The use of feedback in the organisation of a large class -
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A Case Account Reflecting Objective Alignment and the use of Feedback in the
Organisation of a Large Class

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Background
The subject Introduction to Marketing has grown to accommodate 900 students. It has traditionally included assessment of multiple choice exams at mid-semester and end-semester and a group report worth between 35% of the subject’s total. Prior to my convenorship this group project involved analysis of a case study. In my first year as convenor I used the existing assessment structure and found a number of concerns. The group work was fraught with problems that often required intensive student consultation, conciliation and arbitration to remedy. The analysis of a case was not in alignment with the content that I was teaching and the tutorial activities. The quality of the group reports was quite poor with in many cases evidence of disparate sectioning that indicated students were really working as individuals rather than addressing the case through team effort. The final exam evidenced an ineffectual understanding of segmentation and targeting consumers, a fundamental theme in marketing.

I addressed these concerns in a restructure of the subject with thoughts of increasing flexibility, aligning assessment with goals, building generic skills and creating an environment that fostered students becoming involved in their own learning through the use of feedback. My review centered on the subject objectives (as outlined below) and the generic skills to be addressed within this subject, which included teamwork and written communication.

The purpose of this subject is to examine the relationships among marketing organisations and final consumers. It focuses on consumer responses to various marketing decisions (product mixes, price levels, distribution channels, promotions, etc.) made by businesses to create, develop, and defend product markets. Emphasis is placed on identifying and satisfying the needs and wants of consumers. While the subject is heavily based on theory and learning the core concepts, practical application of these concepts to "real world" situations is also essential.

Resultant Structure: Assessment, Building Skills and Feedback for Learning

The resultant structure included on-going progress tests, a multi-phase team project and a final exam as the assessment. These items supported the learning of the core concepts but also utilised a real-world application. The role of feedback was key within the progress tests and multi-phase project to assist students in assessing their
own learning. When students get timely feedback about their performance, they are much better able to take charge of their own learning and are more able to determine where they need to direct their efforts.

With the goal of facilitating the learning of the core fundamental concepts, progressive concept tests were introduced. These tests accounted for 35% of the semester total. The feedback from these tests was seen as a crucial element to the success of the tests in promoting quality self-directed learning. The feedback was incorporated within an on-line interactive revision module. Students needed to access the module to retrieve their test result. This result was accompanied by their individual item responses, highlighting errors. They could then link from the errors (and correct responses) to the questions from the test and review correct answers for the items supplemented with reasoning for the answer and references to associated material.

Even with this feedback system in place, reliance on multiple choice tests was somewhat of a concern in the redesign of the subject. Evidence in the literature criticizes multiple choice tests for testing recognition and recall rather than understanding and promoting a shallow approach to learning (Yunker 1999; Becker & Johnston 1999). This dilemma of the use of multiple choice testing is being faced within many marketing courses as class sizes grow and convenors struggle to find assessment tasks that respond to the subject objectives and promote quality learning yet are time efficient and maintain consistency across marking (Smart, Kelley & Conant 1999; Wood 1998). Acknowledging these limitations, it was felt that these tests and the web feedback initiatives were still forming an integral part of the learning process of students within the subject, particularly in learning the "language" of marketing and its core concepts. The tests were acting as a motivation, albeit extrinsic, for students to learn the material in an ongoing manner and offered quick feedback on progress of understanding. With over 2000 hits accumulated on the web pages providing feedback on the tests, it was felt that students were making good use of the feedback module to assist in evaluating their own learning. This is especially of benefit where many of the early concepts form the basis of understanding later models.

The project accounted for 35% of the semester total. The assessment item was altered to a team project that involved application of core concepts to create a marketing mix for the team’s own product. The project was completed in phases to ensure students had opportunities to develop from feedback.

Concern from the previous year regarding the poor understanding of the fundamental principle of segmentation and targeting was also addressed by the multi-phase method. Phase one was due early in the semester and required students to have selected their product, given it a brand name and a core benefit proposition. Brief feedback from tutors was given to ensure students were on track and had a do-able product. Phase two was due in the middle of the semester and required groups to have reviewed literature on segmentation, applied the bases of segmentation to the product and define their target market. Extensive feedback was given by tutors through the use of a marking schema that, in-turn, required students to reply to the feedback with courses of action to remedy any problems. The final phase required an
integrated report of the product, the target market and the positioning strategies. This phase was then graded.

In addition to the feedback on content, specific attention was given to developing teamwork skills. The problems in the past were addressed by bringing teamwork "out of the closet" in that students were required to record their management and reflections on how the team was working on an ongoing basis throughout the semester. A logbook in which to document their goals for each meeting, tasks completed, and work to be prepared for the next meeting, was kept by each team. The logbook included rules and a mission drawn up by the groups within their first operational tutorial together (McKendall 2000). It also included self-evaluation and team-evaluation forms that were to be completed at several points during the semester and were considered in round-room discussions during tutorials. Time was made each week within tutorials for teams to work on their project. This time was also used by the tutors to discuss progress and problems with each group individually. The students were also empowered with the task of deciding how the final mark should be allocated among the group members. Discourse on this occurred in the reflection and evaluation round-room discussions. The logbook and final group evaluation, including team-mark distribution, were included as appendices to the project report and were assigned a portion of the report marks.

Large class workshops were also utilised at the commencement of the semester to introduce the notions of teamwork skills and team reflection. These workshops were also used to develop the idea of improving from feedback, both from peers and from tutors. The learning assistance unit provided help with these workshops.

**Outcome**

The student results from the project report, while not able to be directly compared to past group reports, seemed much improved. Indeed the overall grades of students were higher than in the past year. The number of teams requiring intensive consultation and conciliation at the conclusion of the project appeared to be significantly reduced, though no evidence on the number of meetings required from past years are available. Students also commented within subject evaluations that the project was the part they liked most about the subject.

The assignment provided a fundamental clear understanding of the subject.

I enjoyed the group work- I was initially very apprehensive about working as a group- but found it worked well.

how the assignment was based over the semester and not in one big hit and we could fix our mistakes.

The assignment allowed us to be creative, it was good.

Additionally, the progressive concept tests appeared to be successful in encouraging a building block approach to learning the foundations. The following extracts from student evaluations show students were motivated to learn, albeit extrinsically.

"….motivated to keep up to date with reading…",

"….It makes us learn throughout the semester, not just at the end"

"I find that without continual assessment I slacken off"

"The tests every 4 weeks forced us to continually study. Feel more prepared and have learnt more over the semester, even found out where I was going wrong…."
From these various sources of feedback, it was concluded that the assessment items and the integrated feedback mechanisms were shaping active learning, skill development and involvement in the subject content amongst the student body.

Concern with resource implications of teaching and marking in a class exceeding 900 students was also a critical consideration in the evaluation of the restructure. The ongoing progress tests utilised computer scoring and were not resource intensive. Preparing the on-line feedback module was conducted in two stages. The first stage required many hours in conjunction with the flexible learning team to create the template. Thereafter, the input of tests and answers was not particularly time consuming and became the role of the subject convenor. The multiple-phase marking of the project was possible due to the student team structure, which effectively divided the load to five assignments per tutorial. Though it was quite difficult to ensure consistency of marking across the nine tutors, an in-depth marking criteria was used in conjunction with model assignments marked up with example feedback for tutors to read. The only excess marking hours accumulated in the subject were for the final exam. This was regarded as an acceptable resource model within our school, which resonated positively on the evaluation of the restructuring of Introduction to Marketing.

References


