Assessment for Learning

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Nicol (2009)

‘Re-engineering assessment practices’ to stimulate

• **Student Engagement**
  – Students supported to act as partners in learning, via active involvement in and commitment to study

• **Student Empowerment**
  – Students supported to exercise increasing levels of control over own learning via self-monitoring and self-regulation.
Assessment for learning: key conditions

- Develop students' abilities to evaluate own progress, direct own learning
- Emphasises authentic & complex assessment tasks
- Is rich in informal feedback (eg peer review of draft writing, collaborative project work)
- Uses high stakes summative assessment rigorously but sparingly
- Is rich in formal feedback (eg tutor comment, self review logs)
- Offers extensive 'low stakes' confidence building opportunities and practice
HOW MIGHT WE (RE)DESIGN ASSESSMENT TASKS TO PROMOTE ENGAGEMENT?
Conditions 1 and 2

- AfL environments emphasise complex and authentic assessment tasks relevant to the subject or profession.
- AfL environments use summative assessment, which is needed for a variety of purposes, rigorously but sparingly.
Some challenges

• Usually I have my 2:1 in mind. I need a 60% and that’s what I’m writing for.

• There's no obligation, you’re writing for a set task and a set thing and once that’s been achieved then that’s it. You just copy down the books in a different language.

• Normal assignments have no audience. I don’t know what happens when they go in: they get read and they get sent back.
An AfL response: Project-led summative task

• Live brief to produce
  – a guide for staff
  – a guide for students
  – learning materials

• All teaching sessions built gradually towards the development of ‘on-display’ products
Cognitive engagement

“I put so much effort into this, read loads, you had to. With this you can’t just sit there and take the notes, you have to make sense of it...to produce something that gets the message over. “

“It’s thinking.....It’s more analytical. “
Engagement in academic-social learning partnerships

“We definitely discovered working together you’re giving so much more. You’re pulling things out of each other you didn’t realise you had!”
Students as partners in raising others’ awareness: sense of achievement and contribution

“It’s not just a pass or a fail or a number in a box, there’s other important things like satisfaction, recognition, the feeling that it is going to help other people.”
In summary...

How can we design assessment tasks that are meaningful to students beyond ‘being marked’?
HOW MIGHT WE (RE)DESIGN FEEDBACK PRACTICES TO SUPPORT LEARNING?
The value of feedback

‘...it has long been recognised, by researchers and practitioners alike, that feedback plays a decisive role in learning and development, within and beyond formal educational settings. We learn faster, and much more effectively, when we have a clear sense of how well we are doing and what we might do in order to improve.’

(Hounsell, 2003: 67)
It's a normal day at Muddlestone University, and Sam, a student, is thinking about his uni experience....

I never get any feedback on my work!

Meanwhile, Linda is working through her marking....

They never read these feedback sheets anyway.... They only look at the marks.
‘Traditional’ models of feedback

• ‘...all too often feedback is conceptualised simply as the provision of information...’ (Sambell et al, 2013:73)
• ...as ‘monologue’ (Nicol, 2010)
• ...as ‘a matter of information transmission’
  ...‘an episodic mechanism delivered by teachers’ (Boud & Molloy, 2012)
Associated problems with ‘traditional’ models

Feedback after the event is too late

“The problem is, you can hand in an assignment thinking that you've got it...but sometimes you really haven't...and there's no way of checking that.”

Not always easy to understand

“If I'd known how to ‘be more critical’ I'd have done it!”
Condition 3

AfL environments offer students access to a rich and timely supply of formative formal feedback
Common strategies: improving feedback

• Providing comments on work while students are producing it (drafts)
• Helping students learn from feedback by breaking assessment down into smaller linked components
• Using alternative formats e.g. audio-files
• Using peers to provide feedback
• Offering students the choice about *when* they receive feedback
Such approaches were often highly prized by students

“[The teacher] has actually sat down and said ‘this is where you're going wrong, you might want to try this.’ And I really like that. That helped me a lot.”

“She would help you to know where you had gone wrong and she’d help you to fix it, rather than just to say ‘That's where you went wrong’.”
The need for teachers to rethink models of feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2012)

Unless there’s a perceptible influence—unless students actually engage with feedback and/or it’s used to modify learning activity in some way (Black & Wiliam, 1998)—it is simply ‘dangling data’
HOW MIGHT WE (RE) DESIGN OUR TEACHING TO REPOSITION FEEDBACK AS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING?
How do we design in learning experiences which

• Offer plentiful and richer opportunities for students to *engage* with feedback?

• Embed feedback in learning communities, where students ‘own’, internalize, reflect and act upon it by playing a *participative* and *generative* role?
Conditions 4 and 5

AfL environments offers students low-stakes opportunities to practice, try out or rehearse what they are learning in order to improve and develop.

AfL environments are rich in informal feedback (e.g. peer review of draft writing, collaborative project work)
Some challenges: teaching environments

“I don’t see the point of lectures, not really. Basically, you go along and get the notes.”

“The problem is, you can hand in an assignment thinking that you've got it...but sometimes you really haven't...and there's no way of checking that.”
Creating the conditions for authentic feedback opportunities via everyday academic-social interaction
Authentic feedback...

• As ‘seeing’ where you are now
  
  “It's something that you've done instantly.. and you talk about it instantly, and then you get feedback instantly...so you can see if you need to alter or change.”

• As seeking

• “without talking to people and explaining your ideas to other people, you can’t work out whether you’re on the right lines...you’re sort of left in the dark.”
Authentic feedback redefines the tutors’ role

...as interacting ‘on the fly,’ asking questions, and exploiting moments of contingency (Havnes, 2012)

“They [tutors] came round saying, ‘OK, that’s good. That’s one way of seeing it. But how else did anyone see it?’ And that helped you, sort of, delve a bit further, take the next step.”
...and a stark contrast/foil to feedback as ‘teacher telling’ (Sadler, 2010)
When informal feedback permeates the curriculum and is activated by students it helps them understand disciplinary expectations on a deeper level...

“Doing that poster, it finally clicked. So that’s what this course is really about! “

“It’s something quite tangible. So you can see ..um...whether you see the way it's supposed to be seen. It’s knowing what questions to ask, which somebody who knows their subject knows.”
HOW MIGHT WE EMPOWER STUDENTS TO ACT AS PARTNERS IN THE ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK PROCESS?
Condition 6

AfL environments explicitly help students develop and hone their abilities to evaluate their own progress, and direct their own learning.
Indispensable conditions for self-regulation (Sadler 1989)

- **The student** comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher.
- Is able to **monitor continuously** the quality of what is being produced during the act of production itself.
- Has a repertoire of alternative moves or **strategies** from which to draw.
Challenges: students’ previous assessment and feedback identities

• “At school you've got told what you needed to put in your essays, exactly what you need and what you don't. It was always like 'Make sure you include this point.' It’s not your own initiative.”
Interesting projects..

• Beginning to engage students as partners in helping others to ‘rethink’ conceptual models of assessment and feedback as part of assessment and feedback literacy development
• ‘Feedback is a Dialogue’
• Feedback Know How project
• Mentoring, Learning Leadership
But assessment and feedback literacy depends on teachers devising explicit opportunities for students to become actively involved in the assessment process

E.g. via

– Self and peer assessment (Boud, 1995; Taras, 2001)
– Peer review (Nicol, 2012)
– Exemplars (Hendry, 2012; Sambell, 2010)
One AfL response: Exemplars

- Exemplars are ‘key examples chosen so as to be typical of designated levels of quality or competence. The exemplars are not standards themselves but are indicative of them. ..they specify standards implicitly.’

Constructing effective exemplars

Handley et al (2008: 44) suggest that exemplars

– may be complete assignments or excerpts
– may be authentic pieces of student work, or may be (re)constructed by staff (so as to illustrate specific pedagogic points in as transparent manner as possible)
– may be annotated with feedback to
  • help students understand what tutors look for
  • help students build their self assessment skills
Exploring the Rules of Engagement via Exemplars Project

Encourage staff student dialogue re assessment and learning practice by enabling students to

– actively make, in a scaffolded and supportive learning environment, evaluative judgments about the relative merit of concrete examples of student writing

– participate in assessment in a generative way (that is, providing, rather than simply receiving, feedback)
What did we do?

• Students **prepared** short piece of writing on a key concept in Childhood Studies (not more than 1 side A4)
• Students brought this to session, where they were given 4 exemplars on this topic and **negotiated criteria**
• Students asked to work in small groups
  – Place exemplars in **rank** order
  – **Prepare feedback** which would help the student of each exemplar to improve the work
  – After a lengthy plenary discussion of tutors’ views of the above, students were advised to **reflect** on how they would improve their own writing, in the light of the session.
Students’ views...the value of discussing concrete examples..

“I think seeing it just makes you understand it more. Like, someone can stand there and say, 'You shouldn't do this and that' but until you've actually seen it then you don't know what that looks like.”
• **Variation**
  – “It helps, because you read it and think ‘Oh, they’ve put that, and that didn’t sound right, or that looks right’, and so it helps you listen out for your own writing.”

• **Making ‘mistakes’ and thinking again**
  – “We didn’t put them [the exemplars] in the right order. Before we thought one was a really, really good essay, but then when we talked about them and looked at different points you could see that, ‘Oh, yeah, that’s not that good’.”
Transformed roles for students in the feedback process

“I used rather informal language, and I saw I have to change that.”

“When we discussed this task in class I realised that what I had written didn’t focus on the question, and I had looked more at socialisation rather than social construction. It was this that made me read around the subject more.”
A striking contrast with students’ conceptions of feedback in the earlier Case Study...

- Student positioned self as reliant on tutor to identify action and change
  - ‘It is very helpful that we can write a draft for [the tutor] who checks it and then we can write it’.
  - She is very supportive of us and she’s telling us what we should or shouldn’t do.
To what extent do you design in formal opportunities for reflection, self and/or peer evaluation in your courses?

– How are students engaged with understanding goals, criteria and standards?
Thanks for listening!

Contact me

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