

2015-06-16

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Recommended Citation

McKeivitt, Conor (2015) "Questions for Assessment: A Guide for Tutors' Practice and Student Development," *Irish Journal of Academic Practice*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 9.

doi:10.21427/D72M82

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijap/vol4/iss1/9>

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Questions for Assessment: A Guide for Tutors' Practice and Student Development

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Abstract

Assessment is a time consuming and important part of academic life for tutors and students alike. It shapes the teaching and allows the tutor to guide the learning process. However, student learning is more effective when they understand the assessment process. Tutors, as expert assessors, are in the best place to develop such knowledge but, they need to plan for this in advance and consider the students' perspective. The purpose of this paper is to both inform and influence tutors' assessment practice using recent literature. Information searches were employed to gather literature from peer reviewed journal articles using keywords that are important within the assessment context: assessment, formative assessment, criteria, feedback, and self-assessment. The literature was collated under each of three question areas that take into account the students' perspective: 1. If I had some criteria and examples I would know 'What do I need to do?', and 'What should it look like?' 2. If I had some feedback while doing my work I would know if 'I am doing what is required?' and 'How I can improve?' 3. If I had support to self-assess 'Would I be able to assess myself?' The literature addressed each of the aforementioned questions. The findings suggest that: in order to answer question one student engagement with criteria and exemplars is required; In order to answer question two students need to engage with tutor feedback that is clear, meaningful and related to criteria; Finally, in order to answer question three students must be given the opportunity to self-assess and be supported through this with feedback from the tutor. Practical suggestions are provided to assist tutors' assessment practice. Proposed elements and benefits of the assessment process for tutors and students are outlined. In

general, a formative approach to assessment is ideal for students. While engagement with the assessment process is valuable for the student it has to be planned for in advance by the tutor.

Keywords: Assessment, Criteria, Formative, Feedback, Peer Dialogue, Self Esteem

Introduction

Assessment is the single most important aspect of a students' life (Gibbs, 2010). It shapes their learning and determines how they will spend much of their time. The purpose of this paper is to both inform and influence assessment practice among tutors. For a number of years, there has been a call for tutors to develop students' assessment knowledge (Rust 2007; Smith, Worsfold, Davies, Fisher, & McPhail, 2013). Sadler (1989; 2010) calls for students to develop assessment skills akin to those of tutors so they can become proficient assessors of their own and others work. Tutors can assist in developing these skills by revealing to students the various elements of assessment e.g. criteria, exemplars, feedback, and involving them with those elements. This means that the tutor will have to make the assessment process transparent for the student, but will require some planning on the tutors' part.

Most tutors know what they require from students when it comes to assessment. However, students are not privy to that information or knowledge. A transparent approach to assessment will go some way to amending this situation by informing students about assessment criteria, exemplars, feedback, and self-assessment for example. Commonly for most assessments students are provided with an assessment brief at the beginning of a module and in some cases marking rubrics and examples of good standards of the work to be submitted. However, due to the high demands on tutors' time it is difficult for them to speak to students regarding the assessment until close to, or after, the submission date, for example when providing feedback.

Sadler (1989) highlights the need for formative assessment in which the tutor provides feedback during the assessment process that can assist students in improving their work and also in developing tacit awareness regarding the assessment process. The opportunity for

feedback and guidance provided from the tutor to the student is hugely important, particularly during the assessment process. Tutor feedback during the assessment process can assist students' learning hugely (Taras, 2003). If that feedback is considered carefully it can help students to learn how to regulate their own work (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). Rust, Price & O'Donovan (2003) found that students' learning and performance improved when they were guided through a marking process by a tutor using criteria and exemplars. The main point is that learning is more effective "*when students understand the assessment process*" (Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2011, p.485). This paper outlines what current research and literature is stating in relation to assessment and how the tutor can incorporate this in his or her practice.

Tutors have a well-developed tacit knowledge regarding assessment which students need to develop also (Sadler, 2010). Tutors are in the best place to make this happen but in order to appreciate the significance of assessment for the student the tutor has to take the students' perspective. In this paper the following questions, that are relevant for any student facing the assessment process, are addressed: what do I need to do? What should it look like? Am I doing what is required? How can I improve? Would I be able to assess myself? The paper is structured around these questions and explains how current literature in the area of assessment can address these questions. The purpose of this approach is to make tutors reflect on what they do at different stages of the assessment process and to consider their practice in relation to the research.

Desk-based Research

The research and literature that is gathered under each question area was specifically searched using the EBSCO (Academic Search Complete) and Google Scholar search engines.

Secondary research consisting of a literature search was conducted. The literature was sourced with the purpose of assisting in formulating answers to several questions (see below). Peer reviewed journals containing keywords that are important for assessment were used to gather literature that would provide information relating to those questions. The keywords assessment and formative assessment were initially used to source peer reviewed material relating to the whole area of assessment.

Following this, advanced multi-searches were conducted using the keywords criteria, feedback, and self-assessment. The reason for using these keywords was due to the fact that assessment criteria, feedback and self-assessment are major elements of the assessment process as evidenced in the material sourced from the initial searches. These keyword searches uncovered literature that connected research relating to each of the questions. Literature found using the word criteria assisted in the collation of research under the following questions: *what do I need to do? What should it look like?* Literature found using the word feedback assisted in the collation of research under the following questions: *Am I doing what is required? How I can improve?* Finally, literature found using the word self-assessment assisted in the collation of research under the following question: *Would I be able to assess myself?* Further journal articles were sourced using the reference lists in the articles obtained to find new relevant articles. This method was used repeatedly in the review process (Jonsson, 2012). All of the articles sourced include at least one or more of the keywords which lead to a situation in which some of the literature spans a number of the question areas. The search was carried out in December 2014, and while it is by no means exhaustive in nature, it is indicative of scholarly practice in the area of assessment.

If I had some criteria and examples, would I know ‘What do I need to do?’, and ‘What should it look like?’

When any of us are about to do a task we usually ask ourselves the above questions. So, it is useful if we are provided with some target that can assist us in doing the task. Finished examples can also be a great benefit in this regard and this is no different in assessment. Therefore, a set of criteria that describe what needs to be done and at least one example would be useful.

Criteria

Assessment criteria are descriptions of how a piece of work will be evaluated in terms of quality and an explanation of levels of quality (Andrade, 2000). In other words, they can tell us what needs to be done and maybe how it could be done. A marking rubric would be a good example of assessment criteria displayed in this way. Studies have found that explicit criteria improve students’ application to their work (Andrade & Du, 2007; Bloxham & West 2007). Criteria referenced approaches benefit students by: illustrating what counts in their work; guidance on what the teacher is looking for; as a guide to plan the assignment; and for self-assessing their work (Andrade & Du, 2007). Both, Andrade & Du (2007) and Bloxham & West (2007), conclude that tutors should discuss assignment expectations with students to provide clear guidance. While the provision of criteria can benefit the student and discussions about those criteria are advantageous an explicit articulation of assessment criteria alone will do little to assist students in developing the requisite knowledge for that assessment (O’Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004). If students can benefit from an explicit articulation of criteria tutors should provide criteria that inform the student what is expected in the assessment. However, the criteria should be accompanied with a sample of the expected work that illustrates those criteria in a real way.

It would be difficult for a student to comply with assessment requirements in the absence of clear criteria that describe the task and a sample of the proposed quality of such work (Rust, 2002). Sadler (2005; 2009a; 2010) affirms this point and proposes that such an approach is more holistic because it exposes students to criteria and a sample of those criteria in action. Consequently, it would be better for students to begin the assessment with a clear idea of assessment criteria and the actual standards needed to achieve those criteria captured in an exemplar.

Exemplars

Exemplars are sample pieces of work that illustrate the criteria in action i.e. they illustrate a standard. In other words, they can provide the student with an idea of what the work should look like. Indeed, exemplars are the embodiment of what a piece of work should look like (Handley & Williams, 2011). Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling (2002) found that, when used together, exemplars and criteria assisted students and tutors on reaching an agreement on criteria meaning by developing a deeper knowledge of criteria and standards in students. Therefore, it is only when the exemplars (standards) and criteria overlap that benefits result. Indeed, students can find criteria hard to understand in the absence of exemplars (Hendry, Armstrong, & Bromberger, 2012). In a seminal study Rust *et al.* (2003) provided marking criteria to students and followed this up with exemplars for them to mark. Students were then invited to a workshop in which the criteria and the exemplars were explained and discussed by tutors with students. Those who attended workshops did significantly better than those who had not even though all students had received the criteria and standards (exemplars). Rust *et al.* (2003) conclude that the discussion of both criteria and the marking process improved students' understanding of the assessment process. Bloxham & West (2007) found that exposure to a marking workshop in which exemplars and criteria were united assisted

students in developing an understanding of the marking process. Handley & Williams (2011) found that while students valued exemplars, particularly those with annotated feedback the absence of a process where tutors and students could discuss the marking of exemplars resulted in an inability of students to develop knowledge to improve (p.104). Therefore, discussion and interaction between tutors and students can impact on students' understanding of assessing. Teacher explanations of the marking of exemplars provide students with a clearer understanding of the expected standards for an assessment (Hendry & Anderson, 2013).

In some contrast to these studies, Wimhurst & Manning (2013) showed that when students have to mark exemplars and provide feedback, in the absence of detailed criteria and marking workshops, it impacted positively on their performance when compared to students who did not do the same marking activity. No difference was observed between those same students on an exam assessment with no intervention present. Practice marking and providing feedback seems to have benefitted students in this case. Taken together these findings tell us that practice assessing when you have criteria combined with exemplars, and/or exemplars combined with an explanation of marking (feedback) is important for students. Engagement with criteria and exemplars is vital for students to develop an understanding of what they need to do and what it should look like. Tutors should provide criteria with at least one exemplar of what is expected in the assessment, and an opportunity for students to engage with those criteria e.g. via a marking workshop.

If I had some feedback while doing my work, would I know if 'I am doing what is required?' and 'How I can improve?'

It is useful to get some input from someone who is familiar with the task and who can let us know if we are doing it in the correct way. It is also useful if we can get some direction from

that person on what we might do next to ensure success. Therefore, information and feedback that lets us know that we are doing what is required and also if adjustments are needed would be useful.

Feedback

Sadler (1989) highlights how important feedback is and defines it in “*terms of information about how successfully something has been or is being done*” (p.120). It is singled out as the most influential element of the assessment process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Rust, 2007; Gibbs, 2010; Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011; Ferguson, 2011; Jonsson, 2012).

However it “*can only be effective when the learner understands the feedback and is willing and able to act on it*” (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010, p.279). Feedback during the process would help. Indeed, students report that *they “highly value formative feedback activities”* (Beaumont, O' Doherty, & Shannon, 2011 p.684). Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick (2006) propose a model and seven principles of good feedback practice in relation to formative assessment and self-regulation. These seven principles will be used as a guide to investigate other pertinent research in the area of feedback to help address the questions posed at the beginning of this section. These principles should be considered individually and also collaboratively.

Good feedback practice should help clarify what good performance is

This can be facilitated by students and tutors discussing and negotiating criteria and standards (exemplars) (Orsmond *et al.*, 2002; Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2005; Andrade & Du, 2007; Bloxham & West, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Pokorny & Pickford, 2010; Price *et al.*, 2010; Handley & Williams, 2011). An intention of the marking workshops mentioned in the previous section is to illustrate to students what good performance is. The workshops can

help clarify to students what good performance is and how to go about achieving such performance. Discussion of criteria and exemplars together is important in this regard.

Good feedback practice should facilitate the development of self-assessment in learning

The area of self-assessment is important and will be dealt with in more detail in the following section but it will briefly be commented on it here. Andrade & Du (2007) found that self-assessment benefitted students by providing them with guidance using criteria, giving them experience of assessment, helping to review and check their work, and assisting them achieve better grades. Tutors do have a responsibility to develop students' self-assessment capacities (Sadler, 2010). This can be facilitated by introducing a self-assessment task before work is to be submitted (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). Consequently, students will need the criteria against which the assessment is to be judged.

Good feedback practice delivers high quality information to students about their learning

Orsmond & Merry (2011) found that students were unable to use feedback provided by tutors because it was not relevant to their learning. Consequently, students should be afforded the chance to request the feedback they require to develop and learn (Price *et al.*, 2010; Orsmond & Merry, 2011), thereby allowing them to request information that they need for that learning. In other words, it has to be understood by students and have meaning (Orsmond *et al.*, 2005; Price *et al.*, 2010). The use of feedback that is related to clear and understandable criteria is preferred by students because they know what to do with it (Ferguson, 2011). Indeed, feedback that provides clear guidelines can impact on student achievement (Hendry *et al.*, 2012). The feedback information provided to students should be informative and clearly linked to criteria if they are to learn anything from it.

Good feedback practice encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning

Interaction between tutors and students can help students interpret feedback (Cramp, 2011). Students found that the interpretation of feedback was difficult in the absence of dialogue and exemplars (Price *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, the absence of dialogue was found to prevent students from adjusting their work even though they had exemplars with annotated feedback (Handley & Williams, 2011). This highlights the central value of dialogue in the feedback process. If dialogue is lacking “*students never become fully aware of the potential contribution of feedback to their learning and tutors never fully appreciate how their feedback is being used*” (Orsmond & Merry, 2011 p.134). Giving students an opportunity to discuss feedback and learning with a tutor reduces confusion and enables clear communication (Nicol, 2010). Dialogue is imperative for student learning and should be promoted using tutorials for reviewing feedback, asking students how feedback helped, and asking students to peer assess and feedback (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006).

Good feedback encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem

From a formative perspective, feedback should focus on the task at hand and how that person is progressing in relation to the task (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Gibbs, 2010). For example providing a grade with feedback impacted on students' self-efficacy (Black & Wiliam, 1998). It is therefore better not to provide a grade when giving feedback (Taras, 2003; Gibbs, 2010). This would allow students to focus on the feedback alone without the worry of a grade. The feedback itself should be positive in nature while supporting students in making changes that are required in order to improve. Where possible, such feedback should be clearly linked to criteria. In this case tutors should utilise a situation where students submit a piece of work for feedback (draft), non-graded, and then resubmit that work having made adjustments for

grading (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). In general, the feedback provided to students should focus on the positive and encourage students concerning what to do with their work.

Good feedback provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance

Students should get information that allows them to improve on the work they are doing (Sadler, 1989; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Price *et al.*, 2010). This specific information should reduce the discrepancy between their work and the task goal (Sadler, 1989). Taras (2003) found that the tutor noticed errors that the students missed and was then able to feedback to students to correct those answers. Beaumont *et al.* (2011) found that students highly valued formative feedback in which tutors informed them of how to improve their work highly for their learning. Consequently, tutor feedback should clarify how the student is doing and provide clear guidelines for students to revisit that work and make adjustments. This is the fundamental assertion of formative feedback (Sadler, 1989). The feedback provided has to enable action on the students' part (Price *et al.*, 2010; Orsmond & Merry, 2011) to improve their performance.

Good feedback provides information to the teacher that can be used to help shape teaching

The feedback situation should be two-way to benefit both tutors and students alike. To reiterate, students have the most at stake in the assessment situation and should be given an opportunity to tell the tutor what they want from feedback (Price *et al.*, 2010; Orsmond & Merry, 2011). Therefore, tutors should create situations in which they can gather information from students, particularly for assessment, that can in turn be used to guide their teaching. So tutors could ensure that students know: where they are going, how they are going, and where to next (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) by using the information that they are gathering via

formative assessment. In other words, in a learning context which is formative in nature tutors should assess students' learning and then teach appropriately.

Feedback is a complex meaning making process that requires dialogue and interpretation on the part of tutors and students (Cramp, 2011). It has a major role in the development of student learning when used constructively in assessment. Considering the points made here tutors should create an assessment environment in which communication between the tutor and the student is commonplace. Engagement with feedback is vital for students to develop an understanding of doing what is required and how it can be improved. Tutors should provide feedback that is based on criteria that the students are familiar with and prior to final submission.

If I had support to self-assess, 'Would I be able to assess myself?'

If we are a novice or are unsure about the task we are undertaking, this question may be more important. Having the confidence or ability to assess ourselves is important. Therefore, if we were able and confident enough to assess ourselves it would be very useful.

Self-assessment

Andrade & Du (2007) describe student self-assessment as "*an activity in which students gather information regarding their performance and compare it to the goals and/or the criteria for their work*" (p.160). It is an essential skill for effective learning (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 2009b; Carless *et al.*, 2011; Boud & Molloy, 2013), and one that must be acquired (Lew *et al.*, 2010). In order for students to learn how to assess they will need practice and support from expert assessors and this can help to develop their assessment skills. Boud & Molloy (2013) acknowledge that for students to become better at

assessing they will need practice and some input from tutors over time. Smith *et al.* (2013) assert that getting students to judge work could aid them in improving both the work, and their judgement of it. Students who self-assessed using a rubric before submitting their work found that it improved their learning and their work (Andrade & Du, 2007). They found that once they had criteria to work towards and some practice, they were better disposed to this approach. Therefore, tutors should stimulate more self-assessment in students (e.g. Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Orsmond & Merry, 2011). An opportunity to practice assessment is required for students to develop as assessors in general and to become more experienced. Studies have found that students' self-assessment of their work is significantly different to the tutors' assessment of that work. Lew *et al.* (2010) found that first year students' accuracy of self-assessment scores in the first semester is poor when compared to tutor scores for the same work. Overall, they found that students' self-assessments in relation to tutor assessments of the same work actually worsened over time. However, Boud, Lawson, & Thompson (2013) showed that with time, over two to three semesters, students' self-assessments did become more accurate in relation to the tutors. Therefore, students' assessments of their own work do converge with tutors over time. This suggests that practice at assessing is leading to this improvement. What is significant in this case is that students were able to see how the tutor had assessed the work. Given these findings it may take time for students to meet the tutor's experience in relation to assessing performance and grading. Also, students may derive greater benefit from other sources of feedback like the tutor. Boud *et al.* (2013) suggest that interventions that employ feedback for students on their assessment and engage students in exercises that will increase their knowledge of criteria and standards would benefit and develop self-assessment. Therefore, an approach that employs a self-assessment element with formative feedback providing information not only on the work but the judgement of that work could help.

Formative Self-assessment

Taras (2003) proposed a model of self-assessment which is based on Sadler's (1989) formative approach to assessment. She proposes that students should engage in self-assessment of their work, receive tutor feedback and then take corrective action. She asked final year students to self-assess their work and then provided them with feedback that allowed them to examine errors in their work which they had previously been unaware; understand them; and take corrective action (Taras, 2003). In other words, the formative approach helped students close the gap between their current work and a higher standard (Sadler, 1989). In a similar study, Sendziuk (2010) found that when students received tutor feedback and then had to provide feedback on their self-assessment they actively engaged with the assessment criteria and feedback and became more critiquing as a result. What these findings illustrate is that while feedback for oneself is a worthwhile exercise it is strengthened and developed by providing access to the expert knowledge of the tutor. Practice and experience in self-assessment should assist students in improving their learning and performance. However, it seems that tutor feedback is crucial in this regard. Engagement with self-assessment in a supportive environment is important if students are to be facilitated to guide themselves doing their work. Tutors should include a student self-assessment task prior to submission, as a requirement for the assessment.

Conclusion

Assessment is the means by which we determine students' learning and is a time consuming and important part of academic life for tutors and students alike. The literature and evidence gathered together here shows that it is possible to make the assessment process more transparent and user friendly for students and tutors. However, this has to be planned in advance. The questions addressed in this paper collate recent research and theory that tutors

can use to create a useful assessment environment for both themselves and their students. They point out what is important for students at each stage and what the tutor can do to plan for the assessment process. At the end of each section there are practical suggestions that tutors can include in their assessment practice that will go some way to addressing the questions for their students. However, like any practice it is important to continuously reflect.

The purpose of this paper was to both inform and influence tutors' practice using recent literature. The questions put a context on this and push the tutor to consider the assessment in a more complete way to ensure the students' learning goals are being met while also developing their assessment capacity. Table 1 outlines the assessment elements and the benefits that knowledge of and practice with those elements may bring to both tutors and students during assessment.

Element	Benefit
A clear set of criteria used to assess the work	Both tutor and student can use the same set of criteria for assessment and discuss same
At least one exemplar of that work	Allows the tutor to show the student the criteria in a piece of finished work
A requirement for students to assess their own work using the criteria	Allows the tutor to see how students are assessing their own work & if they have missed anything. Engages students in the process of assessing a piece of work using criteria
An opportunity for students to get feedback before the assessment deadline - using a draft	Allows the tutor to guide the student regarding their work and make adjustments prior to submission; also, lets the tutor know what learning has taken place or if more tuition is required. Give student an opportunity to see how they are progressing during the assessment
Drafting or providing spoken feedback that is clearly related to the criteria and details not only how the student is performing but how they could improve	Allows the tutor to give direct information to the student regarding their work – guides the feedback; provides useful and meaningful information to the student regarding their work

Table 1 Elements and Benefits of Assessment for Students and Tutors

To reiterate, students are novices at assessment and need to develop assessment skills akin to tutors (Sadler, 2010) because when they understand the assessment process they learn in a more effective way (Price *et al.*, 2011). Engagement with the assessment process is valuable for students' learning. This would be further enhanced in a context in which a formative approach to assessment is followed. Tutors need to plan for this in advance to reap the benefits for both themselves and their students.

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