The future of assessment in Higher Education
El futuro de la evaluación en la educación superior

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Abstract

The pending challenge of assessment in higher education, although also at other educational levels, continues to be its effective link with student learning. Students' strategic learning could and should be achieved by the assessment. This paper arises from the attempt to answer the question about what would be the future of assessment in higher education and it is presented under the form of a collaborative text that was elaborated by all the authors who sign it. This contribution offers a joint reflection by various authors from different contexts and regions on three essential aspects. First, the need for reflection and a change in assessment based on current trends that are demonstrating their timeliness and validity is highlighted. A second issue focuses on the value of technology for the changes that are taking place on assessment, but as long as it adapts to its principles and, therefore, does not imply a return to the last century under the dominance of models today widely overcome. Together with the use of technology-enhanced assessment, the interrelationship between assessment and learning implies to redesign assessment practices, to incorporate proposals from the fields of social justice and sustainable assessment, the design of authentic assessment tasks, to promote feedback and encourage students' participation. In brief, to collaborate to develop the students' evaluative judgment in order to achieve free, socially responsible and fair citizens.

Keywords: Assessment; Assessment as learning; Sustainable assessment; Assessment tasks, Feedback; Participation; Assessment tools; Technology enhanced assessment; Higher education

Resumen

El reto pendiente de la evaluación en educación superior, aunque también en otros niveles, sigue siendo su vinculación efectiva con el aprendizaje de los estudiantes. A través de la evaluación se puede y debe conseguir un aprendizaje estratégico del estudiantado. Esta aportación surge a partir del intento de dar respuesta al interrogante sobre cuál sería el futuro de la evaluación en la educación superior, presentándose la misma bajo la forma de un texto elaborado de forma colaborativa entre todos los autores que la firman. Se ofrece así una reflexión conjunta de diversos autores de diferentes contextos y regiones sobre tres aspectos esenciales. En primer lugar, se resalta la necesidad de reflexión y un cambio en la evaluación basado en las tendencias actuales que están demostrando su oportunidad y validez. Un segundo aspecto se centra en el valor de la tecnología en los cambios que se están produciendo en la evaluación, pero siempre que se adapte a sus principios y, por lo tanto, no implique una vuelta al siglo pasado bajo el dominio de modelos hoy ampliamente superados. Interrelacionar evaluación y aprendizaje junto a la utilización de tecnologías que mejoran la evaluación implica, finalmente, rediseñar las prácticas evaluativas incorporando propuestas desde los ámbitos de la justicia social y la evaluación sostenible, el diseño de tareas de evaluación auténticas, propiciar retroalimentación de los procesos y fomentar la participación del estudiantado. En definitiva, colaborar en la formación del juicio evaluativo del estudiantado para conseguir ciudadanos libres, socialmente responsables y justos.

Palabras clave: Evaluación; Evaluación como aprendizaje; evaluación sostenible; tareas de evaluación; Retroalimentación; Participación; Medios de evaluación, Tecnologías que mejoran la evaluación; Educación superior

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We believe education, particularly Higher Education because of its broad scope, to be the prime engine of change and transformation towards a more just, responsible and equitable society for all. Consequently, our fundamental tenet is that learning should be at the centre of education, meaning that the success of Higher Education should not be measured by the quality of teaching offered by institutions, departments, courses or lecturers, but by the quality of student learning. Until now it has been more common, as well as easier, to focus primarily on teaching and learning. Assessment has been relegated to a secondary level or, at least, considered as an issue where effecting change is more difficult. But what should assessment in Higher Education mean in the years to come? What are the challenges? Where should future research and innovation in assessment be focused? How can assessment contribute to the development of responsible citizenship?

These questions involve rethinking assessment based on new approaches and perspectives, considering and analysing the technical and technological opportunities and modifying current assessment practices from a critical and creative perspective.

Rethinking assessment

If, at the end of the last century, interest was focused on the technical dimension of assessment processes (validity and reliability), in recent years we have witnessed the progressive conceptual development of assessment which has generated new ways of conceiving and understanding assessment in Higher Education. Approaches such as assessment for learning (Sambell et. al., 2013), learning-oriented assessment (Carless, 2015) or assessment as learning (Dann 2014, Earl 2013) have provided a new vision on assessment that is crystallizing in a rethinking of the role and nature of assessment in Higher Education. Based on this important concept new and interrelated approaches are now contributing to essential changes in assessment.

In sustainable assessment (Boud & Soler, 2016) the emphasis is placed on the need for assessment to contribute to student learning beyond the narrow spatio-temporal limits of a specific course or subject. It is about offering students the opportunities and the necessary preparation to be able to autonomously satisfy their future learning needs and develop their evaluative judgment (Boud et al., 2018), that is, their ability to make judgments about their own work and that of others.

Assessment as learning and empowerment (Rodríguez-Gómez & Ibarra-Sáiz, 2015) highlights, among other aspects, the collaborative nature of assessment through the participation of students in decision-making in each and every one of the phases and stages of the assessment process, from the initial design to the final qualification. In short, it is the students themselves, both individually and as a group, who assess their own work, are critical of the assessment practices used and are creative in offering alternatives to those proposed.

Assessment, analysed from the critical prism of social justice, leads us to the need to understand it as a social practice that develops within an environment plagued by multiple contradictions and tensions in which it is necessary to rethink basic concepts such as trust, honesty, responsibility, forgiveness and responsiveness (McArthur, 2018). To consider the issues from this perspective, as this author has emphasized, invokes the idea of challenging accepted practices and of looking for alternatives and the possibility of doing things differently. This requires preparing for the discomfort, the pain and the danger of questioning conventional practices, whilst also enjoying the benefit of collaborating for a more just society.

Assessment will only be useful insofar as it is relevant for students, politicians, leaders and institutional managers, tutors, academics and society in general. Collaborative processes need to be established in which different interest groups participate (professional associations, social agents, accreditation agencies, etc.) to identify and define what, in the light of these new approaches, is really significant in assessment and encourages the transition from assessment considered from an

individual perspective led by academics, to a truly collaborative and shared method of assessment.

Technology at the service of assessment and learning

The use of technology has been shown to deliver efficient and consistent assessment, but little attention has been paid to its contribution to rethinking the relationships between learning and assessment and the role that technology can play in supporting vital changes (Timmis et al., 2016). It is increasingly possible for learning systems to be designed efficiently and to ensure that students complete their programs by knowing and doing what is required of them. However, new tools need to be developed that reflect innovative pedagogical principles, harnessing technologies that support more democratic, equitable, creative and socially just methods of assessment.

Students will have to face new and challenging problems for which the solutions cannot actually be taught because no one has ever faced them before. In this context, technology should incorporate collaborative and participatory assessment modalities; provide students with opportunities to make decisions within contexts of uncertainty; offer assessment alternatives that allow them to demonstrate their achievements in creative and novel ways; develop skills and abilities that prepare them for employability and citizenship (Brown, 2015); support the development of their evaluative judgment (Boud et al., 2018) and thus enhance their self-regulation and lifelong learning.

Redesigning assessment practice

Although assessment practice has shown strong resistance to change, it is important to consider some aspects related to the quality of the method and instruments of assessment used and of the assessment task themselves, so that the process is technically convincing. In addition, questions must be asked about the sustainability of the assessment itself, its

viability, its efficiency and its implementation over time at a reasonable and appropriate personal and professional cost.

There is already a well-established international movement that calls for more authentic assessment tasks, real and contextualized challenges that students will face in the world when they leave Higher Education (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; Boud & Soler, 2016; Dann, 2014; McArthur, 2018). This trend will accelerate, and it will soon become the norm for assessment tasks to be seen and felt as activities undertaken in the real world. Likewise, assessment tasks will increasingly reflect professional scenarios, so that students learn what is meaningful for themselves and for the social and professional world they are entering. The progressive development and use of virtual reality or computer simulations will contribute to the authenticity of these tasks.

Educational research has identified the crucial importance of feedback and his role as mediator of learning (Ibarra-Sáiz et al., 2020). Previously attention has been paid to aspects such as the speed, level of detail, clarity, structure or relevance of the information provided. But attention needs to be refocused onto what feedback means to students and on the interaction between the students and those who deliver the feedback (teachers, peers, tutors). The current unidirectional character of feedback (from tutor to student) needs to transform into a process of collaborative communication with multiple channels through which teachers and students interact and enable a dialogue between all participants with the clear intention of making learning happen (Nicol et al., 2014; Rowe, 2017).

In short, as indicated by Boud (2019), any assessment activity that does not serve to develop in ever more effective ways the ability of students to assess their own work and that of others, that is, their evaluative judgment, cannot be considered as sustainable assessment. This implies using assessment as an activity to shape and develop the evaluative judgment of learners, and not just to make

unilateral decisions about them. How will students learn effectively if they are not able to assess the quality of their own work? If students cannot collaborate and help each other to assess the quality of their work, how can they work effectively as a team?

This reflection has focused on the assessment of learning (micro level), but logically the challenges highlighted also involve rethinking and modifying both institutional assessment policies and the assessment of entire educational programmes (meso level). Although the changes in assessment practice are required at these two levels, it is also essential that policies and commitment exist at the macro level, that promote the transformation of assessment based on sustainability and social justice so as not to put at risk the integral development of future citizens.

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