

# Assessment for Empowerment: Using the Assessment Criteria to Create a Transformative Dialogic Learning Space

Jennifer Bain & Lili Golmohammadi



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The presenters are at this interim point in analysing data and revealing research findings. Therefore, the intention of our presentation is to share our work so far and to raise some interesting and emerging issues about dialogic assessment practice, with the intention of gaining valuable feedback from our peers to support development of a full paper.

## Introduction

Higher Education (HE) assessment practice remains imbued with the principles of behaviourism (Brown, 2006). The use of learning outcomes and 'constructively aligned' assessment criteria are based on behaviourist principles, often requiring educators to conform to a model where learning is pre-determined, defined in a way that negates the need for discussion and instead creates a 'dialogic vacuum' around assessment (Bain, 2010). This can present a paradox for educators who seek to integrate more contemporary theories of learning, such as Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2000) and Expansive Learning (Engestrom, 2009), into their practice.

Drawing on a conceptual framework, *Assessment for Becoming* (Bain, 2010), that places democratic dialogue at the centre of assessment practice, this paper seeks to examine this paradoxical dilemma by focusing on how assessment criteria might be framed and used in ways that seek to empower HE learners through assessment. Through an illuminative case study, that formed part of phase 2 of research spanning 2012 to 2015, this paper explores how assessment criteria might be used to help transform the 'dialogic vacuum' of assessment, the empty dialogic space that often surrounds assessment practice, into a rich and vibrant community of practice. Initial findings from the case study offer insights into how this vacuum might be filled with learning conversations and narratives, and consider the impact of this on HE learners. This is done through a quasi-experimental approach, contrasting the experiences of a dialogic assessment practice to prior experiences of being assessed in HE.

## Theoretical Underpinning

A dialogic approach to assessment may be of interest to HE practitioners who seek a 'pedagogy of possibility' as a way forward for assessment practice (Mayo, 1999; Keesing-Styles, 2003; Bain, 2010), that is those who seek to rethink assessment practice in a 'sustainable' way (Boud, 2002) from the perspective of autonomous, lifelong learning and who seek to integrate more contemporary theories of learning, such as Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2000) and Expansive Learning (Engestrom, 2009), into their practice.

This paper seeks to examine this paradoxical dilemma by focusing on framing and using assessment criteria in ways that seek to empower learners through assessment. It draws on a conceptual model of assessment, 'Assessment for Becoming' (Bain, 2010), that offers an authentic approach to student voice in assessment practice and focuses on 'how we might live our lives, rather than on known understandings'. The model outlines a pedagogy that endeavours to be transformative:

educating students to take risks, to struggle with on-going relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of a world that is 'not yet'...

(Simon, 1987 p375)

'Assessment for Becoming' is designed to promote the autonomous learner, who takes a pro-active role in the learning process, generating ideas and looking for learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to the various stimuli of the teacher (Knowles, 1975; Boud, 1988; Bain, 2010). The features of Assessment for Becoming identified as pertinent to this paper are identified in figure 1 below.

• Student's opinions on assessment are given space, epistemological, practical and ontological modes of voice, audience and influence.
• There are opportunities for students to negotiate what, when and how learning is assessed
• Feedback from assessment is collaborative and reflexive
• Students are active subjects, with assessment language that of the student. There is possibility for praxis
• The approach to assessment includes lecturer-led, peer and self-assessment.
• Sustainable assessment practice is developed.

**Figure 1: Pertinent Features of Assessment for Becoming**

The overall aim of the research study was to develop assessment practice that embodied a set of principles that might improve the consequences of assessment, or consequential validity (Messick, 1989; Boud, 1995; Boud 2007), which refers to the effect of assessment on learning (Messick, 1989; Linn, Baker and Dunbar, 1991).

Phase 1 of the study examined whether the consequence of current assessment practice was in keeping with the desired consequence of Assessment for Becoming, and whether this contributed to the creation of a dialogic vacuum around assessment. Practice trialled during Phase 2 was derived from Phase 1 findings. The primary focus was to examine how assessment criteria might best be constructed and applied in order to transform the dialogic vacuum of assessment into a rich and vibrant dialogic space in order to improve the consequential validity of assessment.

The most appropriate strategy for the research was deemed to be an exploratory single-case study, where the rationale for the single-case is illuminative or revelatory (Yin, 1989). Decisions around data collection were based on the need to build as rich and meaningful a case study as possible. It was felt that employing more than one research method would also enhance rigour and avoid invalidation (Robson, 2011). Questionnaires were given to participants at the beginning of Phase 1 and the end of Phase 2 in order to investigate changing perspectives on assessment. Observations and semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate in order to provide more focused empirical data (Cohen et al, 2007) by observing current practice, getting participants to talk about their understanding, perceptions and experiences of assessment (Phase 1) and to investigate the impact of the pedagogy developed on the consequential validity of assessment (Phase 2).

Phase 1 of the research revealed quite starkly the contradiction between the role of dialogue in current assessment practice and that conceptualised by Assessment for Becoming. This was revealed by examination of practice, questionnaire data and backed-up by more in-depth interview discussion across a range of UG and PG programmes.

All students interviewed during phase 1 of the research were, or had been, on HE programmes focused on the delivery of Desired Learning Outcomes (DLO), with some evidence of assessment criteria aligned to the DLO (Biggs, 2003). Phase 1 findings revealed, however, student experiences across all HE providers appear to confirm the usual application of assessment criteria was housed in a system of assessment characterised by a summative, lecturer-led approach. Findings confirmed that assessment criteria were exclusively pre-determined and lecturer-driven, with their generic nature problematic for students. There was some evidence that formative assessment activities supported critical thinking and resulted in a 'pure learning effect' (Dochy, Segers, Gijbels and Struyven, 2007: 91). Interview data indicated some evidence of sustainable assessment practice (Boud, 2002). However, the impact of this on empowering learners was again limited by a lack of exploration of assessment criteria and the consequence of this appeared to be that, even in a constructively aligned programme delivery, a 'dialogic vacuum' existed, where students struggle to understand what is being assessed, again dependent on the lecturer, seeking clues on how to succeed (Miller and Parlett, 1974), see figure 2 below.

In setting up an aligned system there are 4 major steps:

1. Defining the Desired Learning Outcomes (DLOs)
2. Choosing the teaching/learning activities likely to lead to the DLOs

**Assessment Vacuum**

3. Assessing students' actual learning outcomes to see how well they match what was intended

**Assessment Vacuum**

4. Arriving at a final grade

Based on Biggs (2003)

### Figure 2: The Dialogic Vacuum of Assessment

Findings also indicated that the language used in student/academic dialogue and feedback appeared complex, judgemental and grade driven. This seemed of little use to students in helping them learn, as they struggled to find meaning in what was being said or written. The predominant use of 'final vocabulary' (Rorty, 1989: 73) appeared to leave little room for manoeuvre, 'It has the final say. It classifies possibilities' (Boud, 1995: 44).

In conclusion, from Phase 1 findings it was possible to assert that the consequence of the limited role of student voice in developing and applying assessment criteria, was to encourage learners to be dependent on their lecturers, disempowered in terms of assessment and with the potential to perpetuate social inequality (Giroux, 1989; Zgaga, 2005). It is also possible to assert that, when considering key features of Assessment for Becoming (see figure 1), the consequential validity of assessment practice across the sample of HE programmes was low and Phase 1 data illuminated central issues that contributed to this, see figure 3.

• Lack of opportunity for authentic dialogue in assessment
• Generic 'meaningless' nature of assessment criteria, which were rarely used to focus learning
• Feedback predominantly focused on grades rather than learning
• Overly complex language which made feedback difficult to access and apply
• The approach to assessment exclusively lecturer-led
• Students remain dependent on trying to 'please' lecturers as a means to succeed

**Figure 3: Issues Contributing to Low Consequential Validity**

### **An Illuminative Case Study from Phase 2: Overview and Findings**

Phase 2 of the research study centred on developing assessment practice consistent with the assessment features outlined in figure 1 above. Early development of phase 2 learning activities considered ways to provide spaces and practices that nurture dialogue as integral practices of human learning and daily encounter (Griffiths, 2003 and 2012; Leitch, Lundy, Clough, Galanouli and Gardner, 2005; Bain, 2012). Pedagogy centred on introducing, discussing and maintaining focus on assessment criteria as central to and directly related to learning. Activities such as taught sessions, seminars and tutorials were rooted in dialogic interactions so that the roles of teacher and learner were shared and different modes of student voice were validated (Freire, 1973; Keeling-Styles, 2003), with dialogue consistently focused on assessment criteria as a means to focus learning. A particular emphasis was put on ontological voice so that 'a student need not force himself into the identikit model of a successful student ...He (sic) can discover his own individual way of being a student' (Batchelor, 2006: 791). Student's views on assessment were given space, voice, audience and influence (Leitch *et al*, 2005), the pedagogical approach assumed the students were intellectual performers rather than a docile and compliant audience, and this appeared successful in supporting students to take control of their learning and in encouraging critical thinking (Harvey and Burrows, 1992).

Assessment appeared particularly effective in focusing learning when students were provided with 'modelling' opportunities, followed by scaffolding and fading activities (Falchikov, 2007). These were refined over time to include preparatory activities that provided 'base' assessment criteria pre-written, which then supported students in learning how to develop assessment criteria and encourage ownership of these criteria (Falchikov, 2007). Scaffolding activities also focused on the selection and use of assessment criteria, in a real rather than preparatory situation (Falchikov, 2007). Again, provision of 'base' criteria appeared to support the learners in developing their understanding of the links between learning and assessment and, as lecturers collaborated with students to provide support, develop shared understanding. Fading activities involved lecturer support for developing and applying criteria being reduced over time (Fineman, 1981; Falchikov, 2007) and explored the degree of autonomy afforded to students in developing and applying criteria. Data revealed that under graduate (UG) students consistently required more modelling and scaffolding when first introduced to the concept of dialogic assessment but in both UG and PG students this lessened over time.

It was also considered important to explore what or who drives assessment and how it might contribute to the process of empowering learners. Data indicated



that the dialogic approach described above was effective in lecturer-led assessment, but two approaches to assessment, peer and self-assessment, proved particularly effective in developing a collaborative approach to assessment (Hounsell *et al*, 1996; Black and William, 1998; Falchikov, 2005). Consistent with the key features of Assessment for Becoming, the consequence of implementing peer-assessment appeared to be to encourage 'reflexivity, self-regulation, and active learners' (Boud, 2007, p22). In addition, trials of the learning activities revealed a future-driven approach to be most effective in creating a climate for authentic student voice with 'the power to sustain itself beyond completing the programme of study' (Tan, 2007, p119) and was instrumental in students developing authentic communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1999). Activities were developed where the role of the academic was to work in partnership with students to develop their self-appraisal skills in constructing and refining assessment criteria. This process permitted students to focus 'beyond the expectations of the teacher' (Tan, 2007, p120). Data analysis showed that this collaborative approach supported students in reflecting more critically on assessment, presenting them with an effective opportunity to enhance their learning.

Careful consideration was given to the kind of language used in the dialogue of assessment. Boud (1995: 44) asserts lecturers must 'choose our words carefully with an eye to the consequences ...and provide something valuable which learners can use to change what they do, and not have to worry about defending themselves'. Development of learning activities focused on application of assessment criteria and feedback engaging students and lecturers in 'reflexive and collaborative dialogue' (Hounsell, 2007: 106). Data revealed this process to be most effective when it resulted in action, such as adjustments to teaching (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The approach to application of criteria and feedback was of one controlled by the student and driven by their needs (Mallett, 2004). Here data revealed that greater student engagement with assessment criteria appeared to generate rich feedback, particularly where this was supported by interactive learning conversations about assessment criteria, feedback, self-assessment and critical reflection (Robinson and Udall, 2006).

The most problematic issue for students and lecturers emerged early on in the data analysis. Both groups appeared to grapple with the relationship between learning and grading (or quality of learning) when developing and applying assessment criteria. Different approaches were trialled and literature around assessment criteria provided insights into different approaches (Rust, 2003; Price, 2005; Brown and Pickford, 2006; Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Hughes (2010) reveals a way forward by making a clear distinction between criteria and standards, stating 'It is important to understand the distinction between criteria and standards. A clear understanding of these terms will make the development task easier'. Sadler (1987) defines these terms as:

**Criterion:** a property or characteristic by which the quality of something may be judged. Specifying criteria nominates qualities of interest and utility but does not have anything to offer, or make any assumptions about, actual quality.

**Standard:** a definite level of achievement aspired to or attained. Standards are about definite levels of quality (or achievement, or performance).

Over the course of the study, data reveals that a separation of assessment criteria from quality descriptors allowed both students and lecturers to make sense of

each, bringing them together to inform learning and make effective judgements around the quality of learning.

Data also revealed that, particularly during modelling and scaffolding activities, students struggled to make sense of criteria in relation to their assessed outcome. Over time, interview data reveals a simple solution was found.

Student 46: It was amazing really. The assessment criteria seemed, well, abstract... but as soon as we turned them into questions then we could ask the work questions.

Researcher: Could you explain what you mean by that?

Student 46: Yeah, instead of, say, a criteria that says something about being able to apply different methodologies – we just reworded it to a question. So it became 'Do I draw on different methods and do I explain why each one was selected and 'Bingo' it (the criteria) was real and relevant.

Thus, framing assessment criteria as questions, using the language of subject proved most effective in supporting application of criteria in an independent way.

Several headline findings are emerging from Phase 2 data to support the assertion that the new approach to developing and applying assessment criteria had improved the consequential validity of assessment, in keeping with the stated aims of Assessment for Becoming. The interim findings currently suggest:

- Over time students attitudes to assessment became more positive
- Engagement with the dialogic approach to assessment appears to increase students understanding of the connection between learning and assessment
- Student and Lecturer judgements on quality of work became more consistent
- Students described being more in control of their attainment and became pro-active in developing assessment 'communities of practice'
- The dialogic assessment activities appeared to increase authentic 'constructive alignment'
- The process provokes critique/evaluation of the DLOs and appears to compensates for broad or vague DLOs

## **Conclusions and Areas for Further Development**

Consistent with the philosophy of Assessment for Becoming, the ultimate aim of this paper is not about prescribing an assessment methodology, but rather '... locally and contextually formulating practice within an integrated moral and epistemological stance' (Simon, 1992: 58). However, in bringing the Phase 1 and Phase 2 findings together, it is possible to speculate on the kind of practice around developing and applying assessment criteria that might be consistent with Assessment for Becoming and might improve the consequential validity of assessment practice.



The intention of the authors is to continue analysis and discussion of data to share good practice through development of a framework for dialogic HE assessment, that includes a number of principles that may not be familiar in generic HE assessment practice. In order to do this it is intended that further development focus on the following areas:

- Meeting the challenge of dealing with learning complexity through participatory assessment processes that seek to bring together increasingly diverse groups of students, often with different experiences, interests, cultures and ways of looking at the world by drawing more widely on key theories such as ‘communicative action’ developed by Jürgen Habermas, or Hannah Arendt’s concept of ‘representative thinking’ to establish that the critical quality of dialogue lies in participants coming together in a secure space to understand each other’s viewpoint in order to develop understanding.
- Inclusion of extracts from qualitative student data to more fully provide a first-hand narrative around student’s contrasting assessment experiences and to better support and illuminate key findings in order to establish more securely, *how* the dialogic space afforded by integrating assessment criteria into the learning process is profoundly connected to students’ flourishing communities of practice.

Lastly, it is acknowledged that, whilst Phase 2 data revealed that 93% of students who participated in the study could see the benefits of being involved in developing and applying their own assessment criteria, not all of them welcomed new and innovative ways of assessment. Students were initially concerned about the potential impact of the new systems of assessment on their workload and on their marks and grades. Some also considered the introduction of peer and self-assessment as a timesaving mechanism for lecturers (McDowell, 1995; Falchikov, 2005). Students also shared with academics concern over their competence in awarding marks (Fineman, 1981; Lapham and Webster, 1999; Connolly, Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012). It is also acknowledged that innovative assessment practices may call into question the value of academics’ judgements and render the powerful powerless (McGrath, 2001). Thus, the sense of disjunction felt by the student, may be shared by the academic (Savin-Baden, 2000). However, by developing sound, research-led HE assessment practice, as highlighted by this study, the authors believe that that the role of lecturers in HE can, and should, become one of partnership with students (Falchikov, 2005) and that examination of assessment roles must form part of the complex debate around accountability in grading student work (Bloxham and Boyd, 2012).

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