

Overcoming Student Fear and Loathing of Exams: a collaborative project

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Introduction

This article reflects upon a collaborative project involving the Write Now Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (<http://www.writenow.ac.uk>), and a Business School lecturer who teaches an Honours-level module, International Purchasing. The collaboration was in response to an analysis of module exam results that were disappointing with regard to the lower performing students. A student survey identified which, in particular, fear was thought to have played a significant part in the students' exam preparations. It is the intention of the article to demonstrate how collaborative projects can be employed to address specific issues relating to teaching and learning.

Context

The Writing Centre

The Writing Centre is based at London Metropolitan University and forms part of the *Write Now* Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), a partnership between London Metropolitan University, Liverpool Hope University and Aston University. It is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

The Writing Centre works with students, academics and educational staff to improve students' academic writing. It aims to enrich students' learning experiences by enabling them to develop academic and disciplinary identities as empowered, confident writers. Its work is informed by current theoretical and conceptual approaches in the field of student learning and investigates the effectiveness of its initiatives with students and staff through a comprehensive programme of research (Harrington & O'Neill 2008).

One aspect of the research conducted by the Centre is an allocation of funding to pay for one-off projects. These normally involve a lecturer or academic making a proposal that, subject to approval, forms the basis of a small-scale project that will contribute to the overall research the Centre carries out. In this case the lecturer made a proposal to specifically address the poor performances she had identified in the exam for the International Purchasing module. She was then able to call upon the expertise offered by the Writing Centre to provide extra support for her students. Once the proposal had been accepted she worked mainly with the Writing Specialist and the Learning Technologist to develop strategies for improving the way the students respond to the exam question (O'Neill et al. 2010).

To address the problem of low performance in the exam, the Writing Centre was approached at an early stage and collaborated with the lecturer throughout the period under discussion.

The International Purchasing module

International Purchasing is a specialist Honours-level 15-credit module taken by International Business students at London Metropolitan University. It is also available as an optional module. It enables students to understand international purchasing from a business perspective, and can be used in conjunction with other modules to obtain 'exemptions' from the professional requirements of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT). However, the Institute have a firm preference for examination-based assessments, so there is not much flexibility to change the assessment regime. The assessment is a 50/50 split between coursework and examination. The exam component of the module is two hours in duration and includes a short case study, typically involving an ethical dimension.

The students

London Metropolitan University has traditionally upheld an inclusive stance to student recruitment and has sought to open up access to students from social backgrounds often excluded by other institutions (Leathwood & O'Connell 2003). The International Purchasing module is therefore characterised by a diverse range of students with differing abilities, outlooks and cultural understandings (Holley & Dobson 2008).

Methodology

An action research methodology (cf Norton 2009) was followed in undertaking this project. Action research can cover a wide range of research paradigms and processes, and this work draws upon what Norton (2009:51) identifies as 'the British tradition' - in that it links research to improvement of practice and is education orientated. The authors argue that locating the work of this project within the scope of a deliberate, solution-orientated investigation as advocated by

Kemmis & McTaggart (1998), characterised by spiralling cycles of problem identification; systematic data collection; analysis; reflection; data-driven action and problem redefinition means that the work can be recognised as theory based, relevant and improving classroom practice.

Understanding the problem

In determining the reasons for the poor performance it was clear that low levels of engagement were apparent. This was verified both informally, by feedback from students - resulting from the close relationship the lecturer had formed with them - and from more organised feedback derived from a questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. Evidence of poor attendance was also a factor. Explicit evidence was gathered from students in the previous cohort during Week 5 of teaching. A system using Post-it notes was employed. The students were asked to give “good” and “bad” comments on aspects of the module such as satisfaction with the progress of their writing; interactivity; materials; quality of teaching and so on. All of the “bad” comments identified a fear of the examination.

Interestingly, a simple check utilising the tracking data on Blackboard, (the institution’s VLE platform) showed that not a single student had accessed the pages set up by the lecturer under the heading: ‘Prepare for your exam’. These contained previous examination papers; marking schemes; feedback to previous cohorts on examination performance and external examiners comments. When this was brought to the attention of the students during an in-class discussion it emerged that students’ fear and apprehension was not especially related to the International Purchasing exam, but examinations *per se*. This fear had apparently inhibited students from even looking at the prepared materials.

The project team considered various options that may explain this pattern of behaviour. The most likely reasons for this were thought to be concerned with the student profile, including as it did a high percentage of ‘non-traditional’ students who may have been unfamiliar with the conventions of taking exams in Higher Education. It may also be conjectured that fear of the exam was more influential in the cases where students possessed weaker language skills, English not necessarily being their first language.

Outcomes

Subsequent discussions after an analysis of the previous cohort exam papers clearly indicated to all parties that the weaker students were, for some reason, unable to successfully make use of the theory they had learned in class to complete the case study. This and other observations provided the basis for the course of action taken.

Having agreed on ‘fear of the exam’ as a suitable target for action, the lecturer, in conjunction with the Writing Centre proposed key interventions aimed at reducing

the levels of fear and improving the use of theory used in answering the exam question. These are summarised below:

- The Writing Specialist agreed to come into a taught session and discuss exam techniques with the students. It was hoped this would help dissipate fear by discussing the source of the fear openly and directly.
- The lecturer devised an in-class activity using selected scripts from a previous cohort to illustrate how the case study had been addressed in the past. The activity asked students to predict the grade of each script. The intention was to promote active reflection on the writing strategies, particularly relating to the case study, essential to exam success.
- The Writing Specialist produced a questionnaire designed to elicit further information relevant to the cohort.

The Learning Technologist developed an online resource to provide out-of-hours support for students preparing to take the exam. It was hoped this would dissipate fear by providing the virtual support of the lecturer (by means of video) and would thereby serve to reassure students by offering a familiar human presence and easy access to the course materials. The final result can be accessed here: <http://prezi.com/t6gsdnytc7oj/exam-case-study-pineapples-from-brazil/>.

From the above it can be seen that the interventions were designed to address the issue of fear by maintaining a human connection between the students, the exam and the theory they needed to draw upon. Given the student profile, this seemed an especially important strategy since it was felt that unfamiliarity with the business of taking exams may well have been a significant factor in the poor performances of the weaker students.

The classroom session

The classroom session was divided into two parts. In the first part the students focused on their coursework, in the second, the interventions mentioned above were deployed. The Writing Specialist used a *PowerPoint* presentation to outline some key strategies advocated by the Writing Centre and the students were encouraged to participate by asking questions. Following this, the lecturer then delivered her carefully prepared revision of the essential features of the exam, supported with example papers from a previous cohort and with reference to the marking criteria. It should be said that the example papers were obtained with full permission of the students.

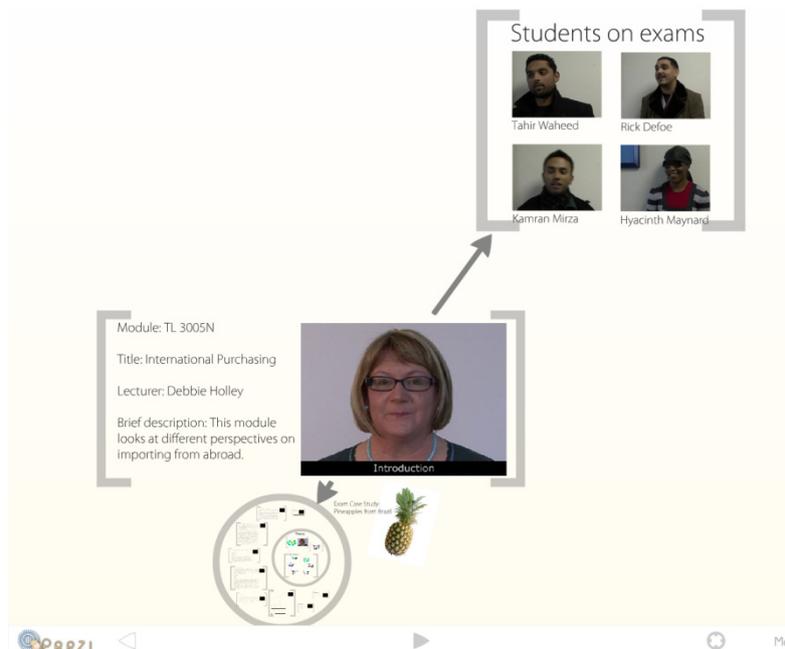
The in-class delivery of the revision work proved to be lively and vocal. The class was asked to vote on a spread of exam papers chosen to exemplify the marking criteria in the five main bands; a, b, c, d and e. This proved extremely effective in

providing opportunities for the lecturer to make explicit how theory had been used successfully or otherwise and the kinds of writing strategies that could have been employed. The instant results evidenced by a show of hands for each grade provided a scatter of opinion that could be exploited by the lecturer in highlighting different points of interest. Engagement levels with this part of the session were noticeably elevated and all students seemed to show signs of involvement.

In the final part of the session the Learning Technologist presented the latest iteration of the online resources he had been developing. It was made clear that this was a work in-progress, not the final version, but it was well-received and elicited several complimentary remarks.

The online resource

<http://prezi.com/t6gsdnytc7oj/exam-case-study-pineapples-from-brazil/>



Development of the online resources ran parallel to the other preparations and involved close collaboration between the lecturer and the Learning Technologist. Several options were considered but the idea of using video was decided on at an early stage. The use of video was envisioned in direct response to the evidence regarding the students' fear of the exam. It was supposed that by providing virtual, asynchronous access to the lecturer, and by seeing her talk through the exam, some of the fears the students were experiencing might be allayed.

In working out a suitable way to present the video content the Learning Technologist also needed to address the question of how the weaker students were engaging (or not) with theory. The eventual solution came in the form of a relatively new online service named *Prezi*. This enables resources such as text, video and *Flash*

movies to be positioned in a presentational space that allows the user to zoom-in or zoom-out of regions to target resources individually. The strength of this presentational tool is that the user always retains a sense of the overall structure of the elements comprising the whole. There is also a facility enabling a pathway to be set up through the various elements so that a “guided tour” can be created. In this case the Learning Technologist linked the key theories underpinning the case study, in the form of *PowerPoint* slides, to the videos. The exam papers from the previous cohort, used in the in-class session, were linked in with videos and the exam-marking scheme was also handled in the same way.

Initial Evaluation

Students were invited to comment on the resource after the examination. Only three did so, although several other students did make complimentary comments when calling in to collect their coursework.

In summary, the students were very grateful for the resource, described as ‘extremely useful’ because ‘it gives students a very structure[d] way of learning how to answer a question’ and modelled academic practice: ‘having case-study as an example and theory linked to it makes it much easier to understand and learn’. They felt it was ‘an amazing way to help students’ and hoped the project would continue to ‘make a difference in students learning’.

Conclusion

The collaboration between the Writing Centre Lecturer demonstrates how specific problems concerning teaching and learning can be addressed using an action research approach. In particular the authors believe that collaborations such as these benefit from the complementary skills of the parties involved, all of whom can learn something from each other. In this instance, it is too early to comment on the effectiveness of the interventions but, it is fair to say, the dimensions of the problem are now much better understood.

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Biographical note

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