Moving the focus from grades to feedback: A case study of pass/fail marking

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Abstract
Assessment is a crucial aspect of academic work. Indeed, there is substantial literature on assessment design and how to ensure the integrity of students' learning. Much work goes into enhancing assessment practices to ensure the validity of assessment to safeguard the reliability of students' knowledge. Yet relatively little research has investigated how university educators might learn about significant assessment concepts through experiencing them for themselves. This evaluation sought to explore how a change in a marking approach on a professional development module for academics supported an assessment for learning approach. The reasons for the change are described and the experience of implementing a pass/fail model on an assessment-focused module is discussed. Data was collected from an interactive student activity, external examiner feedback, and a module evaluation survey. Findings indicated a range of reactions suggesting that consultation processes, orientation time, student involvement, and care with nomenclature are required by those considering similar changes.

Keywords
Assessment for learning; higher education, grades, academic development.

Context
Dublin City University (DCU) currently offers three accredited modules for academics to develop their teaching knowledge, competencies and skills. This paper focuses on a change to the grading approach used on the 'Assessment and Feedback' module which addresses assessment and feedback practice in particular. Throughout this module students are introduced to assessment terminology, theories and approaches they might not have experienced or considered previously, with the possibility of potentially adopting those relevant to their own teaching practice. In particular, students are asked to reflect deeply on the potential of Assessment *for* and Assessment *as* Learning: Lee (2007) describes Assessment for Learning (AfL) as ongoing, formative assessment that the teacher provides to students to highlight strengths and weaknesses and help them develop their knowledge. Earl (2003) describes Assessment as Learning (AaL) as an approach that enables the student to act as assessor through mechanisms such as self-assessment and peer review.

This particular module is taught mainly online using a combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities including discussion boards, webinars, and online collaborative tools. Socio-constructivist, reflexive, and experiential learning approaches are integral and it has been designed to offer students the opportunity to explore, experience, and discuss a diverse range of concepts and approaches drawn from assessment research and practice. The AfL theme underpins the use of a range of feedback strategies including written, audio, and multimedia options, marking guides and rubrics, and the use of exemplars. In the AaL activities, there is a focus on peer feedback, peer review, and peer assessment alongside the management and assessment of group work. The module content includes resources and discussions around assessment in relation to large class sizes, and the advancement of academic integrity.

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To achieve the learning outcomes, students on this module, comprised of staff from the university, are asked to:

- Reflect on their experience of assessment (including challenges, difficulties, opportunities and requirements)
- Critique key assessment issues from their own disciplinary context
- Evaluate contemporary assessment approaches

By the end of the module, students are expected to be able to design a well-informed and workable assessment strategy appropriate to their teaching context.

The assessment and feedback module has been running at DCU since 2012. Since then a total of 74 students (including staff from other Irish higher education institutions) have completed this module. It is run over 12 weeks with two additional weeks for reading and preparation of the final strategy submission. Facilitated by the university's Teaching Enhancement Unit, it attracts approximately fifteen to twenty students from various disciplines per cohort and had been using a conventional numerical grading scheme before a decision was made to pilot a pass/fail approach in 2017. The overall aim of this paper is to describe:

Why was the shift to pass/fail marking undertaken?
How did students respond to the new model of marking?
What were the lessons learned from this change approach?

Why was the shift to pass/fail marking undertaken?
There were several reasons why a pass/fail system was adopted and these were largely driven by feedback from the external examiner, a desire to enhance students' learning, and a belief in the value of cultivating a collaborative, non-competitive learning community for higher education professionals.

External examiner feedback
Each year an external examiner provides a critical constructive commentary on the processes and standards of modules offered. This commentary considers the teaching and learning strategies used on the module, the quality of students' work and the nature of assessment. For two subsequent years the external examiners' report requested that the module team think critically about how appropriately a numerical grade-based approach served to support assessment for learning. On reviewing the literature on assessment for learning, a feedback- and feedforward-oriented model of learning was emphasised (Carless, 2015; Nicol, 2014; Winstone et al., 2016). Research indicated that students could be empowered by feedback and become more compelled to enhance their learning (Carless, 2015). According to Daniels et al, 2004; Gibbs, 1999; Guba & Lincoln, 1989, formative feedback rather than marking with grades is more helpful when nurturing a peer-to-peer mode of feedback.

In light of this, the module team liaised with other academic developers across higher education institutions and discovered that pass/fail approaches to assessment were frequently favoured over grade-based marking in several professional learning programmes for academics. Furthermore, pass/fail marking approaches appeared to support ipsative assessment where learners were interested in the motivational impact of learning gain rather than being motivated solely by a summative and final mark (Hughes, 2011).

Desire to enhance and deepen learning
According to Black and William (1998:12) there is a convincing body of evidence that formative

assessment is an essential component of classroom work and that its development can raise standards of achievement. These authors write that "Feedback has been shown to improve learning when it gives each pupil specific guidance on strengths and weaknesses, preferably without any overall marks. Thus the way in which test results are reported to pupils so that they can identify their own strengths and weaknesses is critical." (p. 8). A combination of constructive feedback and 'no grades' marking therefore seemed to offer attractive possibilities as regards student learning that we were keen to explore.

Furthermore, one of the core aspirations of the lecturers on this module was to encourage students to develop their competencies, skills, and confidence in key areas of assessment. We were not concerned about maintaining what we perceived as sometimes very minor differences between grade bands. However, we were concerned that, as many previous students had reported with their own students, there was potential for our students to focus on grades at the expense of feedback. As Stobart (2008) writes, when both grades and comments are employed, there is evidence that the explanatory comments are frequently ignored and all too frequently "It is the grade that matters." We therefore wanted to model an alternative pass/fail approach with the dual purpose of (1) encouraging deeper engagement with the feedback given and (2) potentially stimulating conversation about alternative means of student assessment based on students' direct experience of same.

We also wanted to minimise superficial or strategic learning approaches. The module team were aware that under the 'old' system, there was potential for pass by compensation, and students could fulfil module requirements without passing all assignments. We decided to review our assessment criteria and look again at the minimum threshold level of acceptance for each assessment criterion (Spiller, 2014, p.5): if a student achieved the 'minimum' standard across a set of assessment criteria, then they would pass. If not, they would be asked to review, revise, and resubmit their work so that they could fittingly meet the assessment requirements. The team hoped that this developmental approach might potentially foster the type of constructive dialogue between lecturer and student that is so strongly endorsed in the literature (Carless, 2015). It seemed also to support the ideals of assessment in encouraging self-regulating learners, capable of appraising their own work in relation to accepted success criteria.

Above all, we wanted to show students that feedback designed to help learners identify where they are and help them move on (Stobart, 2008:145) could be immensely valuable in supporting student learning.

Desire to cultivate a learning community

The team are interested in the long-term progress of academics as learners so were keen to explore future-focused assessment *for* learning rather than retrospective assessment *of* learning approaches.

Thus, we began to think more in depth about the power of feedback (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). We began to consider how we might put a greater emphasis on providing formative, constructive feedback rather than (unintentionally) encouraging a focus on the attainment of grades. Implementing a criteria-referenced pass/fail approach would, we hoped, take grades out of the conversation and help students better achieve the learning outcomes of the module.

Harland et al. (2015) have remarked on students being single-minded when it came to grades and that grading conditions contributed to competition for student attention leading to a grading arms race and frequent reports of stress. Tannock (2015) has argued that graded assessment leads to competitive individualism, subordinance to teachers, and an undermining of the intrinsic motivation

for independent, critical, and self-directed learning (P.6). In his treatise against the neoliberal agenda in assessment, Torrance reiterates Lave & Wenger's (1991) sentiment that 'learning is a social process' (p. 93). He writes that:

> ...education, and its attendant assessment processes and procedures, must be seen as a collective responsibility, maximising success and minimising failure, but above all recognising that both are co-produced as part of a collaborative process in context, and may change over time as circumstances and the nature of the educational encounter change (p. 94).

Based on this research, we hoped our approach might foster a community of teachers sharing practice and solving problems of practice together. We wanted to remove the idea that it was important to (perhaps unfairly) distinguish between the students' abilities using a numerical grade. We believe that a community of educators, participating in professional development does not need to be a competitive endeavour to be successful, and this community should be well-positioned to continue after the 'formal' module ends. This philosophy of cooperation and continuous development rather than competition could reinforce the values of becoming a teaching professional (Sachs, 2003). Indeed, pass/fail marking is being used increasingly in medical education in the United States where physicians are expected to participate in continuous learning activities and it is said that 'discriminating grades' fail to foster effective, collaborative, self-regulating learners (White and Fantone, 2010).

Nonetheless, we were conscious that the pass/fail approach might not be a simple and seemingly magical solution to this assessment issue. We were conscious that assessment can be a highly emotional experience, that students might have deeply held beliefs and desires for performance 'categorisation' that would be challenged under this regime. Through discussion on the module team we agreed that some students may feel that additional or exceptional effort was not being adequately rewarded or recognised. We decided to follow the lead of other higher education institutions who highlight incentives such as Teaching Awards and the scholarship of teaching and learning as a means to showcase and celebrate excellence in practice. Another pertinent topic of conversation arose among us: the modern university is said to lean towards neo-liberal and competitive models of enterprise. We wondered how staff in a competitively-focused and entrepreneurial university might respond to a feedback-oriented model and an assessment for learning approach. The following sections explain our methodology and what our research revealed.

Methodology

In Autumn 2016, we implemented changes to the assessment approach. This involved changing the rubric marking criteria on the module and also getting approval from the university Dean of Teaching and Learning. There were other administrative implications of this change including changing the criteria for the marks entry system.

The module commenced in January 2017 and in the interests of transparency we communicated the change of marking approach to the students on the module. This cohort contained 15 students. All were full-time or part-time teachers in higher education who had limited formal knowledge of educational theory or research. They were all experienced teaching practitioners from the disciplines and fields of Science, Engineering, Nursing, Law, Computing, Communications and Online Education.

This evaluation, formative and diagnostic in nature (Keane & MacLabhrainn, 2005), sought to make sense of what was happening as we implemented this new approach to grading. We wanted to identify impact and outcomes of this change and hoped that the output would lead to further improvement in teaching and learning.

Data for the evaluation was collected through an interactive student activity, a post-module survey, and external examiner feedback:

The interactive student activity
An in-class activity giving students the opportunity to critique one of the module rubrics was devised. The students were asked if they thought the rubric was fit for purpose and asked to make suggested changes. This activity was intended to provide clarity for students in how marking was approached in order to ensure transparency, fairness, and a 'no surprises' assessment.

During this online activity, several insightful comments pertaining to the pass/fail approach were recorded. The students had engaged in deep discussion and thinking about a pass/fail approach compared to a numerical grading approach. Eleven students out of fifteen participated in the activity. Extracts from pass/fail related comments are paraphrased or quoted in the Findings.

Ethical approval was sought from DCU ethics committee to incorporate the comments from the activity for evaluation and research purposes. The ethical approval process assured anonymity of those who wished to participate in the collection of the feedback comments; Consent was gained for the use of written comments; an information and consent document outlined the evaluation and research purposes. Students could choose to opt out at any time.

Post-module survey
An anonymous module evaluation survey was distributed some weeks after completion of the marking process and offered an additional opportunity to explore students' views on the marking approach.

Students were specifically asked the following question about the pass/fail approach: *Having received your results from all assignments, do you have any further comments on the pass/fail approach and its potential role in professional development?*

External examiner comments
At the exam board meeting the external examiner provided the team with feedback on this new approach to marking.

Findings
The interactive student activity revealed mixed feelings among the students to the pass/fail approach. Student A described this new model as strict and restrictive. Student B thought the approach lacked the transparency that numerical grading presented, and they felt that the bar was set too high as they had to meet all of the assessment criteria. Student C described their opinion that a 'binary' approach to criteria achievement was possibly too reductive, and they highlighted some of the challenges that can come into play when multiple assessors are involved:

> I just think that in this binary case it would be beneficial to have considerably more clarity on where the pass/fail line is 'Irregular participation', 'appropriate contribution', 'thoughtful and constructive ways'; all these need tightening up so that a student (and indeed multiple assessors, if there are more than one) can unambiguously agree on what the criteria are. I've used rubrics before where the level of agreement on marks between several staff was way off, because vague terms were subjectively interpreted.
>
> (Student C).

Another interesting discussion arose in comments around qualification versus development. Student D initially wondered if the pass/fail approach was fit for purpose for all disciplines. Another student response elaborated their understanding of the approach:

> I had never experienced the pass /fail approach before …. but my experience is that it is substantially more capable of driving learning than the enumerated grade (if the latter is the correct description)
>
> (Student E).

This comment indicated the student's grasp of assessment for learning, suggesting that this approach was motivational in terms of encouraging continuous learning rather than having a narrow focus of grade attainment.

There was another comment that learning was comprehensive and wide-ranging when assessed in this way:

> Meeting the threshold across X number of required headings creates an absolute necessity to cover all the ground. To labour the point perhaps but a pass on a traditional 1-100 system only really requires one to go in depth into about half the module and given the generally accepted 'wisdom' as articulated by Biggs that students are 'strategic' about assessment systems...
>
> (Student E).

This student accepted that a requirement to meet all of the criteria was a deeper form of learning rather than a strategic surface approach to engaging with certain topics.

Module evaluation survey

The following responses to the survey seem to indicate that students recognised the pass/fail approach as being both rigorous and feedback-rich. Similar to the in-class online discussion activity, it was remarked that this approach encouraged deep engagement with the module topics:

> It is excellent and demands that the candidate develop their understanding of all of the module.

The depth of feedback was noted by students:

> Feedback was useful and welcome.

> The feedback we received was so good that it really enabled to compensate for a pass/fail approach giving us clear guidelines of what we have done right/wrong and how right/wrong. I still think a greater level of detail (e.g. a pass with honours/pass/fail) would be good.

While feedback was well-received by students, it seems that feedback alone was not enough for some. Some students wanted a grade and to be rated into certain bands so that they could ascertain the success of their work on the module. Indeed, Harland et al. (2015) citing Orr (2007) highlight that grades have become proxy for education and assessment rituals. It may be worth noting that the banded approach (distinction/pass/fail) was considered by the module team earlier in the planning stages but was viewed as being similar in spirit to the original approach. The module team wanted to avoid unintentionally introducing grading by another name which could result in student work being driven by grades and contribute to a lack of space for higher order learning experiences (Harland et al., 2015). In essence, we wanted to avoid the potential issue that Tannock (2015) noted where

'pass/fail assessment can end up becoming another form of grading if different levels of passing are added (high pass, pass with honours, etc.)'.

External examiner comments

The comments from the examiner were:

> The pass/fail grading system is appropriate for assessment of the learning process. There are plans to continuously refine the module in areas such as the peer review process, and the use of feedback templates for same. Students should also be encouraged to develop their understanding of assessment.

Thus, it seems that this approach was approved by the external examiner and that future work on feedback templates would further enhance the assessment for learning approach on this module. Building capacity in the assessment literacy of students was also commended and will be continued in future iterations of the module.

Discussion

So what did the module team learn from this radical change in assessment approach? The change in assessment practice on this module highlighted pertinent challenges and perceptions about how assessment is regarded and accepted by the various stakeholders, including students, assessors, and external examiners. Overall, the pass/fail approach was more rigorous as all students had to meet all the criteria set for all assignments with no room for compensation if some criteria were ever 'failed'. Our reflections emphasise that involving the students in an activity around the approach to grading was a powerful kickstart for enhancing student assessment literacy and for starting open discussion on grading approaches. We reflect that this open discussion reduced the perceived unfairness of the assessment approach and promoted transparency with students.

This approach was feedback-rich, but we realised that students needed time to process feedback (Carless, 2015) and they needed help in knowing how to act on feedback (Winstone et al., 2016). Also, this approach was an emotional experience (Illeris, 2003) and we felt that care and attention was needed in how feedback dialogue was engaged with.

There were some downsides to this new approach. Since students had to meet all assessment criteria, this resulted in more resubmissions of student work. This contributed to more work for students and more marking work for assessors. While this additional workload was manageable with a small student cohort of fifteen, we reflected that this might not be sustainable for larger student numbers.

Some students complained there was lack of reward through the new approach; we also felt that the pass/fail approach was a blunt instrument with no room to acknowledge the outstanding work of some students. In common with recommendations from other academic developers we encouraged those high achievers to consider applying for learning and teaching awards.

In discussions amongst ourselves on the module team, we acknowledged that we had similar attitudes to grading and marking as our students. While we wanted to implement an assessment for learning approach and a culture of feedback, we recognised that if we ourselves were being assessed that we might like to know what grade we attained. For us numerically categorising our performance was a measure that we understood. As much as we might like to usher in changes to a culture of feedback, it seems that we have been conditioned into a pervasive culture of grading (Harland et al., 2015). Additionally, we felt that the terminology of 'pass' was an imperfect expression of achievement for the students' successful work.

Lastly, professional challenges arose for us as academic developers. Instigating critique of assessment approaches with students challenged our knowledge and work as professionals in teaching and learning. Opening up practices to the potential criticism of students was worrisome but in the long-term this activity was well worth the challenge as it created a community of constructive teaching professionals critically thinking about assessment and feedback approaches, providing us with relevant feedback for evaluation and future enhancements of the module.

Recommendations

From this evaluation process, we have developed a number of recommendations that might be taken on board by other assessors motivated to make changes to assessment approaches:

- Firstly, a change approach such as this should be done in consultation with other teaching professionals in similar disciplines. Likewise, the literature on assessment should be investigated to ascertain if a change in approach is likely to work for particular disciplinary teaching and assessment contexts.
- Learners need time to assimilate to new assessment and feedback approaches. Nicol (2014) recommends designating specific time to enhancing the assessment literacy of students. Developing trust among learners and assessors in these processes is critical. Similarly, students need to understand how to use feedback (Winstone et al., 2016) and what actions to take on receipt of feedback. In traditional grade-based cultures students, even adult learners, might not appreciate how feedback can lead to learning gain (Hughes, 2011) and their continuous professional development. It is a cultural change that takes time as the importance and value of feedback is not always recognised by students or indeed in academic practices. Further work on developing assessment literacy is significant to this (Boud & Falchikov, 2006).
- Involve students in the assessment change process. Student participation in and critique of the marking approaches are important. This enhances their assessment literacy (Nicol, 2014) and enables them to understand the benefits and drawbacks, while also helping gain consensus of approaches used, leading to the development of trust among teachers and students. This approach might also lead to the formation of a community of practitioners into the future.
- Finally, if the term pass is an imperfect expression of achievement, how can we express student achievement in a better way? Other academic developers have suggested the use of the term 'success' rather than 'pass'; this question will require further discussion and we intend asking students how they might like their achievement of success phrased.

Future work

Feedback from students, assessors, and external examiners from this evaluation process supports a continuation of the pass/fail marking approach into the next academic year. This model underpins an assessment for learning philosophy where feedback helps support a journey of learning and development. In common with the conclusions of Reimann (2018), this study seems to indicate that transformative learning can occur when an AfL approach is deeply embedded within an academic development course. There was some similar evidence of "letting go of previously held conceptions of assessment as end-point-testing and grading" (Reimann, 2018, p. 95), for example. However, continuous evaluation of this marking approach with stakeholders should be sustained over the coming years to review how, or indeed if, the pass/fail model continues to serve students' learning. As part of this, it would be useful to explore evidence of changes to students' assessment practice as a result of their learning experience.

DCU aims to develop a new programme of academic development for teaching staff in the near future. The development process of such a programme should involve discussion of the philosophy of learning and assessment if a developmental model is deemed suitable. Into the future we will ask how an assessment for learning approach might work in that context?

This approach was implemented also to foster a community of practice among teaching academics. Further evaluation is needed to establish if an assessment for learning approach encourages and supports community sharing and learning from practice on teaching, learning and assessment issues.

In conclusion, consider the following quote from Stobart (2008, p. 182):
Assessment never just has a single function. We may claim an assessment is about judging learning outcomes on a particular course, but it is never as simple as this. What it also does is transmit our views about what is important for our subject and send messages to those being assessed that will influence their future learning.

If the pass/fail model of assessment persuades more academics to adopt proven feedback-oriented approaches in their teaching, the authors of this paper are content to continue to transmit that view.

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