

Variation in academics' conceptions of e-assessment (0328)

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Abstract

The paper reports the results of a phenomenographic study on academics' conceptions of e-assessment. The ubiquitous technologies supporting assessment have presented new challenges in higher education regarding feedback, authenticity of student work and plagiarism. Transparency of criteria, reliability, construct validity and manageability of assessment processes have also been revisited within online assessment educational milieus. The study approached these issues from an academic development angle, i.e. how can teachers improve their conceptions of e-assessments and enhance their practice. Adopting a phenomenographic approach, the session reports on qualitatively different categories of description of conceptions of e-assessment and explores the relationships between such categories. Dimensions of variation and Implications for academic development are consequently discussed.

Extended summary

Earlier research in academic development proposed that enhancing teaching often derives from changes in how teachers think about their own teaching (Dall'Alba, 1991). Accordingly, the current study postulates that academic teachers conceptualise e-assessments in a number of qualitatively different ways; some of them may replicate traditional pedagogical approaches and merely transfer them to blended or online assessment settings while others may endorse transformational notions of assessment, underpinning knowledge construction and student agency. The study aims to synthesize and extend the findings from two existing clusters of studies. The first cluster derives from qualitative, non-phenomenographic research exploring conceptions held by academics about assessment without taking into account the layer of complexity brought about by technological tools. Influential studies in teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning identified a continuum of conceptions ranging from teacher-focused and content-oriented conceptions on the one end to student-focused and learning-oriented on the other end (for a review see Kember, 1997). Entwistle (2000) noted that *limited* evidence suggested that contrasting conceptions of teaching tend to hold corresponding views on assessment. Several studies also contended that teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching affect their approaches to teaching (e.g. Kember & Kwan, 2000). However, there have been no extensive, follow-up studies aimed at ascertaining whether contrasting conceptions of teaching are aligned to corresponding views on assessment or what the exact nature of such an alignment may be. Samuelowicz and Bain (2002) identified a continuum ranging from an emphasis on knowledge reproduction to an emphasis on knowledge construction and transformation and Postareff et al.

(2012) described categories of conceptions, from reproductive conceptions to more transformational conceptions of assessment. The second cluster consists of phenomenographic studies in the area of conceptions of teaching and learning through technologies. These studies investigated university teachers' conceptions of, and approaches to e-learning (e.g. Ellis et al., 2009; González, 2010) and blended learning (Ellis et al., 2006). They did not, however, take into account assessment as a distinct element of the process of university teaching.

The question this research addressed was: What are the different ways academics in higher education conceive the notion of e-assessment and the practices associated with it? Secondary questions have been utilised with the aim of 'extracting' themes in the variation of the experiences of the research participants:

- What do university teachers think about e-assessment?
- What is the purpose of e-assessment?
- What is important in e-assessing student learning?

The adopted phenomenographic approach aimed to describe the phenomenon from the perspective of people involved with the phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997) i.e. teachers e-assessing within blended and online environments. Twenty-one academics attended semi-structured interviews. The sample was drawn from teachers of a teaching-focussed British university. A wide number of disciplinary backgrounds and academics with differing levels of teaching experience as well as experience of e-assessment was sought. The interviewer prompted academics to describe *actual* and *possible* ways of utilising e-assessment tools, their experiences of practicing e-assessments in general and details of a particular e-assessment task they were engaged in. Participants were invited to explain what the purpose of the e-assessment was, how they understood their role in e-assessment and what they believed the role of the student was. Preliminary findings report on the formation of categories of description and provide an insight into the relationship between different ways of experiencing e-assessment. The outcome space summarises the hierarchical structure of the emerging conceptions of e-assessment. Implications for academic development and design of assessment are discussed.

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