Transforming assessment and feedback case study

Viewpoints as a catalyst for change

Harper Adams University and Cardiff Metropolitan University

Summary

A set of curriculum design tools produced with funding under our Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design Programme by the Viewpoints project team at the University of Ulster has been transforming approaches to assessment and feedback at a growing number of higher education institutions. Among these are the two universities featured in this case study – Harper Adams and Cardiff Metropolitan.

The Viewpoints combination of reflective resources and hands-on activities grounded in established educational theory has since been adapted for use in a number of other curriculum enhancement contexts. The principle-led approach pioneered by the Viewpoints project also provided the foundations for the institutional change projects in our 2011 Assessment and Feedback Programme.

“Viewpoints was a trigger and a hook for a wider conversation, an opportunity to stand back and think deeply.”

Harper Adams University
Case study

Challenge

Designing the curriculum is one of the most important aspects of an academic's role yet rarely attracts the attention or resources it deserves, according to Professor David Nicol in the 2012 evaluation report for the Viewpoints project. A lack of opportunities to develop a programme-wide vision has been particularly detrimental to assessment and feedback practice. All too often the student experience on modular programmes is one of summative rather than formative assessment, late feedback and inconsistent workload.

Such limitations can prove damaging, as seen in the lower than average results for assessment and feedback in many institutional National Student Survey (NSS) scores. Challenging though it may be to achieve a consistent, programme-wide approach to assessment and feedback, institutions now recognise the need to develop a vision for assessment and feedback that can be articulated in strategies and policies and implemented at the grass roots level. Quality-assured tools are then needed to establish the guiding principles around which a consensus can be built.

Innovative approach

To bridge the gap, Viewpoints developed tools for use in face-to-face workshops that draw on the good practice assessment and feedback principles developed by the Re-engineering Assessments Practice (REAP) project. The focus, shaped by the principle-led nature of the resources, is on learning rather than teaching and on educational aims rather than course content.

The Viewpoints resources comprise two elements – a set of educational principle cards and a storyboard or timeline. These act as a focal point for discussion and reflection among groups of staff as they evaluate their current practice then redefine their vision for assessment and feedback using the REAP principles as prompts.

The conversations that ensue are highly valued aspects of the workshops. Rather than providing readymade solutions, Viewpoints resources enable participants to arrive at their own decisions about how to enhance assessment and feedback, using the reflective and dialogic nature of the card and timeline activities as a springboard. The aim is to enable academic teams to arrive at their own objectives then articulate and share the philosophy and values that underpin them. Thus the process is not scripted and outcomes are likely to vary from group to group as participants work with the resources to evaluate and re-design their assessment and feedback practices.
“The artefacts become tools that help...course teams to reflect on, discuss, review and ultimately storyboard the redesign of a module or course.”

Professor David Nicol

Viewpoints assessment and feedback theme card and associated timeline and principle card adapted from REAP and the QAA Enhancement theme: The First Year Experience. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence © University of Ulster

The most common application of the cards is to ask groups to discuss which of the principles have the most resonance in their context then evaluate current practice under those headings, using the good practice points on the reverse of the cards as benchmarks. Working in teams, participants next identify where in the learning lifecycle depicted in the timeline document they would introduce changes to meet the educational goals they have agreed. A further activity can be to discuss how technology can assist the process. (Examples of resources supporting this third tier of activity can be found in two companion case studies in the Transforming assessment
and feedback series – Embedding assessment management, and Enhancing employability skills through assessment.

That is not to say the Viewpoints resources come with prescriptive instructions. In fact, the resources support a variety of activities – the Viewpoints toolkit provides free access to printable A6 card sets, a workshop facilitation plan and presentation templates with editable versions to meet different needs. However, clarifying underlying pedagogic aims remains the vital first step in the Viewpoints process.

Making it happen

This case study, focusing on the outcomes of workshops held during 2013–2014 in Harper Adams University and Cardiff Metropolitan University, provides insights into how best to deploy the Viewpoints resources to develop a programme- or institution-wide vision for assessment and feedback. Bringing together staff in a variety of roles in a workshop context in which a common vision for assessment and feedback can be forged is now a key aim for the many higher education institutions seeking to improve the consistency and educational effectiveness of their assessment and feedback practices.

“We found, like most institutions, that there was a range of practice, some exceptional and some not so good. We focused on improving the weakest practice.”

Harper Adams University

Collectively, the universities’ tips for successful Viewpoints workshops include:

» Introduce the workshops as part of a wider institutional drive to improve assessment and feedback but allow individual groups to identify their own challenges and aspirations. These may range widely, from improving feedback dialogue to agreeing a set of principles for assessment and feedback that all staff and students can sign up to

» Establish an inclusive, non-threatening environment in which experienced and inexperienced, committed and uncommitted staff can freely share their challenges and discuss solutions

» Involve a range of roles wherever possible. Senior managers working alongside course teams, administrative staff and students can result in a 360-degree perspective on assessment and feedback that is more likely to achieve long-lasting change

» Encourage participants to stand up and move around – for example, when placing cards on the timeline. Physical activity prompts constructive thought and removes barriers
» Introduce an activity that asks participants to link particular assessment and feedback aims with appropriate technologies

» Focus on achieving small but significant steps towards a programme-wide vision. Rather than exemplifying the work of a few, the Viewpoints process provides a catalyst for a consistent vision for assessment and feedback that has a significant chance of improving the student experience

Impact

From the experience of these universities, the Viewpoints process has a number of proven benefits. Firstly, attending a workshop gives busy academics a rare opportunity to reflect on their assessment practice, discuss how it might be improved and envisage the role technology might play. Then the tangible nature of the card and timeline resources offers an accessible and unthreatening way of re-imagining practice – a process that could otherwise become mired in complex challenges. In the process, participants also develop a common language that supports ongoing conversations.

“One of the beauties of Viewpoints is that participants have something physical in their hands that gets them speaking the same language. No amount of instruction would achieve this.”

Cardiff Metropolitan University

A mixed response from staff attending the workshops at Harper Adams indicates how important it is to prepare participants for the conceptual and unstructured nature of the Viewpoints activities. Academics expecting ready-made solutions to assessment and feedback issues may be uncommitted. Nonetheless, conversations that start, but are not resolved in a workshop, can bear fruit later. For example, the deciding factor for one lecturer was not attending the workshop herself but seeing the effects of a colleague’s work who, as a result of a Viewpoints workshop, introduced a peer review element carrying 10% of the total marks into all her assignments. What seemed too labour intensive at the time became an established part of the assessment practice of both staff.

“My students have become more organised and the standard of their work higher as a result of peer review. It’s been a real eye opener.”

Academic tutor, Harper Adams University

Furthermore, Cardiff Metropolitan University provides evidence that workshops can establish a programme-wide approach to assessment and feedback if the intervention comes at an appropriate time. A Viewpoints
session held with the School of Sport just before the undergraduate programme came up for review, for example, resulted in revalidation with a programme-wide rather than the individual, discipline-based approach to assessment and feedback that would otherwise have occurred.

“The School of Sport used Viewpoints to drive a common teaching and assessment methodology before breaking into disciplinary groups to work out the detail.”

Cardiff Metropolitan University

Lessons learned

The key learning points from the two universities are these:

» The Viewpoints principle-led approach is widely accepted by staff and students as a trustworthy way of addressing assessment and feedback issues

» The success of workshops depends on a range of factors beyond the resources themselves. Changing culture is a long-term process; there are no quick solutions

» Whatever the degree of success on the day, workshops based around resources rooted in established educational ideas generate conversations that can bear fruit later

» Timing workshops to fall in with formal institutional processes such as validation can produce more immediate gains

» Scaffolding workshop activities helps establish a common, educationally based discourse around assessment and feedback that supports ongoing dialogue and decision making

Ensuring sustainability

Viewpoints resources as an introduction to good practice in assessment and feedback have a wide application. Users see their potential in induction programmes for new staff, post graduate certificates of teaching and learning as well as at course review and revalidation. A community of practice is planned to build a pool of Viewpoints facilitators, ideally in each institution and in different disciplines, to support such applications.

Originally designed as four sets of cards focusing on learner engagement, information skills and creativity as well as assessment and feedback, the concept has successfully migrated into other curriculum design areas, as illustrated by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's flexible curriculum toolkit. In all cases, a
winning formula depends on allowing staff the time to reflect on their practice and set their own objectives within a framework of established educational principles.

Find out more

Jisc Design Studio: Viewpoints project

Jisc: Guide on changing assessment and feedback practice

Nicol, D (2012): Viewpoints evaluation – principles as discourse

University of Ulster: Viewpoints workshop toolkit