

PRE Journal Assessment Special Issue 2018

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Editorial

This special issue of Practitioner Research in Higher Education focuses specifically on assessment and feedback. We know that assessment has a powerful influence on student engagement and learning, making it an important focus for enhancement activity. We also know, however, that assessment is a nuanced, complex and contested area of university practice, which makes it a notoriously challenging one to change. Heightened awareness of the centrality of assessment-related matters, a commitment to scholarly endeavour and the processes of conducting, sharing and debating diverse approaches and perspectives are all vital. The two research papers and nine evaluation studies of innovative practice in this issue provide insight into the ways that many academics are, in various ways, investigating and enhancing their practice in this important area.

Higher education institutions as workplaces are currently experiencing a policy framework with very high levels of accountability within a neoliberal policy framework that includes league tables based on proxy measures of quality and student experience. Within this framework it is all too easy for institutions to respond to the shortcomings of assessment by adopting managerialist approaches to leadership or quick-fix mandates. We would argue, however, that a collective leadership approach is key to the development of high quality teaching, learning and assessment. Such leadership embraces professional inquiry and practitioner research by teaching teams: to support the development of their programmes, to develop and share important insights into the everyday challenges stakeholders encounter, and to explore possible ways of addressing them.

The papers in this special issue consider a wide and thought-provoking range of issues around assessment and feedback in higher education. These include a focus on: peer network support; e-portfolios; authentic assessment; rating tutor feedback; assessment experiences in masculine programme environments; pass or fail in place of grades; tackling grade inflation in a work-based module; student scoring in group assessments; adaptive comparative judgment; students making sense of feedback; and student experiences of audio feedback. Collectively they raise a series of important questions, which, while emanating from specific local contexts and preoccupations, are likely to resonate with many readers of the journal.

How might students gain support for assessment through their peer networks? In paper 1 Rita Headington investigates, in a longitudinal research study of undergraduate student teachers, the assessment support peer networks provide and enable. For those students who gained membership of assessment support cliques, her analysis shows how reciprocity and gradually increasing trust enabled students to provide peer support through sharing ideas, reviewing draft writing and eventually analysing each other's tutor feedback and grading on assignments. More work is needed on those students who have a more isolated experience of assessment and feedback.

In what ways do students experience differently an e-portfolio assignment as an alternative to a hard copy portfolio? In paper 2 Dawn Nicholson reports on a switch from a printed portfolio assignment to the use of e-portfolios. This careful evaluation study highlighted the benefits of moving to the e-portfolio format and process, identified by both students and tutors, for formative assessment and feedback. The paper highlights the challenges experienced by some tutors but also shows that there is some potential in using e-portfolios for managing tutor workload in terms of marking and feedback.

How do students experience judgment of authentic assignments that require creativity? In paper 3 Martin Andrews, Rachael Brown and Lynne Mesher, working within a School of Architecture, evaluate their collaborative work with undergraduate students to develop practical assessment guidance tools and to develop assessment literacy of staff and students. The focus was on the marking and feedback for authentic assignments involving design. The paper raises interesting questions concerning the particular identification of students with authentic assessment tasks and also the possible high stakes and tensions involved in assignments that demand individual creativity from students and then require a tutor to judge it.

How do students understand and rate tutor-written feedback? In paper 4 Liz Austen and Cathy Malone report on a careful piece of research that uses an innovative methodology asking students to work with a body of examples of written tutor feedback. A sophisticated approach to analysis of the texts and of student responses was used to outline the characteristics of feedback which students in this sample judged to be effective - specific praise, clarity and completeness, forward orientation, interpersonal positioning and clear and error-free text. The contrastive analysis brought the metadiscoursal features strongly into focus, with distinct linguistic patterns emerging in the use of modals, personal pronouns and the mitigation of criticism. The study highlights the interpersonal nature of academic feedback and students' sensitivity to the tenor of the feedback and the incorporation of criticism.

How do male students experience assessment on courses with few female peers or tutors? In paper 5 Caroline Sheedy focuses on the gendered experiences of undergraduates studying within a male-dominated degree programme in computing. She argues that the hegemonic masculinity on the programme being studied created a considerable impact on the assessment experience of students. Most work on gender focuses on women's experiences, but in this study the focus is trained instead on illuminating the experiences of college men.

How do students experience the award of pass or fail in place of grades? In paper 6 Muireann O'Keeffe, Clare Gormley and Pip Ferguson focus on the potential learning power of getting rid of grades. They evaluate their change of practice on a postgraduate academic development programme for new lecturers in which they moved to providing a pass or fail judgment rather than a technical grade. They speculate that such a change has the potential to improve learning outcomes on other programmes.

How might a formative assessment intervention help to reduce grade inflation of work-based learning? In paper 7 Joy Robbins, Amanda Firth and Maria Evans evaluate attempts by their programme team to reduce grade inflation that had been identified on the assessment of a work-based learning module by clinical practitioners acting as mentors for undergraduate midwifery students. They found that introducing a formative assessment element helped to enhance student learning as well as helping to address the grade inflation issue.

How do students experience audio feedback in place of written comments? In paper 8 John Pearson reports on an evaluation of the use of audio feedback in place of written tutor feedback on student assignments. Students were generally supportive of the approach. They claimed that it made them more likely to revisit their submitted work whilst listening to the audio feedback from the tutor. They also felt that the feedback seemed more thorough and more like an invitation to continued dialogue than written feedback.

How do students and staff experience 'adaptive comparative, judgment'? In paper 9 Jill Barber helpfully contributes to the growing body of literature on evaluating the implementation of an 'adaptive comparative judgment' approach to grading student assignments. The project involved

students in peer assessment of each other's work as well as tutor grading of student assignments. An interesting aspect of the findings concerns the differences between adaptive comparative judgment and conventional grading. The evaluation supports the use of adaptive comparative judgment especially for open-ended assignments and for peer assessment activities.

How do students make sense of feedback? In paper 10 Ann Cleary, Brid Delahunt, Claire Fox, Moira Maguire, Lorna O'Connor and Jamie Ward report on an innovative collaborative project involving librarians, tutors and learning development staff. The project focused on engaging students with feedback on their academic writing. In addition to raising the profile of engaging with feedback across the institution, the project also helpfully involves sharing of practice and perspectives across staff involved in supporting student learning.

Taken as a whole, the papers indicate that while the processes of reviewing, enhancing and refreshing approaches to assessment and feedback are vital, improving assessment on a wider scale is not likely to be a simple business. Most obviously, assessment serves diverse functions, some of which sit uncomfortably together. While an emphasis on measurement and certification undoubtedly matters, many of the papers also testify to the ways in which professionals and learners now place emphasis on assessment as a positive educational force. The need to challenge widespread and commonly-held assumptions about assessment and feedback, and the value of thinking carefully about the nature of the underpinning roles and relationships, are important dimensions, to varying degrees, of a number of the papers in this issue. They all imply that assessment should no longer be regarded as an afterthought or add-on to teaching, and as such, help drive assessment in fruitful directions.

Pete Boyd and Kay Sambell Editors