

Research Domain:

Learning, teaching and assessment

Title:

**Change through courses: can courses on assessment transform staff understandings of assessment and their assessment practice? (0201)**

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Extended abstract:

There is conflicting evidence and on-going debate about the impact of formal courses on learning, teaching and assessment practice in higher education (HE). It has been argued that HE teachers mainly learn and develop through non-formal workplace learning (Knight et al., 2006) and this has been confirmed by research on courses for new lecturers, e.g. Knight (2006) and Warnes (2008) who identify 'doing the job' and informal discussion with colleagues as the main methods of learning about teaching. Much of the research examining the impact of courses for HE teachers is based on the notion of conceptions of teaching and focuses on conceptual change. Various studies have demonstrated a link between the conceptions of teaching HE teachers hold and their reported approaches to teaching. This body of research has been very influential, not only by stimulating the direction of research on HE teachers' learning, but also by providing an evidence-based focus for practical academic development activities.

Courses have been shown to have some effect on staff conceptions of teaching, reported teaching practice as well as other benefits. Both Knight (2006) and Hanbury et al. (2008) found evidence of greater student-centredness; Hanbury et al. (2008) also reported increased confidence and opportunities for interaction with other course participants, while Knight (2006) indicated that the impact of a course may become more pronounced later-on, in particular once participants have more responsibilities in relation to learning and teaching. In a similar vein Postareff et al.'s (2007) research suggested that it is longer courses that are effective at changing approaches to teaching and self-efficacy beliefs in a positive way, while shorter courses seem to have the opposite effect.

The study reported in this paper focuses on courses about assessment rather than about learning and teaching in general. It was conducted in order to understand whether and in what way courses influence staff understandings of assessment and their assessment practices. Apart from a few notable exceptions, relatively little research addresses staff learning about assessment and we are not aware of any studies which specifically focus on the role of courses for learning about assessment. In Samuelowicz and Bain's (2002) study staff reported the use of assessment strategies which were in line with their orientations to assessment; these show parallels to orientations to teaching. On the other hand, Shannon et al., 2008, Norton et al., 2009, and Maclellan, 2001 have drawn attention to discrepancies between HE teachers' espoused theories of assessment and actual reported assessment practices. Other studies focus on everyday workplace learning about assessment. Jawitz's (2007, 2009) work highlights the importance of context and of relationships within departmental Communities of Practice for understanding new academics' learning about assessment, while Harman and McDowell (2010) show that the way in which multiple discourses about assessment position academics and students.

The project discussed in this paper examines learning about assessment through two types of courses: a compulsory course on assessment for new academics and a course on Assessment for Learning (AfL) available on a voluntary basis for experienced staff. The project combines an

evaluation of the respective courses with generating insight into conceptual change and changes in assessment practice achieved through formal courses. 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 8 with participants of the course for new academics and 6 with participants of the course for experienced staff. Interview questions focused on the benefits or otherwise of the respective course, the learning activities undertaken as part of the course, other professional development activities, changes in participants' understanding of assessment and changes in their assessment practices. Two associated studies (not considered in this paper) were also conducted at the same institution and have been reported elsewhere: a study exploring interrelationships between socio-cultural context and academic assessment practices within three different academic Schools, and another study investigating staff engagement with and learning through an informal AfL network.

In the analysis we focused on understanding the nature of the learning that had taken place within the courses, in particular in relation to conceptual change and ways in which this was afforded by the courses and the learning activities undertaken. Learning about assessment-specific concepts and terminology emerged as especially important. Some interviewees described the notion of AfL as having transformed their understanding of assessment ("it was like a light bulb suddenly switched on") and, as a consequence, their assessment practice. Concepts provided course participants with theoretical underpinnings of their practice which made them not only more confident, but also more critical, both of their own assessment practices and those of their discipline/context more generally. In some cases knowing and understanding certain concepts was described as being able to make sense of or analyse their own practice and enabling further development. This supports Tynjälä who argues that "formal education and planned learning situations make it possible to exploit informal learning effectively, turn tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge and integrate conceptual knowledge and practical experience, which is the foundation for the development of expertise" (Tynjälä 2008: 140). Insight into the practices of other people, other disciplines and other contexts enabled course participants to question the taken for granted. Courses were also referred to as protected spaces facilitating reflection upon teaching, learning and assessment. Certain learning activities turned out to be particularly important and transformative: interviewing a student, presenting assessment practices to peers from other disciplines and designing a module according to particular assessment principles.

The study demonstrates the ways in which staff learn from courses and that they do have a role to play in the professional development of new as well as experienced HE staff. We suggest that the attention of research must shift from investigating the impact of courses in general to understanding how they contribute to learning about particular areas of practice such as assessment, and to a more fine-grained analysis of those aspects of courses that are conducive to conceptual change and transformation of (assessment) practices.

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Short version:

There is on-going debate about the impact of formal courses on learning, teaching and assessment practice. While they have been shown to have some effect, it has been argued that HE teachers mainly learn informally 'on the job'. Only some studies address staff learning about assessment and there is no research specifically about courses. The present study focuses on one course on assessment for new academics and one for experienced staff. 14 interviews were conducted with course participants and offer insight into the ways in which staff learn about assessment from a course and aspects that are conducive to conceptual change and transformation of practice. Assessment-specific concepts were found to provide participants with theoretical underpinnings of their practice and to stimulate practice developments. Insight into different assessment practices made staff critical of their own practice. Courses also served as reflective spaces and certain learning activities turned out to be transformative.