

Do essay assessment criteria refer to transferable skills, deep approaches to learning, or complex learning?

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Using assessment criteria to support student learning

Assessment criteria traditionally have a two-fold purpose: firstly to guide markers and ensure that marking is as fair and accurate as possible, and secondly to inform students about the standards against which their work will be judged. The second purpose is important, but there is evidence that providing explicit descriptions of the assessment criteria, though valuable, is not sufficient to improve students' understanding of the criteria and enable them to perform better in assessments; active, structured engagement with the criteria is also needed (Price *et al.*, 2001; Mc Dowell & Sambell, 1999; Orsmond *et al.*, 1996). That engagement is increasingly being facilitated in teaching situations, often in the form of workshops where students discuss the assessment criteria and apply them themselves to their own or other students' assignments (Rust *et al.*, 2003; Pain & Mowl, 1996; Harrington & Elander, 2003; Elander, 2003). The rationale is that if students are enabled within structured teaching sessions to reflect on the qualities specified in the assessment criteria, their learning and performance in assessments will improve. Focussing on assessment criteria as the subject-matter of teaching warrants reflection on the type of learning embodied in the criteria themselves, for an understanding of this learning should inform the structure and content of the teaching sessions. This need provides the rationale for the present analysis, which focuses on four criteria that appear very frequently in essay assessment criteria: structuring, critical thinking, using language, and arguing.

Assessment criteria as skills

Skills concepts have long been influential in UK higher education (e.g. Payne, 2000), most recently with the recommendation that learning outcomes be formulated in terms of key skills (Dearing, 1997) and the inclusion of subject and generic skills in course benchmarking statements (QAA, 2002). Transferability is a key feature of the concept of skills, and has been the main focus of challenges to the value of skills approaches (e.g. Whitston, 1998).

Certain criteria have been described explicitly as skills. Critical thinking, for example, was defined as 'a propensity and skill to engage in an activity with reflective scepticism' (Halonon, 1995, p. 75). Writing and use of language are also often approached as generic skills that can be developed independently of what is being written about, especially when the focus is on grammar, punctuation, and referencing conventions. Structuring is also sometimes approached in a skills-oriented way. Peck

& Coyle (1999, pp. 97-100), for example, offer advice about 'techniques ... that can be easily learned' for 'how to build an essay, including how to shape a paragraph and a sentence'. Treating assessment criteria as skills is simplistic, however, and probably holds only at low levels of essay writing competence. On the other hand, the skills approach potentially offers most scope for transferable benefits from incorporating assessment criteria in teaching. It would also allow teaching related to assessment criteria to be separated from subject knowledge and delivered across disciplines.

Assessment criteria as deep approaches to learning

The defining characteristic of a deep approach to learning is the 'intention to understand' (Ramsden, 1992, p. 46), which should lead students to engage with, reproduce, and create knowledge within the context of a specific discipline or field. The essay is considered well suited to assessing the outcomes of deep approaches to learning. One study showed that students regarded essays as assessing higher levels of cognitive processing than multiple choice examinations, and that deeper approaches to learning were associated with higher achievement in essay assignments (Scouller, 1998). Essay assessment criteria could therefore be expected to correspond closely to what is involved in a deep approach to learning.

This is often true, especially for better quality essays. Structuring, for example, is often linked to the subject-specific content of the essay: 'We are particularly interested in how the structure constructs the relationship between different ideas' (Creme & Lea, 1997, p. 88). The SOLO taxonomy is often used to assess structural complexity of writing, and research has showed that more structurally complex essays were written by students with deeper approaches to learning and better understandings of assessment criteria (Campbell *et al.*, 1998). Adopting the perspective of promoting deep approaches to learning when incorporating assessment criteria in teaching would involve emphasising the discipline-specific aspects of the criteria, and most of the innovations in this area have in fact been discipline-specific (e.g. Rust *et al.*, 2003; Elander, 2003).

Assessment criteria as complex learning

Skills-based approaches have declined in influence in higher education partly because they produced disappointing results in the area of employability. One reason for this is that many of the qualities sought by employers are rather nebulous characteristics which relate more to motivation and personality than to specific abilities, and which do not lend themselves well to teaching. Complex learning has emerged as an alternative way of conceptualising desirable outcomes of education, especially in relation to employability: 'Complex learning aims at the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes; the coordination of qualitatively different constituent skills; and the transfer of what is learnt to daily life or work settings' (van Merriënboer *et al.*, 2003). What is distinctive is that in addition to skills and knowledge, psychological characteristics similar to those underpinning concepts of 'graduate identity' (Holmes, 2001) and 'social practices' (Knight & Yorke, 2003) are regarded as important to the learning process.

Complex learning is usually associated with practical contexts and problem-based forms of assessment, but essay assessment criteria such as critical thinking and argument reflect aspects of essay writing that are consistent with complex learning in that they combine academic qualities with personal development. Research has showed that the development of critical thinking depended on both academic and out-of-class experiences (Terenzini *et al.*, 1995), and 'argument goes to the heart of who

we are and what we want to do with our lives' (Bonnet, 2001, p. 3). An emphasis like this on personal development as part of what is assessed in essay writing could lead students to a greater meta-awareness of what assessment criteria represent and promote a more autonomous approach to learning that may transfer to other contexts.

Assessment criteria as complex skills

Most essay criteria have skill-like qualities to some extent, but none of those we have examined resemble the classic pattern of a generic or transferable skill. Most criteria also have characteristics in common with deep approaches to learning. Criteria like critical thinking and argument most closely resemble complex learning, and criteria like structuring and use of language resemble transferable skills at the lower end and a deep approach to learning at the upper end of the range of performance.

We concluded from our analysis (Elander *et al.*, in press) that conceptualizing essay assessment criteria as 'complex skills' provides the greatest scope for informing the use of assessment criteria in teaching. The reason for retaining the notion of 'skills' is to remind us that essay criteria describe things we 'do' in the process of understanding and producing knowledge; they are abilities one needs *in order to* understand and produce knowledge, and those abilities can be acquired, practised, refined, and even go rusty without use. The reason for describing those abilities as 'complex' is that the skills in question are understanding-oriented, inter-related, and linked to the development of personal attributes relevant in academia and beyond.

The skills represented by essay assessment criteria are complex also in the way in which they are related to subject knowledge. At the lower end of the performance range, they can be presented and promoted with little reference to the specific discipline. For example, aspects of language use and structuring begin with generic issues that would apply to essays in any discipline and, indeed, to writing outside higher education. As the skills of language use and structuring writing become more highly developed, they become more closely linked with the discipline-specific content of the writing. Complex skills therefore put the knowledge back into skills. The concept of complex skills is somewhat consistent with that of 'academic literacy', defined by Warren (2003, p. 109) as 'the complex of linguistic, conceptual and skills resources for analysing, constructing and communicating knowledge in the subject area', which also makes very strong links between subject knowledge and writing skills. Complex skills and academic literacy are both concerned with the construction of disciplinary knowledge, but complex skills can be more explicit about the nature of the skills required.

Conclusions

The qualities represented by essay assessment criteria do not correspond directly with the main types of learning currently prevalent in pedagogic theory. Complex skills is a new concept that can help to integrate assessment criteria with learning processes at a theoretical level. Applied to the development of teaching that provides structured engagement with assessment criteria, a complex skills approach can inform essay writing right across the ability range by improving students' understanding of assessment criteria, developing students' ability to participate in knowledge production, and developing a meta-awareness about assessment criteria that may promote more transferable, autonomous approaches to learning.

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