

Linking Assessment with Learner Success

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ABSTRACT

Assessment 'for' Learning (A4L) as well as 'of' learning is an important approach to adopt if the assessment process is to be deployed to help learners realise their full potential (Department for Children Schools and Families. The Assessment for Learning Strategy (2008)). The concept of Assessment Literacy (Price, 2012), which encompasses 'Assessment confidence' (Handley et al, in press 2012) through learners' understanding of 'Discourse of assessment and feedback dialogue' provides a useful frame of reference through which to describe assessment processes which are formative. These are developmental and focussed on improving likelihood of students to achieve at their maximal level.

This paper translates key aspects of A4L and Assessment Literacy into practical strategies based upon the literature and the author's experience of assessment in schools and higher education internationally. Focus is given to the rationale and strategies for preparing students for assessment so that they are clearer about expectations of the form of the tasks they will undertake and how it they be graded and to approaches to feedback which capitalise on harnessing its formative powers. This in addition to its summative 'measurement' functions.

The paper sets an agenda for professional development of teachers and harnesses the concepts of modelling, scaffolding and metacognition within the AFL process and importantly gives them life through real examples of classroom practices that make a difference. It is argues that assessment can be a secret garden, a 'Black Box' (Reference) into which learners (and teachers in their professional development) need a clearer view. They need experiential tools/keys to the box to gain fullest access. Understanding the rules, language, expectations and permission to demonstrate criticality are central to the argument that A4L is a profound approach to enabling learners to demonstrate what they know and can do to the best possible effect.

Assessment literacy: What does this mean?

Assessment literacy considers students understanding of the expectations and processes of assessment and how this can be enhanced so as to maximise the chances of their being able to demonstrate their full potential. It is a 'no secrets' approach. The foci below are essential elements of assessment literacy if students are to be equipped to succeed.

- 'Assessment confidence' (Price et al, 2012). (If students know how it works, they are more likely to succeed)
- 'Discourse of assessment and feedback dialogue' (Price, 2005). (Tutors showing examples of work and talking about how they assess and then discussing this with the students)

- ‘Self-evaluative ability, independent learning and employability’ (Boud, 2009) (Students, through a better understanding of assessment and feedback, can take more charge and know more about their strengths and areas for development)
- ‘Useful evaluation’ (Price et al 2011). (Feedback is key: they understand why they got the mark and how to improve).

How can Teachers make feedback work to its best effect?

Feedback to students (in written, oral or electric forms such as podcasts and screencasts) must be developmental if it is to have good effect in enhancing of learning and successful completion of learning outcomes. Feedback is less effective when students are not well prepared to use it productively so as to have ongoing, formative, advisory versions which are contingent and offer opportunity for development over time. This, when effectively planned and delivered may mean less time and energy needs to be expended in ‘end-on’ summative written feedback. If feedback (formative and summative) is timely, it is easier for learners and teachers to make connections with the assessment experience and the learning it was measuring.

Preparing students to receive feedback

Students need an appreciation of assessment’s relationship to learning otherwise it is not worth doing. Where there is a greater sense of the holistic programme, students are more likely to achieve the learning outcomes than students on programmes with a more fragmented sense of the programme (Haynes and Kaholokula, 2007). (It is good to explain to students where the module and its assessment fit and why it is important in the overall scheme of things). For example:

- Align the students’ expectations with yours by explaining the purpose of feedback and you ‘marking’ and thinking out loud with examples of work on a screen.
- Use previously marked assignments to show how feedback was used to improve the quality of later submissions.
- Ask students to submit brief evaluations of their work along with their assignments.
- Let them have a go at assessing pieces of work against the criteria, awarding marks, writing feedback and discussing the process.

Reducing emphasis on written feedback

Some skills, literacies, conceptual understandings are ‘slowly learnt’ and need rehearsal throughout a programme. (Yorke, 2001) (i.e. Practise! Examples!). Dialogue supports understanding and engagement (i.e. look at examples of work and feedback and discuss how it all joins up). For example:

- Student engagement is enhanced if written feedback is supplemented with dialogue such as in-class discussions of exemplars and peer review discussions or discussion of feedback with a personal tutor.

Providing timely feedback

“Setting students assignments as soon as they arrive at university could help cut dropout rates.....integrate students into university life as quickly as possible. This involves making them aware of the quality and quantity of work expected from them.....The freedom...is too much for some and they probably need more structure in the first year.” (Times Higher Education Supplement, 2003)

For example:

- Consider early ‘writing’ as a diagnostic tool
- Clearly communicate the process, demands, structure, functions and timing of assessment
- Consider giving generic feedback to a whole group as soon as a general picture emerges of the quality of assignments.

So, if students are to be in a state of maximised preparedness to receive and act productively on feedback it is important that teachers:

- Clarify expectations - be clear what feedback is for and what the students’ responsibilities. Show them examples.
- Engender good study habits; diagnose areas of individual difficulty; promote engagement. As in the above, let students see how it all works. If there are no secrets, they ‘get it’ and can perform better.

A key issue in feedback is that students often do not understand what a better piece of work is and when students do not understand what is being asked of them particularly in terms of standards and criteria. (O’Donovan, 2008)

Students need to find out what sort of feedback they will receive; written, verbal or online and who will give feedback and when. If they are to understand and engage with feedback, it is important that teachers consider and have strategies related to the following:

- Students need to understand the assessment standards and criteria to be able to self-evaluate their work in the act of production itself (Sadler,1987)
- They need a conceptual understanding of assessment (i.e. understanding of the basic principles of valid assessment and feedback practice, including the terminology used)
- Understanding of the nature, meaning and level of assessment criteria and standards is important. In other words, seeing examples lets students into the ‘secret’.

For examples, students should be actively encouraged to read or listen carefully to feedback and how it applies to their work or ideas and how it relates to the assessment criteria. They should expect and be expected to ask for any clarification as they cannot use feedback they don’t understand! Points to consider include:

- The ability to make informed judgements on the work is a key graduate attribute. (Boud, 2009)
- Learning effectiveness (and student engagement) is strongly influenced by opportunity to apply feedback to future performance. Is feedback uniformly developmental, even for the best students?

This relies on:

- Ability to understand feedback (legibility and interpretation)
- Expectations of how feedback will be used
- Perception of self-efficacy – do the students understand enough to know they can do even better?

For example students can use feedback:

- To think about what has been done well and what can be improved
- To plan subsequent pieces of work
- To prepare work in other modules
- To develop subject knowledge
- To prepare for personal and/or tutorials.

Some Helpful Thoughts and Reflections on Real Practice at the Front Line about Formative Experiences and Preparation for Success in Assessment:

Formative experiences are about the deliberate teaching for understanding of what assessment is, what it is for, and how it works. This includes a significant focus on explaining and demonstrating the use of Intended Learning Outcomes, Assessment Criteria and ensuring students know and understand what feedback is all about. Working with real, meaningful, examples, containing useful ideas and content in the discipline is the primary vehicle to achieve this.

The best practice is to specify deliberate plans for formative experiences in the teaching programme or module in the design phase. This may be presented as a grid or chart. Preparation for first year students, or those returning to study (or postgraduate) after a significant gap should be given particular attention. You could also consider this in the planning for learning and teaching sections early in programmes to assist students with induction and transitions into the curriculum.

Unpacking ‘Formative’ Experiences prior to Summative Assessment:

Given the A4L position, the following synthesises key components which are worthy of note. All assessment can be considered to have formative elements if the very act of doing it is linked to developing one’s application and integration of knowledge and ideas. This is particularly true if a student is building on feedback from the last assessments. This is even more formative if it is coupled with excellent, developmental, feedback along the way. Perhaps through discussion of plans, structures and drafts. Formative assessment is done in rehearsal and preparation for summative assessment (‘that informs marks and classes’). It is a key element of the notion of ‘assessment for learning’ e.g. having a go at an assessment and getting some feedback or an indicative mark to help you see how one is doing.

‘Formative experiences’ are where the real added value to the student experience is at (and these can include formative assessment). Formative experiences are included in the expectations of the Undergraduate/Postgraduate Frameworks at Edge Hill University. A curriculum at the University cannot be validated for delivery unless this is expertly addressed. This is about deliberate teaching for understanding of what assessment is, what it is for and how it works. It involves focus on explaining and showing the use of

learning outcomes, assessment criteria and focus on what feedback is all about. Working with real, meaningful, examples, with useful ideas and content in the discipline is the way forward.

Formative experiences through explanation and exemplification can include:

- Modelling, writing in front of students (showing and explaining how good writing works ‘in action’).
- Showing pieces of written work and describing its qualities (e.g. text projected up and annotated with comment bubbles and track changes).
- Marking it and explaining how the criteria work and writing the feedback one would give.
- Getting students to mark using criteria and to write feedback and talk about it.

The following case study expands upon the above notion of modelling and scaffolding of students’ engagement with assessment so as to enhance their chances of deeper engagement and understanding of the processes. Without such it can, for many, remain a mystery unless made explicit in teaching as a component of A4L/Assessment for Learning.

The Skills for Personal Learning Module in the BA Education and Literacy has a focus on helping students to understand assessment and feedback processes prior to submission of their first piece of summative assessment in year 1.

A number of teaching strategies are deployed in sequence including:

- Teacher modelling of production of short pieces of writing, emphasising the structure of argument, referencing conventions, ‘beginnings’ ‘middles’ and ‘conclusions’ using the subject matter as a vehicle.
- Teacher modelling their thinking whilst reading pieces of students work on screen, and talking about how they judge quality in relation to the learning outcomes and grading criteria and actively writing feedback as they go along
- Students in groups assessing three pieces of work of varied quality, considering learning outcomes and grading criteria and writing feedback for each. They then compare across groups and engage in dialogue with the tutor, rather like a practice ‘moderation’ session.
- Students sharing their thoughts so far and reflect on roles and responsibilities in relation to feedback and what makes for good production and use of feedback to enhance learning.
- Students jointly construct short pieces and consider feeding back against grading criteria across their groups.
- Students then constructing a piece of writing related to a hot ‘interest’ topic in their subject and the tutor writes formative feedback which they discuss in peer groups and in small group tutorials with the tutor.
- Students, after engaging with this journey, finally write their assignment for summative assessment.

On receiving feedback from students and being observed by peers the tutor felt that he had been more explicit than ever in explaining how he assesses and writes feedback. Students were more receptive to these processes than statements of intent and

descriptions in module handbook, which students don't always pay attention to, or just 'don't get' as they can be relatively inert documents.

Students reported that this was an extremely helpful process of 'easing them in to real assessment where marks are awarded'. Indeed, seeing writing and assessment and feedback being produced in action, gave them clearer insights into what the purposes of feedback were and what was expected of them through a 'no secrets' approach. The activities also served to get a sense of mutual support and community going in the group. Students have subsequently reported how reflections on the experiences in the module set them up well for subsequent modules and their success. They felt encouraged to engage more actively with feedback and with tutors. The reflections of the teacher are summarised below.

- The sequence of modelling by tutors and assessment practice events by students, it is argued, may be transferable to other subjects.
- Similar approaches could be built into induction activities as a matter of course.
- Second year students could be used to contribute to such induction activities.
- After the summative assessment event, general feedback to the whole group (like a mini-examiners report) could be submitted to the group via e-mail or the verbal learning environment. If feasible, this could be passed to the teacher/s who next teach the group. As such, this would extend the process of academic induction longitudinally.

A related case study, based on similar principles was articulated through the eyes of a second year undergraduate student on the same programme. It is summarised/paraphrased below based on the tutor's discussions with the students as a group activity achieved at obtaining insights into their experiences of assessment in an Appreciative Inquiry mode (Cooperider 2005).

"I was a student on Skills for Personal Learning Module where the tutor put a piece of work on the projector and explained how they would assess it. They talked out loud about how they were thinking about learning outcomes and grading criteria so we got a much better of how things worked. It was useful to look at pieces of work and have a go at assessing and writing feedback like the tutor did. It felt good to discuss the connection between the marks and the grading criteria and gave us a good mind set to have a go at some writing ourselves. We had a go at a short 'mock' assignment, writing it together as a group. We passed it to another group and they assessed it and wrote feedback and we did their piece. We had to justify why the piece was a pass and why we had given the mark we did by referring to the grading criteria.

The next thing we did was to write a short piece and the tutor assessed it and wrote feedback. He called it 'formative assessment' and it was a good practice for the real thing at the end of the module which was a piece of coursework. I felt that seeing what feedback is all about, writing it and discussing it set us up to do better than if we were just told about this or given details in a handout.

This was an extremely helpful way of easing us in to real assessment where marks are given. Seeing writing and assessment and feedback being

produced in action, gave us clearer ideas about what the purposes of feedback were and what was expected of us through this 'no secrets' approach. The activities also served to get a sense of mutual support and community going in our group. The experiences in the module set us up well for subsequent modules and helped us succeed. I felt especially encouraged to engage more actively with feedback and with tutors. Things I would recommend include:

- The sequence of activities could be used in other subjects and be built into induction activities.
- Us, as second year students could be used to contribute to such activities for first year students to explain what it is like from our end.”

Conclusion

Translating the conceptual frame of A4L into practical strategies is key to unleashing potential and student success. This paper offers approaches which may be adapted for all types of assessment, not just writing. So, in conclusion:

- Assessment is important as it measures student success. Formative preparation is important.
- If assessment is understood, students can be more successful.
- Formative experiences (practice and rehearsals) are important as they are more sophisticated than just getting feedback on a draft or a practice attempt.

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