.

Problem when people are absent as you might be trying to assess something when it might not be relevant to someone.

Frequency isn't necessarily always a good thing needs to be really relevant at the time.

2. What has been the most frustrating aspect of assessment for you?

We need more time with making productions - more consistency in this area – we've had just the right amount, not enough too much – can be a problem with our own self imposed deadlines. As we only get 2 OCR visits a year extra time can be given but then this sometimes leads to a lack of structure.

3. When I assess, am I too critical? Does the volume of intervention and advice end up leaving you demoralised and fed up?

No.

This is a feeling of Perfectionism sometimes – but this gives us more confidence – it does build up the pressure but this is a good thing as we can see we're achieving and we like not being talked down to. You take us seriously and you take our work seriously

Really like critical feedback

Happy with feedback and levels of it

4. Why do you think it's working so well? Final comments

Smaller group more relaxed – know each other a lot more everyone helps each other out on deadline day everyone's an individual working

Bit longer for some deadlines

Emails are really good used heavily by Nicola and I – relieves a lot of pressure

Really different from school – never had any feedback

Method 2 : My Diary entries (Extracts follow)

I collated them into a grid to assess what I learnt and what I learnt through my learning

Date	What I did	What I learnt	What I learnt through my learning
19.Jan.06	Gave direct and spontaneous feedback to a student who got very upset	That it is easy to forget other factors may mean my giving "constructive" feedback is inappropriate at that time	To slow down. Try to judge things a little more carefully. Consider what the student is ready to hear and able to process before storming in – it may not matter to them that their work will improve if they feel worse for the feedback!
2. Feb.06	Talked to a small group about the need for being honest about my teaching – why it's important for me to learn to improve my practice	Incredibly strong levels of communication can be achieved between student and teacher when the dynamic is right. That what I assume to be their priorities are often not their priorities at all!	How easy it is to forget some of the fundamentals in teaching when you're assessment focussed
1 March	Focus Group with 3 students from group 2	That there is a full range of resilience and maturity throughout the two groups – much less than in any of my AS or A2 groups – reinforcing the importance for incredibly structured and sensitive well paced assessment and Unit management	Better sometimes to Go in with an open mind rather than a strict set of questions – allow it to be open and fluid

Diary Extracts

The intention was to keep a bi monthly diary, but this ultimately proved impractical. In total I ended up keeping a total of 6 entries, all prompted after particular high and low points in the course. The highs were generated by successful and satisfying production work, flexible & independent research tasks and formal acknowledgment of success from the Moderator and the College itself The lows were generally sparked by the sheer intensity of a 100% coursework load.

The diaries took different shapes, ranging from a very loose and spontaneous response (19 Jan) to a more structured positives versus negatives model (2nd Feb). The latter was probably more

useful in terms of reflecting with a more balanced and objective perspective. It also helped me to avoid “awfulising”.

Diary 2nd February 2006-02-02

We are currently half way through units 3 & 4 and as yet everything’s very much a mixed bag

Positives	Negatives
Massive success on units 1 & 2	Many seem stressed
Formal acknowledgment of success by John Guy	Am questioning whether the goals set are unrealistic – students’ moods are very variable
Big endorsement by OCR moderator	Difficult to establish what is really going on from the students’ perspectives as they are presenting such wildly different views and experiences
Students very busy and creative	Focus seems to be very much on end product – what about the process? What about their engagement – equality of opportunity – esp in group work are the leaders pushing ahead at the expense of others?
Students who were unsure about staying have stayed	Some real clashes with students in their groups – there seems to be a whole issue of getting over the hurdles that prevent them from engaging in learning – they seem to have little problem with the conceptual understanding – they just cannot work together!!!
Really great conversation with Niall Stuart and Felicity – lots of trust and honesty there (doing course forums)	Certain students seem hell bent on self sabotage. Almost as if all they know is criticism and failure – am surprised that the success of the first 2 units does not appear to be giving some students as much confidence as I thought it would.

The following extract was quite pivotal in terms of getting me to stop and slow down. Compared to their AS peers, this particular group of level 2 students frequently struggled with the following ; emotional resilience and maturity ; managing their behaviour ; conflict resolution. The incident described

Diary 19 January

Feel very annoyed - incident today where F got really upset as a result of me responding to the video. I hadn’t clocked how upset she was when she came into the lesson and didn’t take account of her obvious “mood” before I began to critique the project. She was very upset and I took the full blast of her fury. I was obviously the last straw in a series of events but it revealed something about remembering the importance of listening to them. This definitely feels very different from last year when the exams broke up the coursework > It feels like we’re on this relentless line to keep churning work out, constantly refining, improving – feels like there’s something of a gap developing between those who are secure with this and those for whom it is overwhelming – mainly because they have never had to work so hard before. It is clearly a shock to the system for many of them! Focus needs to be on identifying individual areas for focus. The biggest issues are definitely: Independent learning; Problem Solving; Planning; Communicating with others; Anticipating problems; Asking for help; Reliability; Common sense

Method 3 : Students' video diary

(Students were given questions to think about before making responses)

What single factor would have made a difference to you in terms of how you get feedback?

L : Most of it was negative during the filming...it seemed like she didn't like it at all.... but then it put us on the right track so we got it right in the end

What has been the most effective way of communicating to you?

Luke: on a one to one basis because it gave me more a view of what to do and it was quicker to find out what I did wrong

So how did you feel when you thought you were doing the wrong thing

Rubbish because we thought we had the wrong idea

The negative feedback helped us a lot

Uniform folders helped us a lot – I'm very disorganised so it helped to manage the work ...I knew where everything was

Method 4 : Course reviews

Broad consensus of opinion on all matters relating to teaching and learning. Failed to generate any kind of qualitative feedback beyond what we knew already. Confirmed what we hoped was going well, ie interesting and engaging course delivery / supportive and knowledgeable teaching / generous access to resources

FINDINGS

What were the preliminary findings?

1. My assessment / focus is still too narrowly focused on assessment objectives – not addressing the more nebulous but critical issues of EI independent learning being a true participant. Raises the question – is the intensity of FA making them more reliant on me?
2. Variables of individuals threshold (too much feedback – folder / email / verbal / peer / student diaries
3. Student capacity for self reflection is limited
4. Contradictory responses
5. Unlearning old habits

➤ What are the principal findings?

Reflection on Assessment strategies Used

- **Individual portfolio (initial completion / interim feedback / final completion / tutor comment & final grade - covers detail for Tasks 1-3 for Unit One - Introduction to the Media** Time consuming to fill in / useful for isolating areas of difficulty early in the

course when some students were less likely to be assertive or confident. Enabled them to highlight particular areas of difficulty / therefore encouraging them early to be self reflective – established early the importance of asking, questioning ..

- **Interim feedback sheet. For 3 tasks students commented on an area of difficulty to the tutor - prompting a more clearly directed response from the tutor .** Again, time consuming to fill in but allows for early formal feedback on arrange of tasks – also useful for student in communicating to them how on track they are
- **Standardised Templates for students answers :** Very very popular with students and highly praised by OCR Moderator. Enabled students and new staff to the Course to see at a glance what was required in terms of content / depth of response. Allowed us to direct responses appropriately to the more prescriptive requirements of the course. They encouraged students to work together as answers had similarities in form and any concerns about dubious similarities in content were easily identified!
- **Student written diaries across 4 weeks for two units.** Not particularly successful. Students encountered real problems being reflective – they were characterised by being very brief and descriptive. The process was repeated over a second unit with some improvement, though ultimately students were uncomfortable with the process as the diary had a dual audience.
- **Personal Video Diaries.** By far the most illuminating and helpful in terms of qualitative responses. Significant preparation was done over a matter of weeks to ensure that students understood the purpose of the video diary. Emphasis was put on how vital their honest feedback was and the positive impact their feedback could have on this and future courses. It also helped to establish a culture of trust and respect ; in some cases it enabled students to be more open in their critiques beyond the video diary. The process was set up twice, latterly with one of the Media technicians on hand to prompt questions and encourage more revealing responses. Her questioning technique was highly valuable in drawing out honest and candid responses. The overall consensus was that verbal feedback should be detailed and on going but it could easily demotivate if it wasn't planned carefully. It is very easy for verbal feedback to become rigorously focussed on the negatives and even when it is balanced out by lots of praise, the negatives are what gets remembered.
- **Other methods used included:** peer assessment on photography unit (very positive experience / very much a celebratory experience) ; teacher diary (useful but needed to be more frequent) ; Uniform folders & portfolios (very popular & a key strategy in terms of addressing the serious organisational issues within the cohort)

DISCUSSION

1. Students thrive on personalised and frequent verbal feedback. It is by far the most popular form of feedback and efficiently targets areas of their work that need attention. It helps to indicate very quickly where teaching needs adapting either in terms of approach or resources. This necessitates a readiness on the part of the teacher to be self critical without being judgmental
2. Varied and frequent interim assessment is helpful in terms of altering the pace of teaching & learning for the better. It can be a guide to slow down / pick the pace up.
3. All too often it is easy to be results rather than process focussed.
4. Regular F/A keeps a pretty constant dialogue going with the students. How easy it is to forget some of the fundamentals in teaching when you're assessment focussed
5. Where there is a wide range of resilience and maturity throughout a class, FA reinforces the importance for incredibly well structured and sensitively designed feedback.
6. If assessment is going to be effective **it needs to be varied** - ideally it should include oral, written, and performance activities.

7. Assessment should **engage** learners – this is traditionally viewed as being the part of the process that students see as the teacher's responsibility. Students need to be directly drawn in using language that they understand / managed in a way that is relevant to them. Innovations in new technology could be critical here.
8. *While feedback generally originates from a teacher, learners can also play an important role in formative assessment through self-evaluation. Two experimental research studies have shown that students who understand the learning objectives and assessment criteria and have opportunities to reflect on their work show greater improvement than those who do not (5)*
9. Students need to be more directly involved in assessing their own and others' skills and learning. They recognise when this is done well and enjoy the process if it has been set up and scaffolded properly.
10. Even when students are achieving well they are essentially nervous about the whole area of assessment. It is fraught with associations of being under scrutiny, not measuring up & ultimately failure. This can even be the case when hard evidence shows that they are meeting targets and succeeding. Where self esteem is low, formative assessment needs to be made very accessible and as far as possible non judgmental.
11. The essential contradiction is that formative assessment embraces notions of frequency and inclusivity. This sustained focus on making judgments and measuring risks being a de motivator for some students

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The project has been crucial in terms of encouraging me to reflect on my own practice and re examine the merits of academic success.

The starting point with many of the students was low self esteem and a dis engaged attitude to learning. The final summative achievement is important, but perhaps more so (as much?) is the process and how they see themselves developing as thinkers and learners. All students did ultimately go on to achieve a distinction and their feedback clearly indicates they are very proud of this achievement. As pleasing as this is, it does not disguise the real story behind the process; that students need to be involved more ; encouraged to be more independent ; more aware of how to cement / transfer knowledge and skills ; see interim failure as a natural and healthy part of the learning process. The list is possibly endless.

Formative assessment clearly helps to support the expectation that all students can learn to high levels and "counteracts the cycle in which students attribute poor performance to lack of ability and therefore become discouraged and unwilling to invest in further learning ." (4)

Personally I think there is something to develop here – perhaps through utilising technology inventively and not just for the sake of it. This has already led to a programme of personalised tutorials being prepared (using Macromedia Captivate). Here students can learn at their own pace / get ahead if they're ready or repeat tutorials if they are struggling. Essentially it supports independent learning and varied learning preferences. I would like to incorporate student feedback far more skilfully into my devised schemes (ie edited filmed presentations running alongside students' completed work) This necessitates a more confident engagement with the smartboard technology and INSET is being organised around very specific T& L objectives.

Ultimately, the experience of being an Action Researcher has been very rewarding. It has re ignited my interest in trying new methods, grappling with the unknown and being creative. I think most importantly it has given me a much better understanding of what it might be like to be a student at the College.

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