Practitioner Research in Higher Education

Editorial

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Assessment and feedback form the subject matter of the six papers that together comprise this fourth edition of Practitioner Research in Higher Education as they are drawn largely from work initially presented at the 2009 Assessment in Higher Education Conference. The papers make a timely contribution to our growing understanding of the complexity, in particular, of the meaning of feedback and the diverse nature of student and staff engagement in assessment practices. After a decade of attempting to codify standards, create transparent assessment processes and involve students in assessment, practitioners and researchers are now investigating the multiple layers of engagement implicated in constructive assessment and feedback practices.

In this issue, authors pursue some common themes in their practitioner research. There is an emphasis on understanding and applying feedback practices which give greater voice to the student experience. They challenge us to think how customary processes which position students as passive recipients of feedback can be replaced by approaches which position the students as co-creators and mediators of the meaning of feedback. They investigate the concept of 'dialogue' in different ways, particularly in the light of the power dimension in the tutor student relationship. In their different ways, the papers in this issue encourage us to consider how we might use what resources we have to move the focus of power in the assessment relationship towards the students.

Sutton and Gill, for example, have drawn on an Academic Literacies approach to investigate the social practices, identities and relationships underpinning student feedback. Students are seen as active agents in creating the meaning of feedback which is mediated through the student-tutor relationship and characterised by difference and diversity. Their discussion of power asymmetry contends that this does not prevent a useful dialogue between the tutor and the student.

In a similar vein, Bain systematically identifies the component elements in moving from students as passive partners in assessment to having a voice in the process. Grounded in concepts from radical education and critical pedagogy, she also argues for a rebalancing of the power asymmetry between students and tutors. The paper builds a case for the empowerment of students such that they become more autonomous and are able to take a critical perspective on both their own work and the assessment and judgement process. Lilly and colleagues' study provides an interesting example of research empowering students in their dialogue with tutors regarding their experiences of, and attitudes to, feedback practices. Working with tutors, they used material from students to debate potential ways of addressing some of the students' dissatisfaction with the content, clarity and style of feedback. One outcome of the research is that whilst staff recognise the problems that students face in receiving and using feedback, they feel constrained in their ability to change practices by a range of institutional and personal factors.

Murphy and Cornell also bring the student voice into our knowledge of assessment by examining both student perceptions and tutor intentions regarding feedback. They discovered a mismatch between student expectations and what tutors feel able to deliver. As with Lilly and colleagues' work, they discuss

the constraints that staff face in improving feedback in ways that students would value. The difficulty of getting a sense of progress across a range of assignments is examined and a plea is made for paying greater attention to developing student understanding of the language and culture of higher education. Sambell's work, whilst looking more broadly at the whole learning environment created by an innovative enquiry-based module, continues the theme of challenging the power asymmetry between students and staff. The paper investigates efforts to reframe novice undergraduates' concept of studentship as one of active enquiry and meaning-making. The resonance between key concepts in enquiry-based learning and assessment for learning is used to tackle challenges created by increasing diversity in the student body.

Finally, the impact of empowering students through generating and engaging with formative feedback is a theme in Parry and Bamber's quasi- experimental study of MBA students. Parry and Bamber investigated whether formative feedback activities improved students' performance and satisfaction. Interestingly, they found that continuous formative feedback during the module increased students' satisfaction but had an apparently unexpected effect of creating a level of reassurance in students about their work. Student grades were not significantly increased as their enhanced self knowledge was used in a satisficing way, to reassure themselves that they would pass rather than as a basis for improvement.

Overall, this series of papers continues the direction of travel of current assessment and feedback research in higher education. Whilst the studies are largely small scale, they bring with them the vitality and reality of a practitioner perspective; challenging in their depth and theoretical engagement but ultimately positive in the ideas they present for concerned and progressive tutors.

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