

Assessment literacy and subject commitment: a critical discourse analysis (0234)

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Abstract

The concept of assessment literacy was developed to reclaim assessment as central to learning and in recognition of the challenging circumstances of assessment practice in higher education today. However, further understanding is required of the relationship between learning and learner identities as social constructs and the meaning-making processes employed by learners in the negotiation of assessment. We performed a critical discourse analysis on audio diary data, collected from 18 students over a period of one semester. Our analysis conveys a rather limited and instrumental employment of assessment literacy where what seems lost is a commitment to the subject. We argue that only such a commitment can steer learners towards assessment as driver of learning, rather than towards agendas of employability, evaluation of teaching, and performance of institutions that have come to dominate higher education. We discuss what implications such a perspective might have for assessment cultures and assessment design.

Outline

With the various managerial demands that are placed on assessment, a core purpose risks falling by the wayside: learning. This risk is well documented in the literature, for instance in the assessment *for* learning versus the assessment of learning debates (e.g. the Assessment Reform Group 1999; Gardner 2012; Torrance 2012); in alternative perspectives such as sustainable assessment (e.g. Boud 2000), authentic assessment, building on Brown et al. (1989), formative assessment; and the redefining of the purpose of assessment (e.g. Havnes and Macdowell 2008; Stobart 2008, Broadfoot and Black 2004). However, it is argued (York 2003) that there is a notable disconnect between current theoretical thinking and what is happening in practice. Whereas approaches to learning and research now overridingly draw on social-constructivist theories, assessment in practice remains “inappropriately focused on testing” (p. 483) with a strong belief in the relationship between numbers, targets and league tables on the one hand, and the delivery of quality and accountability on the other (Crossouard 2010).

To reclaim assessment as central to learning and at the same time, in recognition of the challenging circumstances of assessment practice in today’s higher education institutions, Price, O’Donovan, Handley and Rust (2012) developed the notion of *assessment literacy*. Drawing on situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1992) and the academic literacies model (Lea and Street 1996), the emphasis in assessment literacy lies on the importance of strong academic communities that can facilitate development of the learner with learning taking centre stage. The organising principle of the need for the development of assessment literacy therefore is the belief that “[g]reater understanding of assessment processes and standards should lead to better designed assessment and a focus on learning rather than assessment

techniques” (Price et al. 2012, p. 4). However, where assessment literacy is less well developed is in its understanding of the meaning-making processes employed by students and the relationship between learning and learner identities as social constructs in specific assessment regimes. In addition, assessment literacy as theory is somewhat removed from assessment literacy in practice

In this paper, we perform a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) on diary data to further develop the concept of assessment literacy. The data was collected via audio diaries over one semester, total number of participants was 18: eight undergraduate and ten postgraduate students across 13 different disciplines. By focussing on language in particular, we follow up on Tusting’s suggestion (2005) that such a focus could generate a better understanding of negotiation and meaning-making processes as both sustaining communities but also acting as the ‘nursery for change’ (p. 53). In addition, to further develop the notion of assessment literacy, an attention to language as a critical qualitative inquiry allows insights into the discourses students draw on to support their learner identities. We contrast texts produced by students perceived as representing the mainstream - British, white, young - with those perceived to be outside of it. We problematise what we highlight by adopting a stance, like an anthropologist would, of an a priori ‘othering’ of our research participants: what shows up to us as situated interpreters of text is what is unusual or strange.

Being successful at doing assessments seems an exacting skill. The language employed in assessment negotiation processes as reported on in the majority of diary entries risks sustaining a rather instrumental interpretation of what it means to be doing well in the assessment task. Skilful coping in the assessment culture of today’s higher education environment appears to mean achieving as a goal in itself, encouraged and endorsed by a number of stakeholders and systems. We conclude that the concept of assessment literacy needs to be expanded with the notion of learner identity, that includes the wider social and cultural spheres, and commitment to the subject that links these spheres. Only such a commitment can steer learners towards assessment as driver of learning and love of the subject, rather than towards agendas of employability, evaluation of teaching, and performance of institutions. We discuss what implications such a perspective might have for assessment cultures and assessment design.

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