Embedded academic skills and student assessment literacy

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Project Overview

Effective assessment literacy (AL) helps students understand the purpose, standards and expectations of assessment. Furthermore, AL develops students' understanding of the learning objectives of their modules and programme, the role of assessments in the overall learning process, and how assessments relate to the learning objectives (Price et al., 2012). Once students have become assessment literate, they can better monitor, manage and evaluate their own learning, leading to improved performance and motivation (Smith et al., 2013), and an enhanced learning experience.

Developing AL requires practice, iteration, imitation and a dialogue between students and staff about the process and standards of assessment (Rust et al., 2003). Embedded, contextualised, synchronous and asynchronous academic skills teaching in the curriculum could provide a space for AL development, if the design of such teaching and resources takes an "academic literacies approach" (Lea and Street, 2006, p.370) to support "the social construction" (Price et al. 2012, p.34) of assessment knowledge.

However, academic skills provision could be perceived as remedial and secondary in curriculum design, with limited contact time given to develop students' literacies. Therefore, I was motivated to pursue this LITE project, exploring how embedded academic skills provision is perceived by staff and students in developing students' assessment literacy.

Project Objectives

- To examine the impact of academic skills provision on student assessment literacy in two undergraduate modules at the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies (LCS)

- To compare staff and student perceptions of embedded academic skills development and student assessment literacy

Methods

This project employed a mixed-methods approach to gather data, using interviews, focus groups, and a survey to collect information from students and academics about their experiences and perceptions of assessment and academic literacies development.

Data was collected via:

Method	No. conducted	Participant group	No. of participants
Interview	4	Staff	4
Focus group	4	Students	9
Survey	1	Students	18

Key findings

- Students find consideration and discussion of exemplars in embedded academic skills sessions[1] most useful for understanding assessment standards and expectations

- Students perceive the marking criteria as ambiguous and difficult to use for self-regulation with their current level of assessment literacy:

  "I'd say that it's kind of I feel like I understand [marking criteria] *more after the session, but like only like relatively a little bit and I feel like it's kind of a thing that we'll need to keep doing, and it's yeah, a cumulative process."* (Speaker 2, student focus group 3)

  "I think, like, judging my own work is, like, really hard. Like if someone gave me an essay, I feel like I will be better at analysing it than my own work, like, for some reason with my own work I can't really tell what's wrong about it, but on someone else's work I can, I don't know. It's just easier to see." (Speaker 3, student focus group 1)

- Students desire more contact time, skills sessions, and formative assessment and feedback opportunities to develop their assessment literacy

- Staff report tension between content and literacies development, due to the limited space in the curriculum

- Staff report low student engagement with feedback; however, students find it difficult to get access formative feedback and some find summative feedback not constructive:

  "I wish there was like more opportunities, like a little bit of time in the class just to, like at the end, maybe finishing like a few minutes early, so you could actually ask the teacher instead of having to book an office hour." (Speaker 4, student focus group 1)

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[1] A typical embedded academic skills session is a 50-minute interactive workshop in a module timetabled slot, after assessment is released (e.g. week 6-8 in semester 1) or before the holiday or assessment period (e.g. week 23-24 in semester 2).

Implications for practice

The findings of the research suggest several recommendations that could be adopted to elevate practice in supporting students to develop assessment literacy. Some of these are quick and easy to implement, whilst others are longer-term considerations:

➢ Quick wins

- Use clear signposting in teaching to develop student assessment literacy. For example, "here the author of this article points out X and it is a demonstration of critical analysis because…..."
- Provide at least one session per semester for assessment support (analysing and discussing exemplars and marking criteria) in first-year modules or whenever a new assessment method is introduced
- Allocate two brief time slots (5-10 minutes each) for student questions about assessment: once when the assessment is first released and once closer to the submission deadline
- Use module-specific assessment exemplars and marking criteria in embedded academic literacies teaching
- The scheduling of embedded academic skills sessions should be tied to when assessments are released
- Make academic skills resources in Minerva assessment-specific and avoid generic signposting

➢ Long-term recommendations

- Design formative assessment and feedback opportunities in first-year modules or whenever a new assessment method is introduced
- Integrate assessment literacy development into programme-level assessment strategy
- Engage staff and students in more dialogue about assessment practice and expectations

Outputs

Proposed and planned research outputs include:

➢ Internal outputs
- Reports for module leaders who were the staff participants for this research

- A case study about embedding assessment literacy and academic skills for the Learning Development Team's "For Staff" webpages and link this to relevant places such as the ODPL Academic Literacies pages and the Leeds Educator Space
- Presentations and/or blog posts for Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence (LITE), Learning Development Team, Library All Staff Briefing, Pedagogic Research in the Arts (PRiA), Surfacing Skills Conference, TIPS Community Assessment Matters and University of Leeds Student Education Conference 2024.

- ➢ External outputs
- Conference proposals in 2024 for the Information Literacy Conference (LILAC), Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) Conference, Assessment in Higher Education (AHE) Network and Advance HE's annual Teaching and Learning Conference
- Book chapter proposal on assessment literacy and sustainability education
- An article on assessment literacy and academic skills development submitted to relevant journals

Challenges

The project faced two main challenges, the first being the misalignment of the project timeline with the academic cycle. This led to a delay in data collection, but I addressed this issue by proactively engaging in discussions with colleagues from LITE at the planning stage to explore possible solutions and by temporarily suspending the project during the summer of 2022. The second challenge was balancing the research with a heavy teaching workload. To overcome this, I set an out-of-office email response during my LITE days and participated in LITE Fellows' pop-up co-working sessions to prioritise the project. These strategies allowed me to maintain focus and progress on the project.

I understand that these challenges are commonly experienced by Fellows, and I am grateful for the support provided by LITE. To future researchers, I recommend maintaining regular communication with the LITE research officers and seeking their support if necessary.

Next steps

This LITE pedagogy research project enabled me to strengthen connections with colleagues who share my enthusiasm for academic literacies development and student success. This has led to co-leading a scholarship project that aims to assess the effectiveness of the collaboration between the Language Centre and the Library's Learning Development Team

in providing embedded academic literacies teaching in Linguistics, MAPLIS, and Translation and Interpreting MA programmes. The goals of the project are to gauge the views of both academics and students on the academic literacies approach, enhance the planning of embedded support for the development of academic literacies, and establish a working model for future partnerships.

Furthermore, with the ongoing debate on artificial intelligence (AI) and assessment, there is a growing urgency to integrate assessment literacy into the curriculum. This integration can equip students with the skills and knowledge required to understand the purpose and standards of assessment, as well as to navigate the complex assessment landscape in the age of AI. This also creates opportunities for future pedagogical research into AI literacy, through the lens of learning and education development.

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