

## **Feedback use in Formative Assessment – are academics practising what they preach?**

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### **Context**

The changing nature of higher education given the recent period of massification has spurred an increase in research into formative assessment methods as a tool to support learning and encourage student self-reflection. This changing nature of higher education has resulted in larger classes and more diverse populations (Yorke, 2005; Bartram & Bailey, 2010) causing educators to rethink the ways in which they assess their study bodies (Bartram & Bailey, 2010) to respond to raised expectations of assessment methods (Di Costa, 2010). Online formative assessment methods have grown popular as a 'low-cost, reusable, customisable and scalable initiative' (Armellini & Aiyegbayo, 2010) and although this approach carries a fixed overhead, it is better suited for a mass approach to higher education than more traditional methods (Yorke, 2005). With such a renewed focus on formative methods and assessment for learning, there are concerns over extent to which theory underpins the implementation of formative assessment in the classroom (Yorke, 2005; Pryor & Crossuoard, 2008; Taras, 2010; Ussher & Earl, 2010) and whether confusion exists in the understanding and use of formative assessment aims and methods (Taras, 2008, 2010; Wiliam, 2011).

Black & Wiliam's (1998) early definition of formative assessment essentially outlines a remit of an assessment approach which provides information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Winger, 2005; Yorke, 2005) where to be effective for students, this feedback must be more than just information about the gap between achievement and intended learning (Taras, 2010; Gikandi et al., 2011; Wiliam, 2011). Gikandi et al. (2011) concluded that the lack of physical interaction with online methods meant that any feedback provided must be interactive, easily understood and timely, and educators should not overlook communications such as emails and discussion boards as media to garner feedback about the effectiveness of the assessments. Although research into the benefits for student learning through formative assessment and feedback is widespread within the literature, the focus on academics' use of feedback to modify their teaching activities has been relatively overlooked. This study aims to examine how academics use online formative assessment feedback to improve teaching effectiveness, which has been relatively overlooked in the literature

### **Methods**

This small-scale study took a two-phase mixed-methods approach. The first phase consisted of holding semi-structured interviews with six academics teaching large first year modules that utilised online formative assessment methods. During the second phase, these online assessments were scrutinised to triangulate and contextualise comments made in the interviews. The mixed methods approach was

taken to 'provide a more complete picture of the research problem' (Gasiewski et al., 2012:234) than what would have been possible by considering one method in isolation. Interviews were held with a group of six academics teaching on the first year of a large undergraduate social science programme at a post-92 institution in Northern England. The academics came from a variety of departments including Law, Accounting, Economics and Informatics, and all used online assessment as part of a formative assessment strategy. The academics were asked what they understood by the terms formative and summative assessment, how they conceived of their interaction and how they managed feedback processes on their module. Only first year modules were considered since approaches to teaching at different levels of a degree programme may differ significantly (Trigwell, 1994), and the first year has the greatest potential impact upon retention (Yorke, 2005). An iterative deductive/inductive thematic analysis was undertaken to analyse the transcripts.

### **Findings and Discussion**

There was a consistency of opinion regarding the purpose of formative assessment to provide students with a way of monitoring their own progress, and agreement that the responsibility was on the student to engage in the online materials. Half of the academics used methods which were integrated into classroom delivery, whilst the remainder kept them as separate entities. Overall, scrutiny of the online assessments used revealed that the level of feedback offered to students was generally less extensive on modules in the latter group. Whilst all academics discussed the benefits to students who engaged in the online assessments, not one interviewee commented on the potential for academics to monitor the effectiveness of their teaching using formative assessment results as a proxy for student understanding. This is despite the results being readily accessible through an online platform integrated into the virtual learning environment used by the institution. Those who discussed the online assessments in class claimed to have access to the general level of understanding through the classroom 'climate' but unlike the formally required academic reflection on summative performance, the potential for teaching benefits through scrutiny of formative results went entirely unrealised. The main barrier to academic reflection seemed to be resource-based, with lack of available time to monitor another layer of assessment the most prevalent reason. Scrutiny of the online methods used on these six modules demonstrated that this information was relatively easy to access, manipulate and perform discriminatory analysis on, ie: identifying which questions caused most difficulty etc.

### **Conclusion**

This small scale study, whilst limited to one institution, demonstrates that there may be gaps in the understanding of the key aims of formative assessment within higher education, and these gaps are being realised as lost potential to make teaching modifications during the a student's course. Whilst students are being encouraged to reflect on their progress through formative assessment, the academics in this sample demonstrated no propensity to undertake any self-reflection regarding their

teaching effectiveness. The findings here suggest that staff development on integrating formative assessment methods in undergraduate teaching would be useful, paying particular attention to self-reflection.

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