

Building Learning Opportunity Into the Formative Assessment Process: limitations and possibilities

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Introduction

Many teaching situations beyond the formal, didactic lecture offer the opportunity for formative assessment, to the benefit of student and tutor. Indeed, as soon as we move beyond mere knowledge dissemination (Bourner & Flowers 1999), formative assessment opportunities are always available and sometimes taken up. However, the concern here is to consider the extent to which we can build formative assessment into teaching processes and review why it is argued ever more strongly that we should (Southern 2002; Yorke 2003). The concept of “building in” is problematic, in that it appears to imply a formally planned process, which, indeed it may well be. In addition, a tension can exist between giving helpful feedback and playing the role of assessor. Hence, engaging in formative feedback *when it appears necessary*, rather than when it is planned, is equally important and clearly demands the use of a further range of skills on the part of the tutor *and the student(s)* (Claxton 2002; Southern 2002).

The role of formative assessment

There is a general premise shared by many authors (Green 2001; Brown *et al*, 1997) that it is desirable to move away from traditionally assessed programmes (set essays, multiple choice questionnaires, unseen examinations) that are derived from traditional delivery (lecture, guided reading, tutor-led seminars) (Boud 1988). This is despite the effects of what Mantz Yorke (2003) describes as the “unitisation of curricula in UK higher education” and the subsequent “reduction in the amount of formal formative assessment as the number of end-of-unit summative assessments has increased.” Nevertheless, the academic arguments for a development of formative assessment range from issues of addressing differences in learning style (Andrew *et al* 2002) and learning approach (Byrne *et al* 2002), so as to promote “higher level” elements of learning (Bourner & Flowers 1999), to concerns over the role of tutors and their abilities to affect learning. This places a greater emphasis on tutors and their agency or otherwise in the epistemologies of the students (Rowe 2002). There is also the prosaic but necessary concern over the larger number of students appearing before tutors and over performance that is untested except by end-of-module/course assessment (Southern 2002).

While the argument often runs that students are always focused on what will gain the grades and that this is therefore a reasonable starting point in the design of the learning programme (Gibbs 1999), the assessment process can itself of course constrict the learning possibilities:

“learners and teachers [are] ‘agents of, and subject to the disciplinary process of individual measurement and assessment’ ... Following this argument, learners become passive subjects, defined by the atomising effect of the assessment categories and criteria. Thus, a ‘vast bureaucratic web...constructs learners’ progress...’whilst its detail renders them as ‘(the) objects of surveillance and regulation.’” (Ecclestone 1999, citing Edwards & Usher)

By contrast, there is a different viewpoint that places value on the learning gained from structured and unstructured opportunities for formative feedback that are unlinked to the regulatory processes of formative or summative assessment – processes that are often linked to the notion of ‘graduateness’ and the tutor role of gatekeeper to the world of work or progress in work (Holmes 1995).

The student role in formative assessment

The focus on learning rather than regulation has led to an increasing consideration of alternative methods of feedback, particularly so-called autonomous feedback processes, those of self- and peer-assessment and feedback. Clearly, if students rather than the tutor carry out feedback, this can not only ease the tutor’s workload but also engage him or her in a different relationship with the students, which Rowe (2002) describes as a ‘change in the degree of mutual respect for each other’s perspectives’. This has also led to a shift from a focus on the cognitive to a consideration of non-cognitive aspects of learning within the setting of Higher Education (Moriarty & Buckley 2003). It is epitomised in the writings of Kremer & McGuinness (1998), who propose the careful use of leaderless group discussions and associated peer assessment, rooted in the advancement of active learning processes. Students are given readings, as a guide to discussion within a set group. Their contributions are then rated in terms of specific categories (preparation, sharing, support, facilitating, membership). Paradoxically, this type of student-led discussion still relies on forms of control: the readings do not have to guide the discussions but in practice do, so selection becomes a part of the construction of the discussion. Similarly, although the tutor does not intervene in the discussions, the ground rules are set and “moderated” by the tutor, so that the element of surveillance inherent in summative assessment survives.

This controlling tendency on the part of teachers, of course, reflects an instinctive concern over the perceived value of such events in the eyes of the students:

“If reflective learning is not assessed it is most likely to be neglected. Assessment has been described as “the tail that wags the dog”. Attention follows assessment and behaviour follows attention. Most students pay most attention to what is assessed. That which is not assessed is most likely to be most neglected.” (Bourner 2003)

Yorke (2003), developing arguments from Shepard, places this regulatory inclination within a dominant paradigm of “behaviourist theories of learning, social efficiency and scientific measurement. Shepard’s argument is that, whilst approaches to learning have moved in the direction of constructivism, approaches to assessment have remained inappropriately focused on testing”. This is unsurprising, given governmental and social pressure for league tables, comparability and the strong vocational agenda in education.

There is some struggle in the acceptance of self-assessment, reflected in Brew’s caveat that students need “systematic practice in judging their own work and getting feedback on their ability to do so” (Brew 1999). This is partly ameliorated by the notionally greater validity of peer assessment - a validity bound in the “rationality “ of the use of numbers in the averaging process of peers’ marks. It is this that managerialist considerations of the measurement of active learning

processes attempt to address (Serva & Fuller 2004). Brew does, however, remain concerned that where collaboration is the focus of the student group in the process of learning, then peer assessment, rather than peer feedback, may go against the ideal of collaborative learning. If so, such an outcome would negate the best intentions of student-led discussion groups (as per Kremer & McGuinness 1998). It is also a concern of students, from a different perspective, who do not trust the outcomes of a group process that is not attached to some “expert” opinion. Once again, a frequent tutor response is to mark the work as well and engage in some moderating process where there is a noticeable disparity (Falchikov in Schwartz & Webb 2002).

Rethinking formative assessment

In exploring this issue of the goals of formative assessment, Brew (1999) considers a typology of self- and peer-assessment practices that is based on elements of Habermas’s three ‘knowledge interests’: technical, communicative and emancipatory. Brew believes that, certainly in the province of self-assessment, “the emancipatory domain constitutes the ultimate in autonomous assessment” and gives reasonable examples of the development of critical analytic and evaluative practices. But she is less clear as to how this could be constructed as a peer assessment. The problem is that because what is ‘emancipatory’ is indeed an individual construction, student peers might, in fact, not be able to recognise it as such, and therefore not be equipped to assess it. On this score, a previous criticism (Connelly 2003) can be validated: that Habermas’s “knowledge interest”, based on the negotiated validity of the language of the speaker and the hearer, assumes an ideal model of language and of speaker and hearer.

One way to locate formative *feedback*, rather than the “rationalist” demands of assessment, within the individual learning process, lies in the adoption of action learning approaches, which may or may not be facilitated by the tutor, and from which the summatively assessed outcome is produced (Marsick & O’Neill 1999; Thorpe M 2003). Built into this process is the inevitability of peer feedback, unconstrained by connotations of peer assessment, with the greater possibility of the student engaging in some form of reflective practice. Such an approach recognises, as Knight (2002) observes in the context of the professional development of teachers, that learning is “an individual *and* a social process” and “much learning is informal and subliminal” because it is embedded in shared practices. Likewise, in programmes based on action learning sets, the focus is on learning from doing, developed through experiential learning cycles (Kolb, Honey & Mumford in Reid & Barrington 1999). However, there is a danger here in succumbing to over-simplified models of learning through doing. As Lea and Street (1998) propose, we need to view ‘student learning and writing as issues at the level of epistemology and identities, rather than skill or socialisation’.

Another challenge for formative assessment, as Knight (2002) argues, is that we have poor data supporting the notion of valid (rather than reliable) marking of complex achievements associated with tasks set at a tertiary education level. The reliability of criterion-referenced assessment, he contends, is equally problematic, because criteria are subject to the same questions of interpretation that they are trying to clarify. Nevertheless, formative assessment can be effective, Knight concludes, where its use is perceived as potentially beneficial and of limited damage to the student (“low-stakes assessment”), and located within the framework of written or verbal conversation.

This kind of approach acknowledges the interpretive nature of the assessment and the learning process. It thus could tie together the various issues raised in this paper – the mutuality of the tutor-student relationship (Rowe 2002), and the need to engage students’ epistemologies (Lea & Street 1998) and learning experiences that extend beyond the cognitive (Miller et al 1998) to

address a broader range of learning. The implication is that we, as tutors, need to reassert an “emphasis on the learning enhancement purpose of assessment rather than its certification and accountability purposes” (Holroyd 2000).

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