Testing, Testing, Testing

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Whilst reflecting on the marking, moderation, meetings and all the other processes associated with bringing each academic year to an end, I have often wondered whether the focus on the measurement of discernible outcomes (a hallmark of reductionism) will ever abate.

In my opinion, one of the major drivers of reductionism in many undergraduate degrees is the high profile accorded to and the emphasis placed upon summative assessments. As a lecturer, I have recently felt exasperated enough to explain to a set of my students that the difference between a graduate and a non-graduate is not simply a list of completed assignments - or at least it shouldn't be - and there was a somewhat bemused reaction to this! From my teaching experience, I construe that, increasingly, students view assessments as the prima facie reason for their study commitments, to the extent that they judge any work not being formally assessed as not worth doing. Whilst this situation may be disillusioning (at least to many lecturers), it is not really surprising, given the emphasis on assessment and testing that is embedded in the school systems through which the students have travelled.

What stimulates this focus on summative assessment? Part of the answer could lie in the interpretation of the *accountability* to which educational establishments are being held; they believe that they are required to *prove* that they are functioning and performing entities, capable of producing outcomes that can be objectified and measured (Department of Education, 2014). Summative assessment generates tick-box measurement, towards which end academic endeavours may be processed and directed. The situation is, possibly, a by-product of the culture of 'new managerialism' now embedded in UK education. Works by Deem (2007), Broadfoot (2009) and Ainley and Allen (2010) are amongst those that provide us with the landscapes and worldviews that help to explain how and why we have reached this point.

Students themselves have played their part. Kemmis (2012) wrote about the objectification of education, in which students see themselves as "paying customers". This view is corroborated by the 2012 study by Peters and Higbea, who found that students had "a fixation on maximizing grades within the allotted time for studies", seeing a focus on summative assessments as being a more "effective use of their study time". Such student single-mindedness is perhaps understandable, given the competitiveness of the graduate job market and the cost of studying for a degree.

Market forces drive universities to focus on the proportions of first and second class honours degrees awarded, as this data is published in the external league tables used to attract potential 'customers'. As achievement levels are seen as a barometer of an institution's success, academics may find themselves obliged to concentrate on summative assessment and even to award high grades, despite the subjectivity inherent in most assessment schemes. In the current market context, it would be a brave university indeed that would risk a dent in student satisfaction levels and associated elements of its perceived ranking by moving its modus operandi away from an assessment-based paradigm.

And how credible are these measurements anyway? Sadler (2009) examines the entrenched usage of pre-set criteria and rubrics in university assessments and provides an interesting exploration of the anomalous patterns that may arise from the use of reductive techniques in assessing student work, irrespective of the complexity of and variation in the tasks' objectives. Student voice and an array of student satisfaction surveys have helped to address some of the contentious aspects of summative assessments, but concentration on the measurable may still side-line the important, non-measurable products of an education: some important facets of personal and intellectual growth are difficult to measure under the current summative assessment paradigm. For example, where do ipsative development (i.e. the student's *own, internally*-generated drive to better previous performance), praxial development (in terms of the desire to apply learning to different environments and contexts) and the sheer enjoyment of learning fit in?

However, it is not all doom and gloom. In fact, it is quite gratifying to see some of the progressive work that steers us towards the Freirian paradigm, in which education is regarded as a *conversation* to which students can also make a major contribution. In realising such a world, true achievement is verified not through an overtly reductionist approach, but through a more phenomenological examination of students' learning: their inputs into the education system - their thoughts, capabilities, feelings, ideas and mind-sets - should all play a much greater part in what we call 'achievement', whether these elements are quantifiable or not. The adoption of risk-based approaches to curriculum design and assessment has done much to mitigate the effects of reductionism, a good example of which was seen in the student enterprise and entrepreneurship initiatives at Coventry University (NCEE, 2013). The Change Agent Network (CAN) also seeks to influence academic thinking and practice in this sphere. CAN's recently-published papers on dialogic approaches (Rochon and Knight, 2015), on student-led fellowships (Matheson and Poole, 2015) and on the use of student teaching and learning consultants (Jensen and Bagnall, 2015) are amongst a range of endeavours that portray the Freirian dialogue in action.

My concluding opinion is that, in determining achievement levels, phenomenological aspects of learning and summative assessments should be seen as having equal weight. Such a stance would go some way to combating the effects of reductionism that I have encountered in my teaching career. As many undergraduates live multi-faceted lives, I feel that there is a need for greater examination of, emphasis upon and reflection about the ways in which every subject/course/module studied is experienced within the context of the student's own wider (vocational and non-vocational) life experiences. Boud's (2010) work on sustainable assessment has a bearing here. Increased emphasis and reflection on ipsative development within each academic subject could also be embraced, as advocated by Hughes and Crawford (2009). E-portfolios, learning journals and diaries are suitable vehicles for the recording and sharing of such reflections, aspirations and ideas.

So, overall, although the pressures towards reductionism in undergraduate studies might seem unrelenting at times, I think that, in measuring achievement, it is possible to strike a better balance between summative assessment and phenomenological aspects of learning - and there do appear to be significant changes afoot. In the meantime, I must get back to my marking…

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