

Constructing academic (developer) identities: analysis of written feedback on summative portfolio assessment of new lecturers (0172)**Abstract**

The portfolio is widely used within academic development as a means of enabling the enhancement of teaching practice as well as the summative assessment of teaching quality. The drive towards transparency in assessment has fuelled the search for objective measures of reliability in marking. However, interpretivist approaches have challenged assumptions of shared understanding underpinning these measures, particularly with regard to teams of academic developers who hail from a diverse range of disciplines that precludes such assumptions. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which assessors conceptualise, construct and reinforce reflective practitioner identity. This will be investigated through critical analysis of feedback forms produced by a team of academic developers on the portfolio submissions of new lecturers. The analysis compares inter- and intra-assessor feedback to explore the stability of constructions of academic identity and extent of shared values of assessors as a community of practice.

Introduction

Postgraduate certificates for new lecturers constitute a well-established initiative for the development and recognition of individual lecturer's academic practice. In many cases, such programmes adopt a reflective practitioner model for developing new lecturer academic practice and professional identities (Pill, 2005). Given the complexity of the individual

reflective practices to be taught and assessed within such programmes, the teaching portfolio has been widely promoted as an authentic assessment tool (Trevitt & Stocks, 2011) for capturing a “rich picture of teaching reality” and, at its best, enabling not only the summative assessment of teaching quality but also the ongoing enhancement of the teaching practice of lecturers by initiating critical reflection (Tigelaar et al., 2005, p. 596; Conrad & Bowie, 2006; Klenowski et al., 2006). The portfolio is, therefore, a method that requires the explicit fulfilment of the ‘double duty’ of assessment (Boud, 2000)

However, despite the potential validity of portfolios for facilitating and assessing teacher development, the qualitative and multifaceted nature of the collated evidence and reflective narrative as well as the significant role of the assessor in interpreting the claims, have led a number of researchers to question the possibility of inter- and intra-assessor reliability when reaching summative judgements (Baume and Yorke, 2002; Tigelaar et al., 2005). Acknowledging the subjectivity of assessment practices, recent interpretivist approaches have challenged assumptions about objective measures of reliability in marking. Indeed, Winter (2002) argues that rather than being an indicator of truth, objectivity can actually serve to detach authorial voice from its context, leading Trevitt and Stock (2011) to refer to subjectivity in portfolios as a ‘potential signifier of authenticity’. Interpretivist approaches, therefore, assert that the ways in which assessors reach decisions necessarily involves contextualised, provisional and socially-constructed standards that emerge out of their participation within communities of practice (Bloxham, 2009; Orr, 2007; Johnston, 2004). From this perspective, assessment judgements and feedback on assessment tasks can reveal the tacit knowledge and values underpinning assessor judgements as both individuals and members of an assessment community. As Land (2001) suggests, however, academic developers in the UK are “a fragmented community of practice” (p. 4) and it is necessary to recognise that “the different pathways by which people come to academic development and

the different contexts in which they operate preclude any assumptions of a shared body of professional knowledge on which they are able to draw” (Hughes, 2009, p. 126) when making formal judgements on the quality of the portfolios.

The development and assessment of critical portfolios, therefore, represents a primary site for investigating the construction of academic identities through exposure to the hybrid or liminal identities of academic developers as assessors and the potential tensions of academic identity formation in an increasingly diversified academy. Surfacing what is valued and what is not, what identities and practices are privileged and what activities or ways of being are marginalised by assessors in the assessment of teaching portfolios can provide an insight into the evolving conceptualisation of the lecturer as reflective practitioner. Drawing on previous research concerning the tacit knowledge underpinning assessor judgements (Medland, 2010), the purpose of this ongoing study is to explore the ways in which assessors conceptualise, construct and reinforce reflective practitioner academic identity. This will be investigated through the critical analysis of assessor written feedback on portfolio assessments in the context of a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice in a research-intensive UK higher education institution.

Background

Recognising the discursive functioning of the portfolio as a locus for the construction of a narrative of professional practice, the potential for such professional development activities to inscribe and reward specific forms of teaching identities must also be acknowledged (Nicoll and Harrison, 2003). The generation of the portfolio is a “textual enactment” of academic practice that is, in itself, contributory to the author’s professional identity (Ruth, 2008, pp. 99) whereby authors might seek to construct and simultaneously enact “ideal-type” teacher reflective identities in their writing of portfolio texts (Buckridge, 2008, p. 119). The

performative function of the portfolio is simultaneously to demonstrate and enact the author's matching of their own identity and practice to a way of being that they perceive as desirable or complying with the projection of institutional norms of behaviour.

It has been argued that assessor judgements about what constitutes teaching effectiveness are routinely informed by the individual assessor's conceptualisations of teaching. Assessors of teaching reach their judgements by tacitly comparing the observed or reported teaching approaches of practitioners with their own teaching practices, personal experiences and their expectations about the typical pedagogies of specific disciplines (Quinlan, 2002; Courneya et al., 2008). Discrepancies between different assessors' judgements about portfolios are therefore inevitable and, in the context of teacher development, are arguably accentuated by the diversity inherent in traditionally "generic" postgraduate certificates for new lecturers which can include participants and assessors from a wide range of disciplinary, professional and cultural backgrounds.

Whilst portfolio narratives might represent a version, authentic or not, of new lecturer academic identity, analysis of assessor feedback provides an opportunity to better understand the specific narrative of professional teaching practice in the process of rewarding and acknowledging the performance of specific forms of academic identity in portfolios, the cohesion or otherwise of academic developers as an assessment community of practice, and how the act of assessment in itself informs the academic identity of academic developers. Whilst Trevitt and Stocks (2011) have attempted to articulate expectations surrounding the 'signifiers of authenticity' associated with portfolios, Darling (2001) notes these constructed values and ideals of practice might simply reflect back to the assessor the beliefs and assumptions about academic practice articulated in the programme of study undertaken by lecturers.

The study

The study comprises a critical analysis of 120 feedback forms produced by a small team of academic developers on the portfolio submissions for two cohorts of new lecturers completing a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. Each portfolio assessment has been independently marked by two assessors as part of the marking process. The analysis develops thematic categories and sub-categories relating to how assessors construct the concepts of academic identity, critical reflection, scope of academic practice and professional development in their feedback comments. The analysis also compares inter- and intra-assessor feedback to explore the stability of assessors' constructions of academic identity across the corpus of feedback and the extent to which assessors share values or conceptions of academic identity as a community of practice.

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