A SMALL-SCALE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN AN EAP COURSE: CHALLENGES, OUTCOMES AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

In the current international context, there has been increasing emphasis on the synergy between higher education and evaluation –and, more specifically, on quality control and management of education. Drawing inspiration from the principles of quality assurance in learning dictated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQUA, http://www.enqa.eu/), I describe here the implementation of a small-scale management system for quality assurance in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at a Master level.

In applying the Deming cycle, the quality system sought to develop the following learning-related areas of enquiry: i) a revision of the efficacy in the teaching/learning processes regarding the interconnectedness of conceptual contents imparted in the course, ii) an analysis of the students' individual learning processes and strategies and iii) an examination of the teachers' role(s) throughout the learning process according to the 'competence' model for teacher assessment proposed by M.A. Zabalza, 2003).

Borrowing L. Muresan / F. Heyworth, Frank /G. Mateva, Galya /M. Rose´s (Eds.) (2007) overall approach to quality, I first set the basic quality principles upon which this small-scale quality system relies and provide some reflections on the importance of developing a quality culture in an EAP course at a university level. Then, I detail the procedures developed for assessing the quality of the teaching/learning processes

involved the three target-areas mentioned above. In the light of the positive results yielded by this small-scale management initiative, I finally seek to raise concern on the importance of ongoing revision and of an accurate monitoring of EAP educational practices –in tune with the European Higher Education bid for excellence and innovation.

Introduction

In the current context of the European Convergence in Higher Education, there has been increasing emphasis on the synergy between university teaching and evaluation, a synergy which has fostered the implementation of quality control and management systems of learner-oriented educational activities. Specifically, the principles established by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) (see also S. Sangeeta/ D.K. Banwet, D.K. / S. Karunes, 2004,; S. Fallows / C. Steven, 2000; D. E. H. Tigelaar / D. Dolmans/ I. Wolfhagen,/C.van der Vleuten, 2004) and the guidelines provided by the Spanish Ministry of Education (2005) bring to the fore the need for implementing those quality systems for excellence in education.

Borrowing the principles of quality assurance in learning dictated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQUA, http://www.enqa.eu/), I describe in this paper the implementation of a small-scale management system for quality assurance in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at a Master level. The general goals of this quality-management system were the following: firstly, to revise the efficacy in the teaching/learning processes regarding the interconnectedness of conceptual contents imparted in the course; secondly, to ascertain the students' learning processes and strategies and, thirdly, to enquire into the teacher's roles throughout the learning process.

Context of the study

How to write a research article in English, the EAP course in which the quality system was implemented, is one of the three compulsory courses of the Master in Textual and Cultural Studies in English at the University of Zaragoza, Spain. The 18 students (both national and international) that participated in the course during the academic year

2009-2010 showed interests in one of the three sub-disciplinary itineraries of the Master degree: literature studies, film and cultural studies or linguistic studies. The goal of the EAP course (involving a total of 50 hours of instruction, 20 hours of counseling/advising and mainly drawing upon a task-based approach), was to provide them with the necessary academic writing skills for participating in the other compulsory and optional courses of the three sub-disciplinary itineraries the students can enrol in. Although the course offered a comprehensive view of a repertoire of academic genres, the primary focus of the course was on research article writing.

Implementation of the quality assessment system and results

In applying the Deming cycle (*plan*, *do*, *check*, *act*) (cf. E. Deming, 1986; see also M. Walton, 1986), the quality system sought to develop three learning-related areas of enquiry, namely, the efficacy of the teaching/learning process, the students' learning performance and the teacher's role in the learning process. A quality specialist at the University of Zaragoza was in charge of supervising the quality assessment process and guaranteeing the transparency of the results in the three areas of enquiry.

The first learning-related area of enquiry, that of the efficacy of the teaching/learning process, was specifically measured using the *Questionnaire on the Quality of Experience of Master Students* and, more specifically, the Questionnaire for Assessing Courses (Cuestionario de Evaluación de Asignaturas, C9-DOC10, available at http://www.unizar.es/unidad_calidad/calidad/procedimientos.htm). On a 4-degree scale of satisfaction (unsatisfied-partially satisfied-satisfied-completely satisfied), the results of the questionnaire showed that all the students were completely satisfied with the efficacy of the course in the following respects:

- ✓ Understanding the general pedagogical goals of the course.

- ✓ Having a clear idea of the course design, organisation and expected task performance.

- ✓ Interrelating the contents of the different thematic aspects imparted in the course.

- ✓ Understanding the reasoning of the concepts and their link with employability.

✓ Understanding learning in relation to the specific competences of the course (namely, analytical and critical thinking competences).

✓ Being aware of the meaningfulness of the learning tasks in relation to the general learning goals of the course.

✓ Being capable of successfully performing the specific tasks designed for the course.

✓ Being capable of transferring and applying the knowledge learnt in the course in new situational contexts.

In agreement with similar initiatives (e.g. A. Lizzio/ K. Wilson / R. Simons, 2002), these overall results provided accurate data on the students' perceptions of the learning environment and academic outcomes, and lent credence of the efficacy of the course design and development in terms of consistency and fitness to purpose.

The second learning-related area of enquiry involved an analysis of the students' learning processes and strategies. In order to assess the students' learning processes and strategies, the assessment procedure established for the University of Zaragoza's Counselling Programme (Proyecto Tutor, available at http://www.unizar.es/unidad_calidad/calidad/procedimientos/def/C4-DOC4-ANX6.pdf) was adapted to the specific profile of the Master. The goal of this assessment procedure was to retrieve information on the students' learning difficulties, ways of solving them, time management, use of office hours for solving problems, use of library resources and Internet resources and use of ICTs during the course. In order to know the students' individual workload, a self-register was also designed. In this register students were asked to specify the number of onsite sessions, the time spent in carrying out the course tasks and the final essay, the time devoted to library search and compulsory readings, and the students' attendance to office hours.

The results of this second area of enquiry showed that, possibly because of the international scope of the Master, students coming from universities outside Spain initially lacked the necessary academic background for participating in the course successfully. This deemed it necessary to provide further counselling/advising support to those students thus strengthening the learner-centered approach. As regards the students' learning processes, the students reported they had a work plan, that they studied the course contents on a regular basis and that, on the whole, they were able to

follow successfully the ongoing assessment process of the course. Interestingly, the students' observations and their high level of responsibility in their autonomous learning processes significantly correlated with successful learning outcomes at the end of the course.

Information on the students' individual learning strategies was also retrieved. Essentially, the students reported that they read extensively, drafted outlines for essay writing and thought critically on the information sources provided in the course. These observations, along with the students' final learning outcomes, confirmed that the students acquired the most relevant competences established for the course, namely, analytical and critical skills. The only weakness observed among the students was their lack of awareness of the transferability of the knowledge acquired in the course for their future careers. As regards onsite learning the students also reported that they found no difficulties in following classroom instruction and in accessing and using confidently the e-learning platform (*Moodle*) where all the learning materials, bibliographical and online resources and instructions for task performance were available for the students.

Another aspect which was favourably regarded by the students was the counselling process, which they described as very useful for solving problems, finding resources for carrying out tasks and assignments and receiving advice on how to succeed in the learning process both at cognitive and competence levels. Finally, enquiring into the students' learning process showed a very slight difference adjustment between the estimated individual workload proposed for the course (a total of 137.5 hours) and the students' self-reported individual workload (an average of 156 hours). This deemed it necessary to revise and fine-tune the course design in order to optimise the actual workload proposed for the HTW course.

In sum, this second learning-related area of enquiry proved to be of interest for forthcoming academic years insofar as it facilitates the assessment of qualitative information on the students' individual and group learning processes and strategies. As reported above, this information allowed the identification of strengths (e.g. effective course design, course organisation, teaching materials, methodology ad use of ICTs) and weaknesses (e.g. identification of competences which were not acquired by the students, and optimization of the workload reported by the students and the proposed course workload). In addition, the procedure provided useful information on the

students' learning styles, which in turn fostered more accurate decisions in their counseling/advising process.

The third learning-related area of enquiry was targeted at examining the teacher's roles throughout the learning process following the 'competences' model for teacher assessment proposed by M.A. Zabalza (2003) and A. Villa (2006). Drawing on the principles established by *Education and Training 2010,* 'Common European principles for teacher competences and qualifications' (see also J.K. Rice, 2003), the roles of the 'competence model' comprised the following:

- leader: facilitates group work, offers challenges to students, shows enthusiasm, encourages classroom work and task work, stimulates the students' interest in the learning process and shows respect towards the students.

- organiser: develops learning guidelines, organises the teaching/learning process, designs learning environments, clarifies topics and tasks and supervises classroom work.

- facilitator: works with relevant materials, shows flexibility towards use of materials and resources, fosters classroom dialogue and participation, synthesizes the *status quo* of the discussion, knows the starting point of each individual learning and provides responses to students' learning problems.

- advisor: welcomes clarification of students' questions and doubts, overcomes student isolation, provides orientation and guidelines in the learning process, and communicates effectively with the students.

- assessor: provides information on the assessment process, provides orientation in autonomous work, offers guidelines for self-assessment, assesses work and tasks and establishes assessment criteria.

- coordinator: fosters participation, shows concern towards the quality of students' contributions and classroom participation, guarantees that all the students express themselves in classroom, shows classroom management skills and coordinates group work.

On a 0-4 scale of importance, overall results showed the desired uniformity of those roles, which were ranked over 2.5 and an average mean of 2.5 to 3.58 of the six roles. On the basis of the mean of the teacher's self-assessment, the mean of the students'

assessment of the teacher's roles and the quality specialist's observation of classroom and counseling/advising observation, the different roles were ranked as follows:

- leader (3.55): facilitates autonomous individual/group work (3.66), offers challenges to students (3), shows enthusiasm (3.66), encourages classroom work and task work (3,66), stimulates the students' interest in the learning process (3.33) and shows respect towards the students (4.0).

- organiser (2.66): develops learning guidelines (0.66), organises the teaching/learning process (3.0), designs learning environments (3.66), clarifies topics and tasks and supervises classroom work (3.33).

- facilitator (3.33): works with relevant materials (4.0), shows flexibility towards use of materials and resources (3.0), fosters classroom dialogue and participation (3.66), synthesises the *status quo* of the discussion (3.33), knows the starting point of each individual learning (2.0) and provides responses to students' learning problems (4.0).

- advisor (3.58): welcomes clarification of students' questions and doubts (3.33), overcomes student isolation (4.0), provides orientation and guidelines in the learning process (3.66) and communicates effectively with the students (3.33).

- assessor (2.53): provides information on the assessment process (3.33), provides orientation in autonomous work (2.66), offers guidelines for self-assessment (2.33), assesses work and tasks and establishes assessment criteria (3.66).

- coordinator (3.25): fosters participation (3.66), shows concern towards the quality of students' contributions and classroom participation (3.33), guarantees that all the students express themselves in classroom (3.0), shows classroom management skills and coordinates individual/group work (3.0).

All in all, the teacher's profile in terms of the competence-model shows an outstanding ability in the roles of advisor, leader, facilitator and coordinator, being particularly prominent the teacher's willingness to counsel students (3.58 over 4). Some weaknesses were observed in the teacher's role of assessor (e.g. in orienting towards autonomous work and providing self-assessment guidelines) and in the role of organiser (namely, the development of course and learning guidelines). Both aspects have already been optimised for the forthcoming academic year by means of rubrics on self-assessment and autonomous learning. Overall, this third area of enquiry proved to be an effective

way to keep track of (un)successful teaching performance and to eventually accredit teacher performance in the current context of higher education.

Concluding remarks

This paper has sought to contribute to the understanding of how quality assurance tools and procedures interact with institutional quality frameworks. The small-scale quality system reported in this paper, even if it is at a preliminary stage of development, gives a more precise, panoramic view of what's going on in the course as it goes beyond mere classroom observation. Acknowledging limitations in this quality-assessment pilot initiative, the quality assessment processes carried out in the EAP course proved to be a complementary source of information on the quality of learning, together with class observation, thereby allowing a more accurate monitoring of the quality of educational processes.

Essentially, the quality assessment system in the EAP course was useful in that it helped supervise three key quality standards in learning: i) the quality of being capable of engaging students in a demanding learning environment, both at cognitive- and competence-oriented levels, ii) the quality of being capable of offering effective guidance (in terms of counselling and advising) throughout the students' learning processes and iii) the quality of being capable of improving the learning objectives, methodology, activities, resources and assessment system. These quality standards in learning bring to the fore the importance of ongoing revision and of an accurate monitoring of EAP educational practices in higher education.

From a broader perspective, one can claim at this point that only effective and successful teaching/learning enterprises, assessed by quality principles, recalls M. Ali / R.K. Shastri's (2010: 9) observations on the present role of universities and the need for developing a quality culture. As these authors rightly envisage it,

> In order to fuel the socio-economic development of the country, higher education is playing a more active role in our country and this requires a paradigm shift in terms of governance and service delivery. Higher education

institutions must become more innovative leading to quality institutions of knowledge production and dissemination.

Making sense of quality assurance in institutional contexts makes it interesting to pursue the development of small-scale management initiatives and a quality culture in EAP courses at a university level, in tune with the European Higher Education bid for excellence and innovation.

Acknowledgement

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