Building Pedagogical Research Literacy in Assessment Practices within Higher Education (0591)

Xiaotong Zhu[1], Veronica Spencer[1], Emanuela Lotti[1], **Neil Ford**[1], Carol Evans[1] *[1]University of Southampton, United Kingdom*

Abstract

Effective implementation of assessment initiatives requires shared understanding of the principles underpinning practice. This paper reports on the experiences of academics in implementing assessment initiatives to promote student self-regulation using an assessment inclusive research-informed conceptual assessment and feedback framework: EAT (Evans, 2013, 2016). Twelve projects were undertaken to support student's development of assessment feedback skills using elements of an action research frame (Scott et al., 2014). Using an interpretive research design, the experiences of lecturers and the associated outcomes of the project are scrutinised to identify key learning points in implementing successful assessment change from the lecturer perspective. Thematic analysis of data obtained through interviews and on-going team development (Braun & Clarke, 2006) highlighted a number of overarching themes impacting lecturer development. These themes include: (a) issues around ownership, responsibility, agency and autonomy; (b) connectivity; (c) sustainability; (d) development of research-informed learning communities; (e) flexibility; and (f) validation.

Rationale

In framing assessment practices, we argue the importance of attending to students and academics' beliefs, values, and conceptions of assessment feedback practices at the earliest opportunity given their potential impact on learning (Brown, Peterson, & Yao, 2016), along with the need to address assessment practices in an integrated and holistic manner acknowledging the interrelationships between all dimensions of curriculum design. Assessment needs to place a premium on the knowledge, skills, and attributes we value both from holistic and discipline-specific perspectives. Fundamental to achieving the above is the development of a shared understanding of the principles underpinning work in assessment. The importance of team-based rather than individually constructed course design in enabling shared understandings, development, and the use of effective pedagogies is advocated. (Bass, 2012).

In this paper we explore the learning gains of fifteen academics involved in twelve focused projects as part of government funding from the Office for Students (OfS, UK) aimed at enhancing students' development of assessment feedback skills through the use of the EAT Framework (Evans, 2016). Learning gain is defined as increases in lecturers' understanding and application of assessment research to inform pedagogy within their own disciplines (to include personal and disciplinary pedagogical knowledge development).

Underpinning Framework

EAT is a self-regulatory interdisciplinary assessment framework (aimed at supporting the development of learners' cognitive, metacognitive and emotional regulation skills), underpinned by an inclusive pedagogical approach: The Personal Learning Styles Pedagogy (Waring & Evans, 2016). EAT addresses assessment literacy, assessment feedback, and assessment design as part of an integrated approach. EAT is underpinned by an integrated theoretical approach drawing on constructivist, socio-cultural, and socio-critical theories. The Framework draws extensively on assessment feedback research literature and practice across disciplines over the last twenty years (Evans, 2013; Evans, Muijs & Tomlinson, 2016; Winstone, Nash, Parker & Rowntree, 2017). The Framework provided colleagues with a tool to analyse their own practice. In this project on-going training and support was provided for those involved in developing assessment interventions. Crucially, it was up to the teams to select their focus and to clarify the rationale for what they wanted to do. In implementing assessment innovations, they needed to ensure the key principles underpinning the Framework were adhered to. Teams were supported using a facilitative approach whereby tools and methods of tackling specific issues were shared but the ownership of the approach, validated by the project leads, rested directly with the team in accordance with the EAT principles.

Methodology
To explore the learning gain of academics engaged in the development of assessment interventions using the EAT Framework, data was collected from a range of sources including: (i) one-to-one interviews with colleagues; (ii) group meetings working on the project; (iii) case study reports; (iv) individual reflections on lessons learnt personally and for the project as a whole; and (v) evidence of longer term changes to curriculum. Methods for collecting data involved both tight and loose framing of research questions attuned to specific contexts. Data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and findings were reviewed with the team as part on ongoing development of practice. The value of the EAT Framework in supporting colleagues' understanding of assessment design was explored as an integral part of the project.

Findings
Key learning points in implementing assessment interventions included planning and criticality of design, buy-in and ownership by all, importance of a research-informed approach, and communication (Gordon, C., McKenna, C., & McCabe).

In supporting lecturers' learning, the following nine themes were explored and detailed mapping of these will be explored with colleagues at the symposium

  i.   The importance of an underpinning research-informed pedagogical framework
  ii.   Addressing contextual issues
  iii. Support for team development
  iv.   Research design understandings
  v.   Acknowledging the importance of their own and students' beliefs and values
  vi.   Importance of the integration of interventions within the curriculum offer

vii.   Preparation for learning

viii.   Managing complexity

ix.   Building sustainability

In exploring the importance of the underpinning theoretical framework, time was needed for teams to develop a shared understanding of the underpinning assessment feedback principles, how to enact these within different disciplines, and with colleagues with varied research and teaching backgrounds.

> The EAT framework provides a sustainable, inclusive and research informed approach, so it is a powerful way to develop our A&F framework. The focus on sustainability, on entitlement and on assessment literacy have informed my practices in various modules. (lecturer 3)

The Framework enabled colleagues to view assessment more holistically and changed the lens through which lecturers viewed assessment. A key strength of the project was in its interdisciplinary nature, enabling colleagues to support each other in addressing different levels of experience and confidence in designing and implementing their own assessment initiatives.

The project promoted professional conversations around assessment pedagogies; it improved understanding of the interconnected nature of all aspects of assessment, impacted curriculum design and delivery, and led to sustained engagement with assessment research initiatives with 50% of the project team continuing to be engaged in research projects.

In, sum, if we wish to advance students' engagement in assessment practices we need to make substantial investment in supporting lecturers' assessment feedback pedagogic research literacy.

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