**Module Design, Delivery and Assessment for Large Student Numbers**

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This chapter examines an approach to managing the design, delivery and assessment of a final year undergraduate module at a UK University Business School. The trend to larger course sizes and wish to provide engaged learning practices suggests the benefits of having practical guidance on creating experiential learning frameworks (Lund Dean & Wright 2017). We provide a practical 'road map' that we hope will be of value to others who manage similar modules. We share our insights derived from a combined experience of over 40 years as reflective practitioners teaching undergraduates, including the continuous evaluation of formal and informal student feedback. These insights were thematically combined (Braun & Clarke 2006). We focus here on a module that has been running for six years with a single cohort of 800 students. The approach taken is broadly constructivist (Vrasidas, 2000) focusing on the complexities and 'soft' issues within organisational change.

One of the major influences on the approach developed has been the requirement to coordinate a teaching team of up to 13 tutors. In addition, the teaching materials and assessment regime have had to accommodate the module being delivered to several hundred students internationally by local teaching teams at multiple partner institutions. Through a process of continuous refinement, we have given detailed attention to macro-design issues as well as the day-to-day micro-challenges of delivery and assessment.

Our practice is based on three interacting processes. Firstly, in order to ensure the teaching team and the students can understand the learning requirements, we have given careful attention to principles of design and delivery communicated through detailed guidance and resources. Secondly, to maintain the smooth running of the module, we work with an ongoing awareness of processes of sensemaking, the impact of emotion and the maintenance of confidence levels, with a focus on socially situated practice (Shay 2004). This involves managing both staff and student expectations, with a strong emphasis on ensuring that the teaching team remain 'on-message'. Thirdly, considerable efforts are made to ensure that assessment marking and feedback is consistent and of high quality.

Our discussion covers the following themes:

- The unique characteristics and complicating factors of such modules
- Module design and principles of materials development
- Assignment design and providing developmental feedback
- Working with student feedback and anticipating potential 'flashpoints'
- The module leader role in relation to processes of assessment and moderation

Working with diversity in student groups (of location, capability, experience, culture, and English language ability) is embedded within our discussion of all the above.

**Unique Characteristics**

Managing a module with large student numbers is not merely a question of 'scaling up' the approach taken on a module with more modest numbers. There are different dynamics at play and these can be magnified by complicating factors. For example, our module is delivered in the semester leading up to the completion of the UK National Student Survey and these results contributed to our University gaining Gold TEF status. The size of the module means that student experience of the learning process is a major contributor to responses and consequent rankings and so it important to the institution that student satisfaction is high. Consequently, this is of political as well as pedagogical significance.

Further, our UK cohort runs with 20-25% of direct entrants (students on a 'top-up award' to study in the UK for their final year). These students are working in English as their second language, with varying levels of ability. In addition, our overseas partners have several hundred students also working in their second language. Another important issue is that our main UK cohort requires a teaching and marking team of 13 staff. We are fortunate that all have an organisational behaviour background and interest, but some of our overseas partners employ staff who are not specialists in this field.

These complicating factors are not unique to our institution but - when combined - create a situation in which it is important to ensure that the module is designed and administered with considerable care. A danger on modules with large student numbers is that the dissatisfaction of a few students can quickly escalate to involve others and become difficult to manage. Our approach is to try to anticipate potential problems and organise to avoid them.

**Module Design**

With a focus on the management of organisational change, students must learn to make contextualised judgements, which Lozana et al (2015:212) call '*discerning and inquisitive* *learning*'. This involves a sophisticated approach to teaching that encourages self-managed learning, a spirit of inquiry and critical thinking skills (Colby et al., 2011: 37ff). This approach builds from Bloom's original taxonomy (cf. Anderson et al 2001) and allows a tight integration of the module design with assessment. In the assessment, students are rewarded for independent thinking and the development of their own arguments (Izak, 2017: 207ff). In this section, we discuss the implications for module design in relation to the development of teaching materials to support delivery across multiple groups and cohorts, the presentation of complex concepts, the use of plain and straightforward language, and supporting teaching teams.

*Materials to Support Delivery across Multiple Groups and Cohorts*

We aim to produce a single set of materials that can be used in each teaching context. To provide a holistic pedagogy and learning experience these are developed to align with the content, learning outcomes and the University's approach to delivery and assessment (Hussey and Smith 2003). Some of these materials are written for students, some for the teaching team. Our partner organisations can tailor the content to their own context but they will use substantively the same resources as the UK cohort.

Giving careful attention to thorough preparation, reviewing drafts and seeking second readings of new material is essential. This applies to single sessions/ topics as well as to maintaining the style, message and overall narrative of the module. This level of attention to detail is a time-consuming process and one that those used to working on smaller or single deliveries may not anticipate. Working informally, flexibly, and just-in-time carries a high level of risk. For staff and students to have confidence in the learning process and to avoid confusion, we rarely make substantive changes once module teaching has begun. What we do is to record good new ideas and materials and incorporate them in future deliveries.

*ILLUSTRATION: Identifying and Embedding the Driving Message*

A critical step in module design for large student numbers is to decide on a small number of containing narratives that are clear and engaging. These driving messages act as a consistent thread that help staff and students to navigate the learning journey. For example, the challenge to move from a simple to a more complex understanding of change management. Within teaching and assignment briefings, we repeatedly urge students to see past a 'simplistic' way of seeing change management and to consider its emergent and contextual complexity within which 'no one size fits all'. These messages are not easy to discern, and it took us several deliveries of the module to realise this message was a good one to foreground within the delivery and the materials.

In our experience, this process of design and preparation is helped considerably by sharing the module leadership role. With two of us we are able to be 'critical friends' in working together on key design issues and in reviewing each other's materials. This aspect of large modules is resource intensive and requires working on an elongated timescale.

It also takes time to build understanding with both specialist and non-specialist delivery teams. We aim to have materials signed-off and ready at least six weeks before delivery to allow our staff team and partner colleges time to prepare and raise any queries. This also ensures that we cater for students with special learning needs, who require materials to be available at least two weeks in advance.

*Questions we ask ourselves:*

Can the guidance and teaching materials be understood and interpreted in a consistent way by the staff team and students, including those with different cultural backgrounds, knowledge and experience?

When it becomes evident that there has been a misunderstanding, how do we judge whether we can make amendments and still maintain student confidence?

*The presentation of complex concepts to students with differing learning needs*

As a discipline, change management involves working with complex ideas, which requires students to learn through debate and the exercise of critical thinking skills. In order to facilitate understanding by non-specialist staff as well as the students, more complex concepts are introduced gradually through a number of simpler themes. This means avoiding over-engineered content and ensuring that messages are clear and straightforward.

*Questions we ask ourselves:*

Are we clear enough on the key threads/ narratives that hold this module together?

What do we need to do in order to foreground these narratives to aid sense-making for tutors and students?

Do the range of options meet the differing learning needs of students?

How will we deal with deviations in delivery and differing interpretation of materials and guidance?

*ILLUSTRATION: Materials Allowing Tutors to Tailor Activities to the Needs of the Group*

In each seminar/workshop we may provide tutors with various options of different materials that address the same learning points. The extract below is taken from longer Tutor Guidance Notes:

*Options / Choices:*

i. Case Study: This matches content and learning points. However, some student groups struggle with the amount of reading and it is a long case. Recommended only if students are likely to pre-read and engage with discussion of cases.

ii. Video Case (46 mins): This offers a different format to reading so adds variety compared to previous seminars and appeals to those who want a change or prefer a visual / listening learning opportunity.

iii. Short Videos: Several clips that cover aspects of the relevant materials and enable interaction to be established after short bursts of watching (i.e. 3-5 mins). Learning points can be covered with different clips, which allows for the gradual building of understanding. More able students might be encouraged to watch more complex clips as additional self-study to reinforce understanding.

*Plain English*

Translating complex material and terminology into plain English is both time-consuming and difficult. We have often been surprised by alternative interpretations raised by staff and students.  However, clarity and consistency of message and interpretation is essential when the module leader cannot be 'in the room' to explain what is intended. This is important for home students and further complicated for overseas deliveries, operating within a different culture and studying in their second or third language.

*ILLUSTRATION: Early 'Seeding' of Complex Ideas to Aid Understanding*

We are continuously reviewing our success in teaching complex ideas to students. For example, in early deliveries we found students struggled with the concept of 'storying' as a way of building sensemaking and its potential role in the complexities of organisational change.  We learned to build in earlier 'seeding' of the idea of stories and their importance.  Specifically, we mentioned stories as one way of understanding what is said about change when discussing communication and informal communication.  Secondly, in an earlier seminar case study in which employees' views were quoted, we encouraged students to identify the stories in these contributions.  When the main topic of storying was later addressed, we were able to use this grounding to move to a greater level of depth of analysis. This also fitted with our thread of moving from a simple understanding to the more complex.

*Questions we ask ourselves:*

Can we explain what we mean and be understood not only by a teaching team who are specialists in the subject, but also by non-specialist staff and students?

Have we managed to achieve this in the course content and the guidance to staff?

*Supporting Teaching Teams*

In relation to the teaching teams, a constant *challenge* is the *need* to design the module in order to *achieve* consistency of teaching and assessment standards without imposing uniformity. This is a balancing act of providing a range of resources and guidelines whilst permitting enough freedom for tutors to work with the diversity and unique learning dynamics within each classroom. For standardisation and clarity, we provide staff with comprehensive guidance. The student version of materials does not include these additional notes. Likewise, additional examples are also sometimes provided for staff to bring a concept to life.

*ILLUSTRATION: Simple Ways of Bringing Concepts to Life*

One PowerPoint within a lecture on organisational learning discusses single loop, double loop and generative learning related to organisational change. To bring this to life, the example of learning to mend a leaking tap (single loop learning); learning to identify what causes taps to leak (double loop learning); and generative learning (learning with understanding that could support the redesign of taps so that they are less likely to leak).

For seminars we provide detailed commentaries on the activities so that staff can respond to the range of responses students may bring. We also suggest ways to focus in more depth on different aspects to suit the level of understanding of their seminar group, including options for individual and group work.

*Questions we ask ourselves:*

Have we provided clear enough guidance for others to teach these lectures and seminars in the variety of delivery contexts and student groups?

## Assignment design and feedback

In this section we discuss assignment design, support and feedback. In this module, we require a summative individual written assessment (Jessop et al., 2013). Assignments and assignment support need to be designed to meet the learning outcomes and the diversity of students on the course.  Timely formative feedback (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004) is incorporated into seminars, including a practice written assessment opportunity. This feedback is intended to improve learning (Norton 2008), building skills of critically engaging with content and improving performance in the summative assessment.  The pass rate has ranged from 97-99%.

In modules with low student numbers, particularly those with a single tutor, it is relatively easy to adapt to student concerns and queries about the assignment and to alter your guidance accordingly as the module progresses. On modules with a large staff team, it is essential to plan ahead and carefully managing tutor understanding of the assignment requirements. Achieving this requires attention to the design of the assessment and comprehensive guidance materials, followed up by systematic processes of briefing, dialogue and review within the staff team prior to delivery.

*ILLUSTRATION: Managing Differences in Student Expectations of the Assessment*

One of the key differences between home students (who are in the third year of study within the UK system) and international students (taking only the final year having studied for two years in their own country) is their expectation of assessment. In particular, this requires additional pre-assessment support for those new to the UK system. Importantly, this is not a uniform need as experiences and expectations vary with the nature of the home education system of students. We have found a range of expectations, from '*the lecturer will tell us the answers'* to one that demonstrates an awareness of the requirement for self-managed learning and independent research. This puts additional demands on tutors as well as a requirement for careful consideration of the nature of the assessment design.

One of the keys to the success of formative marking and feedback is that staff have enough guidance to give comparable levels of developmental feedback. Delivery and assessment is a socially situated practice (Shay, 2004), which needs to be nurtured and supported with appropriate collaborative discussions and inputs from the whole team. Before developing the detailed support exercises and guidance for the assignment we, as module leaders, went through a process of exploring how we would:

- answer the question/ task ourselves
- describe to staff and students what a 'good answer' might look like
- build the detailed guidance based on these refined explanations and answers
- test out this guidance with some of the teaching team
- build in progressively detailed assignment support into the final weeks of delivery

*ILLUSTRATION: When Seminar Tutors Neglect Key Messages*

In the past we have had some tutors who have missed activities related to the assessment/ assignment preparation or failed to address key learning points. We have dealt with such situations with respectful and open emails reminding all staff of the critical importance of ensuring that 'key items' are covered. This is typically followed-up with 'light-touch' check-in conversations with individual members of staff. We also check the clarity and emphasis of *Tutor Guidance Materials* and revise accordingly. This includes:

i) Separating out 'key messages' into a highlighted box format.

ii) Clarifying at the beginning which activities are *optional* and which are *mandatory*.

iii) Discussing the importance of (i) and (ii) within our staff team meetings and in briefings to Partners.

*Questions we ask ourselves:*

Have we sufficiently tested out the interpretation of the question/task with the teaching team?

How comprehensively does our assignment support meet the needs of different students?

*Differences in interpretation and understanding of the assignment*

Student understanding of the assignment can vary for a number of reasons:

- a lack of previous knowledge or study of similar subjects

- the ability and willingness to read around the relevant topics
- interest for the subject
- familiarity with institutional assessment approaches and marking criteria.

These vary between and within cohorts. We make it clear that it is a priority for tutors to monitor student understanding carefully and discuss with us any difficult issues within their groups. If necessary, we will make adjustments for individual groups or the cohort as a whole. For example, we recently made a change to the assessment design and it emerged that Direct Entrant students were finding the requirements particularly difficult to understand. As a consequence, we developed new support materials, including a 30-minute video on 'how to do well in the assignment'.

We have found that many students struggle with understanding 'critical thinking' and 'critical writing'. Therefore, we build in plenty of conversations and seminar activities with examples of both, explicitly naming what we are doing as examples of critical thinking / writing:

- At an early stage, 'seeding' information to do with the assignment by reviewing the marking scheme and introducing what is meant by 'critical analysis'. One seminar activity uses the marking scheme to evaluate short assignment extracts.
- Requiring students to practice writing critically, including a formative written assessment opportunity, enabling them to gain written feedback

*ILLUSTRATION: Building from Basic to More Complex Critical Evaluation*

One of the case studies we use discusses the imposition by management of a new appraisal system. A *basic answer* would draw upon theories of effective communication involving employees in the change process and whether this would make sufficient difference to employees' resistance to this change. A more *complex answer* might also include, for example, attention to power and politics, the cultural context, organisational history, and intentions of management actions.

We guide students to understand how to use additional theories to build a more insightful analysis of a case and how to build arguments through critical writing. This approach is adapted from Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Through this we also make visible to students that the structure of assignment briefings and the marking criteria follow the progression from basic to more complex.

*Questions we ask ourselves:*

Have we provided suitable exercises and guidance to help students understand what is required for higher marks?

Do the opportunities for feedback help students to understand how to improve their work?

**Working with Feedback from Students and Anticipating 'Flashpoints'**

*Obtaining and responding to student feedback*

At regular intervals throughout the module delivery, we seek informal and formal student feedback and adapt our teaching approach in response to student needs. Seminar tutors are responsible for asking for this feedback and for contextualising the messages (e.g. whether the messages are coming from all students or particular groupings, like Direct Entrants). We find that this is often of greater value than an end of module survey, when it tends to be only the highly satisfied or very dissatisfied who will bother to provide feedback. We undertake this in addition to the feedback from programme forums and student representative mechanisms.

ILLUSTRATION: Responding to Feedback from Students

After collating feedback in week 8 of a 12-week delivery, we discovered that there was a higher than normal level of concern about the assignment. We responded by providing a range of additional support activities, including producing a video with tutors' 'top tips'.

*Questions we ask ourselves:*

How quickly can we respond to student concerns?

Do we know how best to identify the appropriate response in this situation?

Have we asked for the right feedback at the right time to enable us to better support the learning process?

*Anticipating potential 'flashpoints'*

The biggest potential flashpoint we have experienced relates to students' perceptions of variations between staff members' understanding and/or guidance relating to the assignment. This requires ongoing attention. It is particularly important that the tutor team are clear and consistently 'on message'. Achieving this requires careful handling and robust conversations, which is helped significantly by good collegiate relationships.

> *ILLUSTRATION: When a Seminar Tutor Goes 'Off Message'*
>
> We have experienced 'rogue' messages or practices from a single tutor, and this is something that needs to be dealt with promptly before it becomes a flashpoint. For example, we have a policy of not reading draft essays because there are insufficient staff resources to offer this opportunity to all students. Further, the seminar tutor may not be the final marker of the assignment. In previous years, when reading of draft material was permitted, this sometimes led to complaints when the student perceived that feedback given on particular sections of the essay was different, even contradictory, between the tutor and final marker. Since implementing the policy, we once had a tutor offer to read drafts. Students in other seminar groups quickly raised this as inequitable. In this case, we spoke with the seminar tutor in question, praised his intention (a 'generous spirit') but asked him to withdraw the offer to his groups. We also reiterated to the whole student body the policy – published in the student module handbook – of staff not reading draft material.

For several years we used the resources of a university learning support service to offer student assignment guidance workshops. This had mixed results and one year caused a 'flashpoint' due to what students perceived to be contradictory messages.  Overall, we have found extremely difficult to communicate effectively the standards and approach of the module to those outside the main teaching and delivery team.  There is always a balance to be achieved between providing students with enough support based on available resources and the potential difficulties of using additional resources beyond our control.

**The Module Leader Role**

In this section we go further than Lozano et al (2015) and suggest there are essential roles that go beyond single tutor responsibility to ensure alignment and the achievement of learning outcomes within a constructivist, complex module. As module leaders, we aim to encourage, through our own approach and behaviour, a culture and community of practice where contributions from all are listened to with a willingness to learn from errors.  This is a conscious process that reflects our values and approach to learning and how we want the staff team to behave in student interactions and delivery. We have found that this depends on a number of factors, such as:

- planning sufficiently far in advance to allow time to review and learn with one another
- the social skills of the module leaders and members of the teaching team
- a willingness and commitment to engage in the work of review and evaluation

This is particularly important in relation to the processes of assessment and moderation.

*Managing the Processes of Assessment and Moderation*

The complications of ensuring teams of markers mark consistently cannot be underestimated (Bloxham et al., 2012). We find it essential to build a community of practice in order to build a shared understanding and consensus on approaches to marking, agreement on benchmark standards, and the requirement for active participation in the moderation process (Bloxham et al., 2015: 644). We approach this as a dialogic process within the team. For new members, there is an early socialisation process requiring them to blind-mark a selection of past essays. Through this we introduce benchmarking standards and approaches to the interpretation of student assignments. We use a detailed marking scheme, which identifies different levels of achievement in relation to (1) Theory and Knowledge (2) Application and Analysis and (3) Criticality and Coherence. Staff are supported to fully understand the marking scheme, what is expected of students, and what earns marks at each level / band of achievement.

For the whole team we hold pre-moderation meetings where we have all marked the same sample scripts (typically 3-5). At these meetings we discuss the range of marks given by different members of staff to each script and explore differing evaluations – particularly focusing on disagreements in the interpretation of the task. We aim to come to a consensus view on how to evaluate the different issues, including taking account of individual marker's preferences for different types of script. As part of this process we also agree the level and style of written feedback so that students will experience a consistency in approach when their scripts and feedback are returned.

*ILLUSTRATION: Rewarding Different Styles of Essay*

We have some markers who prefer essays that tell a story and others with a preference for a more analytical style. The most recent marker guidance, based on the consensus achieved in the staff team discussions, is an understanding that students will inevitably vary in their interpretation of the task and that we should seek to reward all valid approaches, whatever our personal preferences. This requires of each tutor a high level of self-awareness and open mindedness.

In the different phases of our management of the processes of assessment and moderation, we are seeking not only to achieve consistency in marking standards but also to avoid the need for a tutor's work to be remarked, which is particularly important given the University requirement for the prompt return of marks to students even on large modules. Consequently, another important aspect of our approach is to ask tutors to mark their first five scripts as quickly as possible, and certainly within the first week of marking. This allows module leaders to do an initial moderation and give feedback on the standard being applied. Where necessary, a request is made for a change in approach to evaluation, feedback and/or level of marking. The complexity of essay marking means that, even with rigorous assessment processes, we inevitably find some instances where the script has been mis-marked (see Knight, 2002).

We have two further layers of moderation in place. With two module leaders, we are able to gain an additional opinion not only on general marking standards, but also on problematic or unusual scripts. We also conduct a statistical analysis of results – for the whole cohort and for individual markers, which allows us to identify further, more nuanced, areas of difference in marking standards. For example, some markers may be less inclined to use the full range of marks and not reward sufficiently the stronger scripts.

## Concluding Comments

Within this chapter we have discussed the questions, concerns and priorities that we attend to in running a large module. The aim has been to demonstrate the importance of clarity and preparation in all things. We have discussed principles of good design, coherent delivery and guidance that seeks to accommodate the diversity of staff and students working on the module. We have also shown how smooth running and 'on message' delivery is achieved as a socially situated practice that emphasises attention to sense-making, emotions and building confidence, including managing staff and student expectations. Finally, we have demonstrated the careful attention that we give to processes of marking and feedback on assignments, ensuring that both are consistent and of high quality.

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