

Enhancing student engagement with online resources: Case study of using the Assignment Survival Kit (ASK) essay writing tool with first year undergraduate Multimedia Technology and Design students

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Abstract

In a response to the perceived lack of study and academic skills evident among HE students, a great deal of time and effort is put in across the country to create online resources for students. However, it is common for staff to express a concern that students do not access these resources, or that the resources produce only a minimal improvement in performance.

This paper examines the results of the introduction of the Assignment Survival Kit (an online essay planning and writing guide) to first year undergraduate multimedia students. Initial results of the trial indicate some improvement in essay writing skills with a positive response from students regarding the usefulness and usability of the ASK.

A model for introducing online resources is proposed and factors influencing student success with using online resources will be considered. The 'before and after' performance of the group in an essay writing task will be compared specifically to identify advantages gained by students from using the ASK. In addition, feedback from student focus groups will be presented and discussed and future developments, based on student input, will be suggested.

Participants will gain information about models for implementing online resources effectively and will also be able to discuss and share their own experiences of using online generic study resources.

Keywords: online resources, academic writing, student engagement, study skills, time management, essay writing, generic writing resources.

Introduction

The University of Kent provides a central service for learning and study skills support as part of the Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (UELТ). This support includes one-to-one tutorials, workshops and downloadable materials. Some taught modules provide embedded study skills as part of the curriculum; however, this is not widespread across the University. To address the need for development of essay writing skills, UELТ produced the online Assignment Survival Kit ([ASK](#)) as part of a joint project with Staffordshire University. This resource is available to students on or off campus, in any module. It is situated on the Academic Integrity website which contains resources for staff and students on academic writing, referencing and plagiarism (<http://www.kent.ac.uk/uelт/ai>).

The Multimedia Technology and Design course at University of Kent is a unique venture. Established in 2000 at the Department of Electronics, it successfully combines digital technologies curriculum with strong emphasis on art and design. Applicants with A levels, or equivalent, in mathematics and physics have equal chances of gaining a place on the course to those from artistic backgrounds with good A levels in Art and Design or English, for example.

The first year syllabus has been constructed to give balanced foundations in both the technological and creative aspects which underpin the development of multimedia systems. These include software engineering, with modules on visual programming and Java technology, web site design, digital visual narrative as well as a module on visual communication which explores aspects of art history, graphic design and communication theories. One of the aims of the first year is to bring all students to a similar level of expertise from which they can embark on more advanced studies. Assessment is strongly coursework orientated with programming assignments, computer labs, design projects, presentations and essay writing, among others.

The multidisciplinary nature of the course is both its strong advantage and a significant challenge. Gonzalez et al argue that “the number of disciplines that lay claim to multimedia have traditionally antagonistic cultures” (2000 p. 89). Designing a course curriculum that brings these disciplines together to create a real fusion of techno-creative diversity requires a

balanced approach which caters not only for different disciplines and different abilities, but also a different way of learning and managing cross-disciplinary course requirements. The course attracts a mixture of students, both home and overseas. In 2008/09 there were 90 registered students, with 9 international and 81 home students.

Rationale

Although the entry requirements for the multimedia course have not changed since its beginning, it has become apparent that more and more students are struggling with the written component of the course and need extra support with essay writing. Our visual communication module relies fairly heavily on written assessment, and we have noticed over the past few years that the quality of writing has deteriorated. This may be due to many factors, for example, more students are joining the course with only vocational qualifications (e.g. BTEC National Diplomas) where little or no essay writing is required; more overseas students, whose first language is not English, are enrolling on the course; as well as more home students, despite having achieved the required grade in English, are finding written assignments particularly difficult. As a result, we are dealing with a fairly large cohort of students with poor performance in essay writing. Of particular concern are lack of critical thinking and understanding of the question, followed by lack of more basic requirements such as writing with a coherent structure, correct grammar and spelling, and using the correct register and style.

The rationale for our project was to provide an easily accessible and robust learning resource available to students studying the first year visual communication module which would facilitate student engagement with essay writing as well as cater for diverse abilities of the cohort. To that effect, the course convener worked in close partnership with the LearnHigher Local Area Coordinator from University's Unit for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching to evaluate students' progress in essay writing as well as their level of engagement with the Assignment Survival Kit.

Since it is well documented that the provision of online resources does not necessarily ensure that student can or will use such resources for effective study and learning (Lim 2004), and that students frequently fail to make the best use of such resources (Brown et al 2008), we

were aware that the ASK should be introduced as part of regular academic content and connected to the assessment task to facilitate the best possible student uptake (Biggs 2003).

The use of the ASK in this multimedia module was aimed to answer the following questions:

- Can an online writing tool support and improve students' writing skills?
- Will embedding this resource facilitate its use?
- How will an online essay writing resource be used?
- How can we incentivise students to engage with the available learning resources?

Development and implementation (methodology)

The Assignment Survival Kit is based on the original Assignment Calculator developed by [The University of Minnesota Libraries](#), with further adaptation for the UK by [Staffordshire University](#). The resource is designed to provide a timetable of activities to support students in writing an academic essay. Typical essay writing advice is provided, but the key feature of the ASK is that a personal timetable is created based on the assignment due date which is keyed in by the student. The steps required to complete an essay are broken down so that students can manage their time and tackle interim goals. Checklists for each stage are also provided. To evaluate the effectiveness of ASK in supporting students' essay writing skills, students were required to use the ASK as part of an essay assignment, complete a self-evaluation of their finished piece of writing and then participate in focus groups on both the task and the ASK itself.

The essay assignment was based on the recommended textbook by John Berger entitled 'The Ways of Seeing' which was a familiar text for students as it was discussed and analysed in seminars. Students had previously written another essay based on one of the chapters from the book; therefore, they were familiar with the subject matter. Essay writing was a normal part of the assessment for this subject; however, the use of the ASK was new.

The ASK was introduced in one of the visual communication lectures with the lecturer demonstrating how to use the resource. The essay marking sheet was re-designed, in collaboration with LearnHigher Coordinator, to match the structure and the sections in the ASK, and students were introduced to the marking criteria by the lecturer in class. A self-assessment form, closely matching the marking sheet, was used to promote their reflection on

how they used the ASK and how effective the resource was in supporting their writing in line with self-regulated learning theory (SRL). SRL argues that self-evaluation, as a meta-cognitive strategy, enhances effective learning (Cho 2004). However, this assumes that the students are sufficiently cue sensitive (Gibbs & Simpson 2004) and confident to pick up the connection between the assessment marking criteria, self-assessment criteria and the ASK headings.

In line with the self-efficacy theory (Bandura 1977), students need to be confident in their own abilities to be able to initiate, persevere with and complete a task in the face of perceived difficulties which challenge their coping skills. This can influence a student's engagement with an online resource which they see as exceeding their coping skills either academically or technically. In addition, excessive cognitive load involved in using the online resource itself will redirect a student's attention away from the task and onto activities irrelevant to learning (e.g. resource navigation) resulting in de-motivation and disengagement from the resource and therefore the learning (Lim 2004; Hacker & Niederhauser 2000). Cue sensitivity is necessary for students to make the connection between the material presented and how to complete the assignment successfully. Gibbs & Simpson (2004) argue that successful students are highly cue sensitive, while students who struggle in this area are less likely to succeed. Therefore, our assessment sheet was designed to provide adequate cues for successful completion of the task.

Following submission of the assignment and the self-assessment sheet, students were asked to participate in focus groups. The focus groups (consisting of discussion and completing an anonymous feedback form about the ASK) ran mainly on one day, during scheduled workshop times, to be as convenient as possible for students. In addition, an incentive of £5 was offered to participating students. Thirty four students participated (out of the class of 90), possibly as the focus group was held on a Friday, at the end of term. Many students left as soon as they realised that it was not compulsory to stay for the entire session; however, those who stayed were keen to provide feedback about the ASK and were generally very positive about the resource and the project.

Results

Assignment grades: Initial results showed that assignment marks increased by 6%- from an average of 60.5% to 66.5% with average marks increasing from 12.1 (out of 20) to 13.3 (less

than a whole grade). Furthermore, while there was an overall improvement for the group, nine students dropped a grade or more, and eleven increased by a grade or more.

Self-assessment: There was a poor rate of submission of self-assessment sheets (27 out of 90 students submitted). Of those received, students gave themselves an average mark of 14.4 (71%), indicating that they over-rated their own achievement.

Survey forms given in focus groups: Surveys conducted during the focus groups indicated that respondents found the ASK useful (91%), with ‘useful’ sections of the ASK including drafting the plan (12%), understanding the question, time management, writing references and proofreading and editing (10% each). When asked if students used the timetable produced by ASK in completing their work, the majority (18%) used the timetable to set personal deadlines. The main additional uses were to improve references (13%) and to understand the question (12%).

Of the English as a first language group, 89% found ASK helpful, with the main ‘useful’ sections being drafting the plan (12%), and understanding the question, time management, proofreading and editing (10% each). In this group, the majority again used the timetable to set personal deadlines (18%), while the next most frequent uses were to structure the assignment (16%), to improve referencing (14%) and to understand the question and to help with research (11% each).

In the English as a second language group, 100% found ASK helpful, and ‘useful’ sections of ASK were writing the references (15%) and reading and note-making (12%), with understanding the question, drafting the initial plan, proofreading and editing rating at 10% each. Once again, in this group too, the majority used the timetable to set personal deadlines (16%), equal responses with understanding the question (16%) and writing in drafts (16%).

Comments recorded in focus groups: Focus group feedback overwhelmingly showed that students found the time management aspect most useful. While some comments indicated that the amount of material available in the ASK was difficult to take in, many appreciated the level of information. Comments include:

- ‘I used to just type a lot of words but then I saw that there was more to it’
- ‘I can scan through it to get the information I need’
- ‘It made the target clearer’

- ‘This should be introduced earlier’.

Students in all focus groups commented on the time management aspect of ASK:

- ‘Time management helped’ and the “by this date” was good’
- ‘Time management and writing in drafts helped a lot’
- ‘The interim deadlines kept me on track’
- ‘The deadlines were good although I couldn’t always stick to it’.

Discussion

In answer to our initial question, ‘can an online writing tool support and improve students’ writing skills?’ the results are inconclusive. Although overall student marks increased by 6%, this does not constitute a whole grade (low 2:1 to a high 2:1), and nine students did gain lower marks. Interestingly, the quality of the essays submitted was improved and there was a marked improvement in general which demonstrated good paragraphing and some references as opposed to previous assignments which showed poor structure and lack of referencing. As ASK was stipulated to be used in this task but not checked, it may be possible that these students did not use ASK.

The question of student engagement is relevant here: students were told to use ASK and reflect on their writing using the ASK categories on the self-assessment sheet (but not all submitted their self assessment sheet). They were also given incentives to participate in focus groups on ASK; however, only 34 students out of the cohort of 90 joined the focus groups (and one requirement of the focus group was experience of using the ASK). This may indicate that only this third of the cohort used ASK, or that only these students were prepared to stay for a non-compulsory Friday afternoon focus group.

This level of engagement goes some way towards answering the second of our questions: ‘will embedding this resource facilitate its use?’ With what seems to be a relatively low level of participation, it would seem that the embedding in lectures plus the reflection task have not greatly increased student use of this resource. Brown et al (2008) reported that approximately one third of the students in their study (on student use of online avoiding

plagiarism resources) actually accessed these resources which were not part of the taught curriculum; thus, both studies have similar uptake despite differences in implementation. Brown et al (2008) argue that the application of adult and self-regulated learning theories to students at this level may not be relevant. Time management, an essential skill for adult learning, was cited as a reason for lack of engagement with their resources. They report student reasons such as 'too busy...' or 'left it too late' (Brown et al 2008 p.151) indicating that students lack time management skills. This ties in closely with how students used the ASK in this study, bringing us to our third research question.

Comments received on the evaluation forms and from focus group discussions indicate that students used the ASK for a range of tasks around understanding the question, drafting an essay plan and time management. Many students reported that the ASK helped them to realise how much work was involved in writing an essay, with some indicating that they hadn't previously thought about certain activities before seeing them explained on the ASK (eg proofreading, editing, writing in an academic register). Interestingly, international students mainly used the ASK for referencing, and reading and note-making, indicating a focus on language related tasks rather than time management. All students (including the international students) cited the setting of personal deadlines as a key use of the ASK timetable of activities.

All students used ASK to set personal deadlines; however, home students rated this as the most frequently used aspect of the timetable, while international students rated this function equally with understanding the question and writing in drafts. Typical comments such as 'it helped me manage my time and spread the workload', 'I was able to set myself targets and avoid procrastination' and 'being given deadlines for each section of the essay' give a clear indication of the main strength of this resource. As Brown et al (2008) shows, although students are expected to show independent self-directed learning (online and off), this type of activity requires a great deal of engagement from the learners: engagement which may work to increase cognitive load and thereby inhibit learning (Johnson & Aragon 2002).

In addition, this application of adult learning theory based on learner's being intrinsically motivated to learn content and strategies which will help them cope with real situations, overlooks maturity issues with first year students. The majority of the students in this cohort

are not adult learners and have not experienced other courses: they are around twenty years of age and relatively inexperienced learners. Their essay writing skills are poor and they even pointed out in discussions that most were unaware of the steps involved: ‘we didn’t realise how much was involved with essay writing until we saw it on the ASK’ is not an atypical comment. In addition, behaviour in class indicates a certain level of immaturity.

Given these points, it is unrealistic to expect students to identify skills gap by themselves and then to seek out and engage with support resources. Even though the ASK was embedded in this module, students may still be unaware how they could use it to their own benefit. Rather than adult learning theories, we would argue that, at least in this case, students would benefit from an application of scaffolding learning theory to support their learning. While this can be incorporated into certain online resources, the ASK presents headings from which students can select further information if they wish. Its strength lies in the personal time management facility; it does not strictly scaffold student learning. Furthermore, generic study skills resources risk simplification of the task and may encourage students to engage in surface learning (Clerehan 2003).

Overall, the ASK was well received by the students with participants in the focus groups overwhelmingly endorsing ASK as an essay writing and time management resource. We would argue that our evaluation shows that students require support in time management and development of adult learning skills, rather than ‘more of the same’ generic study resources. Without the strategies and maturity to identify their own skills’ gaps, they cannot be expected to work independently. Planning and time management resources, along with the activities to promote self-evaluation, may facilitate the development of self-regulated learning, and ultimately independent learning.

Future directions

Further developments of the ASK based on information from our evaluation include:

- Wording on the introductory page has been adjusted to encourage students to access only the material they feel they need to access. Many students felt overwhelmed by the amount of the material on the ASK and did not seem to realise that they did not need to use or

even read every single item. Wording now encourages students to ‘use the information you need’, bookmark helpful pages and to use the ‘useful links’ page.

- Staff will be encourage to embed ASK into essay writing assignments and workshops rather than just tell students that the resource is there if they need it.
- A search engine will also be attached to the site in response to student feedback, along with a ‘guide for use’.

In response to student feedback:

- Providing an exam revision guide incorporating exam revision tips and a personalised timetable for several exams. This latter resource will depend on the feasibility of being able to provide a timetable which incorporates several deadlines, but as this was strongly requested by students in the focus groups, it will be investigated thoroughly.
- Creating a personalised timetable which could incorporate ‘days off’ or multiple assignments. Again, could be implemented depending on programming requirements.
- Streamlining of the navigation: Focus group results indicated that students, at times, found the navigation awkward, especially if they were searching for a specific link which they had accessed previously. To aid navigation, pages have been linked (‘next’ and ‘previous’) plus a final summary page of all external links has been added.

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