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Empowering students to perform an enhanced role in the assessment process: Possibilities and challenges

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Empowering Students to Perform an Enhanced Role in the Assessment Process: Possibilities and Challenges

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Abstract. Assessment is key to student learning. This paper examines the case for increased participation by higher education students in the assessment process to deepen learning and improve learner motivation. While increased student participation may not solve all problems relating to assessment, a review of the literature dealing with enhancing the role of students in the assessment process, and original research conducted amongst academics and students at the author's institution, suggests improvements can be made leading to increased student satisfaction, motivation and competency. This paper therefore argues for change in the approach to assessment by empowering students to become partners in the assessment process rather than being mere recipients of grades.

Keywords. Student, Learning, Assessment, Participation, Reflection, Empowerment, Peer

1. Introduction

Much has been written about the subject of assessment. For example, a Google Scholar search using the term "assessment in education" returned 30,900 results. In conducting the research underpinning this paper, I was particularly interested in current material in books and peer-reviewed journals dealing with student empowerment and increasing their involvement in the assessment process.

This focus on the student as a partner in the assessment process was prompted by a desire to seek opportunities to help students improve (both academically and in preparation for the world of work). The author's experience has been that many students do not engage effectively with assessment processes and I deliberated if more student participation in the process might help having regard to findings made by the National Forum (2016) [14]. A second consideration was the reality that both students and lecturers are dissatisfied with assessment feedback as reported by Boud and Molloy (2013) [4].

The central theme of this paper therefore is the enhancement of learning through increased student participation in the assessment process. Its purpose is twofold: to identify developments from the literature relating to student-lecturer partnerships with a specific focus on assessment; to consider the results of two surveys (involving both

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students and academics at the School of Business, ITB) dealing with aspects of learning and assessment.

In conducting the literature review the author relied on ITB's library databases and Google Scholar to identify relevant peer-reviewed journals and conference papers as well as relevant books dealing with student collaboration and empowerment in the assessment process. The search terms used included: student empowerment; collaboration; assessment; peer assessment; self -assessment; student as partner.

This paper is structured as follows: the literature review is presented first; the survey methodology is then introduced followed by the findings and discussion. Finally, the conclusion summarises key findings and identifies recommended actions.

2. Literature Review

Increasing student participation in the assessment process is but one facet of a wider involvement or partnership movement currently underway. Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014, p .6) have highlighted examples of students working in partnership with lecturers in areas such as "1) Designing a course or elements of a course, including assignments 2) Responding to the student experience during a course 3) Assessing student work" (p. 28). They have pointed out that:

> Partnership does not mean we simply turn the responsibility for conceptualising curricular and pedagogical approaches over to students, nor does it mean we should always do everything they recommend to us. Rather, it means that we engage in a more complex set of relationships involving genuine dialogue with students. (p. 8)

Focusing on assessment, Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans, (1999) [7] have asserted that in an era of lifelong learning "traditional testing methods do not fit well with such goals as lifelong learning, reflective thinking, being critical, the capacity to evaluate oneself and problem-solving" (p. 332). Boud (1995) [2] is emphatic on this latter point of lifelong learning having concluded that: "students must leave us equipped to engage in self-assessment throughout their professional lives" (p.37). Boud [2] has also concluded that: "too often staff-driven assessment encourages students to be dependent on the teacher or the examiners to make decisions about what they know, and they do not effectively learn to be able to do this for themselves" (p. 37).

To empower students, Falchikov (2004) [8] has identified: self, peer and collaborative methods of assessment explaining that "self- assessment requires students to rate their own performance against a standard while in peer assessment they rate the performance of their peers" (p.102). The benefits of such approaches have been endorsed by Cook-Sather et al. (2014): "when criteria for grading and other forms of summative assessment are negotiated, student learning and engagement deepen" (p. 56). These assertions are consistent with Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans (1999) [7]who, citing Topping (1998), has asserted that "the research in this field suggests these assessment methods do fit better with more problem-based and authentic learning contexts and are mostly valid and reliable methods" (p. 345).

According to Rust (2017) [17], the use of collaborative techniques will help students acquire the knowledge and skills required to participate in the assessment process. Furthermore, he has asserted that there is "a strong connection between

assessment literacy and the employability agenda" (p. 8). He has highlighted that "a key aspect of employability is critical self-awareness – the students' awareness of the [graduate] attributes and their understanding of their own personal development of the attributes" (p .8).

Resonating with this theme of enhanced student participation in the assessment process, Molloy and Boud (2013) [13] have operationalised increased student participation to address problems around assessment feedback. They have proposed two assessment approaches which they have termed: Feedback Mark 1 and Feedback Mark 2. Both approaches serve to increase the involvement of students in the assessment process but Feedback Mark 2 recognises that students have "significant agency and choice" (p. 22) in that students are active participants who can solicit and use feedback rather than simply receiving a grade and possibly vague comments from a lecturer. They have also pointed out that a premise of Feedback Mark 2 is "that feedback, as a process has a role in developing students' continuing evaluative judgement that has a more sustainable impact on learners" (p. 22).

In summary, the literature points to both short and long- term benefits for students when they are engaged in assessment in a more inclusive way.

3. Survey of Assessment Practices at the School of Business (ITB) – Methodology and Findings

3.1. Method

Two online anonymous survey instruments were prepared using version 4 of the Jotform software product [12]. One survey focused on gathering students' perceptions and the second one (broadly like the student survey) focused on lecturers' perceptions. Both surveys were reviewed by two experienced colleagues and the student survey was pilot tested by twelve students. To maximise response rates, both surveys were optimised for completion on a mobile phone and in the case of the student survey, respondents could optionally submit an e-mail address for inclusion in a draw for one of five €20 vouchers. The research was undertaken in compliance with ITB's ethical policy during April 2018.

The student survey was distributed electronically to 717 business students and 232 valid responses were received representing a 32% response rate. The lecturers' survey was distributed to 67 staff members and 26 responses were received representing a 39 % response rate.

3.2. Respondent Demographics

For the student survey, female and male respondents represented 47% and 52% of the total number of respondents respectively with 1% preferring not to state their gender. Across all study programmes, the response rate by year was: Year 1 - 25%; Year 2 – 30%; Year 3 – 24%; Year 4 – 22%.

For the lecturers' survey, female and male respondents represented 54% and 46% respectively of the responses received. Full-time lecturers comprised 89% of the respondent base with part-time lecturers accounting for the remaining 11%. In terms of teaching experience 73% of respondents reported that they had greater than 10 years' experience.

3.3. What do students believe higher education learning is?

Table 1 reports on what student respondents believe higher education learning is (column 2). Column 3 shows what lecturers believe students think higher education learning is. The data shows that students strongly associate memorisation with learning.

Table 1. Students' conceptions of higher education learning[2]

Student Learning Conception[1]	% of students who agree or strongly agree	% of lecturers who agree or strongly agree what students believe learning is
(1)	(2)	(3)
1. Learning is the passive receipt of information	49%	38%
2. Learning is the active memorisation of information	81%	81%
3. Learning is actively memorising information or procedures to be used in the future	75%	74%
4. Learning is about developing understanding	91%	69%
5. Learning is about a change in personal reality: seeing the world differently	68%	46%

3.4. What do students know about the 'language' of assessment and learning?

Table 2 column (1) shows the percentages of students who believe that specific assessment and learning concepts had been explained to them. Column (2) shows the degree to which lecturers believe students may be familiar with a specific concept. The data shows that except for Learning Outcome, greater than 50% of students report that the other concepts were never explained to them. Apart from Surface Learning and Learning Outcome at least 50% of lecturers rate students as having no familiarity or little familiarity at all with the remaining concepts.

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[2] Using Säljö's (1982) five conceptions of student learning cited by Gibbs & Simpson (2004) [5]

Table 2. Student Exposure to Aspects of Assessment and Learning

	Student belief that concept was explained (1)			Lecturer view on student familiarity with concept (2)				
	Yes	No	Not Sure	No familiarity at all	Little or no familiarity	Some familiarity	Very familiar	Not Sure
Formative Assessment	25%	53%	22%	31%	31%	15%	19%	4%
Summative Assessment	22%	54%	24%	31%	35%	23%	8%	4%
Bloom's Taxonomy	11%	65%	24%	23%	35%	23%	4%	15%
Deep Learning	23%	54%	23%	15%	35%	38%	4%	8%
Surface learning	23%	52%	23%	12%	27%	42%	12%	8%
Learning Outcome	68%	22%	11%	12%	12%	35%	38%	4%
Threshold Concept	17%	55%	28%	35%	38%	12%	8%	8%

3.5. What is students' current participation as partners in the assessment process?

Table 3 shows that opportunities for enhanced participation by students never occurs or occurs only on very limited occasions.

Table 3. Students' current participation in the assessment process

Opportunities for enhanced participation in the assessment process	Very limited occasions	Regularly	Never	All the time
Choosing the type of assessment	39%	13%	44%	4%
Having an input to the marking scheme	23%	6%	68%	3%
Grading your own work	24%	7%	67%	2%
Reviewing the work of fellow students	44%	11%	41%	4%
Indicating to lecturers the type of assessments you prefer	46%	19%	32%	3%
Engaging with the Students' Union on Assessment matters	19%	3%	75%	3%

3.6. What Do Students and Lecturers Think of Assessment Collaboration?

Tables 4 and 5 report student and lecturer responses respectively to various questions dealing with students' interaction with assessment processes. The key student findings include: students would try harder (78% agree or strongly agree) if they were involved in designing assessments; 72% agree or strongly agree that students should be involved in the design of marking schemes; 34% of students do not feel confident approaching academic staff about assessment matters and 44% do not feel confident when tackling an assessment. When it comes to grading their own work or that of their peers 45% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they could do it objectively while 44% disagree or strongly disagree. Interestingly, 55% of students agree or strongly agree that it is up to academics to design assessments while 80% of respondents agree or strongly agree that students should be trained on assessment techniques. When it comes to feedback, 29% of students disagree or strongly disagree that they attend feedback sessions.

Table 4. Student perspectives on engagement with assessment processes

Aspect of assessment	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Sure
I feel confident approaching academic staff about assessment matters	7%	27%	39%	24%	3%
I prefer team-based assessments	25%	20%	28%	17%	9%
Students should be involved in the design of marking schemes to be used in their assessments	2%	15%	50%	22%	11%
I think students' learning could be improved if they were involved in designing assessments	2%	13%	44%	25%	16%
Students would try harder to do well in an assessment if they were involved in designing it	2%	16%	42%	26%	15%
I feel confident I would be able to objectively grade my own work or that of fellow students	9%	35%	36%	9%	12%
It is up to academic staff to design assessments	6%	26%	41%	14%	13%
Students should be trained on assessment techniques	3%	8%	48%	32%	9%
Students should be involved in reviewing assessment procedures at ITB	1%	11%	51%	26%	10%

Table 4. Student perspectives on engagement with assessment processes

Aspect of assessment	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Sure
I can manage my assessment workload effectively	5%	23%	48%	20%	4%
I make a point of checking assessment details in module descriptors contained in Course Handbooks	4%	18%	46%	27%	6%
I always feel confident when tackling an assessment	6%	38%	42%	10%	5%
I always turn up for feedback sessions conducted by academic staff	3%	26%	45%	22%	4%

The key findings from the lecturer responses (Table 5) show that a significant percentage (30% or greater) of lecturers have reported uncertainty in respect of whether they think students should be involved in the design of marking schemes and whether students would be motivated to do better if they were involved with the design of assessments. Also, greater than 30% uncertainty is reported in respect of whether students should be involved in reviewing assessment practices. Aspects of assessment with response rates of greater than 50% (for agree and strongly agree) include: students should be trained in assessment techniques (62%); students feel confident approaching academic staff on assessment matters (88%); viewing assessment as a way of helping students understand course concepts (100%); and finally, assessments are designed to enhance learning by providing feedback (96%).   Response rates greater than 50% in respect of disagree/strongly disagree are recorded for the following statements: students prefer team-based assessments (65%); my assessments are designed to evaluate performance only (73%); students always turn up for feedback sessions (69%); students are good at managing assessment workloads (88%).

Table 5. Lecturer perspectives on student engagement with assessment processes

Aspect of assessment	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Sure
Students' learning could be improved if they were involved in designing assessments	12%	31%	27%	4%	27%
Students should be involved in the design of marking schemes to be used in their assessment	12%	27%	27%	4%	31%
Students would try harder to do well in an assessment if they were involved in designing it	4%	35%	23%	4%	35%
Students should be trained on assessment techniques	4%	8%	50%	12%	27%

Table 5. Lecturer perspectives on student engagement with assessment processes

Aspect of assessment	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Sure
Students can objectively grade their own work or that of fellow students	23%	35%	19%		23%
Students should be involved in reviewing assessment procedures at ITB	12%	27%	27%	4%	31%
Students feel confident approaching academic staff about assessment matters		8%	46%	42%	4%
Students feel confident when tackling an assessment	4%	23%	50%		23%
It is up to academic staff to design assessments	8%	38%	23%	8%	23%
Students prefer team-based assessments	23%	42%	4%	12%	19%
I view assessment as a way of helping students understand course concepts			42%	58%	
My assessments are designed to enhance learning by providing feedback		4%	38%	58%	
My assessments are designed to evaluate performance only	23%	50%	15%	8%	4%
Students always turn up for feedback sessions conducted by academic staff	42%	27%	8%	8%	15%
Students are good at managing their assessment workload effectively	23%	65%	8%		4%
Students check assessment details in module descriptors contained in Course Handbooks	27%	35%	27%	4%	8%

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1. Discussion

Students' conceptions of higher education learning are considered first. This will be followed by a discussion of three broad steps in the overall assessment process namely: design, completion and feedback.

It is clear there is a bias towards memorisation in students' thinking about what higher education learning is (81% agree/strongly agree that learning is the active memorisation of data). Interestingly, 81% of lecturer respondents believe that students hold this concept of learning. Significantly, students appreciate that learning is about developing understanding (91% agree/strongly agree) whereas only 69% of lecturers believe that this is a learning concept held by students. Of course, "learning at its simplest" [1, p. 13] is about change and 68% of students agree/strongly agree with this conception whereas only 46% of lecturers believe students associate with this conception of learning. The implications posited therefore are: students hold multiple conceptions with a bias towards memorisation; students may hold more sophisticated [5] constructs of learning than lecturers appreciate.

Rust (2017, p. 7) [17] has argued that "students are brought into [this] community of assessment practice". If this is to happen, arguably students must be familiarised with the 'language' of assessment and learning. Table 2 data reveals that high percentages of students believe concepts such as Bloom's Taxonomy (65%) had not been explained to them. Significantly, 22% of students believe a straightforward concept such as Learning Outcome was never explained to them. Moreover, the data shows that 73% of respondent lecturers believe students would have little familiarity with the concept of deep learning. While undoubtedly familiarising students with such concepts constitutes an additional learning burden, if the benefits of a partnership approach to assessment are to be realised, then students must be introduced to them.

The co-design of an assessment could for example, in the case of an essay [6] involve co-creation of the essay titles and marking criteria, and formative self and/or peer assessment using the co-designed marking criteria. Table 4 data indicates students certainly have an 'appetite' for such involvement with 72% of respondents reporting they agree/strongly agree with the idea that students should be involved in the design of marking schemes. Indeed 80% agree/strongly agree that students should be trained on assessment techniques, however 55% agree/strongly agree that it is up to academics to design assessments. Responses also indicate positive benefits for student learning (69% agree/strongly agree it would be improved) and motivation (68% agree/strongly agree they would try harder if they were involved in designing an assessment). Interestingly, lecturers have much lower rates (<30%) of agree/strongly agree in respect of student involvement, learning and motivation. Dochy et al. (1999) [7] has observed astutely that the "habit of academics to do the teaching and all the marking is hard to change" (p. 346) and has pointed to the need for a staff development programme if partnership approaches are to be implemented widely. Undoubtedly, there are power differentials in the lecturer-student relationship and it is encouraging to note that 63% of students agree/strongly agree that they feel confident approaching academic staff about assessment matters. This may be a good base from which to build new partnership approaches. However, there is a sizeable 34% of students who do not have such confidence. Further qualitative research may be useful to understand why this may be so.

For any assessment task (irrespective if it is being done on a partnership basis), it is important that students believe they can tackle it (self-efficacy). Table 4 data reveals that 44% of student respondents do not always feel confident when tackling an assessment and further research is merited in understanding why this might be so. In terms of grading their own work, 45% students agree/strongly agree they could do it objectively however, 58% of lecturer respondents disagree/strongly disagree. Interestingly, Dochy et al. (1999) [7] reviewed several studies dealing with self-

assessment and concluded "results showed that students were able to assess themselves to within five percentage points" (p. 336). They have also pointed to additional benefits in that students had greater awareness of the quality of their own work and that it promoted reflection on their behaviour (p. 336).

Traditionally, once an assessment task has been completed, lecturers will grade it and return feedback to the student. A partnership model at this stage of the process sees students involved in either self -assessment and/or peer assessment and/or co-assessment with the lecturer. In arguing for students to be brought into the community of assessment practice, Rust (2017) [17] cites (Sadler, 1989) who concluded "the student comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher" (p.7). However, for many students this goal is unachievable given student non-engagement even with receiving feedback on their submissions.

Lecturer responses indicate that 69% disagree/strongly disagree with the statement that students always turn up for feedback while the figure for student respondents is 29%. Either of these two figures indicate a problem as timely, developmental feedback is valuable for learners [18]. In explaining students' non-engagement with feedback, Sambell (2016, p. 5) [18] has indicated that "students struggle to understand comments they receive as feedback and that too much feedback can dispirit students" and that there is a risk of damaging self-esteem by "ascribing their work to personal failings" (p. 5). Increased student participation and feedback can be supported effectively by technology. Focusing on feedback, Williams, Brown, and Benson (2013) [19] concluded that the use of ePortfolios, Wikis, Blogs, Clickers, Videoconferencing, Smartphones and Personal Digital Assistants have the potential to increase peer feedback and enable students to become participants "in a learning community of practice" (p. 136). Good examples of technology-based solutions which facilitate student peer learning and feedback which I am aware of include: peerScholar (*peerScholar, 2017*), the University of Purdue's CATME application [5], and PeerWise [16]. Hunter (2017) [11] has used Wikis to good effect with his "Wikiography" (p.5) assessment. Harvey and Donnelly (2017) [10] have prepared a resource pack covering sound assessment practice, supporting technologies and cases which readers may find beneficial.

4.2. Conclusion

This paper set out to identify evolving trends from the literature relating to student-lecturer partnerships with a specific focus on assessment, and to consider the results of two surveys (involving both students and academics) dealing with aspects of assessment and learning.

The evidence from the literature is compelling: there are significant benefits in terms of partnering with students using self, peer and co-assessment. These approaches inter alia, improve learning and engagement and crucially better prepare students for success in the workplace.

Reviewing the results of two surveys administered to both students and staff in ITB's School of Business against the backdrop of partnership in assessment practice from the literature, suggests there is scope to embrace a more strategic approach. The following steps are proposed.

1. Teach students the basic concepts in assessment and pedagogy.
    Metaphorically, if students are undertaking a journey, it seems sensible to illuminate the destination and how it will be reached.

2. Trigger a dialogue with both students and academic staff to highlight benefits of a partnership approach to assessment. This will serve to surface the practical aspects of a partnership approach to assessment. It is acknowledged that pockets of partnership practice may already exist, however extending the involvement of students in the design and grading of assessments may pose challenges for both parties. Open communication and dialogue should serve to surface latent beliefs (for example, students cannot be trusted to grade their own work) which may hinder a partnership approach.

3. Consider piloting the concept (self, peer or co-assessment) in say, a single module and capture lessons learned at the end of a semester.

4. Increase the opportunity for students to engage in authentic (mimic the workplace) assessments that contain reflective components.

5. Conduct further qualitative research to understand why some students do not have confidence when tackling assignments. Also, to understand why some students lack confidence in approaching lecturers on assessment matters.

6. Develop and deliver workshops and training for staff on best practice assessment design and feedback approaches to overcome generic weaknesses evident in the literature.

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