Optimising Student Performance in Assessment Through Assignment Brief Design

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Overarching aim:

to offer a rationale for developing our expertise in assignment brief design
Should we bother?

Yes ?  Maybe ?  No ?

Listen to The student voice

Semi-structured interviews
Across student groups
Focusing on effective and less effective features of briefs
Yes – because...

The student experience can be improved by doing so

Assignment brief features do vary in effectiveness so we should aim to identify use the more effective features
Use of student cognitive resources can be made more efficient through improved assessment brief design

The efficiency of university resources use can be improved as the more effective the brief the less support a student needs to seek

Staff and students alike aim to develop assessment literacy and the assignment brief has a role to play in this.
Focus

Assessment Task Cycle

1. Designing
2. Setting
3. Supporting
4. Feeding Back
5. Assessing
6. Monitoring
7. Re-designing

We refer only to the setting of assessment stages.

We suggest the brief is the ‘Cinderella of the assessment cycle stages’ as has received less attention.
Reflecting on You Current Practice

1. What percentage of your students do NOT do what you expect of them in their written assignment tasks?

   - 0% □
   - 1-10% □
   - up to 30% □
   - up to 50% □
   - up to 70% □

2. How much time do you spend per semester responding to requests by students for clarification on assignment requirements orally or by email?

   - 0 hours □
   - up to 3 hours □
   - up to 5 hours □
   - 5 + hours □

3. Name one effective feature of an assignment brief you currently use.
Workshop Preview

• the range of written assignment text types and implications
• effective and less effective features of assignment briefs
  i) the student perspective
  ii) a wider perspective
• cognitive load theory: key concepts and responsibilities
• exemplar brief
• a way forward?
The Range of Assignment Text Types: results of research

Comparative analysis   Article summary   Document summary
Case study   Critique   Article review   Clinical report   Portfolio
Essay   Letter   Research report   Business report   Reflective essay
Feasibility study   Business plan   Reflective statement   Memo
Research project   Qualitative report   Summary business plan
Precis   Analysis   Research proposal   Portfolio Commentary
Gobbet essay   Reflective research proposal   Project plan   Reflective analysis
Online module forum   Media diary   CV   Blog   Project Webfolio
Annotated bibliography   Report   Research proposal   Lab report
Proof of concept report   E strategy report   Poster   Dissertation
Self selected analysis   Summaries of chapters   Project report
Progress report   Visual and performed narrative   Ethnographic journal
Self reflective diary   Event proposal   Evaluative report
So…

Growing range of text types

Growing number of unfamiliar types

But in 23% of sample text type undefined—i.e. not explicitly stated in the assignment brief or elsewhere
Implications: If text type is undefined in the brief, students are …

**More likely:**
- to be unclear about -
  1. format
  2. audience
  3. discourse
  4. style
  5. purpose
- to seek clarification on task from lecturers and academic support services
- ‘to pay a high price in terms of stress, work and worry’ (Carroll, 2005 in Carroll and Ryan, 2005:26)

**Less likely:**
- to do what is expected of them (Sadler, 2010)
- to perform the task to their full potential (Rust, Price, O’Donovan, 2003)
- to be able to develop academic literacy skills (Gillett and Hammond, 2009)
- to be able to gain access to the disciplinary community (Hughes, 2009)
‘A major function of university study is to induct students into particular disciplinary communities through supporting their development from novice to expert users of the text types which characterise these communities’ (Hughes, 2009: 561).
Effective and less effective features of assignment brief: the student perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extracts:</th>
<th>Effective &amp; Less Effective Features Mentioned</th>
<th>In common?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example student quotes</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>Text Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening 1</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>Clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening 2</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>Explicitness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening 3</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>Layout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening 4</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening 5</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>Delivery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Effective and less effective features of assignment briefs: a wider perspective

Students

Survey of assignment brief features

E. Assignment Brief Text Type

1. Text Type
   To ensure students do not have to expend time and effort unnecessarily on working out and confirming requirements make explicit in the instructions the type of text they are required to produce.

2. Aligning
   To ensure efficient optimal use of students' cognitive resources by exploiting existing schemes, avoid mismatches between the assignment brief text requirements and the text provided by core study skills guides and study skills training.

3. Subsections
   To ensure students do not need to spend time seeking confirmation on the use of subheadings: stipulate the requirements for these.

4. Guidelines
   To ensure the maximum level of support for the full range of students: provide access to study skills guidelines on required text types.

5. Shared Understanding
   To ensure students do not receive conflicting messages: aim to have the staff working on the module field communicate a shared understanding of the text types required for each assignment.

6. Exemplars
   To ensure that students' assessment task and text type schema are activated and used as efficiently as possible: aim to provide students with sample completed assignments (exemplar texts).

7. Familiarity
   To ensure that students' assessment task and text type schemas are activated and their assessment literacy developed: aim to increase the level of support available in line with the degree of familiarity of the task type.

8. Discourse
   To ensure students' assessment task and text type schemas are immediately activated and they do not waste time in seeking confirrmation on appropriate discourse style: aim to clarify the discourse style required for the assignment task in the brief.

9. Audience
   To ensure students are immediately aware of the style and register of language to employ: stipulate the type of reader their completed assignment should be written for.

Academic support tutorials

Discourse Analysis

Language Processing

Information Processing

Cognitive Load Theory

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Cognitive Load Theory: key concepts

Cognitive load theory

Intrinsic  Extraneous  Extraneous versus Germane

Novice  Academic Literacy  Expert
Cognitive Load Theory

‘Cognitive load theory is concerned with the development of instructional methods that **efficiently** use people’s limited cognitive processing capacity to apply acquired knowledge and skills to new situations (i.e., transfer)’.  

(Paas et al, 2003: 63)

Intrinsic Cognitive Load

‘… **cannot be altered** by instructional interventions because it is determined by the interaction between the nature of the materials being learned and the expertise of the learner.’  

(van Merrienboer & Sweller, 2005: 150)

‘**Extraneous cognitive load**, in contrast, is load that is **not necessary for learning** (i.e., schema construction and automation) and that **can be altered** by instructional interventions. Extraneous cognitive load may be imposed, for example, by … searching for information that is needed to complete a learning task.’

( Van Merrienboer & Sweller, 2005: 150)

Germane load

‘… is the load related to processes that **contribute** to the construction and automation of schemas.’ (Pass et al, 2003: 65)
Conclusion
Interpreting the brief is **vital** for students when performing assignment tasks, often requiring significant cognitive resource allocation to interpreting requirements. If a proportion of these **resources** can be reallocated towards actual task performance, then more can be freed up to invest in targeting the intended **academic literacy development** outcomes thus facilitating **optimal task performance** and greater engagement with relevant **graduate attributes**.
Assignment Brief Design

The brief shall come to the assessment ball!
A Way Forward?

1. Develop guidelines for effective assignment brief design.

2. Provide a consultancy service to support effective assignment brief design by academic staff.
Guidelines in development on:

A. Layout
B. Clarity
C. Explicitness
D. Consistency
E. Text Type
F. Language
G. Delivery
E. Assignment Brief Text Type

1. **Text Type**
   To ensure students do not have to expend time and effort unnecessarily on working out and confirming requirements make explicit in the instructions the type of text they are required to produce.

2. **Aligning**
   To ensure efficient optimal use of students’ cognitive resources by exploiting existing schemata: avoid mismatches between the assignment brief text requirements and those provided by core study skills guides and study skills training.

3. **Subsections**
   To ensure students do not have to spend time seeking confirmation on the use of subsections and subheadings: stipulate the requirements for these.

4. **Guidelines**
   To ensure the maximum level of support for the full range of students: provide access to study skills guidelines on required text types.

5. **Shared understanding**
   To ensure students do not receive conflicting messages: aim to have the staff working on the module/ field communicate a shared understanding of the text types required for each assignment.

6. **Exemplars**
   To ensure that students’ assessment task and text type schema are activated and used as efficiently as possible: aim to provide students with sample completed assignments (exemplar texts).

7. **Familiarity**
   To ensure that students’ assessment task and text type schemas are activated and their assessment literacy developed: aim to increase the level of support available in line with the degree of familiarity of the task type.

8. **Discourse**
   To ensure students’ linguistic schema are immediately activated and they do not waste time in seeking clarification on appropriate discourse style: aim to clarify the discourse style required for the assignment task in the brief.

9. **Audience**
   To ensure students are immediately aware of the style and register of language to employ: stipulate the type of reader their completed assignment should be written for.
If you would like to take part in the development of the guidelines and the pilot of the consultancy service by submitting an assignment brief and receiving feedback, then evaluating its usefulness:

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List of References


