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Integrated assignment workshops: developing assessment literacy via collaborative exemplar analysis

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Presentation abstract

This lightning talk explored the conceptualisation, implementation, and impact of integrated assessment workshops within the University of Essex nursing programmes. These courses admit a high proportion of students from diverse and 'non-traditional' backgrounds (Wong, 2018; Gill, 2023), including a significant majority of mature students (82.5%), many of whom do not have recent experience of formal UK education settings. Although nursing students generally have a strong commitment to their future professional identities, their student and academic identities may be less secure (Thomas et al., 2023). To address these challenges, learning development (LD) and nursing lecturers collaborated to develop and implement team-taught integrated assignment workshops across the curriculum to support students in making sense of assessment requirements and applying marking criteria to their own work.

Grounded in ALDinHE values (ALDinHE, 2023) and the concepts of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975; 2017), the workshops aim to demystify HE assessment practices and clarify the tacit knowledge required for students to develop autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-regulation in their approach to academic assignments (Hawe et al., 2019; To et al., 2022). The collaborative, dialogic approach to exemplar analysis (Carter et al., 2018; Merrydew and East, 2022) supports academic and social integration, and also engages students in developing and delivering constructive feedback: an essential professional skill (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018).

Initially, we expected that supporting students' ability to interpret and apply marking criteria would increase first-submission pass rates and generate higher marks overall. Two pilot sessions implemented in 2022-23 showed extremely promising results for both aims.

Consequently, further workshops have been implemented across the wider curriculum with the extended aims of achieving an increase in good degrees and reducing BAME awarding gaps over the next three years.

A successful version of this five-minute talk was presented at the University of Essex Education Away Day in October 2023.

Keywords: integrated assessment workshops; assessment literacy; nursing; learning development.

Community response

This lightning talk highlighted the importance of providing students with assessment exemplars as a means of demystifying expectations around writing quality and the assessment generally.

Nursing educators, in collaboration with learning developers, created a successful workshop for students with the aim of clarifying assessment expectations to address a few issues. Low initial pass rates for a Level 6 module on Participatory Research for Service Improvement, along with considerations around strengthening students' assessment literacy, provided some of the impetus. In addition, an acknowledgment of understanding the needs of increasingly diverse student populations (e.g. mature and BAME students) and the awarding gap provided further motivation to investigate the area.

The workshops were underpinned by the Active Assessment Literacy Session (Merrydew and East, 2022). The workshop process had students collaborate in small groups to get acquainted with the marking criteria and discuss exemplar answers covering a spread of grades. Students initially discussed the samples before matching each abstract to marker feedback. They were then invited to comment on overall quality. After this dialogic process, the module leader and learning developer led a facilitated discussion that clarified and contextualised the exemplars and relevant marker feedback.

The workshop organisers also requested pre- and post-workshop feedback from students as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Pre- and post-workshop student feedback (presentation screenshot).
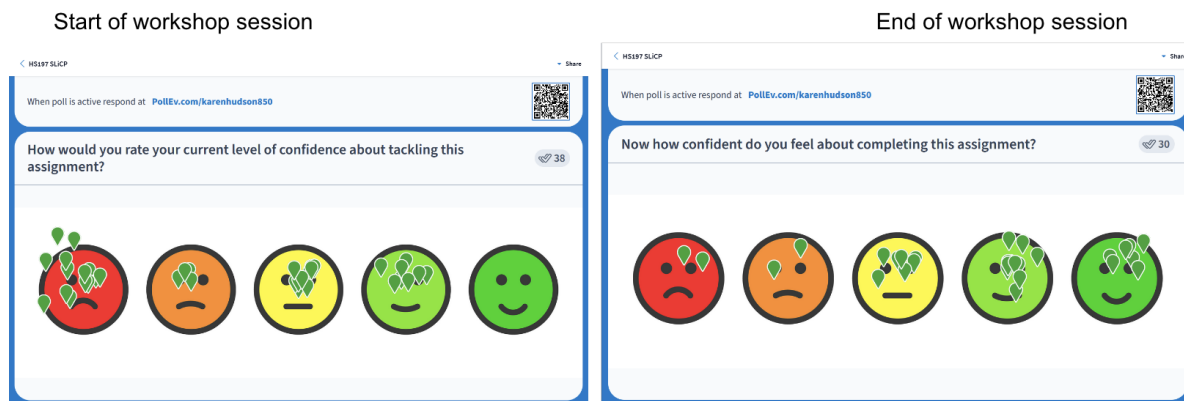
An informal PollEverywhere activity at the start and end of each workshop consistently returns this pattern. In general, students perceive an increased level of confidence after attending the session.

Overall, students reported feeling much more confident at the end of the workshop. While the presenter noted that there was no attempt made to separate the impact of the assignment workshops from other factors, the early observations are consistent with those of Carter et al. (2018, p.93):

> …despite the limited evidence around the use of exemplars in higher education in general and nursing education specifically, students' value exemplars and using exemplars can positively impact upon academic performance…

Building upon the success of these workshops, the organisers will develop and deliver further modules across the Nursing Division while monitoring the impact of these. They also aim to explore the use of collaborative tools, such as Talis Elevate for collaborative annotation.

Next steps and additional questions

The experiences of integrated assignment workshops offer some hope and insight into how learning developers can effectively collaborate with academic colleagues to create rich learning experiences. Some questions that readers might have include:

- What, if any, were the challenges of the academic/learning developer collaborations? What were some first practical steps to make this happen?
- To what extent is there scope for developing these workshops as a student-staff collaboration? What might this look like?

- What are the possibilities for blended and/or fully online integrated assignment workshops, especially for programmes where students might prefer these modes and/or consist largely of commuters?

Author's reflection

This ongoing, collaborative project demonstrates the potential for effective collegial working that enhances both student achievement and a sense of community among course-level and module-level teaching teams. While the observed positive impact on student outcomes is modest, we will monitor whether there is a more cumulative effect as students progress through the curriculum.

The community reflections, next steps and additional questions have provided some useful feedback and potential avenues to explore in developing these workshops and making them more impactful. In response to the specific questions raised above:

1. Challenges in collaborating with subject lecturers
As I am fully integrated within a subject teaching team, there have been relatively few challenges in collaborating with academic colleagues to make this happen. The initial motivation for introducing this strategy was to address a specific poor pass rate in a specific module. Having achieved promising results with this intervention, it has been a relatively easy 'sell' to roll out the workshops across the wider curriculum. There have occasionally been differences of opinion on the range of exemplars to select; sometimes, academics may prefer to show aspirational exemplars, whereas as a learning developer, I prefer a broader range so that students understand a) what 'good enough' looks like and b) what specific features enable the achievement of higher marks. It would be interesting to see if these different approaches could be correlated with different outcomes.

2. Student collaboration
This is an approach that I will be actively exploring in the coming academic year. In particular, I am interested to see how students respond to subsequent workshops once they are familiar with the approach, and what they believe would make these even more

Hudson
Integrated assignment workshops:
developing assessment literacy via collaborative exemplar analysis

useful in enabling them to evidence their learning more effectively. I am also interested in their view on the potential usefulness of collaborative annotation, via e.g. Talis Elevate, although there is the potential that this might unintentionally exclude students with less well-developed digital skills.

3. Potential for blended/online delivery

At present, institutional policy does not permit this; all timetabled sessions are in person only and students who are unable to attend can catch up via lecture capture. To the best of my knowledge, there are no plans to change this policy.

Acknowledgements

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