

Assessments and the self: academic practice and character attributes

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Abstract

A case is made for how, within higher education, we might make use of the relationship that exists between students' academic practices and outputs, and their character attributes such as open-mindedness, enthusiasm and perseverance. Examples of how academic practices have the capacity to reveal a range of character attributes are discussed, and even though there are very good reasons for believing this potential exists, the need is identified for further research of a kind that would stimulate engagement from students, teachers and academic support staff. Since any generalised, formalised or non-student-led application of these insights to teaching practice would be inappropriate, two points are made about the nature and application of such investigation. First, qualitative methods, and in particular narrative analysis, would be best suited to the complex, ethically sensitive and significantly idiographic nature of the relationship in question. Second, research that generated detailed case studies would also serve as an appropriate means of inspiring this form of reflection in students. This could occur either as a direct result of students engaging with these case studies, or indirectly via increased teacher and learning development staff's sensitivity to possibilities of these kinds of dialogues occurring. A brief example from my own teaching experience indicates the form and content of the studies that I have in mind.

Keywords: coaching; student experience; empowerment; learning engagement.

Introduction

Among the attributes implicitly or explicitly promoted by many universities and governments (e.g. University of Sydney, 2012; University of Glasgow, 2014; NCIHE, 1997; European Commission, 2002), the relationship between skills such as 'effective communication' and 'critical thinking' and academic output is relatively uncontroversial and straightforward. Appropriately conceptualised, these attributes can be mapped onto academic learning and performance, and then duly reflected in assessment criteria such that a student is able to articulate to (typically) an employer what they learned at university aside from subject-specific knowledge. The initial point put forward in this article, however, is that the academic practices that determine the qualities of students' assessments also have the potential to serve as indicators of character-based attributes such as open-mindedness, flexibility, and perseverance. In other words, a student's reflections on the work they produce, and the way they go about producing it, could serve to improve self-knowledge beyond a narrow academic identity. Following this it is argued that evidence supporting this hypothesis and, if it is supported, its communication to staff and students, should be achieved via qualitative studies that reinforce the subtle, complex and idiographic nature of such knowledge. These could serve to increase the sensitivity of teachers, and to inspire student-led dialogue, and handled correctly, this perspective on academic practices and outputs has the potential to provide a valuable tool for student self-reflection.

How assessments can signify character attributes

The idea of promoting a 'thinking disposition' or 'intellectual virtues' such as curiosity, attentiveness and open-mindedness through academic education has been the subject of recent discussion within educational psychology (e.g. Perkins, Jay and Tishman, 1993; McCune and Entwistle, 2011), and the philosophy of education (e.g. Paul, 1981; Siegel, 1988; Barnett, 1997; Battaly, 2006; Sockett, 2012; Baehr, 2013). The approach taken in this article, however, differs in several respects. First, the focus is on the potential that assessments and academic practice in general have for facilitating students' reflections on their personal development. Although it would likely be a positive outcome of this reflective process, improving academic performance is not the primary aim of what is being proposed. Second, the ideas discussed are applied specifically to higher education, paying

attention to the practicalities of how this connection might be best approached in this context. Third, it does not draw a sharp distinction between 'intellectual' and other kinds of attributes. Classifications of graduate attributes invariably include characteristics such as 'critical, analytical and problem-solving abilities' and 'a capacity for systematic enquiry and independent thought' (University of Stirling, 2014) that further 'the pursuit of goods like knowledge, truth and understanding' (Baehr, 2013, pp.248-9), but they also incorporate social behaviours such as cultural sensitivity, leadership and collaboration. The University of Sydney's science faculty, for example, includes 'empathy', 'flexibility', 'openness', and a commitment to ethical principles among its 'contextualized graduate attributes' (University of Sydney, 2012); and the University of Glasgow's 'graduate attribute matrix' makes reference to broad character attributes such as 'responsibility', 'confidence', 'flexibility', 'conscientiousness', 'perseverance', 'resilience', and cultural inclusiveness (University of Glasgow, 2014). With a number of universities there are also direct statements on self-knowledge and personal growth more holistically understood, including attributes like 'honest self-awareness' (University of Edinburgh, 2011), 'a capacity for self-reflection, self-discovery and personal development' (University of Aberdeen, 2014), and being 'well rounded, reflective, [and] self-aware' (University of Sheffield, 2014).

This last point is of great importance for understanding the nature and significance of the argument being made. Graduate attributes, whether explicitly or implicitly, encompass a broadly 'personal' dimension, and personality research (e.g. Peterson and Seligman, 2004) and virtue ethics (e.g. Hursthouse, 1999) strongly indicate that certain strengths and weakness we exhibit in particular domains tend to signify more generalised character traits. The person who displays minimal kindness towards peers or colleagues, for example, will be more likely to display minimal kindness in other situations. It can be concluded from this that if character attributes like those listed can be shown to be identifiable in academic outputs, then academic work has the potential to facilitate deep and wide-ranging self-reflection. If deep and wide-ranging self-reflection is generally speaking a positive activity, and is promoted by universities in the form of graduate attributes, then this conclusion should be of interest to higher education practitioners.

The first step is to offer some examples of how, in theory, features of academic output and practice could act as signs of character attributes. The ones that will be discussed – open-mindedness, flexibility, respectfulness, perseverance, commitment and non-defensiveness – are not intended to generate a definitive list of character attributes that might be evident

in academic outputs and processes (nor could there be such a list), but their presence is at the same time not arbitrary. They are primarily drawn from descriptions of attributes produced by universities (see above), but in each case their inclusion is supported by scholarly enquires into dispositions, traits and virtues considered important, not only for fostering and maintaining intellectual activity and motivation (e.g. Barnett, 2006), but for human authenticity, growth and happiness in the broadest sense (e.g. Nussbaum, 1998; Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Van Hooft, 2006).

However, despite this grounding there are two important reasons why these examples should be seen as having a largely heuristic function. First, the history of virtues demonstrates that different cultures and practices in different times and places will value different attributes to different degrees (e.g. MacIntyre, 1985). With this in mind, it is less the particular selection of attributes that is of concern and more their ability to serve as illustrations of how such attributes might be revealed to a student through her academic practices. Second, and as will be discussed in greater detail at the beginning of the next section, the aim here is not to offer specific hypotheses for qualitative research that will provide generalised guidelines for practitioners, but rather to encourage the accumulation of detailed case-studies that serve to inspire student reflection. In comparison to such case-studies, the suggestions below are abstract and generalised, and are designed only to demonstrate the plausibility and scope of the link between academic processes and outputs and character attributes.

Before proceeding, some clarification concerning terminology is required. The term 'character attribute' is used to distinguish between graduate attributes, such as being an effective communicator, that are best understood as skills or 'performance' (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011), and those, such as being open-minded, that are more akin to personality traits. Personality traits can be defined as:

situation sensitive psychological and behavioural dispositions. (Flanagan, 1991, p.277)

They are:

stable and general but also shaped by individual's setting and thus capable of change. (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p.10).

Two features of these definitions are worth reinforcing: first, the too often overlooked 'capable of change' aspect of traits has significant bearing on the extent of this article's conclusions. If traits were inflexible, then although reflecting on them would enhance self-knowledge and adaptation, it would not facilitate change in a more direct or deeper sense. Their mutability allows for reflection upon them to have the potential to initiate more profound personal development. Second, for the purposes of this discussion it is hoped that it will suffice to acknowledge that whilst some of our behaviours are strongly situation-specific, and others are more influenced by our character attributes, the vast majority combine both. One reason for placing significant emphasis on these reflections being student-led is that a primary task of the reflective process is for the student to determine where on the continuum the behaviours in question lie. Thanks, in part, to the academic literacies paradigm, it is now quite well understood how assessments and other academic practices can function as signs of circumstantial factors. These can range from the novel or implicit expectations of specific teachers and disciplines (e.g. Lea and Street, 1998, 2006), to forms of academic, social or institutional alienation (Mann, 2001; McKenna, 2004). The focus of this article is character attributes, but as the academic literacies approach clearly demonstrates, whether it is primarily about context or character attribute, there is the potential for wider insight to be gained through reflection on academic outputs.

With these definitions and caveats in mind, the next few pages will consider the potential relationship that exists between a selection of character attributes and attributes of student assessments.

Open-mindedness

Open-mindedness, or 'receptiveness', is the willingness to listen to and actively engage with unfamiliar ideas. For Rogers 'openness to experience' (1967, pp.115-118), and 'loosening of constructs' (1967, p.137, p.280) is a strong sign of psychological health. Perkins, Jay and Tishman (1993) include open-mindedness among seven 'key dispositions for good thinking' (see also Stanovitch et al, 2013); Peterson and Seligman (2004) list it under the general virtue of 'wisdom and knowledge', and employers have been shown to value it highly in their graduate recruits (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011, p.580). The opposite is narrow thinking and dogmatism, and in the context of a student essay the

arguments presented (and the essay as a whole) might end up weaker because one side of the debate is not taken seriously, or other possible approaches to the issue are not discussed or even acknowledged.

Two signs, and possibly causes, of closed-mindedness are poor listening and faulty thinking. Listening is a 'crucial skill' (Hargie 2004, p.169) that is 'far harder to do than is generally realised' (Winbolt, 2002, p.117), and the same can presumably be applied to accurate reading. Open-mindedness is crucial for truth-seeking and is fundamental to harmonious teamwork and sound leadership (e.g. Daft, 1999; Fisher and Ury, 1991; Greenleaf, 2002, and for personal wellbeing (Hargie and Dickson, 2004, p.170). In academic assessments a deficit in this area could be one reason for inaccurate or incomplete descriptions and explanations of protagonists' positions, and thus a tendency to generate straw man arguments.

Open-mindedness requires effort and courage:

Listening is a very dangerous thing. If one listens one may be convinced. (Hargie and Dickson, cited Oscar Wilde, 2004, p.190.

If you really understand another person ..., if you are willing to enter his private world and see the way life appears to him, without any attempt to make evaluative judgments, you run the risk of being changed yourself. (Rogers, 1967, p.333)

It does not, however, have to be a change to oneself in any profound sense that necessitates various degrees of effort and courage. To recognise one is wrong, even with regard to a small and localised issue, goes along with the recognition that one will have to re-think and re-write previous efforts (Perry, 1970, p.52) and may be associated with a knock to one's pride.

Flexibility

Aristotle saw virtues as the mean between two extremes; for example courage sits between the poles of cowardice and rashness (Aristotle, transl.Thomson, 1976, p.103). This model can be usefully applied to the character attribute of flexibility as demonstrated

in academic practices. It is situated between, for example, excessive respect and disrespect for rules and norms, and between excessive tendencies to accommodate and ignore the desires of others. Flexibility is a frequently used term in descriptors of ideal job applicants, and in discussions of graduate attributes (e.g. University of Glasgow, 2014; University of Sheffield, 2014). It refers to both cognitive and socio-emotional flexibility, and is opposed to unimaginative approaches to problem solving, and to an unwillingness to accommodate the shifting demands and idiosyncrasies of team members, managers and subordinates.

Applied to academic work, we might see conformity and rebelliousness with regard to the norms of essay writing as polarities, and there will be other discipline-specific practices that, like most rules, must allow for exceptions. Making sound judgements and demonstrating the will to accommodate contingencies and particularities requires flexibility, and is often understood as basic to academic development in higher education (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Barnett, 2007). Its absence could be a sign of naïve exuberance or a misunderstanding of the meaning and appropriate exercise of creativity; but it might also indicate attributes such as low confidence, unimaginativeness, egocentrism, or arrogance.

Respectfulness

A range of attributes such as justice, fairness, empathy, and social intelligence are implied by a student's willingness to read and listen carefully to the views of those with whom they are unfamiliar, or disagree with. There is a clear link between respectfulness and open-mindedness: both are impeded by the fear of being changed, and in both cases modesty is an underpinning attribute. They are, however, differently oriented: one towards justice and the wellbeing of the other; the other towards adventurousness, curiosity, self-exploration and creation (Siegel, 1988; Ennis, 1996). For different students these two could be more or less powerful motivators towards what would be, in some respects, similar results - more careful exposition and more balanced arguments.

The absence of these, combined with, say, a dismissive tone or even more passive signs such as the glaring omissions of important commentators and points of view, could be signs of tendencies towards disrespectfulness. With oral communication such as dialogues

in seminars, body language and paralinguistic factors can serve as more vivid indicators of dismissive attitudes; ones that potentially extend beyond academic practices.

Perseverance

Perseverance refers to tendencies such as a student's willingness to fully formulate and think through difficult concepts and arguments. Peterson and Seligman take it to be synonymous with persistence and industriousness, and describe it as the:

voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement. (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, pp.229-230).

A common weakness in essays is the incomplete paragraph, where a point is only half, or three-quarters made. There are many possible reasons for this, but among them is a deficit of perseverance; sometimes greater persistence on behalf of the author could be what is required to elevate them to a higher level of understanding.

Low perseverance seems to be related to two further sets of character attributes. On the one hand there is courage and resilience; a student might not persevere because to do so risks the kind of failure that they have to take responsibility for. It is the kind where there is no option but to acknowledge "I tried my best but still didn't quite get there", which carries with it the harsh truths of personal limitations and/or the need for greater future effort. The resilient student exhibits willingness to reframe their self-perception and objectives and she is prepared to work harder in response to defeat. The second set of attributes that might influence student persistence is dealt with under the next heading.

Commitment, energy and enthusiasm

This collection encompasses notions such as 'ownership' or 'to understand for oneself' (McCune and Entwistle, 2011; Entwistle and McCune, 2013); passion (Kierkegaard, 1974; Barnett, 1997); zest (Russell, 1961 Perkins, Jay and Tishman, 1993) and exuberance (Redfield Jamison, 2004). A 'measure of authenticity' in a student, says Barnett, is her 'commitment', and part of being committed is the 'infusing' of the student into her actions

(Barnett, 2007, p.51). A detailed account of the development of this kind of intellectual responsibility and commitment is found in the work of William Perry who describes commitment as 'affirmation' that is made:

after detachment, doubt, and awareness of alternatives have made the experience of personal choice a possibility. (Perry, 1970, p.136).

With many essays (and other forms of assessment) students are required to offer a firm answer to a question, or to reach a firm conclusion on a complex issue, even if that conclusion amounts to an informed argument for why, at this stage, it is hard to reach a strong conclusion. One way of failing to achieve this is to offer a series of points that, although relevant to the question, lacks an overarching critical narrative. The student has failed to impose themselves on the material and thus failed to reach a satisfactory conclusion. With new undergraduates this is often the result of not being fully conversant with the distinctive demands of higher education, but it could also be a sign of an unwillingness to fully commit to the task and to take full responsibility and ownership of it. Where this is the case it could be a sign of a lack of confidence, or a (related) unwillingness to be decisive or to take risks.

Non-defensive response to criticism

Defensiveness in response to negative feedback will impair learning and development. It is very hard for most of us to be appropriately open to criticism, but since it is a foundation of effective self-reflection a strong argument can be made for it being a vital capacity to develop (rockbank and McGill, 1998; Tiberius, 2008). Being able to respond constructively to criticism is related to attributes such as resilience, modesty and courage, and it highlights the extent to which we exist, and therefore must develop, in relation to others (Bonnett, 2009). The art of receiving criticism seems to require achieving equilibrium between defensive measures that, on the one hand dismiss it, and on the other magnify it, and perhaps the best response involves the kind of measured realism often associated with humility or modesty (Flanagan, 1990; Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

Implications for further research and teaching

If causal links were confirmed between specific tendencies in academic outputs and character attributes by, say, correlating essay feedback with scores from personality inventories, this would in theory provide practitioners with the confidence to pass this on to students and directly or indirectly offer advice on directions their personal development could take. For epistemological and ethical reasons though, it is hard to imagine a circumstance in which this would be desirable. First, if such suggestions were directly initiated by teachers this would run contrary to the orthodoxy regarding feedback, that it should be directed at the work, not the person (Boud, 1995; Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Värlander, 2008). To gesture towards the student's character in this way will often be construed as intrusive and, from the teacher's point of view, signals a breach in the 'ring-fence' that identifies appropriate reflection in an academic context (Cowan, 2013).

Second, the reality of institutional education is that the level of intimacy between student and teacher required for the teacher to be confident of insights along these lines is unusual. Even where it exists, however, there is a third problem, which underlines how a quantitative approach to this subject matter would be epistemologically wrong-headed. Correlating academic performance and transferable attributes like critical thinking and communication skills is achievable because of the relative straightforwardness and definability of the concepts in question; they are not especially deep or messy. Character attributes, on the other hand, **are** deep and messy. By their nature they are an entangled part of a unique and complex personality such that a proper understanding of them requires a holistic appreciation of the person in question. Furthermore, this appreciation is of a kind where the individual's perspective has particular epistemological and ethical privileges.

This is an example of the 'idiographic turn' discussed by Ashworth and Greasley (2009). The idiographic approach emphasises how, in important senses, each student will engage with academic ideas and materials via an:

interplay of factors which may be quite specific to the individual ... [or that] are uniquely patterned in a given person's life. (Ashworth and Greasley, 2009, p.573).

Investigation into the possibility of academic outputs-character attributes relationships is a case in which a pronounced awareness of the idiographic self is required. A richly accurate understanding of how character attributes and academic performance affect one another would involve highly autonomous self-reflection and teacher sensitivity to the fact that:

student diversity in studying cannot be 'factored in' to pedagogy easily. (Ashworth and Greasley, 2009, pp.573-574).

Therefore, instead of attempting to provide a statistically valid set of generalisations, a more helpful approach to research would be of the qualitative variety; notably narrative analyses of individuals' accounts of their understanding of what (if anything) their academic work has revealed about their character.

Space does not allow for extended case studies from my experiences as a teacher, student adviser and researcher, but I can at least provide one example. It concerns a mature undergraduate student I had known in the capacity of teacher and student adviser for several years. He had undoubted academic talent in so far as he was strong on the comprehension of complex ideas and their implications, and highly creative in the way he made connections between concepts and theories such that he would occasionally hit on something that was quite original. His progress was impeded, however, by a tendency to overlook secondary literature, by an aversity to seeking the advice of his tutors, and sometimes ignoring aspects of an assessment's rubric. Poor progress with his final year dissertation led to frustration and eventually a personal crisis, which he came to explain in terms of his relationship to authority figures (which he traced back to his relationship with his father). This prevented him from asking for help or accepting advice, which he rationalised by over-emphasising his self-sufficiency. It was apparent from the way he explained himself that, through reflection on this problematic academic tendency, he had become acutely aware of its deep and pervasive psychological roots. He was of the view that this insight could make a significant difference to how he subsequently engaged with academic work.

There is much more that needs to be said about this case in order to do justice to its specificity, but hopefully it begins to illustrate not just what research data might look like, but also how the indirect communication that comes from detailed and extended narratives could be a helpful method for promoting the value of the connection discussed in this

article. If they did emerge, an expanding collection of these narratives could help us as practitioners to tune into the kinds of signs and circumstances and enable us to recognise and appropriately facilitate such reflection when we are presented with its possibility. This might result in a dialogue with the student, or it might just be a case of directing them to relevant case studies.

Summary and future directions

The argument presented can be summarised in this way: first, there are good reasons for believing that there is a deep and wide-ranging relationship between aspects of academic practices and outputs and character attributes. Second, to provide evidence for the existence and nature of this connection in the context of higher education, further studies are needed that should employ qualitative methods. Third, if the results support the hypothesis then, whilst reinforcing the complex and idiographic nature of the connection in question, the studies generated could also serve as reflective tools for students, teachers and learning development staff. Overall, a non-student-led approach to applying these findings would be unsuitable; however this doesn't mean there wouldn't be circumstances under which it would be appropriate for a dialogue of this nature to occur. Neither does it mean that such a discussion would be of little consequence, or somehow out of keeping with the kind of learning development that should be happening in higher education.

A final remark worth making, concerns the sorts of background and structural requirements that would further facilitate this depth and quality of reflection. One specific line of inquiry could address how reflection on attributes via assessments is affected by anonymous marking and feedback, and in particular whether and how this impedes teacher-student relations. Another could concern the manner of, and extent to which dialogue (especially one-to-one) between students and teachers (as well as learning development staff) is part of pedagogical practice. Finally a more generalised consideration could be given to the ways we can create the 'positive emotional climate' (Värlander, 2008, p.153; see also Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Mann, 2001; Cowan, 2006; Baehr, 2013) that an institution must have if it wishes to encourage deep, wide-ranging and honest self-reflection in its students.

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