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The Challenge of Investigating Academic Understanding and Practice of Formative Assessment in Higher Education: A Thematic Interpretation of Diverse Communities of Practice. (0295)

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The Challenge of Investigating Academic Understanding and Practice of Formative Assessment in Higher Education: A Thematic Interpretation of Diverse Communities of Practice.

Building on previous collaborative research in a case study institution, this paper continues to investigate data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 lecturers, spanning a wide range of disciplines and professions. Having analysed earlier interviews using Ashworth's (2003) lifeworld lens, further data analysis is presented which utilises NVIVO8a to develop a contrasting thematic approach. Findings suggest that the discourse of Formative Assessment is profoundly shaped by the cultural context of the courses and their communities of practice. It appears within disciplines that internal practices are also influenced by broader professional and regulatory environments and consequently vary across the institution. Critical reflection on the work provokes discussion of the implications for future developments in theory, research and practice.

References:

Ashworth, P. (2003).

Introduction.

This paper builds on the work of a previous collaborative research team ¹ into how academics perceive and utilise formative assessment in practice (Asghar *et al.*, 2008, Cooper *et al.*, 2008 and Nolan *et al.*, 2008). The present paper uses thematic analysis of data obtained from in-depth, semi-structured interviews about formative assessment with 25 lecturers, spanning a wide range of disciplines and professions, across the case study university.

Formative assessment has been reviewed in recent years by Black and Williams (1998) and by Gauntlett (2007). Currently there is a strong driver in Higher Education (HE) to support the value of formative assessment in enhancing student learning. This is strongly influenced by student dissatisfaction about feedback, derived largely from the results of recent national student surveys. Policy changes in the recent past, such as increased student numbers and modularisation have contributed to reducing opportunities to use formative assessment in practice (Yorke, 2001).

Rationale and concepts.

¹ In addition to the authors of this paper the collaborative team who engaged in the original enquiry were Professor Sue Clegg, Marion Charlton, Dr John Connell, Dr Bridget Cooper, Laura Dean, Wendy Mayfield, Jane Nolan and Mekala Soosay, all based at Leeds Metropolitan University and whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

Formative assessment can be considered to be 'a slippery concept', in relation to understandings and communities of practice (Asghar *et al.* 2008). A considerable debate exists in the literature about the nature of formative assessment and its role in HE. Race (2007, p. 75) acknowledges formative assessment to be 'highly contested' and cites the working definition of Pickford and Brown (2006, quoting Cowie and Bell, 1999) as: "the processused to recognise and respond to student learning in order to enhance learning during the learning". However feedback associated with formative assessment often occurs *after* the learning, so effective *feed forward* is important to strengthen the link with overall duration, depth and extent of learning. The definition of Black and Williams (1998) encompasses this as "... all those activities undertaken by teachers and /or their students which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged". Biggs and Tang (2007) support this view of formative assessment building further learning. In contrast summative assessment normally occurs at the end of an episode of learning and is not necessarily accompanied by either qualitative feedback or clearly identified feed forward.

Crookes (2001) makes a distinction between formative and summative assessment, whereas Taras (2005 & 2008) sees them as closely inter-related. Yorke (2005) meanwhile identifies informal and formal classifications of formative assessment, plus a signalling system.

Approaches to the present context of assessment, based on socio-constructivism, encourage its integration to promote a culture of learning, in opposition to behaviourist theories which tend to separate assessment from learning (Shepherd 2000, Ecclestone and Pryor 2003). The importance of the assessment rationale in improving practice has been identified by Leathwood (2005) and recent work favours the socio-constructivist interpretations (Pryor and Crossouard 2008, James 2006). Yorke (2003) has identified the need for engagement in qualitative research to deepen understandings and develop practice.

FA is therefore is a key, contemporary, controversial concept with potential for enhancing student learning and reducing attrition rates. It justifies further investigation and debate both in terms of perceptions and application in present practice. ²

Methodology

To enhance perspectives on previous work of Asghar *et al.*, (2008), which used a phenomenological methodology based on the lifeworld lens of Ashworth (2003), current analysis uses NVIVO8 to thematically analyse the transcribed interviews from a purposive sample of academics. Ethical approval was already in place and an ethical approach used throughout. Working collaboratively the following 'nodes' or themes (with additional sub themes) were identified in the earlier stages of analysis and the used to thematically code the remaining transcripts with on-going re-adjustments where necessary:

Assessment.

Communities of practice

² Some elements of the background have been drawn from the literature review from Asghar A (2009) Reciprocal Peer Coaching as a Formative Assessment Strategy Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education (in press)

Dangerous discomfort
Defintion of formative assessment
Diversity of students
Emotion
Empathy
Evidence
FA and Pressure
Feedback
Formative assessment affecting critical thinking
Gentleness safe soft
Issues with size of groups
Learning philosophy
Marks equals value
Modelling
Power
Reflecting on your own experience
Retention
Role of HE teaching experience
Self efficacy
Staff identity
Student engagement
Student pressure re marks
Value

Findings

Based on the above approach a small snapshot of our on-going findings is reported below in relation to the project for 3 of the participants from different disciplines, 2 female (Amber, from Education and Caroline, from Youth and Community) and 1 male (James from Design). These and related findings will be presented and debated with the paper.

Project

There are clear relationships with the theoretical debate provided above and its implications for current practice as demonstrated by the following examples:

Amber on student engagement:

That we feel that if we leave everything to a summative assessment then the students are not as engaged.

Amber who is in Education has identified an important short coming of summative assessment and recognises the value of formative assessment in enhancing student engagement (and hence learning)

Amber on self efficacy:

Yes it is the thought of it, yes the thought of it is not but once they have done it and usually doing that debriefing period afterwards when they have got their written feedback that typically their reaction is of relief.

Here Amber identifies the process involved in development of self-efficacy through the use of formative assessment. Feed forward is not explicit here but it is possible to see how this could be linked to the process described.

Both examples from Amber demonstrate a student-centred focus, but also are very much concerned with the learning process, which appears to reflect her discipline.

Caroline on self efficacy

I mean I was a teacher for many years as well, so training is kind of a real interest to me and not just imparting skills because it raises so much sort of self esteem and self confidence in students when they get involved in it

Caroline provides a different perspective to Amber, but is also student –centred and appreciates the role of formative assessment in building self-esteem and self confidence in order to result in self-efficacy. Interestingly though Caroline was a teacher in the past, but in line with her current discipline (Youth & Community) she demonstrates her interest in enabling self-efficacy to support achievement.

James re feedback:

I think the nature of what I deliver on these courses means that the feedback loop is quite a lot slower than the studio stuff. The studio stuff, you know you could be there with the students in a workshop or in the studio or whatever talking about what they have done, talking about this drawing and so on and there's a kind of immediate feedback link, you know and they could say well what if I try this then and that's sort of learning in action and all that sort of thing.

James illustrates different examples of the use of formative feedback, including very informal and spontaneous feedback. He also identifies the importance of timing (and in particular speed in the practical setting for his discipline of Design).

James re definition of formative assessment:

Formative assessment is like, there is an element of it's always about you know what you are moving towards, its always about the future.

Here James is referring in his own words to feed forward and how formative assessment influences future learning. His discipline of design is also mostly very future focused.

These extracts illustrate examples of the importance interviewees attach to formative assessment and student engagement in it from different perspectives.

Discussion

The above snapshot provides a very limited picture of overall findings (which will be described in more detail in the presentation) but suggest that the discourse of formative assessment is profoundly shaped by the cultural context of the courses and their communities of practice. Possibly there may be some gender influences worthy of consideration across the full range of findings. It appears that within disciplines internal practices are also influenced by broader professional and regulatory environments. In conclusion understanding and approaches to formative assessment have been found to vary across the institution, in keeping with 'signature pedagogies' described by Shulman (2005). There are interesting comparisons to be made with related researchers for example McDowell *et al* (2006). Critical reflection on this piece of work raises debate on how to meet the challenges posed for the future development of formative assessment in relation to theoretical frameworks, research investigations and communities of academic practice.

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