

Do academics' folk pedagogies of assessment and feedback limit the impact of higher education research?

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the role of 'folk pedagogies' – the intuitive, often tacit beliefs about teaching and learning – in the well-documented gap between research and practice in the domain of assessment and feedback in higher education. Previous research has looked at the barriers to the impact of research created by our limited understanding of academics' decision-making processes. Drawing on Jerome Bruner's theory of folk pedagogy, this paper extends that discussion by arguing for greater attention to the intuitive theories of learning and teaching that academics' hold. Although folk pedagogy has been examined in school education, its relevance in higher education remains underexplored. The paper concludes by proposing methodological and practical implications for bridging the research-practice gap, ultimately aiming to improve assessment and feedback practices in UK higher education.

Full paper

Introduction

The study of assessment and feedback is often presented as a sub-field of higher education research with particularly limited practical impact (Boud 1995). One well-documented challenge is the limited understanding of how academic staff make decisions regarding assessment practices (Bearman et al 2017). It has been argued that this gap hinders assessment researchers' ability to connect their work with the practical realities faced by academic staff (Buckley 2024).

In this paper, I extend this debate by exploring the relevance of academics' 'folk pedagogies' to the persistent gap between research and practice in assessment and feedback in higher education.

Folk pedagogy and higher education

The concept of folk pedagogy was introduced by Jerome Bruner to describe the fundamental, intuitive ideas that we all hold about how learning happens, in contrast with the pedagogical theories derived educational research (Bruner 1996). Bruner conceptualises folk pedagogy as an application and extension of ‘folk psychology’ – the intuitive understanding people have about human behaviour (Stich 1983): for example, Paul’s arm extends because he wants the apple. Bruner’s insight was that just as folk psychological beliefs shape interpersonal interactions, folk pedagogical beliefs influence educational interactions between teachers and students.

Folk pedagogy has been explored in the school sector as a significant factor affecting the uptake of research-based ideas, with evidence suggesting that intuitive beliefs about learning can act as barriers to the adoption of contemporary, evidence-informed practices (Ilic & Bojovic 2016). However, there has been limited discussion of folk pedagogy in higher education, despite its potential to illuminate the research-practice divide. Notable exceptions include research on the role of active learning in the folk pedagogies of computing educators in higher education (Sanders et al 2017) and on how folk pedagogies shape university teachers’ decisions about learning technologies (Drumm 2019).

In this paper, I contribute to this under-explored area by examining the relevance of folk pedagogy to the impact of higher education research on practice, with a specific focus on assessment and feedback.

Folk pedagogy and assessment and feedback

Several strands of current research on assessment and feedback underscore the potential value of the idea of folk pedagogy. These include investigations into academics’ real-world decision-making processes (Dawson et al 2013) and studies of assessment literacy (Chan & Luk 2021) and feedback literacy (Zhan 2022).

However, while these areas of work align with the spirit of folk pedagogy, they differ in important ways. They do not explicitly seek to uncover the fundamental, intuitive and – crucially – *tacit* beliefs that staff and students hold about assessment and feedback. The idea of folk pedagogy allows us to distinguish between the intuitive ideas that people bring to higher education, and those they acquire through their higher education experiences.

Implications of folk pedagogy for research on assessment and feedback in higher education

A focus on folk pedagogies of assessment and feedback would require researchers to investigate the underlying intuitive beliefs that academic staff hold. This would build on existing work but would explicitly aim to surface tacit, intuitive assumptions about

fundamental questions of assessment, feedback and learning. This approach differs from research into deeply held but nevertheless espoused beliefs of staff, and would necessitate distinct methodological approaches (Argyris and Schon 1974).

The idea of folk pedagogy also has implications for the design and implementation of enhancement activities that draw on research. There may be a need to more actively encourage academic staff to articulate and critically examine their intuitive beliefs about assessment and feedback. Additionally greater attention may need to be paid to how enhancement activities align with – or challenge – those intuitive ideas.

Conclusion

Limited engagement with academics' decision-making processes is a recognised contributor to the gap between research and practice in assessment and feedback in higher education. In this conceptual paper, I extend this discussion by examining the relevance of 'folk pedagogies' to this domain. I outline implications for both research and enhancement efforts, arguing that greater attention to the tacit, intuitive beliefs held by educators and students can deepen our understanding of assessment and feedback – and ultimately improve practice.