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Report for Dialogue on Professor Graham Gibbs' seminar; How to change assessment of degree programmes to improve student learning.

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The seminar was held at Oxford Brookes Business School in March this year; Graham Gibbs presented his views on some practical ways to go about changing the assessment pattern at programme level, and the impact this can have on improving student learning. His findings draw on 'theory and empirical evidence [which comes] in part from a national project that currently involves a dozen universities changing assessment systems...' (Oxford Brookes University: ASKe seminar outline)

From his research over many years Gibbs has gained a perspective on students' approaches to their studies. He has found that students in the UK do not do enough work (we have some of the shortest degree programmes in the world); do not make use of feedback; and do not understand goals and standards. He used the term 'selective negligence' to describe how students make choices about how to apportion their study efforts (Snyder 1971), and highlighted a study by Miller and Parlett (1974) which looked at 'the examination game' and found that students, very early on in their programmes of study, identify and excise the bits they don't need to do.

Gibbs offered some practical suggestions on how to design assessment tasks which require students to be active participants in the assessment process. This is to move the focus from assessment done to students to assessment done with and by students. These were presented under four headings:

1. Changing the perceived demand changes the way students approach the task
 - On a teacher training course a compare and contrast essay task asked for a comparison of two philosophies (out of several presented on the course) of approaches to classroom management. The replacement task required students to watch a previously unseen video of a teacher in the classroom; they then had to present an argument for possible strategies the teacher could use supported by the relevant philosophies. As the students did not know what challenges would be presented in the video, they needed to study a wider range of philosophies, as well as demonstrating how these could be applied to choices of classroom management. Deep rather than surface learning was thereby acquired and evidenced, and was of greater value to the students both in terms of knowledge and practice.
 - Get the students to self check. Tutors had found themselves repeatedly writing the same corrective comments over and over again, with no real improvement. One programme gave students a checklist frontsheet to attach to their work

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asking them to 'tick all the things you've done wrong'. This resulted in perfect lab reports.

- Sampling coursework. For example on a programme with 25 pieces of work across the year, with 4 overall Learning Outcomes for the programme, students are told that their work will be sampled at random for one LO per sample. Not knowing which piece of work will be sampled, nor which LO will be the focus of that sample, students ensure that they address all the LOs in all their tasks.
2. A mark is a substitute for thinking about quality
 - Formative assessment at Oxford encourages students to focus on what they don't know or understand. Oxford has a high volume of formative and low volume of summative assessment: students every year ask for marks for their formative tasks - and every year Oxford declines, as they maintain that it is unreasonable to mark students on task they are still learning how to do.
 3. Diversity may be a red herring

Offering many different types of assessment results in students not taking feedback on board as they know they will never do another similar type of assessment.

4. LOs don't help students understand what they need to do

Contrary to the belief that greater explicitness of learning outcomes and criteria will naturally result in students understanding what it is they have to do, and to what standard, Gibbs (2010) and Rust (2002) have found that students become much clearer about requirements and expectations if they have opportunities to work with exemplars.

- Gibbs suggested trying 'Traffic light' peer assessment - identifying 'good' and 'needs fixing' (now in use in primary schools).

Summary

In summary, the key to improving student learning lies in the assessment design sequence. It works when it captures

- sufficient student time and effort: time on task
- high quality learning which matters to the student: engagement and deep approach
- a focus on learning rather than marks: feedback
- learning to self-supervise: feed forward

To conclude, Gibbs offered some examples of what doesn't work and what does.

Strategy	What doesn't work	What does
Clear assignment briefs	Greater and greater detail results in student cunning and selectiveness	Discussing and marking exemplars; critique each other's work.
Assessment tasks	Too many summative tasks	More formative tasks, with prompt and targetted feedback; cumulative tasks which lead to a final summative task.
Feedback: speed	Four weeks is too slow	'Quick and dirty' feedback within 2 weeks maximum
Feedback: making use of	Volume of written feedback does not count	Make development a priority: e.g. a tear off slip for the

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		feedback sheet to be attached to the next assignment will remind student and marker of focus for improvement
Diversity	Too much variety means students are uncertain of expectations, and have little opportunity to practice and improve.	Link across units: students need to see the common principles of the types.

References

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