Assessment Feedback for Learning Disabled Students in Higher Education

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Introduction and Research Context

- The requirements of the PG Cert in HE
- My role as SpLD co-ordinator in the Dpt Social Sciences
- An interest in widening access to and participation in HE
- An interest in the politics of disability poly responses to learning disabled (SEN, SpLD) students

Assessment Feedback
- Area of increasing interest in HE (Evans 2013)
Assessment Feedback in HE: Some observations

- Considered key to improving student outcomes and raising achievement (Bloxham and Boyd 2007).
- Evidence that it outweighs all other elements of the assessment process – consistent across socioeconomic status, race, academic locale; level of study (Orsmond et al, 2013)
- Instrumental in increasing student engagement and participation, and reducing student attrition (Lunt and Curran 2010).
- Can provide the means by which independent learners might acquire the ability to monitor and evaluate their own performance, both in their academic career and beyond that into their professional lives (Ferguson 2011)
Assessment Feedback in HE: Some criticisms

- Quality (detail & timeliness) (NUS Connect 2011).
- Put down to:
  - Increasing numbers of students now entering higher education (Moore and Kuol 2005);
  - Additional administration due to current emphasis on tutor accountability and output measurement (Deem and Brehony 2005);
  - Lack of opportunity and space for individual tutorial sessions (Bloxham and Boyd 2007).
  - Belief that it is the mark rather than the feedback that is of utmost importance to students (Carless 2007; Higgins, Hartley and Skelton, 2001).
  - Claims by tutors that students fail to engage with and respond to feedback, and either misuse or ignore it (Draper 2009).
  - Predilection of tutors to conceptualise feedback as a ‘single notion that must be understood’ (Boud and Molloy 2013, 699).
Aims of Research

- To identify examples of ‘best practice’ with learning disabled students through a systematic review of literature

- Ethics
- Methodology
- Method
- Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) Framework (Hudson 2010)
Terms of Reference: Interrogate journals that present practice based research, using a variety of keyword terms identified via the systematic reading of abstracts from the following journals

- Active Learning in Higher Education
- Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,
- Higher Education,
- Higher Education Quarterly,
- Journal of Further and Higher Education,
- Quality in Higher Education,
- Teaching in Higher Education
- Studies in Higher Education.

- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Special Educational Need
- Specific Learning Difficulty
- Learning disabled
- Personalised guidance
- Inclusive
- Innovative
- Audio
- Verbal
- Student Centred
- Audio–Visual
- E–learning
- Feed–forward

In addition to: ‘higher education’, ‘feedback’ and ‘assessment feedback’
Inclusion Criteria

- Literature on learning disabled students’ assessment feedback
- Literature on higher education
- Literature relating to pedagogical approaches
- Research of an empirical nature
- Literature written in English

Exclusion Criteria

- Literature that does not focus on learning disabled students’ assessment feedback
- Literature on other educational provision
- Literature relating to other approaches
- Non-empirical research, methodological or reviews
- Literature written in other languages

Date parameters: 1st August 2008 – 31st August 2013
Findings:

- Identified eighty-nine sources relating to assessment/feedback more generally
- Only two that matched the criteria:
  - Habib et al (2012) The effectiveness of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in encouraging dyslexic students to engage in online student–student interaction, providing feedback for co–students’ drafts and discussing academic issues on message boards
    - Highlights the challenges dyslexic students experience when using in VLEs to access feedback
    - Information overload,
    - Being judged by the other VLE users on the basis of their spelling,
    - The mode of feedback requires thinking through thoroughly to ensure its efficacy
    - Requires investment to support students, both to engage them and to enable them to become proficient in its use (ibid).
    - Highlights the advantages of engaging in more innovative forms of communication as a means of enhancing the student experience and constructing interdependence between L/D student and tutor,
    - Reservations about tensions inherent in the multiple roles of ‘dialoguer, teacher, and assessor”
    - Success of such an approach very much depends on the “pedagogic awareness of the tutor, their habits and level of practical experience” (ibid:60)
Discussion

- Since 2005 HE Institutions have a ‘Disability Equality Duty’ (DED) ...
- Legal obligation to have a dedicated disability services unit; must be ‘proactive in ensuring that disabled people are treated fairly and equally’ (Vickerman and Blundell 2010, 23).
- But Disability advisers have not been ‘highly regarded’ (Parker, 2000)
- Some evidence of resentment from academic staff; that they are required ‘to provide support for students who should never have been admitted to courses in the first place and cannot manage academically or are not interested’ (ibid, 282).
- Whilst this is disputed (Mortimore, 2013; Smith, 2010) individual lecturers report ‘low confidence and experience in accommodating the needs of students with disabilities’ (Mortimore 2013, 40), and there is little agreement on what inclusive practice actually is (Smith 2010).
- Rhetoric of rights… but a needs discourse dominates...
- Strategies for inclusion – unevenly implemented (Barnes 2007).
- And…‘the rhetoric of support is rarely matched by the reality of provision’ (ibid, 1).
Discussion

- Responsibility for inclusion of disabled students sits squarely with administrators rather than educators.
- Little evidence that there is much innovation in terms of improving the feedback experience for learning disabled students.
- Little done to ensure academics engage with learning disabled students in dialogue regarding their feedback.
- Solutions advocated tend to be technical in nature and focus on ‘simple and easy ways to implement strategies for managing difference’ (Allan 2010, 609).
- Focus remains firmly on traditional forms of written feedback and no indication is apparent that this is monitored for effectiveness.
- Little attention paid to the ability of the staff to accommodate the educational needs of learning disabled students (Fuller et al 2004; Smith 2010).
- Learning disabled students report an on-going battle with institutions in regard to alternative forms of assessment ‘adjustments in pedagogy and curriculum’ (Riddell and Weedon 2006, 70) and this systematic review of the literature identifies that the efficacy of assessment feedback for learning disabled students too is yet to be addressed in any meaningful way.
Evidence suggests that for feedback to be effective it needs to form part of a ‘collaborative discussion’ between educator and student ‘which enables shared understandings and subsequently provides opportunities for further development based on the exchange’ (Blair and McGinty 2013, 467).

Orsmond et al (2013) argue for systems of feedback in higher education that can be delivered in multiple formats which encourage dialogue between tutor and student.

Adcroft and Willis (2013, 804) argue that for feedback to be effective academics and students must possess a shared understanding of the purpose and form of feedback.

Research indicates there is little evidence of participatory or innovative working to enhance the experience of learning disabled students and still less this ‘collaborative’ discussion/ dialogue taking place between learning disabled students and academic staff.


