ENGAGING STUDENTS VIA ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that student engagement is receiving a considerable amount of attention in research, policy and educational development. A wide array of engagement initiatives have recently flourished in the UK and elsewhere, often with a view to helping students adjust and adapt to university culture, so that they are enabled and encouraged to engage in university life on a number of levels. This chapter focuses on the ways in which assessment can play an important part in helping or hindering students' levels of engagement with academic study. First, drawing on recent scholarship in the field of assessment, which asserts the need for widespread shifts in the ways in which assessment is conceptualised, it highlights the ways in which assessment offers a fruitful and potent arena in which faculty can make concerted efforts to engage students with their studies and the experience of being and belonging at university. It goes on to warn, however, about some of the problems that emerge if the underpinning principles of the new paradigm are poorly understood or applied in restrictive ways, because these act as barriers to engagement. Next, it focuses down on the links between assessment and engagement, which are then related to holistic models of assessment for learning (AfL). Finally, the chapter offers some concrete examples of the ways in which assessment can be designed to promote engagement and improve the student experience of learning. Illustrations of students' views of the benefits are offered, drawn from empirical studies conducted as part of a large-scale initiative to implement AfL in a UK university (Sambell et al, 2012). Broadly speaking, these link strongly to themes of engagement.

Overall, the chapter argues that, because the new paradigm involves establishing and sharing a set of assumptions, concepts and values, designing assessment to promote learning is more complex and profound than is sometimes assumed (Boud and Molloy, 2012). However, a sustained focus on issues of engagement in AfL research and practice development offers a particularly valuable lens through which to view and gauge our assessment practices and alerts us to important ways forward when designing assessment for the benefit of student learning.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING AGENDA IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The rethinking of assessment at a theoretical level focused on its capacity to improve and foster, as well as measure learning, aiming for this to become recognised by staff and students alike. This has been an international endeavour. Havnes (2012) has called this the short history of assessment for learning, saying it denotes important theoretical shifts in conceptualisations of assessment in higher education over the past twenty years. He argues this meant recognising assessment's role in defining what students need to learn and its capacity to drive educational practice, becoming part of quality teaching. Assessment became viewed as a prerequisite for learning, rather than simply a measure of it. Havnes asserts this entailed an expansion of focus from

- outcomes to process
- control of learning to support of learning
- students being assessed to students also taking part in assessment
- assessment as a distinct practice to assessment as embedded in learning

According to Birenbaum (1996) this called for a new assessment culture and assessment for learning started to be used as a specialist term embodying a call to improve educational practice.

Early exponents built on the outcomes of prior research into student perspectives on assessment, which demonstrated that whilst summative assessment tasks might be viewed as purely a way of measuring learning and progress, they could also have a significant impact on learning and teaching. For example, the work of Miller and Parlett (1974) in universities showed that what and how students went about learning could be strongly influenced by the ways in which they were assessed and marks were awarded. This was later termed the backwash effect, and it was not always positive. Attempts were made to try and reduce negative assessment backwash and promote high quality learning by diversifying assessment tasks to make them more authentic and engaging (Brown and Knight, 1994; Bryan and Clegg, 2006). Our own early research into the impact of assessment on students' approaches to learning supported this shift (Sambell et al, 1997). Further, the idea of constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang, 2007), where assessment as part of an integrated learning-teaching-

assessment system is designed to issue messages that foster students' active engagement in deep, lasting learning, also became particularly prominent. New terms began to emerge, such as 'learning-oriented assessment' (Carless, 2007) to highlight these aspects of AfL.

Another key shift in view of assessment was an increasing recognition of the active role of students. Earl (2003) used the term assessment *as* learning to include the students' engagement in self-assessment and their active participation in directing their own learning. This view recognises that the student response to assessment is not just determined by assessment task design. Students act on the basis of their individual and collective perceptions of assessment requirements, interpreted in the context of their own standpoint as a student. A common practical reaction was to place more emphasis on providing guidance and information to help students to understand the requirements of assessment. In the 1990s a growing tide of opinion in universities assumed that simply providing information to students about learning outcomes, grade criteria, assignment briefs and marking rubrics would help students develop (Price et al, 2012). Providing feedback as a means of informing students about the quality of their current achievements was also frequently emphasized. This trend continues, especially in recent years, as universities seek to address the poor scores students often award to feedback in national satisfaction surveys.

Giving students information like this are aspects of formative assessment and may justifiably be considered as an element of assessment for learning. However, limited conceptions present some problems. For instance, if feedback is framed exclusively as a product which is given to students (Boud and Molloy, 2012), or if tactics to advise students about assessment requirements are simply written down or basically 'dropped in' to existing courses, with no account of the sense students make of them, they do not sit easily with the underpinning philosophy of the assessment for learning agenda. Indeed, empirical research has subsequently led to the recognition that simply giving students feedback or information on assessment requirements has limited effectiveness in supporting learning (O'Donovan et al, 2004). Even worse, this kind of restricted approach to assessment for learning can undermine the principles of learner empowerment and engagement that the new assessment culture aimed to promote. Torrance (2007) warns, for instance, that sometimes approaches to formative feedback methods that have been designed to 'help' students can actually displace learning. Instead of promoting shared understanding and participation, some enhancement practices designed, ostensibly, to engage students with assessment or feedback, simply

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become a matter of 'teaching to the test,' or controlling student behaviour. Here students and teachers are seen to focus on completing assessment tasks and attaining good marks to the detriment of real engagement with learning (Ecclestone, 2002). In practice, then, restricted conceptions of formative assessment and one-way feedback practices can worryingly result in conformity, poor quality learning and procedural compliance: all alienated experiences that Mann (2001) urges us to counteract if we are serious about creating environments that enable, rather than hinder, student engagement.

Sadler (1989) established that feedback could actually only have an effect if a student was able to: develop an understanding of the standards and qualities required in their subject; relate their own performance and the feedback on it to those standards; and take action towards producing higher quality work. This clearly requires active engagement of students in the assessment process and, in a broad sense, self-assessment. The ASKe Centre for Excellence (Price et al, 2012, 25) has recently documented a change in their own practical approaches over time in line with this. They have gradually moved from simply giving students criteria and rubrics (which the Centre calls "passive engagement" with criteria and standards), towards methods more in line with "active engagement" to assist students' understanding of the qualities and standards of good work in their discipline, such as active use of assessment criteria in workshop discussions and use of exemplars. More recently there has also been a focus on the acquisition of tacit understandings through participation in disciplinary communities (O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2008). The need for dialogue, discussion and student participation in assessment and feedback (Osney Grange Group, 2009) has emerged from a range of different research perspectives, for example the work by Laurillard (2002) on a conversational model of teaching which, in contrast to one-way transmission, enables understanding to be checked and clarified between students and teachers.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

In general terms, then, shifts like this can be seen as attempts to ensure that assessment practices change in sympathy with constructivist views of learning and teaching, which have come to epitomise the hallmark of university education (Barkley, 2009; Biggs and Tang, 2007). Once it is accepted that, in order to learn and participate in the complex and situated epistemological practices which characterise higher education, learners need opportunities to

make meaning and build their own mental constructs, rather than passively receive information and didactic instruction, then it follows that similar opportunities and roles for students should also be embodied within our assessment practices. Price et al (2012) have recently argued that to bring this about and foster active engagement staff and students need high levels of assessment literacy. This entails: being similarly conversant with assessment's relationship to learning; sharing an appreciation of appropriate standards and criteria; seeing the importance of and developing the skills for self-evaluation; and developing the skills to choose and apply appropriate approaches to assessed tasks.

Many arguments about the need to explicitly develop students' assessment literacy, rather than leave it to chance, are firmly rooted in two dimensions of engagement as outlined by Trowler and Trowler (2010) in their substantial review of student engagement. The first dimension is individual engagement with learning activities and subject matter, where informal formative tasks and discussions embedded in the specific context of the subject domain promote a kind of learning by doing. Engaging like this helps students begin to recognise the tacit assumptions of the discipline, which are crucial to assessment literacy because they underpin the *real* (but often tacit) requirements of the assessment tasks that students are asked to undertake (Bloxham and West, 2007; Sambell, 2011). This dimension also relates strongly to the assertion that students must be actively supported to develop understandings of assessment which position them as active participants in the learning process, so that they can monitor and control their own learning (Boud and Associates, 2010). This involves enabling students to learn to *do* assessment and proactively make judgments for themselves, rather than simply receiving and responding to the instructions of others.

Further, a second relevant dimension is engagement through participation and development of identity. This is a sort of learning via participation and relates strongly to a student's developing sense of the deep-level principles and rules of engagement in the subject community, which manifest themselves, again tacitly, in the ways of thinking and practising (Meyer and Land, 2005) of the discipline. Again, a main way of developing this appreciation is via active and social learning experiences, where students learn, gradually, to absorb the ways of thinking and practising of the subject domain by being collectively immersed in a constant flow of disciplinary discourse (Northedge, 2003) which they work on with peers and 'old timers' in a process of epistemic apprenticeship (Claxton, 2011). In another sense, this is also about stakeholders explicitly recognising the relational, dialogic dynamic in learning and assessment. It relates strongly to the growing awareness that students come to a fuller

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appreciation of the tacit assumptions of academic practice, with its emphasis on learner responsibility and autonomy, by participating actively with more experienced learners and peers in social interactions and discussions focused around concrete assessment practices within and beyond the formal classroom (Orsmond et al, 2012). Barnett and Coates (2005) have argued that curriculum reinvention is necessary to ensure that students are triply engaged: in knowing, acting and being.

Some perspectives on engagement and assessment foreground important aspects of identity in other ways. Academic literacies research as pioneered by Lea and Street (1998) highlights the importance of student participation and the development of new ways of seeing the world and themselves with regard to students' academic writing practices, thus bringing issues of identity to the fore in relation to assessment. From a socio-cultural perspective, Mann (2001) has argued that the ways in which assessment practices, experienced by students as a site of power and disciplinary control, need to be reconfigured to reduce alienation and promote engagement in a much broader sense. From this viewpoint issues surrounding engagement and assessment are social and political, rather than purely to do with cognitive processes and accurate measurement. It is worth recognising that for some exponents the main issues are overtly ideological, political and ethical. Clegg and O'Brien (2006,225), for instance, urge their readers to "take the moral high ground" by implementing new approaches to assessment. Progressive educational principles, antithetical to oppressive regimes of authority and discipline, underpin the philosophical thrust of many pedagogically-focused engagement initiatives around assessment practices (see, for instance, McArthur and Huxham, forthcoming; Clughen and Hardy, 2012).

TOWARDS AN HOLISTIC APPROACH TO AFL

As suggested earlier, a number of assessment for learning models have developed a more holistic conception located in what is commonly regarded as teaching and learning (see, for instance, Carless, 2006; Boud and Associates, 2012). They propose ways of radically rethinking assessment in overall terms so that it becomes learning-oriented, rather than focussing on quick technical fixes or partial adjustments. One of these was the work of the national Centre for

Excellence (CETL[1]) in AfL at Northumbria University, which had the principles of individual and social engagement at its heart.

Our model of AfL (Sambell et al, 2012) is characterised by a feedback-rich learning environment that has formative assessment at its core with the intention of enabling all students to enhance their achievements. The notion of feedback is expanded to include not only the 'normal' tutor feedback on student work but also tutor-student dialogic feedback which is part of interactive teaching and learning and peer feedback from a range of formal and informal collaborative learning activities. This interaction enables students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own work, rather than simply expecting tutors to perform that role for them.

By engaging students as active participants in learning activities and feedback, we seek to induct them into the requirements of their discipline or professional area of study enabling them to understand and subsequently, interrogate and challenge the standards, outcomes, and criteria used for the evaluation of high quality work. Social learning, collaborative inquiry and group discussion are valued and promoted with students increasingly taking control of their own learning and its evaluation. These capabilities, where students direct their own learning, evaluate their own progress and attainments and support the learning of others are at the heart of autonomous learning and of the graduate qualities valued by employers and in professional practice.

AfL provides for verification of student attainment without allowing this summative function to dominate learning and teaching. There will be 'summative-free zones' where learning (and teaching) can take place without some of the direct, negative backwash effects of assessment for grading. Students are offered opportunities to practice and rehearse skills and knowledge, to make mistakes and to learn collaboratively in a low stakes context (Knight and Yorke, 2003). AfL challenges the assumption that unless marks are attached students will not do something and enables productive learning to happen without the direct reward of marks or grades. It tackles the downward spiral where marks and grades are used to control student behaviour and, as a response, students deploy effort only when this will be directly rewarded by marks. Here our model seeks to ensure that high-stakes summative assessment is used rigorously but sparingly, so that formative assessment can drive the learning, offering students extensive

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[1] CETL AfL was one of 74 centres of excellence established by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 2005

opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that develop and demonstrate their learning, thus building their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed.

Both summative and formative assessment must be well-constructed and designed and there may in fact be considerable crossover between the two within the learning environment. The assessment strategy must employ a diversity of methods to assess genuine and valued learning. Views of assessment as measurement of capability have left us with a legacy of assessment methods which may effectively serve the purpose of producing numerical marks and differentiating between students. These methods are normally of much less value in developing and evaluating authentic and worthwhile performances of understanding, application, creativity and commitment. AfL requires appropriate assessment tasks - methods which stimulate and evaluate worthwhile learning through the assessment process and foster the capabilities and dispositions for learning in professional and personal life beyond graduation.

This implies, of course, that AfL is much more than a set of simple tactics which can be adopted by teachers, and inflects more towards our view of AfL as a philosophy, which frames learning, and the associated staff-student and student-student relationships, in particular ways. Our model was developed as a means of trying to ensure that participating teachers developed sophisticated levels of assessment literacy which they could then use a basis from which to critically interrogate and inform their practice. To this end it was based on six conditions which act as inter-linking pedagogic principles which could be used to guide the development of effective AfL practice and harness the power of assessment to support learning. The six conditions are, briefly, about trying to create an overall assessment environment which:

1. is rich in formal feedback (via, for example, tutor comment; self-assessment systems; peer review)
2. is rich in informal feedback (through, for instance, dialogic teaching, peer interaction and carefully designed classroom assessment which provides students with a continuous flow of feedback on 'how they are doing')
3. provides opportunities for students to try out and practice knowledge, skills and understanding before they are summatively assessed
4. contains assessment tasks which are authentic or relevant and meaningful in some way, beyond 'just acquiring marks'
5. assists students to develop independence and autonomy

6. strikes an appropriate balance between formative and summative assessment.

PUTTING AFL INTO PRACTICE

During the course of the CETL funding period six experienced academics in different subject areas became CETL Fellows who led the redesign of over 30 modules using the AfL conditions as guiding principles. This was a significant undertaking, as, in practice, it often meant redesigning the whole module's mode of delivery to bring learners' experiences and engagement, rather than content, to the fore. 67 teaching staff and 1,500 students were involved in this strand of the CETL's enhancement activity and a research programme was established to investigate the outcomes.

The following sections briefly illustrate the student response to nine of these redesigned AfL modules, based on data gathered as part of the overall research programme. First, the broad outcomes of survey work will be presented. Here a questionnaire was used to capture the responses of the whole student population on seven of the enhanced modules. Next, practical examples of the different ways in which staff put aspects of AfL into operation on three modules in the subject area of childhood and community studies will be discussed. It is important to bear in mind that, while for the sake of illustration and clarity the examples are being presented separately, in reality each 'type' of AfL practice was actually part of an integrated overall approach within the respective module. All three modules became case studies in the research programme, in which observation studies and interviews were used to build detailed sightings of students' views and lived experiences of AfL. The students' voices that accompany each example have been included to give readers a feel for some of the challenges and issues involved in developing students' assessment literacy, as well as indicating their levels of engagement.

Students' Overall Responses

As part of the overall CETL research programme a student questionnaire – the AfLQ- was developed as a quantitative instrument which would give a broad picture of the ways in which students experience the AfL environments that were designed and implemented (for details, see McDowell et al, 2011). This allowed us to study the general student experience (n=353) of seven AfL modules. On an important level, the survey demonstrated that students noticed a discernible difference between modules which had been redesigned using the

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conditions, and those that had not. Results indicated that the overall student experience was more positive in modules where AfL approaches were used and students were more likely to take a deep approach to learning. It also demonstrated that the student experience of AfL became centred on staff support and module design, feedback, active engagement and peer learning. These, of course, are all aspects of engagement as defined in the literature (Kuh et al, 2010).

Illustrative Examples

We also had a well-established framework and tools for research and evaluation using qualitative approaches. For instance, a series of detailed case studies were undertaken and three of these are drawn upon below. In each case, an independent researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with student volunteers at selected points in each module. In the following three sections, quotes are taken from these interviews to illuminate students' viewpoints, with pseudonyms being used to designate individual students' voices.

Engaging Students in Pre-assessment Tasks.

This first example focuses upon a first year module, where, in the ninth week of study, students were invited to work collaboratively on exemplars. The lecturers hoped that enabling students to see and discuss concrete illustrations of actual student writing might help learners to become clearer about the standards and criteria against which work would be judged. They felt this would enable students to evaluate and calibrate their own achievements, in time, if necessary, to adjust their approaches before their work 'counted' in terms of marks. As such, Sadler's (1989) seminal formulation, mentioned earlier in the chapter, inspired the activity, as did Nicol's (2009) injunction to encourage students to generate, rather than simply receive, feedback. Additionally, Carless's (2007) ideas were influential, especially his discussion of pre-emptive formative assessment. Here lecturers use their experience to identify common misconceptions that learners often make at a particular stage in the course and draw these to students' attention, so that students have time to become aware of the pitfalls and adjust their approaches before any marks are at stake.

The activities were set up as follows. A two-hour teaching session, with over 90 students working in a tiered lecture theatre with two members of staff, was dedicated to workshop activities based on exemplars. Before the two-hour session, students were asked to prepare a short piece of writing explaining a key concept in the disciplinary area being studied. This

was not to exceed 500 words, and students were advised to try and practice using academic writing conventions. Students were asked to bring their writing to the session, where they were given four exemplars. The exemplars were based on previous students' attempts to explain the concept. The teachers selected them to epitomise a range of responses from 'good' to 'inadequate,' with one completing misunderstanding the concept in question, muddling it with a different concept entirely.

First, the session started by involving students in a criteria-setting activity in which, together with staff, they generated some statements which could be used to judge the exemplars. Students were then asked to work in small groups, trying to use the criteria to place the four exemplars in rank order. They were also asked to draft some feedback which would improve each exemplar. This all took about an hour. Next, tutors revealed and discussed the rankings they would award, and talked about the thinking behind their decisions. Students had the opportunity to ask any questions. Finally, students were asked to revisit the draft feedback they had prepared, augmenting or amending it, if necessary, based on the discussions so far. Again, they were encouraged to ask any questions. Students were also advised to reflect on how they would improve their own piece of writing, in the light of the session.

Student Perspective

On one level all seven students who were interviewed afterwards about the activities claimed to find them extremely useful. They seemed prompted to develop their assessment literacy in a range of ways. First, they felt the session offered them chance to develop their views of criteria in a concrete, rather than abstract way. For instance, one student explained:

'I think seeing it just makes you understand it more. Like, someone can stand there and say, 'You shouldn't do this and that' but until you've actually seen it then you don't know what that looks like. I think it's harder if you just get a list of rules and have to figure out for yourself how to apply it.'(Jill)

Some felt they had learned to improve their own work as a result. It was extremely common for students to realise they were required to undertake considerably more reading than they anticipated, as in the following instance:

'I suddenly learned that reading is so vital, as it builds up your knowledge and helps you gain a better understanding. That was the light bulb moment of the whole semester!' (June)

Some also began to pay closer attention to the nuances of definition and terminology within the subject area, which prompted them to engage more deeply with the ideas:

'When we discussed the task in class I realised that what I had written didn't focus on the question! It was this that made me read around the subject more.' (Stacey)

Many said, too, that they felt clearer about their teachers' expectations when it came to writing assignments. For instance, the following student realised the tutors did not want to see students reproducing their secondary reading verbatim but preferred them to summarise it, putting it into their own words to develop an argument:

'I was surprised with what they expected. They didn't want so many long quotes and all the information and detailed knowledge from my reading.' (Jill)

Four groups of students were also observed by the research team throughout the workshop. This revealed the extent of the 'gap' between staff and students' assumptions about the nature and standards of quality work, which, in most instances, was sizeable, yet, from the lecturers' perspectives, invisible. Despite repeated encouragement for students during the workshop to ask questions and clarify uncertainties, few did. Most of their apparent revelations took place backstage, as it were, in discussions amongst the student groups.

The insights gained by the participant researchers were particularly illuminating, as they revealed the immense difficulty that students were having in adjusting to the epistemological premises of university-level work and associated study, writing and assessment practices. For instance, it is especially noteworthy that in their initial group-discussions of the merits of each exemplar, all the students who were observed only noticed and discussed technical aspects, such as spelling or referencing, rather than the arguably more important features, such as analysis and argument. Even more importantly, before any form of dialogue was opened up with tutors and despite access to the assessment criteria, students almost exclusively ignored issues pertaining to the nature of knowledge in the subject domain, even though this was the implied focus of the 'question,' and despite 'understanding' being a superordinate criterion for staff.

Classroom observation further revealed that very few groups of students actually placed the exemplars in accordance with the rank order the tutors allocated. Many students found, often to their surprise or consternation:

'What we thought was best or worst was different to what they thought!'(Laura, Group 3)

While some groups simply muddled the two 'best' exemplars, several believed the exemplar which had misunderstood the key concept was actually the best piece of work and the most effective response was often considered 'worst.' In short, most students seemed unable to discern the exemplars at the extremes. Once they heard the teachers talk about the rankings they would award, all the observed groups were anxious to look again at the exemplars. Although they had been asked to amend their draft feedback for each exemplar, in practice, nearly all their discussion focused on the exemplar which the tutors felt to be a fail. In one sense, students were attempting to see afresh from the teachers' point of view, but this was by far from an easy, rapid or straightforward process. In their discussions students repeatedly looped back to apply technical advice about 'good essay-writing' they had received at secondary school and via university study skills sessions, which continued to distract them from looking for meaning and a deeper-level engagement with the texts.

This example serves as a salutary reminder, then, of the difficulties of helping students to make the adjustment to university academic culture so that they come to understand the real rules of the game and are enabled to engage by developing their assessment literacy. On one level this is unsurprising. Research (e.g. Kember, 2001) draws attention to the huge conceptual shifts students need to make with regard to their views of the nature of knowledge, teaching and learning when moving from school or college to university. This is a gradual, developmental process, which is likely to take time, rather than happen suddenly. This is all the more reason, arguably, to ensure that, as far as possible, the overall student experience of assessment aligns with and fosters the espoused goals and attributes of higher education. Whilst pre-assessment activities such as those described above may be useful catalysts to engagement, they should not be seen as a solution or end in their own right, but rather as part of a longer-term process, as the following two examples imply.

Putting Informal Feedback into Practice

Boud and Associates (2010, 2) argue that, in assessment for learning environments, "everyday learning activities as well as special tasks and tests provide opportunities for the provision of feedback." This example focuses on instances in which feedback occurred extremely informally, as part of the normal flow of teaching and learning, almost as a by-product. Classroom activities, tasks and associated directed study were designed to maximise the formative potential of the university classroom. Here the teachers' role was to create

effective conditions for learning by placing student involvement, effort and activity at the heart of the learning and teaching environment. By carefully structuring progressively challenging classroom activities staff sought to ensure that students were provided with a continual flow of feedback which enabled them to see how they were doing.

This kind of feedback could not be planned in detail, but relied on designing a climate that encouraged dialogue, collaboration amongst students and interaction about subject-related tasks between teachers and students. To this end tutors worked hard to structure the formative tasks and activities they asked their students to become involved in, moving strongly away from didactic, transmission models of teaching towards interactive, participative classroom experiences which were designed to foster student activity, application, discussion and social interaction around subject material. Arguably, informal interactions with peers are massively important ways of developing assessment literacy in universities, because this places emphasis on a process of reflection, peer review and evaluation (Black and McCormick, 2010).

As part of the two-hour weekly teaching sessions on the module, seventy final-year students worked in groups to build posters over a period of three consecutive weeks. The posters were informal, graffiti-like displays, rather than polished performances. The tutors emphasised that they were intended to act as tools for learning, so presentation issues did not matter, other than the material should be accessible to other students and teachers in the class when groups circulated to explore and discuss the findings of other groups' posters. The lecturers set a series of academic tasks for their students each week. To prepare for each session, individuals were asked to research material, which they brought along to contribute to the development of their group's poster. Over a three week period, students worked on their posters to develop different sightings of a key concept which the tutors believed underpinned high-order thinking and mastery in their particular domain. In the first week learners were required to discuss their personal interpretations of primary source material, then in subsequent weeks they incorporated different perspectives from a range of specified sources, which offered fresh perspectives that they layered on to their developing posters. This helped them link new ideas to their existing concepts, so that new ways of thinking were generated.

The students were supported to work collaboratively as groups. Ground-rules were negotiated, with students agreeing amongst themselves that everyone must participate, that consensus should be achieved before anything went on the poster, and that assertions anyone

put forward should be supported by evidence and a convincing rationale. This was important, because discussion was the main means by which learners were to engage with the new material each week. As learners endeavoured to understand the ideas within their own personal frames of reference they interacted with peers and their teachers, who circulated around the groups, listening in to informally appraise students' understandings of the material, interjecting to ask questions to clarify students' understandings of key concepts, or push the thinking further.

Student Perspective

Later, in interviews with the research team, six students talked about the value of negotiating common meaning with their fellow students. They felt this gave them insight into the extent to which they were grasping the relevant ideas:

'You make sure that it makes sense and then, er, to see if you can actually have an, er, a debate about it and have, have enough knowledge to back your arguments through when they go "Well, hang on a minute, what about this, what about that?"'(Briony)

Within this perspective, students seemed to feel that the lecturers' role was to keep students on track in relation to the subject.

'They went around the groups, saying: OK, good point. Maybe work a bit more on such and such. So you knew if you went terribly wrong, someone would say!' (Fiona)

Black and McCormick (2010) observe that oral discussion, involving interactive dialogue where the teacher can explore and steer by sensitive challenge should be one of the main ways through which the learner is apprenticed into the world of academic discourse by being inducted into its practice. In the poster work students framed the lecturers as authorities who could help students 'see' the nature of the subject specialism, and its particular ways of viewing material, by means of asking specific questions:

'It's knowing what questions to ask, which somebody who knows their subject knows. I didn't know the questions [how to approach the material]. That's something that clicks through time rather than clicking because you're told it.'(Lesley)

Here the student notes how it takes time, lots of active engagement with the subject and on-going participation with knowledgeable others to develop a feel for what a subject is *really*

all about. Without this insight, however, it is difficult for students to form a genuine sense of academic standards and requirements.

Authentic Assessment Tasks

This final example briefly highlights the importance of the backwash of the summative task, and the idea of constructive alignment. In a second year option about educational assessment, instead of writing an essay, students were required to produce guides to assessment which would be suitable for using with first year undergraduates. The guides took shape gradually, and as the module progressed teaching sessions were given over to their design and development, with ample opportunity for student-student and staff-student dialogue. This approach helped students to see how the knowledge they were developing, and the way they were building towards the assignment, had direct relevance and importance in the real world, even though the students did not necessarily envisage going on to undertake a professional teaching qualification. It also helped them to think of themselves as authors, encouraging them to argue a case. Learners were highly motivated and creative in their approaches. They chose a variety of formats, including booklets, catalogues, DVDs, games and leaflets to put their points across. Interestingly, given the choice, most students elected to develop their materials in small self-selecting groups or pairs rather than working alone.

Student Perspective

Seven interviewees said this offered them a more 'natural' way of working, in which ideas were shared and co-produced in a constructive process of dialogue, negotiation and peer review:

'Working on the same thing together is kind of helpful with this. Because we both have a working knowledge of the topic, we could actually say, No, I don't think that's right. Does this mean this? Should we put it this way?'[Becky]

Hounsell (2007) argues that collaborative assignments like this can help foster connoisseurship and a fuller appreciation of academic standards amongst students, because participants can learn from co-generation and co-writing as they work together on subject material.

Further, students claimed to approach this task in markedly different ways from other summative assessments. For instance, they found themselves investing personally in learning, rather than, as the following quotes suggest, finding themselves overly preoccupied with

performance goals and the alienating effects that the sense of being marked can entail (Mann, 2001):

'Normally I don't write it for me. I don't think I write my academic assignments for myself, I'm writing them for the person who is reading them.' (Sally)

'Normally, I have my 2:1 in mind, I need a 60% for my postgrad course, and that's what I am writing for.' (Helen)

By contrast, Sally claimed

'I used it to think through the things with assessment that had happened to me. It was about me, which my assignments aren't normally. I just normally check what they're asking and put bits in on each criteria (sic).'

Moreover, Helen talked of experiencing a sense of authorship which she associated with addressing an audience, rather than her assessor

'The sense that someone would read this- I think that helped us create it, especially after seeing the guides that they handed out as examples and they had said it might [be displayed]. People might pick it up, have a look through it.'

Elander et al (2010) argue that the concept of authorial identity can be useful in mainstream attempts to understand and improve student writing practices in university courses. AfL approaches and authentic tasks have an important part to play in this regard, helping students to genuinely engage with the real rules of the game in academic writing. Importantly, for instance, Sally found that her experiences of authorship on this module had a knock-on effect to the way she approached other assignments:

'I saw what they wanted- like a light bulb went off in my head. I started to rethink the whole way I did things on every assignment and suddenly I started to do better- across the board!'

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that assessment is a significant influence on students' experience of university study and all that they gain from it. Because assessment powerfully frames how students learn and what students achieve, it is useful to focus explicitly on improving assessment practice to improve the quality of teaching, learning and the student experience. It is crucial that students develop a broad understanding of assessment, are assured of its role in their learning, and aware of their role in the process.

However, as Price et al (2012, 14) point out, there are clearly some significant challenges to be faced in developing assessment literacy amongst staff as well as students. If widespread transformations to assessment are to become a reality in higher education assessment experts assert that a planned and sustained staff development strategy is needed (see, for example,

HEA, 2012, 15). It is important, for instance, to recognise the extent to which our CETL offered a whole range of staff development activities and opportunities for its associates, helping them to rethink assessment. This included, for example, one-to-one support, master-classes, reading groups, practice exchanges, mentoring, collaborative research and development projects, all led by international experts in the field of assessment in higher education. This represented a significant resource allocation, which was supported by the originating team's successful bid into a competitively allocated central funding stream to support learning and teaching innovation. The current economic climate places increasing pressure on the resourcing of pioneering pedagogic initiatives.

Nevertheless, carefully-developed AfL approaches offer some practical and feasible ways forward, even in resource-constrained circumstances. To develop the work further we need to know more about the ways in which students develop and use assessment literacy, especially over time and beyond the academy in the longer term. However, it seems clear that, as part of students' overall experience of being at university, assessment has an impact on their broader experience of engagement. By the same token, the nature of student engagement has an influence on the ways in which they view and respond to assessment. Well-developed AfL practice provides an important key to engaging students via quality teaching and learning.

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