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Enhancing student learning through the assessment
of outcomes: developing and demonstrating essay
writing skills.

Maggie Coats

Dr Maggie Coats
Centre for Outcomes-Based Education
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA UK
e.mail: m.a.m.coats@open.ac.uk

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Enhancing student learning through the assessment of outcomes:
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Maggie Coats

The Open University, UK

Abstract

This paper documents current developments in the UK Open University (UK/OU) with reference to the requirement in the UK that all Higher Education institutions now have to describe their programmes in terms of learning outcomes. In response to

this, the UK/OU set up a three-year Learning Outcomes and Their Assessment (LOTA) Project to explore and implement an outcomes-based approach to curriculum

design and delivery throughout the university. The intended learning outcomes for all

courses and all programmes of study have now been documented in course and programme specifications. Currently the challenge is to ensure that assessment strategies and assessment methods support the development of the stated outcomes

and enable them to be appropriately assessed.

The LOTA Project has always seen assessment as part of the learning process through both formative and summative assignments. In many OU courses academic

essays are used to assess students work, both throughout a course and in the final

examination. The paper goes on to describe an action research project that set out to

examine the extent to which assessment through essays encouraged students to both develop and demonstrate the outcomes claimed by each course. The aim of the project was to explore the process of essay writing and essay marking. It involved pairs of tutors who exchanged and double-marked the essays of two of their students throughout the course and met at the end of the year to compare their experiences. The assessment materials provided by the course team were examined and the progress of the students analysed through their essays. The evidence suggests that essay writing can be used to assess learning outcomes but that present practice shows these are not explicit and that many students fail to demonstrate them. With clearer guidance to tutors and to students, both cognitive and communication skills could be developed more effectively and assessed more rigorously. The findings contribute to on-going work to find better ways of enhancing students' learning through the articulation and assessment of outcomes. The paper concludes that moving towards an outcomes-based curriculum, with appropriate assessment strategies, can enhance student learning but the process needs to be more transparent and to explicitly encourage a meta-cognitive approach.

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Introduction

Undoubtedly the most significant event for Higher Education (HE) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was the publication of the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education – the Dearing Report (1997). An equivalent report, the Garrick report (1997), was produced by a similar committee in Scotland. In the rest of this paper I will refer mainly to the consequences of the Dearing Report; there have been parallel, though not identical, developments in Scotland. The remit of the committee chaired by Dearing and the subsequent report covered all aspects of HE; here I concentrate only on the sections, and subsequent actions, that refer to learning outcomes. In Recommendation 21 the report states: We recommend that institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop,

for each programme they offer, a 'programme specification' which identifies potential stopping-off points and gives the intended outcomes of the programme in

terms of:

☹ the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon

completion;

☹ key skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn;

☹ cognitive skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical

analysis;

☹ subject specific skills, such as laboratory skills. (Dearing 1997)

This was a significant statement for three reasons

i) It was from a committee that was set up to make recommendations but this clause said 'begin immediately'. The action that followed was 'immediate'.

ii) The requirement for a 'programme specification' for every award was new. Institutions had described their programmes and awards – their courses and degrees – in many ways and for various audiences but never in a format that was compulsory.

iii) Most significant – and controversial – was the expectation that not only should these 'programme specifications' clearly state the learning outcomes for each award but that four categories of outcome were prescribed.

The 'immediate' action included the setting up that year of a new agency – or rather a

merging of other agencies with a new remit – known as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) responsible only for the HE sector. It is the initiatives that have been

instigated by this agency and the responses to these by the sector that have a direct

bearing on HE as a whole and therefore on the work we are doing in the UK/OU.

(For details of the work of the UK QAA see their website www.qaa.ac.uk).

The Learning Outcomes and Their Assessment (LOTA) Project

All HE institutions are now required to produce specifications for every 'programme'

of study that leads to an HE award (certificate, diploma, undergraduate or postgraduate degree). The QAA has developed a series of suggested formats for such

specifications and there are examples on their website. Although the QAA have denied that specific categories of learning outcomes are being imposed, the four

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categories in the Dearing Report are used in most examples, although the actual terminology has changed. Ultimately all programme specifications will be made public, with versions required for students and for employers.

These national developments in HE form the background to the work of the LOTA

project in the UK/OU and have transformed the brief of the LOTA Project from one of exploration to one of implementation. The project brief was to work directly with academic staff in all Faculties and Schools to transform curriculum design and delivery throughout the university into an outcomes-based approach – a massive academic task in an institution that offers almost 200 undergraduate courses to over 125,000 students, plus a full range of Masters courses and two taught Doctorates.

(Post-graduate awards by research are, at the moment, not affected by the QAA initiatives.)

The students of the OU are all adults, studying part-time through distance learning, supported by local tutors known as Associate Lecturers (ALs) who are all part of a

regional network staffed by academics and administrators. The programmes of study

towards awards (certificates, diplomas and degrees) are compiled from the accumulation of credit through studying different courses. Course teams of academics

based mainly at the central campus in Milton Keynes plan and produce the courses

which are delivered directly to students but their learning is mediated and supported

by their tutors through tutorials, individual contact and, most importantly, through the

marking and feedback on assignments. Any curriculum change that involves the specification and the assessment of learning outcomes is going to affect those involved in the design, as well as those responsible for the delivery, of the curriculum.

Three characteristics of the OU, however, make us different to any other HE institution in the UK:

i) There are no entrance requirements whatsoever – the OU is ‘open’ to any adult who wishes to study any OU course and go on to gain any recognised award, providing they are able to afford the fees or qualify for financial assistance.

ii) Students may start their study with the OU by taking any course at any level in the undergraduate programme (there are some restrictions on entry to postgraduate

courses). Some take one or two courses for interest or professional development; many continue to complete a degree.

iii) Related to (ii) above – students may combine courses in any order to make up the requirements for their degree. General and honours degrees can draw on courses from any discipline; named degrees have to fulfill the requirements for certain core and option courses but these may be accumulated in any order.

These three characteristics of OU study present major difficulties when we seek to describe our awards in terms of learning outcomes. We can describe in detail the learning outcomes for any individual course but we cannot predict in any detail exactly what the learning outcomes will be for any specific programme of study except for those students who take one of our few single honours degrees where course choice is more restricted.

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Four categories of learning outcomes

Moving from a system where the curriculum is described in terms of individual courses to a specification of what is achieved in a programme of study has meant that we had to agree terminology for describing the learning outcomes of our courses. We made the decision to work within the four categories as described by the QAA using the terms that have now become most widely accepted, although there are still some variations in their documents. The terms we use for the four categories of outcomes are:

- i. Knowledge and understanding
- ii. Key skills
- iii. Cognitive skills
- iv. Practical and professional skills.

Knowledge and understanding: This refers to the main content of the course as determined by the course team and agreed by the OU Board of Studies responsible for the award.

Key skills: The university has decided to use the current national (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) framework for key skills. This consists of six skills defined at five levels – communication, application of number, information technology, working with others, problem solving, improving own learning and performance – to which the UK/OU has added information literacy.

Cognitive skills: These are defined by each course team within a discipline area then collectively agreed by the named degree or other award board and include contextualised subject outcomes such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation etc.

Practical and professional skills: This category refers either to practical skills that are specific to the subject (eg laboratory skills in chemistry; field work skills in earth sciences) or to professionally related skills in courses and awards that make reference

to work-based practice (eg in teacher training or social work), where external requirements may need to be addressed.

There is however, one further learning outcome that we consider to be important for

every student to develop even though we may not assess it explicitly, and that is the

ability to demonstrate the meta-cognitive process of 'learning how to learn'. This was

the focus of my paper at the 1998 ASEESA conference (Coats 1998), written when

we were just starting our work on learning outcomes and this still informs our approach. I would argue that describing both our courses and our programmes of study in term of learning outcomes, and devising appropriate assessment of those

outcomes, can and will enhance student learning by making more explicit the process

of learning and giving the student more responsibility for both what they learn and

how they learn.

The major problem for the academic staff in individual course teams is not necessarily

the identification and description of the relevant learning outcomes for their course

but the collaborative agreement and terminology they use to describe the outcomes of

any awards to which their course contributes. A more difficult task is to revise or devise appropriate assessment methodology to demonstrate the development and

attainment of those outcomes. The main role of the LOTA Project is to assist course

teams and award boards in this process.

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The assessment of learning outcomes

All programmes of study offered to students have to identify and articulate the learning outcomes of those programmes and describe explicitly the ways in which the

outcomes will be demonstrated and assessed. Course publicity and materials have to

make clear to students what those outcomes are and how they will be able to demonstrate that they have achieved them – or how they are moving towards the achievement of them. This means that the assessment strategies and methods used in

any course or programme have to be designed with the outcomes in mind. This does

not mean that the strategies and methods have to radically change but it does mean

that the process has to be more explicit.

Moving towards an outcomes-based curriculum may be a controversial development

but there are ways in which such a development can enhance learning. It helps students to know what to expect both in their course and in the assessment of it. Focusing attention on what the student knows, understands and is able to do puts the

emphasis on the skills, abilities and processes that enable a student to handle that

knowledge. It places responsibility on the student to demonstrate these through assessment but equally it requires course teams and programme boards to provide the

opportunities for the stated outcomes to be demonstrated.

In addition to re-examining the assessment strategy of each course and programme to

ensure that all the appropriate outcomes are covered it is also essential to re-examine

the assessment methods that are used, to check that they provide the students with the

opportunity to demonstrate those outcomes. If traditional approaches to assessment

are retained – for example, essay assignments and timed essays in examinations –

there needs to be a clear rationale for this that links each essay question explicitly to

the relevant outcomes.

Assessment that is formative (as well as summative) should enable a student to learn

from that assessment experience, but this means they will expect the feedback they

receive to relate to the skills they are meant to be developing, as well as the knowledge content of their course. They will want to have feedback on how well they

have done as well as how much they know.

Specifying learning outcomes and how they are assessed can enhance the process of

learning through assessment – indeed it enables assessment to be seen as part of

learning. By giving students clearer information about the skills that are needed in an

assignment, it encourages students to develop those skills. Where feedback on assessment also focuses on skill development, a student's performance may be enhanced.

All assessment directs and drives learning especially within the UK/OU system of continuous assessment. The main focus of students' study of a section of the course

will be driven by the related assignment. Each assignment receives specific, personalised feedback from the tutor to the student thus re-emphasising the importance of assessment on learning.

This means that assignments have a key role to play in students learning. If the task

and the associated student notes focus only on the knowledge and understanding

required for that assignment, students will have no clear guidance about what skills

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they should demonstrate. If however the student notes and tutor notes signify that

certain skills and processes are important then students are more likely to demonstrate

these in their answer and tutors are more likely to give constructive feedback on those

skills and processes. For example, in essay writing, the processing of knowledge requires the student to demonstrate their understanding through the use of a range of

cognitive skills or processes – such as application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

In addition students are expected to present their essay in a conventionally structured

way and in an appropriate style. What often happens is that the full range of learning

outcomes that could be demonstrated by assessment through an essay are only achieved by those who gain the higher marks; in many cases most students include the

relevant knowledge and may demonstrate some understanding but other potential

outcomes will not be met.

Currently the LOTA project is exploring the extent to which students are aware of and

can interpret the requirements of the task before they start work on the essay – in other words to what extent they know what cognitive skills are needed, what those

skills mean and how they can be applied . While it can be argued that the ability to

analyse the question is in itself an important skill – and at higher levels of study this

might be justified – there is evidence to suggest that it is assumed that students can do

this. While there are some excellent ‘study skills’ books available to students, many

of these cognitive processing skills only develop through practice in real assignments

and individualised feedback from the tutor. Making the task more explicit by indicating what learning outcomes are being assessed in any specific assignment

– especially what cognitive or key skills are involved – might help students to develop those skills. Making such information explicit in the tutor notes would indicate that tutors should reward and provide feedback to their students on such skills as well as the subject knowledge.

‘Learning how to learn’ through assessment

Within the UK/OU the processing of assignments by a tutor is referred to as ‘correspondence tuition’ because through feedback on each assignment continuous assessment, tutors create a ‘learning dialogue’ with their students. Their efforts can assist learning only if the student engages with that feedback. Various studies within the university have been looking at the nature of feedback and the ways in which students use it.

More important, however, is to encourage an approach that places much more emphasis on the need for the student to take responsibility for their own learning – to be aware of how they learn and to be pro-active in seeking the help they need. Learning outcomes and their assessment can encourage and facilitate this approach to independent learning.

In many lists of learning outcomes, ‘learning how to learn’ or some variant of it is listed as a ‘key skill’ that should be encouraged and developed in all students and in all graduates. Indeed, this is much more than a skill – it relates to and engages with the process of meta-cognition. Encouraging students to become aware of how they learn enables them to make changes in their learning styles and strategies; to look for more effective ways of learning. It encourages them to analyse their learning tasks and to check where they may need more practice or development.

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The explicit assessment of learning outcomes can contribute to this process by making clear the knowledge, understanding and skills that a student should develop throughout a course, or indeed a programme, and how and where these are taught, practised, developed and assessed. Learning outcomes and their assessment can guide

progression through a course and through a programme, helping students to self-assess

as well as be assessed. Learning to self-assess performance is not easy and needs to be taught; some students may find it impossible. But it is the key to monitoring and improving performance – to 'learning how to learn'.

Assessing outcomes through the writing of essays

The academic essay has been, and still is, a major assessment tool throughout HE,

across many disciplines and levels. It is argued that higher level cognitive processes

like analysis, synthesis and critical thinking can best be demonstrated through the

writing of essays – both as part of continuous assessment and, under timed conditions,

as questions in an examination. This section of the paper describes a research project

that explored how students might be encouraged to develop their essay writing skills

through assignments that make explicit those skills in the actual question, in any additional information given to students and in the way in which the marking and grading of essays, with feedback from tutors, endorses and extends the development

of those skills.

Traditionally an essay has involved students responding to a question that is usually

formulated in a specific way, requiring a particular approach and assuming a number

of essay related 'skills' will be needed, as well as a firm understanding of the appropriate knowledge component. There are a well-used range of 'process' words or

terms that are used in framing a question.

However the assessment of learning outcomes through essay writing requires that the

actual outcomes assessed by a specific essay are identified: the knowledge and understanding, key skills (including communication), cognitive skills (the higher level

critical processes appropriate to the subject, such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation

etc) and any practical or professional skills specific to the subject. Potentially essay

writing can require a student to demonstrate outcomes in all these categories if the

task set is appropriate and if the marking of that essay specifically recognises the assessment of those outcomes.

To justify that an assignment is an appropriate way to assess these skills, it is essential

to ensure that (a) the students know that they are expected to demonstrate these outcomes in the essay and (b) that tutors, when grading and commenting on it, will

recognise and reward both the knowledge and skills required. Evidence from the literature and from the OU project, suggests that this is not usually the case.

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An overview of the literature on writing and marking essays

Most recent research into essay writing and marking in Higher Education falls into

one of the following categories, although individual pieces of work may come under

several headings.

1) Studies of how students go about the task of essay writing

A paper by Braithwaite, Trueman and Hartley, (1980) looks at the way that a group of

psychology students prepared their essays and then generated a list of criteria from

both students and tutors that they believed were used in marking the essays.

There

were several fundamental differences in the lists generated by each group. For example the students placed 'originality' at the top of their list but it was not in the tutors list; reading and relevance was high on tutors list but much lower on the list generated by the students.

This work suggests that students try to fulfil requirements which they clearly do not

comprehend and initial feedback during the first term seemed to have little effect on

their actions.

In a study of Australian education students Campbell, Smith and Brooker, (1998) adapted Biggs taxonomy (1988) to analyse their essays and subsequently

identified

three categories:

Unistructural essays = serial listing of successive points without links

Multistructural essays = serial listing but some comparison or synthesis

Relational essays = theme/argument used to integrate different aspects into

coherent

whole.

There was evidence that more experienced essay writers moved towards the relational

group but even after three years there were still students who submitted

unistructural

essays. (I return to Biggs' taxonomy later in this paper).

In this study the criteria for marking were shared with the students but most did not

understand the meaning of the criteria used, eg 'organisation', 'synthesis', 'critical evaluation' etc. There were also differences in the way students were reference

finding, note taking, structuring, drafting and revising their work.
'... attempts to improve students' essay writing skills need to shift from focus on discrete skills to an emphasis on the relationship between students' understanding of the content and their ability to write about it.' (p449)
In another account of their work Smith, Campbell and Brooker, (1998) suggest that in literature based essays the deficiencies in students' work are due to lack of higher order skills not the mechanics of writing.
Hartley, J. and Chesworth, K. (1998) argue for the importance of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to understanding essay writing. Drawing on work by Lea and Street (1998) they explore three reasons why students produce poor essays – deficits in skills (eg spelling etc), interpretation of the task and institutional failings. When 10 asked, students suggested that while deficits in skills was the main difficulty, problems with interpretation were the most frequent.

2) Studies of how lecturers/tutors comment on and provide feedback and how student respond to this
In a study of Australian humanities and social science students Channock, (2000) demonstrates how students frequently misunderstand tutors' comments on essays finding that, while some know they don't know the meaning of comments, others think they do know - and do not.
Channock took a frequently used comment 'too much description, not enough analysis' and asked both tutors and students what they took this to mean. There were wide differences especially in their understanding of the term 'analysis' with marked discipline differences in its interpretation. Clearly the term was not explained to students who therefore did not understand it as an essential part of the essay writing process within their discipline.
'Process is as important here as product; students will not get far simply by imitating an end product without knowing how to achieve it. Students who have seen a model of both process and product, and know that they have, can be more confident in their own attempts; they have not been told what to say in their essay, but they have been shown roughly what it might look like and how to put it together.' (p 103)

In a detailed study of feedback on assignments given to university students Higgins (2000) looked at students responses to feedback and their reasons for not using it. His findings show that feedback is often of poor quality; impersonal, vague, and too general. Students demonstrated a misconception of academic language, failing to understand academic discourse and/or criteria used for assessment. Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000) provide us with a very significant study of feedback on essays in which they look at the extreme differences in feedback to students from both subject tutors and specialist English skills teachers. These varied from a grade with no comments at all to extensive comment, in one case making up to 50 points about a student's essay. From their analysis of the style and nature of the comments six different types of response were identified –

- ⌘ Explain the grade in terms of strengths and weaknesses
- ⌘ Correct or edit the student's work
- ⌘ Evaluate the match between student's essay and an ideal answer
- ⌘ Engage in dialogue with the student
- ⌘ Give advice which will be useful in writing the next essay
- ⌘ Give advice on re-writing the essay. (p55)

The authors argue that through feedback students receive messages about themselves, about academic writing and about university values and beliefs.

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3) Comparisons of students and tutors attitudes to the assessment of essays
In their study of second year biology students who completed self-assessment forms before submitting their essays, Merry, Orsmond and Reiling, (1998) found that students were more concerned with factual content than structure. In subsequent interviews with both students and tutors they identified from each group the factors that they thought made a good essay. In all cases the factors were ranked differently showing again the discrepancies between what students and tutors consider to be a good essay. Using two distinct perspectives - phenomenographic and systemic functional linguistics – Prosser and Webb (1994) also explored both the process and the product of essay writing with Australian sociology students. From questions to students about essays and their perceptions of what tutors expect, they suggest that the process and

product are inextricably linked. This, they argue, demonstrates the importance of teaching academic literacy within discipline contexts.

The emphasis on discipline specific approaches to understanding essay writing are

endorsed by Storch and Tapper (2000). Working in geography and education departments, tutors were asked to identify their main goals in setting assignments

which the authors then linked to the comments made on them. Students were also

asked what they thought are main purposes of assignments and what feedback they

expect. They found that the tutors' comments and purposes did not match and students did not get what they expected. Tutors focused on style; students expected

feedback on content. The authors suggest this may be one reason why students do not

pay much attention to comments on their essays.

In an early study of contrasting conceptions of essay-writing. Hounsell, D. (1984) worked with both history and psychology students. From his exploration of different

conceptions of essay writing he identified three categories:

∩ Essay as argument – ordered presentation of argument well organised and supported by evidence.

∩ Essay as viewpoint – ordered presentation of a distinctive viewpoint on problem

or issue

∩ Essay as an arrangement – ordered presentation of facts and ideas

Different perceptions of what academic writing requires are also explored by Lea (1998) from an approach based in the discourse of academic literacies. From working

with OU students studying technology and social science courses over a period of two

years she identifies two distinct approaches to learning:

∩ learning as the reformulation of texts - where the student reproduces course material in own words; works through linear process and uses subject/discipline terminology

∩ learning as challenging texts – where the student relates what they are learning to

own experience but still gives the tutor what they perceive they want.

4) Studies exposing the discrepancies in marking/scoring essays and work on defining and using criteria

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Perceived discrepancies in marking is one reason why there have been, and indeed

still are, many attempts to devise some form of criteria that can be applied to essay

marking. Two relevant papers are the one by Kuisma (1999), based on his work in

Hong Kong, who found that marking written assignments without and then with criteria led to a wider range of marks when the criteria form was used even though

marking took longer with the form when unfamiliar. When students were also given

the form their grades improved.

Price and Rust (1999) take the process further by devising and using a common criteria assessment grid across all modules within an academic department. The aim

of the project was 'to provide better guidance to students (and better work as a result)

as well as enabling consistency in marking, easier moderation and easier provision of

feedback.' While the project appears to have demonstrated that the use of the grid can

achieve these aims, it does raise questions about the use of such a tool in setting and

demonstrating standards.

From the review of the literature the following points can be made:

1) There are distinct differences in the approach and expectations of essay writing in

different disciplines therefore the teaching of essay writing needs to be discipline specific. Students who move across discipline boundaries during their degree

need to

be warned that the questions, requirements and marking may differ and some form of

induction into a discipline may be needed.

2) Students may not benefit from generic advice on essay writing except in gaining a

basic understanding of structure and style.

3) Students and tutors (and in the case of the UK/OU also course teams) may have

very different perceptions of what they mean by a 'good' essay.

4) The language of essay writing is unclear to many tutors and often incomprehensible to students eg what is meant by 'critically analyse ..'?

5) Comments given in feedback, eg 'be more analytical', may not be understood by

students and therefore do not – indeed cannot – help the student to improve.

Using essays to assess learning outcomes

The need to demonstrate the assessment of specified outcomes requires all course

teams and programme boards to be able to justify the assessment of specified outcomes in their essay assignments. It may seem that the easiest outcomes to assess

through essays are knowledge and understanding but few would claim they want to

encourage the unstructured regurgitation of content however accurate and comprehensive. Therefore if other skills are to be recognised and rewarded they need

to be specified in both student and tutor notes and in marking schemes.

Two taxonomies might help us to examine the cognitive skills involved in essay writing. Bloom's taxonomy provides us with one way of describing the processes and

of helping students to understand, in the context of the discipline, what each process

means. Bloom et al (1956) used the following categories:

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- knowledge
- comprehension (understanding)
- application
- analysis
- synthesis
- evaluation.

Although I would not accept that these cognitive skills are necessarily in a strict hierarchy, there does appear to be some progression that can be described to students

as they try to develop their essay writing skills.

Biggs (1988 and 1999) provides a useful categorisation by which outcomes can be

identified that can also apply to other written tasks but is particularly relevant in identifying essay structures.

He uses the terms below to describe a hierarchy from high to low level engagement:

- theorizing
- reflecting
- generating
- applying
- relating
- recognizing
- note-taking
- memorizing.

His taxonomy based on the 'Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome' (SOLO)

describes the approaches to learning as

- prestructural
- unistructural
- multistructural
- relational
- extended abstract.

In applying these analyses to essays we need to be clear what the specific

questions

require students to do.

a) Essays that ask for a description, explanation or statement on behalf of a single

position may be asking students only to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of a topic.

b) Essay questions may require the student to apply concepts/theories etc to a new

situation, topic or case study. This approach is reflected in the 'unistructural approach

described by Biggs (1999) and in Redmond's (1998) 'advocacy' questions.

c) Essays that ask the student to draw on a range of sources, presenting different and

sometimes contradictory positions/explanations may require students to analyse (the

question/problem/topic) and then synthesise the different perspectives on it - as in

'multistructural' or 'compare/contrast' questions.

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d) Essay questions that explicitly or implicitly expect some judgement or evaluation

to be made, thus expecting an essay that moves from multistructural to relational (Campbell et al 1998) or to an essay as an argument (Hounsell 1984, Redmond 1998).

This expectation is what is usually described as an 'academic' essay where the student

not only needs to demonstrate a firm grasp of the material but also that critical thinking that is claimed to be the hallmark of higher education.

The processes involved in essay writing may be indicated – or concealed - in the title

although students do not always recognise this. Even though essay writing guides may

provide lists of 'process' words these will not be helpful unless the student (a) knows

how to de-code what is required eg in a question starting with 'To what extent' or

even more obtuse, a statement followed by 'Discuss'; and (b) is familiar with and confident enough to process the content in the way required.

A generic list of process words like assess, compare, contrast, critically evaluate, examine justify, outline, relate, summarise etc is of little use to a student unless the

instructions inherent within the term are made clear, not just in the subject/course they

are studying but also in the interpretation given to it by the person responsible for setting the question and the tutor who marks it. A similar list in Marshall and

Rowland (1996) is prefixed by this quote from Lewis Carroll -

'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more or less'.

We also need to ensure that the essay is a good demonstration of the students' ability

to 'communicate' in a written form. Essay writing, rather than being a single skill, is

in fact a combination of a range of skills – understanding the complexities of the task,

identifying appropriate sources, extracting and summarising material from those sources, processing and ordering the material into a coherent, structured form

that

relates to the question and producing a written or word processed piece of work that

demonstrates both a firm grasp of the knowledge and understanding relevant to the

task but also – and this is critical in terms of outcomes – the ability to apply those higher level cognitive skills that are often used to defend the practice of essay writing

as an assessment tool – the application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation of theories,

ideas and concepts of the discipline.

These were some of the concerns that led us set up this small scale project as part of a

larger piece of work on assessment of learning outcomes in the UK/OU.

The design of the project

The focus of this project was on essay writing and essay marking. We wanted to discover and understand what kind of 'essay' questions were asked in assignments in a

range of different courses and levels, how students responded to these questions and

how tutors both marked and gave feedback to their students specifically on essay writing skills. In particular we were interested in how the use of criteria, marking schemes or guidelines reflected the development of these skills.

Although the exact definition of 'an essay' is open to dispute, with disciplines interpreting the task, the structure and, particularly, the style in very different ways,

few assignments expected the essay simply to regurgitate material. The type of 15

questions asked in assignments obviously varied according to the course concerned

but cognitive skills and processes were evident in most of the essay questions.

The intention was to involve tutors in a research activity that might enhance their own

understanding of essay writing and marking in a way that contributed to their own professional development. Their contribution to the project was critical – a paper based exercise or one that focused only on the course team perspective would

not have yielded such rich results. More important however was their own involvement in the process and reflection upon it. Working in pairs and meeting as a group at the end of the year was considered an essential aspect of the project so that (a) their experiences were shared with another tutor on the same course, and (b) their exposure to cross-course and faculty differences contributed to the final outcome. Throughout one year, fourteen tutors from seven courses followed the progress of two students in their group (with their permission) by exchanging and second marking all the assignments that involved an essay with a colleague tutoring the same course. The tutors involved were from courses at all OU levels and from six different faculties. The practicalities involved copying and exchanging scripts, and retaining copies of marked and 'second marked' scripts. Participants were free to decide if they wanted to exchange marked scripts during the course or to communicate about their experiences in any way. At the end of the year the whole group met together to explore their experiences and to provide feedback to us. We collected copies of the marked and double marked scripts, together with both student and tutor notes for the courses involved and any other material on writing or marking essays provided by the course team. Our fundamental concern was that the project should not disrupt the normal assignment processing routine. We wanted to minimise any changes in their practice as they marked the scripts of the two students in each group who had given permission for their work to be used in this way although, inevitably, participation in a project that focuses on the skills of essay writing may have influenced both grading and feedback. We were also aware that marking 'for real' your own student's work, knowing that the grade would count towards their continuous assessment and that any feedback would be read by the student, was different from marking and commenting on the work of students you did not know and where only your partner and the two people who organised the project would see the result. Confidentiality for both

students and tutors was assured unless individual tutors gave permission after the project for their comments to be disclosed to the relevant course team, which, in fact, they did.

(1) Summary of the findings from the process

Discrepancies in assignments grades

Although this was not the main focus of the research it was inevitable that it might

expose some discrepancies in marks awarded for sections of assignments and for

assignments overall. Several patterns emerged in the discussion of this –

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∩ some tutors consistently gave higher/lower marks than their partners

∩ some tutors marked higher or lower on some assignments but the results on other

assignments were reversed

∩ some pairs appeared very close in their allocation of marks throughout the year.

Three points are worth making here:

i. Differences in marks awarded were not related to the provision of detailed criteria or marking schemes. One of the closest pairs tutored a course that did not

have detailed criteria or mark distribution guides; one of the greatest discrepancies occurred on a course that appeared very prescriptive about mark allocation.

ii. Tutors knew that the second marked script would not be seen by the student or count towards their grade in any way. Some felt that they may have second marked more harshly.

iii. Some pairs exchanged their second marked scripts throughout the year and seeing discrepancies may have affected their subsequent grading though most participants thought that this had not happened.

In the meeting at the end of the project, when participants de-briefed in pairs, it was

particularly interesting to note that, where discrepancies occurred, tutors were able to

justify their marks to their partners. What clearly emerged was that the rationale for

the mark awarded was different, ie they were each penalising/rewarding different aspects of the essay even when marking guides were supplied and used.

Feedback on scripts and cover sheets

From the scripts and from discussion among tutors, it appeared that ‘feedback’ has a

range of meanings. There was a clear distinction between feedback that applied to (a)

the script of that particular essay and (b) the progress of the student and indeed

to

them as a person.

(a) Feedback on the essay

This generally covered three issues – content, style and structure.

Feedback on content included:

- correction of factual data
- indication of what was not included but should/could have been
- indication of what was included but could be condensed/removed
- indication of what could have been presented more clearly.

Feedback on style included:

- references to or corrections of spelling, punctuation, grammar etc
- comments on or correction of sentence structure
- indications where type of language used was not appropriate
- comments on clarity of expression
- accuracy and format of references.

Feedback on structure included:

- overall structure of the essay

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- appropriate (or missing) introductions and conclusions
- re-arranging sections to provide a better 'flow'
- structure of the 'argument'
- not answering or drifting away from the question.

Relatively few comments related directly to the higher level skills that should be demonstrated in essay writing such as depth of analysis, synthesis from different sources, comparison of competing explanations or theories, critical evaluation of material or of the position taken by authors.

(b) Feedback related to the student

Overwhelmingly this was encouraging and supportive, occurring on almost every cover sheet but some tutors also included student related comments on the script.

Some examples were

- personal comments on the cover sheet that reinforced the relationship between tutor and student, offering further help or contact
- many explicitly commented on progress indicating improvement or explaining an

apparent drop in marks

- comments that related to the overall relevance of the mark according to OU guidelines (a good pass etc)
- comments that indicated how the student had performed relative to the group.

(2) Summary of findings from the course materials

The course materials that we looked at were

∩ the title of the essay or task;

∩ the student notes/advice that accompanied this and any other general advice on

assignments;

∩ the associated tutor notes and other advice to tutors.

Analysis of the 'essay' questions

The assignment tasks varied considerably. The tutors had selected and worked only on those questions that included a piece of extended writing – we did not confine this to the word 'essay' since this is interpreted differently by the various courses. Thus the assignment materials included those from courses where every assignment consisted of an essay, possibly with options (ie two questions of which only one is answered) as well as assignments with multi-part questions (usually without options) with short answer questions, possibly including calculations or diagrams, plus a piece of extended writing described as an 'essay'. Two courses (a level two course and a masters module) also required the preparation for and completion of a project. Two other courses (a level one and a level three course) included a final 'reflective' question in each assignment asking students to self assess and comment on their own work.

We did not stipulate which assignments in a course, or which questions within an assignment, should be copied and double marked. We simply said that the project was about essay writing and marking and left tutors to decide if that was a reasonable description of the task involved. The analysis that follows focuses only on the tasks

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that involved an extensive piece of writing, referred to here as an 'essay' unless given a different description in the student/tutor notes.

The title of the essay usually, but not always, indicated the nature of the task, using both content and process words as in a traditional essay title. This suggests that most essays and other written work are required not only to draw on students' knowledge and understanding of the subject but also to demonstrate, in terms of both cognitive and practical/professional skills, that they can apply, analyse, synthesise and evaluate that knowledge.

Analysis of the student notes

In every case the student notes amplified the task and gave advice to the student on

how to tackle it. At this point it was clear that there were marked differences between

the disciplines with two interpretations of what is meant by an essay emerging –
i. those questions that, despite the title, largely required the content (knowledge and understanding) of the course to be re-presented accurately and comprehensively, though possibly in a different format to that used in the course materials. In a few cases the content had to be applied to a different topic.

ii. those questions that expected the student to analyse the topic in some detail, synthesise from various sources and possibly evaluate the content, requiring a critical review or a clear argument to be made.

In a few cases it was impossible to decide from the title, task or student notes exactly

what was required, apart from coverage of the material. Student notes at all levels

frequently directed students to specific parts of different materials and texts indicating

clearly exactly what should be included. For some courses the inclusion of a diagram

was encouraged or required and this was usually indicated in the advice. In all cases

word limits were clearly stated often with warnings about keeping within them.

Analysis of tutor notes and associated guidance

A much clearer idea of what was required in the assignments came from the tutor notes, all of which were marked confidential or not to be copied to students, in some

cases reinforced by warnings like ‘Under no circumstances should students be allowed to see the contents of this booklet.’

There were considerable differences in the quantity, detail and prescription provided

by the various course teams. Some notes gave full details of the answer expected;

some made explicit references to course materials and indicated generally what sort of

answer was required or indicated if a variety of responses were acceptable.

Linked to

the notes were different ways of indicating criteria for allocating marks. These included –

⌘ detailed marking schemes with every mark allocated,

⌘ guidance on mark allocation but with some tutor discretion

⌘ a general indication of what was expected within a broad band of marks.

In all cases there was much greater emphasis on the content of the answer than on

either the processing of the material or the rewarding of essay writing skills. Most 19

notes gave tutors a clear idea of what should be included with little guidance on how it

should be presented.

Marking schemes ranged from the allocation of single marks for specific points (1 mark for x; 3 marks for y etc). Others gave a number of marks for content with, usually fewer, separate marks for 'style'. (eg 26 for content, 4 marks for style). References to the 'structure' of the essay were rarely made though often implied, with

marks allocated for the introduction, conclusion, referencing etc.

No course provided students with a list of criteria and mark allocation that exactly matched the one produced for tutors, although some tutors clearly indicated on the

script how marks had been allocated for particular aspects of the essay. It was not

surprising, therefore, that most tutors comments on the script were about content since

most tutor notes suggested that this was the expectation of the course team.

Comments on style and structure of the essay were usually, though not always, confined to the cover sheet.

Despite the availability of other resources, for most students help with essay writing

comes directly from the feedback related to specific assignments that they receive

from their tutors. While this has the advantage of developing skills within the context

of the course and of being advised by a tutor who knows the standard of their work,

there are also disadvantages in relying on this support –

- assignments, notes and marking schemes that focus mainly on content (ie knowledge and understanding) will not help to develop essay writing skills

- mark schemes that separate the marks for content from those for structure or style

will not reinforce the inter-relationship of these components in a good essay

- tutors who want to take seriously the task of correspondence tuition in relation to

skill development are not paid sufficient to make this possible, especially if they are forced to spend most of their time checking detailed content

- tutors tend to focus (and course teams encourage this), on the components of an

essay such as the introduction, the conclusion, the length and, particularly, correct

referencing thus ignoring the links between these components and the essay task

as a whole

- general advice on essay writing given at the start of a course or elsewhere may not

be read or remembered by a student especially if they are struggling to keep up with their studies or to understand difficult content

- some tutors in the project raised issues about students who (repeatedly) disregard advice or maybe do not understand the points being made. Tutors comments on assignments set by their course team

It has to be said that many of the tutors were quite critical of current practice but that the response varied according to the course concerned. Overall there was a strong message that many course teams appeared to imply through their advice or marking schemes that content was more important than skills. Skills were seen as something extra rather than something important that should be embedded into the course and the assessment. For several courses tutors felt that far too much content was required in essays and that keeping within the word limits was an unreasonable constraint. Indeed cramming too much content into an essay was encouraging bad practice.

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Some tutors found their marking schemes too prescriptive; others thought the advice given to tutors was too vague. There was criticism of marking schemes that were very focussed on particular parts of the content of the course whereas the essay questions asked were either ambiguous or so general that selecting the 'required' content became a lottery. There was an overwhelming request for marking schemes that gave credit for content but also for skills, style and structure as an holistic part of essay writing not as separate components

Another important point raised by several tutors was the need to offer help and advice on essay writing well before the start of the course. This is particularly important if the first assignment is not an ungraded formative one. Students who are weak or inexperienced in essay writing are particularly disadvantaged if their only advice and support in developing the necessary skills is part of the assessed component.

Course teams do not seem to realise that most students do not use the advice on essay writing provided by the course team and that the tutor has to reinforce this. Several tutors stressed the importance of essay planning and there was considerable support for those courses that required an essay plan to be submitted before or

with an assignment. Since an inappropriate plan of the structure of the essay is one of the fundamental weaknesses of many assignments, this requirement might well be considered. There were several requests for model answers – if only to show if the word limit was realistic. Tutors do not have time to produce these and some students would benefit from seeing what kind of work they should be producing. There was considerable support for the inclusion of a reflective component in each assignment where students were encouraged to self-assess their own work and identify areas for improvement and this was endorsed even by tutors on the level three courses.

Overall themes

Confusion over what outcomes were being assessed. Despite all the details in the student and tutor notes, the project showed clearly that there were considerable disjunctions between how assignments were designed, how they were completed by students and how they were marked by tutors. Comparing the instructions in the student notes, the intentions of the course team as indicated in the guidance in the tutor's notes, the marking of the actual assignment scripts and the feedback from the tutors participating in the project the main confusions seem to arise through different interpretations of the questions and how marks should be awarded.

Of the two courses (a level 2 and level 3) where all the questions took the form of a traditional essay the questions asked all implied that more than a coverage of knowledge and understanding was required. There were guidelines but no detailed criteria or marking guides for these assignments. Most of the other written tasks appeared to focus on content although the instructions in the student notes suggested that discussion or argument was expected or implied by terms such as 'distinguish between' or 'determine whether'.

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Allocating marks for different types of outcomes

One main issue was about the weighting given to content (knowledge and understanding of the course) and the skills demonstrated in producing the

answer.

Questions that asked only for content to be explained or described gave marks for the

accuracy of that content and little else, although occasionally there was a token allowance for 'style' or 'clarity of expression'. Assignments that asked for an analytical

or evaluative essay requiring comparison of perspectives or critical argument posed

problems for some of the students but not for the tutors in terms of awarding marks.

Feedback and the teaching of more advanced essay skills is always a challenge. that is made more difficult when the skills required are not made explicit.

The assignments that caused most problems for students and for tutors were those that

demanded a good coverage and understanding of content but also required cognitive

skills in handling the material and presentation skills in terms of structure and style of

the essay – but where the marking scheme prioritised the accurate coverage of content

above all else.

Schemes that awarded the majority of the marks to content and a minimal amount to

presentation send signals to students and cause a dilemma for tutors. How can you

reward an essay that happens to cover all the list of content stipulated by the course

team but is entirely deficient in structure and style while penalising a well presented

well argued response that does not contain all the content on the marking tick list?

This is not likely to be conducive to good essay writing and certainly does not suggest

that many learning outcomes, other than knowledge and understanding, are demonstrated.

Fragmented marking inhibits a more holistic approach

Questions that require the coverage of a long list of content encourage fragmented

marking (single points scored for each item) at the expense of the quality of the writing and the more advanced processes of essay construction. Indeed some of the

content lists in the tutor notes suggest that complete coverage within the word limit

would be impossible and indeed needs to be demonstrated in model answers.

Responses that suggest that the skill of writing succinctly is important are not justified

when such coverage is also superficial. There is also evidence from the project that general guidance on content and a vague task given to students that is subsequently marked against a tightly prescribed scheme encourages students to produce 'write all they know about' answers lest they lose out on the lottery of not guessing exactly what is listed on the mark scheme.

One of the prime dangers of setting assignments that require extensive coverage of content at the expense of developing skills in handling that content is that tutors have to focus on the checking and correcting of that content and cannot also engage in the process of helping students to develop their essay writing technique.

Conclusions

The above points are not intended to be an argument for dispensing with all forms of marking schemes for the assessment of essays and a return to impression marking with students having to guess or pick up cues on what their tutor really requires. There

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is evidence from other studies in HE that criteria used in marking essays can enhance the performance of students but that such criteria needs to be shared with the students.

There is also evidence to show that such criteria need to be holistic rather than checklists of content and a few additional prompts on the presentation of that content unless the task is meant only to test comprehension.

This project raised a number of important issues about the use of essays for the assessment of learning. The evidence suggests that essays can provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of course material, as well as the higher order cognitive skills within a discipline. However, if essays are used for this purpose, the process needs to be made much more explicit both to students and to tutors. If essay assignments are used to assess learning outcomes, the criteria used in marking them need to be directly linked to the specific outcomes concerned. Encouraging students to self-assess against those criteria, as well as making reference to them in feedback, can encourage students to develop such skills through the essay writing process, as well as demonstrating them in the

assignment.

This could provide a record of each student's development and attainment of the outcomes and contribute to the student's understanding of their own learning.

The essay project provided evidence that it is possible to assess learning outcomes

through the writing of essays but that many students were 'passing' assignments, often with low grades, without demonstrating any of the more complex cognitive skills and in some cases, making little progress during the course despite very helpful

feedback from their tutors. If assessment does contribute to learning then the process

needs to be much more explicit and there is now evidence that a learning outcomes

approach can contribute to this. Already some course teams are moving in this direction by stating outcomes in terms that students can understand and using both

student and tutor notes to make the process more transparent.

Other course teams are using this transparency to encourage self-assessment as part of

process by providing not only details of the learning outcomes involved but also of

the criteria used to assess them, thus encouraging tutors to provide more focussed

feedback. The process of 'learning how to learn' is being encouraged both by course

teams, throughout programmes of study and through generic materials.

The explicit assessment of learning outcomes presented a challenge that requires us to

re-examine current practice and implement changes. There are no 'right answers' or

simple solutions; there is a lot to be discovered about how best to both assess the

outcomes and develop the learning. Moving towards an outcomes-based curriculum,

with appropriate assessment strategies, can enhance student learning but the process

needs to be more transparent and to explicitly encourage a meta-cognitive approach.

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