Working with students on assignment resubmission

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Abstract

Most tertiary students are required to write extensively for assessments following a variety of academic conventions, even though they may not be guided explicitly on how to write academically. For many first-year students, it can be challenging to put ideas into academic language, to structure ideas clearly and/or to reference ideas correctly to meet the course requirements. As a result, some students fail to meet the standard expected of them and need to resubmit their assignments. At some tertiary institutions, such as Unitec, some of the courses are fully assignment-based and students are not required to sit final exams. If students fail the assignments, they are sometimes given the opportunity to resubmit them. If this occurs, however, they normally receive only a pass grade after the resubmission. Students having to resubmit assignments may have access to a Learning Centre. They often bring with them different reactions and expectations. This paper discusses some of the key factors relating to why students fail their written assignments, from the perspectives of students and the authors as Tertiary Learning Advisors. It reports on some of our strategies we have used to assist students with assignment resubmission: analysing lecturers' feedback, revisiting the assignment question, and unlocking awareness and knowledge about writing requirements. Finally, this paper highlights how TLAs can influence students' attitudes towards making resubmission a positive learning experience.

Introduction

In tertiary studies, academic writing is the "key assessment tool" in most programmes (Lillis, 2001, p. 20); many students find it challenging and some fail to meet the requirements. At Unitec, some programmes allow provision for assignment resubmission, which gives students another chance to rewrite their assignments. However, the minimal grade is awarded after resubmission regardless of how much improvement there is in the writing. Students with an assignment to resubmit normally come to the Learning Centre at the advice of their lecturers or of their own free will. The appointments are usually a one-hour, one-to-one session with Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs). The students tend to express various attitudes and expectations about their academic learning development when they need to work on resubmission of assignments.

It is shown that students who are given opportunities to resubmit their assignments have positive outcomes in their overall learning. Research undertaken by Karavirta, Korhonen, and Malmi (2006) found that students who did assignment resubmission have been shown to be more effective in their learning. Moreover, Becker (2006) stated that the ability to resubmit assignment results in "higher achievement and a greater overall reported degree of satisfaction" (p. 6). Posner (2011) also confirmed that students have better attitudes towards the subject and score better on the final exams when given the opportunity to resubmit assignments. Based on evidence that there are positive outcomes for students when they work on resubmission of assignments, the authors agreed that it is necessary for TLAs to come up with appropriate strategies to support students so that they will have a positive learning experience.

Students' concerns and perspectives

Students asked to resubmit their assignments often have varied perspectives about their failure. The following are some of their comments:

> I think this is the best academic writing I have done. Why did I fail? I have put in all the necessary referencing.

> I have used my own words and I expressed my ideas, why did I fail?

> I got an A for my last assignment so I don't understand why I failed this one.

> This has affected my self-esteem and I doubt whether I should continue with the course.

Observation by the authors found that a significant part of students' reaction in regards to assignment resubmission was their emotional state, which may affect their attitude about their own learning. Research undertaken by Chireshe, Shumba, Mudhovozi, and Denhere (2009) also confirmed that students who failed felt disappointed, embarrassed, depressed and disillusioned, and some felt the need to take remedial action such as seeking extra help. Students express a wide range of emotions when they come to see us. Some feel defensive as they believe that having to resubmit the assignment is a personal attack from their lecturers. In addition to this, some may also feel highly anxious as this may have implications on their graduation, finances, and student visas. Some students feel shocked because it is the first time they have failed an assignment because they knew they did not put the time and effort in, or because they knew they did not understand the lecturer's instructions. Sometimes, they feel sad about failing the assignment and some feel disappointed because they feel have tried their best and claimed that they have followed all the necessary requirements such as referencing. Others feel that it is unfair to receive only the minimal pass grade after resubmitting. They can also feel frustrated due to an inability to understand what the lecturer wants them to do. Lastly, some have low self-esteem and begin to lack

confidence about study and themselves as learners. Therefore, it is important for TLAs to be aware of and to acknowledge that negative emotions can be detrimental because they erode motivation. This affects students' performances which is likely to cause further failure in the course, as mentioned by Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, and Perry (2002).

Tertiary Learning Advisors' perspectives

Based on discussions with colleagues and feedback from students, as well as literature, the authors found some common perspectives why some students need to resubmit their assignments. These include:

- failure to address a topic and/or insufficient depth provided;
- inability to demonstrate basic academic writing conventions;
- insufficient application of critical and analytical skills;
- lack of paraphrasing and referencing skills;
- insufficient demonstration of appropriate use of reference materials shown;
- failure to write in formal language.

Through our conversations with students regarding their failure, we aim to help them to see explicitly the underlying reasons for their failure, and at the same time minimise their negative emotions so that they are in a position to focus and concentrate on learning new strategies to improve their assignments. A number of strategies for TLAs to follow have been identified. The first strategy involves closely examining the lecturer's feedback with the student.

Analysing lecturers' feedback

Analysing the lecturer's feedback can help the student significantly in their learning. Race (2005) asserted that:

> Feedback is a key factor underpinning successful learning and should enhance students' want to learn by increasing their self-esteem and confidence wherever possible, and by helping them to believe that they can indeed achieve the learning outcomes and demonstrate this in ways where they will be duly credited for this achievement. (p. 95)

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) also explained that good feedback can help students learn to troubleshoot and self-correct their own performance. Given this, students are able to recognise the purpose of lecturers' feedback. The following are examples of lecturers' feedback taken from some students' assignments:

Examples of a lecturer's feedback, focusing on referencing:

> Thank you for your assignment. It is evident you have struggled with this assignment and your ability to answer the questions in your own words but with reference to literature. At this point there is too much information that has been plagiarised and this is unacceptable. You need to show your own understanding of the requirements. I recommend you seek assistance from the Learning Centre about using literature and how to reference it.

Example of feedback focusing on analysis of the question:

> Case analysis is not evident with focus mainly on technical and manufacturing aspects. You need to look at the case, research on effects of fibreglass on humans and what best way to deal with the problem. You also need to cite the HSE Act in the process as well as suggesting what solutions exist for similar cases in history. Please resubmit.

Example of more general feedback:

> You have good ideas; however, I was not able to understand what you are trying to say. Try to explain clearly by reorganising your sentences. Resubmit.

Example of a very minimal feedback:

> Format not clear.

From the examples, it is evident that some feedback from lecturers may be more usable for some students than others. When analysing the lecturer's feedback, we first examine the general feedback as well as the marking criteria to identify what the main problem is. Next, we go through the student's writing in order to identify whether what they have written is congruent with the lecturer's comments. This is followed by asking the student what they think of the lecturer's feedback, for example:

> Why do you think the lecturer has given you a low mark for referencing?

> Do you think you have answered the question adequately?

By using the student's feedback, we can further analyse their lecturer's feedback objectively. Boud (2000) also supported this by stating that effective feedback from lecturers helps students to improve their work and redo the same assignment. As a result of carrying out this process with them, our aim is to get the student to understand what improvements they are to make and how to go about doing this. Therefore, with a clear understanding of the lecturer's feedback, the student can then make the appropriate changes to improve their writing.

Revisiting the assignment question

The next strategy is to revisit the assignment question with the student. Firstly, we analyse the assignment instructions and marking criteria carefully together by using the questioning technique. Using effective questioning can facilitate learning and guide construction of knowledge when working with students one to one (Wilson, 2008). By using this strategy, we can help the student to investigate whether their writing accurately follows the requirements by asking some specific questions, for example:

Did you follow the marking criteria as well as the assignment instructions?

Where do you think you have lost marks?

We then help the student to identify areas where marks have been deducted according to the marking criteria. Next, we focus the student's attention on specific areas as identified in the marking criteria that need correcting and/or improvement. Some of the areas that we can help students to consider when making changes are:

- focusing on the content;
- ordering ideas logically;
- showing critical analysis and evidence of research;
- demonstrating an appropriate referencing style;
- using correct grammar.

Explicitly 'unlocking the knowledge' of writing requirements

At this stage it is crucial to help the student to unlock the knowledge of academic writing requirements they are expected to demonstrate in their assignments. Lucas and Mladenovic (2007) argued for the potential of unlocking dialogue and uncovering dissent that surrounds the knowledge of writing requirements. Unlocking the knowledge refers to helping the student become aware and understand the expected conventions of academic writing at tertiary level. This involves using the following strategies:

- Discussing explicitly and showing the student the specific academic writing conventions;
- Discussing the importance of using formal academic language;
- Eliciting from the student what makes writing coherent: for example, by writing clear topic sentences with supporting details and referring them to a paragraph of their writing and asking how they would make changes to improve;
- Demonstrating how to use proper referencing styles by referring to handouts or visiting websites together with the student;
- Helping the student identify the grammatical errors which affect writing significantly;

- Asking the student to summarise how they would approach the assignment differently. Their response helps us to evaluate whether our strategy has been effective or whether a follow-up appointment needs to be made.

Opportunity to influence the student attitude towards their learning

By working with students on assignment resubmission, TLAs have the opportunity to help to shift students' perceptions of themselves as learners. Huijser, Kimmins, and Galligan (2008) pointed out that in a one-to-one session, "not only learning is scaffolded but also self-confidence is built in an emotional environment that is often safer than the lecture or tutorial context" (p. 27). It was observed by the authors that students felt safer in an environment that allowed them to 'let go' and unpack their negative emotions about the assignment. Once they got to a calm state, they were in a better position to learn about the changes they needed to make in their assignment. In this way, there was an increase in self-confidence as well as an improvement in the students' attitudes towards their learning. Besides, Crossman (2007) stated that the "relationships between students and teachers have far-reaching effects, possibly influencing learning experiences many years ahead of an original interaction" (p. 324). It is through the entire process of interaction between the TLA and the student that the student can become aware of how to redo the assignments clearly with their newly learned writing strategies. The student may also learn to develop new writing strategies into skills and then apply them when doing other assignments. This may help them to manage their assignment tasks more effectively and consequently have more positive learning experiences throughout their studies.

Students' change in perspective on assignment resubmission

The TLA may also direct the student's focus to the overall purpose of the assignment. Once the student develops a better understanding of the purpose of the assignment, they are able to develop an awareness of the significance and relevance of their assignment to their course and their future profession. This can cause a powerful shift in their perception of their learning, even though they have failed in achieving the purpose of the assignment in the first instance.

Examples of the questions we might ask are:

> Why do you think this question is being asked?

> What do you think the lecturer wanted you to learn from doing this assignment?

> How does this assignment relate to your future profession?

Chanock (2006) explained that students find their writing more comprehensible when they focus on the purposes of the subject and the ways in which these purposes

generate the tasks that they are asked to do. An example of this is to help students relate the assignment question to the course learning outcomes, as this can help them to see the relevance of doing it. When students understand the learning outcomes explicitly, they will be able to learn more effectively (Bingham, 1999, as cited in Posner, 2011). In this way, students find that doing the assignment becomes more meaningful and purposeful.

Opening a new perspective on writing

TLAs can help students gain a new perspective of their writing by modelling specific academic writing conventions which may be considered as the 'stuck places', as explained by Meyer and Land (2006) in their work on the 'threshold concept'. When students are helped to get through the stuck places, they can gain a better understanding of the requirements of academic writing. Meyer and Land (2003) suggest that "the change of perspective occasioned by the learning of a threshold concept is unlikely to be forgotten, or will be unlearned only by considerable effort" (p. 4). For example, some students may experience difficulty with using a particular referencing system; however, once they have been shown how to do it, they are able to apply this new knowledge appropriately in their assignments. Students may experience a transformative process of learning particularly in academic writing. Therefore, this kind of learning enhances students' perceptions of their assignments and also gives them a new perspective of writing in general.

Conclusion

The authors conclude that there are various processes involved when working one to one with students on assignment resubmission. These include recognising the negative emotion and attitudes demonstrated by students; acknowledging the students' perspectives regarding their failure; and showing them appropriate strategies, such as focussing on analysing the lecturers' feedback, revisiting the assignment question and unlocking knowledge of academic writing. As TLAs, we not only provide the strategies to help students to redo the assignments, but there is a possibility that we can have an impact on making a transformative difference in students' attitudes towards learning, in their perspective on assignment resubmission and in their writing in general. This will ultimately help students to experience a more positive outcome in their learning.

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