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“Am I on the right lines?”: Fostering a shared understanding of feedback to support student’s self-assessment.

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Abstract

As future professionals in the education sector, the students involved in this study will be expected to judge the quality of their work and the work of the learners they will engage with. It is our responsibility as teacher educators to create the conditions for students of education to develop and practice these skills, abilities, and attributes required. This paper evaluates an aspect of a UKRI funded project which aimed to explore practices, interventions and curriculum design which would support both the students and the teaching team in enabling student self-assessment and a shared understanding of quality. The premise is that if students can engage in self-assessment and they can become more autonomous in making improvements in their work. The aspect of focus here is the introduction of Taras’ (2015) model of Integrated Student Self-Assessment (ISSA). This was chosen due to its focus on assessment AS learning in contrast to assessment OF/FOR learning. The findings highlighted that a move to this model would require both teachers and students to make a more profound fundamental shift, both culturally and pedagogically to reimagine a theory of assessment as a process of social construction.

Keywords: Self-assessment; autonomy; social construction; assessment AS learning

Summary

This research aimed to implement and evaluate practices which may increase student autonomy in assessment. Participants were 17, level 5 Undergraduate students studying education. The issue of assessment and feedback would consistently come up in our National Student Survey (NSS) as an area that we could strengthen. Our analysis and synthesis of NSS and programme feedback over three years, revealed a pattern that was both complimentary and contradictory. It told us that our students valued our feedback and assessment and felt that it was fair and clear. Students also felt that staff were good at explaining things and the subject was intellectually stimulating, but they also highlighted that they did not feel challenged to do their best work. Students were also less convinced that they received their feedback in a timely manner. This led the teaching team to explore Taras (2015) Model of Integrated Student Self-Assessment (ISSA) which is an approach to ‘creating a common, negotiated understanding of feedback’ (2015: 4). The unique

aspect of the model is that students revisit their summative work, with the benefit of hindsight, and make their own judgments after receiving feedback from their peers and the teacher.

Project Background

Prior to this project, the teaching team had been working to create more opportunities for students to gain feedback during the learning process before their summative assessment submissions. We had set up draft submission points and gave feedback without grading. As teacher educators, we collectively understood this practice as formative feedback (Black and Wiliam, 1998). We appreciated the value of assessment *for* learning and our intention was to prioritise this for our students, both for their learning and to model effective assessment practice that they might take forward into their careers as future educators. The reality was less impactful. Similarly, to Prouse et al (2007), only a handful of students would submit the interim drafts asking for us to tell them '*if they were on the right lines*'. If the feedback was generally encouraging, it was rare to see any noticeable changes to those pieces in the final submission. At the start of this project, students confirmed to us that in the main they would only look beyond their grade to read the feedback if they disagreed with the judgment. If they accepted or were pleasantly surprised by the grade, they may look at the feedback before they started their next piece of work (6 months may have passed). If they were disappointed with their grade, then they were less likely to engage with that feedback in a timely manner. What we perceived as limited student engagement in their feedback was a real concern for us.

Discussion

Our conversations and research led us to the work of Taras (2005, 2015), which was influenced by Scriven (1967) and Sadler (1989, 2010). Taras's (2015) model of ISSA recognised what many assessment theorists have, that self-assessment is mandatory for learning. This helped us to realise that our drafting policy prioritised our judgments upon our student's work rather than focusing upon *their* learning from the process. This resulted in the teacher identifying the areas for development and this negated the necessity for students to self-assess and self-regulate against their own understanding of the expected standards and criteria. Sadler (1989, 2010) stated the importance of student's ability to recognise the gaps between their own work and the standards was integral to feedback being formative, which in turn, could lead to greater autonomy and dialogue and less reliance on the teacher.

From this, we developed two research aims:

- We wanted to find ways that would support students to use their summative assessment and feedback, which they felt was fair and valuable, in a formative way.
- We wanted to develop student's understanding of the assessment criteria so that they could be more aware of how they could improve their work.

Taras (2005) follows Scriven's (1967) view that all assessment is judgment, with or without a grade. To suggest that our feedback on the draft submissions was focused upon development without judgment (formative) was disingenuous, if well intentioned at the time, as it was informed by the teacher's conceptions of quality as part of our tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009). For students to also develop this tacit knowledge, it required the immersion of both teacher and student in the context to have a deep appreciation of how judgments are made (Taras, 2006 in Sadler, 2010). This project prompted us to review our established understanding that formative feedback was primarily the task of the teacher. This project aimed to apply aspects of ISSA to meet Taras' (2005) and Sadler's (1989) conditions for students to compare their work to the expected standard and act towards closure of the gap. This required us to place assessment AS learning at the centre of our curriculum design and instructional sequencing.

Outcomes and Impact

Students at level 5 had experience of feedback and assessment using the 'Generic University Grading Criteria' and it was hoped that they could be more reflective upon how valuable the change to the assessment process may be for them. The assessment task was an individual essay which drew upon some core content and theory which all students would be familiar with. We expected that this would be helpful at the point of peer assessment in the ISSA workshop.

In the first couple of weeks of the module, the process of ISSA was introduced. The first step was to develop a shared understanding of the assessment criteria (Taras, 2015). We discussed the University grading criteria in detail and the students responded positively to this opportunity prior to starting the assessment task, noting that they felt more secure in their knowledge about structural, technical and procedural expectations.

"This has helped with the organisation of the essay. Where I stand with the marking is clearer too. I feel more confident with this essay 😊" (S.2)

Teaching for the module continued and 6 weeks later, all students submitted their completed essays for summative feedback. Students were asked to reflect upon what they felt went well and less well in their essay development. They mentioned that they felt their essay structure and planning went well and they engaged with more literature than they had previously. However, they were less confident that they had used the literature critically in crafting a clear argument.

"...[I think I was] struggling with critically analysing my own points or view through the literature...unsure if my writing is going off topic – I am bad for waffling sometimes..." (S.8)

Two weeks after this summative submission, the ISSA workshop was held. Perhaps unsurprisingly due to the weighting of the ISSA workshop at 10% of their final essay grade, it was fully attended. This contrasted with the limited engagement with draft assignment writing workshops we had held previously. The distinctiveness of the ISSA workshop was that students spent the first part of the workshop revisiting their summative work using their notes on the grading criteria to make comments about their own work. The benefit of hindsight that Taras (2015) writes about was a crucial aspect here.

“Revisiting work after a few weeks is actually very refreshing. It is helpful to look at my own work and be critical of it as if I hadn’t seen it before now. It’s nice to know that I have the ability to reflect upon my own work and spot the issues myself.” (S12)

Our feedback was released to them without a grade during the workshop, after they had viewed their own work. The Taras’ ISSA ten step model also required students to share their work with their peers. The importance of this aspect is to enable students to make comparative judgment on their work and to open dialogue between students about their work. On this occasion, students were resistant to this part of the process, and it was made optional. The area of peer assessment was deemed the most challenging cultural shift for us and will form the focus of future developments. With both sets of feedback, students were asked to set their own actions to improve this work and take two weeks to resubmit for their summative grade. This was another divergence from the Taras (2015) model. Our rationale had been to enable students to act upon the same piece of work in timely manner. However, the increase in workload for the us did not create more value for the students. As Sadler (1989) and Taras (2015) have noted, any grade is counterproductive to formative work by students and perhaps in response to this, only two students took the opportunity to act upon their co-constructed feedback and resubmit a developed piece of work. We initially felt deflated by this, however, they understood from the feedback that they had passed and with greater autonomy comes genuine choices that they are free to make.

Conclusion

Our intention had been to extend our pedagogies of social construction in teaching and learning to our practice of assessment. The aim was to increase dialogue around assessment between students, their peers, and their teachers. The expectation was that this would increase student’s autonomy and confidence to judge their own their work and act to make improvements. Reflecting on our first engagement with ISSA has illuminated some aspects of our practice which will need to be considered further as we progress with this work.

The first is in relation to the co-creation of the assessment criteria. The students valued the opportunity to discuss the criteria and felt more confident that they could apply the criteria to their work using the same language of assessment as the

teacher (Willis, 2011). However, the autonomy to co-create our criteria is not in our gift. The criteria for grading is standardised across the university and this will require a re-imagining of university policy to allow us to authentically co-create criteria for judgment. In the meantime, we will continue to develop a shared language of interpretation of the generic criteria.

A genuine success of the project was the ISSA workshop in creating a space within the learning cycle where summative assessment was the driver for dialogue and development. Normally, when assessment occurs at the end of the teaching and learning cycle, the opportunity to apply the feedback in a formative way is restricted by the structure of the semester based modular programme design. ISSA was an opportunity for teachers and students to talk openly about assessment and seek clarification about how judgments are reached. Generally, teachers make the judgments away from their students and the students receive the feedback away from their teachers. Challenging this expectation is a unique and powerful aspect of this approach. Extending this open dialogue peer to peer is our future aim for development. Sadler (2010) stressed that the transition from teacher supplied feedback to learner self-monitoring is not something that comes about automatically however we hope that through the sharing of their successes, hopes and fears around the construction of assessment will support its value as central to learning.

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