

Student understanding of Formative Assessment in Higher Education: how diverse communities of practice operate in one university.(0114)

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Outline

This paper builds on previous collaborative research, which was undertaken to identify academics' perceptions of formative assessment in practice (Asghar *et al*, 2008, Cooper *et al*, 2008, Nolan *et al*, 2008 and Laight *et al*, 2010). Driven by the poor results of national student surveys, academics were invited to discuss their own practices of formative assessment, and to present their perceptions and opinions as to how their engagement with it can enable students to improve their current and future work. However, poor results continue to persist, showing student dissatisfaction in the area of Assessment and Feedback.

The findings published in the University's Students' Union Annual Student Survey report (Watson, 2010) show a poor level of student satisfaction across the whole university, indicating also that five out of the six faculties scored poorly in Academic Support. In spite of academics striving to enhance student learning through a variety of assessment strategies, such as providing feedback on assignments within three weeks of them being handed in, students are still not satisfied. It is therefore important, in an effort to discover the reasons for this dissatisfaction, to consult the students directly. The Student Voice needs to be listened to and heard to provide information for academics so that informed communication may take place.

Formative assessment has come under scrutiny in recent years, particularly from the point of view of the academic or teacher. Black and Wiliam (1998) describe it as Assessment for Learning (AfL), which is meant to enable learners to improve their work and performance, ready for the evaluative summative assessment, or Assessment of Learning (AoL). Their early research was conducted in schools, where children were being 'processed' to enable resultant outcomes to fulfil government-initiated criteria. However, their work has the potential to benefit all learners. The intention of AfL is to allow learners to take an active role in their learning, which will motivate them to progress in a positive way and foster a deeper understanding and commitment to their subject of study. In this way, students can engage with their learning, forming a bond with their tutors and peers, so that teaching allows learning to take place and feedback from tutors and peers can enhance the learning experience.

Although formative assessment as a tool to enhance student learning, and allowing ownership of learning by taking an active role, is a positive step, anecdotal evidence shows that many students are not taking advantage of the opportunities. Many students do not understand the terminology used in formative assessment, nor do they recognise it when it occurs during teaching sessions. Many confuse summative assessment and formative assessment, concentrating primarily on the marks they receive at the end of an assignment. Is this because the students are confused by the term 'assessment', perceiving assessment as something formal, written down and unable to be changed? Is it because they have become strategic learners, having been 'trained' to perform to pass government-initiated tests, seeing the value of only the summative result, but missing the point of the enabling that formative assessment could bring? According to Sadler (2010), students need to be adequately equipped to be able to take charge of their own learning. They need to be more aware of how to recognise and monitor the quality of their work to become more independent learners. This means that tutors should be more in tune with the needs of the students, scaffolding their learning and understanding of formative assessment. Tutors already feel they spend a great deal of time engaging with formative assessment, providing detailed feedback for students on their assignments, both verbal and written, which is largely ignored. However, if students perceive the term 'assessment' to suggest formalisation, then does the word 'feedback' suggest a less pressured approach to their studies, providing a better climate for learning? Would the term 'feed-forward' release students from the tyranny of marks by enabling them to carry the formative feedback along to subsequent assignments?

The university provides literature, which is available to all students and tutors on the subject of assessment. Tutors are given guidance to enable them to reduce their workload (FLAP, 2009a) and students are given advice about the types of assessment they might meet during their first year at university (FLAP, 2009b). Examples of best practice in assessment, including the best times to give feedback, assessment tactics, and other ways to support student learning, may be found in such publications (Gibbs, 2010). Oral assessment has also become a focus for discussion amongst tutors as an efficient method of assessment (Joughlin, 2010), and there is plenty of advice on the university website with which students and tutors can engage.

According to Yorke (2010), university regulations do not make sense to students as they are meant for staff. It would appear that this university is endeavouring

to acknowledge this requirement. Yorke also states that feedback needs to be prompt and useful to feed forward to improve the next assessment. Student Academic Representatives (STARs) were asked to fill in a questionnaire using Survey Monkey to record their views and opinions on formative assessment, feedback and feed-forward. They were also asked to discuss the views and opinions of their peers who they represent on their courses. The questionnaire was sent out to 50 STARs across all six faculties. Analysing the responses to these questionnaires, the emerging themes show that students perceive formative assessment as 'written feedback after handing in a piece of coursework'. Typically, students understand that formative assessment is intended to enable them to improve their work, as is their understanding of feedback. However, there are some misconceptions regarding the term feed-forward, typically suggesting it is used 'when a student advises or gives feedback to the tutors on their teaching methods'. Many of the peers on the courses 'just look at the mark then read the feedback'. It seems that both tutors and students have made assumptions which need to be addressed to enable formative assessment to perform the function for which it was intended.