A reflection of my professional role as a module leader of EFPM266
Gaby Meier

Graduate School of Education, College of Social Sciences, University of Exeter

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Abstract

I use the opportunity of this article to reflect on student needs in terms of assessment, with an emphasis on formative assessment. In the first part, I will look at student presentations as a formative assessment tool and describe the rationale, trial and evaluation of an alternative model. The second part will discuss theories that relate to formative assessment in terms of staff-student relations and concept maps, which will serve to design a road map for further improvements, building on findings discussed in the first part.

Keywords: assessment; assessment design; student presentations; concept mapping

Part I: Taking over and improving module EFPM266

I am the module leader of EFPM266 Principles of Language Learning, which is a core course for those students working towards an MEd (TESOL strand) in the Graduate School of Education. The prerequisite for this course is at least 2 years of practical experience as a teacher of English as a second or other language (TESOL). I took on this module when I started working as a Lecturer in Language Education at the University of Exeter in October 2011.

Since taking up my role at the University of Exeter, I have taught this module twice. The first time was in the Autumn term of 2011. At that point I followed the format that had been established by my predecessors. The second time I taught the module was the 2012 Summer course. During the latter course, I adapted the module based on a problem that I intuitively recognised and thus altered, namely the format of student presentations. Thus, I trialled a new format in the Summer of 2012, for which I collected and evaluated student feedback generated for the purpose of adapting my teaching practice.

In the following, the learning and teaching context and the formative assessment tool of student presentations are introduced. Then I will outline the problem I intuitively found with this assessment, and how an alternative format was introduced and trialled. An evaluation of this trial on the basis of student feedback will then be presented.

Learning context and status quo ante

This course is taught in two forms, 1) for campus-based learners during the university term (10 x 3 hour seminars during 10 weeks), and 2) for distance learners during Summer School (8 x 3 hours

1 Email: G.S.Meier@exeter.ac.uk
during 4 weeks). I am the module leader and in the past a colleague has taught three seminars, this Summer she taught two, and in the future I will teach the entire module on my own.

The Autumn and the Summer term cohort comprised 18 and 24 students respectively. These students were of many nationalities who taught sometimes in their home countries and sometimes in third countries. The majority of the campus-based cohort was from the Far East, mainly China, with some European and Middle Eastern students. They comprised mostly young students (early twenties) with a few more mature students. The distance learner group were largely from Europe, Northern America and the Middle East, with no Far Eastern students, and on the whole was more mature with very few students in their early twenties. In both cohorts, the majority of the students were female with only 3-4 males in each class.

The assessment for this course prescribes 7500 words of students work. This has been divided into formative and summative work (1000 words for a presentation held in class, 500 words for an essay outline, and 5500 for a summative essay). In the past, students have been exposed to and have engaged with theories, before orally presenting their idea for an essay in the last session of the course. The rationale for this was that the students needed full coverage of themes before they could decide on an essay topic. Thus the Autumn group was split into two groups for the presentations, and my colleague worked with one group while I worked with the other. A small change that I introduced for this exercise was a peer-feedback procedure, besides my public comments on the presentations. This was to maximise learning opportunities and to help the audience engage with the presentations. For each presentation, 3-4 students were nominated to fill in a form that contained closed and open-format questions and recommendations to the presenters.

I perceived this session as a very heavy-going and repetitive process that demanded much concentration and stamina on behalf of the presenters, the audience and the facilitators. The presentations in their then format posed the following problems:

- They all took place in one seminar, which is very repetitive for students and teachers,
- Students and teachers hear about learning contexts with which students are familiar only at the end of the course, and so theories could not be linked to these contexts by seminar facilitators during the course,
- Two people are necessary to conduct so many presentations; since I will be delivering this module on my own, it will no longer be possible to split the group,
- I did not look at the peer-feedback, so I did not know to what extent this provided useful guidance for the presenter in the development of their essay idea.
- Content instruction was intense, and by the time students came to present it was difficult for them to recall the various theories.

**New adapted format for student presentations**

Thus, I was unhappy with this format and sought to incorporate the presentations into the module in a more organic way. I discussed this with my colleague. Following our discussion, we tried out a new format of conducting student presentations during the summer school of 2012. I asked 2-4 students to present their contexts per seminar, suggesting that there would be student presentations every
time we met, apart from the first session. From this I expected the following advantages and disadvantages:

Advantages:

- The students and teachers learn about the students’ backgrounds throughout the course, and can relate theory to student knowledge and practice.
- The presentations are spread throughout the course and are not all on the same day,
- The students learn about the importance of relating theories discussed in the course to their contexts (part of the assignment),
- The tutor is not the only person presenting in each seminar (variety).
- The presentations require active engagement of the audience in formatively assessing their presenting peers.

Disadvantages:

- More time is required to accommodate the presentations into each seminar; i.e. less time is available to focus on seminar topics,
- Students do not receive feedback on their essay outline through presentations; they only receive feedback on the presentation of their context.

The reduced time for teaching would have to be saved by reducing lecture time to introduce theoretical content, which may be necessary anyway, since students can generally only be expected to concentrate for 15-20 minutes on a conventional lecture (Johnstone and Percival 1976). In the Autumn term I tried to vary the learning format including lectures, plenary discussion, paired and group work. However, the lecture part still took up about two thirds or more of the seminar time.

The students still receive feedback on their ideas for assignments, through the second formative assignment. Thus, the aim of the presentation would be to make the context and role of the student teachers visible, the second part would be aimed at designing the assignment, and the third would be the summative part.

Implementing the new format in the Summer school

I introduced a new format for presentations to be part of each seminar, rather than have all presentations at the end. In the first session (3rd July 2012), I explained to the students that the presentation would be part of the formative assignment covering a part of their essay, namely a description of their workplace or learning context.

Practicalities

This was a class of 18 students, and presentations were spread across six seminars. This meant that in some seminars we had four presentations, and in some we had two or three. When four students presented, 14 were in the audience. In this case I split the audience group into four and asked one group to provide written feedback to one of the presenters.
result, each student would give written feedback to one of the presenters, and would have had the opportunity to provide verbal feedback to the three other presenters. This means that each presenter would get written feedback from 3-4 people, with verbal feedback from peers and from myself.

The students all produced interesting presentations, and I learnt a lot from them. As to the format, the students did not all keep to time. I had to remind a number of students who were running over time. The following illustrates the type of presentations given:

- A UK student of African heritage working in a prestigious all-female university in Saudi Arabia,
- A US student working with autistic primary and secondary children in a school in California,
- A Russian student working in her own private English school for adults and children,
- An Egyptian student working in a primary school for very privileged children of Arabic, but globally-oriented, families in Saudi Arabia.

In terms of student engagement, all presentations triggered interesting questions from peers, and the designated peer reviewers filled in their sheets and gave them to the presenter (I did not look at the peer reviews). My verbal feedback highlighted the gaps in the description of the context, such as missing student characteristics, or I pointed out the dangers of stereotyping school populations in saying, for instance, that ‘they have low motivation’. I also suggested aspects which students might want to pursue in essay questions, such as looking at a phenomenon in the light of a certain theory. For instance, the learning of autistic learners in California could be examined on the basis of their Zone of Proximal Development, and the scaffolding that is used to help them achieve their potential.

As to peer learning, the students working in Saudi Arabia were surprised to find variations in the interpretation of education policy between institutions. For instance, while in male universities teaching stops for prayers, in female universities it does not. It was also found that, again in Saudi Arabia, in some contexts role play and group work is encouraged, whereas in others it is virtually outlawed, and strict adherence to teaching a certain syllabus in a certain time from a book is expected.

I felt that the exposure to such different learning contexts enabled the students to reflect on their own practice and experiences, which in many instances is rather broad and diverse. I hope that it enabled them to critically reflect on their own practice, and question what they might think is ‘normal’ in education.

**Evaluation by students**

In order to evaluate the usefulness of this exercise from a student perspective, I produced a feedback form, which contained, among other things, explicit questions about the presentations and the peer feedback. Of the 18 students, 17 completed at least a part of the form. I found that, of those students who gave responses, 12 found the presentations good or interesting. Those who suggested there was scope for improvement unanimously felt that the presentations took too much time (8 out of the 17 respondents).
Analysing all the feedback relating to students’ presentations, I could identify two themes: benefits and challenges. Thus, looking at the benefits of this exercise, it met the objective of foregrounding learner knowledge and expertise by showcasing their teaching contexts, and it took a student-centred approach, making visible the students’ practical experience and allowing me to illustrate theories based on learner backgrounds. As a formative assignment it was useful, since it allowed the learners to start thinking about using theories to conceptualise their practice and contexts, which is also what they would need to do in the summative assignment. It seemed that many found the peer feedback they received useful, and as a whole they did not mind giving peer feedback, even though some found it challenging. There were some extra unexpected benefits, namely building confidence and overcoming anxiety. In terms of the challenges, first of all the students thought the presentations used up too much time. In addition, some felt that feedback needed to be more specific, and that they did not like to give ‘negative’ feedback to their peers. Three felt that their peer feedback was not so useful.

Summing up this part, I conclude that there is value in making visible the learner’s practical knowledge in class, and it is a feature that should be retained. The question that arises is in what format this should happen. This question will be discussed in the next part.

PART II: Designing a road map for further improvements

In this section I will look at student-staff relationships and assessment, as well as concept maps to work towards building a more holistic learning experience for the learners on the module described above.

Student-staff relationships and assessment

‘Assessment for learning’ describes how students can be supported through constructive feedback (formative) and graded (summative) assessment of classroom-based learning (Black and Wiliam 1998; Nuffield Reform Group 1999; Black, Harrison et al. 2002; Black, Harrison et al. 2003). This approach relies on supported learning based on an exchange between teachers and learners. Similarly, Crook et al. (2006) argue that relationships between tutor and students matter a great deal in assessment. Thus, I will concentrate on the staff-student relationship and the role this plays (or can play) in the assessment process.

Crook et al. (2006) are of the opinion that assessment and feedback systems in universities tend to be more process-focussed, which hinders meaningful social engagement. They argue that the assessment process often consists of a ‘firmly scripted procedure: one marked by clearly timetabled events, and mediated by various locations, roles, artefacts and technologies that are well recognised by the participants’ (2006, 109). They see this as an overemphasis of input and the stages towards the desired output. In contrast – or rather as a complimentary idea – they posit the idea of practice, which they see as involving non-linear, dynamic and ‘undocumented interpretive practices’ which depend ‘on individuals taking the opportunities and constructing the mutual understandings that local circumstances allow’ (2006, 97). Based on case studies, they conclude that it is these
opportunities for informal face-to-face dialogues and feedback opportunities that students sometimes miss.

Millar (2010) stresses the importance of learner identities as part of a community of practice, finding that a discourse of positive feedback value which reflected

‘the broader pedagogic and policy discourse, [was] juxtaposed with a discourse of failure: failed institutional practices, failed staff-student relationships, and failings in independent learning that produced negative learner identities.’

Thus good staff-student relationships based on a positive feedback culture can be instrumental in facilitating positive learner identities.

Nicol (2007) puts forward ten principles of formative assessment. He places these principles in four quadrants (Figure 1). This arrangement shows that there is a direction from engagement – via adapting teaching to student needs – to empowerment and self-regulation; from the academic and social experience to adapting teaching to student needs.

![Figure 1. A framework and ten principles for assessment and feedback in the first year. Source: Nicol (2007) (numbering of quadrants mine).](image)

All authors stress the social angle and a lived, dynamic conceptualisation of staff-student relationships as being connected to learner identities, empowerment and self-regulation. Crook et al. invites us to consider not only scripted and systematic processes, but also opportunities for unscripted, or less scripted, relationship and feedback practices.

While the above centres on student-staff relationships, we have to be clear that peer-to-peer assessment can also benefit learning. Based on a literature review, Wen and Tsai (2006) conclude that ‘PA [peer assessment] is found to increase student-student and student-teacher interactions,
and can be used to enhance learner’s understanding about other students’ ideas during the learning experience. Based on this, I also value and aim to encourage peer collaboration and peer assessment in my module. Nicol situates this angle in the second and fourth quadrants. However, I feel peer assessment can probably be placed in other quadrants too.

**Concept maps**

Interest in using concept, knowledge or mind maps in instructional settings has increased from 1997 onwards, and since then Nesbit and Adesope (2006) estimate that over 500 articles have been based on this idea. The idea of such maps is that concepts or knowledge items are organised graphically in a diagram. According to Nesbit and Adesope the map metaphor is based on the earlier idea of a ‘graphic organizer’ that goes back to Ausubel’s work from 1968, whose theory proposed ‘meaningful learning’, according to which learners actively subsume new concepts with pre-existing, superordinate cognitive structures (Nesbit and Adesope 2006, 413). Based on memory and retention theory they conclude that (geo)graphical information in conjunction with verbal information can ‘enhance learning when they [the concept maps] are used to summarize information’ and ‘encourage[s] a range of deep learning strategies’ (Nesbit and Adesope 2006, 419). Unlike other types of graphic organisers, concept maps are built on concept-relationship-concept triplets that constitute complete propositions.

Looking at Chang et al. (2002) and Nesbit and Adesope (2006), the idea of concept mapping as an instructional tool can be summarised as follows. Firstly, there are two purposes of concept maps: one is using it as a teaching strategy, where teacher prepare concept maps of learning material, and the other is as a summary of learning produced by the students (learning strategy). Chang et al. (2002) refer to the former as a top-down process that offers limited or surface processing opportunities. Further, there are two types of concept maps: there are preconstructed maps that tend to benefit individual learning, and non-preconstructed maps that tend to benefit cooperative learning. According to Nesbit and Adesope (2006), there is no conclusive evidence that concept maps benefit students more than other instructional methods in all instances. However, they maintain that there have been no negative effects. Thus, their ‘review should persuade teachers to make extensive, well-planned use of concept mapping activities and preconstructed concept maps’ (2006, 435). In contrast, Chang et al. (2002, 7) found that when working with texts, the bottom-up approach of non-preconstructed concept maps ‘results in cognitive overload’ that may affect students negatively. Indeed, Nesbit and Adesope (2006, 420) state that ‘[c]onstructing concept maps from a text, students must more thoroughly and precisely extract the text’s meaning’. It seems that constructing a map from scratch is time-consuming and cognitively and linguistically demanding, especially for bilingual speakers of English. Chang et al. (2002) examined two alternatives: 1) presenting the students with a semi-preconstructed concept map – where ‘a partial solution’ (scaffolding that is gradually withdrawn) is provided by the tutor to be completed by the students, and 2) offering a partial solution of a map where 40% is wrong. Intuitively I would not support the latter, even though Chang et al. showed good and consistent results with school children.²

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² From my own learning experience, I dislike providing false information, since I often memorised the false information when presented with multiple choice exercises.
Implications for my work

The above shows that a more holistic learning experience emerging from the above theories would be based on good staff-student and student-student relationships: learning that is based on rigorous and dynamic formative, summative and informal assessment processes, and practices that enable learner engagement with appropriate content, based on socially mediated construction of meaning. Having said this, it also sounds like a tall order, one that I will not be able to put into practice from one day to the next. In the following I will describe two areas which I would initially like to address based on the above. These areas are:

- Formative assessment of presenting practical experience,
- Deeper learning of theoretical content through concept mapping.

Formative assessment

From my student presentation trial, I conclude that it is worth keeping the idea of sharing student contexts with others in class, and the peer assessment seems to provide valuable formative feedback in most cases. However, the format of student presentations is still questionable from a practical point of view. Thus, alternative formats could be:

- Presentations of five minutes instead of 10 minutes, with the same format as previous. However, the larger cohorts and the time needed to set up PowerPoint presentations requires a substantial amount of time.
- Poster presentations: this would allow several discussions in small groups to take place at once. Thus, four students could present simultaneously, discuss their content with their peers and receive peer feedback. If I allow for a five-minute presentation, five-minute discussion and five minutes to fill in the feedback form, plus a 10-minute plenary session to share ideas from the presentations, the exercise could be finished in 30 minutes. All students could present in five sessions rather than in every single one. In the trial, four sessions would have taken at least an hour. The advantage of posters is that students could copy them as handouts for everyone, and we would have a bank of contexts which we could discuss in terms of theories.
- Podcasts: my supervisor suggested the use of podcasts. This means that students would record their presentations using their personal mobiles, which could then be put online. I feel that this would lose the bonding experience of actually telling your colleagues about where you work as a teacher. Given that the students seem to value classroom time, and that many come to England to practice the language, it seems wrong to include more non-face-to-face activities. Intuitively, I feel it makes the process less personal, and not conducive to better social relationships.

Concept mapping
In the following I will discuss to what extent concept-mapping literature could be used to scaffold deep learning and meaning-making, based on verbal and written text to which the students are exposed.

From the above I deduce that trying out concept maps as a means of summarising and deepening learning and helping students may be a good way of enabling cooperative learning and joint knowledge construction of what are often complex theories presented in lectures, seminars and articles. Thus, the content that I ask the student to engage with as part of my module is verbal and written text provided in the form of seminar content (lectures and discussions) and set readings related to the course content, which will be described next.

As part of their studies, students are required to engage with literature, above all academic articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Encouraged by student feedback, I have started to routinely provide students with scaffolding (questions) to guide their reading of set articles. Thus, I would like to examine to what extent using concept maps (with pre-defined nodes) may help students understand and draw out relevant information, namely concepts, and link these to wider debates/theories in the field of language learning, and to their own practice as language teachers or learners.

In practical terms, I could introduce new theories by giving a short lecture, including plenary and pair/group discussion to explore resonance with their own experiences and understanding (as I have done before), but instead of setting reading as pre-reading, students could engage with the set reading texts after the taught session, thereby building on their learning. At this stage concept maps may be useful. Thus a concept map with predefined nodes could be completed by a student group each week, and be presented at the start of the following session. This would act as a review of the last session. The idea is that the designated group would produce a concept map as a summary that makes meaning of the content to which they were exposed in the previous session, and link it to the wider theoretical framework (learning strategy). The concept map thus produced would then act as a peer-teaching strategy for others, and could be part of the documents produced by peers for peers.

**Bringing it all together: a holistic plan for learning and teaching**

In this concluding section I make myself a road map that will allow me to strive for a more holistic plan for learning and teaching that I may be able to apply to other areas of my teaching in the future.

**Social relationships:** I strive to establish good vertical (staff-student) and horizontal (student-student) relationships, wherein both types of information can flow in two ways. This means that student knowledge and experience needs to be made visible, and it is the aim to link this to theories presented in the course. The linking should be socially constructed through vertical and horizontal discussions.

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3 Extract from student email (received 9.11.2011) ‘Thanks for your efforts in these sessions. In the last two sessions [sic], guided by your questions in the pre-reading, I found it easier to catch some concepts and theories in the reading. Today’s class is very interesting and brilliant!!! Thanks!!’
**Assessment**: I strive to combine assessment process and practice, providing both summative, formative and informal feedback and opportunities to talk informally. While the process or system of formal assessment is relatively fixed in terms of formative (presentation and outline) and summative (essay), there should be more staff-student interaction in terms of informal feedback. I feel that the poster presentations and the concept map discussions described above could open up opportunities for more informal interaction, including feedback opportunities.

**Learning experience**: I strive to facilitate academic and social experiences. These need not be mutually exclusive, but could overlap. Both the poster and the concept-map activity offer both social and academic engagement with content as well as with peers. Furthermore, it provides practice in presenting academic content, and allows students and facilitator to jointly negotiate meaning and link it to student knowledge and practice.

**Learner identities**: I strive to empower learners as knowledgeable partners, supporting positive learner identities in facilitating opportunities for them to generate meaning based on theoretical content and their own knowledge through horizontal and vertical relationships.

In sum, I see my postgraduate classroom as a community of practice (Wenger 1998, 2007; Millar 2010), where we are all learning teachers and researchers who bring different expertise to the classroom and who all want to improve our practice to benefit our learners.

**References**


