

Students Enhancing Their Learning Experience: From Evaluation to Action

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Abstract

Much of the formal module evaluation takes place at the end of a module through questionnaires developed by higher education institutions (HEIs) as part of their effort to improve modules. However, there is limited literature on approaches to module evaluation in collaboration with students. This deficiency in the literature represents an opportunity to involve students in the formative and summative evaluation of the module in order for them to enhance their learning experience from module evaluation to module improvement. This Student as Academic Partner (SAP) project focuses on an undergraduate module enhancement in terms of learning, teaching and assessment for the benefit of current and future students.

SAP REPORT

Introduction

Much of the formal module evaluation takes place at the end of a module through questionnaires developed by HEIs as part of their effort to improve modules. Many authors criticize this approach and suggest a broader range of approaches to module evaluation including formative evaluations (Kember, Leung, and Kwan, 2002; Barrie, Ginns, and Prosser, 2005). In particular, formative evaluations are useful as any changes to the module can be made while the students are studying on the module as well as for the benefit of future students. However, there is limited literature on approaches to module evaluation in collaboration with students. The key exception is some work conducted by Giles et al. (2004) and Bovill et al. (2010). The latter reported that students'

involvement in the evaluation of a research module enhanced student engagement and increased student confidence in their research skills.

This deficiency in the literature represented an opportunity to involve students in the formative and summative evaluation of a module in order for them to enhance their learning experience from module evaluation to module improvement. The SAP project scheme 'offers an opportunity for paid employment to enable students to work in equal partnership with academic staff to strengthen the student learning experience at the University for the benefit of all' (SAP Project Scheme, 2015). A SAP project was initiated which was subsequently approved. The approved SAP project had a particular focus on the students' experience on a module. In particular, it was designed to evaluate a particular business and management module in terms of learning, teaching and assessment, in collaboration with the students studying on the module.

Included in the SAP project team were the module leader (in the role of SAP Project Staff Partner) and one of the students on the module (in the role of SAP Project Student Partner). The SAP project was designed to enable a formative evaluation of the module to take place throughout the module with the student partner taking an active role in the learning and teaching team and offering an opportunity to the students to have shared ownership in the learning process. This allowed for a better understanding of the students' experiences on the module and interpreting the students' perspectives from the student partner's perception who was also a student on the module. The approach of this study had aspects of action research; therefore, ethical approval was obtained before the commencement of the project. The SAP project has duration of 8 months.

Aim, Methodology and Methods

Aim

The SAP project was carried out during the course of an undergraduate level business and management module here at the Worcester Business School. The module was delivered across two semesters to forty students across two occurrences. The module is an innovative and practical

module as students are engaged in experiential learning and active student-centered activities through team work on live projects in semester one and using a live case organization in semester two for their assignments.

The aim of the SAP project was threefold: the project, first, explored and developed a survey/tool for a formative module evaluation. Next, it collected students' perspectives and opinions, evaluated and interpreted the results. The project, finally, offered an opportunity for the SAP project team to discuss findings, outline issues and devise a course of actions to improve further the students' learning, teaching and assessment experiences on the module.

Methodology

The approach of this study had aspects of action research (Mcniff and Whitehead, 2011). A number of authors (largely) agree that action research, by definition, is about intervention (Gummesson, 2000; Robson, 2003; Saunders et al., 2008). Action research is distinguishable in terms of its purpose, which is about bringing change within particular organizational settings. In this sense, *improvement* and *involvement* are focal points to action research (Robson, 2002). Kolb (1984) proposes a four-stage learning process with a cycle of learning, consisting of concrete experience, observation and reflection, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Figure 1 below depicts the Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984). Kolb (1984) suggests that the process of learning can begin at any stage; however effective learning can only occur if all four stages of the cycle are executed by the learner. In order to reach the SAP project objectives, the action research followed, in a cyclical manner, the steps of the action theory learning process (Kolb, 1984), namely, plan --> act --> observe --> reflect. This allowed for a better understanding of the issues involved in learners' experiences and practical improvements to be made.

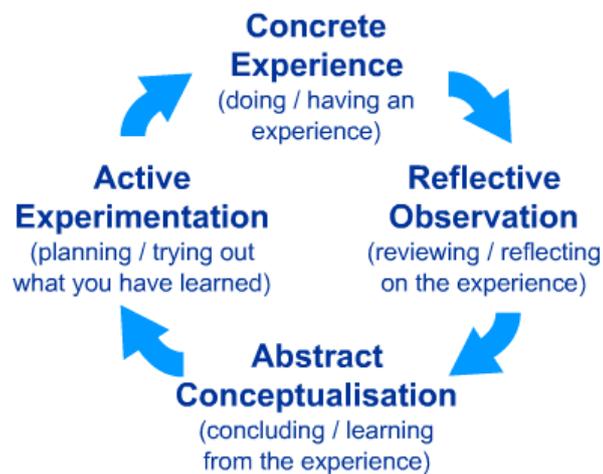


Figure 1 – Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984)

Methods

In early stages of the SAP project, the student partner undertook some informal interviews with the students studying on the module on both occurrences. The module leader (who is also a staff partner) also collected via post it notes some feedback from the students on their learning experiences as part of mid-module feedback. Additionally, some feedback was collected by the module leader on another occasion via informal conversations with the students before the commencement of the second semester while discussing with them semester two content.

The SAP team members discussed potential questions for inclusion in the survey/tool based on the themes emerging from the informal interviews, conversations and feedback and suggestions from the education literature (e.g. Moore, 2011). The final e-survey for formative module evaluation was designed to obtain answers and perspectives from the students, which included a total of eleven questions, in combination of five closed questions and six open-ended questions in order to allow respondents to answer in their own way (Dillman, 2000). In contrast, the formal summative questionnaire run by the University offers only two open-ended questions.

The first close-ended question in the survey/tool for evaluation of the students' experiences on the module was about whether the students are part of occurrence A or B. The other four questions

were: 'I would like more activities throughout the lecture'; 'Lecture should be split into two parts, lecture and seminar'; 'I would be happy to research a case study over several weeks which will help with the current assignment'; 'The sessions prepared me for the assessment.' The students were asked to answer these questions by ticking boxes labelled 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree'. The students were asked to report their perspectives and opinion through six open-ended questions. These included: 'What are you looking for in the remaining sessions?'; 'What would you like more of?'; 'What would you like less of?'; 'What is the best part of this module?'; 'What would you like to improve or change?'; 'Please use this space to add any other relevant comments not already covered above that you may have'.

It took longer than planned for the final survey/tool to crystalize and set this up due to the student partner having other commitments. Once the final survey/tool was developed, this was administrated electronically using Qualtrics software and submitted to all forty students studying on the module in order to gather their perspectives. Unfortunately, the response rate was unsatisfactorily as only five out of forty students completed the survey which could be deemed as not a representative sample. The low response rate may be due to the fact that the survey was submitted before the Easter break.

The SAP student partner analysed the findings from the small sample and highlighted a number of recurring themes. Four action points were suggested by the student partner. In the spirit of action research, interventions were made to address the issues identified through the survey and further feedback was collected from the seventeen students participating in the particular intervention.

The next stage of the SAP project was to analyze the results from the final summative survey managed by the University and compare these to the formative evaluations generated throughout the module. The SAP team will evaluate these and any changes will be discussed for implementation for the next academic year. The student and tutor will then communicate the results

to the students. The SAP project is still in progress, however, some preliminary outcomes of the SAP project are discussed below.

Outcomes of the Project

Formative module evaluation results

This SAP project provided an account of what occurred in practice in terms of evaluation and enhancement of learning, teaching and assessment for the benefit of current and future students. Interestingly, the themes that emerged from the informal interviews carried out by the student partner with the students on the module, by asking them what they 'like' or 'dislike' about the module, were around the 'activities on the module', 'the use of case study' and 'the lecture slides'. Similarly, the results from the informal feedback and conversations that the staff partner collected were around the 'lecture slides' in terms of the slides' length and the 'relevance of the lectures to the assignment'. These themes informed the development of the final formative survey/tool.

Despite the low response rate on the survey which could not be considered adequate and representative, the student partner identified some issues concerning the responding students in term of their experience on the module. These included:

- Students would not like further activities in class time (3 out of 5 responding students);
- Students would like the lesson split into distinct two parts lecture and seminar (3 out of 5 responding students);
- Students would be happy to research a case study over several weeks which will help with the current assignment (3 out of 5 responding students).

Some of these results seemed contradictory as the respondents stated they do not like lectures (perhaps not long lectures) but they would not also like to get involved in activities in class time. Currently at the Business School the class session consists of three hours, including a lecture and seminar type activities often throughout the whole session. In the past, on certain modules students

needed to move from a larger lecture room to a smaller seminar room which included being split in smaller groups. Due to students' feedback most modules are now planned to have the whole session in the same room. An assumption could be made that some students would like to have a session that is distinctively split in two parts (lecture and seminar) may mean that they would like to attend first hour lecture only and then not attend the rest of the session. Noticeably, the respondents found working on a live case study for several weeks a positive experience.

The open-ended questions provided an opportunity for the students to express their opinions in their own words. The empirical evidence gathered revealed that all five respondents indicated that the sessions did not prepare them for the assessment. Also when the students have been asked 'what they are looking from the remaining sessions?', they have pointed out that they need 'more assignment help' and 'more information about the case organization' and 'how they can relate what is taught in the sessions to the assignment'. Interestingly, the student partner in her report commented that 'the students talked about assignment work being the most important element of the module and that all coursework should relate to this'. Some respondents stated that the slides are too long and indicated that there should be less slides each week.

Four action points were suggested by the SAP student. These included:

- Activities that simulate the field of study;
- Split the lecture into two distinct parts ;
- In-depth case study that provides opportunity for learning the theory;
- Reduction of slides and greater use of video.

These suggestions were discussed among the teaching team and different changes were implemented throughout the module such as slides reduction and greater use of video. Interestingly, the student partner suggested the use of in-depth case studies that provides an opportunity to apply the theory of practice. Some case studies were discussed in class throughout the module; the third

assessment task consisted of a live case study that provided a more specific opportunity to the students to apply the theory to a real life scenario. This raised a question whether the students were aware of what the assignment task entailed.

As only two weeks were left until the end of the module, the two areas for the benefit of current students were addressed such as 'more assignment help' and 'more information on the case organization' which would ultimately have dealt with the other underlying concerns. In order to address each of these two areas the following two interventions were made:

- To invite the representatives from the 'case organization' to provide further information;
- To provide assignment three guidelines.

Interestingly, these two actions did not necessarily originate from the students' feedback as both action points were already planned in advance and included in the module outline. Although, the module leader provided some feedback in class and made the students more aware of these activities via discussion in class and via announcements through Blackboard.

Following the assignment three guidance sessions, anonymous feedback from the students was sought via distributed paper-based feedback sheets in order to evaluate this intervention. The students were asked to report on how useful this session was to them by ticking boxes labelled 'not useful', 'some use', 'very useful', 'extremely useful'. Seventeen responses were collected across the two occurrences. Figure 2 below shows that 94% students found the session useful.

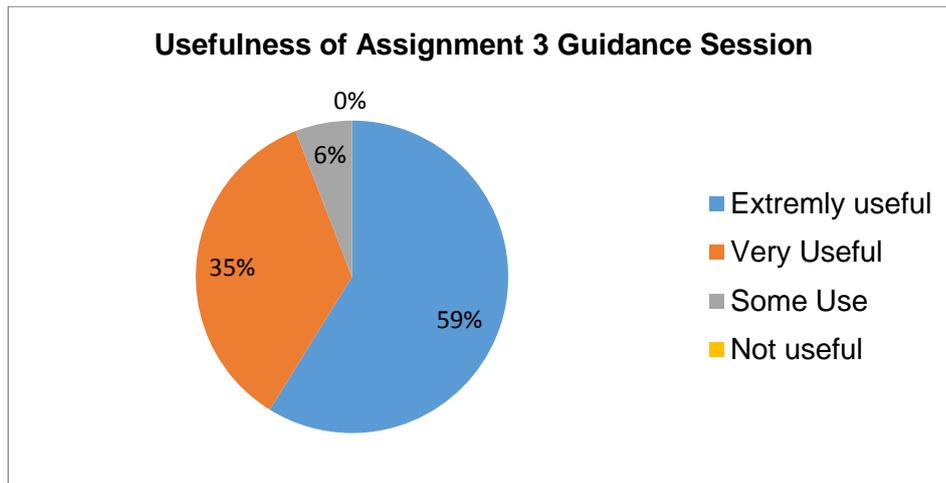


Figure 2 – Usefulness of Assignment 3 Guidance Session

Only one student reported that they found the session of 'some use' but they did not provide an answer to the question 'why this was'. The sixteen students, who reported that they found the session "extremely useful" and "very useful", included reasons such as:

- 'By far the most important lecture, created a path for assignment';
- 'It helped clarify points of uncertainty, make things clear';
- 'It was directly about the assignment';
- 'This session clarified all important points including the structure and layout of the assignment in detail'.

Interestingly, some students noted within the feedback sheet that they would have preferred to have this session earlier on the module. Noticeably, this demonstrated that students often lack awareness, as the same slides were used during the briefing session in week three of the module and were informed that a more detailed guidance session is planned in week eleven of the module. The same slides were used for both briefing and guidance sessions and were already made available at the beginning of semester two via Blackboard. The briefing session was followed with

two hour long interactive presentation and questions and answers delivered by the senior management team of the live case organization at their premises.

The students were also asked: 'what has the session inspired you to do?'. The empirical evidence gathered reveals that most of the respondents felt 'inspired' and 'motivated' to complete the assignment task. Some respondents clearly stated that the session inspired them to 'write a good assignment and get an 'A'', 'It has given me more motivation to work on the assignment', and 'Inspired me to do my assignment, using the right resources'. Others claimed that the session helped them to 'structure the assignment better and reminded me to include things', 'use more models' and 'to rewrite what I have started'.

The positive feedback of the intervention indicated that the students placed a great importance on the assessment. Gibbs (2010: 14) suggests that 'students can tackle assignments that are intended as learning activities so as to maximise the marks they obtain rather than maximising the learning achieved from engaging with the assignment.' Furthermore, it seemed that the students consider the assessment as 'the most important element of the module.' This may imply that students' learning was driven by their assessment. Besides, it appeared that the students expected that 'all course work should relate to this [the assessment].'

Summative module evaluation results

The SAP project started in November 2015 and it will end in June 2016 with the submission of the final SAP report. In the first six months of the project, feedback and perspectives from the students were sought via informal feedback, interviews and conversations and more formal but formative approaches were adopted using a survey and feedback sheets. During this first main stage, it could be argued that single-loop learning has occurred. Argyris (1993: 68) defines single-loop learning as 'whenever an error is detected and corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system.' This may mean that single-loop learning is about problem solving and improving the existent process. Argyris and Schön (1978) and Argyris (1993: 69), argue that double-loop learning

occurs 'when mismatches are corrected by first examining and altering the governing variables and then the actions.' In this sense, double-loop learning is more than just intervening and fixing problems but it questions the underlying assumptions of why we do and what we do. It could be argued, that, double-loop learning can be expected to occur when a comparison between the formative and summative evaluation is made and conclusions are drawn informing the process and the steps for the future. In the next two months, the findings from the formative evaluation will be analysed in light of the summative evaluation.

Twenty students out of forty responded to the summative questionnaire provided by the University. This is 50% of the sample which can be considered (to a certain extent) more representative and provides more reliable data. Early analysis of the data from the questionnaire responses showed that students valued the support and the opportunities for regular feedback provided throughout the module. In relation to what made the students learning most effective, three key categories are emerging such as 'Lectures, lectures slides and Content', 'Feedback from tutors', and 'Use of live case organization for assignment'. The positive feedback (on assessment and feedback) included comments such as:

- 'Very helpful and supportive teachers who provide good and regular feedback';
- 'The level of feedback provided by lecturers on assignment';
- 'Guidance throughout the study with lots of support compared to some other modules';
- 'The feedback process was very good.'

Clearly most students appreciated the level of support and feedback. Hattie and Timperley (2007), Gibbs (2006) and Gibbs and Simpson (2004) outline the importance of good feedback to students' learning and development.

Type of assignment – Live case study organization

- 'The company has inspired me to work hard on this assignment and added motivation';
- 'Working on the company was useful to get an insight into real operations management';
- 'The case study topic was good and the company were very helpful';
- 'Enjoyed having guest speakers in lectures, as made theory much more interesting and applicable to day to day life.'

Noticeably, the respondents found working on a live case study for several weeks a positive experience. This enables students to develop practical skills in 'real-life' scenarios. Research shows that teaching and learning methods such as collaborative learning (Johnson et al., 1991), problem-based learning (Savery and Duffy, 1995), team working (Michaelsen et al., 2009) and practical projects (Harvey et al., 2006) seem to be effective.

Lectures and Content

- 'Quality of lectures has been very consistent throughout this semester';
- 'Quality of presentations';
- 'The teaching of the module was good as well. The information was well projected';
- 'A rich variety of useful topics';
- 'Content is easily applicable to the real world.'

Some of the negative comments were around 'lecture slides' and 'link to assignment.'

- 'Lecture slides too long, not a lot of question/seminar time';
- 'Lectures are long, too much information at times and can come across as boring';
- 'No clear link to assignment in lectures';

- 'Only include relevant information to assignment.'

Clearly some of these findings provide a mixed picture as some students found the lectures interesting and of good quality, while others reported that they find the length of the lectures too long and 'can come across as boring'. In the Student Experience Research 2012 by NUS and QAA (2012), carried out among 4,440 students, 50.2% responded that 'more interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials' would improve the quality of the teaching and learning experience at the University while 26.1% answered 'more lectures'. There is evidence that students appreciate active learning rather than lectures and that these approaches to learning and teaching delivers benefits to students, lecturers and universities (Harvey et al., 2006). In terms of 'link to assignment', Biggs (1999) argues that there should be an *alignment* between what the teacher wants the students to learn, what teaching methods are going to be adopted and what assessment criteria and tasks will be used. Often this link may have been established by the teaching team but it seems that this could be made more transparent so as to the students to become more aware of this.

Impact

In terms of SAP project success this could be evaluated in terms of achieving the project success criteria and delivering the stated benefits. The SAP project was delivered on time and within budget; all the objectives, as stated at the beginning of the project, were achieved. Moreover, the project provided benefits for both staff and students.

The staff partner appreciated the opportunity to explore staff and student relationships and hear the students' voice through the collaboration with the student partner. The project fostered the scholarship of learning and teaching and professional development for the staff partner. The outcomes of this project will be disseminated via conference presentations and journal publications. Furthermore, this engagement allowed improving students' experiences on the module that the staff partner co-teaches and delivering a module that meets current students' needs.

The benefit of working on the SAP project for the student was threefold, firstly, working with a staff member to produce an academic research project, secondly, the project taking place in the second year at University, supported the student work in third year. Thirdly, attending meetings and workshops of the SAP project enabled the student to understand the importance of academic research and how it fitted in to the academic and the wider world. Overall, the SAP project for the student provided an opportunity for growth, development and confidence building.

Conclusions

The SAP project team found the experience beneficial and learnt a lot from the experience. The results of the SAP project suggested that formative evaluations from the current students on the module set up as an open-ended process throughout the module are useful as the teaching team can fine-tune the module in order to match current students' needs. Other academics therefore, may well benefit by adopting formative evaluations throughout their modules so as to proactively respond to their current students' needs in order to improve their teaching, learning and assessment experiences.

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Biographies

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