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Highlight:

Can we use creative free rein to enhance student skill learning?

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Abstract

Tasks which are solely formative sometimes suffer from a lack of student engagement, however these tasks are often included to teach students essential skills and the intended benefit is in engaging with the process not necessarily the finished outcome. In this study a traditional task (5 minute PowerPoint presentation on cancer treatments) was replaced with a creative approach to encourage engagement. The hypothesis was that by giving the students creative free rein to choose their topic and presentation method they would engage more fully with the process. The groups were told to select a topic related to cancer which they thought had made a significant contribution to our understanding, diagnosis or treatment and present it in whatever means they felt was most suitable for the topic. The result was enhanced engagement and effort in developing and delivering the presentation. The students also appeared more confident and knowledgeable when answering questions related to their topic. This pilot study suggests that free rein to be creative in formative tasks may encourage students to engage more fully with the process and develop enhanced skills.

Introduction

Student engagement can be defined by the time, energy and resources that the individual puts into a task that they are given; often we see that this is driven by the relationship of the task to assessment stakes with increasing engagement directly proportional to how high stakes the assessment is (Holmes, 2017). When a piece of work or session is solely formative with no subsequent summative follow up there can be observed a large diversity in the effort that a student gives to the piece and process, with many students exhibiting surface learning to meet the requirements of the task (McMahon 2006). These formative tasks are often included in teaching not as a means to produce a finished piece but to provide an opportunity to engage in learning a process and providing an opportunity for self-assessment of performance, which the student can then learn from to improve their practice at the next occasion (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). In essence the true merit of the process is in the process itself not the final outcome; however encouraging students to engage in these opportunities to the best of their ability can often be difficult particularly early in a course.

This paper describes one such formative group activity originally designed as a first introduction to researching and presenting information for first year medical students. The task was formative and embedded into a unit on cancer. The students were asked to work in their problem based learning groups (10-12 students) to produce a 5 minute presentation on either the diagnosis or treatment of a certain type of cancer which they would then present to their peers and a small number of staff (3-4) and answer questions about. The feedback for the task was a written summary of the presentation slides, oral delivery and responses to the questions. The main purpose of the session was to engage the students in thinking about how to research and present information orally. For many this would be the first time in which they had to present in this format formally to a moderate number of people (~130).

However the quality of the presentations was often variable and consisted of slides with high levels of text, poor verbal communication and a general lack of knowledge on the subject, which could be seen when the students were posed questions. During the period of the task students were still engaged in their usual module work and from anecdotal evidence and conversations with groups, they were putting minimal effort into completing the task. To address this issue a novel approach was needed to encourage students to engage in the session whilst remaining a purely formative task.

Method

With this in mind a creative approach was taken which aimed to give the students freedom to direct their own learning and ownership over how they wanted to complete the task, whilst still preserving the core aim which was to give them an opportunity to experience presenting in a semi professional manner. The hypothesis was that they would engage more with the task and subsequently gain the experience in researching information and presenting. The students were told to select any topic related to cancer which they thought had made a significant contribution to our understanding, diagnosis or treatment of the disease. They could then present that information in any manner that they felt was suitable for the topic they had chosen but must produce both a physical piece and a verbal presentation. Students were given dates and a few examples at the start of the unit with the first half of the cohort due to present 2 weeks later and the second half a week after that (Figure 1). They were informed that it was a formative piece and that another group would be randomly selected on the day to ask questions about the topic.

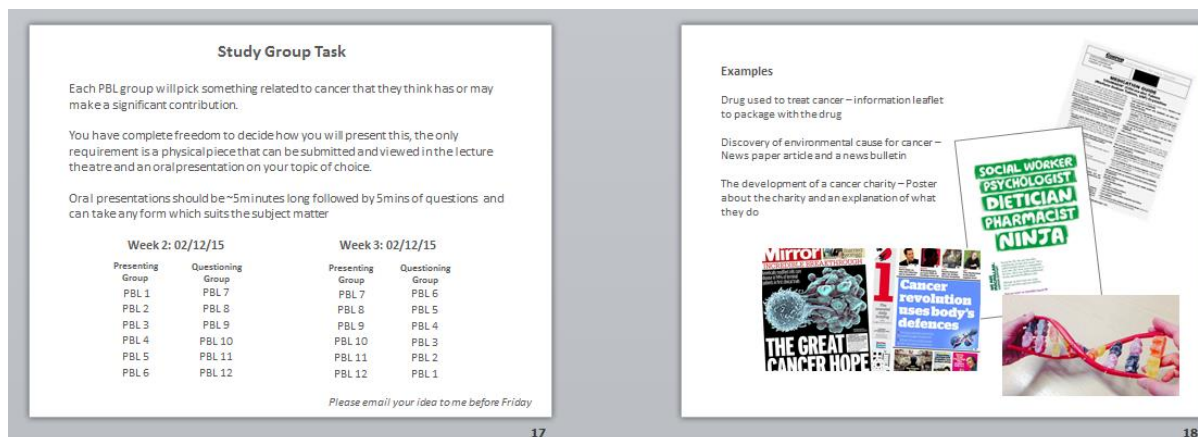


Figure 1: Direction given to the students regarding the task.

The students were given free rein to choose a topic and method of delivery within the constraints that it should be related to cancer and suitable for the topic they chose. To enable groups to feel comfortable in the task examples of ideas were provided

Topic	Verbal presentation	Physical output
Fasting and preventing cancer	BBC news report and interviews	BBC news page
HPV vaccination	Role play classroom teaching	Presentation
CRISPR	News segment	Advert
Breast Self-Examination	Dance showing how to self-check	Leaflet
Celebrity effect on screening uptake	Presentation	Poster
PET-CT	Role play Drs surgery	Information leaflet
History of surgery for cancer	Presentation	Timeline poster
Bowel cancer screening barriers	News interview with video segment	Video explanation
Mustard gas as chemotherapy	Presentation	Poster
Discovery of BRCA1	'Historical' video of discovery	Presentation
Right to Decide end of life	Role play discussion	Poster

Table 1: The variety of topics and delivery methods chosen by the groups

There was high diversity in the topics chosen by the groups for presentation spanning a range of disciplines; scientific research, clinical treatments, history, psychology and public health. Whilst some groups chose traditional methods in which to present their topic others explored other genres with mock news presentations and role play used well to convey the subject

Results

There was a huge variety of presentations put forward by the groups and anecdotal evidence from talking to tutors and groups seemed to suggest that they had been thinking about the topic to choose since they were first introduced to the concept at the start of the unit. There was a high diversity in the topics chosen and the presentation types used; with several of the groups presenting mock BBC interviews and others role playing a consultation between patient and health professional (Table 1). From listening to the student presentations all of the groups seemed enthused and the work was of a much higher quality than that which had been

submitted in the past. All of the members of each group were involved in the presentation of the topic and all answered the questions well from their peers and members of staff.

For the formative feedback staff were asked to comment on the ease of understanding the presentation, appearance, clarity and how well the students answered the questions that they were posed. In previous years the feedback received commonly highlighted cluttered slides, poor layout and irrelevant information in the presentation, alongside variable quality in delivery; with some groups performing well but relying on confident presenters whilst others were not clear and read from notes. The area which groups have clearly struggled in the past is their knowledge around the topic and ability to handle questions from peers and tutors. With the alterations to the task the overall feedback for the cohort was good with positive comments on the presentation quality and delivery. The majority of the groups handled the questions well and showed a depth of knowledge beyond that which they had presented. In addition groups which were asked questions to which they didn't immediately know the answer showed confidence and maturity in how they thought logically through the question and attempted an answer, instead of merely replying that they didn't know. The creativity of the groups was excellent but still relevant to the topic and many of the presentations provoked strong emotions in the student and staff audience with several commenting that it had made them think about the subject in a way that could not have been conveyed simply by a lecture. Most poignant was the role play depicting end of life decisions, support and care a topic not often covered and that the group approached sympathetically and competently.

By giving the students free rein to present how they wished the task now encourages the groups to think about the different ways we have to communicate and to consider which is most suitable for the content in addition to learning the basic skills needed.

Considerations

Whilst the changes appeared to increase student engagement with the task and the presentations were of a much higher quality than that seen in previous years there are some considerations which need to be addressed. By giving groups complete free rein to think creatively some students may have felt daunted and struggled with this concept, particularly if they are used to being given a very direct list of tasks to complete and structure to do this. There is also the possibility that such a free structure could cause tension within a group with naturally creative thinkers taking hold of an idea and the other members of the group not engaging in the task. The

task is continuing to run in the new format for another academic year and the perceptions and comments of students will be analysed alongside tutor reflections to assess whether any of these considerations are valid concerns.

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