

Case study: Implementing Active Self-Feedback

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Course information

Final year BSc Psychology students at the University of Manchester typically have one or more coursework assignments (50% weighting of 20 credit units) half-way through the semester. In the Clinical Cases in Neuropsychology module, students study a different neuropsychological case each week and use this as a lens through which to better understand neural functioning and behaviour. For marks at the top of the mark scheme, students are expected to demonstrate independent critical understanding of the material, but this is a skill students consistently reported finding difficult. Indeed, the nature of the unit means that students are often considering very rare neuropsychological cases, and many students would default to comment on the nature of the single case study as a means of demonstrating critical thinking. Most of these case studies are very well designed and such comments typically are not convincing and generally do not demonstrate such independent critical thought.

After discussing this with students in class, it became clear that students did not appear to understand what the mark scheme meant by independent critical understanding, leading them to default to vague or generic ideas in their essays. To address this, Dr Jennifer McBride – a Senior Lecturer in Cognitive Neuroscience and Psychology – implemented active self-feedback principles to encourage students to examine fictional (but representative) examples of critical evaluation and score them. This was followed by a whole-class discussion together with the member of staff, before students applied their learning about what made for effective critical evaluation to their own coursework essay plans or drafts. The whole task was completed in a 50 minute face-to-face seminar (but this was also effectively adapted and delivered asynchronously during Covid-19 lockdown).

The task

The seminar is timetabled for a few days before the coursework deadline. Students are encouraged to bring their work so far to the seminar (e.g. a plan, or draft essay) but there is no requirement for the students to do so. Students have a timetabled seminar in their schedule, but attendance is not mandatory (~40 students are allocated to each seminar class and around 30 students attend; the whole cohort is ~160 students/year).

Students were provided with 8 examples of paragraphs showing critical evaluation of different literature relevant to that week's topic. Students were asked to read each of the examples – discuss with a partner – and to score them according to the mark scheme – rating each one as “excellent”, “good”, “acceptable”, or “weak”. Students then reported their ratings for each comparator via Mentimeter, and the average scores were projected

on the classroom screen to the whole class. A whole-class discussion followed, and the academic leading the session provided feedback to the class on the examples provided.

Students are then asked to write down what they have learned about effective critical evaluation in the session, and how they will implement this learning to enhance their in-progress coursework essay. The task is formative and does not directly contribute towards students' marks for the module.

Comparators

The eight comparators used were fictional and created by the academic leading the session but were representative of what students include in their essays before this exercise. The comparators included examples highlighting good practice as well as poor practice and varied in quality across other measures in the mark scheme (e.g. wider reading beyond the class materials) as well as critical evaluation.

Instructions

The academic leading the session gave this instruction to encourage self-feedback: *"Now that we have discussed these examples, please write down (1) what you have learned; and (2) what you will now change in your coursework essay to incorporate what you have learned"*

Reflections by teaching staff

The formative nature of the task, the seminar not being mandatory, and the timing of the seminar being shortly before the assignment due date, mean that attendance at the seminar can be challenging. However, students who do attend are very engaged, keen to take part, and see significant value in the activity. Students' insights into the process and how they will implement what they have learned are not collected, so it is difficult to evaluate whether their self-feedback is effective in improving marks.

Reflections by students

At the end of the sessions, students were given an optional show-of-hands to indicate whether they found the seminar helpful and should be retained in the module next year. 100% of students who attended the seminar reported finding the seminar helpful and should be retained in future years.

While there were no specific questions on the approach in the anonymous unit evaluation survey, some students specifically commented on the critical evaluation seminar where active self-feedback principles were used.

"The academic critical analysis seminar delivered by Jen McBride was fabulous and has helped in in other modules too, exceptionally useful!"

"The seminar on critical evaluation was very helpful for the assessment."

"Interesting seminars – very useful for essay writing, especially Jen's one."