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Making the Language of Assessment Inclusive: Assessing students' familiarity and confidence with assessment terminology.

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: This paper reports on work-in-progress in developing a framework of high frequency terms in assessment and feedback to identify the troublesome phrases in terms of an erroneous assumption of a shared understanding of their meaning and use. This understanding gap contributes to a power balance dynamic in the staff-student relationship in the assessment space creating barriers to attempts for partnership in co-creating and evaluating learning. This paper is one aspect of a QAA funded collaborative enhancement project and focusses on a survey completed with staff and students to identify key troublesome terms both in terms of understanding and associated confidence in interacting with them in the assessment space. The findings will be used to inform the development of a 'mysterious quotient' table of terms that often lack shared understanding and a toolkit to support staff-student dialogue aimed to support student partnership approaches in assessment.

Paper: Background and Context

This paper presents the initial findings of the student facing data collection aspect of the QAA funded collaborative enhancement project that is the focus of this symposium. The critical enquiry approach adopted in this project aimed to expose mis-understanding in common terminology used in assessment to identify effective approaches to bridge the gaps thereby promoting effective dialogue and trust as essential components of students as partners in assessment.

There has been an increasing emphasis on students as partners and, whilst the term is often contested, the commonality is a desire to work effectively with students to shape, evaluate and evidence learning through 'a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis' (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felton 2014). Partnering in assessment is a strand within this focussing on approaches that support staff and students to co-create assessment and feedback practices.

The collaborative project was identified through a student partnership project in the lead institution in the area of assessment and feedback. The participants shared an intention to develop more effective approaches to personalisation in learning by identifying barriers and enablers to developing partnership approaches in assessment and feedback. The value of conversation and dialogue in the

assessment journey emerged as a key enabler. A shared understanding of the language of assessment emerged as a key stumbling block.

The staff-student relationship is an important aspect of students as partners and in the assessment space dynamics of power balance and identity create a complexity in striving towards partnership (Matthews et al. 2019). Open dialogue is a fundamental component to disrupting power dynamics thereby enabling equality through the creation and maintenance of cultures of shared responsibility in assessment and feedback (Winstone et al 2017). Having a shared understanding of the language in that dialogue is a foundational starting point which this project aims to address.

Methodology

The survey stage of the QAA enhancement project was preceded by a document analysis and literature review. Through the analysis of key documents across the participating institutions, high frequency phases and terms commonly used in assessment tasks and marking criteria were identified. These were triangulated with findings from the literature review to identify 'troublesome language' that play a significant role in lack of clarity in assessment resulting in anxiety for staff and students and local variation in interpreting local standards.

The results were used to create surveys to be completed at each partner institution by students and staff with a range of experience, background and disciplines to gain an initial understanding of which terms and phrases are most commonly perceived to be "mysterious" (based on a Likert scale) and how confident they are interacting with the terms in assessment tasks and feedback. The results of the survey will be used to inform focus groups to explore emerging questions in greater depth.

The presenters will share insight during the session of the process of developing the survey for use across all the collaborating institutions with the associated challenges of designing a tool that has local relevance whilst maintaining cross institutional coherence. The initial results will provide an indication of commonality and difference between institutions and subjects relating to the mysterious and troublesome language that contributes to misunderstandings linked with their interpretation and use in assessment tasks and feedback.

Implications

The implicit assumption that students and staff share a common understanding of frequent phrases in assessment is contested. The misunderstandings that exist permeate through learning outcomes, to assessment tasks and into feedback creating disconnects that result in frustration on both sides, potentially contributing to awarding gap challenges in the sector. For practitioners advocating for a 're-conceptualisation of feedback and assessment as a relational practice and praxis unfolding between learners and teachers within a hierarchical educational system' (Matthews et al 2021), it is of paramount importance to address the misunderstandings in language that hinder dialogue and trust. By developing a mysterious quotient framework around the lexicon of assessment, the project aims to produce staff and student facing resources to improve dialogic and partnership practice in assessment and feedback to support trust in the staff-student relationship and create an environment for genuine partnership.

References:

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