Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0252

G6 | Denbigh 1
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Reconceptualising Assessment and Feedback to Promote Student Wellbeing

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract:

We present results from a three-year qualitative enquiry, exploring changing student emotions and learning behaviours linked to a student-teacher dialogic assessment approach implemented in a second year undergraduate course at a large teaching-oriented British university. The approach uncovered the inherently emotional experience for students of receiving assessment commentary. Through dialogic feed-forward meetings, negative emotions such as apprehension and anxiety were transformed into positive emotions such as enthusiasm and pleasure. The relational interactions and collaborative reflections in the meeting also had longer-term effects on student self-regulatory and self-efficacious behaviours, relating not only to the specific assessment task but beyond to other second year assignments and into their third year of study. By creating a safe and nurturing learning environment, positive beliefs were built and/or strengthened, empowering students to develop resilient academic behaviours, boosting learning outcomes, and maximising the potential for sustainable learning and academic success. We conclude with implications for practice.

Paper:

Introduction

The number of students in UK higher education disclosing a mental health condition has tripled since 2007/08 (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015). Academic pressure is cited as the primary cause of stress and this is often felt most keenly with respect to assessment (Barnett, 2007). One way to enhance student wellbeing in higher education is to work more closely with the emotional realm of learning. Beyond the cognitive domain, in which students process information and construct meaning (Bloom et al., 1956), the affective domain engages students' with their feelings in response to a learning task (Krathwohl et al., 1964). The affective domain influences an individual's perception of an activity and therefore their approach to any learning experience. As such, emotions are fundamental to learning and intrinsically linked to student wellbeing (Felten et al., 2006). In this paper, we conceive wellbeing as an umbrella term that emanates from the achievement of a number of personal attitudes and

behaviours. We view positive emotions, and self-regulative and self-efficacious behaviours, as leading to academic resilience, in turn promoting wellbeing.

We present results from a three-year qualitative enquiry, exploring changing student emotions and learning behaviours linked to an assessment intervention implemented in a second year undergraduate course at a British university. We assess whether consciously encountering emotion within assessment can move students from negative feelings towards positive emotions, attitudes and learning behaviours, and we conclude with implications for practice.

Methods

We adopted a dialogic assessment approach offering preparatory guidance, in-task guidance and task-specific feed-forward (Hill and West, 2019). Students choose an essay to research from a selection. They write a considered draft, which is discussed in an individual face-to-face meeting with the teacher. For summative assessment, students write a self-reflection of their essay progress and self-assess their essay draft (25% course mark). A week later, students submit their revised essays (75% course mark).

We implemented a two-phased qualitative approach to data collection, following ethical review. In phase one, we undertook individual semi-structured interviews across two student cohorts on completion of the course (academic years 2015-2017) (n=44). The transcribed interviews were analysed thematically through an interpretivist lens (Braun and Clarke, 2013). We adopted a grounded approach, searching for commonly occurring themes inductively across transcripts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). In phase two, we undertook semi-structured group interviews with students at the end of their third year (academic years 2016-2018) to elucidate their self-avowed final year assessment behaviours, and skills of self-efficacy and self-regulation.

Results

We uncovered the inherently emotional experience for students of receiving 'feedback'. The face-to-face meetings were emotionally charged as students received their draft grade and feedback, and then strived to adjust their actions and self-concept. As such, the meetings purposefully acknowledged the students' emotions and deliberately brought them into discussion.

There was clear evolution in emotions over the feed-forward process. Students initially felt nervous and apprehensive to receive commentary on their drafts. Some talked about feeling scared due to fear of criticism/failure and there were expressions of disappointment, annoyance and even shame:

'It's quite disheartening when you're like I tried so hard on this and there is still so much more I can do'

As their encounter with feed-forward progressed, students reported more positive emotions of enjoyment, satisfaction and motivation as they recognised the utility of teacher commentary in guiding them to improve their work:

'The bit in between my draft and writing the final piece was the best bit because I knew what I was doing

and I enjoyed that process of making it better'

Recognising students' emotional vulnerability, the meetings were designed to interweave constructive academic commentary with discussion about what the students might do post-meeting to attend to the comments and how this might make them feel and act differently as a learner. The disheartened student, for example, continued by saying:

'It does make you work harder at the end of the day, because you know what to improve and how'

The meetings increased student confidence and motivation to act upon the feed-forward as they prepared their final submissions because they had a clearer idea of task expectations. Students commented on having a 'sense of direction' and an opportunity to improve their work:

'You get that progress and can discuss how you can change it as opposed to just this is wrong'

Consciously encountering and talking through emotions offered a personalised and inclusive learning experience:

'Getting personalised feedback is really useful … I definitely felt like you cared about what I was getting'

Students reported that they altered their behaviour post-meeting, both within-task and with respect to post-assignment self-regulation. They self-avowed to increased self-efficacy, believing more strongly in their capabilities to accomplish assignments in future:

'I definitely feel more confident … being able to prepare, structure and write in the future. I will be able to self-critique and identify weak areas now'

Themes emerging from the third year interviews were carrying forward a better understanding of the assessment process, producing a good draft to reflect upon, and soliciting relevant feedback via selective questioning.

Conclusions

Through a dialogic feed-forward assessment approach negative emotions for some students were transformed into positive emotions. The relational interactions in the meeting also had longer-term effects on student self-regulatory and self-efficacious behaviours, relating not only to the specific assessment task but beyond to other second and third year assignments. We argue that teachers and students must be willing to work within borderland spaces of learning (Hill et al., 2016), to become comfortable with uncertainty and challenge, potentially changing their ideas and behaviours, and becoming more responsible and resilient in their learning (Figure 1) (Hill et al., 2019).

Figure 1. The potential effect of dialogic feed-forward assessment in enhancing student wellbeing.

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In calling for openly attending to emotions in learning we are not advocating for teachers to become counsellors. Rather, we encourage opening up to the potential that working with the affective domain can offer to enhance wellbeing. We recognise that this may not be easy for academics as they may legitimately fear addressing student emotions. As such, we offer practical advice to support staff in relating to students in ways that are hospitable, and to sustainably apply assessment-for-learning across different levels of study.

References

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