

Exploring the assessment experiences of postgraduate 'international' students: developing 'culturally sensitive' practices

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Introduction

This paper reports on the first phase of a qualitative research project which seeks to understand more fully the ways in which international students understand and experience both formative and summative assessment at postgraduate level and to develop a range of assessment practices that are 'culturally sensitive'. We argue that it is not only important to take account of student experiences of assessment in order to counter what Kennedy et al (2008) call the 'negative impact' of assessment, but also in order to explore the differences in perceptions of assessment that might be explained in terms of cultural context. The project was conceived in response to a range of formal and informal feedback from postgraduate students in a large and diverse Education department in at the University of Bristol. This feedback had indicated to tutors that although students were generally satisfied with many aspects of their overall experiences of postgraduate study, feedback on assessment processes indicated there was significant room for improvement. These findings resonate with the findings of much larger surveys such as the National Study Survey (NSS, 2011) where overall satisfaction with courses from the 2011 was at 83%, but satisfaction with Assessment and Feedback was at 68%. The overarching aims of the project are to explain what such 'improvement' might look like and to further develop strategies and resources that might more fully take account the needs of our diverse student group.

Context

In the vein of Weurlander et al (2011), the project is underpinned by an approach that conceptualises students' experiences and stories of assessment as important sources of information about the complex and dynamic relationship between assessment and learning. University funding supported the development of the project and offered tutors the resources to:

- To investigate current assessment practices within the department;
- To collaborate with students on developing assessment activities to broaden the range of opportunities we offer;
- To consider the use of our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in enhancing our assessment provision;

In this paper we report substantively on the first bullet point, while considering the implications of such findings for the second and third points.

The department has a large and diverse postgraduate student population and has a long tradition of working with education professionals from all phases of education, from all over the world on a full time or part time basis, both in Bristol and Hong Kong. The student population has continued to change within the context of the 'internationalisation' and 'widening participation' agendas, as is the case in many other UK universities. We are interested in the learning, teaching and assessment implications of such developments and argue that an inclusive and 'culturally sensitive' approach to assessment will take into account the cultural contexts in which understandings about assessment have been constructed. We seek to critically explore the implications of a diverse student group specifically in relation to assessment, and consider what Trahar (2011) calls 'the challenge to ensure that all students, irrespective of background, context and previous educational experiences, feel that the environment is structured to be inclusive, rather than one that marginalises those are not of the dominant majority.' We recognise, in the same way as Boud (1995) and Kennedy et al (2008) that assessment sends strong messages to our students about what we value as knowledge. Our observations and reflections upon our own on practices highlighted a tension between the desire to get students 'involved' in assessment throughout the course of the studies and their reticence to participate in such activities. While we claim that our practice is based upon Black & Wiliam's (1998) well known principles of 'Assessment for Learning', we know that the associated principles such as 'lifelong learning' 'formative assessment' 'self-assessment' and 'peer assessment' are largely Western constructs that have little meaning for some of the students that we work with when they first begin their study in the UK. Like Kennedy et al (2008) we are not seeking to claim that these strategies are more important or more effective per se, but rather to locate and explore our assessment practices in the context of the diverse cultural experience brought to our classrooms.

Project Design

The overall aim of our project is to establish a range of 'culturally sensitive' assessment practices that can be designed, implemented and evaluated as part of our on-going monitoring of leaning, teaching and assessment quality. We report on the first phase of the project where the team looked to develop more in depth understandings of students' experiences of assessment, prior to postgraduate study and during the course of their studies in our department.

Our broad questions for this phase were:

- How students do explain their past experiences of assessment and how does this account for their current beliefs about assessment?
- What are students' experiences of assessment during their postgraduate study?
- How have students experienced practices such as 'self-assessment', 'peer assessment', 'formative assessment' and how do they feel such practices support their learning?
- What assessment strategies do students feel have the potential enhance their learning?

Consultation events were organised to enable full time and part time students, in both the UK and Hong Kong, to contribute. Students took part in a range of focus group and individual activities designed to yield rich qualitative data in a variety of formats. Focus group interviews with student groups were recorded; students were encouraged to submit written responses to a range of activities and field notes and observations were generated by the research team. In our presentation we will report on the key themes generated at this stage of our work and then critically reflect upon the ways that findings were used to formulate an action plan for assessment provision in 2012-13. We further problematize the notion of 'culturally sensitive' practices and give some examples of the ways that our understanding this term has translated into future plans for assessment provision. We believe the project offered an important opportunity to challenge our own assumptions about 'effective' assessment processes in higher education and to consider 'culturally sensitive' approaches to assessment that value the cultural contexts in which previous experiences have taken place.

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