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Engaging and Empowering Students Through Inter- and Intra-Module Continuity

Rebecca Lees[1], Barry Avery[1], Daniel Russell[1]

[1]Kingston University , Kingston-upon-Thames, United Kingdom

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Abstract: This study reflects on an integrative assessment approach designed to achieve inter- and intra-module continuity to improve student engagement and empowerment, and ultimately performance. It builds upon a previous study that utilised a shared context for one assessment element on an informatics module delivered to marketing students, and extends this to provide a constant point of marketing focus to explore quantitative theories and information management principles within an informatics module.

Guided by Bigg's theory of Constructive Alignment, this approach provided both inter-module continuity, utilising a common language and context to enable students to make bi-directional links between the modules, along with intra-module continuity within the informatics module by using the same assessment context across the statistical and information management content areas. The resulting strategy demonstrated improvements in both performance, evaluation and satisfaction metrics, particularly those related to assessment and learning.

Paper: Introduction

This work reflects on an assessment approach that aims to achieve continuity of context on a first year informatics module delivered to marketing students with the aim of engaging and empowering students. It builds upon a previous study that focused on just one shared assessment element to deliver a fully integrated assessment strategy using shared context and student led assessment to achieve these goals.

The module introduces students to a range of analytical techniques, along with coding data for website production and designing and using databases in order to handle marketing data and understand the online world of digital marketing. Typically, quantitative subject content is decontextualized so it can be learned and tested independently, and then applied to the relevant

context elsewhere (Biggs, 2012). However, for applied programmes such as marketing, in our experience this abstraction can lead to a disconnect between the learner and what is learned, and poor engagement and performance often results from this lower perceived relevance. Our approach therefore prioritises this relevance so students become invested in, and take ownership of, their learning activities, thus becoming empowered.

Guided by Biggs' stance that learning is about conceptual change (Biggs, 2012), this new integrated approach utilises an overarching marketing context providing sustained relevance of how statistical methods can be used within the marketing field, rather than as an add-on. This context was 'borrowed' from a New Product Development (NPD) concept the students develop in their Marketing module and was used to flavour the informatics assessments rather than utilising cross-over teaching and shared materials, and being reliant on other modules' timeframes and syllabus decisions. The informatics module therefore achieved the benefit of common context whilst still retaining its independence, and therefore avoided the structural and experiential issues that typically hinder cross-module cooperation which makes integrated assessment a rarity in HE (Price et al., 2014).

Our approach

To develop this integrated strategy, we adopted a Constructive Alignment approach (Biggs, 1996) utilising continuity of context and continuous assessment that developed incrementally throughout the module. This approach provided inter-module continuity whereby students were able to develop the bi-directional links in their learning through this shared context and language. It also offered intra-module continuity within the quantitative module by using the same assessment context across the discrete statistical and information management content areas, supporting the creation of a "web of consistency" (Biggs, 2012:64) designed to keep students on task and engaged in the learning activities.

Whilst the marketing module assessed the new product development concept for idea novelty and creativity, this module assessed the process and justification of that concept. Students chose their own sector within which to develop their idea that was consistent across both modules. For the quantitative analysis assessment, the students then researched the available secondary data and applied relevant statistical methods to determine if there was a need for their product idea, with their justification culminating in an infographic. For the information management elements of the module, students designed a database that could hold customer or product details for their NPD idea, and designed a small website to promote their product, which acted as the vehicle to demonstrate their coding ability.

Several studies have suggested that an integrated approach helps students make these connections across their modules (Gorra, Lazarevski and Campbell, 2007), lending authenticity and meaning (Hartley and Whitefield, 2011) and encouraging deeper learning and thus improved student

engagement (Gorra, Lazarevski and Campbell, 2007; Smith, 2012). We were conscious that as an applied subject area marketing data could be interpreted differently depending on the context, and our aim was to afford students the freedom to make their own judgments and rationale about how they interpreted this data. As well as choosing the sector to develop their product within, students also decided themselves on what data to analyse for the in-class assessments, therefore taking ownership of their own learning, making their own decisions. By becoming invested in the decisions they make about their own work, students move to become empowered learners (Leach, Neutze and Zepke, 2001).

Outcomes

Overall, the integrated strategy was well received by the students. As well as seeing improved performance in 2018-9 with the highest progression rate seen in over a decade, the module also scored highly on its module metrics and achieved the highest module evaluation completion rate across the university. Students appreciated the opportunities to engage in the assessments and were able to see the connections between their quantitative and marketing modules. Student commentary included:

"engaging topics, relevant to marketing"

"It felt like less of a workload and I noticed more students were motivated to actually do the work as the two were closely linked and facilitated the flow of ideas between modules"

Module metrics relating to how the assessment supported student learning ranked the informatics class in the top 5% within its discipline, and had higher than average scores compared to the department, faculty and the university overall for all other evaluation measures.

From our experience, using both continuous and continuity of assessment had a synergistic effect on the formative benefit of our assessment strategy. Underpinned by and utilising Bigg's theory of Constructive Alignment, we found the new integrative strategy caught the students' interest in a consistent web of context, thus "optimising the likelihood that they will engage the appropriate learning activities" (Biggs, 2012:p64), with benefits for engagement and empowerment, and subsequently student outcomes.

References

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