

Using assignments instead of final exams: a case for assessing learning in prisons

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The majority of my learners have learnt the relevant skills required for them to use the tools of a particular Office product, however, some are finding it difficult to pass exams due to:

- 📖 the pressure of having to do them within a set period of time;
- 📖 the number of accuracy errors they are able to incur (3 in a Level 1 exam and 5 in a Level 2 exam);
- 📖 the fact that exams remind them of school and this is putting a mental block into their heads if they have not enjoyed school;
- 📖 the fact that the exam relies on how good your memory is.

This can be a big area as due to the nature of the environment I teach in and the background

that a lot of learners have come from, exposure to drugs has had an impact on a lot of learners' mental health (as will be explained later).

From a teaching perspective, going assignment based would make my life easier as I would have more time to spend teaching learners rather than constantly marking exams or checking IPU's not just for ICT content, but for grammar and spelling. The learners would be more involved and stimulated as there would be more flexibility, as the idea would be that they could either do the assignment about a subject that they are interested in or they can have a pre-set subject and providing they meet the criteria specified they have carte blanche to create the documents how they wish, rather than having to follow a complete set of instructions. The thinking behind this is that it removes the pressure of an exam, takes away terminology, removes knowledge and means that the learner does an assignment based on

their skills. As mentioned in *The Power of Classroom Assessment* (Earl, L. (2003). *Assessment as learning*. London: Sage Publications LTD, p.3.) "It is clear from this body of research that formative assessment done well is very powerful".

Action Research is appropriate for this study because it will enable me to learn something from the process, analyse what has gone well and how it can be improved further. It will also mean that I can make it applicable and relevant to the environment that I work in.

To help with this challenge, a while ago I visited another prison with my Curriculum Manager where they do not submit any exams to their awarding body (which is the same awarding body as we use) but submit assignments instead that meet the same criteria. We wanted to see how this worked at this prison and whether we can incorporate this into our curriculum and

whether it would work within our environment. It's a common misconception that people think or believe that all prisoners are the same, but the prison we visited is a sex offenders prison and their prisoners are very different to the prisoners that we get. The prisoners at this other prison are very compliant and they very rarely get issues as they are all in that prison for very similar offences, whereas our prisoners crimes can be various and they are not so compliant, as they may have been put in our prison where they could be a very long way away from their families, due to mental health issues or anger issues we can get very up and down prisoners.

However, what we saw made us believe that there is a place for this type of assessment within our prison, as the majority of our prisoners will be released, they do want to get a recognised qualification and more importantly they want to have a job, trade or business so that they can support their family, so with this in mind we knew

we stood a good chance of re-designing the content of our assignments to make them more real to life and get the learners thinking for themselves on how to use the tools to good effect, rather than just showing that they can follow a set of instructions.

Before putting this together, I have done some research into the impact of drugs on students learning.

The website below was very interesting and provided some useful information into the impact of drugs and a learner's mental health and the impact on that:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3120118/pdf/ascp-05-2-4.pdf> - accessed 20th November 2017 @19:46

To summarise some of the main points of interest “neural processes that underlie addiction overlap those that support cognitive functions”,

this means that damage/alterations to neural functions such as through drug use affect memory and learning. It also states: “Patients with mental illness are at high risk for substance abuse, and the adverse impact on cognition may be particularly deleterious in combination with cognitive problems related to their mental disorders.”

Talking about memory “The first stage in memorisation is creation, to assemble information for evaluation and analysis.” (J.Baker and R.N.Tucker. (1990). The interactive learning revolution: Multimedia in Education and Training. London, Kogan Page.)

For this Action Research the piece of work that has been created is a Level 2 Excel Spreadsheet assignment, as this will give the learners an opportunity to create something, which they can then learn from and also take ownership of, this in turn then helps them to remember it. The

assignment is designed so that they can choose, evaluate and apply e.g.: they may be asked to format the spreadsheet using a consistent font, with different font types and sizes.

The learner who in effect is the 'guinea pig' for this Action Research works very well in class, he takes his time to go through the workbooks and exercises very thoroughly and methodically. To begin with he has issues with remembering things and has to go over them time and time again. With Excel, the learner unfortunately failed all 6 exams that he sat, which meant that he could go no further with this unit, and if he wanted to achieve his full Level 2 Certificate he would have to study a new unit; however, time was no longer on his side because his guided learning hours (GLH) had been used up considerably trying to pass this unit. This wasn't because he lacked Excel knowledge, but because if he couldn't remember a particular function that he needed to use, (as there were

so many that he needed to know), he was taking his time to try different functions, this in turn meant that he was using up the allocated time allowed of 3 hours, which meant that he did not have time to then complete the other tasks that were on the assessment paper. After speaking to my Curriculum Manager about the issues we encounter with exams, and also because of our visit to another prison, he was more than willing to give me permission to try this new type of assessment with this learner. I approached the learner to see if this new type of assessment would help him and would he be willing to participate. He was very enthusiastic about being involved and was more than happy to participate in this research – a consent form for the action research project was issued to him, which he was happy for a third party to sign (due to security issues with us not being allowed to disclose his name – hence the reason for the third-party signatory) The majority of the resources were already in place i.e.: PC,

Microsoft Excel, marking criteria. What had to be developed was a scenario that would be straightforward enough for the learner to do, to check his understanding and that he was able to do the majority of the work how he wanted, but also guiding him along the right lines to meet the marking criteria, for example: I had to make sure that an Exploded Pie Chart and a Scatter Chart were included, at least one logical function was included. However, things like formatting could be at the learner's discretion providing he again met the minimum criteria required, which was stated for him. Once the scenario was written, this was then tested by myself and another tutor to make sure that we hadn't missed anything out, this involved mapping the scenario to the criteria, and making sure that the scenario was doable. The aim is that the scenario can be completed within 3 sessions.

After the scenario has been completed by the learner, I am going to ask them for their feedback verbally.

Once everything had been done, the scenario was given to the learner to complete. At the time of writing this, I am happy that the learner has completed the piece of work satisfactorily however, this piece of work has not yet been sent to the external awarding body.

In my role as the tutor, I have to make sure that I do not do the assessment with them or for them, I have to take on the role of the observer and make sure that everything is fair e.g.: if the learner doesn't understand an instruction I can provide the same instruction using different language but not giving him the answer, I also have to make sure that it is his own work as he is doing it in a classroom environment, and that he is not getting any help from any other learners. I must also take into account the feedback that I

receive from the learner as regards how they felt the assignment went, whether there were any areas that were not clear, and what improvements they believe could be made to the assignment that they have just completed, this in effect will be the qualitative, and when the awarding body have passed the assignment (fingers crossed!) this will be the quantitative.

After the learner had completed the assignment, the learner fed back that he felt a bit muddled on some parts as to what he should be saving and when and what names to give the spreadsheets, on marking it I could see why he had fed this back as there were areas in the assignment which had caused confusion, this was mainly because I was trying to minimise the number of spreadsheets that the learner was creating, however, this created problems as if the learner made a mistake on a previous version of the spreadsheet but hadn't then been asked to save it with a different file name before

moving on to other things with this spreadsheet, then this created a muddle for the learner when he tried to go back and correct something, so I have learnt from this that the spreadsheets do need to be saved at certain moments but with another name! He also fed back on a positive note that he felt that the assignment had gone well and that he hadn't felt so under pressure as he didn't have the time constraint associated with an exam.

In general, I am happy with this Action Research project, I found the research side of it rather tedious but this needed to be done to justify why it is beneficial to do assignments as opposed to exams, it was also hard to cross reference the points in the assignment with the marking criteria that had to be met for the awarding body, ensuring that the correct marking codes were assigned to the points in the assignment. I am however, hoping that when the moderator looks at this assignment that not only will he pass it but

that he will also provide constructive feedback as this can then be put into practice with any other assignments that are created. The plus side is that I found it very easy to put it into practice as the learner was very receptive, and I have also since then asked another learner to create a piece of work and use this for their Improving Productivity Unit, rather than analysing an exam that they have already done, this again has been successful on their part as they have created a piece of work on a subject that they like, have an interest in or are looking to do as a business when they are released, and then they have written about it in the question and answer section of the Improving Productivity Unit. Again, I am happy that this has met the criteria, but am awaiting the ok from the awarding body that they are happy that this piece of work has met the criteria too. The learner who did this piece of work, was much more relaxed, found it interesting and didn't struggle to understand the

concept of IPU. So, although initially the Action Research was primarily for the exam scenario (hence the reason why Excel was used) I have adapted it now to take into account another unit, and I hope to going forward offer learners the choice of exam or assignment.

Action Research is primarily used to help to solve an existing problem by identifying what the problem is, how you can go about making changes and what the end result will be after these changes. I think the diagram below sums it up quite nicely.

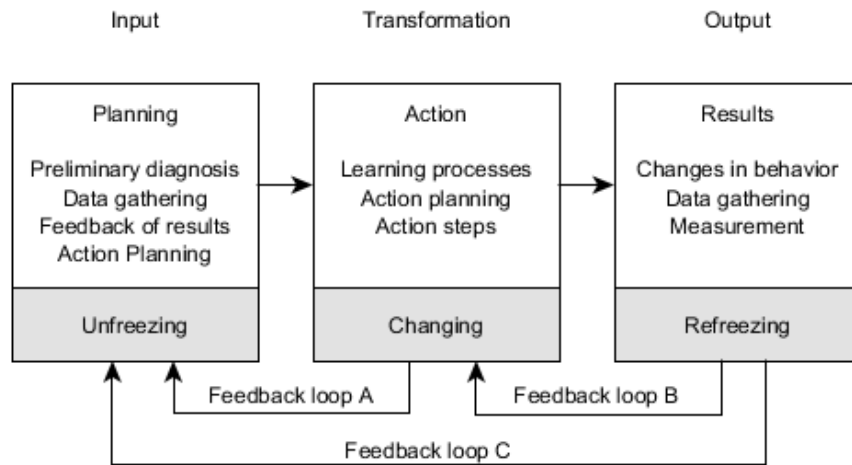


Figure 1: Systems model of action-research process (see Referencing section), Wikipedia accessed 02/01/2018 @19:26

In the workplace it is very important that you carry out Action Research on a regular basis as it can have a positive effect on both you as a tutor, your colleagues and on your learners. As a tutor it helps you to be more effective about your teaching and ways in which your learners can be developed going forwards. One of the most important things that I find as a tutor is

making sure that my students grow in confidence and that they are achieving things and this is great if it is as a direct result of a piece of Action Research – using my example Action Research project here it will be brilliant if I find out that my learner has passed his Excel exam as a result of this change from final exam to assignment.

For Action Research to work effectively the person who is conducting the research and the client must work very closely together to diagnose the problem and to find a workable solution to the problem. It is very important that they plan what they are going to do and how they are going to do it, how they are going to work out if it has been effective and if it hasn't reflected on what didn't work so that they can then repeat the process.

Depending on the type of data that you are looking to obtain will depend on the type of

research that is needed eg: group discussions, individual interviews, participation and observations are good examples of Qualitative Research as it can be used for exploratory purposes to uncover trends by gauging people's opinions and thoughts on a particular subject and what motivates them. If you are looking to provide statistical information which can be measured then Quantitative Research would be a good option as if you produce a survey (this could be electronically or paper based) or an online poll is conducted amongst a wide spectrum of people then the results can be analysed to formulate facts and find trends/patterns within the research.

Risk assessments need to also be incorporated e.g.: a ethics form can be used and signed by the learner, as it is important that the Action Research is not impacting on the learners learning, and not interfering with them achieving their original goals, or putting them in a vulnerable position – this is especially important

in the environment that I work in, as there can be dire consequences if information about a learner is disclosed outside or inside the prison. It is also important that bias is eliminated – the research must be conducted in a fair way, no manipulating or influencing the results or the learner's opinion to achieve a particular result. The tutor must stay neutral and get the learners to provide the feedback.

Looking at my own Action Research skills I don't think that I am very good at researching, I find this very tedious and monotonous, spending hours trawling through books and on the internet is not my cup of tea, I am more of a putting together type person once it has been identified what needs to be done, e.g.: I can spend hours writing exercises, scenarios for learners as I love doing this and I find that this is a strength of mine, as I find it easy to put these together, so yes researching is something I need to work on as I can't put this together if I haven't researched it. I also feel that in my present

environment time is my biggest enemy for doing Action Research, I don't have any time at work to research and plan things, so I need to again work on this as one of my skills to make sure that I time manage efficiently to enable me to do more Action Research.

References:

Earl, L. (2003). *Assessment as learning*. London: Sage Publications LTD, p.3.

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