Using Reflection To Evaluate Course Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Student feedback is essential to improving the quality of instruction in higher education. This article chronicles the process by which an end-of-course reflection exercise was used to gather additional feedback from students and to determine learning outcomes in online course for adult learners. Students were given guiding questions for the reflection activity and student responses were analyzed using categorizing strategies. Four themes emerged from the student responses (qualitative data) including academic planning, earlier exposure to the Kolb model, application of Kolb model to career and professional lives, ability to organize and present information, and student satisfaction.

Keywords: Student Evaluation of Instruction, Prior Learning Assessment, Student Reflection, Postsecondary Adult Learners, Distance Education

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on how reflection was used to gather additional student feedback on instruction and learning outcomes in an online course for adult learners. The instructor wanted to glean more information from students than what was provided through the course evaluation surveys that were used at the institution. The method to gather this additional student feedback was an end-of-semester reflection exercise. Students were enrolled in an introductory course for an accelerated degree program at a four-year public institution in the southeastern United States. The institution is classified as a *Master's Colleges and Universities - Larger Programs* by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Most of the students had previously earned college credits and this course was the first course that many took upon enrolling at the university. The primary goal of the course was to assist students in developing a prior learning assessment (PLA) portfolio that they could use to petition for course credit toward their degree plan.

REFLECTION AND EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTION

Most colleges and universities utilize some form of “student evaluation of instruction” (Menges, 1999, p. 270) and the majority of these evaluations are collected through surveys which are quantitative in nature (Menges, 1999). The value of reflection in online courses has been documented in the literature as an adult learning practice. Thorpe (2000) utilized reflection in a distance education communication technology course as “an integral part of the various texts and activities,” (Thorpe, 2000, p. 81). Thorpe reported that students are often surprised by the inclusion of reflection activities as assignments and that such activities do not come easily for students. The value of critical reflection in an online environment was confirmed by Glowacki-Dudka and Barnett (2007) in order to “gain feedback for instructional purposes,” (Glowacki-Dudka & Barnett, 2007, p. 51). In 2000 Salmon warned that assessment and evaluation methods utilized in an online course must be addressed in order to avoid between “how students learn and how they are assessed,” (Salmon, 2000, p. 93). He also called for a closer review of online assessment and evaluation practices so that students and e-moderators (faculty) do not become “constrained by old assessment methods,” (Salmon, 2000, p. 93).

INSTRUCTOR AND STUDENT BACKGROUND

The instructor for this course was an adjunct instructor who taught the class entirely online. His interaction with the students was through online asynchronous class discussions, feedback on assignments, email communication, and the occasional telephone conversation. He has never met any of the students face-to-face. The instructor had previously taught this online.

For many students this was the first semester that had they had returned to college. Students were required to meet weekly course attendance requirements which were validated through their access of the online course. All students enrolled in the course fit the profile of “participants in adult learning for academic credit,” (p. 67) as described by Cross (1981). A total of 19 students started the course and a total of 16 students completed the course. Three (3) students withdrew prior to midterm and communicated with the instructor that they were unable to keep up with the schedule for the course.

Support for the course came from University College at the institution where this course was offered. University College is an academic unit of the institution that houses associate and baccalaureate degrees in general studies as well as student academic services such as advising the disability services. The dean of University College is the secondary author of this article. The dean and the staff of University College support the course by screening the students prior to enrollment to ensure that they meet the meet guidelines for enrollment and by providing academic advising and other support services to students. All students enrolled in the course were majoring in general studies, most of them in the professional studies concentration, in University College.

COURSE DESIGN AND OBJECTIVES

The primary goal of the course was to facilitate the development of prior learning assessment (PLA) portfolios for adult learners with training and education credentials that were not earned an accredited postsecondary institution. Students registered in the course were enrolled through a special adult-learner friendly accelerated degree program. Students were screened by advisors prior to enrolling in the course in order to ensure that they had prior learning experiences that could be articulated through the PLA process. The course objectives were focused on the development of the PLA portfolio, easing the transition of adult learners returning to college, and assisting students in applying course content to their present work environment.

Kolb’s Model of Experiential Learning (1984) was used as the model for developing the PLA portfolio. Prior learning assessment is the “process of earning college credit from learning acquired through a student’s work, training, volunteer experiences, and personal life,” (Colvin, 2006, p. 5). Students were guided through a myriad of course activities that led to the development of the PLA portfolio. Class activities included articulating personal education and career goals, writing an autobiography, completing a prior learning inventory, and drafting an experiential learning essay. The experiential learning essay had four components including concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, and reflective observation, which emulate the Kolb Model.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive definitions of reflection is offered by Mezirow (1998) which offers a description of the many activities which may encompass reflection.

Reflection, a “turning back” on experience, can mean many things: simple awareness of an objective, event or state, including awareness of a perception, thought, feeling, disposition, intention, action, or of one’s habits of doing things. It can also mean letting one’s thoughts wander over something, taking something into consideration, or imagining alternative. One can reflect on oneself reflecting (Mezirow, 1998, p. 185).

The instructor decided to use a reflection activity with open-ended questions as an additional method for students to evaluate the course and to articulate what they learned. Student comments have value in the evaluation of instruction process by providing a venue to express feelings and offer examples of what changes need to be made (Menges, 1999). Students in this course were asked to write a short reflection paper using some guiding questions

provided by the instructor. The short reflection paper was a graded assignment and accounted for five percent of the final grade in the course. The instructor verified that the students completed the assignment and awarded all points if the assignment was completed. The instructor did not read the reflection papers until after the final grades had been posted for the course. Thirteen students completed the reflection exercise.

The reflection exercise used in this course closely emulates the practice of having students submit class journals. Although students in this course were not required to journal or reflect throughout the semester, the intent was the same. Dean (1994) explains that “the primary purpose of a journal is to help learners increase their self-awareness and commitment to learning,” (p. 108). Journals are a recognized method to evaluate adult learner outcomes through synthesizing information in a self-reflective mode. Journaling enables students to relate material to personal and/or professional development (Dean, 1994).

In designing the reflection exercise, the instructor was careful to provide clear and concise directions to students. In keeping with the guidance offered by Lowman (1996), the instructor wanted to make certain that all learners were clear about the assignment’s purpose. Because this course included various writing assignments leading up to the course portfolio, the instructor was certain to always provide clear instructions. For the purposes of the reflection exercise, students were instructed to reflect and respond to guided questions. The guided questions were developed by the instructor to elicit student feedback about their individual progress in meeting the primary objectives of the course. The instructor also included questions about academic advising processes in order to assist learners in determining if they had any unresolved questions about their degree program. The guiding questions included:

- Have your degree plans changed since enrolling in this course? If so, how?
- Has the Kolb Learning model helped you as a student?
- How do you feel about the course portfolio that you developed in this course?
- What other courses do you plan to write a PLA portfolio for?
- Do you have any unanswered questions about the PLA process?
- Do you have any issues should to discuss with your academic advisor about your degree plan?

ANALYSIS OF STUDENT REFLECTIONS

Following the end of the semester student reflections were analyzed to using *categorizing strategies* in order to “identify similarities and differences among the data,” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 272). Student reflections into one file and labeled alphabetical for data analysis purposes. Upon reviewing the student responses, the data was coded based upon similarities and differences. Four themes emerged from the data:

- Academic planning,
- Earlier exposure to the Kolb model,
- Application of Kolb model to career and professional lives,
- Ability to organize and present information, and
- Student satisfaction.

Rossman and Rallis (2003) warn that “all researchers enter the field with a perspective,” (p. 274) and that “Theories that inform this framework offer focus, questions, and potential categories and themes,” (p. 274). The instructor, who had the primary responsibility to analyze the data, has a background as an academic advisor and has had an extensive background in adult education and distance education. The dean of University College has an extensive background in administering programs for adult learners (non-traditional students) and also has experience overseeing degree programs offered via distance education. It is important to note the background of the two researchers relative to how they approach the data analysis process.

SELECTED RESPONSES FROM STUDENT REFLECTIONS

Student reflections include a myriad of topics, most of which adhered to the guiding questions provided by the course instructor. A few students were slightly off topic; however, their responses were a form of reflection that was purposeful to them. Most students responded to the questions about their future academic plans and stated what their intentions were and how the course assisted them in resolving some questions about their degree program. Many students referenced the Kolb Learning model in their reflections. Two students expressed that they wish they had learned about the Kolb Model earlier in their college career and others discussed how the model could be applied in their career and professional lives. Some students spoke of how the course allowed them to improve their organization and presentation skills. Finally some students gave general feedback about the course.

Academic Planning

Two students indicated that they planned to graduate with their baccalaureate degree in the semester after this course was offered. One of those students stated that they planned to start a graduate degree program after earning their baccalaureate degree. Through the work completed in this course one student completed the requirements for their associate's degree and plans to continue working toward their baccalaureate degree. Other students were able to determine the area of concentration for their degree and two others determined what their minor would be.

Earlier Exposure to the Kolb Model

One of the first assignments was to complete the Kolb Learning Style Inventory and determine one's preferred learning style. The inventory provided students information about the types of careers more commonly associated with certain learning styles. This exercise was especially beneficial for two students who stated that they wish they had been exposed to the Kolb Learning Model earlier in their academic career. Both comments eluded to how the Kolb Learning Style Inventory exercise helped them better understand how they learn and isolate career options.

Student A

Knowing this theory would have been very useful to me 20 years ago when I was a freshman trying to determine a career path.

Student B

I believe that it [Kolb Learning Model] has helped me somewhat; however, I wish I had had this class about 13 yrs ago.

Application of Kolb Model to Career and Professional Lives

Two students were able to make the leap from the course content to how they might apply the Kolb Model in their career and professional lives. Although one did not elaborate on how they might utilize this knowledge, they did acknowledge that it would be beneficial. The other made a direct connection to how understanding the Kolb Model would assist them in teaching others.

Student C

I also learned where and how my learning style can help me in my professional career.

Student D

I was not surprised by my results, but it helped me to understand all of the learning styles. This will help me in my career as I try to teach others. I will be able to recognize other learning styles and adapt my training to meet those styles.

Ability to Organize and Present Information

The instructor introduced the prior learning assessment (PLA) process and divided each component into separate exercises for students to complete. Prior to beginning the portfolio, students provided a justification for the course they planned to challenge and an outline for the essay and portfolio. The instructor provided guiding questions for the four components of the Kolb Model, the basis of the PLA essay. These activities were deliberate on the part of the instructor in order to have students methodically consider how they might best present information. It was a goal of the instructor to aid students in how they present information. Four students indicated in their reflections that they improved their ability to organize and present information.

Student E

I am much more organized and this organization has allowed me to formulate higher level theories on performance.

Student F

I have enjoyed taking this class and feel I have learned how to present things which I have accomplished and learned outside of a university setting into a complete and well documented body of work.

Student G

The essay helped me to better explain my previous learning experiences, since I have never been very good at properly explaining things such as school work.

Student H

I learned that how you convey your message is as important as the message itself. Many times I would re-read a paper and see that it did not get across the intended message in a clear manner. Forcing myself to use a more structured format consisting of an outline, abstract, rough draft, and a third party proof has yielded better results in my written work.

Student Satisfaction

Five students said that they “enjoyed the course” and one of those elaborated to state, “I have enjoyed this class as well as the forced reflection.” In this context, this student was referring to the myriad of writing assessments that required students to analyze and discuss previous educational experiences. One student did express their discontent with the amount of work involved with the course and stated, “The course portfolio has been a challenge and had I known in advance the amount of work required I would not have took the class.”

DISCUSSION

The goal of the reflection activity was to provide more information from students than what was provided through aggregate data from the course evaluation surveys that were used at the institution. The guided questions focused the responses on course objectives. Most students wrote a few paragraphs that addressed the majority of the guiding questions. One student listed each question and provided a response to each question.

The Kolb Model is the foundation upon which the course was designed. The instructor included the Kolb Learning Style Inventory to allow students the opportunity to understand their learning styles as well as strengths and weaknesses. Throughout the course the instructor reinforced the use of the Kolb Model as the framework for the prior learning assessment (PLA) portfolio. Based upon the students’ responses in the reflection activity, it can be assumed that the Kolb Learning Style Inventory activity assisted students in reconciling some questions about their academic degree plans and career goals. And as evidenced by the comments from some students, they have been able to make the leap from the course content to their career and find ways to apply this newfound knowledge and understanding. The information from the student reflections gives us confidence that the course objective “to assist students in applying course content from the professional studies program to their present work environment,” was met.

A second course objective, “to allow the student to identify and express their competencies and level of college learning,” was also met as evidenced through the student reflections. The proof that this objective was met is indicated by the four students who felt that their organization and presentation skills had improved because the course. The instructor intentionally divided course activities into manageable activities for the learners. He knew that the process of the developing a PLA portfolio can be a daunting task to students, especially those who have recently returned to college, and was careful in structuring course activities. In addition to meeting the immediate objective of this course, we are hopeful that the four students who felt that their organization and presentation skills will be able to transfer this skill to other courses and their careers.

Given the interest of the authors in student retention and progression, it is important to have some evidence that students feel that they have an understanding of both the PLA portfolio process and their academic degree options. This interest is most closely associated with the course objective “to ease the transition of returning to college for adult learners.” We feel that there is evidence that this goal was met not merely by the number of students who not only enjoyed the course, but by the students who provided in-depth explanations of their future academic plans. It should also be noted that many students indicated that they did not have any questions about the PLA process not that they had any issues should to discuss their academic advisor their degree plan.

CONCLUSION

The end-of-course reflection process described in this article was designed to provide student feedback on instruction and learning outcomes as a supplement to, rather than an alternative to, the traditional surveys used to evaluate instruction. Due to the number of writing assignments in this course, the instructor opted to include a single reflection activity at the end of the semester, rather than the journaling process described by Dean (1994) or the one minute paper (Stead, 2005). The process described in this article provided the instructor and the dean of the college in which this course is offered additional assurances that course learning objectives were met. The process described in this article also provides guidance for faculty who wish to glean additional feedback about the effectiveness of their instruction from students through reflection activities. In designing such reflection activities, the authors recommend that reflection questions be directly related to specific course objectives.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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NOTES