

The language of assessment: exploring best practice on Access modules to prepare tentative learners to succeed (0377)

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This paper aims to identify principles of best inclusive practice in assessment design, with a particular focus on the language of assessment, to prepare tentative learners to succeed. It draws on Hockings' (2010, p.2) understanding of the notion of 'inclusive assessment' as 'the design and use of fair and effective assessment methods and practices that enable all students to demonstrate to their full potential what they know, understand and can do'. Inspired by Butcher *et al.*'s (2010, p. 37) recommendation that advice about 'inclusive' wording of assessment tasks should become part of university policy, it aims gain a deeper understanding of the main features of 'inclusive' wordings of assessment tasks. Williams (2008) refers to a 'discourse community', in which words used in everyday life take on a particular meaning. Other researchers refer to 'academic literacy' and the notion that each discipline "constructs and interacts with knowledge differently" (Vardi, 2013, p. 601). There is a vast array of research on academic literacy, which focusses on students' acquisition of disciplinary specific modes of communication. Vardi (2013) advocates that assessment tasks should be interrelated so that feedback from one assignment directly informs how students understand the disciplinary language required of the task and are therefore better able complete the next assignment. Smith et al (2013) identify the notion of 'assessment literacy' , by which students develop an understanding of the "purposes of assessment and the processes surrounding assessment" and suggest that this process needs to be explicitly supported (Smith et al, 2013, p. 44).

The project was contextualised by key literature and policy around HE retention and student progression/success, especially as relevant to the challenges faced by part-time learners, adult learners and distance learners. Lizzio and Wilson (2013) draws links between assessment and Widening Participation students, and Donahue and Coffin (2014) raise the issue of the 'uncommonsense knowledge' of assessment language for students new to HE. The students taking Access modules at the Open University (over 4000 per year) are amongst the most disadvantaged learners in UK HE (70% qualify for a full fee waiver), and we were keen to improve the inclusivity of the language we use in assessment tasks and assessment feedback to increase retention and enhance student success. Rigour, probity and fairness means that assessment should ensure that "all students are treated equitably, and that they are all given equivalent opportunities to demonstrate their achievement of the required standards" (QAA, 2012, p. 6).

Based on surveys sent to 750 students (response rate 23%), interviews with nine tutors and close textual analyses of assignment questions and related written guidance, this paper considers student and tutor perceptions of the language used to set out assessment tasks that form part of the Open University's Access programme. This programme, which is dedicated to support learners new to Higher Education, includes three 30 credit Level 0 interdisciplinary modules delivered through distance learning: Science, technology and maths (Y033), People, work and society (Y032) and Arts and Languages (Y031). The framework of the multi-disciplinary Access Presentation team, with three modules following a very similar set-up, but covering very different subject areas, has allowed this

project to explore and compare the impact of the language of assessment on students' developing assessment literacy and retention across a wide range of different subject disciplines.

We conclude that inclusive practice in assessment design does not just concern the clarity and inclusiveness of the *vocabulary* used to communicate written assignment tasks and related guidance, particularly within distance learning settings. The research findings highlight the importance of the visual layout and brevity of the written assessment guidance. It calls attention to the difficulty of balancing the need to avoid technical shorthand to gradually introduce students to academic discourses and the danger of overwhelming students with lengthy guidance, particularly in more discursive subject areas, such as social sciences and arts and humanities. Most importantly, it emphasises the crucial significance of individual contact and personalised engagement with a tutor in the interpretation of written assignment tasks to reassure tentative learners and build their confidence.

## References

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