

Student Centred Review of Assessment and Feedback with Gillian Ulph and Elly Aspey

Good Practice in Teaching Podcast, recorded December 2022

Transcript

Hannah Cobb (HC): Okay, thank you so much for joining us in this podcast today. My name is Hannah Cobb and I'm the Interim Associate Dean for Online and Blended Learning, and I'm really excited to have Elly Aspey and Gillian Ulph from Law joining us today. They have been undertaking a project looking at student-centred review of assessment and feedback and they're here to tell us a little bit more about it. So, tell us about the project, what did it involve, when did it start, and what inspired it?

Gillian Ulph (GU): Thanks Hannah. So we have been working on a curriculum review within Law over the past couple of years, Elly and I were co-leading this project. And as part of this obviously we were looking at assessment and feedback. We weren't able to bring in the students as much as we would have liked during that period because it was the pandemic period. And we really felt there was a gap there that we wanted to fill by starting to get the students to give us some thoughts and contribute to redesigning how we talk about assessment and feedback. Trying to bring in their ideas and develop a shared understanding of assessment and feedback within the department.

HC: Fantastic. So what did you do? How did it work?

Elly Aspey (EA): So we used a concept called micro-sprints which had previously been sort of introduced by John Owen as part of the ITL Fellowship and what these are three-hour sessions where you do really focused work with students as partners in order to produce a kind of output at the end. So, they follow a set process plan to review reflect, and we had a set target for each of those sessions. So, we did four in total, one of which looked at reviewing assessment materials, one of which looked at marking criteria. And then one on assessment literacy and one on feedback literacy and we had a group of five students, myself and Gillian, and one of the e-learning humanities team was with us as well - to support and give their views on sort of assessment and feedback.

HC: Wow, that sounds brilliant. I should say, I think we will have a link below the podcast for people to John Owens' project that is on the ITL website, so people can have a bit of a read about that kind of broader context; but it sounds like a really constructive way of working. What were the outcomes then of the micro-sprints with the students?

GU: So, in terms of the use of micro-sprints, we've found it a really positive experience. We really, really enjoyed working with the students we've made it really easy to follow the guidance, set up by John Owens and I think the students really enjoyed it as well and found it a positive experience to be working with us. It was very energetic. It was reasonably easy to achieve some of the goals we were setting out to achieve, and there's a lot that we learned from that process but it's definitely

something we would encourage other colleagues to use and something we're going to take forward in our practice as well.

HC: And what were their feelings about assessment and feedback. What did you what did you get from those sessions?

EA: Yeah so I mean I guess it would maybe make sense to sort of go session by session. So for the assessment materials, what we were looking at was any kind of material that was provided to the student. So things like the assessment handbook, we have in law. So our coursework and there's an exam cover sheet, these types of things. And we just ask the students to have a look at them to see, you know, are they clear? Is there any ways we could make them better? And one of the things we identified was that there's potentially sort of lack of consistency in our materials, which is understandable, they've been designed at different times. And obviously with Covid they have not necessarily been reviewed as much as they should. So what we're trying to do is make the language much clearer in those materials, so that we're using the same terms for different types of assessment, we're making sure that they link together a bit better. And also that the language is supportive. This is another thing that the students identified, particularly with things like mitigating circumstances, that we clarify the kind of levels of support that we offer. And we make it so that students feel like they can apply, that it's something that is genuinely offered and that we are genuinely going to support them through. So that the whole thing becomes much more supportive than it was before.

GU: And I think we thought from that, one of our suggestions would be that there's more of a focus on assessment and feedback materials and regular reviews of those assessment and feedback materials within the department. So, we often update materials on an ad hoc basis, but actually, we need that consistency. And we also talked to the students about potentially offering a dynamic web page where all the material is located together or maybe having integrated assessment folders on Blackboard so that all the information is automatically filled in and updated for each of the individual course units, because was just that lack of consistency, which was really causing confusion with the students. And we're quite surprised that they weren't aware of where a lot of the materials were, they weren't using those materials, they were really struggling to find the information they needed in order to feel confident about their assessments.

HC: It's really interesting to hear that you sort of identified all of that. And I think that maybe takes us on to the kind of next question then. So you ran the various workshops and you've had all these kind of insights, and you are now at that kind of stage of sort of pivoting towards thinking about what the next steps are. What are your sort of thoughts on that? What insights would you take from these into the future?

EA: So, I think one of the things that we really pulled from the project, and particularly from the discussions on, well I guess through all of them, on the marking criteria, on through assessment feedback literacies, there's quite a strong disconnect between how staff see assessment and how

the students see assessment and what they're hoping to get from it. And particularly the way that they view assessment is often sort of an attempt to portray their knowledge on a particular thing. And what we really want to do is to identify how we can best support students to see the sort of broader aims of assessments. So how we can see how it links to the intended learning outcomes of the unit, how we can show how it broadens their transferable skills and has a utility outside of just that course unit. So what we want to do really is to try and institute some support for students to see how we can develop that, and develop that wider understanding of assessment and Gill, if you want to build on that, yeah?

GU: Yeah, what's interesting is there's already some good practice within Law. So we use things like exemplars, marking exercises with the students. We draw their attention to marking criteria, but we were just quite shocked by the fact that they weren't able to really use those criteria in any way. So they didn't understand their use for particular assessments, they couldn't look back on them to look at their feedback and they couldn't see how the criteria would be useful in the future. And so that's partly driven by a lack of understanding of the purpose and practice of assessment within the university. And we felt that we spent a lot of time looking at feedback and trying to give better feedback, but actually that's perhaps not going to be as effective if the students don't understand why it's important and how assessment matters, and that sense of developing a shared understanding is really more where we need to focus, we think.

HC: That's fantastic. Really interesting to hear. Did students proposed particular ways, how they thought things like rubrics and marking criteria could be used? Did they have suggestions about what could be done?

EA: Yeah. So for the marking criteria we have at the moment, they felt that they all knew how to find them, they had all actually read them, which was good, but they didn't use them going forward because they thought that they were potentially not detailed enough. They were a touch vague and they lacked clarity on what was required. So going forward what they suggested was much more detailed rubrics. So, things that set out explicitly the types of skills that were required at different bands, and so if you were attempting to get like a first-class, what specifically was required. Potentially a 2:1 level, breaking that down a bit more into a sort of a high 2:1, a low 2:1, and really linking it much more broadly to a wider range of things with maybe more explanation as to what the specific terms meant as well. Detailed as in per mode of assessment too. Ideally what they wanted was different rubrics for different types of assessments. We had quite a lot of discussion about this, about whether, or not, that was viable. One thing we thought about was maybe a greater level of detail at the point at which an assessment was provided, in terms of what people were looking for. And then that could be used with a sort of more generic set of marking criteria at the end. And the students felt that that would work because what they really wanted was further guidance on how to make sure they got to those levels and they weren't quite sure how to do that with the current criteria. And in a sense, they felt like adding more and more, and more detail into the marking criteria used at the end wouldn't necessarily help them. It was coming too late. So it would be more information about the type of assessment at the beginning, I think, rather than at the end. Gill, I don't know if you've got any thoughts on that.

GU: Yes, and one example, we looked at designing assessment templates, that said about the assessment brief, and that we thought the students that would be more helpful to them because it meant that we tend to just give them a question and expect them to go away and think about how to answer that question. But actually giving a more structured support about how to go about approaching that question and that particular assessment, they felt would be quite helpful.

In relation to the criteria, they were able to spot things that they could show us were misleading. So we talked about the need to demonstrate further reading, but we put that in our first class level. so that led to an expectation of students that if they demonstrated first-class, nicely demonstrated by the reading, that would necessarily mean that they would achieve first class mark and that's because it only appeared at the first class level. Whereas, if we had included that all the different stages, at all the different grades and actually articulated what we wanted students to do with that reading, and how they should be incorporating and engaging with that reading then that would allow them to better understand how they could move up across the levels.

HC: It's really interesting to hear you talking about this. My School that I'm from the SALC (School of Arts, Languages and Cultures), and we certainly had been thinking about these kind of things as well. And we do have marking criteria for different types of assessment. And, but that sort of question of how you get that information is something that I think we're thinking about not just in the Faculty, but across the whole university. With the pilot of Cadmus. Are you involved in Cadmus? And I think that is a really interesting space to start to bring those kind of criteria in are you finding, are you using Cadmus in that way?

GU: Yes we're both using Cadmus within our individual course units and in part because we've noticed this disconnect between staff and student expectations around assessment. And the ability to scaffold is where I think that Cadmus is particularly helpful in supporting students, when they're approaching their assessments.

HC: That's so brilliant to hear. I don't want to talk too much about Cadmus because it's a spoiler alert for future podcasts... but it is something that we'll be bringing to this podcast series to sort of talk through people's experiences. So hopefully we can hear more in a bit, but it's really interesting to hear how it connects up with the work that you've been doing. And the sort of student-centred review that you've undertaken.

HC: And so you've told us loads about sit in the student view of it. But what has your work showed about staff assessment literacy?

GU: Again, we think that's probably something that needs a greater focus. We can see that there's a lot of work we could do with the students to develop their understanding of both assessment and its purpose and the practice of assessment. But we also need that shared understanding across the staff as well, so that they're not giving inconsistent messaging to students and that they're able to draw on the current thinking about assessment. So rather than just thinking about assessment of learning, that sort-of very end-point of assessment. That assessment is able to build into the learning

the students do as they're progressing through their studies. That understanding and those developments in pedagogy need to be shared between staff, and that would actually help to support students

HC: that kind of difference between assessment of learning and assessment for learning that kind of pedagogic difference.

GU: Yeah, that's exactly it. But there's been a real shift in pedagogy recently, in the past maybe 10, 15 years, I think. And there's pockets of very good practice within the university. But I'm not sure there's that shared understanding across all disciplines and all courses. And again, if we can get to a point where we've got our shared understanding I think students will better engage with the assessment from an early point and will understand what's expected of them and how to meet the learning outcomes.

HC: That's fantastic. It's really brilliant to hear all about this. I know you're kind of at that stage now where having done the review and sort of thought about it. You were now thinking about the kind of next steps for implementation. And I know we're really lucky that you're going to be delivering a workshop later on in the year, in our faculty Teaching Online seminar series, and you very kindly have said you'll write something for our What Works In Teaching / Best Practice online series. So people who are listening, will be able to look out for those later on in the academic year. Thank you so much for coming to tell us about this today, it's been really brilliant to hear about it. And I think it's going to be really interesting to see how the sort of direction of your review goes in terms of changing assessment and feedback in that kind of way. Thank you so much for coming.

GU: Thank you.

EA: Thank you.

Links:

John Owen ITL Fellowship: [Student-Staff Partnerships in Teaching and Learning Design](#)