

Improving student learning through departmental student feedback self-studies

Possible Action Plan (D) for a Participating Department

Desired Outcome

A lecturer who has devised new materials, for computer assisted learning or assessment or for distance learning, wishes to discover how these are used by learners, and how that compares with what was assumed and intended when the materials were being produced.

Method

1. The lecturer will seek the co-operation of three students who are reasonably articulate, and willing to take on the task as described for a small reimbursement.
2. A stranger to the students, and to the discipline, is recruited to make notes as students talk out their thoughts aloud while using the materials.
3. Student 1 works with the materials in as near normal a manner as possible. Students 2 and 3 ask questions about the decisions made and reactions voiced by student 1 – especially when the active student becomes involved, and provides less of a commentary.
4. After perhaps 20 minutes, student 2 takes the active role. Then after another 20 minutes, student 3 is the active one.
5. The observer now emerges from the background, and checks out the main features of the methods exemplified. The observer checks that these are reasonably generalisable, and accurately and completely summarised; and confirms permission to pass on this information to the lecturer.
6. The main method points are then summarised on a questionnaire, which is issued to the entire class, and asks them, in effect, which statements describe significant features of the way each student respondent uses the materials.
7. These anonymous returns will then go to the lecturer, for analysis – and decisions for action.

Action intended

The lecturer will approach this enquiry with an open mind, expecting to encounter endorsement of practice, surprises and mismatches between what is reported, either as minority or majority behaviour, and what was assumed in conceiving and offering the materials.

The nature of these mismatches with expectations will determine the action then taken.

Analysis of Feedback

[If this enquiry follows what has been a predictable pattern in other such enquiries, the lecturer will often be surprised by the reports of what students are doing when using the new materials.]

Feedback will be grouped under various headings:

1. Features which apparently thwart or frustrate the intended learning, and can be readily eliminated. These will be eliminated, even if only a minority of learners are so irritated.
2. Features which indicate that the desired learning is not being achieved, and that the outcomes of learning are not as listed. These will call for radical redrafting of the material.
3. Features which indicate that the assumed approach to learning is not being followed, but may in fact lead otherwise to achievement of the specified learning outcomes. Where this uncertainty exists, further investigations will be undertaken, to ascertain the nature of the consequent learning.
4. Features which utterly bewilder the lecturer will be raised in class with a polite request for further information later, from those who may work in that way.