Case study: what supports students to improve their grades?

Abstract

This article presents a case study of sponsored students in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at The Open University. Semi-structured telephone interviews were used to explore the experiences of Nursing and Social Work students who were 'borderline' (defined as students who received 40 – 45% in their initial assignment) but who then went on to markedly improve their grades over the course of the module. Of particular interest was how they received assessment feedback and how this contributed to their learning and development. Other themes that emerged from the study include the emotions experienced by the students that challenged their self-confidence and evoked feelings associated with emotional vulnerability, and the tendency for students to initially approach assessment independently, but later to create and take advantage of opportunities for social learning. The role of the tutor in helping students to prepare for assessment appears to be significant, as does the fact that students are sponsored by their employers, which provides an additional incentive to complete the module.

Keywords

Distance learning, qualitative research, borderline students, sponsored students, assessment feedback, social learning.

Introduction

The case study was derived from a university project on strengthening the role of assessment in supporting student learning and improving retention and achievement; and focuses on sponsored students in the Faculty of Health and Social Care (HSC) at The Open University (OU). This project aimed to establish 'what went right' for 'borderline' students, that is, those learners who obtained low grades (between 40% and 45%) for their first assignment and subsequently, improved their performance over the course of the module. The study explores how students perceived the value of assessment feedback and other opportunities to explore assessment requirements through for example, face-to-face tutorials and online forums, designed to support ongoing academic and personal progress through a module.

It is worth pointing out at the outset that HSC has offered supported distance learning for nursing and social work students for many years. Data available for these programmes consistently demonstrate that these students have significantly higher retention and progression compared to other OU students. For example, social work progression from level 1 to level 2 is 94% in contrast to 58% across other areas of the university. The figure is similar for nursing. High retention has been attributed to the fact that these students are sponsored by their employers onto their programmes. Despite this higher retention rate, the project was interested in exploring how students, who struggled initially, sustained their motivation and made academic progress.

Assessment feedback and learning

The value of assessment and assessment feedback to support student learning has long been a preoccupation within the literature. In 2006, Jordan argues that within a higher education context it should be seen as an integral part of any teaching and learning strategy as it can be seen as one of the main driving forces behind student learning. Moreover assessment feedback plays a central role in supporting the development of self-regulated independent learners (Black & McCormick, 2010). Nicol & McFarlane-Dick's (2006) have outlined the principles of good feedback practice and these include tasks such as clarifying for the student what constitutes good performance with advice over closing the gap between that and current performance, encouraging and motivating the student, and that which facilitates self-reflection and self-assessment. In a distance learning environment, Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011) have contended that students engaged in a mode of study, where feedback tends to be provided through written comment on assignments. In this context, they argue, that students need to receive feedback that can enable them to develop their capacity to be independent, self-critical and self-regulating learners. For the students in this study, written feedback provided one source of support for their academic development, alongside discursive opportunities to explore assessment through face-to-face and forum discussions where offered.

This study focuses on the learning journeys of mature students, many of whom had not engaged in formal learning for several years before undertaking their study programmes. The literature highlights how the transition to university is often an anxious time for students because of factors such as a lack of knowledge about the university, a change in learner identity, concern about academic standards and having to develop new ways of learning (Christie et al., 2008). Indeed in research undertaken with new students from non-traditional backgrounds, Christie (2009) highlights how becoming a university student is an emotional journey as well as an intellectual one. Comparisons of distance learners with face to face learners has found that those studying at a distance are more likely to feel isolated and have lower levels of self-confidence than their classroom-based peers (Kahl & Cropley, 1986).

The tone and sensitivity of assessment feedback is likely to be important to consider if we bear in mind the emotional impact that feedback can have on students' sense of their academic identity. Key is the idea of 'feeding forward'. Baker & Zuvela (2013) argue that ensuring students receive advice over future development is crucial in institutions characterised by student diversity and that have a commitment to building student strengths. The future-oriented strategy of feeding-forward they argue, helps students meaningfully engage with assessment concepts that can then be internalised, operationalised and applied to their work. Given that students studying in HSC are often characterised by their diversity, understanding what constitutes good feedback is key to the Faculty's mission.

More recent qualitative research indicates that while online learners may experience positive emotions during their courses, these are tempered by feelings of fear, anxiety, stress, guilt and alienation and recommends that it is "….valuable for online instructors to find mechanisms that encourage learners to evaluate their positive and negative feelings alike and thus contribute to the constitution of a supportive emotional climate" (Zembylas, 2008: 83).

The case study

This case study focuses on distance learning students who are undertaking professional training in social work and nursing. The aim of this study was to gain insights into factors that students attributed to supporting their academic development and their completion of modules; therefore, we adopted a qualitative methodology and conducted semi-structured telephone interviews. Following ethical approval from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee as well as the Student Research Project Panel, we received a list of 33 nursing and social work students who fitted the inclusion criteria. We contacted the students by letter and provided them with an outline of the focus and purpose of the research. Despite offering a £25 Amazon voucher for participation, only three nursing and four social work students responded. All had achieved marks between 40-45% for their first assignment and then went on to achieve higher marks for subsequent assignments. Telephone interviews took place over a period of a month and were conducted by two members of the team. Students were told that they could withdraw from the interview at any time and that interviews would be confidential and anonymous. After permission to do so, the interviews were recorded and later transcribed and shared with the whole team. A thematic analysis of the interviews was undertaken by the whole team.

All students in the sample were white, female and aged between 37 and 59. All stated that their motivation for study related to career and personal development. Levels of prior education and achievement on entry to programmes were lower for nursing than for social work students.

The interviews enabled us to explore why students bucked the trend, continuing their studies despite a poor start, and offer some insight into how they had improved their performance. In particular, we sought to explore ways in which academic development might be attributed to the assignment feedback students received from tutors and other opportunities they had to engage in discussion about assessment. All names of respondents have changed to protect the identity of participants.

The nursing students

All three nursing students were studying a 60-credit entry level practice-focused module [*Enhancing Your Healthcare Practice*] undertaken by students on a pre-registration nursing or a Foundation Degree programme. All students were sponsored by their employer and they worked while studying as Healthcare Support Workers, primarily supporting registered nurses in healthcare settings. They thus brought with them tremendous experience of what it is like to work in healthcare and had a realism around practice that we work with to develop and enhance their skills and other attributes. Having sponsorship meant that they all had multiple drivers to succeed that will be explored later in the paper.

For many students this was a return to study after many years absence, therefore, many were discussing first or very early assignment feedback in their qualifications. Additionally the wholly online teaching and learning approach adopted by the nursing department was also a new venture so they were immersed in multiple new experiences and challenges.

Rachel

Rachel is 47 years old and employed as a healthcare support worker studying the pre-registration nursing programme. It was 30 years since she last studied. For her first assignment she achieved a grade of 44% but as she progressed through the module her grades increased to 62% and 57% for the next two assignments. At first, she struggled to get to grips with the academic language used on her modules and the type of writing she needed to engage in. Rachel explained that she felt she was expected to work independently and rely on her own judgement, however, when she received her marked assignment with a grade of 44% she said she felt 'absolutely heartbroken'. Rachel said that she was able to make use of the feedback she received for the first assignment when preparing the second because her tutor's comments included suggestions about the sort of approach that she needed to adopt. As she explained:

> I need someone to be clear and upfront with me. For example, I need someone to tell me that I didn't do so well in that and that's the reason for that but next time I want you to look at this and this… and that's how she was….When you're immersed in all that and trying to get it in, and getting all your relevant points in you don't see it …….I mean I read it a thousand times before I sent it in but you know it so well by then that you don't change anything – but when someone else reads it, she points out the things that maybe I should have put in… ….that paragraph would have been better there …

This led Rachel to adopt a different strategy for her second assignment that of contacting her tutor before submission for advice about how she might address the question asked.

> I would send her bits and she would say ….that's really not what we are looking for …. Obviously she could not mark it but she did point me in the right direction.

In addition to the support Rachel received from her tutor she also attributed her academic progress to the peer support she received from her tutor group in their online forums and from her work-place mentor at her placement. She explained:

> My work in the practice areas has been particularly helpful – especially my alternative practice where I can be a real student – where I don't know the routine and really have the opportunity to grow, learn and develop and sometimes apply things that I have read about or shared with others. That was brilliant for me. … I was encouraged to talk through things that I was learning as a student ….I had a really good mentor supporting me. She helped me apply learning to practice and helped me make sense of learning.

Sarah

Sarah is 59 years old and from Holland. She was employed as a healthcare support worker studying on the Foundation Degree. For her first assignment she achieved a grade of 40%, and as she progressed through the module her grade increased to 56% and 60% for the next two assignments. Sarah reported feeling 'pushed': pushed into study by her employer and under pressure to achieve good grades. From the start of her module she worked independently with no support from anyone, despite the fact that she lacked confidence and didn't understand what was being asked of her. She stated that at first she couldn't care less what grade she got, as she didn't feel the module was for her, but after her first assignment her motivation improved with encouragement from her tutor.

> My tutor told me that I had started something and that I should try
> to continue. The ambition grew…..so I thought let's make something
> of it.

In contrast to Rachel, Sarah did not want to discuss her assessment with her fellow students. Possibly, she felt that disclosure of her grades and feedback would add to her lack of self-confidence, expressed earlier in the interview. She said:

> I really didn't share my work with much people…. I had no contact with the
> other students. I was struggling for myself. I don't share these types of
> experiences.

Fiona

Fiona is 38 years old and was also employed as a healthcare support worker. For her first assignment she achieved a grade of 41%, progressing to grades of 67% and 59% for the next two assignments. She explained that as she prepared for her first assignment she was:

> …totally naïve and didn't understand what was expected of me. I couldn't easily find
> guidance to help me…. there seemed to be no one to say how to do things.

When Fiona's first assignment was returned she was really disheartened with her grade. Reflecting on this she stated:

> I was really disappointed ….disappointed with myself when I got the result for
> not understanding it properly. I just wanted to get it behind me. I read the
> comments through a few times. We had the opportunity to share our grades
> and feelings on the forum but I refused to engage with this.

When it came to preparing her second assignment like Rachel, she contacted her tutor by telephone but:

> I must say however that I don't find the telephone tutorials particularly helpful. I
> think that because the tutors do this year on year, they know what they're

about but share it in a way that is often academically challenging given the language used and the fact that I had never been in university before. It makes it so much harder to understand. …when actually all you want is some simple guidance.

Despite feeling demotivated by the grade she achieved for her first assignment, Fiona was mindful of the fact she had been sponsored onto the programme by her employer, and she needed to make the most of the learning opportunity she had been given. For her the most useful sources of support for her academic development came from colleagues:

> We were in a cohort of 10 of us who were encouraged by our employers to meet up. Because I think I was so upset; and I thought I had worked so hard on the first TMA *[her assignment]*, it was good to be able to talk through with others….this is what I have done…this is where I needed to refocus writing….This is what others were saying to me once I got through my melt-down I think. People give you confidence boasts, don't they? They support you. They talk you through it.

Fiona also attributed her progress to her placement practice tutor who went through the next assignment she was preparing with her. One difficulty she confronted was that the focus of the assignment didn't always relate to her professional experience.

> …. I felt the question was more geared towards general health and as I work in a mental health unit, I was really struggling to connect the work we do around risk assessment and management to what was being asked in the TMA *(her assignment)*. …When I did speak to my Practice Tutor, mentor or other students in my work organisation is when learning came alive. They all helped me learn and enthused my learning. … It was also interesting in that as we got together, it became apparent that there were bits that I did understand and that I could help others with…this really helped me with my confidence and feeling of self-worth.

The social work students

The social work students had successfully completed 120 credits at level 1 and were now pursuing a second level practice learning module which entailed undertaking 600 hours in a workplace placement alongside engaging in academic study. In addition to this sixty credit module, they were also studying a sixty credit, second level Law module. Although the degree is a distance learning one, the professional requirements for social work include providing opportunities for skills development supported through seven, compulsory face-to-face skills workshops held throughout the module. During these workshops some time is allocated to focus on assessment. Students also interact with their tutor through email and online with their fellow students through tutor group forums which are intended to support their learning. Tutors are encouraged to provide students with detailed feedback on their assignments to support their academic

development. The social work students all work in the social care sector and are sponsored onto the Social Work Degree by their employers.

Emily

Emily is aged 54 and has been employed as a care manager in a local authority for several years. She got 45% for her first assignment and went on to get 63% and 58% for her next two assignments. Emily talked to her tutor about the first assignment at a face-to-face workshop but, despite this preparatory discussion she was unable to achieve a grade she was happy with and stated 'she was gutted' when she saw the grade. Reflecting on this, she explained that she didn't find it easy to adopt the appropriate approach to writing assignments and was conscious of the fact that her work was descriptive rather than analytical.

However, Emily felt able to speak to her tutor about her assignment at the next face-to-face workshop, during the break, she went through it carefully with her. Emily was encouraged to be more reflective and to unpick things at a deeper lever. The tutor also made suggestions about where Emily might integrate points more closely together, drawing on the module materials. When preparing her second assignment Emily returned to her tutor's feedback and was able to identify comments that she could take on board.

Emily did not attribute her academic progress solely to constructive tutor feedback on her work. She felt that the opportunity to engage in face-to-face discussion with her peers during workshops also supported her academic progress. Within this group there was also an opportunity to share emotional responses resulting from the pressures they experienced during their learning journey:

> Everyone at some point had tears, due to different pressures, family pressures, not being well. It's always been a very supportive and trusted group.

Emily also had the opportunity to occasionally meet up with her fellow students at one another's houses and to discuss assignment preparation in a small group since several members of her group worked for the same local authority and knew each other quite well.

> Having three of us in the same placement (same building) was very helpful. Last year we were in different teams but we could pop into each other's offices to discuss things – we could help each other and ask what did you think about that etc.? We were able to share which made for a better experience.

An additional source of support that Emily cited as contributing to academic development came from her Programme Tutor and Practice Educator in her placement.

Students on the social work degree prepare Records of Practice which help them link theory to practice. Emily explained that she had tended to do this at a superficial level relying on Aids to Practice Cards which simply outline a theory or method rather than making links with more comprehensive discussion found in the module materials.

In addition to attributing her progress to peer support she also recognised how her family enabled her study effectively. She explained that her husband had taken on a range of domestic chores so that she had time to focus on her studies. She stated that she 'couldn't have done this without him'.

Jane

Jane is aged 37 and employed as a community care worker in a child protection team. She obtained a grade of 43% for her first assignment and also went on to achieve 63% and 58% for the next two assignments. Like others in this study, Jane did not engage in discussion with her tutor about assessment before submission of her first assignment and then was very frustrated with the grade she received. She struggled to understand the application of grading criteria for assignment as she was obtaining higher grades for her other second level module. Looking back, she attributed this to the reflective demands for the practice learning module which were not required for her law module. Jane engaged in email exchanges with her tutor about this, which enabled her to address the difficulty she had with making sense of the assessment guidance.

Despite feeling upset by the feedback she had received from her tutor for her first assignment, Jane was able to use this feedback to prepare for subsequent assignments. The feedback included guidance on how to structure essays and ways to enhance the reflective focus of her work. There were also comments on her script about where some of the text pointing out where material included was not really relevant to the question.

Like Emily, Jane also felt that the social aspect of learning provide through peer support had contributed to her academic development. Students within her tutor group forum had had supportive discussions because of the positive relationships they had with each other. Several of the students in her group were sponsored by the same Local Authority and knew one and other quite well so they felt at ease discussing these issues, revealing misunderstanding and helping each other get to grips with relevant theories and concepts. Like Emily, help at home was also important in helping her to achieve.

Stephanie

Stephanie is 50 years old and works as a support worker in the NHS. She receives financial support towards her study from the university and has declared a disability of dyslexia. Stephanie achieved 45% for her first assignment, 65% percent for her second,

and 55% for her third. Unlike the majority of students in this case study she did not recall feeling emotionally upset when her graded assignment was returned to her. But like many of the others, she did not discuss her first assignment with her tutor prior to submission. Indeed, Stephanie had by far the least positive relationship with her tutor. She found her less approachable and supportive than other tutors. Stephanie did not have an academic background and said:

> I have to work really hard to get a high mark – some people get good marks without the effort. So if a tutor understands my needs I will get a lot from the course.

The difficult relationship she had therefore meant that Stephanie cited other factors that aided her development. These included opportunities to engage in discussion with her fellow students in her tutor group forum. She explained:

> There was brilliant peer support amongst the nine of us. One is a colleague and she will explain things I don't understand – breaking down language I didn't understand.

When preparing her second assignment she did read her tutor's feedback on her first assignment but could not recall what she able act on from this. Because of her dyslexia Stephanie described her academic writing as not strong. She has what she described as a "brilliant" software programme to help, which she values highly. Further support with writing was provided by her husband who would proof read her assignments before submission and offer feedback about how well he thought she had addressed the subject matter and question asked.

Reflecting on her academic progress in general, Stephanie felt that the good progress she made on modules could be largely attributed to good tutor support and having effective rapport with them. However, in this instance other factors were more influential such as being able to make good use of the written guidance available for assignments and the support of her fellow students and family.

Discussion and conclusions

Analysis of the interviews identified four key themes that emerged for the students: feedback, social learning, sponsorship and emotional vulnerability.

Feedback

Nicol and McFarlane-Dick's (2006) principles of good feedback practice are relevant for this case study. These include tasks such as: clarifying for the student what constitutes good performance as well as giving advice over closing the gap between that and

current performance; encouraging and motivating the student; and giving feedback which facilitates self-reflection and self-assessment. Some of the students certainly valued the discussions that they had had with their tutors and their grades suggested that they had managed to internalise and operationalise the feedback they received in subsequent assignments. This supports Baker and Zuvela's (2013) argument that a future-oriented strategy of feeding-forward guidance is enabling for students.

As noted in the literature review, feedback plays an important role in the development of an independent learner; however, our findings also highlighted the importance of getting feedback that is pitched at a level that the student can understand, as demonstrated by Rachel's tutor who was clear and to the point. While Stephanie's marks improved, this seemed to be despite the tutor rather than because of her, as Stephanie felt that her tutor was unable to advise her because they did not share a common language. This support Chanock's (2006) findings where 49% of history and politics students who were surveyed did not understand the feedback they received from tutors.

Social Learning

What was interesting from this research was that there were other forms of feedback and support which helped students to engage with assessment once they had got over their emotional distress associated with obtaining a low grade. Respondents described how opportunities to engage in social learning with peers and colleagues supported their academic development. Several of the students engaged in peer/colleague discussions about assessment and took part in informally and formally in forums and study groups. It seems that students were proactive in seeking out and extending opportunities to engage in discussion about their learning beyond those formally provided by the module teams. For social work students establishing what might be called a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) where they help each other through a shared endeavour, these groups became a valuable way of engaging with their learning in order to improve their work. They provided a safe, supportive environment in which to reflect on content and included opportunities for students to give and receive feedback about assignments. Social work students, by virtue of their context had had time to get to know and trust their peers, having studied with them over a considerable period of time – this is a luxury that may not be available to students in other contexts and studying other programmes.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship appears to be an important motivating factor for study success and may in part explain the perseverance of students to continue with study despite disappointments related to assessment. We should not underplay the impact of expectation employers have for student achievement and success. For example, Sarah was completely baffled why her employer was investing in her development. She said she only planned to work for a few more months before retiring and struggled to understand why 'her hands were tied' to register onto studies. However once she had settled into study, she discovered a desire to prove to

herself that she could be successful and achieve. In addition to funding training, employer support for both nursing and social work is reflected in their allocation of paid study leave. This enables students to devote adequate time to their learning. Support provided by family also created study space for two respondents. They described how their partners recognised the pressures associated with the intensity of study combined with work placements that they were experiencing. In response to this the partners had extended their support with household chores. Study for these students and their families was not clearly demarcated from work and employer expectations for success.

Emotional vulnerability

As pointed out earlier in this article, the transition to university study is characterized by anxiety for many students. Certainly this seemed the case for the level 1 nursing students who were reluctant to talk to their tutor to obtain guidance before submitting their first assessment. Asking for advice would, possibly, expose perceived 'deficiencies' and may have been too threatening an activity for the students interviewed to engage in. Moreover, the student experiences outlined here support Kahl and Cropley's (1986) assertion that those studying at a distance are more likely to feel isolated and have lower levels of self-confidence than their classroom-based peers. The emotional vulnerability that was displayed by all the students interviewed needs to be taken into account by all who teach in a distance learning environment whether it is those who design the study materials and tuition strategies. Indeed, we would accord with Zembylas's (2008) recommendation that tutors need to work hard to construct a supportive emotional climate for our students.

In summary, our research, while not generalisable to all students, suggests that the variables listed above combine together to facilitate student success. Tutors have a responsibility to proactively support engagement rather than wait for students to approach them and tutors also need to be alert to the anxiety and emotional vulnerability that students may experience when studying at a distance and that the feedback they give should be sensitive to this. Clear well-crafted feedback that is written in a way that is intelligible for a student is integral to a successful learning experience but for some students this is not enough: the social setting of learning needs to be in place and so opportunities to engage in social learning with peers and colleagues are extremely valuable. For students on professional programmes, where making links between theory and practice are central, extending informal opportunities for social learning alongside formal ones which enable them to identify themselves as learners could play a useful role in strengthening learner support within distance learning context.

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