

9 Using core assessment criteria to improve essay writing

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Introduction

In this chapter we discuss the implementation and evaluation of a programme of writing workshops designed around the concept of 'core' assessment criteria. The workshops had two aims: helping undergraduates improve their essay writing and promoting deep approaches to learning. Essay assignments continue to be valuable as a way of both assessing (Prosser and Webb, 1994) and promoting deep approaches to learning (Scouller, 1998), despite trends in some disciplines towards alternative forms of assessment (MacAndrew and Edwards, 2003). Students often find essay writing difficult and struggle to know exactly what writing a good essay requires, partly because their understandings of the criteria that are applied to essays differ from those of their tutors (Merry *et al.*, 1998). We therefore devised a programme of formative learning opportunities that focused on a small group of centrally important criteria for essays, and linked the meaning of those criteria to relevant disciplinary knowledge and understanding. We hoped this approach would increase the likelihood that students would adopt a deeper approach to learning through writing essays, and encourage strategically focused students to reach a more advanced understanding of the discipline.

The work took place in departments of psychology at three UK universities as part of Assessment Plus, a HEFCE-funded FDTL4 project (<<http://www.assessmentplus.net>>). The evaluation drew on student feedback and measures of student performance as well as focus groups with each group of students and tutors. We found the programme facilitated a deep approach to learning and improved performance for some students, but that those benefits were limited by low levels of student attendance and variability between tutors in how well the workshops were delivered. We conclude with recommendations for those considering running similar programmes.

Core assessment criteria

The criteria that are employed in the assessment of essays vary between institutions and disciplines, just as individual tutors vary in what they see as the most important qualities in students' written work. However, some criteria are commonly employed

across different disciplines and institutions, and appear to have a central role in the shared perception of what constitutes a good student essay (Elander *et al.*, 2004). These include the following criteria: addressing the question, demonstrating understanding, developing argument, using evidence, structuring, critically evaluating, and using language well. A recent review of theory and evidence concluded that many of these core criteria describe properties of the outcomes of adopting a deep approach to learning (Elander *et al.*, 2006). The concept of core criteria, however, does not exclude other criteria, nor does it restrict the meanings of the criteria, for each is open to interpretation in the context of the discipline in which it is used, as Lea and Street (1998) have shown. Our core criteria are a small set of criteria that are centrally important in written work in the social sciences and specify some of the outcomes of taking a deep approach to learning.

The use of core criteria can support a student-centred approach to learning and teaching by:

- channelling assessment-oriented students towards deeper approaches to learning;
- providing straightforward and manageable focal points for students and staff to develop a shared understanding of assessment criteria and standards;
- facilitating students' ability to generalize and apply what they have learned from one assignment to the next and from one module to the next;
- facilitating a coherent departmental approach to marking and feedback procedures.

In this chapter we are concerned with the first two of these potential benefits. The approach is similar to that of other work on the benefits of interventions designed to engage students actively with understanding assessment criteria (e.g., Price *et al.*, 2003). The findings we report focus on the experiences of psychology students, but the approach of identifying core criteria and providing writing workshops built around those criteria is applicable across a range of disciplines where essays are assessed.

The workshop programme

Full workshop protocols are available at <www.assessmentplus.net>. We summarize below the ways the programme was implemented and evaluated differently in the three institutional contexts, before going on to an appraisal of the successes of the programme and the obstacles we encountered.

At Liverpool Hope University College and Aston University, the programme consisted of workshops that mixed discussion and practical exercises, with an emphasis on hands-on activities and interaction between students, which were offered as optional support for first-year psychology students. There were five workshops on the following themes:

- What are assessment criteria?
- Addressing the question and the importance of structure.
- Demonstrating understanding and developing argument.

- Evaluation and using evidence.
- Applying the assessment criteria to your own work.

At London Metropolitan University, the programme was adapted and compressed into a four-workshop series and embedded in a third-year health psychology module that was assessed by essay-style examination answers. The workshop strategy was to use the core criteria to facilitate discussion about how material that had been covered in lectures could be used to construct high-quality examination answers. Students also had opportunities in the workshops to apply the criteria themselves in marking exercises in which they assessed specimen essays.

At Liverpool Hope, the workshop tutor was a psychology lecturer who was one of the designers of the programme. At Aston and London Metropolitan, the workshops were facilitated by specially trained postgraduate psychology students. At each institution students completed an end-of-programme evaluation questionnaire, and at Liverpool Hope students completed an evaluation questionnaire after each workshop. Students and tutors at each institution also took part in focus groups.

What we have learned: the successes

The evaluation of the workshop programme was guided by three questions: Were students helped to understand the assessment criteria? Were they helped to write better essays? Were they helped to learn psychology?

Helping students understand assessment criteria

Students were generally appreciative of the workshops and the focus on facilitating an understanding of the meaning of assessment criteria, as this comment made by an Aston student illustrates: 'Yeah, there have been extra study sessions that explain them in quite a lot of detail. [They were about] what they mean by evidence, what do they want as evidence, what does "analyse" mean. We get told what each word means because not everybody knows.' At Aston and Liverpool Hope, the end-of-programme evaluation questionnaires included rating scales where students indicated how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements about whether the workshops had helped them understand the assessment criteria (see Table 9.1).

Table 9.1 Proportions of students who agreed/strongly agreed with statements about understanding assessment criteria in the end-of-the-programme evaluation questionnaire

<i>The workshops helped me to understand . . .</i>	<i>Aston (n=11)</i>	<i>Liverpool Hope (n=11)</i>
How to address the question	91%	100%
How to structure	91%	91%
How to demonstrate understanding	82%	91%
How to develop an argument	100%	82%
How to use evidence	82%	100%
How to evaluate critically	82%	100%

Table 9.2 Proportions of Liverpool Hope students who responded in different ways to statements in evaluation questionnaires after workshops 2, 3 and 4

	<i>Yes definitely</i>	<i>Not sure</i>	<i>No definitely not</i>
<i>Workshop 2: Addressing the question and the importance of structure (n=20)</i>			
I understand the importance of the introduction.	100%	—	—
I understand the importance of the conclusion.	100%	—	—
I have a good idea of how to structure my essay to ensure it addresses the essay title.	70%	25%	5%
I have a clear idea of strategies I can use to stay focused on the essay title.	60%	40%	—
I feel confident that I can use an essay plan to help me structure my essay.	60%	35%	5%
<i>Workshop 3: Demonstrating understanding and developing argument (n=17)</i>			
I know what my tutors are looking for when they judge whether I understand the issues I am writing about.	100%	—	—
I understand that argument in an essay involves examining the pros and cons of an issue rather than providing just one side.	94%	6%	—
I understand that building arguments in psychology depends on supporting claims with evidence which can be accepted or criticized.	94%	6%	—
I have a clear idea of what strategies I can use to help build an argument in my essay.	88%	12%	—
I have a clear idea of how I can demonstrate understanding of theories and concepts in my essays.	76.5%	23.5%	—
<i>Workshop 4: Evaluation and using evidence (n=14)</i>			
I understand what is considered appropriate and inappropriate evidence in my subject.	93%	7%	—
I feel confident that I can cite and reference material correctly.	71%	21%	7%
I know how to evaluate the quality of a book.	50%	50%	—
I know how to evaluate the quality of a journal.	29%	64%	7%
I know how to evaluate the quality of an internet source.	43%	57%	—
I know how to evaluate the quality of the information in a book.	50%	50%	—
I know how to evaluate the quality of the information in a journal.	43%	50%	7%
I know how to evaluate the quality of the information in an internet source.	29%	64%	7%
I know how to detect bias in written sources.	50%	43%	7%

The evaluation questionnaires completed at Liverpool Hope after each workshop asked students about the specific learning objectives for each workshop, and Table 9.2 shows the results for Workshops 2, 3 and 4, which focused on specific criteria. The most positive student response was for Workshop 3, on demonstrating understanding and developing argument.

Helping students write better essays

Table 9.3 shows the proportions of students who responded in the end-of-programme evaluation that they agreed or strongly agreed with statements about how the workshops helped them with essay writing. Responses from the third-year (London Metropolitan) students were notably less positive than those from the first-year students at Aston and Liverpool Hope. This probably reflects less confidence among first years about what university writing requires.

Responses to several of the questionnaire items that Liverpool Hope students were asked after each of the workshops (Table 9.2) also provided insights into students' perceptions of whether and in what way the workshops helped them to write better essays. Comparisons between items with very high (90–100 per cent) and those with lower levels of positive endorsement reveal that students felt the workshops helped them to know what is involved in good essay writing, but were less sure about how to produce that writing. For example, after Workshop 2, all the students believed they understood the importance of an introduction and conclusion in an essay, but substantially fewer were confident about how to structure an essay, what strategies they could use to stay focused on the title, and using an essay plan. Similarly, after Workshop 4, nearly all students felt they understood what was considered appropriate and inappropriate evidence in their subject, but far fewer believed they knew how to evaluate the quality of that evidence. Those findings suggest there is a need for practical writing sessions with tutor feedback, allowing students to gain experience of writing to assessment criteria without being summatively assessed.

Table 9.3 Proportions of students who agreed/strongly agreed with statements about essay writing in the end-of-programme evaluation questionnaire

The workshops . . .	London Metropolitan (n=50)	Aston (n=11)	Liverpool Hope (n=11)
Will help me write better essays	55%	82%	100%
Will help me achieve a better grade in future essays	45%	82%	100%
Will help me make better use of feedback from tutors	36%	60%	100%
Helped me feel more confident about writing	N/A	55%	100%

Helping students learn psychology

Table 9.4 shows student responses to the items in the end-of-programme questionnaire that specifically addressed the issue of engaging with the discipline of psychology. The figures indicate that the first-year students (at Aston and Liverpool Hope) found the workshops more valuable than did the third-year students (at London Metropolitan). This is perhaps surprising considering that it was at London Metropolitan that the workshops were embedded within a module but may reflect more negative perceptions of 'study skills' sessions among third-year students.

To explore that issue in more detail, students' qualitative responses to the open-format question 'What was good about the workshops?' were content analysed and assigned to one of three categories: 'deep-related', 'strategic-related' and 'unclassified'. Responses categorised as 'deep-related' included those referring to understanding the subject and the benefits of engaging with different points of view. An example of this type of comment was: 'Gave insight to psychology and aspects of psychology.' The 'strategic-related' category focused on the essay-writing task itself, without reference to broader issues of learning and understanding in the discipline. An example of this type of comment was: 'The essay planning was explained pretty clearly.' The third category of 'unclassified' included any comments that were vague or were not attributable to either of the other categories. An example was: 'I learned so much.' Comments falling into the third category were not included in the final analysis, which showed that 43 per cent of London Metropolitan students' and 44 per cent of Aston students' comments were 'deep-related', compared with 57 per cent and 56 per cent, respectively, classified as 'strategic-related'. The slightly higher numbers in the latter category are disappointing; however, it is nevertheless encouraging that nearly half of the (analysed) comments to an open-ended question about the benefits of the workshops seemed to reflect a perception that they encouraged a deep approach to learning.

At London Metropolitan it was possible to examine workshop participation in relation to performance in the module examination. There was a significant positive correlation between the number of workshops attended and examination grade ($r = .25, p < .01$), so that students who attended more workshops obtained significantly higher grades (see Figure 9.1). Multiple regression analyses showed that attendance affected achievement, rather than vice versa. That is, attendance

Table 9.4 Proportions of students who agreed/strongly agreed with statements about subject learning in the end-of-programme evaluation questionnaire

The workshops . . .	London Metropolitan (n=50)	Aston (n=11)	Liverpool Hope (n=11)
Helped me understand my subject	48%	64%	73%
Helped me study more effectively	30%	70%	64%

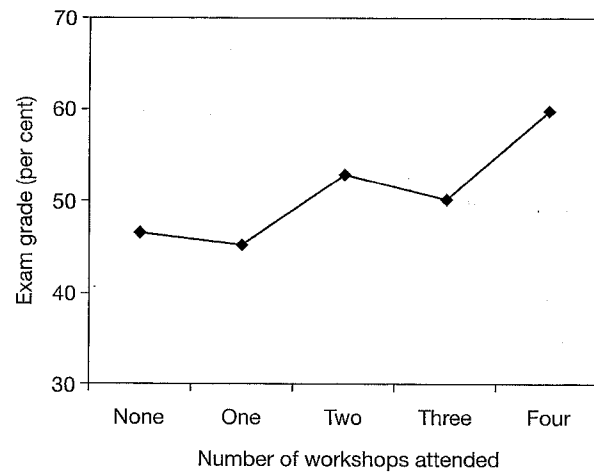


Figure 9.1. Mean module examination grades for students attending different numbers of workshops at London Metropolitan

predicted examination grades, but examination grades did not predict attendance, which means that the correlation between attendance and achievement was not simply the result of more able students attending more workshops (Lusher, 2004).

What we have learned: the obstacles

Attendance

Workshop attendance was poor at each institution, and especially at Liverpool Hope and Aston, where the workshops were an optional programme outside timetabled teaching. At Liverpool Hope, 33 students (10 per cent of the total cohort of first-year psychology students) attended at least one workshop, and at Aston the figure was 35 (16 per cent of the total cohort of first-year psychology students). At London Metropolitan, where the workshops were timetabled as part of a module, 80 per cent of the 111 students enrolled in the module attended at least one workshop, but only 19 per cent attended all four. The low participation rate affected the impact of the workshops on students who did attend, whose comments included: 'Poor attendance, therefore little chance for discussion'; 'Few numbers meant that when I did turn up, I was the only one and was given the worksheets, then sent away.'

The 'remedial' perception

Poor attendance and commitment is a common problem for workshops associated with study skills, especially when the workshops are optional. One reason may be that there is a perception among students that such programmes are remedial. As

one third-year London Metropolitan student said: 'If you need extra help, they are useful.' One of the London Metropolitan tutors commented: 'A subgroup of students was really enthused and found content relating to essay-writing skills extremely useful. Some others felt such study groups would have been more helpful in the first year.'

These reactions were not confined to third-year students and their tutors. Some of the Aston students felt the workshops were not pitched at the right level: 'A lot of the stuff was quite simplified. I already knew it'; 'Sometimes it took a lot of time to get through something relatively simple.'

One of the Aston tutors thought that the workshops appealed more to those who were anxious or unprepared for studying psychology:

For the core few that attended regularly they were overall very pleased with the workshops as these were students who were very concerned or anxious with taking degree-level psychology and how to go about writing in psychology. Typically these students had either taken a few years out, or had never done A-level or year 0 psychology.

It should be noted, however, that not all students fitted that tutor's view. One Aston student, who had done A-Level psychology, commented: 'If we hadn't had study skills at the beginning, it would have been like walking through treacle. It has been, a bit, anyway, but there's been some things to help.'

Nevertheless, the attendance figures as well as several comments from students and tutors do indicate that the 'remedial' perception is generally widespread and appears to be an unfortunate consequence of provision that is not explicitly and primarily concerned with subject learning. Many students did not see the sessions as a worthwhile investment of their time, including this Aston student: 'I haven't gone because it's on a Monday for an hour and it takes me an hour to get here and an hour to get back. There's nothing else on so it's just not worth it.'

Variability between workshop tutors

Another important issue to emerge from our analysis of the evaluation questionnaire and focus group data was that the approaches to the workshops taken by the tutors at both Aston and London Metropolitan varied considerably. The following comments were made in a focus group with the Aston students: 'The person who was doing them didn't seem to know what they were talking about, they were just too simple'; 'I was really lucky, mine was great.' This awareness of variability among tutors and a feeling that one has to rely on being 'lucky' in order to receive useful instruction was also a prominent feature of student comments at London Metropolitan.

This problem did not emerge at Liverpool Hope, probably because one individual, who was a full-time lecturer in psychology, was the tutor for all five workshops. At London Metropolitan and Aston, by contrast, the workshops were delivered by trained postgraduates. Delivery by a single tutor seems to have

provided a level of consistency that was unattainable with teams of tutors, and the fact that the tutor was a full-time lecturer may also have lent additional credibility to the workshops.

Conclusions and recommendations

We had hoped the workshop programme would deliver some of the benefits of engaging students with assessment criteria while enhancing their learning of the discipline. Positive indicators were that first-year students appreciated the workshops and felt that they:

- helped them understand the assessment criteria;
- helped them understand their discipline;
- helped them study more effectively;
- helped them understand better what their tutors are looking for in essays.

And among third-year students, attendance at the workshops was associated with:

- higher grades in the module in which the workshops were embedded.

Based on the main obstacles we encountered, we recommend that workshops:

- be as deeply embedded in subject teaching as possible, in order both to promote links with disciplinary knowledge and raise expectations about attendance;
- be run by a small number of tutors who can establish a consistent approach based on a shared understanding of the purpose of the workshops.

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