

Teachers and students as co-participants in the assessment process: integrating learning and assessment for student empowerment

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Assessment in higher education is increasingly acknowledged as an integral part of the teaching and learning process, not a discrete component. Used in this way, assessment is a powerful tool in engaging students in the content and process of their learning. However, despite recent changes in the higher education system leading to an increased focus on student-centred approaches to learning, approaches to assessment have not yet paralleled this shift in practice or realised the potential for student engagement at a mainstream level.

This paper discusses the development and implementation of a cross-disciplinary undergraduate unit designed to engage and empower students as self-regulated, active learners. Specifically, the central role of integrated learning and assessment tasks in this process of empowerment is explored. Multiple sources of evidence are drawn upon to show that when teachers and students engage in the assessment process as co-participants, powerful, authentic, and empowering learning takes place.

Introduction

Students frequently do not have the opportunity to see how the process of assessment actually works. It is something they experience as a procedure to which they submit themselves, rather than something they own (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 403).

The two basic tenets that undergird this paper are that assessment “drives the student experience” (Taylor, 2006, p. 1) and that assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process, not a discrete component. Specifically, we will argue that, rather than adopting the traditional role of passive receivers of the process, students ought to be actively engaged in the process of assessment. Such active engagement empowers students to take control of their own learning, the implications of which reach far beyond the boundaries of the university context. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) refer to this active engagement of learners in their own assessment as “self-regulated learning” (p. 199). The possibilities presented by self-regulated learning are discussed in this paper through the development and implementation of an undergraduate unit designed to teach students about thinking and writing at university, and to engage them in the process of self-regulated, active learning.

This unit is fundamentally an immersion model. Students are actively engaged in both the dialogue and practice related to the entire process of assessment – including the purpose of assessment tasks, the criteria against which they will be assessed, peer and self review. For such a model to work effectively, a re-conceptualisation of the traditional roles of the teacher and student in the assessment process was necessary. In this unit we, as the teachers, did not see ourselves as ‘owners’ of assessment, with responsibility for transmitting feedback. Rather, we saw ourselves as co-participants with students, engaged in an open, collaborative process.

In keeping with the notion of “pedagogic resonance” (Trigwell & Shale, 2004), we consciously sought feedback from students throughout the unit and used this to inform our planning. We share some of that feedback in this paper. Thus, both teacher and student voices are heard.

Context

The role of assessment in learning

Assessment and learning have a symbiotic relationship. It is widely recognised that assessment has the capacity to not only define the curriculum, but also to determine students' motivation levels and their approaches to learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Biggs, 2003; James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002). Indeed, Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999) describe assessment as "the single most powerful influence on learning" (p. 413). In this regard it seems impossible to separate assessment from learning. Yet the relationship between assessment and learning is not always a positive one.

While recent changes in the higher education system have resulted in a greater focus on student-centred approaches to learning, approaches to assessment have not necessarily paralleled this shift in thinking; students' increased responsibility for learning has not been matched by their increased responsibility for assessment (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). While such continued traditional approaches to assessment may not necessarily operate through policy, they do operate "through the lived experience of students and teachers" (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 411). The unit that is the focus of this paper has been designed with the intent of making the relationship between assessment and learning a positive one where both the learning experiences and assessment processes are student-centred.

The development of an undergraduate unit

The unit discussed in this paper was developed in 2005, after the Centre for the Advancement of Learning & Teaching was approached to offer a unit that would address critical reading, writing, and analysis for students regardless of academic discipline. We subsequently developed *HFE100: Thinking and Writing at University* to achieve this purpose. The unit is offered to students across all disciplines, and carries credit towards some Bachelor Degree programs and most Associate Degree programs. HFE100 was taught for the first time in semester 1 2006, with approximately 150 students across all three major campuses of the University of Tasmania.

In the unit, students work through five interrelated modules: *interpretation, inference, analysis, presenting arguments*, and *evaluation*. Classes are highly interactive and practical, and involve discussion, some lecture material, and extensive work with students' assignments. Our aim is to introduce students to a range of skills that will be developed further throughout their university studies, and to foster approaches to learning that will persist beyond the university environment. The assessment model of HFE100 is integral to achieving this aim, and to enhancing student learning. In the next section we discuss the key principles and understandings that originally informed our unit design and continue - through a process of reflection - to inform our successive iterations.

The assessment model: Empowering students

In developing the assessment model for HFE100, we attempted to embed several principles, related to the content of the unit and the process of student empowerment. First, in acknowledgement of the developmental nature of thinking and writing at university, we provided opportunities for the skills we taught to be assessed multiple times throughout the unit. This enabled students to track their development, and to clearly understand the required levels of proficiency as these too developed. This type of developmental approach has been heralded as one of the 'solutions' to the problems related to academic writing proficiency at tertiary level (Angier & Palmer, 2006).

The second principle embedded in HFE100 is a focus on holistic design and assessment (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Boud et al., 1999). Rather than viewing the assessment tasks in the unit as discrete, we sought to create a coherent sequence of assessment which would acknowledge the developmental acquisition of skills. Early assessment tasks, we felt, should focus on the foundational skills of interpretation and inference, building to a focus on argumentation later in the unit. When viewed as a whole, the assessment for the unit was designed to engage students in the total process of thinking and writing at university, rather than assessing disconnected 'fragments' of this process. By assessing development across a sequence of related skills, the process of assessment also became the content of the unit.

However, the most significant principle embedded in the assessment model of the unit is a focus on building students' awareness of their own levels of proficiency, and their skills in judging this proficiency for themselves. Only when students are thus empowered are they genuinely in a position to respond to feedback and take action to redress problems in their academic writing (Ahmad & McMahon, 2006). Given that HFE100 is a one-semester unit, designed for first-year students, we felt that the fundamental goal of the course should be to not only provide students with an introduction to the skills of writing and analysis, but also to prepare them for ongoing learning. To achieve this, we aimed to equip students with a firm foundation in assessing: requisite skills; the proficiency they currently have in these skills; and how they might extend this proficiency. Such a capacity has high levels of relevance for students, both as they study and as they move outside of the university context, for as Boud and Falchikov (2006) note: "Graduates in the workforce will not in general be taking examinations or writing academic essays. They will be puzzling over what counts as good work and how they will be able to discern whether they are producing it" (p. 403). We saw this as a fundamental step in empowering students to become self-aware and self-regulating (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) learners.

With these principles in mind, we developed a model of assessment which consists of four assignments, incorporates peer-feedback and assessment, and has an increasing focus on self-assessment. The sequence of these assignments is as follows:

<i>Week 1</i>	<i>Week 5</i>	<i>Week 9</i>	<i>Week 13</i>
In-class writing task	Group presentations	Essay plan	Essay & reflection
300-400 words	15 minutes	750 words	1750 words
[teacher assessed]	[teacher assessed]	[teacher/peer assessed]	[teacher/self assessed]

Assignment 1

The first assignment is an in-class writing task, where students are asked to read a short opinion piece and respond to a series of questions. Questions include the following: "Comment on the way evidence is used", and "What is the main argument being forwarded?". This assessment task takes place in the first class. Students complete their responses in 45 minutes under exam conditions. Students are assessed against four criteria – use of source material, use of writing conventions, ability to interpret and clarify meaning, and ability to question evidence.

The purpose of this assessment task is twofold. First, it serves as an early diagnostic assessment, enabling us to identify the relative proficiencies of students in these fundamental areas of the course and acting as a benchmark for monitoring development. Just as importantly, this task acts as a diagnostic assessment for the students themselves, giving them opportunities to clearly identify what they need to learn, and what counts as good work within this context (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Not surprisingly, James, McInnis and Devlin (2002) refer to the use of such diagnostic assessment tasks as one of the key indicators of effective assessment in higher education.

Even at the relatively early stage of four weeks into the unit, students were able to indicate in written reflections what they were learning in this area. One student, for example, in response to the question What do you now know that you didn't at the beginning of the semester, wrote: "My standard of writing, what I need to work on, how I can improve it, and the standard at university." This assignment occupies minimal time, is low-stakes and provides rapid feedback. Further, this task becomes the content of the class in subsequent weeks - students' work is returned in class, the assessment rubric is discussed and the original article is revisited in light of revised understandings of 'interpretation'.

The additional purpose of this first assignment is to move beyond simply providing students with formative feedback and expecting them to understand how to further develop their level of proficiency: we model a process of using this feedback for improvement. In the Vista resources for the unit, we provide electronic versions of the rubric, with each criterion linked to appropriate web-based resources – students need only click on a criterion to receive supplementary instruction in this area. In this way, we explicitly link formative feedback to a process of continuing development and learning, and provide students with an additional step in developing their skills. In practice, students made extensive use of this resource – in the week after receiving the feedback for assignment 1, this resource accounted for 30% of all online activity in the unit. This use of rubrics to provide information about expected levels of proficiency, and to

provide links to supplementary instructional material, extends to all four assignments for the unit.

This first assignment explicitly mirrors the three conditions – as espoused by Sadler (cited in Nicol & Macfarlane, 2006) – necessary for students to benefit from feedback in assessment tasks: the students knowing the standard for which they are aiming; the students understanding how their current performance relates to preferred performance; and the students knowing how to reduce the gap between their current and preferred performance.

Assignment 2

The second assignment is a group presentation, requiring students to locate information about a current issue from a range of sources, interpret the arguments forwarded in these sources, and consider alternate perspectives. As this task is fundamentally collaborative, students are awarded a group rather than individual mark. There are three assessment criteria for this task – presentation/communication skills, ability to categorise information and clarify meaning, and ability to evaluate information/evidence. While the first criterion is specific to this task, the other two criteria are clearly linked to criteria from assignment 1.

The purpose of this task is to provide an opportunity to revisit the interpretive skills previously assessed, and for students to gain further feedback on their progress in these foundational modules of the unit. This extends the use of formative feedback to promote student development that commenced with assignment 1. We incorporated a group-based oral presentation task as a way of explicitly addressing the university's generic graduate attributes of communication skills and problem-solving skills, as well as acknowledging the importance of such skills. James, McInnis and Devlin (2002) claim that much of the recent innovation in incorporating problem-solving skills in assessment tasks in higher education is based on recognition of the importance of such skills in work and life situations beyond the university setting. Furthermore, as Boud and Falchikov (2006) have argued, after graduation, most learning that students engage with will be socially situated, involving engagement with communities of practice on shared problems/issues. We felt it important in a course addressing communication and in range of contexts to incorporate an opportunity to highlight the socially-situated nature of learning.

This oral presentation also plays an important role in empowering students to become self-aware and active in shaping their learning experiences. We see this as a first step in moving beyond the commonly-held view of collaborative learning as 'cheating' (Boud et al., 1999, p.418), instead repositioning the group as an active site of knowledge construction. We introduce a presentation as a way of making analysis and interpretation 'public' – something that can be engaged in collaboratively and critiqued openly. Such an approach to the skills of analysis and critique is vital for the success of the final two assignments.

Assignments 3 and 4

To provide students with an holistic model of assessment, and to make coherent the process of developing an argument at university level, assignments 3 and 4 are linked to represent the development of an essay, from the initial planning through to writing and redrafting. Both assignments share a common essay question, requiring students to examine the influence of the mass media by critically analysing a range of sources on an issue of their choosing. For assignment 3, students submit an essay plan, along with three fully-developed paragraphs which incorporate the use of appropriately cited evidence. For assignment 4, students submit their completed essay, along with an evaluation of their achievement against the assessment criteria: structure and development of answer, use of source material, academic writing style, and grammatical correctness. This sequence of assessment was designed specifically to empower students to share control of the assessment process and their development as learners. To facilitate this process of empowerment, we use formative assessment to shift the focus and responsibility for feedback away from us, to peers and ultimately the self. In doing so, we aim to avoid the all-too-common situation of students seeing the process of assessment as "some mysterious tacit code which they cannot access" (Husain & Waterfield, 2006, p. 27). We believe that these two assessment tasks qualify, according to James, McInnis and Devlin (2002) as examples of "well designed assessment", the criteria for which include students self-monitoring, rehearsing, practising and receiving feedback (p. 7).

In terms of assignment 3, we have timed the process of assessing and providing feedback so that students submit their work in week 9, engage in a process of peer review in week 10, and receive our feedback at the same time as engaging

in a process of self review in week 11. In semester 1, this process was identified as the most challenging aspect of the unit by a number of students, but also the most valuable and rewarding. The peer review session was carefully scaffolded. We spent considerable time with students, identifying and discussing the criteria by which they felt one could assess the quality of an argument. These criteria were then combined with our predetermined assessment criteria to form a 'feedback sheet'. We then led the students through the review process, with partners reading each other's work, assessing against the criteria, providing written comments and then sharing their findings.

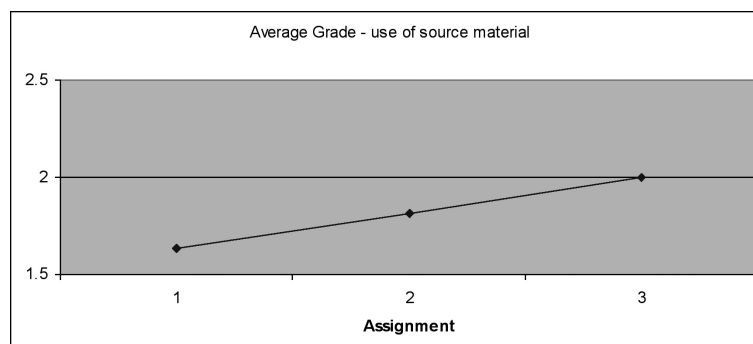
This process had a number of advantages. First, students received feedback on their work almost immediately – in some cases this session took place one day after the plans had been submitted. They were then able to use this feedback to inform the final assessment task. Second, the students were working in a scaffolded, supported environment to develop their familiarity with the criteria and the relative levels of proficiency. Third, and most importantly, they were also developing skills in critique and judgement, to be able to identify strengths and areas for improvement, which are vital in making assessment a process of empowerment (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Further, we had effectively made the assessment task the content of the class itself, rather than being a peripheral concern. To be engaged in class was to be engaged in understanding and completing the assessment for the unit – making assessment something that was visible, and making the prospect of self-review and self-regulation something that is achievable.

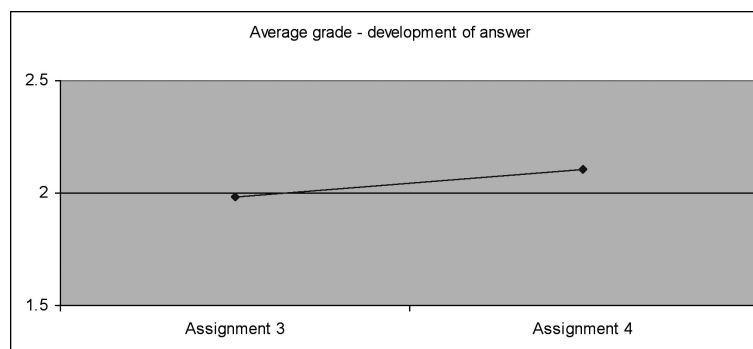
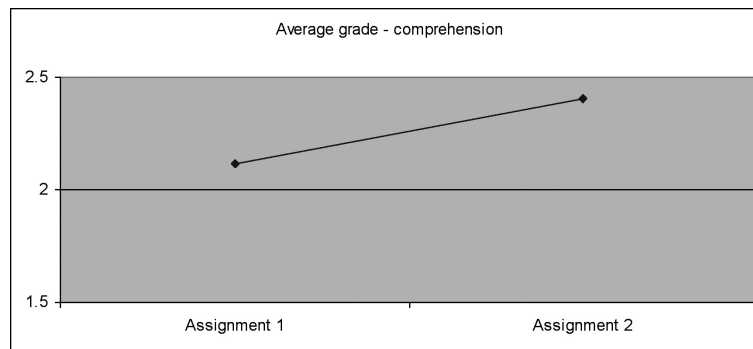
In order to complete the final assessment task, students have to take this process of review and reflection one step further – self-review. As well as the completed essay, students are required to submit a short reflection, describing the process undertaken in evaluating their argument, the revisions made based on this process, and how well they meet the criteria for this assignment. As such, students have to incorporate what they have learnt from peer review, from our feedback on their work, and from their own critique, to draw upon and extend the assessment and learning process. The rubric for this final assignment has a new role – although it still provides students with links to supplementary materials, it also provides them with a framework within which they can judge their progress and achievement.

Furthering this self-assessment process, our final session with the students is based on the notion of developing an 'independent learning plan' – asking them to reflect on the skills they have acquired through the unit, the skills they still need to improve, and most importantly to identify how they can acquire these skills, and how they will know they are improving. This, combined with the self-assessment exercise, represents our most fundamental attempts to empower students through the learning and assessment process. It is important that students see themselves as proactive participants, not passive recipients of assessment. We reinforce to students that while the final assessment task represented the summative assessment for their work with us, this is in fact primarily formative – identifying their development in the much larger context of studying for a particular discipline and acquiring an approach to learning that will extend far beyond the institution.

Outcomes

Evidence from the semester 1 cohort indicates that this approach to empowering students through assessment and learning processes has been highly successful in enhancing students' skill development. The following graphs indicate students' average grade (where 1 is the minimum, and 3 is the maximum) against those assessment criteria that were assessed multiple times, and show students' development in three key areas:





Further, students' own evaluations of the unit were highly positive, particularly with regard to assessment. In formal evaluations of the unit, students were asked to respond on a Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree) to a range of statements, including "I was given useful feedback on my assessed work", and "Submitted work was returned to me in a reasonable timeframe". These items received mean scores of 4.7 and 4.6 respectively, indicating the high level of effectiveness of the feedback and assessment processes as perceived by students.

There is also evidence that this approach was effective in enhancing students' awareness of their current levels of proficiency, and how these may or may not match with their understanding of what constitutes adequate skill levels. In the final evaluative task, for example, one student wrote that she had learnt that: "Essay writing is a skill and can be learnt over time. I can improve". Demonstrating that self-knowledge relates equally to identification of weaknesses as well as strengths, two students commented: "Well, I know how to structure an essay and what an essay should consist of, but I just can't seem to be able to do it. I think it's just going to take practice and time"; and "I have learnt about what types of evidence to use, how to evaluate information and how reliable information is. I have also learnt not to just accept what is written or televised or printed, to continually question the writers' motivations and aims. I still need to master the art of incorporating all of these things."

Also evident from students' evaluative comments was the transferability of the skills learnt in this unit. For example, one student stated: "I believe I have developed a better understanding of how to structure an essay. This has helped me with my other subjects at uni." Another wrote: "This course has shown me how to structure an academic essay and also how to incorporate evidence into my own work. Returning to school after a 12 year break, I have found this to be extremely useful in all of my subjects."

Students also identified the benefit of the peer review process in the essay writing task. One student, for example, wrote that she had learnt "the importance of using fellow students as an aid in assessing work re feedback, and the importance of being available for other students". Some students did comment about the challenge they had initially felt in reviewing each others' work – one student, for example, wrote: "I thought that the marking we did of each other's assignment plans, while a little intimidating, was one of the most useful parts of the unit". A particularly poignant reminder of not only the vulnerability of students in opening their work to peer review, but the capacity for such assessment practices to operate on an affective as well as a cognitive domain, occurred when one student approached us during the peer review process and expressed genuine concern that if he were to write honest

comments on his (struggling) colleague's work it wouldn't in fact be beneficial; it would be destructive and would defeat the primary purpose of engaging in the peer feedback loop. The student, with our guidance, decided to limit comments to just those areas the student would be capable of addressing.

Some changes were made to the unit for the second semester iteration, although none were specific to the assessment tasks. The content of examples and class exercises (to more closely reflect the actual essay students would write), was one change. Another was a change in focus of some of the early sessions – more emphasis on students' own writing (rather than others' writing). We believed this would better prepare students for writing their own essays.

Conclusion

The comments above attest to the benefits of an integrated assessment and learning approach, where the process as well as the product is transparent, explicitly shared and mutually valued, and where students feel confident, supported and empowered through and by their own learning. Although other practitioners may not be in a position to construct new units, this basic principle is highly transferable – that engaging students explicitly in the assessment process furthers their engagement with all aspects of the unit. The possibility of students feeling empowered through explicit and transparent access to the process of assessment was best encapsulated by one student, who admitted: “At the start of [this unit] I was unable to structure a strong argument in essay writing. I was also unable to write an introduction and conclusion. This is mainly because we did not write many essays in high school or college. When I did read back over my essays I couldn't see things that were wrong with them because I was new to essay writing.”

This comment illustrates that empowering our students is not just about helping them identify strengths. Learning what cannot yet be done well and knowing how to go about developing in these areas is equally important, if not more so, for these are the skills that are most transferable to contexts beyond our course and indeed the institution. It is through teaching, learning and assessment practices such as those described in this paper that students can be empowered to the point where they are able to self-identify issues and concerns, rather than just being passive recipients of such information.

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