Assessment and feedback in higher education: considerable room for improvement?

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Introduction

Assessment exerts a major influence on students' approaches to study in higher education, so it is important to ensure that it enables students to develop and thrive as learners. Generally speaking, however, the student experience of assessment remains far from positive and assessment has been accused of having damaging effects on student engagement. Mann (2001), for instance, sees assessment as an important mediating factor in determining a student's relationship to the university. All-too-often, she asserts, it results in alienation rather than engagement, provoking general feelings of compliance, powerlessness and subservience rather than a sense of belonging, enthusiasm, enjoyment and ownership of the learning process.

For the last two decades researchers have been vigorously advocating a shift in assessment culture, such that assessment actively promotes learning rather than simply measuring it (see, for example, Brown & Knight, 1994; Birenbaum, 1996; Sambell, McDowell, & Brown, 1997; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Stiggins, 2002). In response to sustained efforts to improve the state of play there is now widespread recognition of the need for approaches to assessment which are focused specifically on stimulating and improving student learning. These are commonly referred to as assessment for learning approaches (Boud & Falchicov, 2006; Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2011; Sambell, McDowell, & Montgomery, 2013) and many higher education providers have begun to acknowledge them in their learning and teaching strategies.

However, despite some advances in policy and practice, institutional approaches to assessment and feedback still seem to be lagging behind the curve. Assessment seems particularly resistant to change, and remains one of the most conservative features of university education (Bloxham, 2016). Large scale surveys of student opinion still consistently identify assessment and feedback as the source of greatest student dissatisfaction (Soilemetzidis, Bennett, Buckley, Hillman, & Stoakes, 2014). Calls for assessment reform continue to proliferate, based on scholarly evidence of assessment practices being largely unfit for purpose. For instance, at an international level Boud and Associates (2010) have developed seven propositions to help inform the ways in which assessment should be heading over the next few years if it is to be fit for the purpose of equipping graduates for life and learning in the longer term. Even more recently Brown (2015, p. 106) has contended that

> *If we want to improve students' engagement with learning, a key locus of enhancement can be refreshing our approaches to assessment.*

While recognizing that the issues are undoubtedly complex, and assessment is a nuanced, highly situated phenomenon, in what follows I will briefly highlight some

core areas which, based on key theory and research findings on assessment for learning in higher education, are commonly regarded as being vital to developing more engaging assessment and feedback practices. I will finish by focusing on the concept of partnership working in assessment, which is an area that has so far been largely neglected, relatively speaking. I will offer some brief suggestions as to why this might be the case, while flagging it up as an important, but challenging, area for future development.

Fostering student engagement via assessment tasks
In an edited collection of work on improving student engagement and development via assessment, Clouder, Broughan, Jewell, and Steventon (2009, p. 211) claim that assessment can act "as a formidable enemy or powerful ally in achieving the central tenets of what higher education means." Suitably designed and appropriately adapted to the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, assessment can serve as a powerful tool via which to engage, include and retain students. More particularly, it can foster high-order learning, especially if imaginative and inclusive assessment formats are used, often moving strongly away from outmoded 'one-size-fits all' practices. The messages from the contributors to this useful volume are fairly consistent: to foster engagement assessment should be student-centered; diverse (so that some students are not repeatedly disadvantaged); more responsive to the rapidly changing landscape of higher education; and should offer higher levels of choice and flexibility in terms of negotiating what is assessed and when.

Student engagement, of course, is a diffuse concept that can have a number of levels. Trowler and Trowler's (2010) review of engagement identifies two dimensions of engagement that seem especially relevant to assessment. One dimension is individual engagement with learning activities and subject matter. The second is engagement through participation and development of identity. Good summative assessment tasks can help activate both of these dimensions. This is because from the student point of view summative assessment tasks send out strong signals that can promote active engagement in appropriate learning, much akin to a hidden curriculum (Sambell, McDowell, & Brown, 1997).

Unfortunately, though, many assessment tasks currently act as alienating influences. Students act on the basis of their interpretations, rather than lecturers' intentions, and learners' perceptions of commonly-set tasks as burdensome and as bearing precious little relationship to 'real life' persist (Sambell & Graham, 2011). Furthermore, it is increasingly being recognized that modular course structures, which risk fragmenting the experience of assessment into separate compartments, do little to help here (Hartley & Whitfield, 2011; Jessop, El Hakim, & Gibbs, 2014). Modularization not only has had an unfortunate tendency to squeeze out opportunities for formative assessment but it can all-too-easily also result in bunching and log-jamming (Gillet & Hammond, 2009), giving students the sense of being pushed along relentlessly on an assessment conveyor-belt. Worse still, it can result in over-assessment and an obsession with grades which risks marginalizes some educational objectives, such as the development of self-regulation or intrinsic motivation (Harland, McLean, Wass, Miller, & Sim, 2015). Indeed, it is not just students who find this process alienating, it typically holds true for staff too, as the economies of scale which are gained by teaching large groups of students do not readily transfer to assessment and the provision of feedback (Gibbs, 2010).

The case for adopting a programme-level view of assessment as a means of improving the overall student experience is gathering momentum. We know that well-designed, carefully integrated and sequenced assessment can encourage deep rather than surface approaches to learning and inspire students to devote high levels of effort and 'time on task' consistently over the course of a programme (Gibbs, 2006). Moreover, streamlining and coordinating assessment across a programme can, for instance, also help achieve a better balance between formative and summative assessment; enable the development of more challenging tasks which integrate learning from across a range of modules; and build in cycles of feedback which focus on development and feed forward across tasks and modules (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens, 2008). These kinds of design strategies support learners to engage productively with disciplinary ways of thinking and practicing in an ongoing way, for example, by encouraging them to focus on the 'big picture' and the gradual development of expertise, rather than provoking a more piecemeal approach focused on completing atomized assessment at the level of individual module. Indeed, rather than being tacked on as an afterthought (Medland, 2016) more holistic approaches to assessment for learning, such as the one we developed in our Centre for Excellence in Assessment for Learning (Sambell et al., 2013), fully infuse assessment into the curriculum. Threaded judiciously (and sparingly) throughout the student learning journey and placed at the heart of the learning environment, then, good assessment tasks can encourage students to develop as learners instead of simply revising and 'cramming' in order to undertake a relentless barrage of end-point tests.

Alternative approaches to the design of engaging assessment demand a radical rethink of the purposes and methods of assessment in additional ways. It is important to acknowledge the legacy of a testing culture which has left us with an undertow of competitive assessment which ranks students, both in relation to each other and in terms of a perceived fixed external standard. While this system works well for some, for others it damages self-esteem, fosters identities of deficit, is demotivating and limits learning. In response to these kinds of challenges, Hughes (2014), for instance, presents a case for moving much more strongly towards ipsative assessment. This entails focusing comparisons on someone's previous work to evaluate their relative progress, and concentrates on enabling learners from all backgrounds to focus on achieving their personal best.

Furthermore, if engagement is understood as the propensity to take serious interest in learning and demonstrate commitment and activity (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011) a student's sense of authenticity in assessment is a vital ingredient of good assessment design. Authentic assessment tasks are ones which seem more meaningful to students, so that students can see the point of doing them in broader terms than simply accruing marks or jumping through hoops. They may be based on tasks with an external 'real life' basis, clearly indicating that what students are being required to demonstrate is pertinent for the longer term. For example, authentic tasks may engage students, at least to some degree, as participants in communities which embody the ways of thinking and practising of the discipline or the professional area being studied (Carless, 2015). In addition, they may offer students the chance to tailor their assessed work to issues which particularly interest them, with students importantly becoming co-creators of assessment, as well as co-creators of learning

(Deeley & Bovill, 2016). Other innovative approaches include patchwork assessment (Leigh, Rutherland, Wild, Cappleman, & Hynes, 2013), learning contracts or portfolio assessment, which explicitly enable students to negotiate the focus and assemble their assignment throughout the learning process. Alternatively, assessment tasks may involve students in processes which better emulate how things are done in the 'real world,' for example, where team work is central, or where students are required to discuss their work, or where they get chance to consult material and get advice while undertaking the assessed task.

Reviewing and synthesizing key literature on assessment for learning, Carless (2015, p. 964) sees the 'right kind' of summative assessment as key to the development of highly valued learning dispositions and behaviours. He also importantly draws attention to the ways in which well-designed assessment is fully and seamlessly integrated into the learning and teaching environment. From this viewpoint the very process of working towards summative assessment is vital, as it can offer opportunities for a plethora of formative assessment strategies, including feedback made available via participation in active and participatory learning (Sambell, 2015), enabling students to learn from preparing for the ways in which their work will be summatively assessed.

Shared notions of validity lie at the heart of engaging assessment (Sambell et al., 1997), whereby students are convinced that assessment soundly represents what they know and can do. Flint and Johnson (2011) have shown that students particularly value a system where they feel they can demonstrate what they are capable of: to them, this is fair. If students see the system as inherently unfair it can result in a breakdown of trust and alienated responses, such as just doing what they think their lecturers want by 'faking good' (Gibbs, 2006, p. 25). Here students use strategies which focus on trying to convince assessors that the student knows or understands more than they actually do, as opposed to genuinely engaging with learning, lest they expose a weakness or deficit and get marked harshly. Of course, it is not just students who stand to benefit from undertaking more varied, enjoyable, engaging and authentic tasks: it is generally more interesting for academics to engage with a diverse and adventurous set of assignments than to evaluate a batch of scripts which all take a similar approach.

Fostering student engagement with feedback
Concentrating on helping students gain access to helpful, timely and developmental feedback has been acknowledged as one of the most valuable things institutions can do for their learners (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Brown, 2015). However, there is ample evidence to suggest that, as it stands, there is considerable room for improvement in universities' approaches to feedback (Price et al., 2011). One problem is that in institutional discourse feedback has rather curiously become seen as synonymous with summative commenting after the fact (Sambell et al., 2013). Assessment-related artefacts, such as university feedback sheets, are officially produced to reify feedback. Yet while summative commenting can have an important part to play in the overall feedback and guidance loop (Hounsell et al., 2008), it is only one (arguably low impact) aspect of the overall system (Beaumont, O'Doherty, & Shannon, 2008).

In order to make a difference to future performance or the development of skills and understandings, any comments need to be appropriately interpreted and acted upon by the student. Unfortunately, many students' lack of connection to traditional feedback comments can be seen in the batches of work which, despite being painstakingly annotated and commented upon by staff, linger uncollected in offices across campus. The reasons for this apparently alienated behaviour are varied. Students often complain that after-the-event feedback comes too late to have any remedial benefit (Sambell, 2011). They frequently struggle to apply the messages they receive to future work, especially if the feedback comments are closely related to the specific piece of work that has just been undertaken, rather than linking more firmly to next steps and future tasks (Walker, 2009). From students' viewpoints, many of the comments they receive from academics seem opaque, overly complex and difficult to understand or do not help the learner to see how to close the gap between their performance and desirable goals (Carless, 2006; Glover & Brown, 2006). There is some evidence that too much written feedback can, perversely, dispirit students (Scott, Hughes, Evans, Burke, Walter, & Watson, 2013). Moreover, research suggests the emotional impact of feedback can be deleterious (Värlander, 2008), especially if feedback damages students' self-esteem by, say, ascribing inadequacies in their work to personal failings.

In response to these problems, a host of efforts have been made to make feedback more engaging. In one sense it is perhaps not surprising that many attempts to improve feedback have focused on refining commenting practices - especially in light of the UK National Student Survey items which ask students to rate how far they have received 'detailed comments on my work' and to indicate whether they feel 'feedback on my work has been prompt.' Some approaches have focussed on more constructive commenting (Hounsell, 2015), either by concentrating on the provision of future-focussed, developmental comments (Chen, Chou, & Cowan, 2014), or by blending criticism with praise and attending carefully to the tone in which comments are couched. Additionally, a range of new media have been utilised, including technology-enabled commenting, sometimes to add a more 'human' or personal touch via, for example, the use of pod-casts or audio-feedback (Merry & Orsmond, 2008). Other approaches have ensured the provision of speedier summative commenting procedures, with, for example, institutional-level policies to ensure a more rapid turnaround time of comments on summative assessments (Brown, 2011). Yet others have sought to audit or ensure that comments are attended to, either via comment-only marking (whereby marks are withheld until students have engaged with feedback comments in some way, on the basis of evidence that learners are distracted from paying attention to comments by the ego-involvement of grades); or by 'staging' assignments; or by explicitly building conversations about feedback into curriculum designs (Reimann, Sadler, & Sambell, 2016).

Important as all these innovations or policies are, though, it is widely accepted that the impact of feedback comments will be restricted if the student is cast in the role of passive recipient (Boud & Molloy, 2013). Arguably, the dominant cultural practice of equating university feedback with summative commenting poses a particular problem here, because it encourages feedback to be conceptualized in a very limited way: as a matter of information transmission (Sambell et al., 2013: 73); as 'monologue' (Nicol, 2010); as "an episodic mechanism delivered by teachers" (Boud & Molloy, 2013); or as 'teacher-telling' (Sadler, 2010). In response to this restricted

view of feedback, there are strong arguments, based on extensive research evidence and views of learning which foreground learning for the longer term, of the developmental benefits of moving towards a much broader definition of feedback as *dialogue* 'to support learning in both formal and informal situations' (Askew & Lodge, 2000, p. 1). From this viewpoint, learner *engagement* in formative activity becomes a key driving principle which supports self-regulation and helps bridge the gap between teacher comments and what students do to effect learning. Indeed, Boud and Molloy (2013: 699) argue that 'feedback' without learner engagement is simply inert 'dangling data.'

Feedback can no longer be seen to stand alone, then, as a product, artefact or tool. Instead of focusing too much attention on improving commenting practices, we need to shift the focus to feedback as a relational process that takes place over time, is dialogic, involves activity and is integral to learning and teaching (Merry, Price, Carless, & Taras, 2013). For instance, according to Carless (2013), sustainable feedback practices are required, which fundamentally reposition feedback as an experience with the development of student self-regulation at the core:

> *The focus on dialogue is central to our thinking because of the limitations of one-way written comments. We view feedback as being part of pedagogy, in that all good teaching is interactive and dialogic.*

From this viewpoint, then, simply 'tinkering' with the timing and detail of feedback elements is likely to be insufficient (Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011, p. 396). What is needed is a more fundamental rethinking of engaging feedback practices and processes, which cede power and ownership to learners (Sadler, 2010).

Involving students proactively in the assessment and feedback process
The real challenge revolves, then, around changing the ways in which all stakeholders think about 'assessment' and 'feedback'. This involves viewing assessment and feedback as dialogic, dynamic and open to negotiation, with an emphasis on process as well as product. It also involves rethinking assessment and feedback practices to enhance learners' capacity to successfully monitor their own work. To assist with this Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) have developed principles to guide feedback practice with a view to promoting student self-regulation and the capacity for self-assessment. Creating circumstances that encourage students to see themselves as active agents in their own learning and that foster a sense of the value of making (rather than simply receiving) informed judgments are vital, not least because they form an integral part of ongoing learning and evaluative practice in the world of work, where the capacity to make sense of ongoing, formative feedback from a range of sources is highly prized. Sustainable feedback (Carless, 2013) prompts learner action and agency, views peers and others as active sources of feedback (Evans, 2013) and helps students develop an 'inner ear' for standards and criteria which guides their progress.

Active, social and participatory learning and authentic feedback experiences which facilitate self-evaluation through dialogue and involvement all lie at the heart of our own model of assessment for learning or AfL (see Sambell et al., 2013). In our work we have shown in a range of subject areas that feedback is significantly improved by activities that make students' ideas and aspects of their academic work available for

discussion with competent members of the discipline community in an ongoing way (Sambell, 2010). Even with large classes, if carefully thought through, this can be enacted by 'flipping feedback' (Hounsell, 2015), so that it is embedded in teaching, based around active-learning exercises where students spend time on task and generate real-time, authentic feedback during class time. The use of 'clickers' to enable students to have a go at questions and compare their responses to those of their classmates and in discussion with tutors is a prime example of this. Others include feedback flowing from peer-and self-review exercises, where students generate as well as receive feedback.

Students need to develop a 'nose' for standards and criteria before they can begin to monitor their own work successfully. This is a slowly learned proficiency, largely because of the tacit and situated nature of this kind of knowledge (Price et al., 2011). Participatory approaches where students learn through working in collaboration with others create feedback rich environments through which students gradually develop a feel for standards and criteria in situated contexts. Here informal feedback (Sambell et al., 2013) stems from learners engaging with what lecturers and fellow students say and do in relation to a task or activity, enabling learners to gauge their own ideas, proposals and possible next steps. These ways of engaging with feedback can be seen as the hidden repertoire of effective learners in academia, who tend to make use of a whole range of networks and informal learning spaces offered by the university. However, we know that for a large number of first year students, especially those with low levels of social and cultural capital, the dissonance between their understandings of how to participate in what higher education has to offer, and the expectations of academics, often presents barriers (Sambell, 2011). Because of this universities are increasingly recognizing the value of activities (such as the mentoring of junior students by more senior students with developing 'expertise' to help with academic transition) as strategies to support academic engagement, which augment more formal self-assessment activities and 'dialogue with experts' in the formal curriculum.

Control shift? Developing staff-student partnerships in assessment
I will now briefly turn to the literature on partnership as a means of throwing new light on the possibilities for further developments in assessment. The discourse of partnership has recently become prevalent in universities (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014), as universities seek to engage their students in a fresh range of ways. Regardless of whether we see this 'new' preoccupation with the student voice in visionary terms, or as a reactionary response to the seismic changes in the world of higher education and an upsurge in a consumerist discourses, it is difficult nowadays to ignore the myriad calls "for increased student engagement in their educational environment and in the ways in which learning is delivered, managed and quality assured" (Owen, 2013, p. xxii). Indeed, Ryan and Tilbury (2013) have claimed that 'learner empowerment- actively involving students in learning development and processes of "co-creation" that challenge learning relationships and the power frames that underpin them" - is one of a handful of novel pedagogical ideas to recently emerge in higher education.

An undeniably exciting, rich and varied array of pioneering approaches to enhancing student engagement have emerged over the past five years or so (Dunne & Owen, 2013). Some widely disseminated beacons of partnership working exist, including

student-as-producer (Neary, 2010); students as co-creators of curricula (Bovill, 2014); students as researchers and enquirers (Jenkins & Healey, 2009); and students as change agents (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). While admittedly the key focus of each of these examples varies, to some degree all of these initiatives have concerned themselves with challenging and changing the ways in which the role and responsibilities of students are perceived vis a vis staff-student relationships. Most, if not all, have engaged students themselves in that enterprise. As such, they represent a notional shift in the balance of power within the academy, with learners being afforded much more control, choice and flexibility in shaping and developing their own learning, albeit on a range of levels. Each purportedly represents the student-teacher relationship in terms of a more reciprocal model whereby everyone is deemed to have a role, a voice and agency to influence and meaningfully participate in learning and teaching processes (Bovill, 2013).

Although pioneers like Bovill are keen to emphasize this should not be taken to mean a situation in which complete control is handed over to students, and there are difficulties in terms of adequately representing *all* students, the underpinning philosophy of partnership moves strongly away from a default position whereby staff maintain unilateral control over all the important decisions in the academic environment. With some notable exceptions, though, (see, for instance, Sambell & Graham, 2011; Holden & Glover 2013; Sambell, 2013; Deeley & Bovill, 2015) the notion of partnership in assessment has been far from prominent. This may seem curious, given that, at root, models of assessment for learning seek to cede authority and provide opportunities for collaboration between students and teachers. Perhaps assessment's sheer dominance in the lived experience of being a member of staff or a student in educational settings is a big part of the problem. Ideas about the unilateral nature of assessment – and assumptions about the power dynamics that underpin them- seem deeply engrained in people's psyches, making them profoundly resistant to change.

In addition, it is extremely difficult to avoid the deleterious effects of an assessment paradigm which foregrounds the measurement and validation of student learning. Assessment continues to serve multiple purposes and, given the high stakes nature of marking people for life, it is easy to assume that it most properly 'belongs' to the teacher, with suspicion cast on whether students should, or indeed can, meaningfully act as partners in assessment (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). Indeed, in the larger socio-political arena, testing cultures not only continue to exert their grip, but that grip seems to get even stronger (Harland et al., 2015). In an increasingly metric-driven, performative culture, the significance of normative scores, which determine one's place in relevant league tables, is becoming even more highly prized and hard won. Students, understandably, are notoriously reluctant to engage in educationally beneficial practices which jeopardise their marks and an ethos of competition and normativity continues to be a pervasive one, despite policy moves towards standards-based criterion referencing in higher education.

One huge challenge innovators face, then, is to try to negotiate an appropriate balance between the requirements to measure performance and simultaneously support and promote learning. Another challenge revolves around making a case for change which impacts positively on stakeholders' values, attitudes and assumptions, so that good ideas for development are adopted more widely. Bovill (2013) usefully

observes that partnership approaches imply a radical shift in the power dynamics and take some people – staff and students alike- well beyond their comfort zones. The challenge that is presented to official culture, custom and practice, and the identity shifts and unfamiliar roles this necessarily entails, also indicates why putting partnership approaches into practice is much easier said than done. Nevertheless, often in the face of resistance and discomfort, higher education has taken significant strides forward with some forms of partnership working, once the possibilities for alternative practices are more widely known and key stakeholders become suitably convinced of the benefits. The power differentials that inhere in assessment undoubtedly pose significant –but not insurmountable- challenges to more active student participation in the co-construction and governance of assessment. The present issue of this journal, and the work of pioneers and members of RAISE's special interest group on assessment is, therefore, a welcome addition to the literature in helping to raise awareness and disseminate diverse ways of developing more engaging assessment and feedback.

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