Perceptions of assessment: an audit of practise

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Summary

An audit of academic staff's perceptions of their extant assessment practices was carried out by questionnaire. Views on the **principles and concepts** of assessment showed there to be inconsistencies in the perceptions held. Essentially staff had aspirations towards authentic assessment but engaged in practices which militated against this being fully realised. The findings imply that assessment must be understood conceptually as well as procedurally.

Biography

Effie Maclellan is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Strathclyde. A Chartered Psychologist, she has **research interests** in learning, teaching and assessment and is engaged in a number of projects which seek to clarify what 'good practice' in education might mean.

Keywords

authentic academic achievement, authentic assessment, formative assessment, measurement model, standards model.

Introduction

The literature makes it quite clear that assessment shapes and drives learning in powerful, though not always helpful, ways (Ramsden, 1997). If students perceive a need to understand the material in order to negotiate the assessment task successfully, they will engage in deep learning, but if they perceive the assessment instrument to require regurgitation of information, they will be unlikely to engage with the higher level objectives which may well have been intended by the programme of study. The power of assessment to influence learning suggests that assessment and learning be aligned (Biggs, 1999). The purpose of this study was to describe academic staff perceptions of assessment, as this information was to be used to review institutional policy on the related matters of **learning, teaching and assessment**. The need to review such policy was all the more pointed given the current desire that assessment should reflect the ways in which knowledge and skills are used in real world contexts and are demonstrated through **authentic tasks**.

Data gathered

Data on perceptions of in-Faculty assessment were collected from 100 academics by means of a questionnaire, the construction of which was influenced by the ideas of Bowden & Marton, (1998) Biggs, (1999) McDowell, (1998) and Prosser & Trigwell (1999). The questionnaire explored perceptions of extant practices on the purpose, mode, content, timing and marking of assessment.

Findings

All frequencies are in percentage terms to the nearest whole number.

Table 1: Purpose of assessment

Assessment is used to	frequently	sometimes	never
motivate learning	69	23	9
grade/rank achievement	83	15	2
diagnose strengths/weaknesses	66	23	11
evaluate teaching	41	40	19

Table 2: Content of assessment

Assessment focuses on the	frequently	sometimes	never
development of knowledge	81	15	4
application of knowledge	76	23	1
presentation of knowledge	66	30	4
analysis of knowledge	86	14	0
synthesis of knowledge	76	23	1
evaluation of knowledge	79	18	4

Table 3: Assessors

Assessment is carried out by	frequently	sometimes	never
self	9	50	41
peers	5	48	48

Table 4: Timing of assessment

Assessment is carried out by	frequently	sometimes	never
at the start of the module	4	24	73
during the module	29	53	19
at the end of the module	86	8	6
when the student is ready	10	14	76

Table 5: Mode of assessment

Assessment is through	frequently	sometimes	never
seminar contributions	13	48	40
presentations to peers	10	59	31
essay	79	16	5
multiple-choice questions	5	35	60
short answer questions	13	45	43
case/fieldwork notes	15	44	41
reflective logs/diaries	19	58	24
participation in labs	10	38	53
audio/video recordings	6	31	63

Table 6: Marking of assessment

Marking is	frequently	sometimes	never

Marking is	frequently	sometimes	never
against implicit criteria	9	29	63
against explicit criteria	81	15	2
to assess knowledge	60	31	9
to assess thinking	64	29	5
to assess presentation	54	31	15
given a summative grade	85	11	4
routinely second marked	18	50	33
second marked if a fail	50	33	18
sampled by a moderator	38	44	19
anonymous	39	19	43

Table 7: Value of feedback

Feedback	frequently	sometimes	never
is helpful in its detail	49	44	8
prompts discussion	63	30	8
enables understanding of assessment	50	40	10
improves learning	49	45	6

The importance of assessment

The primary purpose of assessment was to grade or rank students (Table 1). The importance given to determining achievement is perhaps not misplaced given the need for universities to communicate students' **levels of achievement** with professional bodies and potential employers (Atkins et al, 1993). However, the **formative** purposes of motivating students, diagnosing learning and evaluating teaching were also noted. The value placed on formative assessment is further evidenced in the roles attributed to feedback (Table 7), to strengthening the students' knowledge base, and to developing student thinking and improving presentation (Table 6).

Inconsistencies in perceptions

But the importance allegedly placed on formative assessment is not internally consistent with other views. For example, staff reported that assessment neither took place at the beginning of a module nor could students be assessed when they themselves felt ready (Table 4). Furthermore, staff reported that self and peer assessment were infrequent occurrences (Table 3). There are at least three important educational implications arising from this:

- The practice of not assessing at the start of a module precludes the opportunity to modify/design teaching in response to student understanding (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).
- The practice of not allowing students to be assessed when they feel ready for assessment denies that students may need differential amounts of time to achieve desired learning outcomes (Boud, 1995).
- To discount students' judgements is to fail to appreciate that effective learning is in large measure a function of strategic metacognitive behaviour (Biggs, 1999).

All three practices, which discount the status of the students' learning, are inconsistent with **a constructivist view** of learning and, by extension, with a **standards** model of assessment.

The importance of deep learning

Assessment was frequently perceived as judging the development and application of knowledge together with the skills of analysis, synthesis and the evaluation of information. This finding is reflected in the perceptions of both the content and marking of assessment (Tables 2 and 6). These tables suggest that declarative knowledge per se was not the sole focus of assessment and that students were being assessed on their ability to assemble and interpret information, formulate ideas, construct a defensible argument and critique a line of reasoning. These particular types of cognitive tasks are important because they have the potential to be generalisable to other learning and problem solving situations in the real world (Messick, 1994). Moreover, it is these types of cognitive tasks which underpin **authentic academic achievement**.

Ambivalence about authenticity in assessment

However, the extent to which assessment genuinely focused on students' capacity to transform or evaluate declarative knowledge can be viewed as questionable when considering the modes through which assessment took place (Table 5). Perusal of the different 'instruments' suggests that some more obviously mirror real life than others. For example, tutorial contributions and oral presentations might be seen as manifestations of the practical, real world skills of group interaction and problem solving (Taylor, 1997). Similarly, reflective diaries are promoted as evidencing continuing professional development (Brockbank & McGill, 1998). Finally, the creation of videotapes, the maintenance of case notes and participation in labs/workshops can directly map on to real life activity. The extent to which these real life modes of assessment were used was, by staff's own admission, not frequent. Conversely, while the essay mode and short answer mode may well assess the use of cogent argument and the expression of complex ideas, writing about one's ideas is somewhat removed from actively demonstrating one's knowledge. The extent to which assessment tasks made authentic demands of students is then questionable. Staff believed that they were assessing a full range of learning but the heavy emphasis on one particular mode suggests a more limited range of learning was actually being assessed. This would not be fully consistent with the standards model.

Conclusion

While the standards model of assessment is the desirable model in formal education (Biggs, 1999) because it attempts to reflect *what has been learned* in criterion referenced terms, the historical dominance of the measurement model means that extant practices in educational assessment may not be consistent with a standards model (Taylor, 1994). In this study such inconsistency was indeed evidenced. Staff declared a commitment to the formative purposes of assessment but engaged in practices which militated against formative assessment being fully realised. Similarly, staff maintained that the full range of learning was frequently assessed yet the dominant mode of assessment was the traditional, written assignment, thereby attenuating the idea that students were engaging in authentic assessment which could enhance their learning.

Such inconsistency in perception is, however, perfectly understandable. In the transition from a measurement to a standards model of assessment, academics have to cope with:

- tensions between their personal desires for student learning and institutional expectations;
- conflicts in their beliefs as to what good teaching is (in an increasingly diverse context of widening access);
- changes in their understanding about assessment.

But academics who seek to change their practice may not have useful images to guide the creation of a focused assessment strategy that emphasises enquiry and the exchange of ideas. If academics themselves experienced a measurement model of assessment, their own points of reference give them little insight into how assessment might be different from what their own experience would dictate. Clearly, then, there is a need for academics to develop techniques and activities that stimulate (active) learning and are consistent with a standards model of assessment. However, while learning to implement new assessment procedures is one aspect of a change to one's teaching, it is important to remember that without concomitant changes in fundamental **beliefs** about the nature of assessment, outward manifestations of changes in practice may be no more than a pastiche of techniques and strategies located in different, and possibly inconsistent, theoretical positions about learning. Movement in the direction of a standards model will doubtless involve acquiring new strategies and techniques but it should also involve an examination of currently held beliefs to discard elements that no longer serve practice well and to appropriate those that allow the academic to construct a coherent pedagogical perspective on **assessment**.

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