

Integrating Teaching Resources and Assessment Tasks to Enhance Student Experience

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Abstract. This paper outlines the importance of integrating teaching resources with assessment tasks and continuous feedback in creating a unique student experience through effective student engagement and interactive learning. These activities are undertaken in two undergraduate services marketing and strategic marketing units offered in an off campus teaching mode in a regional Australian university. The resultant impact upon the overall student satisfaction, academic performance, retention rates and attrition rates has been studied. Results indicate that student engagement increased and, also, that students focused on deeper learning approaches because of the integration of technology-enabled teaching resources with authentic assessment tasks. Continuous feedback provided by the academic staff member acted as a feed forward element that gauged students' deep interest in the unit offerings.

Key words: student experience; student engagement; student learning; interactive resources; authentic assessment; feedback

1. Introduction

Rapid changes are evident in teaching and assessment related activities in the higher education sector throughout the world due to forces such as globalisation, privatisation, technological evolution and migration. The higher education sector is significantly influenced by processes of rapid globalisation, frequent policy changes and international movement of students (Kirkwood & Price, 2014). The changes in the higher education sector are evident in many areas including the internationalisation of classrooms, changes in teaching and study modes, changes in unit offerings and changes to assessment and grading methods. Technology has an undeniable impact on these changes and so contemporary educational institutions are embracing technology to a greater extent in their service offerings (HEFCE, 2009).

On the other hand, modern day students cannot be expected to access higher education institutional offerings without any knowledge of the subject content. Students have information at the forefront of their concerns and go to tertiary institutions with greater knowledge than before. Students are also increasingly looking for unique experiences from tertiary institutions rather than just aiming for degrees or awards. These students' expectations place immense pressure on teaching staff and tertiary institutions in outlining their curriculum, courses and unit offerings. Coupled to this, modern students' attention span is less (Coates, 2007) and academic staff have to design unit content and assessment tasks differently to maintain student engagement throughout the unit offering, to offer an authentic learning experience and to create a unique study experience (Coates, 2007).

This paper outlines the importance of aligning teaching resources with authentic assessment tasks and continuous feedback to promote unique study experiences through better engagement and learning strategies for distance education students in two marketing units offered in a higher education institution in Australia. These intervention strategies not only improved students' academic performance but also had an impact upon the students' deep learning processes, as well as student retention and attrition rates.

2. Literature Syntheses

2.1. Teaching Resources

Pedagogical changes in the contemporary higher education sector cannot be ignored. Technology now plays a pervasive role in the enhancement of teaching resources that further student engagement and the overall student experience. Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) commonly is used in many countries to foster student learning (Kirkwood & Price, 2014). TEL promotes efficiency of existing processes, enhances learning outcomes and the transformation of existing processes (HEFCE, 2009). Technology supported interventions have been used in the higher education sector to improve teaching resources that generate inherent interest in subject content, making the learning process interesting, informative and useful for students (Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

TEL is often linked to learning outcomes and defined graduate attributes in order to foster deeper learning among students. As contemporary students are well equipped and connected to various technologies, TEL is widely used by many higher education institutions to foster active student learning. TEL promotes interactive student learning and facilitates student deeper engagement with the subject content.

2.2. Assessment Tasks

Assessment tasks are important components of active student learning. Assessment tasks may be divided into formative and summative tasks. Formative assessment tasks include a set of tools to effectively monitor students' progress during learning (Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009). Such tasks are oriented towards the provision of continuous feedback to students through various activities while instruction is under way. They are directed towards understanding the students' viewpoint and further preparing them towards achieving higher grades and improved learning (Heritage, 2007). Thus, formative assessment is considered an ongoing activity to enhance students' participation and active learning (Perie et al., 2007).

Inclusion of formative assessment tasks will engage students in continuous learning. However, summative assessment tasks remain important tools for grading the performance of the students (Knight, 2002). Gradable summative assessment tasks motivate students to progress further in their learning activities and foster achievement-oriented academic learning. Students' academic performance is measured through the inclusion of summative assessment tasks in the curriculum.

2.3. Student Engagement

Student engagement has attracted considerable attention since the 1990s. It has been a topic of interest in North America, UK and Australasia due to collaborative efforts between government bodies and the higher education sector and the commissioning of large-scale national surveys on an annual basis (Trowler, 2010) in order to gather student related data. As such, student engagement is related to student representation, student feedback, learning spaces and learning development. Student engagement has been linked with sense making, belonging and feelings (Harper & Quaye, 2009a). The three most important dimensions of student engagement relate to behavioural engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfield & Paris, 2004). In behavioural engagement terms, students tend to comply with acceptable positive behavioural norms and tend to score less on disruptive and negative behaviour. Emotional engagement refers to the students' affective reactions such as enjoyment, interest in the subject matter, sense of belonging etc. Cognitive engagement relates to students' deeper involvement with the learning activities and students' interest in taking on challenging work. Student engagement is an important concept and is attracting global attention in the higher education sector in order to improve retention and avoid student attrition and withdrawals (Trowler, 2010).

Coates (2007) outlined four types of student engagement styles on the basis of academic and social patterns. These student engagement styles refer to intense, independent, collaborative and passive forms. Students having an intense form

of engagement are deeply involved in their academic studies and view learning environments as supportive, responsive and challenging. An independent style of engagement scores high within an academic context but less in terms of social orientation and these students generally are less interested in collaborative forms of study. Collaborative engagement is characterised by involving students in activities that fall beyond a formal higher education context. Passive engagement reflects a lack of interest in productive learning and as well as general inertia in educational terms (Coates, 2007). Student engagement is linked to student learning and how the process of learning and learning activities are influenced by a student's active participation in educationally meaningful activities (Coates, 2005).

2.4. Student Learning

The traditional models of student learning have undergone several changes in order to suit current pedagogical approaches. There seems to be an upsurge in embedding online or virtual learning environments into curricula to suit different study modes, and also to enhance the level of student interaction and engagement (Dale & Lane, 2007). Many higher education institutions are focusing on creating stimulating learning environments through the incorporation of technology in their learning and teaching strategies (Graham et al., 2007). Debates related to online versus offline study modes, and criticisms oriented towards low levels of student participation in these study modes, spurred interest among higher education institutions and teachers to embrace interactive online resources in order to foster student learning oriented towards the development of high order critical thinking and problem solving skills (Trowler, 2010).

Students' learning differs widely. Distance students additionally have family and work commitments meaning that they often have to pace their learning differently to the traditional face-to-face students. Enhancing student learning through effective engagement has been widely debated (Graham et al., 2007). Similarly, the existing literature on student engagement is linked directly or indirectly to improving students' learning (Coates, 2005). However students are further classified into active versus passive and/or surface versus deep learners. In order to transfer the skills and competencies acquired through higher educational learning to the work environment, students need to be active, achievement-oriented and deep learners. The impact of student learning is directly reflected in their academic achievements and performance and is indirectly reflected through metrics such as student retention rates, student attrition rates and their enrolment in other unit offerings. Therefore, it is normal to expect that students' learning will have an impact on the overall student experience gained within the higher educational context.

2.5. Student Experience

Higher educational institutions are increasingly moving away from the traditional model of just offering educational services to students. While students are viewed as the most important stakeholders, the notion that they are 'consumers' of service offerings is losing popularity. In contrast, the contemporary focus within educational institutions is not only to foster students' academic success, but also to embrace overall student experiences beyond the university setting in order to create value for their service offerings. Students are also increasingly focusing on matching their experiences with their educational expectations in order to enhance their deeper learning capabilities.

3. Methodology

This paper is based on the interactive teaching resources developed for distance students enrolled in Marketing units at a regional Australian university. The information presented reports the teaching interventions undertaken by the researcher, who is an academic staff member coordinating Marketing related units for undergraduate students. The staff member focused on developing interactive resources to foster student engagement and student learning in order to create an enhanced overall student experience in two third year undergraduate units (Strategic Marketing [MM316] and Services Marketing [MM314]). The staff member, who is also the unit coordinator, deliberately focused on the weekly release of interactive teaching resources as a way of simplifying the content included within these units.

These particular units were offered only to the distance students. This specific mode of offering made it difficult for the unit coordinator (initially, at least), to fully understand the needs and expectations of those enrolled in the courses. These students lacked the advantage of having physical contact with the staff member and focused on learning the subject content on their own at their own pace. This setting seemed to provide a passive delivery of the unit with minimal or no interaction between some students with their peers and/or the unit coordinator. The latter focused upon utilising available technology and developed resources that gauged student interaction with peers and the teacher, and motivated students to engage in online interactive discussions. A number of formative and summative assessment strategies were linked to the interactive resources and these were supplemented with feedback on both kinds of assessment tasks that indicated students' interest and self-regulated learning skills.

4. Results and Discussion

Strategically, course development was focused upon the provision of weekly interactive resources and aligning these resources to assessment tasks (see Figure 1). Initially teaching resources were updated and rewritten, incorporating real life examples, with an emphasis upon the provision of appropriate readings. Later, module-based and topic-based interactive resources were developed for release to learners on a weekly basis. Module-based resources consisted of interactive case scenarios and concept maps that provided an overview of the topics in that particular module. Topic-based resources presented related information to learners in various interactive formats such as concept maps, power point slides, activities, audio podcasts, summaries, and case studies on a weekly basis. In doing so, unit supervisor focused upon simplifying subject content and presentation within interactive formats for easy access by learners. In unit evaluations completed by students, these were appreciated as 'excellent resources, which were of great assistance'; other students stated that 'content guidance and resources made this subject a pleasure to study!' (MM314 2012); 'the material content is relevant and very applicable to marketing strategies' (MM316 2012); and the reworked course material 'provided great resources, in particular the audio summaries' (MM314 2013). The unit supervisor also focused on integrating technology enabled learning through the development of the interactive teaching resources.

Students also commented on the relevance of the resources. Their comments included the 'learning material seemed very relevant and useful for a future career in marketing', providing scenarios 'really like the real life case studies' (MM316 2012); others noted the 'excellent resources' and the 'interesting and diverse subject matter' (MM314 2012). In the second step of the overhaul of the courses under discussion, the focus was upon developing assignments in the form of 'Marketing Plans' and 'Strategic Marketing Plans', whereby students needed to apply critical thinking skills to problem-solving and draw logical conclusions. This was further supplemented with 'assignment tips' that provided an overview of the entire assignment. Learners appreciated that 'the assignments were highly relevant' (MM316 2013) allowing them to 'create our own marketing plan... rather than spend assessments simply reciting definitions' (MM316 2011). These revised weekly interactive resources and assessment tasks were complemented by a feedback system in order to develop distance learners' core competencies and their ongoing development; in this respect a student noted that the academic staff member 'provided thorough and timely feedback to enquiries and assessment submissions' (MM316 2011); other comments included 'feedback provided areas for improvement' (MM314 2013);

and 'outstanding feedback' was provided (MM316 2012) in a distance education context.

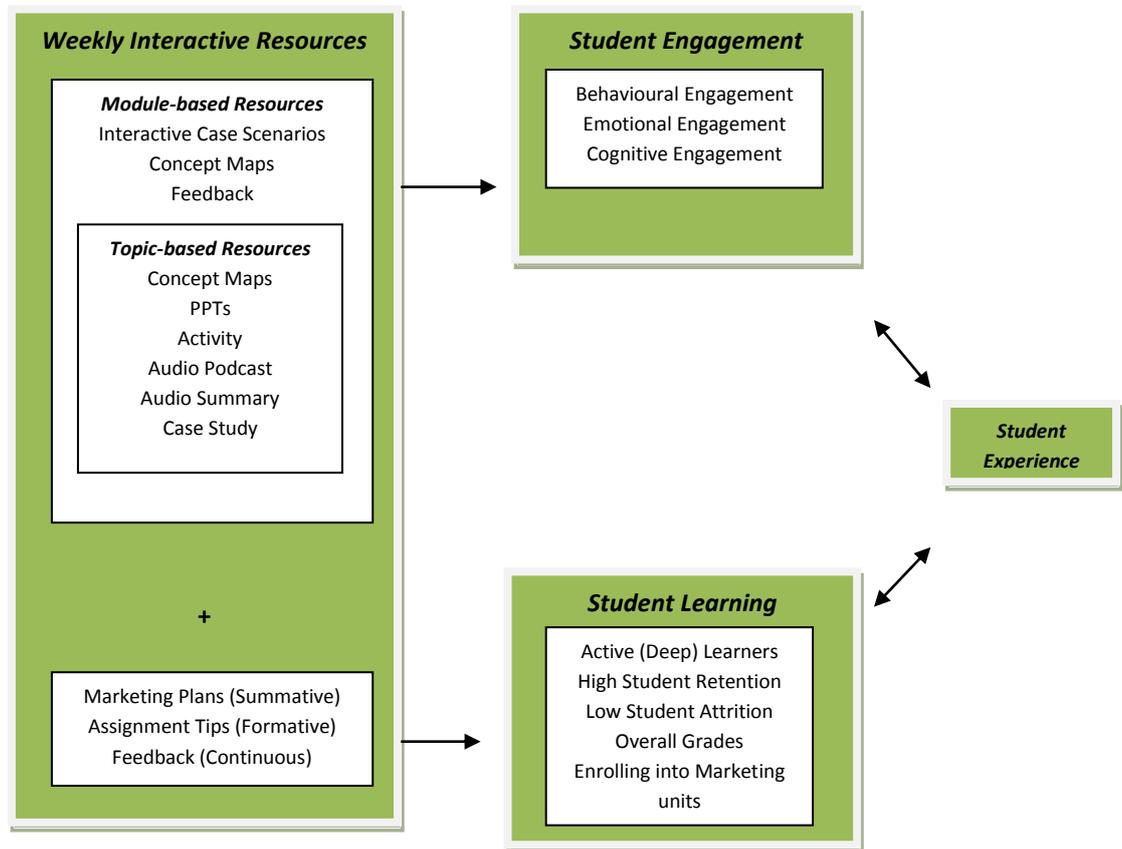


Figure 1: Constructive alignment of weekly interactive resources with assessment tasks

The interactive case scenarios within the module-based resources and activities and case studies within the topic-based resources included questions that allowed students to provide responses on a weekly basis at their convenience (Figure 2). The focus of the unit revision has been to introduce a combination of learning resources. These weekly interactive case scenarios, activities and case studies were intended to be formative, whereby feedback was provided student learning and participation but did not form part of student assessment. As Biggs & Tang (2007) highlight, active learning goals require the communication of clear objectives and expectations. Students commented that 'I've followed Moodle conscientiously and found all of your feedback extremely constructive and well-explained' (MM316 2012). These interactive case scenarios developed

largely focused on embedding the subject content with the real life experience to motivate students to gain virtual work related learning experience, thus enabling them to focus on the acquisition of work-ready skills. Through the enhanced forms of engagement with the subject content in the two Marketing units, students developed skills, capabilities and competencies that are sought by employers.

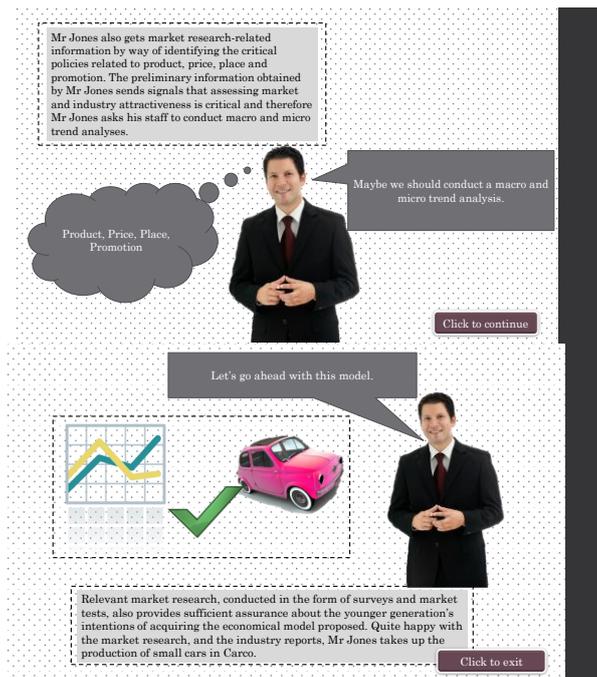


Figure 2: A snapshot of interactive case scenarios

Assessment is an integral part of the learning process. Assessment tasks implemented in these units complemented the weekly interactive resources; they also encouraged students to think beyond the unit content and the university environment to expand their knowledge, skills and competencies to real world situations. The aim of the unit supervisor was to enhance the quality of student learning by aligning the assessment tasks with the weekly interactive resources as students learn most effectively through relevant activities (Biggs, 1999). Assessment tasks were used as learning approaches in the teaching practice (Earl, 2003) because well informed assessment tasks aid the deep learning process and develop goal setting and critical reflection. In authoring clear and comprehensive assessment tasks, the aim has been to transform students' approaches from being passive and surface learners in the online environment to deep and active learning by way of stimulating critical thinking and interpretation abilities.

For example, assessment tasks developed in the forms of a 'Marketing Plan' and 'Strategic Marketing Plan' received very positive feedback from students; one noted that 'the assignments are highly relevant' (MM316, 2013) while another commented that these kind of assessment tasks would be 'useful for a future career in marketing' (MM316 2012). Other comments included; 'I am planning to use this business plan and start the AusAdrenalin business in the next month' (MM316 2012); 'this subject has been extremely enlightening and my managers are extremely happy that I have been able to develop a comprehensive plan after doing this course' (MM316 2012); 'I have based my second assignment on a current marketing project I am working on (my manager was rather happy that I volunteered to write the strategy)' (MM316 2012); and 'I will definitely take everything this unit (and others) have taught me onboard, and look forward to taking all the knowledge and skill set into the real world with success!' (MM316 2012). These assignments were made interesting by enabling students to develop marketing plans that aligned with the teaching material. Placing a greater emphasis on application-based learning, students also commented that the best aspects of this unit related to 'the plan itself' (MM316 2011) and 'the opportunity to put into practice the concepts and create our own marketing plan' (MM316 2011).

The staff member also provided 'Assignment Tips' to students in advance that helped enhance students' problem-solving and critical thinking abilities. Assignment tips consisted of relevant information about how the assignment question needed to be logically argued and critically evaluated. Additionally, these assignment tips highlighted the structural and the general components of assignments that sometimes were overlooked by unit coordinators and were identified as much needed for fostering students' engagement and learning. Students found the assignment tips to be highly relevant, commenting that 'the assignment tips were great, thanks again for doing them up for us' (MM316, Moodle Discussion Forum, 2011); 'Thank you for the assignment 2 tips. I feel that I have been able to make a good start on the assignment' (MM316 2011); and 'I really enjoyed the article (...refers to assignment tips), it was a great exercise and I thoroughly enjoyed the critical thinking required to answer the assignment' (MM316 2012).

Crucial to the revised teaching process has been the implementation of a thorough feedback system that enables students to acquire and develop core competencies (Hattie & Timperley 2007). Prompt feedback was provided to students on their assessment submissions as well as the interactive case scenarios and activities included in the weekly interactive resources. Thus regular support was provided to distance learners in MM314 and MM316 units. Emphasis was placed upon the provision of constructive, respectful criticism highlighting areas for further development. Students' comments included: 'I

found that her speedy and thorough replies to questions on Moodle were really helpful. I would definitely take another marketing unit if she were the lecturer' (MM316 2011); 'thorough and timely feedback to enquiries and assessment submissions' (MM316 2011); 'she is especially helpful and quick to reply to questions. The unit was made more inviting by having her teach this unit' (MM316 2011); '.... responded quickly, with helpful responses to questions regarding assignments' (MM316 2011).

The formative assessment tasks were designed after identifying the extent of distance students' disengagement with existing online discussion forums. Emphasis was placed upon the development of technology embedded formative assessment tasks in the form of interactive case scenarios that encouraged students' involvement and engagement with learning activities. The formative assessment tasks provided effective training and empowerment and their success was evident through increased grade point averages, increased retention rates and decreased attrition rates. Emphasis was placed upon providing continuous critical feedback to students.

The learning progression developed through this process enabled students to break down one large learning goal into several smaller achievable sub-goals (Popham, 2008). For example, the larger goals of submitting assignments or taking an examination were divided into several weekly formative assessment tasks. Distance students provided in-depth answers to the questions asked in the discussion forums and this activity encouraged students' critical thinking and reflective writing abilities. These short-term learning goals helped students to develop confidence in managing their studies and promoted self-regulated learning, an important facet of successful distance education provision. Both formative and summative assessment tasks were planned to align with student progression in the courses under discussion (Forster & Masters, 2004).

5. Conclusion

The overall comments obtained from students in their unit and teaching evaluations demonstrated that the effective integration of teaching resources with the assessment tasks positively influenced students' overall study experience. The division of students' larger learning goals into simpler and more manageable weekly learning goals through the inclusion of formative assessment tasks enhanced student engagement and learning. Student engagement is evident at behavioural, emotional and cognitive levels and student learning is evident through academic performance and other measures such as attrition rates, retention rates and enrolment in other marketing related units.

As higher educational institutions are increasingly grappling with retaining the satisfaction levels of their students and are focusing on creating experiences that foster deeper learning skills it is important for academic staff to focus on developing meaningful assessment tasks. Students appreciate the learning process if the creative development of teaching resources provides authentic assessment tasks. The focus of the higher education institutions has been on developing interesting course content through the creation of teaching resources that are interactive, stimulating and target maximum student interest. Students are no longer considered passive receivers of learning material and are increasingly looking for subject content that offers most value to them. Students are also looking for learning experiences beyond the traditional university context and are focusing on the development of appropriate skills, capabilities and competencies that foster both their deeper learning capacities and employment opportunities.

It is the responsibility of teaching staff to harness student interest in the subject content through the creation of subject material that is current, interesting, stimulating and informative. Teaching material should address contemporary challenges and include real life case-based scenarios to foster students' interest and engagement. Academic staff should focus upon integrating teaching resources with authentic assessment tasks and the provision of a worthwhile feedback system that fosters students' overall learning experience.

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