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The assignment that triggered ...change: Assessment and the relational learning model for generic capabilities.

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500 Word ABSTRACT

While embedding generic capabilities into assessment may be commonly understood as necessary to bring about learning, what does this mean in practice? If we accept that changes in conceptions or experiences associated with learning generic skills is a desirable learning outcome, how can embedding generic capabilities into assessment bring about the desired changes?

In current research students studying the same subject in IT (Information Technology), have suggested that assignments are one of the two elements in the learning context that they attribute to bringing about change. Further, students point to the ability and quality of the teaching staff, which can also lead to changes in learning outcomes.

While observing the students over the semester variation in their web-based information searching experiences have been noticed. This paper will describe the research which has brought about an insight into the student's perceptions, and explain the implications for assessment and curriculum design.

Preliminary Findings

Data gathering 2000 - 2002 involved preliminary investigations of student diary work and a series of phenomenographic interviews. Phenomenographic interviews at both the beginning and the end of the semester were conducted. At the second interview students were asked to reflect upon reasons for any changes in their information searching behaviour.

What has been identified to date is that student's experience information searching differently. Furthermore, at the end of the semester, all students believed that they had changed in their searching methods as a result of the unit.

Students were asked to identify possible reasons for the changes in experience and they pointed to two major elements for the change. The two elements identified by the

students were either high quality teaching, or, a specific item of assessment designed to encourage reflection.

Students who attributed changes in their information searching experience to one of two assessment items identified the reflective element of the assignments as important. The first assessment item identified was the weekly reflective journaling. Students stated that the effort of having to reflect upon the content each week had caused them to change their experience. In the other assignment students were required to produce a search report. The students reported that being forced to reflect and report on assumptions, keyword selection, or other aspects of the search process, made them realise that they should change the way they approached searching.

The other element identified by the students was the quality of the teaching staff. Students attributed changes in their information searching experience to great teachers who made the unit fun. In their opinions, the great teachers each had a fun approach to classes, as well as being eager to help and simply were approachable people.

Discussion

On the basis of student perceptions, we can carefully construct assessment to bring about change. Given the student responses it appears that the early pieces of assessment have included an intuitive element which now needs to be expanded upon. We now need to design the assessment to make the assignments work harder, to lead students into the structure of the experience that is considered desirable.

Students also point to the ability of the teaching staff to arouse curiosity and make the learning environment both stimulating and enjoyable. This helps promote interest in the topic, which can also lead to changes in learning outcomes.

The accepted paper gives evidence for findings and discusses the likely implications.

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CENTRAL QUESTION: Can assessment tools lead students into new conceptions or experiences?

PROPOSED ANSWER: From a student's perspective two major elements produce changes in conception or experience. From a teacher's perspective, these changes lead the student into desirable learning outcomes. The two elements identified by students are assignments designed to encourage reflection and the ability of the teaching staff.

STRAND PREFERRED:
Assessment for Learning

DISCUSSION FOCUS*: In a context where changes in conceptions or experiences associated with learning generic skills is a desirable learning outcome, how can embedding generic capabilities into assessment bring about the desired changes? In current research students have suggested that assignments are one of the two elements in the learning context that they attribute to bringing about change. On the basis of student perceptions, therefore, we are further challenged to carefully construct assessment to bring about change. Further, students point to the ability and quality of the teaching staff as the other element which leads to changes in learning outcomes.

MAIN THEME(S) :
Generic Skills, Generic Capabilities, Lifelong Learning, Assessment, Information Technology Students, Relational Learning Model.

KEY WORDS :
Generic skills, Generic capabilities, lifelong learning, IT, Information technology, Internet, assessment, curriculum design