

Using assessment strategically to gestate a student thesis: Learning through community

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Abstract

In the context of higher education in South Africa and drawing on the author's experience as a lecturer in two higher education institutions (HEIs), this article presents her attempts to bring together – and into balance – teaching, supervision and research in an endeavour to offer a transformative learning experience for her post graduate students. It does this by foregrounding student assessment in the Master of Education (MEd) degree in the field of Educational Leadership and Management (ELM) where the development of a half thesis, underpinned by research, stands as the evidence of success. The author suggests that the MEd (ELM) degree be conceptualised differently in order that the half thesis be permitted to gestate over a two-year period. Within this conceptualisation, she argues that inspired teaching and meaningful research is best attained through a community of learning approach which seeks to foreground participatory learning, the advancement of scholarly discourse and the development of student agency. Through the use of a case study, the author provides evidence to suggest that a range of authentic assessment strategies which are purposeful and in alignment with the teaching strategies, the content and the intended outcomes of the qualification being taught are essential. She further argues that well-crafted, formative, recursive and sustainable feedback is an essential part of the gestation process.

Keywords: Community of learning approach, participatory learning, authentic assessment, feedback, gestation of a thesis

INTRODUCTION

Writing in the context of the United Kingdom, Northedge (2003b, 17) describes how 'higher education has seen a radical diversification of students and courses, over recent decades, in the context of continuing pressures towards greater "relevance" and widening of participation'. In the context of higher education in South Africa and nearly a decade later, these challenges remain pertinent and still need to be grappled with. Indeed, higher education in South Africa today, as a result of the inequities of the apartheid era, is dealing with issues of redress in the context of a complex and diverse student population (Quinn 2012) and ever increasing student numbers (Snowball and Sayigh 2007). Consequently, university lecturers are under mounting pressure to find alternative ways to teach large classes of racially, culturally and

linguistically diverse students. Simultaneously, the national imperative to increase the percentage of university students studying at the postgraduate level (DHET 2012) results in increased pressure on university lecturers to grow their postgraduate student intake whilst also ensuring a good throughput rate. And, if this were not enough, lecturers are required, as a fundamental part of their job description, to research in their field of expertise in the quest for new knowledge and to communicate and publish their findings to a range of audiences. How can these competing demands be juggled successfully whilst ensuring quality, defined here as the ‘transformation of the student’ (Harvey and Green 1993, in Stephenson 2004, 62)?

This article draws on my postgraduate teaching and supervision experience as an academic in the field of Education Leadership and Management (ELM) at two South African higher education institutions (HEIs) over the past decade. Against this backdrop, my thesis position is that in order for academics to survive (and hopefully thrive) in the higher education terrain today, they have to work strategically and adopt a more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar. In line with Boyer’s (1991) thinking, I contend that knowledge is acquired ‘through research, through synthesis, through practice, *and through teaching ...*’ (Boyer 1991, 11; my emphasis) and that these four scholarships – of discovery, integration, application and teaching (Boyer 1991) – are inextricably linked to each other. Argued in this way, inspired teaching is as fundamental to scholarship as good research. It is not the ‘poor cousin’ which can be ‘bought out’ and ‘handed over’ to lesser staff in an endeavour to promote the ‘publish or perish’ agenda, as is the culture in some HEIs in South Africa. Instead teaching should demand equal status with research and the challenge facing university lecturers is to find ways to ensure their development, both as good researchers *and* good teachers. One way I have been able to do this effectively is by generating student interest in my area of research and inviting students to participate in group research projects in my topic area. I then weave the topic area into the course work component of the degree in order to support students in their research and professional practice.

The article presents my attempts to bring together – and into balance – teaching, supervision and research in an endeavour to offer a transformative learning experience for my postgraduate students. It does this by foregrounding student assessment in the Master of Education (MEd) degree in the field of ELM where the development of a student thesis, underpinned by research, is the evidence of success. I begin the article by contextualising my teaching within the MEd qualification in the higher education terrain generally and within the field of ELM particularly. I then present my philosophy of teaching and argue for its relevance in the quest for scholarship. Thereafter, I propose that the MEd degree be conceptualised differently and suggest that Hounsell’s (2007) metaphor of the ‘gestation of the thesis’ is an appropriate one. To give substance to my argument, I present a case study of the assessment strategies adopted in an introductory module of an MEd (ELM) qualification. I briefly describe the assessment strategies adopted and the principles of learning which underpinned

them and demonstrate how they ‘fed forward into’ (Hounsell 2007) the broader student thesis process.

CONTEXTUALISING MY TEACHING: THE FIELD, THE QUALIFICATION AND THE STUDENTS

The field of ELM is fairly unique (here I am conceptualising ‘field’ in Bourdieun terms) because of its fundamentally practical nature. Educational organisations such as schools require good leaders and managers and so the field is characterised by ‘the dual interests of the pursuit of academic (“theory”) advancement, typically through research, and professional (“practice”) development through training in generic management skills’ (Van der Mescht 2008, 10). However, because of the relative infancy and immaturity of the field of ELM in South Africa, attempts to negotiate this dual identity have been largely unsuccessful. Thus far, practice has colonised the field, resulting in a divided and under-theorised terrain (Grant 2010).

Qualifications within the field of ELM are located predominantly at the post graduate level. The MEd (ELM) degree – the focus of the article – is a postgraduate qualification lodged as a level 9 qualification on the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF 2008). In line with the dual identity of the field, the purpose of the MEd (ELM) is to enhance professional practice in the field through the advancement of professional and academic knowledge *and* increase practice-based research capacity (SAQA 2005, 1). Framed by the NQF’s critical cross-field outcomes, the MEd (ELM) qualification is governed by the nationally approved exit level outcomes (SAQA 2005, 2) and candidates are required to demonstrate the competences described in these in order to qualify for the degree. These exit level outcomes must be aligned with and drive the development of specific outcomes (course work and research) for the degree at the various HEIs. The MEd qualification is offered as either course work/half thesis or full thesis and, for the purposes of the current article, the focus is on the course work/half thesis offering because of the very different demands on the lecturers and the students of the two components of the degree. Through this course work/half thesis offering, I demonstrate how assessment can be used strategically to bring together teaching, research and supervision.

Regarding the student body of this postgraduate qualification, the MEd (ELM) is designed for education professionals working in the field of education, particularly in schools but also in Department of Education offices as well as in education non-governmental organisations. At both the HEIs at which I have worked, and in line with postgraduate student intake, on average I generally accept no more than 13 students into a cohort at any one time. Many of the professionals who register for the qualification hold formal management positions in their places of work. Thus, the student body is non-traditional in that it is comprised of mature professionals who hold in balance, sometimes precariously, responsibilities related to their careers, their extended families as well as their further studies. It stands to reason then, that the majority of candidates study the MEd (ELM) degree on a part-time basis over a two-year period.

Given the racial, cultural and linguistic diversity of the South African teaching population, coupled with the inequalities of educational experience as a consequence of the country's apartheid history, the education professionals who enter the academy and register for this qualification bring with them a diverse and complex array of domestic, cultural, linguistic, educational and economic capital. This disparate array of capital presents a multitude of social and intellectual challenges in the teaching process. In addition, the majority of these education professionals arrive at the academy with 'everyday discourses' as well as 'professional discourses' (after Northedge 2003b) of educational leadership and management sourced from the mass media or from the work place respectively.

However, when they register for this post graduate degree in ELM, the majority of these education professionals have little experience of the academic discourses which aspire to 'esoteric goals of theory building and research' (Northedge 2003b, 24). Many do not have what Shay (2008, 598) refers to as the discursive or propositional knowledge valued in the field and neither do they have the practical or procedural kinds of knowledge required for postgraduate study, for example: analysis, synthesis, creativity, critique, argument as well as accurate citation and referencing. Thus, in order to induct these education professionals into the academic discourses required for the MEd (ELM) degree, the selection of appropriate teaching and assessment strategies to achieve this goal is paramount. However, the selection of suitable teaching and assessment strategies is not an isolated activity but should be aligned with an appropriate and rigorous philosophy of teaching and learning. It is thus to my personal philosophy of teaching and learning that I now briefly turn.

PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING: LEARNING IN COMMUNITY

In order to 'gestate' a student thesis, I take the position that the liberal notion of supervision with its traditional one-on-one relationship between student and supervisor is fast becoming outdated in the higher education arena in South Africa. I contend that in the complex society in which we live, a more effective approach to postgraduate supervision is a communal one. While I concede that one-on-one 'teaching' (and hence learning) has its place in the complex process of supervision, I believe that the supervision process can be greatly enhanced if it is conceptualised within a scholarly community of practice (Wenger 1998). In this conceptualisation, teaching and learning occurs through participation in discourse communities (primarily academic) and knowledge is perceived as 'constituted in the flow of meaning produced between knowledgeable people when they communicate together' (Northedge 2003b, 19). Participation relies on the divergent viewpoints held and the differing contributions made. Within the bastions of academia, an academic discipline such as ELM is a high status discourse community which emphasises writing *in* the discourse, which is 'highly focused, analytical and critical' (Northedge 2003b, 19).

As a participant in this discourse community of ELM, a university lecturer to

be specific, I foreground my role as teacher in the research and supervision process and consciously construct each new MEd intake as a structure to support scholarly learning and knowledge production in a community of practice (after Wenger 1998). I attempt, through my teaching, to inspire active learners who, with assistance, are gradually able to 'mobilise themselves and their own resources, taking a much more dynamic position in the tasks of learning and assessment' (Boud 2007, 18). To support this active learning, my work is to create an environment which offers a safe, trusting and respectful space for students to find their own voice and participate in knowledge debates relevant to the field of ELM. My argument, following Ranson (2000, 268) is that by finding their voice, students will 'find an identity and the possibility of agency in the world'. Thus, the community I try to develop is one which recognises different voices and promotes genuine conversation as students learn 'through dialogue to take a wider, more differentiated view, and thus acquire sensitivity, subtlety and capacity for judgement' (Ranson 2000, 275). In this conceptualisation of community, and in line with the thinking of Romer (2002, 239), I am not only interested in talking properly, but also 'in talking (and being silent) in new and interesting ways'.

As agents who talk and learn together, the goal is for the MEd students to become active participants in the largely unfamiliar discourse community of ELM. They begin their journey as peripheral participants (after Wenger 1998) in the practice, but through the interplay of learning processes (peer, self and lecturer initiated) they begin a trajectory inwards from the periphery of the ELM community, gradually extending their repertoire of knowing (both in relation to the knowledge field itself as well as to associated research processes) and developing their identity and agency as ELM researchers. Learning is thus the process of acquiring intellectual and social power by becoming progressively more proficient as both 'a user of various specialist discourses and a participant within the relevant knowledge communities' (Northedge 2003b, 22). Conceptualised in this way, learning involves moving between different points in the community towards a more full identity and the possibility of a plurality of full participations (Romer 2002).

Following Northedge (2003a), I see my role as teacher and supervisor as one which opens up authentic ELM conversations and explicitly leads students from their everyday and professional discourses into the specialist and often contested discourses of the field. In other words, in this community, my work is one of mediation where I 'move between a wide range of language games and professional traditions' (Romer 2002, 239); am tolerant of 'variant understanding' (Northedge 2003b, 31); and support the students in their journey from the periphery towards the multiple centres of the practice (Romer 2002). In order to do this effectively, I have been challenged to conceptualise differently the MEd course work/half thesis degree.

CONCEPTUALISING THE MEd DEGREE DIFFERENTLY: GESTATING THE STUDENT THESIS

From the discussion so far, it becomes evident that the MEd (ELM) degree requires students to become researchers and knowledge producers in the field of ELM. To this end, the course work component of the degree is structured to provide exposure to the knowledge, theory and research of the field as well as general educational research methodologies primarily through lectures and seminars offered during a series of contact sessions throughout the academic year. The course work component is conventionally offered in the first year of the degree and comprises 50 per cent of the final degree result while the development of the half thesis is relegated to the second year of study and comprises the other 50 per cent. While many students successfully complete the course work component in the required period of time, they take a number of years to complete the half thesis component and some eventually drop out without completing their half thesis (Sayed, Kruss and Badat 1998; Letseka and Maile 2008). Thus, the half thesis component is by far the more challenging part of the degree, primarily because it demands that students demonstrate the capacity for 'in-depth study of a small dimension of broader management practice' (SAQA 2005, 1). Furthermore, because the half thesis is subjected to a rigorous internal and external examination process, it can be considered an example of what Knight (2002) terms 'high stakes' assessment.

Because the half thesis component is the more challenging part for students, I argue that this aspect be foregrounded at the outset of the degree. The metaphor of 'gestating the student thesis' has relevance here because if the half thesis component is conceptualised as a two-year gestation period, then the course work component cannot be perceived as an individual entity, disconnected from and preceding the development of the thesis. Instead it becomes reconceptualised as integral to, and interwoven with, the research component and structured in ways which enable research and support the growth and development of the half thesis from the onset of the degree.

This, I acknowledge, has serious implications for the assessment process because it is known that assessment is the most influential lever that lecturers have to influence the way students learn (Gibbs 1999). Instead of the conventional fragmentation of assessment tasks as a consequence of a modularisation process in the course work component of the degree, this new approach sees assessment in more holistic terms, as requiring careful planning and integration to ensure that assessment activities of one unit of study complement those in others (Boud and Falchikov 2006). This demands that the assessment process becomes 'recursive' in nature (Hounsell 2007) involving cycles of dialogue and critique as the half thesis begins to gestate. It is the range of formative assessment strategies adopted which will give texture to these cycles of dialogue and critique and their purpose will be to offer immediate and constructive feedback to the students in order to improve their work (Knight 2001). Critical to formative assessment is the role of feedback which can be defined in terms

of ‘information about how successfully something has been or is being done’ (Sadler 1989, 120). These formative assessment tasks constitute ‘low stakes’ assessment and are designed in such a way that they not only feed back to the immediate task at hand but are also ‘in constructive alignment with’ (Biggs 2003) and ‘feed forward to’ (Hounsell 2007) the broader thesis discussion.

In order to concretise my argument and drawing from my experience as lecturer, I now move on to present a case study of the assessment practices I adopted in an introductory module of the MEd (ELM) qualification that I taught for many years. The case study reflects how I used a range of assessment strategies to support the gestation of the students’ half thesis referred to above. In the next section I briefly describe the assessment strategies adopted and demonstrate what I was trying to do with these strategies and how they ‘fed forward’ into the broader thesis process.

THE ASSESSMENT OF A MASTER’S MODULE: A CASE STUDY

The university module under discussion in this section was entitled *Educational Leadership and Management* and its purpose was to introduce students to the main concepts and themes in the field of ELM. Its scope was therefore one of breadth and it covered a range of themes, traditional to the field. In the ensuing discussion, I foreground two assessment strategies adopted in the module and demonstrate the principles of learning which were incorporated into these strategies; how they aligned with the outcomes of the degree, the development of the thesis and reflected my philosophy of teaching and learning as just described. I begin by demonstrating how participatory assessment within a formal student seminar process was used to induct students into a community and assist them in gaining social and intellectual power in the field of ELM. I then demonstrate how assignments were used formatively and fed forward into the thesis development.

Peer learning within a formal student seminar process

Fundamental to the notion of learning in community is the idea that students learn best when they discuss their learning, and the assessment thereof, with others (Boud 1995, in Blom and Poole 2004, 112). Thus, ‘peer learning’ is integral to learning within a community of practice approach. It is a strategy in which students learn ‘with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher’ (Boud, Cohen and Sampson 1999, 413–414). Peer learning, according to Hunter (1999, in Blom and Poole 2004, 114),

engages students as active participants in the learning process, enriches the learning experiences of students, creates a more interactive environment, encourages questioning, discussion and debate and develops skills which benefits students in their working lives.

An example of peer learning used in the module described in the previous section was that of a student-led seminar process, weighted 30 per cent of the module assessment.

The purpose of the student seminar process incorporated inducting students into the discourse community of ELM; encouraging the development of voice; as well as engaging critically in dialogue with peers. To achieve this, a peer assessment strategy in which groups of individuals rate their peers was adopted (Falchikov 1995, in Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans 1999, 337). In pairs, students were invited to select a seminar topic from a list of themes in the course outline. They were given a list of prescribed readings and challenged to source additional readings on the topic. Thereafter, they were required to prepare a half-hour oral presentation on their theme and produce a 1 000 word handout for their peers. Students were then expected to deliver their presentation to the group after which they led a discussion on the theme, organised around questions which emerged from their reading of the texts.

The assessment of the seminars followed an open, transparent and criterion-based format and focussed on the assessment of individual students as each presentation was delivered (Knight 2001). The criteria against which the students were to be assessed were made available for peer scrutiny (Trigwell and Shale 2004) in the course outline. The feedback process was designed to help students understand ‘more about the learning goal, more about their own achievement status in relation to that goal, and more about ways to bridge the gap between their current status and the desired status’ (Sadler 2010, 536). To this end, seminars were self, peer and lecturer assessed and the feedback process was formative and collaborative. Outcomes were listed on a task sheet and peers were required to judge the presentations against the specified criteria. They were also required to write constructive, descriptive comments about each presentation and were invited to allocate a pass, a good pass or a distinction (Blom and Poole 2004).

Because prompt feedback is crucial (Gibbs 1999), directly after each presentation, peers were invited to give ‘constructive comment’ (Boud 1995, in Blom and Poole 2004, 115) in oral form to the presenters during an open and collective feedback process. Two pieces of newsprint were attached to the wall for each presenter and the strengths and weaknesses of each presentation were captured on the newsprint as they emerged from the class discussion. A discursive, safe and visible space was thus created for robust debate, practical advice as well as new learning. I argue that it was through the reading discussions and the peer debates which followed the seminars, that learning capabilities for scholarly activity in the field were built (Lotz-Sisitka, Ellery, Olvitt, Schudel and O’Donoghue 2010).

Also included during the seminar process was student self-assessment by which I mean the involvement of the students in making informed judgments about their own learning. Self-assessment is important because, as Boud and Falchikov (2006, 403) explain, if students attend only to the ‘judgements of others they may not acquire the broader set of skills that enable them to do this for themselves’. Despite the potential subjectivity of self-assessment and the possibility of marker bias (Knight 2001), I contend that self-assessment is a powerful assessment strategy, particularly in a criterion-based, formative and participatory learning context. This is because it is important for students to internalise standards and supervise their own work (Gibbs

1999). In other words, students learn to form judgements on their own learning through their capacity to ‘evaluate evidence, appraise situations and circumstances astutely, to draw sound conclusions and act in accordance with this analysis’ (Boud 2007, 19).

At the end of each of the seminar discussion sessions, the presenters were given the written feedback (the newsprint sheets and the task sheets) in order that they might improve their work during the next phase of the course work component. Thus the role of feedback was one of ‘longitudinal development’ (Price, Handley, Millar and O’Donovan 2010). The final stage of the module seminar assessment process involved my awarding a mark for each of the presentations but I ensured that my marks were based on the group’s collaborative, formative feedback. This is in line with the caution of Taras (2002, 507) that marks should not be awarded in isolation and ‘not before feedback and judgements have been interiorised’.

Despite the many benefits of peer assessment, I acknowledge that the seminar assessment process was not without its challenges. Initially, students found it difficult to criticise themselves and their peers, a not uncommon occurrence (see Williams 1992, in Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans 1999) and, particularly in the introductory module when this type of assessment was first used, students tended to be ‘overmarked’ which affected the accuracy of the assessment (Dochy et al. 1999). However, as students developed their skills of critique and their awareness of the need for sensitivity, they began to offer more critical and valuable feedback to their peers. Thus, over time and with experience and coaching, a more masterful engagement with this form of assessment occurred.

What I have reported on so far is the explicit feedback process that occurred. However, throughout the peer assessment process a more implicit and unarticulated form of learning occurred because of the social dimension of the practice. Because of the social dimension of the learning process, students learnt to care about what their peers thought of them and this contributed to their assessing and critiquing their own learning and setting progressively higher standards for themselves and their peers as the year progressed. Having presented my argument for the inclusion of peer learning (including peer and self-assessment strategies) in the MEd (ELM) module, I now move on to discuss the importance of developing writing in the assessment of the module.

The development of scholarly writing: The assignment process

Because the stakes related to the student half thesis are high and because it is primarily textual, I contend that students would benefit from a range of structured writing tasks in order to develop their academic and ‘field’ discourse proficiency during the two-year period of the degree. I take the position that this writing process be made explicit and be ‘built progressively towards’ (Hounsell 2007) the student half thesis. As a point of departure, I offered students ‘exemplars’ of completed work (Sadler 1989), in other words, a range of high quality ELM theses as examples of what they needed to produce by the end of the degree. This brought into unequivocal

focus the writing demands of the half thesis. Regarding the writing demands of the assignment, I made explicit mention of the carefully constructed writing processes underpinning the written assignments in the course work component of the degree. Thus, while written assignments had pedagogical purposes directly related to the outcomes of a particular module, they were also in alignment with and sought to develop the competences and writing skills necessary for the development of the thesis.

An example of the development of a scholarly writing process with which I engaged, was located within the assignment assessment tasks of the module *Educational Leadership and Management* referred to earlier. The major assignment was a core component of the assessment and was weighted 50 per cent of the module result. Because it relied on the module being completed, it was only done at the end of the module. Students rightly regarded this as a high stakes assessment task because it was externally examined. This major assignment was an extensive piece of work with a 5 000 word limit and students were involved in generating the assignment topic. This was done, firstly, to ensure that the assignment topic was relevant, interesting and meaningful to the students, and, secondly, to make visible one of the key stages in judging learning, that of the ‘establishment of appropriate criteria for the completion of tasks’ (Boud and Falchikov 2006, 403). Thereafter, students were invited to submit a draft of this assignment for formative feedback, prior to the final submission date.

While individual, written feedback to students on each final submission incorporated both formative and summative features, the summative grading took precedence because it ‘summed up’ the student’s performance at the end of the module (Sadler 1989). In response, and in order to minimise this ‘loss’ of individual formative feedback, I introduced a combined feedback document which identified the common problem areas across the assignments and offered suggestions for improvement. The document was handed out to students and discussed in class with a view to the feedback learning being used prospectively in their next module. This was a good example of ‘anticipatory feedback’ where feedback was ‘metamorphosed into feedforward’ (Hounsell 2007, 105).

Because the major assignment was done at the end of the module, I decided also to introduce a minor assignment into the module assessment process. This assignment was introduced at the beginning of the module and had a developmental purpose, namely, to assist students to write in a scholarly way. It was therefore a short assignment with a 1 800 word length and the content of the assignment was less important than the development of writing skills and argument. To this end, coaching in writing was particularly significant (Northedge 2003a) and the assignment essentially became a teaching tool. Students were encouraged to submit as many drafts as they saw fit, each of which was formatively assessed and returned to the student who could then meet with me individually to discuss any concerns they might have had with the written feedback. These feedback loops (Sadler 1989) continued until such time as students grasped the essential tenets of the academic

writing process and felt competent and confident in their creation. Only then did they submit a final submission for grading and this was weighted 20 per cent of the total module result. Also included in this minor assignment feedback process was peer assessment of written drafts. Here students marked draft assignments of their peers against identified criteria and were then given the opportunity to discuss the feedback in a series of communal meetings (Hounsell 2007).

A further opportunity to develop writing in the module entitled *Educational Leadership and Management* was the self-reflective journaling process. This writing process, which ran throughout the module, was of a personal rather than a scholarly endeavour and was a mandatory part of its assessment. Its purpose was to develop leaders and managers who reflect critically on their own practice with a view to change and improvement. Students were guided in the journal writing process through a series of structured questions to which they responded. However, they were also encouraged to write spontaneously in their journals as they reflected on their professional practice and related it to the theories they had learnt. In this way, I argued, professional practice was likely to be improved because, through reflexivity and self-regulation, their judgement was enhanced (Boud 2007). The self-reflective journaling process, offered the space for students to ‘... “look again”, to monitor one’s own performance, to see one’s own learning in the context in which it is deployed and to respond with awareness to the exigencies of the tasks in which one is engaged’ (Boud 2007, 21).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The article presents my attempts to bring together – and into balance – teaching, supervision and research in an endeavour to offer a transformative learning experience for my postgraduate students. It does this by foregrounding student assessment in the MEd (ELM) degree where the development of a half thesis, underpinned by research, stands as the evidence of success. The article suggests that the MEd (ELM) degree be conceptualised differently in order that the half thesis be permitted to gestate over a two-year period. Within this conceptualisation, it argues that inspired teaching and meaningful research is best attained through a community of learning approach which seeks to foreground participatory learning, the advancement of scholarly discourse and the development of student agency. Through the use of a case study, the article provides evidence to suggest that a range of authentic assessment strategies which are purposeful and in alignment with the teaching strategies, the content and the intended outcomes of the qualification being taught are essential. It further argues that well-crafted, formative, recursive and sustainable feedback is an essential part of the gestation process.

I conclude the article by posing some questions: Was I successful in my attempts to juggle the competing demands of teaching, supervision and research? Did I offer a transformative learning experience for my postgraduate students and did I ensure quality in the process? If by quality is meant ‘the degree to which a work

comes together as a whole to achieve its intended purpose' (Sadler 2010, 544), then quality was achieved. The evidence to support this tentative claim is lodged in the throughput rates and quality of student passes over the last few years. Throughput rates for the minimum period of degree completion have increased from 30 per cent to 100 per cent following the introduction of this community of learning model and student degree passes have been upwards of 65 per cent. External examiner reports have been affirmative with many recommending that students publish from their theses and/or pursue further studies. Thus, I argue that the advantages of adopting a community of learning approach to ELM research learning, with assessment as a strategic focus, far outweighs any disadvantages. Advantages include increased throughput and graduation rates in HEIs, a contribution towards the development of theory in this under-theorised field as well as an increase in the number of ELM researchers in South Africa.

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