Improving student online reading for assessment in higher education

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how university students' read their online assessments with a focus on the students' attention towards the essential elements of the assessment task. The objective was to investigate how online assessments are scaffolded by assessment designers to support information searching by students. There is a need for this research as designing effective online assessment tasks is now an integral part of a university lecturer's work to meet the required learning outcomes.

Existing literature indicates that effective assessment in online university study is a contemporary field of study (Weller, Pegler, & Mason, 2005), and previous research around online reading and information searching in a higher education context suggests that:

- students typically use a limited array of information searching tools and do not make effective use of the tools they use (Qayyum & Smith, 2015);
- students resort to quick and selective reading because of; a) the huge volumes of information generated during online searches (Weinreich, Obendorf, Herder, & Mayer, 2008), and; b) the distractions inherent to online readings, which may lead to behaviours that undermine effective learning (Coiro, 2011; Konnikova, 2014);
- there is a need for scaffolding of online reading and information search skills for university students (Smith & Qayyum, 2015).

In view of these challenges, this study was designed to investigate and document both the online tools and search methods that university students' employ to find relevant information for assessment tasks. A mixed methods approach was used across two phases to investigate and compare the information search behaviours of novice and experienced students in the context of their learning behaviours. In each phase, online user behaviour was digitally recorded using an eye-tracking system, followed by retrospective interviews. In Phase I, ten students, enrolled in a transition-to-university subject, undertook two assessment tasks that were embedded in the subject guide's learning modules. In Phase II, five experienced year 3 students worked on an essay-type assessment with a rubric based assessment structure. The recorded observations and interview transcripts of both phases were analyzed using a constant comparative audit of data to discover emerging themes as per the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with a particular focus on assessment design in higher education.

A key finding from the two phases of this study suggests that both first-year and third-year university students miss important elements in assessment task descriptions, and their online reading of descriptions was often unfocussed. The observed information seeking behaviour of the students suggests that most were searching for some terms or keywords

perceived to be important as they speed read the online resources. This behaviour leads the researchers to conclude that there is a heightened risk of students' misunderstanding the intent of the assessment and/or employing ineffective information search strategies in attempting to answer the assessment question. Thus, it is argued that improving the scaffold of online assessment will result in improved student comprehension of the task and subsequent online information searching.

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