

Editorial

This special issue of Practitioner Research in Higher Education, focused on assessment and feedback, brings together seven evaluation and research papers concerning aspects of authentic assessment, different types of examinations, adaptive comparative assessment, doctoral examiner panel reports, online rubrics, formative feedback, and peer learning activity.

In an innovative task design Frances Edwards, based in New Zealand, turns the tables on engagement with social media by setting an assessment in which student teachers edit Wikipedia entries and provide a rationale for the amendments they have made. This is a particularly useful authentic assessment task given the political post-truth debates raging online about what and how to teach (Boyd, 2022).

Also working on task design, David Bell, Vikki O'Neill and Vivienne Crawford, based in Northern Ireland, present their research investigating reliability and validity of extended duration open book examinations compared to time-limited closed book examinations. Focusing on pharmacology assessments for healthcare students they found only a modest reduction in this context of reliability and validity with the adoption of open book extended duration assessments.

Concerned to strengthen student engagement with feedback, Clare Ellison, based in the north of England, evaluates her introduction of adaptive comparative assessment. She used this to generate formative peer feedback with a small group of undergraduate pharmaceutical science students. Although it was challenging to maintain full engagement with all students, the self-reported views of those participants that did complete the assessment and feedback tasks suggested positive impact in terms of them developing self-efficacy and 'evaluative judgment' (Tai et al., 2018).

Based on the sunny island of Malta, Deborah Chetcuti, Joseph Cacciottolo, and Nicholas Vella investigate the post-viva written feedback provided to doctoral research students by academics within examination panels. Using a framework of editorial, instructional and reflective feedback they found that most fell into the pragmatic editorial and instructional categories, basically aimed at amendments for the student to get their thesis into an acceptable shape for successful award of the doctorate. These researchers argue that current feedback is constrained and more reflective feedback is appropriate and would help research students into the future, for example in getting their work published and developing further as researchers.

Joy Robbins and Milena Marinkova investigate the use of online rubrics following five case study students over two semesters. Generating data using interviews but also student-recorded screencasts in which students followed a think-aloud protocol as they engaged with their online feedback. This kind of rich data, moving beyond self-reported perceptions, seems valuable if we are to better understand the influence of feedback on student behaviour and learning (Winstone & Nash, 2023). The findings of Robbins and Marinkova suggest that: '...counter to our hopes for digital enhancement, the online rubrics in these cases tended to actually inhibit feedback literacy development.' However, they did also find that students develop useful online strategies for making sense of feedback and acting upon it, despite the issues with the rubrics.

Dave Darwent and Amy Musgrove investigate how feedback provided to undergraduate social science students during the completion of their dissertations, specifically an initial submission of a research proposal, might influence their attainment in their final submission. They consider written feedback

against a framework of noting specific strengths, noting where improvements can be made, and crucially noting why the assessor is confident that the student is capable of making the improvements. In most of the feedback this last element was missing.

Russell Woodward and Nicola Pattinson investigate peer learning among undergraduate business students. Their study found that in-class activities and group assessment were found to promote peer learning including formative feedback. Engaging with the literature was the area of student work that currently seemed to most frequently encourage peer-learning. This study focuses on the mechanisms of the important learning that seems essential but is beyond the direct influence of the tutor and identifies a minority of students that self-report little if any engagement in peer learning activities.

Overall, these diverse papers demonstrate how assessment and feedback are generally becoming more integrated within teaching and learning activity and there is a considerable effort within higher education to develop activities that generate formative feedback. They also provide some insight into the way that academics and practitioner researchers are using interplay between professional judgment and research evidence to inform their practice.

References

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