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STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE REFLECTION, SELF-EVALUATION AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN AN ACADEMIC LITERACIES MODULE

Abstract

This paper presents the findings from a study in the form of action research (Robson, 1993) involving the use of a combination of strategies to improve performance in an academic literacies course at the University of Johannesburg. Because the subjects were enrolled in a first-year extended degree programme, which meant that they were considered as insufficiently prepared for university study, writing tasks were primarily “low-stakes” (Elbow 997). According to Elbow, low-stakes writing mitigates the tension associated with high-stakes, stringently marked tasks. An earlier study (Dube, 2006) had shown that when students tracked their own progress by evaluating and reflecting on their own performance resulted in some students taking responsibility for their own work and striving to improve on past performance. However, in that exercise, the reflection and self-evaluation were largely voluntary as there was minimal input from the tutors. The present study was extended to include tutor feedback and monitoring in order to assess the effect on the consistency and quality of students’ reflection and evaluation of their work. At the end of the study, it was found that the quality of students’ self-evaluation and self-reflection gradually improved and seemed to have a positive effect on performance. The overall conclusion arrived at in this paper is that extrinsic motivational factors (in the form of marks) can be successfully used, in combination with effective tutor feedback and monitoring, to develop intrinsic motivation, the latter being demonstrated through students’ engaging increasingly more meaningfully in evaluating and reflecting on their performance.

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, two institutions in the City of Johannesburg, namely the Rand Afrikaans University and two campuses of the former Vista University at the East Rand and Soweto, were merged to become the University of Johannesburg. At about the same time, access to university education was extended to students whose performance in the matric examinations minimally qualified them for university entrance. In those faculties which accept such students, there is a special ‘extended’ degree programme in which undergraduate degrees are completed in four years rather than the normal three years. The first-year curriculum of an extended degree programme consists of three or four ‘mainstream’ subjects plus two special subjects. Of the latter, one focuses on academic literacies and the other on general life and study skills. The

students who were the subjects of the study upon which this paper is based were first-year Humanities students registered on the faculty's extended degree programme. Their academic literacies course, 'Argument in the Humanities', was one of four core subjects which had to be passed before students could proceed to the second year.

Assessment in this course was primarily through a set of worksheets used to develop such competencies as self-evaluation, reflection or the use of cohesive devices. Such tasks constitute what is referred to as *low-stakes* writing, the main aim of which is to develop a culture of writing among students (Elbow, 1997). Initially, in order to reduce the stress normally associated with writing for marks, worksheets were assessed and returned to students with only the tutor's comments. This was done in order to focus the student's attention on the feedback rather than a mark. The feedback was such that it recognised strengths and identified weaknesses so that the student could capitalise on the former while minimising the latter. Although the worksheets did not show a mark, they were in fact assessed, for *engagement*, and a mark recorded according to the following marking scheme:

Not done	Poor engagement	Partially complete/unsatisfactory engagement	Satisfactory engagement	Good engagement	Outstanding; full engagement
0	1	2	3	4	5

Fig. 1 Low-stakes writing assessment criteria

What motivated this investigation was that, where one would have expected students to complete all worksheets and engage as fully as they could with the tasks in order to pass at the end of the year, the opposite seemed to be true: the students in the classes that I taught in 2005 and 2006 tended to be perfunctory in their completion of tasks. The result was that they either failed the course or ended up with only mediocre results at the end of the year. It was this that led to the decision to apply an approach to assessment which involved

- (a) assigning marks to all worksheets
- (b) devising strategies to mitigate any negative effects arising from the presence of these marks.

The decision to assign marks was as a result of the realization that, while there was a place for 'low-stakes writing' as a means of getting students to write freely without inhibition, it was necessary to take account of the fact that these tasks contributed a large percentage towards students' final assessments. Thus, it was necessary to give students a clearer indication of their progress than was possible through feedback alone, because they had gone through the first twelve years of school expecting to be awarded marks for the work they produced. If marks were allocated, however, there had to be ways of preventing students focusing only on the marks to the exclusion of tutor feedback.

Setting of the study

The study involved an already existing population of 98 students registered on the university's Argument in the Humanities (AIH) module of the extended degree programme for the Faculty of Humanities in 2007. The students had been put into 9 groups of between 10 and 13 and were taught by a team of 6 tutors, three of whom taught two groups each (groups A and E; F and J; B and G) and the remaining three one group each (C, D and H). These small groups made possible the intensive follow-up procedures required to produce the data that were sought. Teaching arrangements included a weekly lecture and three tutorials, with the latter providing an opportunity for follow-up activities based on the content of the lecture. Most low-stakes tasks were completed in the tutorials, and handed in for assessment by tutors, who were expected to give extensive feedback, award a mark which was consonant with that feedback, and also keep records of these marks. Attempts were made throughout the year to mitigate any disparities in the marking standards of tutors: in addition to individual tutor mentoring and monitoring, tutors brought marked worksheets – at least once each term - to the weekly tutor meeting for comparison of marking standards and discussion. By the end of the year, there was little difference in tutors' standards of marking, although not all worksheets were moderated by the module co-ordinator, leaving open some possibility of unevenness in grading.

When students received back their work, whether it was low- or high-stakes, they had to enter the mark on their portfolio assessment sheet, evaluate their performance and also respond to tutor comments. In order to prepare students for self-evaluation of their performance, two new worksheets were introduced early in the first term, one on self-evaluation and the other on reflection. In its introductory section, the former emphasised the need for students to “take a critical look at [their] own work in order to identify both strengths and weaknesses”, while the latter focused on the value of “stepping back” mentally in order to determine what has been learnt, how the learning took place, how effectively this was done, as well as what needed to be done in order to improve future performance.

Aims of the study

In the light of the conclusions from the earlier study referred to above, the intent of the present study was to motivate students not only to take a second look at their marked work, and redraft and resubmit it for remarking but also to develop their self-evaluative and self-reflective skills along the way. It was hoped that from these approaches students would

- (a) initially, learn to take note of both feedback from their tutors and marks earned to assess their performance in a given task; and
- (b) eventually, develop the skill of evaluating their own work critically whether or not they were awarded marks for it. Only when this latter goal was reached would they develop into the self-directed learners that the module aims to produce.

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- (a) Can students learn to reflect on and evaluate their own

- performance in written tasks effectively over the course of a year?
- (b) To what extent is it possible to promote intrinsic motivation through extrinsic motivational factors such as marks in a language course?
 - (c) What role, if any, does tutor feedback play in the development of effective student reflection and self-evaluation?

Theoretical framework

The study was underpinned by theories of motivation, reflection and self-evaluation.

Motivation

According to Deckers (2005), the actions of humans are motivated by either external (extrinsic) or internal (intrinsic) factors. In an educational setting, on the one hand, the desire for passing grades in various assessment opportunities presented to the student is an external force that coerces her/him to perform. On the other hand, any learning activity that the student engages in for its own sake can be said to be intrinsically motivated. However, as Deckers further observes, extrinsic motivation can *shade* into intrinsic motivation.

Externally motivated behavior shades into introjected motivation, which means the individual has begun to internalize the external reasons for behavior... Behavior is freely chosen because the person feels it will produce self-improvement. ... The continuum, however, ends with *intrinsically motivated behavior* (Deckers, 2005: 276).

This shading in is probably due to the fact that the relationship between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is not necessarily adversarial. Sansone and Harackiewicz (2000) say that, in the past, it was thought that intrinsic motivation suffered if performance was tied to any kind of reward. Now, however, after more than 100 investigations, the original “hydraulic conceptualization” of the extrinsic – intrinsic motivation dichotomy has been replaced by what the two writers call an additive model in which “the expectation of reward can sometimes increase levels of extrinsic motivation without having any negative impact on intrinsic motivation or performance” (p. 67).

In designing the assessment practices for this course, it was hoped that the extrinsic motivation provided by the display of marks on worksheets would gradually give rise to and promote intrinsic motivation via the combined tools of reflection and self-evaluation. It was hoped that, by the end of the year, the students would find themselves wanting to do well, not only because of the improved marks that they received because they had become more self-critical, but because they had begun to find themselves wanting to do well because it gave them pleasure, because that is how they saw their role being as students.

Reflection, self-evaluation and experiential learning

According to Brockbank and McGill, reflection is an integral part of the learning process as it involves the learner being aware of all his actions in order to be able to evaluate them. Through reflection, students are

enabled to develop the capacity to keep an eye on themselves, and to engage in critical dialogue with themselves in *all* they think and do ... it is a reflexive process in which the student interrogates her/his thought or actions. The learning outcome to be desired, from *every* student, is that of the reflective practitioner (Brockbank and McGill, 1998:70-1, citing Barnett, 1992).

As each student engages in this ‘meta-cognition’, she/he reflects on and evaluates her/his own thinking processes (Tishman, Perkins and Jay, 1995) and recaptures each experience, thinks about it, turns it over in her/his head and evaluates it. This working with experience is important in learning (Uk Centre for Legal Education, 2007, citing Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1985:19). Citing Kolb and Kolb’s (2005) experiential learning, Anderson and Neild (2007) say that “the important stages of learning are experience, reflection on practice and reconceptualisation before re-experiencing”. In the context of this study, students first received a lecture on a topic such as “Reading strategies and skills” or “Introductions, definitions and conclusions” and then, in their tutorial sessions, completed a worksheet based on that topic. After the worksheet had been marked mainly for engagement, students had a chance to reflect on how they had experienced that worksheet and articulate their feelings on the portfolio assessment sheet. This reflection and self-evaluation, according to Anderson and Neild (citing Boud, 1995), involves students “making their own judgements about what they have done and what they should be doing”. As this happened, power was transferred from the teacher to the student (citing Biggs, 1999). Thus, it was they that drew conclusions about whether or not they had done well enough to file the worksheet away without further attention, or they needed to relearn an aspect of the worksheet, redraft it and resubmit for reassessment. Because they were also encouraged to express their feelings in these self-evaluations, all three “domains in learning”, which are “doing, thinking and feeling”, as postulated by Brockbank, McGill and Beech (2002:5) were provided for.

Anderson and Neild (2007, citing Biggs 2003) further suggest that students are more likely to be motivated to learn through work that is produced for marks. To them, this is true of both formative and summative assessment. The former enables students to “learn from their mistakes”, which seems to suggest that marks from such exercises should not count towards students’ final assessment. If they must, as is the case in the academic literacies courses at the University of Johannesburg, this should happen only after the students have had a chance to prove that they have learnt from tutors’ initial feedback; the resubmissions can then be assessed summatively.

Methodology

The study took the form of *action research*, a term which refers to the kind of research which “involves a spiral of cycles of *planning, acting, observing and reflecting*” (Robson, 1993:438, citing Lewin, 1946). The person seeking to conduct this kind of research starts with a general idea for facilitating the attainment of a particular goal. In this way, action research differs from the conventional kind which seeks to minimize the degree to which the researcher is involved with the researched, the aim being to focus on objective description of that which already exists. Action research, on the other hand, seeks to promote change in a given situation. In teaching situations, the aim is to contribute “towards a theory of education and teaching which is accessible to teachers” (p. 439). Citing Carr and Kemmis (1986), Robson says that, firstly, there is a desire on the part of the researcher to improve a particular practice, followed by “understanding” of that practice before steps are taken to try to change it. Thirdly, there is a desire to improve the “situation” in which that practice takes place. “Those involved in the practice being considered are to be involved in the action research process in all its aspects of planning, acting, observing and reflecting” (Robson, 1993: 439, citing Carr and Kemmis, 1986:165).

As already indicated in the introduction, the whole purpose of the study was to try to improve performance in Argument in the Humanities by providing students with the conditions that would promote such improvement.

Data gathering

The data analysed for the study was obtained mainly from the Term 2 and 4 portfolio assessment sheets, which were removed from the portfolios and photocopied, students’ permission having been previously obtained. Term 1 and 3 assessment sheets were not included for different reasons. With regard to Term 1, students were at that time being initiated into the process and it took them time to begin to make sense of it all, and in Term 3, assessment sheets from only 3 groups (C, D and H) were made available for the study, hence the decision to exclude them from the data. At the end of the year, all the nine sets of assessment sheets were analysed for students’ self-evaluations, responses to tutor comments, as well as tutors’ follow up feedback. Other data was collected from students’ end-of-year results, as well as their evaluation of the “Argument in the Humanities” module on Edulink, the university’s web-based programme which captures students’ responses to questions set by the module co-ordinator and then analyses them for frequency of response and other information.

In an attempt to develop and promote both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, the portfolio assessment sheet was modified to provide space not only for the marks earned for each worksheet but also for the student to reflect on and evaluate his or her performance on it, as shown in Fig. 2 below. The marks awarded for each worksheet were doubled in order to make them more meaningful to students. It had previously been observed that the low weighting of the low-stakes writing tasks was both confusing and disconcerting to students. In both the 2005 and 2006 end-of-semester evaluations of the module, it was not uncommon to find students commenting that the mode of assessment was ‘confusing’, a reference to the low weighting and the fact

that they only found out at the end of the term how they had done on a particular worksheet. It was hoped that increasing the total marks from 5 to 10 would make the 2007 cohort of students take the worksheets more seriously than their predecessors had been known to do.

Not done	Poor engagement	Partially complete or unsatisfactory engagement	Satisfactory engagement	Good engagement	Outstanding; full engagement
0	2	4	6	8	10

[]

Self-evaluation of performance:

Response to tutor comment:

Fig. 2 Amended low-stakes writing assessment sheet

Where, previously, students only saw this assessment sheet when their portfolios were returned to them, marked, at the end of the term, this time they received back from the tutor marked work as well as the assessment sheet which had the following instructions on it:

1. Record the mark allocated in the space provided;
2. Evaluate your performance by indicating whether you think you did well or not and why;
3. Respond to the tutor’s comment”

Thus, the assessment sheets had been amended to provide space for student self-reflection and evaluation, as well as responses to tutor comments. The requirement that students reflect on and evaluate their own performance was intended to combat the tendency, observed prior to the study, for them to complete worksheets as if all that mattered was that ‘something’ had been scribbled on them, without due regard to quality, despite tutors’ painstaking feedback on previous work. Another concern which such self-evaluation was intended to address was students’ seeming reluctance to take advantage of the provision – clearly articulated in the module Learning Guide – for them to redraft and resubmit any worksheets on which they had performed poorly.

In addition to evaluating their performance on the new assessment sheets, students had to enter the mark obtained and then respond to comments made by the tutors. It was hoped that, in the process of doing so, they would make a connection between the tutor’s comments and the mark allocated, identify both strengths and weaknesses and, on the basis of their self-evaluation, make informed decisions about whether or

not to redraft and resubmit the task concerned. For their part, tutors were expected not only to evaluate the effectiveness of students' self-reflections and evaluations but also to suggest ways of dealing with the specific problems that students identified as being responsible for any unsatisfactory performance. This latter requirement was meant to ensure that students' earlier problems noted in Term 1, of students making such uninformative evaluations as "Satisfactory work" or "Poorly done" were overcome: tutors were expected to give guidance on how students should reflect on and evaluate their work more meaningfully.

Analysis of the data

Students' self-reflections/self-evaluations on portfolio assessment sheets

At the end of each term, students' permission having been previously obtained, assessment sheets were removed from the portfolios and photocopied for analysis of

- (a) students' self-evaluations and responses to tutor comments
- (b) tutors' follow-up responses

Altogether, 65 Term 2 and 59 Term 4 portfolio assessment sheets were analysed individually for consistency in self-evaluation. Analysis of this data showed overall willingness on the part of students to take the time to reflect on and evaluate their own work. The overall effect of this was to marginally raise the class averages when compared with those from the previous year. It is possible, of course, that other factors may have been responsible for the marginally superior results this year, but there were other indicators of higher levels of motivation among the 2007 cohort of AIH students which will be referred to later.

There was evidence that, by Term 4, students' ability to reflect on and evaluate their own work had improved significantly. Such improvement seemed to be linked more to the individual student's willingness to take a second look at his or her performance; whether or not the tutor took the trouble of giving feedback. Below are samples of Term 2 and Term 4 reflections/self-evaluations taken from groups A, C and D.

Student 1, Term 2: Did what I knew. I could have done better. I agree with most of your comments.

Term 4: I could have done more research on the angles within the topic. Would like to resubmit, if possible.

Student 2, Term 2: Thought I did okay. Just rushed to finish. Thank you.

Term 4: Should of read the question again forgot about the point form. Reading it now I see the conclusion is ineffective, no summary of facts.

Student 3, Term 2: I feel this is below my usual standard of work.

Term 4: I think that I understand what was wanted of me. I will go home and write another counter argument.

The differences between the Term 2 and Term 4 self-evaluations above may be minimal but they do show that, by the last term of the year, students were evaluating

their performance much more effectively; they were making an effort to identify specific weaknesses and taking the further step of committing to redrafting and resubmitting the worksheets concerned

End-of-year results and tutor support and feedback

On the chart below, the five highest performing groups, A – E, were taught by four tutors (one of them had two groups) who were the most supportive of the intervention): all made sure that their students reflected on and evaluated their performance on every worksheet. Two of them, who taught groups A and D, took the extra step of responding to their students when necessary. Below are some examples of exchanges between one of these tutors and two of the students:

Group	Average Percentage
A	55.92
B	54.92
C	54.72
D	54.34
E	52.92
F	49.3
G	47.13
H	46.77
J	45.28

Fig.5 Analysis of results per group

- A. Student 4: I didn't have time to do this task properly because I did not want to do it. That is the honestly (sic) truth.

Tutor X : Why not, [name of student]? Perhaps if you were more willing to interrogate your feelings, you would be able to deal with such antipathetic feelings towards your work.

Student 4: I guess I have no choice but to tackle my feelings about it because it shows via my marks and that is a negative thing.

Tutor X: That is the way to go, [name of student].

- B. Student 5: Although the tutor says it's not clear how I am going to expand on my points, I think I know how to expand on them.

Tutor X: Point taken, [name of student]. The only thing that matters is that you are able to make a successful [debate] presentation. (The student subsequently made a fairly credible presentation which was rated at 16 out of 30).

However, it did not appear that following up students' reflections/self-evaluations in this manner had a significant effect on student performance. In some ways, it is just as well that this was so, as tutors complained that such following up took up too much time. What did seem to matter was the tutor making sure that the students took

another look at their performance, without needing to respond to the students' reflections/self-evaluations. The two tutors who taught Groups F, H and J (two of the groups had the same tutor), being three of the four lowest performing groups, were the least supportive of the process; they neither insisted on students reflecting/evaluating their performance nor followed up with comments of their own. Students wrote comments on their assessment sheets whenever they felt like it; when they did not, there was no reaction from the tutors. As a result, it appears that these students did not benefit as fully as the other groups did from the intervention.

Group G, however, did not fit neatly into either of the two categories into which the other eight groups seemed to fall (that is, of involved or uninvolved tutor) because its average percentage was much lower than that of Group B, the second highest performing group, which was taught by the same tutor. There were clearly other factors at play which would require further investigation before any conclusions can be drawn.

Students' comments on the value of reflecting on and evaluating their own performances

At the end of the year, 77 of the original 98 students registered for AIH evaluated the module on Edulink, a facility which allowed them to answer questions posed by the module co-ordinator and then analysed them for "Frequency Distribution", "Percentage Answering Correctly" (broken down into "Whole Group", "Upper 25%" and "Lower 25%"), "Discrimination", "Mean", "Median" and "Standard Deviation". Each question also had a subsidiary one which required students to give reasons for their responses. The question which required completion of the statement "Evaluating my own performance on each worksheet has been..." with a choice from "a. extremely useful", "b. very useful", "c. useful", "d. of limited use" or "e. not at all useful" elicited the following profile:

Response Summary	
Answer	Frequency distribution
a.	11 (14.3%)
b.	30 (39%)
c.	28 (36.4%)
d.	6 (7.8%)
e.	2 (2.6%)

Fig.3. Response summary

Thus, more than 53% of the respondents were positive about the exercise. Each question had a subsidiary one which required students to give reasons for their choices. Analysis of these reasons showed that, as reflected in the "Response summary" above, the majority of the respondents found the exercise of great benefit. Below is a sample of the most significant comments:

"I get a clear indication of where I went wrong when I see the tutor's overall mark..."

“Because I was able to see how much I worked and how much I still need in order to improve my marks. It was also helping me to work hard because I was getting ashamed of evaluating myself on low marks”

“It taught me how to be honest with myself”

“It helped my tutor to see my point”

“I would at most times be happy with my work but reflecting was useful as I would see my strong and weak points”

“Most of the time I did not realize the way I felt about certain activities until I get to do my reflections and actually think about everything”

In summary, it seems that students appreciated this opportunity to take a critical look at their own performance for a number of reasons. One was that it afforded them the chance to analyse the reasons for the marks that their tutors awarded them; another was that it spurred them to greater efforts in future worksheets; and also that they were able to communicate with their tutors on an individual level and try to explain their performance to their tutors. What the students do not mention, however, is that these self-reflections/evaluations encouraged them to redraft and resubmit poorly done worksheets, which had the effect of improving their overall results and also ensuring that they gave themselves another chance to learn whatever skill was being taught on a particular worksheet.

Needless to say, there were a few students who did not see any value in the process, as shown in the following comments:

“I found it hard as I was the one who wrote the work and I wrote it because I thought it was good”

“It was pretty dreadful to evaluate my work because I thought the work I handed in was pretty good. So I don't really like to do that in the future”

“I stated my feelings on my work and I mentioned what I thought about the mark given, but if marks are not altered it is seemingly meaningless”

Because the evaluations on Edulink were in the form of a survey in which it was not possible to establish the identities of respondents, it was not possible to determine whether or not the students whose attitudes were negative ever had any feedback on their self-evaluations from their tutors. It would not be surprising, however, to find that they were taught by a tutor who himself or herself themselves did not see any value in the process.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions from the study can only be tentative as they are drawn from the performance of only one cohort of students. However, the results from the study can be used to guide further research on the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, marks, student reflection and tutor feedback. The fact that some students were still reflecting somewhat superficially at the end of the year suggested the need for more focused development of self-reflective and self-evaluative skills among students. The two worksheets that introduced them to what must have been completely new concepts were probably not enough. Perhaps there was a need to give, at regular intervals, refresher sessions on these in order to improve the quality of reflection/self-evaluation. It might also be a viable idea to precede the worksheets with a formal lecture, perhaps mid-way through the first term, which gives more theoretical information on reflection and self-evaluation, with illustrations taken from past students' work to illustrate these concepts.

It is also possible that disparate standards of assessment among the 6 tutors were responsible for the variations in overall group performance despite the efforts that were made to mitigate such differences.

Notwithstanding the above limitations, there was evidence that students benefited from reflecting on and evaluating their performance. The overall conclusion was that it is possible to use extrinsic motivation to develop and promote intrinsic motivation among students, leading to all round improved performance in a writing-focused module.

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