Inclusive formative assessment practices (IFAP) in Higher Education: Promoting Education for Social Justice

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Abstract

The aim of the current study was to enhance students' motivation and writing performance and ensure that no student is left behind irrespective of their background. The project developed and piloted the Inclusive Formative Assessment Practices (IFAP) scheme in Higher Education (HE) taking into consideration the scarcity of research in HE implementing more than one formative assessment methods using a mixed-methods approach. This study was funded by London Metropolitan University, promoted its Education for Social Justice Framework, and explored the beneficial impact of inclusive modern educational assessment practices on student outcomes, overall experience, and continuous professional development. This project wished to inform scholarly debate around inclusive assessment practices that can enhance students' learning and motivation and cater for their diverse needs.

1. Introduction

The current study examined the use of peer assessment (PA) and digital portfolios as inclusive assessment methods that enhance undergraduate students' writing performance and willingness to write and learn in Business and Management Education. Inclusive assessment refers to a stance towards assessment in terms of which individual students' needs, disparities and perceptions are catered for, as much as possible, to ascertain that all learners have an opportunity to succeed targeting their strengths rather than their shortcomings with the intention of revealing areas for development and helping them as they try to learn (Meletiadou, 2022). As educators in Higher Education (HE) have been welcoming increasingly diverse cohorts recently, inclusive assessment does not necessarily refer to students with

special educational needs or disabled learners. HEI are particularly concerned about using inclusive teaching, learning and assessment practices to respond to the requirements of multilingual and multicultural students who need to work together and succeed first in their academic contexts and later in an increasingly complex workplace which has high expectations from individuals who wish to find career-enhancing positions and succeed in their professional lives.

2. Literature review

Assessment as learning (AaL) has shifted the responsibility for learning from educators to students and is currently regarded as a significant alternative assessment approach that may increase student learning and engagement (Fung et al., 2022). Peer assessment (PA), also referred to as peer review, is a ground-breaking AaL method which empowers learners as it invites them to reflect on and negotiate their learning process with their peers allowing them to increase their academic performance as they are asked to take responsibility for their own learning by relying on themselves and their peers rather than their lecturer (Meletiadou, 2023; Yu & Liu, 2021). It is also described as "a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards" (Liu & Carless, 2006, p. 280). When involved in PA tasks, students can socially construct knowledge through the exchange of peer feedback which allows learners to detect problems in their texts. Subsequently, they are guided to take action to rectify their mistakes and resolve their cognitive conflict (Zhao, 2018). As Universities and tertiary education increasingly focus on self-reliance and collaborative learning (Voogt et al., 2013), educators experiment even more with the use of collaborative tasks that urge learners to become more active as they engage in learning to write (Loh & Ang, 2020).

There are six theories that support the use of PA and portfolio activities in the ESL writing classroom from both cognitive and psycholinguistic perspectives: a) process writing theory, b) collaborative learning theory, c) social cognitive theory, d) interaction and second language acquisition (SLA), e) cognitive constructivist theory, and f) self-regulation theory. These in fact complement and to some extent overlap each other. Research based on these theoretical stances has provided substantial evidence that PA and portfolio tasks help learners develop

their writing, collaborative, and self-regulation skills through the negotiation of meaning that normally takes place during these activities (Lam, 2022; Topping, 2009).

Lately, an increasingly larger number of researchers and educators has been experimenting with portfolio assessment as the literature indicates that it may improve student learning, facilitate lecturers' work by decreasing their workload, improve the learning and assessment process (Yang et al., 2016), promote autonomous learning (Tur et al., 2019), increase students' attitudes toward learning (Beckers et al., 2016), and promote reflection and the development of metacognitive skills (Weber & Myrick, 2018). Evans et al. (1995) refers to portfolio assessment as "an evolving collection of carefully selected or composed professional thoughts, goals, and experiences that are threaded with reflection and self-assessment. It represents who you are, what you do, why you do it, where you have been, where you are, where you want to go, and how you planned to getting there" (p. 11). Therefore, portfolios can show how individual students' learning evolves, their most significant milestones and challenges along their learning journey and can be used as a reference to showcase their achievements in their future professional life.

Handwritten portfolios have now been replaced by digital portfolios as they are easier to use (Sanders, 2000) and students can also be more creative and employ additional resources to unravel their digital and even artistic skills by using, i.e., video clips or interactive elements. Digital portfolios are easier to store, more environmentally friendly and easier to share with the educators, friends, and possible future employers as they can be integrated in blogs, websites and shared through the social media. This enables learners and future professionals to exchange ideas and artefacts among members of a learning and/or professional community and to become more innovative and creative as they can cooperate with diverse teams.

3. Method

The current study explored the impact of group PA and digital portfolios (DP) on 200 undergraduate first-year students' writing performance, development of professional skills and motivation towards learning. Its main goal was to provide an insight into students' viewpoints regarding the implementation of PA and portfolios in HEI classrooms with the aim of enhancing student academic achievement and willingness to engage in academic writing.

This semi-experimental study used a pre-test post-test design to explore the impact of PA and DP on students' writing skills. Students were asked to write a short report as a pre-test during the first week of the semester and then a short report at the end of the second semester as a post-test. After the pre-test students received training in PA and were then involved in one round of anonymous group PA which was followed by a second round of lecturer feedback as PA was complementary to lecturer feedback. In the second semester, students were asked to create digital portfolios individually and were then also involved in anonymous group PA. The lecturer again provided feedback which was complementary to students' comments. The aim was to familiarise students initially with PA and then allow them to combine PA with digital portfolios as these allow students to be more creative. Students were invited to use these portfolios to showcase their achievements. They were gradually introduced first to PA and then to portfolio assessment in order not to intimidate them as they had not used any form of alternative assessment before.

Six lecturers implemented the scheme after receiving relevant training in implementing alternative assessment methods in their classes. They kept a diary and made notes during the implementation regarding the benefits and challenges they and their students encountered. Students were also invited to provide feedback regarding the implementation by writing a short report about their learning experience twice, first at the end of semester one and then at the end of semester two. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative findings of the study and thematic analysis was used to analyse the findings from the lecturers' diaries and students' reports.

4. Summary of findings and discussion

Findings indicated that students increased their writing performance by almost 30% in 2 semesters. The researcher undertook this implementation as students complained about this module, did not attend the lectures, and submitted assignments of low quality. The current study indicated that when this specific scheme is implemented in large mixed-ability classes with multilingual and multicultural students, PA may help cover students' knowledge gaps, expand students' resources, and increase students' self-reliance helping them improve their academic performance (Pintrich & Zusho, 2007). Moreover, taking into consideration participants' feedback and lecturers' observations, the combined use of PA and DP increased

students' internal motivation as they were gradually trained to effectively plan, present, and assess assignments within a short period (Syzdykova et al., 2021) and use their creativity to design their own portfolios and enrich them with many interactive elements. This increased student retention, attendance, involvement in the module, co-creation of the module so that they could eliminate elements that decreased their performance and attitude to write and learn. Asking students to read each other's work and create their own digital artefacts teaches them a range of learning skills and fosters more self-reliant thinking and reflection on a deeper level (Weaver & Esposto, 2012). PA enables students to develop their academic and professional skills by focusing on feedback based on comparison and contrast with their own work (Topping, 2017). Moreover, PA and DP can be used as inclusive assessment strategies as they help low-achieving students develop their reflective skills and detect their strengths and weaknesses. They both stimulate higher-order skills and promote critical thinking increasing student engagement, interaction, and interest in learning, and has numerous affective benefits such as ownership and confidence building (Topping, 2017), social and transferrable skills which will be helpful in future studies and work-learned skills which include teamwork, verbal and written communication, problem-solving, constructive criticism, mindfulness, and diplomacy (Nortcliffe, 2012). Finally, students confessed that when PA and DP are used alongside lecturer's feedback, they can assist them in enhancing their academic achievement.

However, the lecturers who participated in this study revealed that students can be reluctant to accept PA to improve their learning products because they often doubt its accuracy and proficiency of the provider (Panadero, 2016). Therefore, training and instructional scaffolds e.g., rubrics should be used to support learners' engagement in PA and support their digital and creative skills while preparing their digital portfolios. Learners, especially international multilingual and multicultural students, also confessed that the use of PA and DP helped them shape good writing and reflective habits so that they could complete their written tasks more effectively.

Lecturers also detected that multi-PA can provide more total feedback than from an increasingly busy lecturer supporting a large mixed-ability class, more convincing feedback when several reviewers identify the same problems, and feedback reflecting more varied audience perspectives. Students also recognised the value of digital portfolios and PA in

developing their organization, meta-cognition and the role of lecturer– students' partnership as learners can work in a non-threatening environment.

5. Implications and conclusion

Despite increasing interest, PA and DP still remain marginalized as assessment methods in HEI (Nicol et al., 2014) as lecturers still control the learning and assessment process and prevent students' creativity and involvement in and development through assessment (Spiller, 2012). There is a growing literature about the impact of PA and DP on learners' attitudes and writing performance (Barbera, 2009), but there is a need for more studies to show how the design and implementation of PA can be made more effective. This paper aspired to contribute to this growing literature by focusing on what works and what does not in HEI for lecturers who implement PA and DP to improve their undergraduate students' learning experience.

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