HRM STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF AN ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING IN A FULLY ONLINE UNIVERSITY COURSE IN SWEDEN AT THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION IN UMEÅ

Monica Liljeström and Hanna Paulin
Department of Education, Umeå University
SWEDEN

Abstract

The study is built on 75 Human Resource Management [HRM] students' reflections on their learning when conducting an Assessment for Learning [AFL], implemented in a fully online course with strictly text-based communication in spring 2021, aimed to enhance the students' learning experience and development of vocational skills. This study focuses on students' perceptions of the peer review task, incorporated in the AFL, and carried out in asynchronous online discussions [AOD]. The results show that the AOD were perceived meaningful for learning and the development of vocational skills. In conclusion, the AOD in this form can strengthen students' engagement in solving the AFL.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the growing design-based research in fully online education in strictly text-based settings, by sharing the design of an Assessment for Learning [AFL], and the first analysis on the results of the implementation of this task. The AFL was created and implemented in spring 2021, in a fully online 50 % pace Human Resource Management-course [HRM] on the undergraduate level, at the Department of Education, Umeå, Sweden. The analysis is based on the students' perceptions of their experiences in step 2 in the AFL design, in which peer reviews were carried out in asynchronous online discussions [AOD].

The course introduces students to the profession, theories and research on gender and organisations, and theoretical tools for work development, and provides vocational training in planning for change in organisations. About 100-150 students from all over Sweden enrol every year, and about 75-85 finish the course. Some of them have practically no previous experience with HRM work, whilst others have worked for years in this field. The majority are women and full or part-time workers, juggling their studies with many other commitments.

The overall course design is largely based on a "standard design", used in most fully online courses at the department, which means a task driven structure in which students' learning is guided by often long, detailed, and wordy, written instructions about how to solve this or that task, written feedback on assignments, and answers to the students' questions in the *Questions about the module* forum. Usually at least two examination tasks are carried out in forms of AOD in smaller study groups. An important reason for this is to enhance the students' possibilities to participate without compromising other commitments, as it allows students to self-pace their participation and work with the task anytime and anywhere. AOD can also contribute to the sense of belonging to a dynamic community, thereby preventing online students from feeling isolated, and enhance critical thinking and high-order skills (Arend, 2009; Szabo & Schwartz, 2011; Brierton et al., 2016). Since all utterances in text are saved, they can be re-evaluated and reflected on many times, which can stimulate students to spend more time for preparation and to apply more factual arguments then they would have done in face-to-face discussions (Liljeström, 2010). It can be assumed that participating in AOD can enable students who are shy, introverted, or having language or learning difficulties to voice their thoughts better than in face-to-face discussions, as they have more time to formulate their input in a discussion. However, this "best case-scenario" doesn't emerge by simply adding AOD to a course. The task itself must be carefully designed to orchestrate meaningful and rich interaction, and to be perceived as relevant so that students engage wholeheartedly in the discussions rather than making a "duty post" without much depth.

Although elements to stimulate interaction with peers were already included in the HRM-course, the staff had noticed that some students would not engage more than necessary in the AOD, and that the tasks were not sufficient to enhance the students' abilities to *apply* theory in practical HRM-work. This led to the design and implementation of the AFL, which was guided by sociocultural theory, with an aim to stimulate higher engagement and to enhance the students' learning of vocational skills. In this, peer review, in forms of AOD, was found interesting to incorporate in hope that such activity would strengthen the students' engagement and enhance learning.

The focus in this study is the students´ perception of the impact the peer review element incorporated in the AFL in the form of AOD had on their engagement, interaction with each other, and the development of vocational skills.
- What did the students experience during interaction with peers in the AOD?
- What impact did the peer review format have on the students' engagement in the AFL?
- Did the students perceive that they gained support for their development of vocational skills from the interaction with peers in the AOD?

Background

As pointed out by Barab and Squire (2004), "One challenging component of doing educational research on design-based interventions is to characterize the complexity, fragility, messiness, and eventual solidity of the design and doing so in a way that will be valuable to others" (p. 4). Therefore, according to Barab and Squire (2004), it is important when reporting results from design-based research to not simply share a design, but also to problematize it and share information that gives others insight into the local dynamics, the context, theories guiding the design process and design features of the intervention, and what possible impact these features may have on learning. In light of this, the context in which the design for learning was implemented is described below, to better mediate the rationale underpinning the design.

The Overall Learning Design in the HRM Course

The HRM course is divided into two modules, each examined separately but summarised as a final course result after module 2 has been completed.

Module 1: Theories, Concepts, and HRM Work in Practice

Module one begins with a voluntary task in which the students introduce themselves to their peers. The first examination is an unsupervised individual written assessment with a focus on the HRM-profession and its origin, theories, and practices in this work field. This task is usually solved by the students without many interactions with peers or teachers. The second examination is a little more complex. The content is processed through individual preparation of a seminar paper, in which students must describe a relevant scenario in an organisation and apply ethical and gender-theoretical lenses, inspired by cases in a course book or their own experiences. The paper is processed in a seminar, through feedback, questions, and suggestions from peers, and is aimed to enhance the students' ability to identify signs of gender discrimination in an organisation, its consequences, and what role they could play to identify, prevent, and solve gender-related problems in their future profession. The number of replies to peers, and application of theory in their feedback, is strongly formalised to make sure that everyone has understood the processed content well enough to apply it in an analysis of life-like issues.

Module 2: Working with Organisational Change from an HRM-Perspective

In this module the focus shifts from the introduction to the profession, to a more specific focus on organisational change and learning, vocational training in

applying theory, and research results to formulate a plan for change work in an organisation. The module starts with a voluntary seminar, offering the opportunity to collaborate with peers to find appropriate scientific journals and articles to use when working with the AFL. The first examination is an unsupervised individual written assessment targeting theories, models, and research on organisational change.

In the next section, the second examination, the AFL, and the theoretical outlook underpinning is described more in detail.

The AFL

The AFL was formulated to fit into the existing overall course design and underpinned by the teachers' interpretation of sociocultural theory associated theoretical tools. In short, Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (Chickering and Gamson, 1987), became a hub to which other theoretical tools were applied.

The core of the *first principle,* "Encourages contacts between students and faculty" (p. 3), suggests establishing an early connection. Elements like mentorship or Zoom-seminars were ruled out as strategies to use to accomplish this, due to the large group of students and their need for flexible participation. However, the staff made themselves visible by timely answering students' questions and through pre-recorded videos in which they shared personal thoughts and their own experiences from change work.

The *second principle, "D*evelops Reciprocity and Cooperation among Students" (p. 3), is previously addressed at the beginning of the course through an introduction task and by dividing students into smaller study groups. The AOD´s, and especially the peer review AOD in the AFL, is meant to enhance student-to-student interaction.

The AFL and the AOD are also designed to promote the *third principle, "Uses* Active Learning Techniques" (p. 3)*,* which required students to put theories into practise and give feedback on each other's drafts (see steps 1 to 3 below). The use of AOD is also inspired by the community of practice framework [COI] (Garrison et. al., 1999) in which students and teachers are seen as the core participants in an educational situation, as teaching, cognitive, and social presence are important elements overlapping and interacting thus creating a space for learning.

It is a bit tricky to address the *fourth principle, "*Gives Prompt Feedback" (p. 3)*,* as the teachers engage in other responsibilities in parallel to the HRM-course.

However, they strive to answer students' questions the same day they posted them, and to provide individual or group feedback on tasks in as timely a manner as possible.

The strive to address the *fifth principle*, "Emphasizes Time on Task" (p. 3), has resulted in two fact-oriented and rather easily solved tasks, to allow more time for the students to spend on applying these facts when conducting the AFL.

The strategy used to address the *sixth principle*, "Communicates High Expectations" (p. 3), is to reinforce the need to anchor the plans for change work in theory, and that peer feedback should reflect that it is put forward by professionals.

The *seventh principle*, "Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning" (p. 3), is hard to address due to the policy that the type of examination (written or oral) provided in the curricula must be applied, no matter what needs individual students have. However, the students can construct their own cases, which makes some room for individual approaches.

As illustrated in Figure 1 below, the AFL was designed to be conducted in four obligatory steps:

Figure 1

The four steps in the AFL
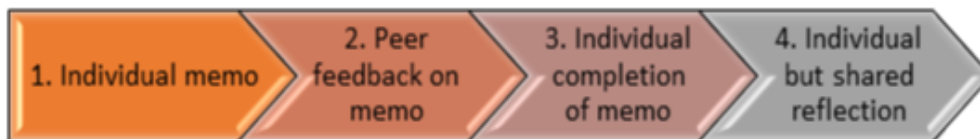
Step 1: Individual Memo

The first element in the AFL means that students must build on the knowledge of signs of gender-related problems in an organisation based on what they have seen in the course and put it into practise by creating their own case, either derived from the course literature or their own experiences. Based on observations made in their fictive cases, each student is to take on the role of a professional HRM and formulate a memo addressed to a manager. In the first part of the memo, they are supposed to put forward observations of gender-related origin within the organisation featured in their cases, laws, and research on the field, in an argumentative text that would focus on why they find it important that the organisation to invest resources in change.

The second part of the memo is devoted to suggesting a plan of action for change at work and defend its design. In this part the students are instructed to apply common models, theory, and research on change at work in general and activities that specifically can help change gender patterns in organisations.

This is a complex task which communicates rather high expectations on students' ability to put theory in practice. It's hoped that encouraging the students to apply theory on an almost authentic case, could stimulate them to spend more time solving the task and enhance their engagement in AOD.

Step 2: Peer Feedback on Memo

The second element in the AFL is the AOD in forms of peer review, which is in focus in this study. The individual memos are shared in the smaller study group, and the students are instructed to take on the role of a helpful co-worker, offering friendly but critical feedback on the quality of the memo and providing suggestions on formulations that can strengthen the impression of a proposal to a manager. They need to show that they have consulted theory and research to enhance their feedback and suggestions for changes. This obligatory task is guided by instructions on what to focus on in the feedback, and formulated to communicate expected standards on the memo, since helping students understand what's expected of them is vital according to research on feedback and can encourage students to actively engage with feedback (see for example Rust et al., 2005). The AFL was also hoped to enhance the students' engagement in interactions with peers.

The peer review element in the AOD was intended to stimulate the three important elements, the *Social, Cognitive* and *Teaching Presence* that, according to the COI-framework (Garrison et al., 1999), are necessary elements in the development of a COI. It was believed that interaction with peers in these forms could prevent the feelings of being left alone, struggling with a challenging task. It was also thought that working in groups, with the opportunity to negotiate different understandings of theory and how to apply it in practice and strategies to communicate their proposal for change work to a manager, could stimulate deeper cognitive processes. Also, as some students usually have very little experience from previous academic studies and/or HRM work, students with more experience in these areas could reinforce the perception of teaching presence in the course.

Step 3: Individual Completion of Memo

The peer feedback is used to finish the memo before it is posted for examination. When doing so, the students need to carefully evaluate the received peer feedback and reflect on which of the various suggestions for improvements are worth

considering when completing the memo. This activity is hoped to strengthen their cognitive engagement in the task and give them the chance to apply skills and knowledge gained from participating in AOD.

Step 4: Individual but Shared Reflection

Reflection was a voluntary task used the year before the AFL was designed. It was originally formulated by a member of staff who had some ideas that reflection can enhance learning. Reflection can stimulate high order cognitive processes and can, therefore, be a useful tool to draw knowledge from experiences (see for example Chang, 2019; Heyler, 2015). Thus, the reflection task was modified to better stimulate reflections on experiences made during the course in relation to learning outcomes and incorporated as the last obligatory step in the design. The students are to reflect on their learning experience from different perspectives and formulate their thoughts in writing. They are to ponder on what interaction with peers and teachers meant for their learning. The paper is posted in an AOD forum to enable peers to read and reflect on them if they want.

Method

As the focus in the study is on the students´ perceived AOD to support their engagement and development of vocational skills to aid changes at work, their reflections conducted in step 4 in the AFL were identified to provide relevant data. After obtaining permission from the seventy-five students who posted reflections at the first examination, their reflections were collected, read through, and negotiated several times by the researchers before being categorized. The analyses were guided by Garrison's (2007) descriptions of manifestations of social, teaching, and cognitive presence in AOD.

Results

The first readthrough of the students´ reflections revealed that all seventy-five expressed satisfaction with their learning experiences in the course. This made it interesting to understand if, and if so how, the AOD contributed to this result. Some students did not explicitly mention the AOD in their reflections on interactions with peers. However, the peer interaction (and with teachers) was most intense during the AFL, which means that reflections during step four provided valuable insight into how the students perceived their interaction with peers in the AOD. Also, as the AFL has such explicit emphasis on vocational skills, the content in the reflections could provide valid information about whether the students perceived that the AFL contributed to such learning.

Two students point out:

- "The last theme has in my opinion been the most important part of the course and broadened my perspective on what it takes to make successful change work. It has become clear to me how important it is to anchor change work in the whole organisation to be successful."
- "Although I know that you learn afterwards and not directly, I saw it myself in case part 2. Without that step, I would never have been able to write what I wrote in step 3."

Few students explicitly mentioned the social aspect of interactions with peers. Those mentioning it wrote about the feeling of being supported by their peers and/or feeling safe with them. One of the students reflected on how their study group formed a Facebook group which initially seemed as a good idea, but which became unimportant over time as the discussions on the course platform were so rich and meaningful. Others put forward that they thought seminar discussions via Zoom could have added to the interactions, but one student wrote about how the AOD added to a feeling of closeness. He wrote that he believed this would not have happened if they had used Zoom, as the positive dynamic could have changed through the awkwardness to talk to strangers. Students also put forward the great engagement in their study group, which inspired their own engagement; as one student expressed it:

- "With the help of fellow students, I find a lot of joy and creativity that inspired new ways of thinking and perspectives."

The students' reflections show signs that AOD stimulated rich cognitive processes. One student described it like this:

- "I have had to think and reflect on others' cases, which has given me a chance to develop my analytical ability. At the same time, I have gained an incredible amount of inspiration and insights from reading other people's work and comments."

Another student reflected on how the written format initially felt clumsy and insufficient for discussion, but that this changed during the course when realising how such forms of communication demand more thoughtfulness and time spent on reflection than face-to-face communication. Many put forward how feedback from peers stimulated deeper reflections about their own strategies to solve the AFL, and how the exchange of experiences with peers made them aware of how narrow their own thoughts were.

Signs were found that teaching processes appeared in the AOD. Almost all described how they learned a lot from the many ways to understand the course content in the group, as well as the importance to apply theory in practical HRM-work and peer feedback. Many believed that this was possible because of the obligatory demand to anchor memos and feedback in the course literature. The

students also expressed that they had learned a lot from the opportunity to observe different examples for how theories and research can be put into practice. As one student described it:

- "We have valued each other's positions by using scientific concepts and literature, rather than on what we think, feel, and believe based on own experiences."

Often, reflections over peer feedback contained words like "enormously," "valuable", and "essential to learning." One student wrote about how others shared valuable tools derived from other contexts than the HRM course:

- "In the conversation with other students, we do not only bring with us the knowledge provided via the course literature, but knowledge acquired through previous formal education, experience, and so on. Knowledge, we bring with us to our fellow students during the seminars. I have gained access to a lot of new analysis tools with the help of my fellow students' accumulated knowledge."

The majority reflected on learning from peer review discussions through the observations on how the course content could be used in many ways, or when details and strategies not noticed or interpreted differently than themselves were mentioned by peers. Most students did not explicitly reflect on what specific vocational skills they achieved. However, all of them wrote about learning outcomes such as insights on how change work in organisations can be planned and organised to enhance the possibility to reach the goals, the importance of putting theory and research in practice in HRM-work, and the importance of ethical reflections. Some indirectly showed their skills through analyses of previous experiences from change at work in organisations, completed with a discussion about how it could have been done in a better way.

One student wrote about how vocational tools were provided indirectly through the learning design in the course:

- "What we will take with us from the course to use in a future workplace is not only what we have learned but also *how* we have learned. The learning process itself has given us an insight in how a learning organisation can work ..."

Students with no previous experience from HRM work seems to have gained a clearer picture of how this is carried out in practise. As one student pointed out:
"Since I do not yet have any major experience of HRM work, it has been very rewarding to gain insight into what reality can look like via other students with a little more experience."

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Discussion

Processing memos in the AOD seems to have sparked students' creativity, cooperation, and sense of reciprocity, and stimulated deep cognitive processes, which was what was hoped would enhance the AFL-design. It may be too early to conclude that the students' vocational skills were strengthened by the processes in the AOD.

Further studies, for example analyses of what refinements the students made on their memos after the AOD and the feedback they received from teachers grading their memos, can reveal more about that. But it is a good sign that the students themselves perceived that this element in the AFL-design contributed to nuanced understandings of the course content and how to put theory into practice. It can be concluded that the text-based format does not seem to have become an obstacle for the development of meaningful interaction, even if some students wished for seminars via Zoom.

Although it is not possible at this stage to draw the conclusion that a COI emerged, all the elements needed for such an outcome seem to have been in place. Therefore, peer review in the form of AOD can be regarded as an activity that substantially contribute to dynamic and engaged interaction, in which processes of social, cognitive, and teaching presence emerged. Further studies of how the students' perceived their interaction with teachers, and what they regarded that the case-based memo-design meant for their learning, are needed to fully reveal how the students' learning experience was shaped by the implementation of the AFL and what impact it had on the students' development of vocational skills. However, it can be concluded that peer-review activities, in which students share examples and provide feedback on their peers' attempts to put theory into practice, can be a successful active learning technique in a text-based educational setting. It also can be concluded that the AOD may have played a crucial role to strengthen the didactic potential of the AFL.

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Author Details

Monica Liljeström
Department of Education
Umeå University
monica.liljestrom@umu.se

Hanna Paulin
Department of Education
Umeå University
hanna.paulin@umu.se