HELPING STUDENTS APPRECIATE WHAT'S EXPECTED OF THEM IN ASSESSMENT: DEVELOPING STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT LITERACY

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WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Students, especially those from diverse cultural backgrounds, often find the first assignment on a course really challenging, particularly if they are 'first in family' to go to university and may therefore have a limited understanding of what is likely to be expected of them. It therefore pays dividends if staff put resources and energy into helping students get to know the rules of the game. Students may be able to successfully manage the unfamiliarity of new learning contexts and classroom environments that are very different to what they have experienced before. However, they can't avoid the need to be successful in assessment if they are to progress. It's part of our job therefore to help students overcome any uneasiness, and the best way to do this is to demystify the process and give them stress-free opportunities to practice the competencies they eventually need to demonstrate to meet the learning outcomes

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

We need students rapidly to develop 'assessment literacy' (HEA, 2012) that is a good understanding of the terminology, protocols and processes associated with higher education assessment so as to be successful and confident learners. Yorke (1999) encourages us to believe that the first six weeks of the first semester of the first year are crucial in setting the right climate for students to succeed, and we certainly know that uncertain students regularly consider dropping out at the very first assessment point in the programme. There are also strong indications that assessment is a key contributory factor to student anxiety while at university (Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2011), so it's important to smooth the path as much as possible.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

1. DEVELOP STUDENTS' ASSESSMENT LITERACY BY FAMILIARISING THEM WITH THE JARGON:
get students talking about terms like 'criteria', 'weighting', 'agency' and so on, possibly by getting them to play a game designed to clarify such terminology, such as Anglia Ruskin University's (2017) **Egg Game** or Brown's (n.d.) **The Biscuit Game**[1]. It's also helpful to clarify what pass marks are and what they represent (a benchmark to be achieved or exceeded, rather than a score of right or wrong answers), particularly for students from a nation where these might be very different. At second-level, students may be used to getting marks in the 90s. The equivalent mark for "excellence" in higher education might be the mid-70s. So even though they mean the same thing, students used to getting marks in the 90s might view a mark mid-70s as a disheartening and disastrously poor achievement.

2. MAKE IT REALLY CLEAR FROM THE OUTSET WHAT STUDENTS HAVE TO DO TO SUCCEED:
this is especially important early on in university life but remains crucial as students progress. This does not mean 'spoon-feeding': rather we should be providing a level playing field for students so that those who have not been prepared by prior study for the specialist kinds of assignment they will encounter in HE (including, for example, formal essays, lab reports, studio critiques in Art and Design, reflective commentaries, business plans and so on) are not disadvantaged compared to peers.

3. USE FORMATIVE FEEDBACK IN THE EARLY STAGES TO ESTABLISH THE STANDARD OF WORK REQUIRED
This can take the form of tutor comments on plans or extracts, or collective discussions in class, but the key function of formative assessment is to inform students what is right on target and what is in need of improvement and to transform students' behaviour and outputs by guiding them towards enhanced achievement (for further information see TACIT Guide 3 – Giving formative feedback prior to submitting summative tasks).

4. EXPLAIN NEW TYPES OF SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT TASKS BEFORE USE:
no new formats should be introduced without advance briefing, rehearsal and formative feedback. For example, if students are to produce posters for assessment, it can be really helpful to provide them with examples of work by previous students and in an open discussion forum (live or virtual) engage students in a dialogue around what makes a particular example particularly good. It can also be invaluable to provide exemplars showing what good work looks like (for further information see TACIT Guide 9 – Using exemplars to enhance learning and support achievement).

[1] The Biscuit Game task instructions are reproduced as an ENhance Activity on a separate card.

5. PROVIDE LOTS OF DIALOGUE OPPORTUNITIES, SO ANXIETIES CAN BE DISPELLED AROUND ASSESSMENT

For nervous students, the crux of the problem can be not knowing how well they are doing and lacking confidence to ask questions in class or in person. Accordingly, offering discussion boards for FAQ on the virtual learning environment (VLE) or using segments of face-to-face time in which structured small-group or whole-group discussions allow students to raise issues without losing face can have high impact.

6. HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP A SOUND APPRECIATION OF STANDARDS, CRITERIA AND THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK

by supporting learners to express these in their own words and practice applying them to illustrative samples of work. Developing students' ability to work with assessment-related information, guidelines and feedback in their context helps them to produce work of a predictable standard and enables them to use assessment tasks to monitor and develop their learning.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Sometimes students are very good at faking or assuming a mantle of confidence, but particularly in the early stages, these shouldn't always be taken at face value. Working hard to foster self-efficacy and resilience on assessment tasks within the whole group, rather than offering remedial support only to those who present problems can improve achievement and also build cohort cohesion.

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