

Tackling Time Management in Foundation Year Psychology Assignments

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Managing study time for assessments is known to be an issue that many students find challenging, particularly in the transition to independent learning as they enter Higher Education. We present an attempt to tackle this issue with a cohort of Foundation Year Students, studying a Social Psychology module. The assessment required them to submit a research portfolio, asking them to conduct and report on their own independent content analysis. Through the term, students were able to access resources associated with each component of the assessment, each of which was introduced on a fortnightly basis. Using Talis Elevate as a tool, we were able to show that students were actively engaging with the assessment materials during the fortnight that they were introduced rather than simply at the end of term when the deadline for submission approached. The implications of structuring assessments in this way are discussed.

Introduction

In a recent UK survey of the first year experience, Yorke and Longden (2007) reported that time management was a major concern for students in their transition to higher education. In fact, not only was it a major concern, it was considered to be the aspect of their first year experience that they did least well with. Similarly, when asked what advice they would offer to future first year students, students at the University of Otago and the University of Groningen both raised time management as a considerable concern (van der Meer, Jansen & Torenbeek, 2010). A common theme was that they would advise future students to begin working from the first day and then regularly and consistently through the term.

The idea that time management is a significant stressor for students as they enter Higher Education is not a new one. Indeed, Aeon and Aguinis (2017) note that as far back as Aristotle and St. Benedict, the issue of how best to use time has been a source of reflection. But in modern times, the need to find a way of promoting effective time management has never been more urgent. Misra and McKean (2000), for example, reported a negative correlation between time management behaviours and perceived academic stress, and the perception of having inade-

quate time to develop a knowledge base is frequently reported as a major academic stressor (Carveth *et al.*, 1996).

Not only can poor time management impact the experience of stress, but good time management can act as a buffer against illness. Vinichenko *et al.* (2018) reported that 42% of the student sample he studied at the Russian State Social University had been ill during the previous year and health had worsened for 60% of the respondents. However, time management was seen to be a buffer against this and could improve health outcomes. This suggestion is similar to that made by Blake and Vandiver (1998), that being able to manage time effectively is a recognised way of reducing stress, and that made by Macan *et al.* (1990), that good time management in students is linked to greater work and life satisfaction as well as less tension.

It is not just student health that can benefit from being able to manage time effectively. It has been linked to other positive outcomes such as improved academic performance (Campbell & Svenson, 1992, Britton & Tesser, 1991), and where it has been incorporated into teaching practices or curriculum planning, positive effects can be seen on study effort (van der Hulst & Jansen, 2002). Khasseh *et al.* (2020) suggest it may be associated with less plagiarism.

One of the common issues reported by students is that even when they are aware of what work they need to do, knowing how to allocate their time can be difficult (van der Meer, Jansen & Torenbeek, 2010). As one of the participants in van der Meer *et al.*'s study reports, being told that there is a lot of work to complete does not automatically translate into an effective time plan. Giving students support in terms of how to translate awareness of workload into a workable time plan is essential.

So, how can we support students to manage their time effectively? A particular issue for students revolves around managing time in the context of assessments (Thomson & Falchikov, 1998). One of the pervasive difficulties here is that students will often drastically underestimate the time it takes to complete academic tasks (Josephs & Hahn, 1995). Tulga and Sheridan (1980) devised an ingenious method of trying to facilitate time management using a computer game. Each "job" that had to be completed was represented by a block that students could see on the screen. Each block was a little nearer to the deadline than the previous. Students could earn points by working on and completing each block. Although this game did help many students, it did not help all, and Tulga and Sheridan pointed to significant individual differences in how effective the gamification approach had been.

Baker *et al.* (2018) attempted to support time management strategies in students using a scheduling intervention. Students studying on an undergraduate STEM course were given the opportunity to schedule, in advance, when they would watch their lecture. Compared to those not given this opportunity, they scored approximately a third of a standard deviation higher on a later quiz, suggesting it had a positive effect on achievement.

This study reports some initial observations of an attempt to build time management into a programme of work across one term on a foundation year Social Psychology module. Rather than presenting students with an assessment brief and then leaving them to work on this alone, or simply giving them reminders of the assessment, the task was broken down into discrete fortnightly steps. Each step was associated with a PowerPoint resource and a seminar where students could look at examples and work through exercises together. Students were asked to submit a portfolio showing not just the end product (the research poster) but the planning stages too. Tiwari and Tang (2003) have pointed to the value of such portfolio approaches to assessment in terms of both academic and affective outcomes. We used a tool called Talis Elevate to monitor both the usage of the resources for each stage and, more importantly, when the peak use of these resources occurred, to give us an idea of whether this approach was helping students to manage their time effectively rather than relying on self-report measures where responses can be affected by social desirability (Huang, Liao & Chang, 1998).

Research Methodology

The context of the study

The study reported here was conducted with students studying a foundation year module on Social Psychology at University of Sussex. There were 152 students on this module, the majority of whom were following a psychology foundation programme. Some students were studying this module as an elective option and were following either a business, social science or arts and humanities programme.

The assignment set

The coursework assignment for this module required students to conduct their own piece of research, namely a content analysis on a theme relevant to Social Psychology. Historically, students had been asked to complete and submit a single written research report detailing their content analysis. In the academic year 2020-21, we instead asked students to submit a portfolio consisting of three component parts that contributed to the marking of the assessment: a collage of ideas and thoughts about the research topic, an annotated bibliography and a research poster which we referred to as the end product. The research poster itself was broken down into three sub-components relating to 1) the rationale, 2) the method, and 3) the results and discussion.

Rather than give students a brief at the beginning of the module and leave them to work on it in isolation, the task of completing the portfolio was therefore broken down into five component parts. For each of the five components, a PowerPoint file, containing detailed instructions of what students were required to do for that component and how to go about completing this, was posted on the Canvas VLE site in Talis Elevate. Throughout the term, students were encouraged to focus on each component part for a two-week period within which they would attend a seminar dedicated to explaining the sub-task and supporting their work on it. The end of each fortnightly task was marked, with a chance to gain formative feedback from either peers or tutors dependent on the component.

The component parts of the assignment

As Table 1 below illustrates, each component part was associated with a two-week period in the term where the focus for students was on that particular task, with the exception of the final component where the time period was only one week due to the structure of the term (11 weeks in total).

Component title	What students were required to do	Week in the term it was introduced
The conversation collage (generating ideas)	Be creative with ideas about what you might research	2
Sling your hook (hooking evidence to ideas)	Write an annotated bibliography	4
Down the rabbit hole (guide us to why you are doing your research using the evidence)	Organize what you found in the form of an introduction/rationale showing where the gap is in current knowledge and add this to your research poster	6
Playing detective	Find your examples and run your analysis, adding your method description to your research poster	8
Be a Rembrandt (paint a picture of what you found)	Finish your research poster by displaying the results and adding a discussion	10

Table 1: The component parts of the assignment showing what students were required to do and when that component part of the assignment was introduced.

Talis Elevate

Talis Elevate is a third-party piece of software that plugs into a VLE. It builds active learning into specific resources by allowing documents, videos or pictures to be uploaded and annotated in real time in collaboration with peers. A student can click on a document in Talis Elevate, highlight a piece of text and raise a question in a text box related to that section, and can do so anonymously if they wish. They do not have to wait for a seminar to ask a question. They can instead get responses from their peers using Talis Elevate as the medium to do so. For the purposes of this assignment, students could raise questions related to the component part of the assignment without the anxiety of whether their question would be seen as silly or obvious.

In terms of objective measurement, Talis Elevate records the amount of time that students are actively using a resource and provides the tutor with weekly analytics for the cohort of students.

From a tutor perspective, use of Talis Elevate enables us to see what resources students are using, how often and how they are using them. For example, we can see what questions are raised, we can monitor other students' feedback on those questions and monitor the discussions that arise to see what students are interested in or struggling with. For the purposes of this study, we used Talis Elevate to monitor the amount of time spent on each assessment resource but also to look at when most students were accessing that resource.

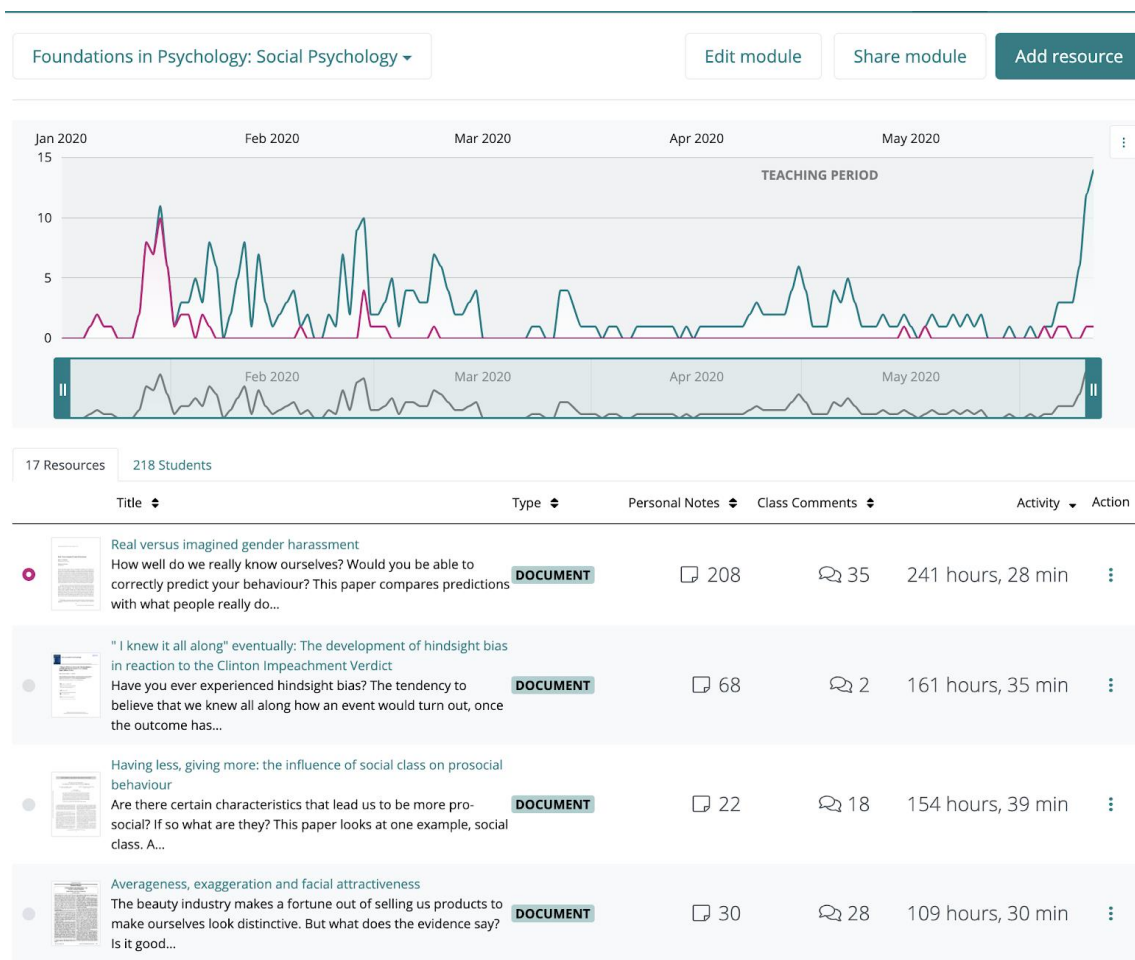


Figure 1: An example of the analytics available to tutors from Talis Elevate, showing the number of personal notes, class comments and time spent actively accessing each resource on the VLE.

Results

One of the advantages of Talis Elevate is that it allows you to monitor both how much students are using each resource and when they are making most use of it. Using the analytics available about the resource associated with each component, we were able to identify both how much time students spent actively accessing the resources and what percentage of students did so. This is summarised in Table 2 below.

Component part of the assignment	Time spent accessing the resource (in minutes)	% of students accessing the resource
The conversation collage	2419	95
Sling your hook	959	85
Down the rabbit hole	803	84
Playing detective	1399	79
Be a Rembrandt	686	74

Table 2: Time spent accessing the PowerPoint resource associated with each component part.

As Table 2 illustrates, all resources were actively used by the majority of students. The resource associated with “the conversation collage”, for example, was used for over 40 hours. The finding that so many students used the resources not only indicated that they were a useful source of information for assessment preparation but also that students are investing a significant amount of time and effort into preparing their assignment. The question is though, when are they doing this? Is this reflective of active engagement at the end of term when the assignment deadline is looming? If so, the idea of breaking up the structure into fortnightly chunks has not really served the purpose it set out to.

Component part of the assignment	First peak time of accessing resource
The conversation collage	3
Sling your hook	5
Down the rabbit hole	11
Playing detective	9
Be a Rembrandt	11

Table 3: Peak time of accessing the power-point resource associated with each component part of the assignment and the percentage of students on the module accessing the resource

Table 3 shows when each resource was used for the maximum amount of time. Where two time points were equal, the first peak time was used. As this table illustrates, students did seem to be accessing the resources throughout the term, specifically, with one exception, one week after the component part of the assessment had been introduced. For example, “the conversation collage” was introduced to students in week 2 of term. The first peak of usage of this resource occurred around 11th February which falls in week 3 of term. Similarly, the “playing detective” component, introduced in week 8, was actively engaged with most in week 9 of term. This suggests that the breakdown of a complex assignment into component parts, each of which had a fortnightly focus, did in fact help to support students in their quest to manage their time effectively.

The one exception to this rule is the third component of the assessment, “down the rabbit hole”. To complete this component, students were required to take what they had found in their review of the literature the preceding fortnight and use this to construct their introduction or rationale for their research poster. On reflection, it does seem to be that students are saving the construction of the poster itself until week 11, that is the writing up of the project report including not just the method, results and discussion but the introduction as well.

Discussion

The pattern of access shown through the Talis Elevate statistics clearly suggests that breaking an assessment into meaningful chunks, which are time-structured, does indeed assist students in managing their time effectively when it comes to assessment preparation. The guidance given on planning and preparation as well as the analysis itself was accessed frequently and throughout the term rather than just at the end of term when the assessment deadline loomed, and the peak time of access, with one exception, was approximately one week after that component had been introduced. This suggests that breaking an assessment task into manageable and separate tasks, particularly those focused on planning and preparation, can help to prevent the

mountain of meltdown experiences that typically occur around the time of a deadline for submission, and supports Van der Hulst and Jansen's idea (2002) that planning a curriculum or teaching practices around time management concerns can have positive study effects.

There was one exception to the rule and that was stage 3, which was termed "down the rabbit hole". This stage required students to take evidence from the academic literature and construct a written rationale or introduction for their research poster. The introduction forms part of a bigger research poster that summarises what students did and found. Active engagement with the resource associated with this stage peaked in week 11. With reflection, it appears that the research poster itself is the aspect that students leave to complete close to the deadline. This does not take away from the benefits of completing the planning, preparation and research in the lead up to the deadline but it does suggest an important implication going forward. It suggests that assessments that are solely dependent on a written submission of an essay or report are more likely to cause an increase in stress and anxiety in students as they are likely to engage with the resources close to the deadline itself.

Enabling students to submit a portfolio detailing their planning and preparation as well as the end product, does help to ensure that the writing of the end product is not as onerous because a lot of the preparation work has already been completed in a time-efficient manner in the lead up to that point. This is consistent with the findings of Tiwari and Tang (2003), who demonstrated that the process of preparing portfolios led to positive and affective outcomes and contributed to an apparent increased interest in learning.

One of the benefits of measuring time management using Talis Elevate statistics is that it bypasses any social desirability concerns (Huang *et al.*, 1998; Britton & Tesser, 1991). Talis Elevate measures active use of the resource across time and therefore is able to provide a picture of what student engagement with the resources looks like over the course of the term. This is particularly important in any study of time management as it is clear that being able to manage our time effectively is a socially desirable response, so that self reports may not be accurate.

A limiting factor in this particular study is the reliance on only one measure of time management. However, this measure does give an unbiased and continuous picture of resource use during the term. To the extent that resource use equates with completion or even working on the associated component of the assessment, this does give us a better idea of what students are doing with the assessment information we share with them.

It would be interesting for future studies to explore students' experiences of portfolio assessment, particularly in relation to the time-managed structure outlined here. For example, do students identify the timed breakdown of component parts of the assessment to be helpful in reducing the stress and anxiety usually associated with impending deadlines? Does it help them to plan their assessments in other modules or are there aspects of the process that they would like to carry forward in their studies?

Trueman and Hartley (1996) raise the important issue of the need to differentiate mature and traditional-entry students in looking at time-management skills. Older mature students in their study were reporting significantly better time-management skills and women more so than men. Particularly with this time-managed portfolio assessment, it would be interesting to see whether such differences are minimised. Hillman (2021) points to recent data from OECD that suggests that in all countries that have data available, women are far more likely to complete their degrees than men. Is poor time management a factor that contributes to this? To quote Cassie and Constantine (1977): "The attainment of a good standard depends upon programmed progress sustained throughout the term from beginning to end."

Hopefully our study goes some way to demonstrating this in a practical manner.

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