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Transformative assessment cultures in higher education: lessons from Denmark (0201)

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The background

Assessment is the embodiment of power in educational systems and this is played out in national systems, individual institutions, and disciplinary cultures and in the role of the teacher, particularly in their role as ‘assessor’. Assessment systems exert a powerful force on how learning is constructed and the ways in which ‘capability’ has to be illustrated (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013) and high stakes summative assessment acts as a tool for educational reform in many industrialised nations (Au, 2008). There is extensive research in education aiming to investigate redress in the balance of power in learning environments and this has often centred upon reducing the impact of summative assessment (Entwistle, Tait and McCune, 2000), devolving authority away from the teacher and involving students in the co-construction of knowledge (Zhao and Kuh, 2004). Educational approaches such as enquiry-based learning (Kahn and O’Rourke, 2005), use of peer communities (Black and McCormick, 2010) and the development of autonomous learners (Boud and Falchikov, 2006) are only a few examples of such initiatives. Many of these approaches to education are predicated on the fact that contemporary society needs more than passive graduates who are victims of an inflexible assessment regime (Boud, 2006; Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013). Independent and autonomous learning at university is thus a *‘key foundation to a career as a lifelong learner who can continue their education after formal education has ended’* (Boud, 1995, p.14).

Research regarding transformative learning is a significant piece of the jigsaw that enables us to picture how we can educate independent graduates in higher education. Mezirow (1991) highlights the importance of educating the autonomous thinker. Other theorists in the field focus on the social experience and the dialogue that is generated through critical thinking (Brookfield, 2005) as being integral to empowering students to become agents of change both in their own lives and in the transformation of society (Freire, 1993; Clifford and Montgomery, forthcoming). Shifts in relationships between students and teachers are a key element in transformative learning with an emphasis on the building of learning cultures and communities where risk and failure are safe and possible. In these cultures, dialogue and exploration of self and others are privileged with dissonance being perceived as a learning opportunity (Saavedra, 1996). The emphasis in these contexts is on perspective transformation as opposed to teaching students how to perform a task, for example for the purposes of summative assessment. Ultimately, this brings us to question the whole purpose of education, viewing it as a force for personal and societal change (Giroux, 1992; Freire, 1993) rather than as a performative tool operating solely to serve the employment market.

The research

Thus it is apparent that there is a tension in education between fixed assessment systems and the provision of transformative learning experiences for students. This research aims to provide illustrations of alternative approaches that enable a robust summative assessment system to exist alongside a university system that privileges cultures of dialogue and exploration. Adaptations to assessment systems remaining within the status quo of institutional cultures have had demonstrable impacts on learning but the purpose of this research is to analyse an entire university system that is

constructed differently in order that lessons can be drawn for the UK context. The research centres on a case study of a Danish university whose learning and assessment systems differ considerably from those in the UK. The university in question was established in the early 1970s with no content-based courses, modules or programmes but was designed to run entirely on the basis of problem-led learning. From the beginning of their undergraduate experience at this university students are the initiators and owners of their own learning. They work in self-selected groups on projects of their own choosing, with teachers in the role of supervisors much like a doctoral process operating at undergraduate level. The enquiry-based project work operates across disciplines although is located in a small number of broad disciplinary streams and specialism is developed as students move through their years at the university. As a result of this different system of learning the university is organised differently and this applies to elements as diverse as the construction e-learning platforms (where student construct their own groups online) to the assessment systems. Summative assessment in the Danish university is constructively aligned with the approach to learning and consists of group discussions carried out with a teacher-assessor, in a similar way to the doctoral viva in the UK.

The research presented for this paper is based on data collected at the Danish university for a pilot study in 2012 and this will be further developed with the data for the main part of the study which will be collected as part of an Erasmus funded teaching mobility initiative where the researcher will teach at the Danish university for a two-week period in October 2013. The main data phase of this study will consist of a case study approach including qualitative data collected from recordings of the summative assessments at the Danish university, embedded in a contextualised documentary analysis of the university processes and systems surrounding assessment. The 2012 pilot study focused, amongst other things, on exploring the learning spaces inhabited by the students and considered the role of elements such as the 'House' system which provides a pastoral and academic 'home' for students within the university. The pilot considered students' conversations in the university's common rooms which were social spaces where students carried out their collaborative group work. Initial findings suggest that the alternative assessment systems in the Danish university have implications for the approaches to learning adopted by the students. These approaches were social in nature and involved collaboration which tended to generate transformative learning experiences through the troublesome spaces engendered by interaction in a diverse social, cultural and disciplinary context (Montgomery, 2011). It is intended that the analysis of the alternative assessment system embedded in the Danish university will provide opportunities for rethinking cultures of assessment in the UK university system.

(997 words excluding references and title)

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