



How does assessment design shape the learning space of a distance course?

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What are the consequences of encouraging students to develop an independent learning path through a course? Is the learning space of a course shaped by the type of assessment chosen? How do students interact with feedback? These questions are addressed in a pilot action research study of a postgraduate course in computer assisted language learning offered in a distance delivery mode. The paper details course design underpinned by the view of assessment as a key driver and vehicle of learning, with particular attention to the role of feedback in student learning. The outcomes of this approach are reviewed in the light of the analysis of student submissions, their engagement with feedback on assessment and student perceptions of the course.

Keywords: assessment, feedback, CALL.

Students who enrol in master's degree courses (especially in applied disciplines) are usually practitioners returning to University to advance their career and discover theoretical underpinnings of good practice. For this reason, there is a need to deliver academically sound programmes that are also relevant to the diverse contexts and learning goals of these mature students. This already challenging situation is further complicated when courses are offered in a distance learning mode, because of a reduced sense of the learning cohort and limited time student are able to devote to their study due to work and family commitments. Moreover, if students live and work in different countries their professional practices are often informed and constrained by social and cultural practices and beliefs of these countries.

All of these considerations played a role in designing a postgraduate course in computer assisted language learning (CALL) which is the focus of the present paper. The main aim of the course was to engage participants in critical examination of theoretical and practical issues associated with using computer technologies in teaching and learning a second or foreign language. Offered for the first time as part of a Master of Arts programme in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, this course piloted an approach to course design that would allow students to create their own path through the syllabus in order to make learning more relevant to their real-life needs as language teaching practitioners. Because assessment sits at the very core of student learning (Brown & Glasner, 1999; Bryan & Clegg, 2006; Heywood, 2000; Ramsden, 2003; Rust, 2007), this approach was realised by designing and implementing course assessment as learning experience (Carless, 2009).

Course participants

All course participants (n=7; median age = 47.5) had prior experience of teaching English as a second or foreign language. At the time of the course, four were part- or full-time ESOL teachers, one was teaching on a university preparation programme, and two worked as material designers/developers for private providers of ESOL courses. Two participants lived and worked overseas (in Korea and Saudi Arabia); three were national students who did not live in the same city as the university that offered the programme; and two participants lived in the same city, but were in full-time employment. All students were native speakers of English.

A survey conducted in the first week of the course revealed that all students enjoyed working with computers, and six out of seven had prior experience with using computers to teach English. Their self-rated level of confidence in using computers, on the other hand, ranged from 'expert' to 'below average'. Only three students had had prior experience in using wikis or creating multimedia resources, and only

two were familiar with scripting or programming or had created CALL activities themselves prior to this course.

Assessment structure

Course assessment was designed to influence quantity, quality and focus of studying (Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-5). Because assessment was used both as a vehicle and a driver for learning, students were explicitly encouraged to use their previous submissions, and feedback on these submissions, as stepping stones for their later pieces of work. Students were also prompted to ask questions regarding assessment rubrics, which provoked a couple of interesting exchanges in the course discussion boards. One such debate focused on the topic of *affordances* in relations to using generic computer tools in language learning.

Course assessment comprised three discrete tasks (contributions to a CALL knowledge base wiki, an evaluation of an existing CALL unit and a CALL project) worth 10%, 30% and 40% of the final course mark, respectively, and an ongoing task – critical reading assignments (CRAs) – incrementally building towards 20% of the final course mark. In fortnightly CRAs, students were required to submit a commentary on one or two key points or questions from core or additional course readings. To facilitate deep learning and more thoughtful engagement with the literature, participants were encouraged to relate ideas from the readings to their own teaching experiences and beliefs. CRAs were submitted electronically through the University LMS, and students received their marks and individual feedback in the same manner within a week of the submission date. In addition, summaries of the most interesting points made in student submissions were posted to the online course journal.

A course in CALL is a complex undertaking because of the multidisciplinary nature of this field (Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Chinnery, 2008). In addition to the key focus on ESOL learning and teaching, common to all MA papers, participants in this course also have to come to terms with more general educational research, in particular that in educational technology, flexible learning and instructional design, as well as with elements of software design and development. In addition, they need to have an in-depth understanding of the area of linguistics they choose to focus on (such as phonology, socio-linguistics, corpus analysis, etc.). Since it is virtually impossible to cover all of these additional areas in a single ten-weeks course (with a two-weeks break in the middle), the choice is either for the course designer to select a limited number of areas for the whole cohort to focus on, or to allow students to specialise, within the main framework of the course, on areas most relevant to their interests and professional needs. This decision has an important effect on the course dynamics and the nature of learning interactions. Because course participants were mature professionals, the latter approach was predicted to better address their diverse needs and contexts. Furthermore, course assessment had to be designed in a way that did not penalise students who were less confident computer users, while allowing experts to utilise their computing skills. For this reason, in the final project students were required to design (but not implement) an original CALL unit of teaching or learning, while any steps towards its implementation were treated as a bonus. In addition, students were asked to complete a number of non-assessed practical tasks (individually or in groups) throughout the course. These tasks aimed to familiarise them with a range of computer software, tools and environments that could be adapted for CALL. After completing these tasks students were encouraged to reflect on their experiences in an online course journal.

To encourage students to create their own paths through the course, they were asked to select an area of interest or relevance for their individual in-depth investigation. After completing introductory readings in the first three weeks, students had to identify and introduce their chosen CALL topic in a wiki page. A range of possible topics was offered, but students could also pursue their own topic, having discussed it with the lecturer. In the second assignment, students evaluated an existing CALL program, tool or web site of their choice related to their identified area of interest. Finally, their CALL project was an opportunity for students to think creatively about application of ideas they discussed in the course and to develop CALL design skills. This highly individualised assessment structure was made possible by carefully devising assessment rubrics that reflected core skills and knowledge needed to complete each of the assessed tasks, rather than focusing on the subject matter of the submissions.

Experienced teachers (and ESOL teachers are no exception) generally have a well-established set of personal theories and beliefs about teaching and learning (Bush, 2008; Ertmer, 2005; Meskill & Anthony, 2007; Warschauer, 1999), whether overt or covert. In a course where teaching practitioners are required to critically engage with the literature on approaches to using technology in teaching and learning, and to evaluate and design CALL units themselves, these theories and beliefs are likely to influence learning outcomes. For this reason, early in the course participants were given a task of describing their own views

about what works and what does not work in language teaching and learning, and why (Hewer & Davis, Module 2.1). Students were encouraged to refer to and reflect on these entries in their course submissions.

Provision of feedback

A key ingredient of implementing assessment for learning is good feedback (Hattie, 1987; Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-5; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Conceptualisation of “good feedback” in this course was based on 7 conditions proposed by Gibbs & Simpson (2004-5) and 7 principles of good feedback practice outlined by Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006). Students were given regular, detailed and timely feedback on their course work. Clear performance criteria were communicated through assessment instructions and rubrics, and students were given opportunities to ask for clarification using discussion forums. They were also encouraged to reflect on the points raised in their submission and feedback using a shared course online journal. Each piece of individual feedback started with a summary of strong points, and group feedback spotlighted the most insightful and thought-provoking parts of student submissions. Course assessment was designed to allow students to use feedback on their previous submissions in order to improve their following submission, creating the feedback loop needed for “learning-oriented assessment” (Carless, 2009). Information from student submissions was also used to guide teaching notes and comments posted to the course web site, in particular, in terms of clarifying misconceptions and addressing technological issues.

Provision of individual feedback to students, however, can be a time-consuming process, and it is a challenge to achieve this goal without significantly increasing the teaching workload. Although it was less of a problem in the present course because of its small size, this approach can create a bottleneck when working with larger courses. For this reason, time to engage with individual students through feedback was made available by minimising the amount of time spent on ‘traditional teaching’. This meant no formal lectures or tutorials (real or virtual). Teaching notes were posted for most (but not all) topics, and always *after* students had submitted their critical reading assignments for that topic, in order to encourage students to develop their own interpretations of the course readings. Electronic submissions of assignments through the LMS provided a tool for timely individual feedback, while the course journal served as a place for publishing group feedback. The journal was also intended to give students a vehicle to engage with this feedback in their own journal entries.

Student submissions

Students’ fortnightly submissions showed a clear trend towards increased critical engagement with the readings and maturing reflective thinking. Initially, feedback coached students in finding a balance between expressing a personal opinion and grounding it in the readings [“it would have been helpful to see *your own* understanding of this framework”; “I would have liked to see more support from the literature for the assumptions you are making”]. This point was reiterated in the group summary feedback, “... best results were achieved by those who were able to *ground their writing in the literature, while articulating a perspective that was distinctly theirs*. I also rewarded submission where key ideas were clearly articulated, well-argued and supported by evidence (either from the literature or by including examples from practice).” Early in the course, students also had to be reminded about being consistent and accurate in using references (even though it was one of the assessment rubrics).

In later course submissions this type of feedback was minimal. CRAs submitted by students in the second half of the course were mostly of two types: either critiques of points made in the literature from the perspective of their personal beliefs about or experiences of teaching, or analyses of examples from personal practice from the standpoint of the theory and research covered in the literature. This important change in the nature of student submissions also affected the nature of feedback; it was now possible to engage more with students’ approaches to critiquing, analysing and evaluating ideas and information, suggesting further readings, resources or directions for future research or projects [“A proposition that ... is worth further consideration, and I am glad you and others have picked up on this”; “I found myself wanting to engage in an academic debate with you about ...”; “I may disagree with you on ... but you certainly know how to engage and challenge your readers”; “I believe the increase in the use of ... in your example demonstrates two points ...”]. However, this change did not occur in everyone’s submissions to the same degree. One student continued struggling with the concept of critical commentary, as opposed to a summary of important points from the literature, while another focused too much on personal views and experiences per se, rather than reflecting on them in the light of course readings. Interestingly, one student’s misconception about the CRA task was not picked up until halfway through the course; this student interpreted the word “critical” in CRA as having to disagree with or criticise something in the readings. It was his engagement with the feedback that revealed this misunderstanding.

The wiki knowledge base served as a vehicle for students to research aspects of CALL they were interested in and introduce them to their classmates. Contrary to what was expected, students did not really engage with each others' work in the wiki (only one student left a thoughtful comments about a claim made by a different student in the wiki). Nor did they make changes to their own wiki pages after receiving teacher feedback. However, all students incorporated at least some points they made in the knowledge base wiki into their the final CALL project. In fact, students referred to ideas and points expressed in their own earlier submissions throughout the course ["I myself am a pragmatist ..." – a reference to the personal teaching theory task; "As mentioned in the CALL review I submitted earlier ..."]. This suggests that assessment design in this course succeeded in engaging students in iterative rather than one-shot approaches to learning (Gibbs, 2006).

High quality of student CALL design projects was viewed as another indication of the overall success of the *assessment for learning* approach adopted in this course. All students showed evidence of deep engagement with both CALL and applied linguistics literature, and met expectations in the areas of design and development approaches, and reflective critique. One of the key achievements of the course was that each student designed a CALL unit of teaching or learning that was directly relevant to and grounded in their teaching or work context. One student wrote, "This [the final project] was a challenge, but very useful. One of the most practical assignments I've done during my Masters studies."

Student feedback

A short survey of student perceptions was undertaken anonymously early in the second half of the course, using the LMS survey tool. The survey was constructed using qualitative open-ended questions, and student responses were coded into four themes related to: *assessment/feedback*; *interest/motivation*, *content/structure* and *technology*. Responses on what students *liked* about the course related mostly to interest/motivation (n=6) ["directly connected to an area of professional interest"; "given me some ideas for a future career path; sense of achievement..."; "changed my views..."] and assessment/feedback (n=6), with feedback mentioned five times ["practical and timely feedback"; "feedback ... is extremely good!!"; "the feedback is much more useful than..."; "individual attention"], while assessment was mentioned once ["CRAs ... promote a personal interaction with the readings"].

Among the things that students *liked the least*, technology was mentioned more often than other aspects (n=4) ["difficult to read online"; "assembling the required information via Blackboard is problematic"; "no help (officially) is given re computer skills"], closely followed by the workload mentioned 3 times (content/structure). Assessment was also mentioned 3 times ["I would like the tasks to be assessed"; "I'd rather discuss aspects of the readings with others through the discussion board than CRA's"; "insufficient modelling of ... assessments"]. Under suggestions for improvement, technology ["synchronous discussions"; "discussions instead of blogs"] and content/structure ["explore more tools and applications"; "more time coming to grips with the theory"; "a visual overview"; "printable weekly class notes"] were mentioned the most. Students also suggested leaving the course website available after the end of the course and setting up an ongoing discussion forum. This suggests that pursuing individual learning focus did not prevent these students from perceived themselves as a learning cohort, after all.

Conclusions

It appears that assessment for learning can form an effective foundation for creating a highly personalised learning experience within a common course syllabus. What are the consequences of encouraging students to develop an independent learning path through a course? Students' course work, their perceptions and experiences seem to suggest that this approach to assessment design enabled students to complete a personal journey of discovery that had real-life value while creating awareness of theoretical and pragmatic foundations underpinning decisions and actions. This point is well illustrated by one of the student comments, "I have found this course to be a big eye opener, in making me look further at the theories behind things... It ... indicated that the path to practical implementation starts a lot further back from the finished product than I ever imagined."

Even though feedback was perceived as one of the most useful aspects of the course, students did not engage explicitly with assessment feedback. It is possible that the workload, perceived as high by the students, was one of the reasons for this outcome. Another possible reason is that the course failed to create the level of trust (between the students and the lecturer, and among the students themselves) sufficient to approach a rather sensitive issue of feedback on assessment in the shared online space of a course web site. Could this have been the result of low student interest in each other's work due to course design that encouraged them to pursue their own areas of interest? At this stage there is not enough

evidence for a definitive answer. Further research is needed to test if creating a more close-knit learning community would encourage better student engagement with assessment feedback.

Finally, one of the key limitations of this research is its small group size. It may be reasonable to ask, *Is this approach to course design scalable?* The answer is twofold. Firstly, the provision of regular, detailed and timely feedback is, no doubt, a resource-intensive enterprise, and, if used in the same form with large courses, would require additional teaching staff. On the other hand, a postgraduate paper in CALL attracts diverse student populations, including experienced practicing ESOL teachers, material developers and computer enthusiasts. It may be possible to orchestrate and channel this student expertise in such a way that a significant proportion of course feedback is provided as peer-feedback. This approach will be piloted in the next iteration of the course.

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