

Making Assessment Meaningful

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“The term assessment is derived from ad sedere – to sit down beside. The implication of its etymology is that it is primarily concerned with providing guidance and feedback to the learner.” Brown et al. 1997 (p.11)

Introduction: the role of formative assessment

A study by Maclellan (2001) found that the most frequently endorsed purpose of assessment, as perceived by both staff and students, was to grade or rank student achievement. He found that 25% of students felt assessment never motivates them in learning. These are quite surprising results when you consider that the QAA General Principle 12 states that “Institutions should ensure that appropriate feedback is provided to students on assessed work that promotes learning and facilitates improvement”. As teachers in higher education institutions, we are expected to design assessment in a way that promotes learning and enables the students to develop and understand their own limitations. Yet, according to Rust (2002), in the QAA subject reviews the aspect that most frequently loses a point is “Teaching, Learning and Assessment”, and the reason for this is almost always to do with inconsistent assessment practices.

Yorke (2003) explains that “the central purpose of formative assessment is to contribute to student learning through the provision of information about performance”. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) similarly define ‘formative assessment’ as ‘assessment that is specifically intended to generate feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning’. In order to meet the QAA Principle 12, and to enhance teaching and learning, we clearly need to be using formative functions of assessment.

This leads us to consider what do we specifically mean by designing assessment for formative purpose? Black and Williams (1998) state, “The ultimate user of assessment information that is elicited in order to improve learning is the pupil”. They propose three elements are involved when providing feedback: recognition of the desired goal, evidence about the present position, and some ideas of a way to close the gap between the two. In order for someone to take action to improve learning, all three aspects must be understood.

Yorke (2003) also identifies three elements to effective formative assessment:

“Underlying the dimensions of formative assessment... is a triple intention – to give credit for what has been done to the expected standard, to correct what is wrong and to encourage emancipation by alerting the student to possibilities which he or she may not have hitherto discerned.”

Here, ‘emancipation’ implies the intention to go beyond the current boundaries of knowledge.

Staff perceptions of formative assessment: an exploration

An initial investigation into staff perceptions of formative assessment within London Metropolitan University was carried out by the author and other colleagues (see acknowledgements), to enable us to understand assessment for formative purposes within the context of our own teaching establishment.

A structured, closed questionnaire was devised using ideas and constructs sourced in the literature (Brown, 1996; Dixon & Williams, 2006; Gibbs and Simpson, 2002; Race, 1996; Knight & Yorke, 2003). The questionnaire mostly used Likert scale to ascertain the degree of agreement or disagreement with a number of statements. Questionnaires were distributed via e-mail to colleagues using various mailing lists to which we had access. Out of approximately 250 people that were contacted for the study, 36 respondents replied making the response rate only 14.4%. The questionnaire was coded and SPSS was used to analyse the data. Whilst there were limitations in the methodology of our investigation, we can still deduce some useful areas of interest from the results, and make links back to the theory and literature.

Some of the areas we decided to explore were whether the participants perceived that the practicalities of teaching (e.g. teaching hours) affected the use of formative assessment, the types of assessments teaching staff were using (e.g. self- and peer-assessments), the type of feedback (i.e. oral or written), and what they perceived students did with the feedback.

Findings

Demographic

- Four-fifths (80.6%) were full-time members of staff, the rest were either hourly-paid lecturers or part-timer staff.
- Nearly half of the respondents (47.2%) had been teaching for more than 15 year; only 1 person had been teaching for less than 2 years.
- Almost three quarters of the respondents (72.2%) were module leaders.

Participants' perceptions

- Everyone asked said 'yes' they used assessment for formative purposes, and 90% of those asked said that this was incorporated into the module specification.
- All but one person (97.2%) gave oral formative feedback; most (80%) of the respondents gave written feedback.
- Half (50%) of the respondents said they did not use either self- or peer-assessment.
- About three-quarters (72.2%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students paid more attention to formative feedback if it was provided before the grades.
- A similar proportion (75%) of respondents agreed that students are less likely to participate in assessment for formative purposes unless there is also a summative purpose attached.
- Those who believed that it is important to encourage students to use feedback, as opposed to simply noting their grade, were more likely to provide regular opportunities for students to discuss their work. (0.442)

Barriers to using assessment for formative purpose

Two-fifths (61.1%) of respondents affirmed that they would like to include more formative assessment, but certain barriers exist:

- The vast majority (91.7%) of respondents agreed (50% of these strongly) that having a smaller staff-student ratio would help them to provide more formative feedback.
- Two-fifths (41.7%) agreed that having less summative assessment requirements would help them to provide more time for formative feedback; but about a quarter (27.8%) disagreed and the rest were neutral.

Overall, we found that there was a perceived commitment to using assessment for formative purposes, and it was encouraging that everyone said they did so. We found that practical issues had impacted on its use: for example, smaller class sizes and fewer summative assessment requirements might allow the educators more time to provide feedback on assessment. Half of respondents used either self- or peer-assessments, although only a small proportion (16.7%) used both.

However, whilst there is an accepted understanding by staff of the importance of formative functions in assessment, the question is whether, in reality, it is formative if the student does not use the information? Maclellan's (2001) study noted that whilst staff place importance on the developmental function of assessment, this commitment does not play out. In that study, 97% of students and 86% of staff indicated that assessment took place only at the end of the module, when there is no time for the student to make use of the feedback. The issue of timing is crucial.

According to Bruner (1970 cited in *ibid.*), “[l]earning depends on knowledge of results, at a time when, and at a place where, the knowledge can be used for correction”. Hence, Maclellan concluded that students did not exploit assessment to improve their learning.

It would seem that perceptions of formative assessment greatly affect its uses in reality. If students do not perceive there to be any formative functions of assessment do they ever benefit from it? An assessor could argue that the feedback he or she gives regarding a student’s work is formative in intention, even though the student does not extract the learning from it. But from the perspective of student learning, a case can be made that the feedback received is actually formative only if it has contributed to learning.

Conclusion

From this small-scale poll of staff perceptions, key factors affecting the efficacy of formative assessment included assessment loads, class sizes, the timing of feedback and giving comments before grades.

Assessment for formative purposes, Yorke (2003) suggests, is effective where assessors are aware of:

- the epistemology of the discipline
- stages of student intellectual and moral development
- the individual student’s knowledge and stage of intellectual development
- the psychology of giving and receiving feedback

and where:

- assessors *communicate with* (‘with’ is preferable to ‘to’ here) students regarding how their work might subsequently develop.
- students *actively seek to elicit the meaning* from formative comment.
- students *are prepared to act on* the basis of their developed understandings.

It is important to note that Yorke places responsibility on the student to be active in the process of formative feedback, and that the students need to be prepared to do something with that information. Through engaging the student in the assessment process (through self and peer assessment) we can encourage them to do so. Students must understand the process in order to be a successful part of it, and conversely students must be a part of the process in order to understand it.

Our investigation highlighted practical implications and barriers for implementing assessment for formative purpose. With larger student numbers it is becoming harder for academics to find the time to engage in formative assessment. It seems a shame that as class sizes grow it is at the cost of the learning experience in terms of formative feedback. So whilst our respondents showed a commitment to using assessment for formative purposes, practical reasons may prevent this from actually happening.

As an institution we also need to be looking at assessment timing. If assessment is to be formative, it needs to happen at a time when students can then act on feedback in a constructive way. We also need to be creating activities that allow students to engage with the feedback: simply handing students a page of written feedback will not encourage all students to act and learn. Creating discussion during teaching time, following assessment, for students to talk about the feedback will encourage them to read and reflect on any feedback.

It is clear that assessment for formative purpose is at the heart of most lecturers' practice within London Metropolitan University, but now we need to place it firmly at the heart of the student experience, in a meaningful and real way.

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Biographical note

Laura Hirst has been working within the Higher Education sector since 2001, in the area of work-based learning. Most recently she was based in The Employability Unit, a team dedicated to increasing the employability and entrepreneurialism of emerging graduates through work placements, live projects and extra curricular activities. Laura has since joined the Innovation and Enterprise Unit in Business Development Services at London Metropolitan University.