

The role of iterative feedback
in developing essay writing skills
in science undergraduates

or

"Real -World" Assessment

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Orsmond et al (2000):

"assessment tends to shape every part of the student learning experience".



The "problem" identified:

In a multicultural institution like Kingston wedded to the progressive Widening Participation agenda many of our students may not be familiar with the unwritten rules, contexts and conventions of academic life (Anyon, 1980) or comfortable with writing complex material in essay format.



This, allied to greatly increased student numbers may lead academic staff to restrict their use of essay writing as an assessment tool for the advancement of student learning.

There's too many of them and they can't write!



Why persist with essays then?

Essay assignments give students a chance to use and develop a wide range of sources and allows time and creates opportunities for sustained reflection (Hounsell, 1997).

Essays test for "deep" learning (Scouller, 1998).



Strategies I use to improve essay-writing

1. Use workshops to introduce essay-writing assignment
2. Restrict question to something very specific but give students a choice.
3. Assess relevance of resources found
4. Formatively assess drafts
5. Summatively assess final essay



Evidence underpinning strategies

1. Use workshops to introduce essay-writing assignment

Workshops and tutorials designed to give formal instruction on how to write essays were the most valued feature for students (Elander, 2003).



2. Restrict question to something very specific but give students a choice.

Students actively interested in and having some personal investment in the topic under discussion do better at essay writing tasks than students with no choice in their topic and no interest in the subject matter (Hughes-Jones, 1980).



3. Assess relevance of resources found

The tutor in this context is ideally placed to guide students in their selection of literature relevant to the question being addressed (Harris, 2001).



4. Formatively assess drafts

Students who used strategies of "minimal drafting" obtained poor results whilst those students who used strategies of "detailed planning and drafting" performed better (Torrance *et al*, 2000).



5. Summatively assess final essay

Students who put more effort into finding appropriate references, wrote preliminary notes and constructed arguments within their work had a better understanding of the assessment criteria and received higher grades (Campbell *et al*, 1998).



What did adopting these strategies do for student attainment at Kingston?



Results

	Control	Treatment	Statistical significance
Year 1	30.1 ± 2.2 (n = 67)	46.1 ± 2.9 (n = 68)	p < 0.0001
Year 2	31.1 ± 2.25 (n = 73)	52.8 ± 1.9 (n = 55)	p < 0.0001
Year 3	48.7 ± 1.83 (n = 74)	50.1 ± 2.3 (n = 39)	n/s
Year 4	43.6 ± 1.69 (n = 77)	57.2 ± 2.3 (n = 42)	p < 0.0001



Real world assessment

Student learning is facilitated by this type of incremental development of a single piece of work subject to frequent and prompt feedback (Hounsell, 1984).



Real world assessment

Interestingly, this model of assessment (review and redrafting) may be thought akin to the process academics themselves undergo when publishing peer-reviewed journal articles and may therefore be providing students with relevant real world skills.



Students' comments

- "I liked the workshops designed to help with examination questions"
- "I *liked* the essay assignment" ?????
- "Workshop assignments had prompt feedback"
- "Confidence levels are raised"
- "The best feature was the level of feedback"
- "Workshops focussed on exam"

