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The Assignment Brief

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Abstract

This paper reports on the results of a pilot study conducted in The School of Engineering and Design at Brunel University, which considered how easily students could extract 'meaningful' information from an assignment brief. The study used two documents, a 'standard' module specific assignment brief (PB1), which used a proforma document issued by the Taught Programmes Office (TPO) and a 'redesigned' assessment brief (RB2), which also used the 'basic' proforma document as the design template. Both documents used the same data but the redesigned version used principles of Information Architecture to structure the data. The study used a designed questionnaire to elicit responses from students at Level 2, which compared and contrasted the two documents.

Keywords: assignment brief, information architecture, informtion design, understanding.

1. Introduction

If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must look into its assessment procedures.' [1].

A large amount of research into assessment methods within the university context has been conducted in recent times. However the author could not find any formal studies which considered the physical structure for the delivery of information of this kind, or that used a 'compare and contrast' research method. Therefore this pilot study sought to determine how much data the student could meaningfully extract from an assignment brief, and concentrated on two brief (containing the same information) which were given to students at Level 2 for one module within Design.

Some universities conduct 'internal' surveys on student satisfaction and often the project brief forms part of the questionairre. In an internal Brunel University survey, general comments regarding the assignment brief, highlighted some of the difficulties students experience: (students) are unsure of what is required of them.

Not enough detail was given was given to help them understand coursework assessments and what was required.
Criteria had not been made clear in many cases, leaving them to not understand what was required of them.
A need for more explicitness up front
Detail given on the requirements … was poorly explained
In modules that use the 'portfolio assignment' or 'coursework assessed' profile as a method of gauging the students' knowledge of the module subject area, a task or series of tasks will be set, which the student must accomplish within a set timeframe. The module leader or lecturer will often communicate the task requirements to the student through the medium of the assignment brief, as well as

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integrating an descriptive outline of the final assessment criteria within the teaching forum. It is essential that the student understands the nature and requirements of the assignment and is able to plan and execute the tasks in an organised fashion. The assignment requirements, in many cases, are referred to and discussed with the students on a continuing basis, however the printed assignment brief remains the constant reminder that the student, metaphorically or literally carries with them, and that they can refer to at any time, until the assignment has been submitted. Therefore the brief becomes a vital component for modules, which set assignments as a method of assessment. As such, it becomes one of the major tools of the module learning aids for both the student and lecturer.

Cannon and Newble [2], highlight several purposes of assessment:
To judge the students' mastery of essential skills and knowledge
measuring improvements over time
diagnosing student difficulties
providing feedback for students
evaluating the effectiveness of the course
motivating students to study

2. The Assignment Brief

Biggs has recommended [3] that the requirements of the assignment should be clearly stated in the assignment brief and that data referring to the following items should be included:

- the structure of the portfolio (task)
- a list of sample items
- the number of items required
- the size of items and the overall portfolio
- any required items

This list and a number of similar such lists, whilst accurate and helpful in what to include, do not give guidance on what to exclude, nor do they give guidance on the form and structure of a document such as this. In a number of examples that the author reviewed, the composers of the documents had included amounts of extra data, which, whilst the implied intent seemed to be that the inclusion of extra data would help the student, in practice (from the perspective of data structure) it potentially 'muddied' the water. A clear definition should be drawn between the data required for submission of an assignment (factual) and the data that helps the student compose the fabric of the assignment. The data, which specifies the requirements for submission, should be contained within the assignment brief and should be clear and unambiguous. The data which helps the student construct the component parts of the submission, should be contained within lectures, lecture notes or other module materials. This is a clear separation of data delivery. The student still receives the data but in different formats and in different psychological settings, which hopefully aids clarity and understanding. Further work on this aspect of the project brief would be required to verify whether this separation of data is helpful and useful to the student (see 6).

Method

This research used a module specific 'standard proforma' project brief (PB1), which was given for Graphic Communication, a core module for Design in the School of Engineering and Design, and investigated how understandable it was by the student. A revised project brief (RB2) document for the same module was also prepared, which used basic principles of Information Architecture [4, 5, 6, 7, 8]. Level 2 students were asked to compare and contrast the two documents, reporting back through a designed questionnaire.

The Proforma Brief (PB1)

The Level 2 students that took part in this pilot study were familiar with the general structure of the PB1 issued by the TPO. The Graphic Communication module has used this document as the basis for assignment briefs that the students were given at Level 1, however in the returned questionnaires which related to this particular document, the respondents reported several areas of confusion:

- the learning outcomes were confusing and vague
- the document was 'set out in a confusing way'
- the structure of the document did not highlight task importance
- assessment structure was vague
- assessment weighting for each item was not included

The Revised Brief (RB2)

Categories Removed

The learning outcomes were removed from the revised document. In discussions with the TPO, it was established that these were not a required part of the assignment brief.

Categories Added

The same 'project specific' data appeared in both documents. Additional data in the RB2 document were as follows:

- contact details for the module leader and any lecturers on the module
- weighting for each item or component
- a self assessment list of questions
- keywords

The addition of these categories to the document is in direct response to feedback from students and discussions with colleagues from the Learning and Teaching Unit at Brunel University.

Structure of the Document

In order for data to become information, appropriate structure of the data is vital. Information Architecture states that the structure of the data is as important as the quality of the data, and that the structure is largely dependent on the user [9]. When preparing an assignment brief for undergraduate students in the University context, the following points should be considered:

- language – always use terminology that is appropriate, direct and unambiguous
- decide what is most important and highlight it – use bold type, capitals, increase font size or underline .
- use logical order for the data – group data in categories, objectives, timelines, etc.
- include as much information as required, but no more – keep simple but not simplistic
- remember that you know what is required but the student does not
- trial the document with as many people, who do not know the subject, as possible
- for this type of document it is best to use sans serif fonts (Arial, Tahoma, Verdana)

Delivery of the assignment briefs and questionnaires to the students

The assignment briefs and the questionnaire, were given to students in a Graphic Communication lecture. The author outlined the project and asked the students for their help in finding out how easy the assignment briefs were to understand. The students were asked to fill out the questionnaire and return it by the end of the lecture, or, if they felt they needed more time to consider the two documents, to drop the questionnaire off in the authors' post box. The author emphasised that the students were not required to fill in the anonymous questionnaire but that the data obtained from the analysis of responses would help the author write future assignment briefs. The students were first given PB1, and asked to review the document then fill out the sections of the questionnaire that related to this assignment brief. The students were then given RB2, and again review the document and complete the questionnaire. Because the 'requirements for assessment/submission' was the same on both documents no contra-data existed, further discussions and reviews of the assignment brief could be proceeded with in the usual way.

Questionnaire responses analysis

Seventeen students returned the questionnaires to the author. Analysis of these responses gave the results shown in the Tables below.

Table 1: Questionnaire Data Returns - 17 subjects

Assignment Brief 1	**YES**	**NO**	**%+**	% -	S/D
Do you find the information easy to understand?	14	3	0.8	0.2	0.5
Do you find the learning outcomes helpful?	4	13	0.2	0.8	0.4
Do you understand what you have to do to complete the project?	15	2	0.9	0.1	0.5
Assignment Brief 2	**YES**	**NO**	**%+**	**% -**	S/D
Do you find the information easy to understand?	16	1	0.9	0.1	0.6
Do you understand what you have to do to complete the project?	16	1	0.9	0.1	0.6

Do think you will find the self assessment helpful?	16	1	0.9	0.1	0.6
Do you find the typefaces easy to read?	17	0	1.0	0.0	0.7
Do you find the layout easy to navigate?	17	0	1.0	0.0	0.7

Table 2

	Brief 1	Brief 2	Poisson	Correlation
Do you find the information easy to understand?	14	16	1.0	1.0
Do you understand what you have to do to complete the project?	15	16	1.0	1.0

Data results for Table 2

The data shown in Table 2 shows the responses to the two comparison questions on the questionnaire. The correlation coefficient is high at 1.00 in both cases. In order to determine whether or not the responses are related, the Poisson test was also applied to the two results and the statistical analysis would imply a linkage in the two results. With the sample group being small (17 responses) and the nature of this pilot study, it was felt that would not be useful to make a probability determination from this data. The author would suggest that the following conclusions could be drawn from the statistical analysis of the Table 3 results, which related to the understanding of the data contained within the documents:

The students overall were able to gather enough information from either of the presentations of the data, however the RB2 document was marginally easier to extract relevant information to enable them to complete the assignment.

Data results for Tables 1

The number of students who did not find the learning outcomes helpful in PB1 was high at 13 out of 17, this confirmed previous comments from students which related to confusion regarding the learning outcomes, these were removed from the revised version.

The addition of a self assessment form was useful to the majority of the students, 16 out of 17 found it helpful.

The layout and typefaces in RB2 found favour with all 17 students surveyed.

4.2. Additional written responses from individual students

Additional written comments on the questionnaires, which were returned from the students, included:

- contact details useful
- percentage breakdown helpful
- makes the project easier to understand
- self assessment is very helpful – almost like a check list
- bold sections mean that you understand the important points and don't focus on the wrong things
- gives a good overview
- good to have itemised weighting

5. Conclusion

An essential part of the assessment process is ensuring that the student understands what is required of them. The requirements are most usually conveyed to the student through lectures (which requires the student to take explicit and detailed notes) and the assignment brief. In this study students were asked to evaluate a standard brief and compare it with a revised, restructured brief. Overall the students that completed the questionnaires felt that the revised assignment brief document had aided their understanding of what was required and would better enable them to complete the tasks required for the assignment. Therefore the revised version, using basic Information Architecture principles, in this study, was shown to be the superior document.

6. Further Work

This paper reports on a pilot study, which had a small number of questionnaire returns. The author felt that the nature and potential responses had to be tailored to the environment in which the survey would be carried out. A number of the questions were therefore rather vague, 'how understandable …' for example. There could be discussions regarding the phrasing of these questions and further work would seek to quantify the questions in order to get more explicit data responses. Another issue is that the PB1 contents had already been designed by the author and had used basic principles of Information Design (not Information Architecture) and therefore was not a good example of the standard of assessment brief which is more often given to students. Further work would look at a selection of assessment briefs, which had not been composed by the author and use those to determine a base level of response from students.

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