

Implementing democratic assessment in higher education: Learning from an action research project with students (0042)

'I think it makes a difference as it helps you to understand marking and make you more likely to pay close attention to the criteria and maybe gives you more confidence to contest things you're not happy with.' (Helen)

'It makes you realise how difficult it is to give someone a number.' (Lisa)

Higher education in the UK has undergone substantial changes in recent years and currently faces its most significant structural overhaul for decades. While these shifts represent significant challenges, they also offer opportunities for innovative developments in pedagogy. With increased numbers of part-time, mature and international students, the argument for teaching and learning that reflects a more diverse range of perspectives, experiences and commitments has gained strength. Equally, increased scrutiny of the value of higher education for society has forced us to look anew at the skills and knowledge that we aim to develop in the sector. At the same time, higher education continues to be an arena that affords significant opportunities for democracy. With relatively egalitarian relationships between staff and students, and a focus on independent learning, higher education is often the first formal educational context in which students experience significant levels of freedom and equality.

This paper reports on an action research project into democratic assessment in Education Studies at De Montfort University. The project aimed to complement the innovative approaches to pedagogy adopted elsewhere in our practice by bringing more democracy into the assessment process. Colleagues in Education Studies tend to adopt collaborative approaches to teaching and learning, favouring discussion, active student involvement, and a conception of knowledge as tentative and contested. However, assessment is often conducted in an entirely different manner. 'Expert' markers assess student work, provide their own evaluative comments, and assign a mark. Our research involved a fundamental rethink in assessment relations, with the aim of making it more collaborative and democratic. Constructivist literature provides a defining principle for effective and engaging pedagogy: 'teaching should promote experiences that require students to become active, scholarly participators in the learning process' (Windschitl, 1999). Incorporating democratic elements into assessment can be one way of enabling such active participation, thus making it a more meaningful part of the learning process for students.

The research was conducted as a collaborative project involving the trial and development of a 'democratic assessment model' amongst staff and students on our undergraduate programme. Data was collected via focus groups and reflective journals, and was analysed thematically. Our findings illuminate a number of challenges encountered when implementing the model, including traditional notions of expertise. Students expressed a lack of confidence in their own opinions and tended to defer to the expertise of tutors, particularly in relation to subject knowledge. Staff also noted this tendency, and identified a sense in which the agreement of marks sometimes felt more like a

concession to students' views than arrival at a genuinely shared decision. The complex emotional dynamics of agreeing marks with students in an open, face-to-face discussion was another challenge identified in the findings. 'Negative' comments that might otherwise have been written and read at a distance were now communicated in a more intimate way. This also had implications for agreed marks – staff noted that the emotional dynamics of the process sometimes resulted in the agreement of a higher mark than might have been awarded had the work been assessed and moderated in a more conventional way.

However, as well as highlighting these challenges, the findings also illustrate the value that students attached to the democratic strategies adopted. Students appreciated the chance to hear a range of opinions on their work and felt that this variety of perspectives added validity to the agreed outcomes. Additionally, they valued the opportunity to have a real say in the agreement of marks, and viewed the process as a genuinely collective assessment of their work. For some of the students, this also meant that the agreed marks were more valid and 'fair'. Finally, students felt that the experience had made assessment more transparent – both giving them greater insight into how marking criteria are used, and exposing the often imprecise and tentative way in which marks are agreed or allocated. Consequently, the students expressed greater confidence in improving their academic work, as well as an increased critical awareness of the assessment process.

One implication of the research is that implementing democratic assessment requires a careful negotiation of attitudes and emotions. Student perceptions of expertise can be deeply held, requiring considerable time and effort to change. For staff, relinquishing a perceived monopoly on expertise demands an evaluation of competing pressures and responsibilities that is far from simple. Additionally, the process of sharing assessment between markers and marked brings its own emotional pressures. These factors require careful consideration when developing more democratic forms of assessment. However, the research also shows that there is considerable value to be gained by making assessment more democratic. By creating situations that offer the chance for genuinely collaborative and collective participation, we can offer meaningful experiences that students value. Furthermore, engaging in such work can demystify the assessment process, not least by exposing the fragility of authority and expertise. This in itself can be an empowering educational experience.

Building on Arendt's concept of political existence, Biesta (2006; 2010) has proposed that one of the tasks of democratic education is to provide opportunities for genuinely democratic action by cultivating spaces of plurality and freedom in the educational sphere. Conducting assessment in a more collaborative and open way - where students and staff work together as equals in an honest negotiation of power - may be one way of creating such spaces within higher education. This can allow us to harness the contemporary characteristics of higher education in a positive way, making important developments in pedagogy, while also contributing to a broader, democratic education that is of value to students both in their academic lives and beyond.

References

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