Assessment, Feedback & Technology

Contexts and Case Studies in Bloomsbury

Edited by

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Chapter 9: Formative Assessment for Postgraduate Academic Skills Development in Arts

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Chapter 9: Formative Assessment for Postgraduate Academic Skills Development in Arts

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Summary

Step Up to Postgraduate Study in Arts is a taught, blended module designed to support students at the point of transition into postgraduate study (i.e. Master's/level 7) across the various disciplines of Arts offered at Birkbeck. The module grew out of a *Changing the Learning Landscape*[2] (CLL) project in 2012/13, in which the Birkbeck project team[3] worked with CLL consultants[4] to develop a flexible, blended learning design approach suitable for Birkbeck students. Once this was developed, the next phase was the creation of a pilot module.[5]

Previously, academic skills training for potential or accepted postgraduates had been identified as a gap in provision, and also a potential route to support student retention. While acceptance on a postgraduate programme might be taken as an assurance of graduate-level academic capabilities, in practice many incoming Birkbeck postgraduates are returning to study after long breaks, and often will face significant work and family commitments. We asked programme leaders from the School of Arts to identify key academic capabilities that could be developed via a pre-sessional module. This wishlist evolved into the following learning units:

1. Critical thinking
2. Plagiarism, referencing and bibliography
3. Resources for research
4. Seminar skills
5. The language of academic English
6. Planning and structuring essays

In terms of the mode of study, while the majority of the module is housed in Moodle, there are opening and closing face-to-face meetings which students are encouraged to attend. Participation in these meetings, as in all aspects of the module, is opt-in. Because *Step Up* is non-credit bearing, all assessment in the module is formative, although the final assessment tasks of each unit are graded.

Implementation

Step Up utilises a blended, flexible approach in which the majority of the learning is self-paced and online. The six units in the online module space follow a consistent structure that opens with an introductory video and self-assessment quiz followed by a series of related learning materials. Each set of learning

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1   Leo Havemann, Learning Technologist, IT Services, Birkbeck.

2   Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, Changing the Learning Landscape, *https://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/research-resources/resource-hub/cll/*.

3   The original project team who worked with the CLL consultants comprised: Joana Barros, Lecturer in Geographic Information Science and former TEL Champion; Joanne Leal, Senior Lecturer in Cultures and Languages and Assistant Dean for Learning and Teaching, School of Arts; Liz Johnston Drew, Flexible Learning Tutor, School of Arts; Vincent Tong, former TEL Champion; Leo Havemann, Learning Technologist, IT Services.

4   The consultants were Alison Le Cornu and Amanda Jefferies.

5   The project team developed the pilot module, with additional content on academic English provided by Fleur Rothschild, Learning Development Tutor, School of Arts.

resources and activities is organised in progressive steps. These comprise readings, multimedia content, exercises, reflective writing, and tips for further learning. Finally, there is a marked assessment task.

From a student's perspective, much of the work of the module consists of formative assessment. The initial engagement with each unit is a self-assessment quiz which must be completed in order to 'unlock' the learning materials. The purpose of this self-evaluation is to enable students to assess their own knowledge and therefore plan their own journey through the units and assessments, prioritising the aspects they feel will be most helpful. Some of the activities in the learning materials are self-marking exercises, or consist of a reflection that will be responded to by a tutor (but not marked). The final assessment task in each unit is graded by a tutor who also provides individualised feedback.

While almost all of the assessment and feedback in the module is technology-supported, one assessment in particular attempts to activate the transformative potential of a specific learning technology: Turnitin. Turnitin is used throughout the module, and throughout the programmes students will go on to study, but the nature of its use and functioning is typically in the background of academic activity. Students often do not have access to view their similarity reports, or place too much significance on the similarity percentage, so we felt they could benefit from a guided introduction to the similarity reporting function.

The Turnitin-focused assessment closes the 'plagiarism, referencing and bibliography' unit and aims to surface and address academic writing expectations and anxieties. In this task, students are asked to write two summaries of an extract of a journal article. One summary should be deliberately plagiarised, and the other should avoid plagiarism. Both of these summaries are submitted via Turnitin and students are given access to both similarity reports. Contextual feedback is provided on each version using the Turnitin Feedback Studio environment (formerly, GradeMark), pointing out any errors or issues, and highlighting good practice. Overall feedback that considers how well they have addressed the task is also provided. Students are then asked to add a reflective post in their journals discussing their experience of completing the assessment. In this way, students are invited to explore the differences between similarity and plagiarism, and the nature of intentional and unintentional plagiarism.

During this assessment activity, students observe that while Turnitin's similarity reporting function can find matches to other known sources, it cannot draw conclusions about which of these matches are 'significant' in terms of plagiarism. It becomes evident that legitimate reuses of text can become part of the 'noise' that Turnitin reports generate, and also that it is possible to plagiarise an original source without generating any matches in Turnitin, simply by paraphrasing without citing. The core outcome of this exercise should therefore be an improved understanding of the importance of not reusing another author's ideas without acknowledgement, whether one quotes or paraphrases, as academic inquiry is a process of 'standing on the shoulders of giants'.

Benefits and Challenges

The benefits and challenges of *Step Up* relate more to the module as a whole than the assessments specifically. The module has now run each summer for four consecutive years and is being used as a template for similar projects. Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, indicating that the content has been pitched at an appropriate level and has acted as a confidence boost as well as an academic refresher course. This has been confirmed by tutors who report that *Step Up* 'graduates' are entering their MA programmes already 'up to speed', participating in seminars with greater confidence and skill.

The most significant challenge we face relates to the ongoing sustainability of the module. Both the original development phase and the subsequent delivery of the module have posed resourcing challenges. Although the online materials are reused from year to year, each instance of *Step Up* requires a significant commitment of staff time to moderate discussions, respond to reflections and mark the assessments, in addition to administration and the face-to-face events. As we prepare to run the module for the fifth time, we are increasingly seeing a need for revision and updating beyond maintenance and the smaller adjustments we have made from year to year.

Another challenge is student engagement. Although all accepted postgraduates in the school are offered a place on the module, a smaller subset decide to take it up, and within that group there is a wide variation between those who engage enthusiastically in all aspects, and those who might log in and have a look or only do the self-assessments. While it has always been our intention that students should choose how much of the module they wish to engage with, it is difficult to be sure if we are reaching the audience which would benefit most from this intervention.

Take-Aways

Step Up has demonstrated the effectiveness of technology-assisted assessment practices in a flexible, blended learning environment. Self-marking activities developed in Moodle were combined with the use of learning technologies and individualised feedback from a tutor to model academic expectations at postgraduate level, so as to help students to identify and address gaps in their prior knowledge.

More information on the flexible model and module are available as these were the focus of an innovative practice *conference workshop*.[6] The module has also been *recognised by Jisc as an exemplar project*[7] in the category of supporting students to study with digital technologies. The team were recipients of a Birkbeck Excellence in Teaching Award in 2016.

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6   *http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/8710*

7   *https://digitalstudent.jiscinvolve.org/wp/exemplars*