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Meaningful Assessment Practices in Higher Education (0614)

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Abstract

Feedback can be very powerful in impacting positive change in learner behaviour, and there has been considerable growth in the amount of research on how learners make sense of and use feedback within higher education in the last five years. Work on supporting students to enhance their understanding of feedback is valuable, however, claims of paradigm shift are frequently overstated especially where the main emphasis is on what students can do with feedback rehearsing yet again a transactional model of instruction rather than a transformational one. We argue that greater emphasis should be placed on assessment designs that promote student engagement with all dimensions of the assessment process as part of 'knowing assessment'. In this paper notions of meaningful assessment to support lecturer and student self-actualisation in assessment are discussed with the emphasis on promoting student ownership of assessment.

Meaningful assessment, transformational; higher education; Personal Learning Pedagogy

Rationale

The focus needs to shift away from the narrow issue of how feedback can be improved and communicated, and towards the wider issue of how *assessment* (rather than feedback) can enhance student learningany assumption that feedback must remain the primary assessment related tool inhibits opening up the agenda. (Sadler, 2013, p. 56)

A key consideration in designing assessment within HE is how we want students and lecturers to best use their time.

What types of feedback process should we be investing in, and what is wasteful (Sadler, 2013). Lecturer orientated feedback models are limited in their capacity to support student self-regulation (Brown et al., 2016; Orsmond & Merry, 2013). For feedback to have an impact the learner needs to have sufficient knowledge to be able to know both whether, and how to use it.

Our aim should be to support students in developing their own internal feedback capacity; this requires full integration with the learning environment, with the student driving their own learning and not being overly dependent on lecturer cues.

The 'best use of time' agenda leads to a series of questions and discussions around what meaningful assessment is, and is not, and how it is operationalised. So what are those dispositions students require to meet their individual needs and those of the fourth industrial revolution? (Edge Foundation, 2016). Building on the work of Sadler (1989; 2013), Barnett (2011), McCune and Entwistle (2011), and drawing on Evans' (2014) "savvy feedback

seekers” those necessary higher level dispositions within assessment practices include students’ abilities to: (i) understand for themselves; (ii) engage with and own assessment requirements; (iii) seek feedback efficaciously; (iv) use feedback effectively; (v) contribute to the assessment process; (vi) accurately self-monitor and self-judge.

Assessment practices need to be designed to support students in realising these dispositions and much work exists within this area to include work on students as change partners (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014); sustainability (Boud, 2000, Carless et al., 2011; Hounsell, 2007); learning oriented assessment (Carless, 2007; 2017) student and lecturer self-regulation (Evans 2013, 2016; Nicol et al., 2014).

What are the characteristics of meaningful assessment practices?

The dispositions noted above acknowledge the importance of students’ abilities to be able to use, apply, adapt and create new knowledge. As noted by Sadler (2013), they need to be proficient in three areas and have to be able to: have a good understanding of quality and identify it when they see it; judge the quality of their own work, their strengths and weaknesses; know what strategies to use to improve the quality of their work (Sadler, 1989). There is growing consensus that students cannot acquire the necessary skills through receiving and working on feedback given to them (Orsmond & Merry, 2013; Sadler, 2013); the curriculum needs to offer opportunities for students to generate their own feedback. For example, Evans’ (2016, p.2) research-informed pragmatic self-regulatory assessment framework (EAT) is predicated on students co-owning their programmes with lecturers and realigning expectations of the assessment role so that students see themselves as active contributors to the assessment feedback process rather than seeing assessment as something that is done to them. In the EAT Framework, feedback from others is seen as a ‘precious and limited resource’ with the expectation that through an inclusive curriculum design and authentic assessments, students will increasingly make the most of curriculum affordances and internalise assessment processes.

Meaningful learning is much more than students being better users of lecturer feedback. It requires a holistic, co-ordinated and integrated approach that frames genuine paradigmatical shift. It is about students noticing and valuing the range of opportunities available both internal and external to themselves; generating feedback for themselves; understanding the role of inner feedback processes as part of monitoring and evaluation components of self-regulation (Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014; Sadler 2013); constructing meaning for themselves (which should reduce the need for external feedback); co-construction of knowledge involving genuine dialogue and not a one-way conversation. It is, therefore, also about power and the conflicting roles of lecturers as facilitators and assessors. Sustainability, in emphasising the role of the student in the assessment process and the changing role for the lecturer in facilitating student agency in managing their own feedback is important. Ensuring best use of resource, and questioning what the learner and lecturer should be attending to most are also critical as part of an integrated approach.

Key features of meaningful assessment, emphasize students’ constructing meanings for themselves (see Evans, 2018); vehicles for this include students:

- personalising and creating their own criteria for each piece of work (Taras, 2015)
- being trained in using, triangulating and making sense of feedback to include the emotional dimension of feedback (Evans, 2013; Forsythe & Johnson, 2017).

- reviewing work of varying quality to support student understanding of quality, and seeing quality can be achieved in different ways (Sadler, 2010, 2013).
- acting as reviewers of others (Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014).
- self-assessing and feeding back to others as part of summative assessment and evaluative processes (Boud, 2000; Boud et al. 2013; Carless, 2012; Deeley, 2014).
- working with assessment to do the noticing, the thinking about repair and modification, and the generation of ways to improve' as defined by Sadler (2013, p. 57) as 'knowing to'.
- co-constructing habitus in working with lectures as part of signature pedagogies in generating dispositions to act and perceive in the discipline (Gray, 2013; Yu & Hu, 2017).
- genuine collaborative partnership and discussion between student and lecturer and emphasis on students leading discussions (Feedback Landscape, Evans, 2013; Dialogic – Carless et al., 2011).
- working as co-producers with the wider community in boundary-crossing, integrative, and socially networked experiences, as part of the pedagogy of the real (Garcia, 2014) that bridge HE experiences with life outside of it (Bass, 2012; Evans, 2013).
- designing assessment with lecturers (Riley, 2017; Riley, McCabe, & Pirie, 2017)
- Teaching and researching with peers and lecturers (Scott, Moxham, & Rutherford, 2013; Evans et. al., 2017)

Realisation of meaningful assessment approaches in practice

At present much assessment aimed at being transformational falls short because of entrenched personal and collective beliefs which encourage adherence to an existing organisational paradigm (Harrison et al., 2017; Taras, 2015) despite any claims of paradigm shift. If we want to transform assessment by promoting student ownership of it, we need to start by addressing student beliefs and values which impact lecturer, student, and institutional behaviours.

To facilitate effective learning communities, organizational and individual beliefs need to be aligned. Beliefs and conceptions about the nature of knowledge frame how learning experiences are designed and how they are interpreted leading to entrenchment on both sides. To support sustainable assessment practices, that build students' self-regulatory capacity and particularly their self-evaluative judgement, much more attention needs to be focused on the development of shared principles underpinning assessment design (Evans, EAT, 2016). Seeking congruence in student and teacher beliefs and values has to be a priority if students and lecturers are to work in partnership in developing valuable and manageable assessment opportunities. (Evans, 2016; 2018).

In investing in change we have to be able to do more than hope that colleagues and students will be receptive; the rationale underpinning the assessment design needs to be transparent to all, and alternative approaches and ways of being modelled and supported. In engaging students actively in assessment, we need to be very careful that we do not fall into the trap of engaging them in waste of time activities. We all need a clear understanding of what facilitates students' and lecturers 'knowing to' and what is a distraction from this core purpose.

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