General Feedback on Exam Performance

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Class Size
490 students

Discipline
Sociology

Feedback Approaches
Whole class feedback, video feedback, post-exam feedback

Technologies
Moodle, PowerPoint, Camtasia

Challenge & Aim

The Sociology Department delivers core modules in First Year Sociology to a cohort of up to 500 students. The module I was teaching (SO101 Thinking Sociologically) in the first semester of 2015-16 was delivered through 24 lectures, and assessed through a terminal examination at the end of the semester. While I was able to engage in formative assessment exercises in the course of lecturing I was conscious that ultimately the students would sit a two-hour exam and receive no direct feedback on their work apart from the grade. The aim was to devise a formative feedback exercise which would: (a) enable the students to reflect on their performance in the examination; and (b) help prepare the students better for facing a similar terminal exam in a follow-on module (SO104) at the end of the second semester.

Evidence from the Literature

Feedback when provided in a timely, appropriate and consistent manner can enhance student learning in significant ways, even in the largest class contexts (Carless, 2015; Boud et al., 2013; O' Regan et al., 2016). The challenge for students who are completing a summative assessment only is that they are disconnected from actual classroom practice (Shepard, 2001). Research on how to improve student engagement and performance in large class contexts in sociology suggests the efficacy of technology to foster feedback opportunities that enhance the learning

environment as well as student learning (Wright and Lawson, 2005). Provision of generic, whole-class feedback on draft work can be an effective way to provide timely feedback, particularly in the context of large classes. This approach can be more effective than individualised feedback that comes too late for students to engage with or apply (O'Donovan, Rust and Price 2015).

By offering students a "follow up" feedback screencast on their exam performance I hoped to provide them with additional supports that would enhance their teaching and learning experience in the remainder of the academic year.

Feedback Approach

I graded a sample of the exam scripts and consulted with my colleague, Dr. Niall Gilmartin who had graded the rest. We discussed the key difficulties which students had in answering each question.

I devised a set of PowerPoint slides which listed the exam questions chronologically, and then focused on providing students with feedback on strategies to employ in order to write an excellent answer.

I consulted with the Centre for Teaching and Learning Staff and we agreed some amendments to the slides.

A member of the Centre for Teaching and Learning briefed me on the Camtasia Technology and we recorded a feedback screencast.

The screencast was then uploaded onto my SO101 Moodle page and that of my colleague teaching SO104 in the second semester.

I attended my colleague's first lecture in the second semester and alerted students to the availability of the resource.

Outcomes

The Screencast provided students with "useable feedback" on approaching a terminal examination in Sociology and provided generic tips for how they should approach such an exam in the future. When a module is completed and exam results issued only a small proportion of students will come to office hours for feedback. Such students receive a one-on- one review which they generally find extremely helpful, and which they can put to good use as they continue with their studies. The Screencast feedback made available from

January 2016 through to the May exam period had the effect of democratizing the process of giving feedback. All students could access the video, and could do so without coming on campus or attending at an office hour. They could also go back to it repeatedly if they wished. In that sense, I feel that the exercise was useful in that it created the potential for all students to benefit rather than just those who are diligent about seeking out feedback.

The total views for general feedback on exam performance was 427. These were unique page views which means that 427 students looked at the video at least once. Given that only 92 students users had viewed it by March 2016 this suggests that most consulted it in the period immediately prior to the May exams.

Student Response

Thirty-four students completed a Y1 Feedback Questionnaire in May 2016. While the response rate is rather low, those students who did complete the questionnaire were positive about the screencast. Two thirds of the students rated the video as useful or very useful. 93.3% of the respondents said that they applied at least some of the feedback (80%) or all of it (13.3%) to improve their work. 87% of the respondents said they would like to receive feedback on exams via video again.

Some selected comments:

"It helped to hear it being said than to read a well written email or suggestions poll instead. Very human, great contract and support for going forward".

"As we do not get our exam papers back, it is difficult to know where we went wrong. Outlining the common mistakes made in the exam is therefore useful."

"it was helpful to know what areas and aspects of the exam needed improving to apply to future exam questions."

"Very accessible, there to review whenever your wish. Also, visual information often much easier to recall than printed material."

"the visual nature of the video helped get the point across in an easy and understandable way."

Recommendations

• At 23 minutes I think the screencast is a little long and might tax the attention span of even the most diligent student! It might be useful to do shorter clips [or edit the video into shorter clips] focusing on individual questions, preparing for the exam, how to take notes, etc.

• Alternately, I would consider developing some graphics to supplement or replace some of the text on the PowerPoint slides. While the video had good energy the slides were rather static.

• The use of humour can help to keep attention focused.

• It is crucial to emphasize the key words that you want to get across. For instance, in the video I kept coming back to the importance of "evidence-based answering" in the examination.

• I would recommend engaging your Centre for Teaching and Learning who were a key resource in implementing this feedback approach.

References

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