A Faculty-Wide Approach to Embedding Assessment for Learning to Enhance Student Learning Experience

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# Introduction

Assessment does not simply provide information on the students’ progress in the form of a grade, rank, and/or feedback; it can also be used to improve students’ approach to learning. Previous research has shown that assessments shape how students view the curriculum, and make decisions about what they learn and how they learn it (Boud, 2002; Ramsden, 2003). The type of assessment and the approach to teaching and learning within a particular module need to be aligned if the learning is to be effective (Biggs, 2003). Assessment practices which demand self-awareness, reflection, metacognitive knowledge and collaborative learning, requires more student-centred pedagogical approaches than traditional types such as unseen examinations, and can contribute significantly to students' learning. Such approaches together with their integrated assessment strategies empower learners to take more responsibility for their own learning thereby increasing their engagement in the learning process which, in turn, leads to improved motivation and more effective learning (Bandura, 1977; Feuerstein, 1991; Ushioda, 1996). *Assessment for learning* which focus on the process as well as the outcome of the learning can therefore enhance the student learning experience, and foster the development of autonomous lifelong learners.

Following a review of pertinent literature and a brief description of the institutional context including central initiatives, this paper will outline the approach to the development of *assessment for learning* taken across all the undergraduate programmes of a large Faculty, based on a pilot project carried out between 2003 and 2005 in the School of Business and Finance (now part of the Faculty of Organisation and Management). This paper will examine: the approach to change pre and post-validation; the nature and implication of the newly revalidated assessment programmes in relation to student support and curriculum design; and some preliminary findings from the 1st year qualitative review[[1]](#footnote-2) including student and module tutor feedback.

The paper will conclude with a reflection on the benefits of *Assessment for Learning* at undergraduate level and issues surrounding its development in an HE context with reference to the above case study.

**Literature Review**

Student engagement and motivation are key to successful learning. Cognitive and more particularly socio-constructivist views of student learning suggests that learners' active and independent/ interdependent involvement in their own learning increases motivation to learn (Dickinson, 1995; Ushioda, 1996; Williams and Burden, 1997; Benson, 2001). Furthermore the ability to influence one's own learning has been associated with improved academic performance ( Findley and Cooper, 1983; Feuerstein, 1991; Bandura, 1977 and 1986). Yet the prevalent teaching methods of teacher-led lectures and seminars have tended to encourage dependence and passive learning. Recently, technological progress combined with resources' constraints and the increasing importance of preparation for lifelong learning have led many UK universities to consider radical moves towards more student-centred approaches to Teaching and Learning, and Sheffield Hallam University(SHU) is no exception. At the heart of these new modes of delivery, lies the need to develop in students the skills necessary to become autonomous learners both in order to enhance their learning experience, and prepare them for lifelong learning. Traditional assessment strategies, such as unseen examinations, tend to focus on knowledge acquisition and its application to specific issues rather than on knowledge construction and problem-solving. If student-centred approaches are to be successful, assessment programmes need to be aligned to these changes in curriculum design.

Although all assessment will lead to some form of learning (Boud, 1995), assessment can be categorised as being **of**, **for** and **as** learning depending on whether the main purpose of the assessment is formative or summative (Scriven, 1967; Knight, 1995; Boud, 1992). The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education defines formative assessment as "designed to provide learners with feedback on progress and inform development, but does not contribute to the overall assessment" (QAA, 2000). The notion of providing feedback is key here; this needs to be provided during the individual module or course so that students may identify what they need to do in order to improve their work and have the opportunity to make those improvements (Brown, 2001; Knight, 2001). In this way formative assessment can be described as assessment for learning. In contrast summative assessment refers to "a measure of achievement or failure made in respect of a learner's performance and in relation to the intended learning outcomes of the programme of study" (QAA, 2000). Summative assessment always contributes to the marks for a unit of study or degree (Brown, 2001) and provides "'feed-out' in the shape of a warrant to achievement or competence (such as a degree certificate)" (Knight, 2001). Summative assessment is therefore a judgment (Elton and Johnston, 2002) of learning. It should be noted that differences in the nature of formative and summative assessment have led to the argument that combining formative and summative aims in an assessment task should be avoided. Summative assessment tends to be 'high stakes' assessment where reliability and accuracy are of utmost importance. The aim of formative assessment, however, is to encourage learners to be open about the level of their understanding/knowledge/learning so that advice on how to improve can be given. Therefore, reliability and accuracy are not as central to formative assessment (Knight, 2001). However, in reality the distinction between formative and summative assessment is not always clear. Ramsden (2003) has argued that the purposes of assessment (as a way of contributing to student learning and reporting on that learning) cannot necessarily be separated, and that formative and summative are not distinct concepts in reality. Boud (2005) advocates a holistic approach to assessment where learning and all assessment activities contribute to an overall assessment profile, in which students play an active role. In order to actively participate in the assessment of their learning, students need to have an idea of the target level/goal of the assessment task, be able to compare their own performance with that level, and be able to take action to bring these closer together (Macfarlane-Dick and Nicol, 2004). In this way students are considered central and active participants, undertaking a significant amount of self and peer evaluation.

For students assessment may have a different role; principally in shaping how they view the curriculum, and make decisions about what to learn and how to approach their learning. Ramsden (2003:67) acknowledges the role of assessment in shaping students' learning:

*"The methods we use to assess students are one of the most critical of all influences on their learning".*

Therefore it is essential that the assessment used give the right messages to students about what they should be learning. One possible way of achieving this is to align the assessment methods to the teaching and learning outcomes for a module or course of study (Biggs, 2003).

According to Ramsden (2003) the way that students approach learning is directly affected by aspects of the teaching and learning environment. Marton and Säljö (1984) have described two such approaches as deep and surface linked to a hierarchical set of conceptions of learning: 1. quantitative increase in knowledge; 2. Memorising; 3. the acquisition of facts, methods etc which can be retained and used when necessary; 4. the abstraction of meaning; 5. an interpretative process aimed at understanding reality. Conceptions 1 and 2 are associated with surface approaches, 3 is an intermediate stage, and conceptions 4 and 5 are associated with deeper approaches (Marton and Säljö, 1984:52).

Deeper approaches, while not necessarily always associated with better grades, are believed to lead to a better understanding of material (Ramsden, 2003) and a longer retention of knowledge (Gibbs, 1992). Approaches are flexible and relate to the process of learning, rather than student skills, therefore many students alternate or mix these approaches. The strategy or approach used may vary according to the student's interpretation of what is being asked of them, i.e. the learning or assessment task (Marton and Säljö, 1984), and the student's previous educational experience (Ramsden, 2003). Factors that may encourage a surface approach to learning include: coverage of breadth of material at the expense of depth, assessing for knowledge rather than understanding, and using assessment that creates anxiety and cynicism (Biggs, 2003; Gibbs, 1992). Strategies that may encourage a deep approach involve; assessing for understanding, involving students actively in assessment, and using teaching and assessment that support the stated aims of the module (Gibbs, 1992; Biggs, 2003). Gibbs (1992) suggests that problem-based learning, group work, reflection, independent learning and experiential learning are all activities which may facilitate deeper approaches. Whilst these activities may act to encourage or discourage certain approaches, this does not mean that these approaches are inevitable (Biggs, 2003).

Whilst many authors advocate the broad usage of conception of, and deep approaches, to learning there has also been some criticism of the model (see for example, Haggis, 2003). The distinction between surface and deep approaches to learning whilst retaining its advocates is also being contested (see Greasley and Ashworth, 2007) in favour of more holistic approaches arising from the interaction between a student' s 'lifeworld' and the 'matter to be learnt'. This alternative learning model would reinforce the need for more student-centred assessment activities.

As well as providing students with an appropriate mixture of formative and summative assessment, the assessment diet that students undertake should utilise a variety of methods (Brown, 2001). One reason for this is that some assessment methods may favour some students over others. When a diverse range of assessment methods are used all students have the chance to show their learning (and potential) through at least some of the assessment tasks (Race, 2001). One strategy for achieving this is to use a variety of sources of assessment; possibly incorporating peer, self, group, tutor (Race, 2001) and computer aided assessment (Bull and Danson, 2004).

Involving students in the assessment process, through self, peer and group assessment strategies, can contribute positively to student learning for a number of reasons:

* "Because students are already self-assessing and peer-assessing quite naturally
* Because tutor assessment is not sufficiently valid, reliable or transparent
* To deepen students' learning experiences
* To let students in to the assessment culture
* To help students towards becoming autonomous learners
* To help students develop skills relating to life-long learning
* To help students gain much more feedback that would otherwise be possible." (Race, 2001, 6-7)

Feedback from peers may also be easier to accept and phrased in more accessible language than that from tutors (Macfarlane-Dick and Nicol, 2004). Boud (2000) suggests that learners require a greater amount of self, peer and negotiated assessment to reflect lifelong learning in the learning society.

Computer-assisted assessment (CAA) can utilise a range of technologies (for example, the internet, intranet, CD-Rom) for formative and summative assessment purposes (Bull and Danson, 2004). There are many benefits in using CAA, including the possibility of providing prompt marks and feedback to students (Hepplestone, 2004), more flexibility for students to take tests remotely and at a convenient time (Bull and Danson, 2004), and bringing the assessment environment more in line with the kind of learning environments students experience (Hepplestone, 2004).

**The Institutional Context**

The University LTA strategies in recent years have focused on flexibility in provision, meeting the needs of student diversity and the appropriate use of technology (Sheffield Hallam University's LTA Strategies, 1999 & 2001). The overarching aim of the 2002 strategy, in particular, captures the context in which the assessment project was developed:

"*The University is committed to ensuring a high quality learning experience for all- students, teachers and all other staff and stakeholders within a learning community".* (SHU LTA Strategy, 2002: 2)

Its emphasis is on the active engagement of learners, the enabling of students to become independent learners and take increasingly greater responsibility for their own learning. The most recent strategy (2006) reinforces this LTA strategic vision:

"*We will provide creative, flexible and responsive learning opportunities and environments to enable autonomy and employability".* (SHU LTA Strategy 2006: 1).

In order to deliver high quality teaching and learning experiences, the University identifies assessment as one of the most pressing areas in need of development. It regards assessment as an essential part of the learning process, rather than being separated from learning. It assumes assessment ***for***and ***as***learning, as well as ***of*** learning. Learning, teaching and assessment needs to be considered together, to provide a holistic approach to enhancing the student learning experience. This founding principle is adopted to achieve alignment and integration between learning, teaching and assessment. Behind it lies the need for clarity in relation to:

* what is to be learned (learning outcomes);
* the activities to promote successful learning (learning and teaching methods); and
* the means to know what and how well learning has taken place and be fed forward into future learning (assessment and feedback).

This study follows the development and integration of the Assessment for Learning approach to course planning through a change agent cascade programme at one of the four faculties within the University – i.e. the Faculty of Organisation and Management.

**The Faculty Approach to the Assessment for Learning Project**

*The Project Aims*

The Faculty aims to move from an assessment culture which focuses on student failure to one which puts assessment at the heart of the learning process, through underpinning the development of all teaching, learning and assessment practices by assessment for learning and its associated approaches. By laying the foundation early on through a strong focus on the process of learning alongside the development of other skills, it seeks to engage students actively in the learning and assessment process. Module leaders/teams are strongly encouraged to develop the use of self, peer and negotiated assessment where appropriate, through the promotion of innovative student-centred assessment practices in other sectors of education, and encouraging the use of new technologies to enhance student learning experience. The Faculty hopes that the change in assessment practices will enhance the overall student experience, promote more effective learning, and improve retention/ progression rates, particularly in modules with high failure rates

*The Pilot*:

The pilot, funded by the Centre for Promoting Learner Autonomy (CPLA), began in 2004. Building on the findings of an audit carried out in 2003, it aimed to develop more student-centred assessment practices across the Faculty, in order to enhance the student learning experience and promote student engagement in the learning process. It sought to: (a) identify current assessment practices across the whole Faculty; (b) identify and disseminate good practice; and (c) evaluate the effectiveness of current practices in the light of best practice and current literature. In order to define what was meant by "good practice" for the purpose of the project, the key principles relating to Assessment contained in the University's Assessment Policy Statement provide a useful starting point. Much of the literature reviewed for the pilot study (Flint & O'Leary, 2004: 2-7) strongly supported these principles:

1. Assessment as an integral part of learning in which it acts as a vehicle and motivation for learning e.g. use of formative as well as summative assessment. There is strong student engagement in the process i.e. self, peer and collaborative forms of assessment.
2. There is clear and easily accessed information regarding all processes and regulations relating to assessment with students actively encouraged to engage with it.
3. Assessment suitable for a diverse student population and should be accessible and inclusive as much as possible.
4. Assessment of all learning outcomes through a mix of formative, summative and diagnostic outcomes as appropriate.
5. Assessment criteria provide framework for learners to demonstrate their achievement and assess their own progress.

*The Method*

The pilot employed a very simple two-stage method. Stage One, data on assessment practice for each module was collected by using module information from the existing module database complemented by a simple questionnaire to be completed by module leaders. The questionnaire was designed to provide answers for the following key research questions:

1. What types of assessment are used across the Faculty?
2. What were they measuring/ testing? (Link to learning outcomes)
3. What contribution do these assessment instruments make to the student learning experience? (e.g. formative/summative, for/ of/ as learning )
4. What is their impact on staff workloads? (e.g. nature of feedback, marking time)
5. What is the diet of assessment across a level for a given course as well as for a whole course?

Stage Two, once the module data was collected, the assessment methods of all modules were mapped out based on the key research questions.

The data collection covered a total of 84 modules, representing 220 units of assessment, out of the 190 active modules which had been targeted.

The findings showed that the existing assessment practices revealed little evidence of ‘good practice’. Traditional methods such as paper-based, tutor-marked and summative assessment dominated the methods of assessment. There was limited evidence of innovation in assessment tasks e.g. portfolios, learning logs etc. The qualitative data gathered, however, highlighted clusters of innovation which were very much in line with the University Policy on assessment. Case studies involving successful examples were disseminated through workshops, pre and post validation, to inform changes in assessment practices. The findings of the pilot also highlighted the predominance of certain types of assessment, such as group work or examinations in some courses. The module database could be used as a modelling tool for Programme planning groups to ensure a varied diet of assessment across a level for a whole course. Most importantly, the findings provided the basis for the Faculty’s rollout strategy, which will be implemented between 2007 and 2010.

*The Faculty Rollout*

The 2006 revalidation of all the Faculty's undergraduate programmes presented a unique opportunity to embed the assessment for learning principles across all the Faculty programmes. The rollout has begun for modules delivered at level 4 (i.e. year 1 of undergraduate studies), laying the foundation for other levels in subsequent phases of implementation. To enable staged rollout, which mirrors a change agent cascade programme, there are six phases to the process:

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| **Phase** | **Action** |
| One - Establish a Faculty-based working group | Faculty Assessment Implementation Team (FAIT) was established. It consists of Head of LTA, Head of Quality, Head of Student Services, Head of Quality Support, the Teaching Fellow for Assessment and the TALI[[2]](#endnote-2) Fellow. The team is led by the Faculty’s Assistant Dean for Academic Development. The constituent of FAIT ensures a balance of senior management and academic as well as administrative inputs into the change process. |
| Two - Establish assessment principles | The Faculty assessment principles covering the overall student experience rather than individual modules were as follows:   * All module assessment to engage and motivate students through relevant formative and supportive activities, supported by appropriate feedback. * All module assessment strategies to encourage deep learning. * A balanced and varied diet of assessment approaches to cater for individual needs and preferences. * Peer feedback and personal reflection as part of the design wherever possible. * Peer and self-assessment to be introduced as appropriate. * Summative assessment to reflect individual student achievement. * Assessment to consider the strength and weaknesses in a student profile holistically. * Assessment programme, including summative assessment schedules to be coordinated across the level, with cross modular assessment where appropriate |
| Three – Raise awareness of the project, establish rationale for change | A careful communication plan to raise awareness of the project to ensure that maximise engagement of staff to the process. The plan entails a series of briefings, workshops and one-to-one support to ensure maximum opportunities for dialogue and prevent anxiety caused by confusion. |
| Four – Collect data on assessment practice for each module | Module leaders are request to submit detailed information on their assessment practice in their modules. Specifically, the information supplied consists of:   * the module assessment tasks * the relative weightings of assessment tasks (weightings should reflect importance of /number of learning outcomes being assessed) * if any assessment tasks that must be passed individually due to professional body requirement? |
| Five – Conduct ‘mapping’ of modules across level to ensure balance of assessment diet. | Information is stored onto a database from which module assessments are mapped across each level with each course/programme to ensure there is a balanced diet of assessment methods. |
| Six – Evaluation of impact | To evaluate the impact of the project on student and staff assessment experience. |

The underlying principle behind this process is that departments and staff should feel that through being in this process they have ownership of the outcomes, and that the outcomes would enhance the assessment experience of students as well as staff involved in the process.

At the time of writing, the project rollout has entered Phase Four and Phase Five. It is still too early to conduct a full, meaningful evaluation and report on its impact on assessment practice. Initial observation suggests that there is evidence of a much greater variety of methods to assessment being used. There is a much better match of assessment process to module as well as programme learning outcomes. Modules which have been mapped show clear descriptions of assessment tasks. Self- and peer-assessments are now more common and is valued for its formative role in students’ personal development. Portfolios and learning logs are used to allow for individual exploration and reflective learning.

It is evident that the change agent cascade process is now embedded. An evaluation of the full impact of the project on student and staff assessment experience will be conducted in due course.

**Conclusion**

Changing the way students are assessed is key to laying the foundations for effective learning, not just at University but throughout life. Embedding *assessment for learning* alongside *assessment of learning* within the undergraduate curriculum constitute a shift of focus from knowledge acquisition, and its application to specific issues, to knowledge co-construction and problem-solving. This change in emphasis implies the adoption of a very different pedagogical approach to curriculum delivery. The biggest challenge to its success may well be the staff development implications.

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1. The modules were running for the first time for the 2007/2008 cohort. The full review is expected to be completed by July 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. TALI is The Assessment for Learning Initiative which is coordinated by, and funded through the University's Learning and Teaching Institute. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)