

Document-speak: what module guides, grids and marking criteria have to say about assessment practices (0129)

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Abstract

This paper outlines habits, conventions and standards that are done through programme documents related to the processes and practices that make up assessment. It is an invitation to 'listen' to what our own documents have to say about our assessment practices. Bearing witness to past and persistent practices, module guides, grids and marking criteria documents are analysed to provide background information about assessment practices and to understand the historical roots of specific concerns and governing conditions that potentially constraint innovative and alternative assessment practices.

It aims to examine current assessment practices in this case through document analysis. Document analysis can be a useful approach for both research and curriculum evaluation. It is important to consider to what extent our own documents and documentation have restricted the development of our programmes and the enhancement of student experience, particularly in developing assessment skills.

Outline

Assessment in higher education (HE) fulfils functions of certification, on the one hand, and accountability for raising standards, on the other. Unfortunately, these have limited the goal of assessment to monitoring measurable outcomes. Assessment as a mechanism of transparency for external quality assurance has been a dominant approach (Filer, 2000; Orr, 2005). Assessment practices in HE are based on techno-rationalist perspective and a positivist model of academic standards (Bloxham, 2012; Bloxham & Boyd, 2012; Bloxham, Boyd & Orr, 2011). Contrary to the daily realities of teaching and learning, assessment has become socially decontextualized practice (Bloxham, 2009; Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Orr, 2005). It focuses on the technical means to reach the required measurable ends of academic quality and certification. In fact, assessment as a social practice, as Filer (2000) points out, is under-examined in assessment-related research. In this paper, this framing will be investigated using assessment-related documents. First it will describe the documents of assessment that were read and analysed and the selective framing they subject academic staff and students. It will emphasise the 'doings' of documents that are hardly spoken about.

The translation of subjective judgements and implicit standards to objective outcomes and standards is manoeuvred, coordinated and maintained to a large extent in and by documents. Documents are the medium and mechanism that ensures and enforces transparency. Transparency is available and enforced in programme handbooks, module guides, marking criteria, feedback to students, moderation reports and more importantly, by clearly articulated learning outcomes. A well-documented programme becomes 'a "thing" capable of being bought and delivered in module-sized chunks, with learning outcomes being the unit of currency' (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 10 cited in Orr, 2005, p. 176).

Documents make the curriculum less hidden and definitely more 'visible' and portable, as a product perhaps, but not as a process.

Assessment as a product of measurement and transparency undermines its everyday practice and silences the power relations inherent to its doings. Limited research has explored and focused on how the judgements made in relation to marking, moderating and external examining are affected by tacit elements, such as, the social context, values, experiences, subject knowledges and the implicit standards of academic staff (Bloxham, 2012). In short, assessment is highly contextualised and subjective (Bloxham, 2009). The highly varied and fluid realities of assessment in terms of the technical means it promotes and the requirements to meet its quality ends are made durable, fixed and circulated under a transparency agenda through very subjective means, which are levelled and de-politicised in documents and through documentation. Therefore, it is a rather pressing matter that we attend to the documents of assessment. Documents are circulated as carriers of transparent information and promoted as evidence of accountability. In fact, they embody the most desired value of transparency, wherein the culture of audit and compliance is fully served and delivered in written and textual form.

Assessment-related documents in two programmes of study in Education and Early Childhood Studies at a post-92 university were selected. These included a total of 53 module guides, including related programme handbooks, grade descriptors and assessment grids. Documents, this paper argues, organise assessment and restricts the development of programmes and the enhancement of student experience, particularly in developing assessment skills. They were not analysed in themselves, but always in relation to other documents and practices. Norms, conventions and habits within a practice-oriented approach are useful frames of analysis. First, universities are rife with normative expectations for how assessment should be conducted. Norms or standards serve as carriers of institutional priorities and expectations. Conventions, in the sense used here, are stable and shared patterns of behaviour that structure, legitimise or delegitimise particular actions, relationships and understandings or views within particular situations. They could easily be ends in themselves. Lastly, repetitive practices that form institutional habits, which are formed and informed by norms and conventions, have to be examined. Habits are not necessarily documented but are usually done with and for documents. In marking, expert markers use implicit standards and are more likely to ignore marking criteria (Bloxham, 2009), where the differences in the 'habits of the mind' are normalised.

One of the institutional norms that is explored in the paper is the use of Bloom's taxonomy across modules which has worldwide influence and adaptation in educational systems and standard. Hager (2004) argues that it has maintained a learning-as-product view and yet it remains to be regarded as the gold standard. In terms of well-established conventions, setting learning outcomes is now the prevailing approach to assessment in HE, replacing the identification and development of content (Orr, 2005). Programme developers and leaders wrestle with documents after documents with demonstrable and behaviourist verbs, such as, 'compare', 'describe' and 'identify'. Verbs are treated as if they could stand on their own when written down and assigned to an educational taxonomy. Students are expected to know what they mean and meet documented learning outcomes.

Documents and documentary realities are usually omitted in organisational inquiry or educational practice (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011). This paper creates an occasion to bring documents into the fold of assessment and give them a space to 'speak'. So what do we learn if we attend to documents? What happens if we see them and the work they are doing, and manage to treat them as part of – and an expression of – practice, rather than as more or less transparent representation of a pre-given reality?

Some key points for discussion include:

- 1) Common or shared understanding must not be assumed just because it is written down. Our shared understanding and practice must not only be evidenced in documents.
- 2) Assessment criteria, grade descriptors and marking grids are not explicitly communicated and clearly understood.
- 3) We talk about number of assessments, types of assessments and 'bunching' of assessments, but we leave the standards of assessment to grade descriptors, assessment criteria and moderation reports.
- 4) Standards (quality assurance) may restrict innovative assessment practices. Effective assessment practices must be contextualised and yet standards are de-contextualised.

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