Teachers' Views on Assessment in Higher Education

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Abstract

From a social constructivist viewpoint, learning is a constructive act of the learner. Several different assessment methods are used in assessing students, which have implications when discussing knowledge construction in higher education. Teachers' views about different formats and methods of assessment were examined by interviewing teachers in higher education. This work-in-progress suggests that students' perceptions about assessment have considerable influence on their approaches to learning, but that organizational and teachers' perceptions of institutional objectives are significant factors in choosing assessment methods. Although the teachers interviewed agree in the constructive act of the learner, the assessment is still more of a teacher-centred process for teachers with little experience of networked learning environments. This is also partly because of the restraints of university examination rules, as well as universities adaptation to the Bologna Declaration (1999). Being gradually acculturated and assimilated into the networked learning community in the form of an apprenticeship should help in making teachers more inclined towards a student-centred approach and to using peer assessment.

Keywords: Assessment in higher education, hermeneutics, Networked learning, knowledge

Structure and purpose of the paper

The intention is to describe and understand assessment methods used by teachers in HE by interviewing them about their perceptions of assessment in their own teaching practice. Laurillard (2002) states that "going from what we know about student learning to what this means for teaching – it [sic] is not a logical one. It is clearly important to base a teaching strategy on an understanding of learning, but the relationship is fuzzy." There are many factors to take into account in an educational setting, such as former experiences, different contexts and the relationship between teachers and students, when looking at learning outcomes. Learning is, from my perspective, essentially: constructive, cumulative, self-regulated, goal-oriented, situated, collaborative, and individually different (De Corte, 1996). More and more universities see students as active partners in the process of learning, teaching and assessing the outcome. What research shows is that students select, perceive, interpret, and integrate new information to form a coherent and meaningful whole with their prior knowledge and past experiences, in a Networked learning environment (McConnell, 2006). The changes go together with improvements in instruction and assessment, where alternative modes of assessment are implemented (McConnell, 2006). This belief in the active role of the learner and findings that the student's perceptions of the learning environment influence how they learn, leads to the question of how teachers perceive assessment in their teaching. The research question in this paper is thus: How do teachers in HE view learning and assessment, and where do they think the students fit into that process in a networked learning environment?

Background and aim of the paper

The paper is of an explorative nature and a qualitative methodology has been used. The interviews have been recorded, reflected upon and interpreted using the hermeneutic method. In the work of analysing the interview material an iterative process was chosen, with continuous listening, reading, reflecting and interpreting the material. (Kvale, 1997) The hermeneutic method in this paper is involved with the interpretation and

understanding of teachers' perceptions of assessment. The essence here is not to point out but to direct towards new interpretations. (Ödman, 1994)

The participants, in this work-in-progress paper, all work at universities. At the moment there are 3 participants interviewed in this pilot study and more will follow in a larger study. There are two more scheduled for being interviewed. Two of the teachers teach English, one of whom is responsible for the English department at a university. They teach large undergraduate classes and small graduate courses. The third person is the Dean of the Business School. Two of the teachers are relatively new to online learning and one is a person with more than 20 years of experience in networked learning environment. The fourth and fifth still to be interviewed are in charge of a teacher training programme at a university. In the paper we will refer to them as P1, P2, and P3. Times were booked with the participants and the interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. The interviews were conducted at the participants' place of choosing. The interviews started by defining what the paper was for, and then open questions about the participants' views on assessment methods followed. This was followed up with further probing questions related to the initial question. In order to achieve the goal of this investigation, we let the teachers talk freely about assessment.

It was made clear that the interviews were confidential, and that at any given time they could terminate the interview or if, after the session, they felt uncomfortable with the process, they could contact me and withdraw. In addition, they all gave their consent to being interviewed and recorded. As the interviews progressed, the subjects became more and more open and comfortable in discussing the subject at hand.

Assessment

But is this paper a valid endeavour? Hasn't HE been successful in assessing students for decades and why would that be different now with web-based teaching? Both Maier & Warren (2000) and Winter (2003) disagree that HE has the expertise to assess either the traditional or new online courses. Assessment and teaching are interlinked and as Laurillard (2002) maintains:

> We cannot claim to have sorted out once and for all what students need to be told if they are to make sense of topic X. No matter how much detailed research is done in the way the topic is conceptualised, the solution will not necessarily be found for new ways of putting it across. […] All we can definitely claim is that there are different ways of conceptualising the topic we want to teach. .. all we can definitely conclude is that teachers and students need to be aware that there are such differences and they must have the means to resolve them within the learning situation. (Laurillard 2002, p. 71)

Traditional methods of assessment have included multiple-choice testing, essay question exams, and continuous assessment via papers and scientific reports, decided by teachers and their institutions (Sambell, McDowell, & Brown, 1997).

In recent years, assessment has gone towards more alternative methods that follow social constructivist ideas, such as the integration of assessment in teaching and learning, involving students as active and informed participants in the process. Assessment tasks are negotiated into a meaningful and engaging process, and examples of these are self and peer assessment and portfolio assessment in networked learning. (McConnell 2006) This is a long way from sitting in classrooms taking tests within a time constraint and without any support in focusing on the products of learning. (Birenbaum, 1996).

One study shows that HE teachers' perceptions of teaching vary in relation to the context. The larger the groups, the more likely the teachers are to use a teacher-centred approach and, conversely, the smaller the groups, the more likely they are to try a more learner-centred approach, which shows the dilemma of logistics in HE (Prosser and Trigwell, 1997).

The purpose of Biggs' (1999) constructive alignment method is that there is a direct link between the alignment of the course content and assessment. This follows on from the instructional design methods used in the beginning of online learning. (Gagne, Briggs and Wager, 1988) The concept is that the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) and assessment criteria should be aligned.

Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on
Networked Learning 2010, Edited by:
Dirckinck-Holmfeld L, Hodgson V, Jones C,
de Laat M, McConnell D & Ryberg T

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ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2

Constructive alignment consists of two parts:

- Students construct meaning from what they do to what they learn.
- Teachers align the planned learning activities with the learning outcomes.

The whole idea is that courses are designed so that learning activities and assessment tasks are aligned with the intended learning outcomes. When that happens the learning system is consistent.

Assessment has been shown to have a real impact on the students' approaches to learning (Marton & Säljö, 1997; Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991). Studies have shown that students will choose the most effective means of passing the assessment/exam (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Entwistle, McCune & Walker, 2001). Finding the assessment criteria the teacher sets for the course, i.e. what will be on the test at the end of the course, becomes the learning process, not the content itself. This leads to surface learning, which means the students only learn for the test and do not gain a deeper understanding of the subject being taught (Marton & Säljö, 1997).

A way of achieving a deeper understanding of the subject is offered by McConnell (2006), who specifically comes from a networked learning background. By allowing the student to participate in the assessment process from the beginning, the focus is transferred from unilateral teacher-centred assessment, which is for the most part a summative evaluation of learning outcome, to a collaborative student-driven assessment process. In doing so, formative learning is realized (McConnell 2006). In networked learning, the assessment method adds an important dimension to the learning process, particularly as the communication is, for the most part, asynchronous. The potential for reflective learning is created through the lack of immediacy found in synchronous communication. McConnell (2006, p. 130) states that this helps "the learner rethink the piece… [It] can also be the basis for discussion of the substantive issues." Another important part of collaborative assessment, used as a learning event, is the learner's access to other students' work. By reading and discussing each others' work, students can make judgments about their own work in relation to others in the peer group. Through this process deep learning is achieved, following on from Marton & Säljö (1997) who found that deep approaches to learning are developed through a process of reflection on learning, which is similar to Schön's (1991) reflection in action. However, following Biggs construction alignment, the whole idea is that of courses designed as learning activities aligned with assessment tasks and intended learning outcomes. Teachers within a university setting in most cases design courses from a teacher-centred tradition, which means students can look at the assessment criteria rather than the course content, and bypass the learning activities in order to get their grades.

Method

The paper is of an explorative nature and a qualitative methodology has been used. The interviews were recorded, reflected upon and interpreted using the hermeneutic method. In the work of analysing the interview material an iterative process was chosen, with continuous listening, reading, reflecting and interpreting the material. (Kvale, 1997). The hermeneutic method in this paper is both involved with the interpretation and understanding of teachers' perceptions of assessment. The essence here is not to point out but to direct towards new interpretations. Through showing one interpretation and understanding of teachers' perceptions of assessment, the reader can meet my interpretation and then follow their own path forward towards understanding assessment in their own context (Ödman, 1994).

The participants, in this work-in-progress paper, all work at universities. At the moment there are 3 participants interviewed in this pilot study and more will follow in a larger study. There are two more scheduled for being interviewed. Two of the teachers teach English, one of whom is responsible for the English department at a university. The third person is the Dean of the Business School. The fourth and fifth still to be interviewed are in charge of a teacher training programme at a university. In the paper we will refer to them as P1, P2, and P3. Times were booked with the participants and the interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. The interviews were conducted at the participants' place of choosing. The interviews started by defining what the paper was for, and then open questions about the participants' views on assessment methods followed. This was followed up with further probing questions related to the initial question. In order to achieve the goal of this investigation, we let the teachers talk freely about assessment.

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Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on
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ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2

withdraw. In addition, they all gave their consent to being interviewed and recorded. As the interviews progressed, the subjects became more and more open and, all in all, we believe that the discussion and conclusion would not have been that different had we chosen different people.

Discussion

In the interviews, one recurring aspect was that students had to learn about the subject to a level where they were sufficiently knowledgeable so as to make an informed decision about assessment methods, with regard to their own learning. Furthermore, P2 said that students have to be more committed to and engaged in the subject being taught in order for them to be part of the assessment process. This cannot be fully achieved in undergraduate learning according to all three. "The only way a student can reach an understanding of the subject is by me setting them questions to be answered…There is a set literature list for them to follow and for me to assess them on" (P1). This is partly in line with Goodyear & Zenios (2007), who argue that understanding concepts cannot be achieved without the engagement of students in conjunction with knowledge experts. However, as all the teachers interviewed stated, students have to learn the subject first. One teacher felt strongly that students could not make judgments about their own knowledge in relation to others without first having a sound basis of knowledge of the subject.

The teachers interviewed all agree that they are the subject experts, and that students are taken up into the research community gradually by reading more and more advanced courses. This apprenticeship, according to the teachers interviewed, is achieved through taking courses leading to a bachelor's degree. Only then can students be trusted to make informed judgments about assessment methods in a collaborative environment. The first years at university are regulated by a set curriculum that can, to a certain degree, be negotiated but only to a very limited extent. "The course plan is crucial. You are never free to deviate from the course plan" (P1). "We cannot even discuss the format. It is already in the course plan, which way we assess them" (P2). "The only way is to change them [the course plans] beforehand, before the course starts. This can be done twice a year." (P2). "The curriculum always has to be followed, which makes it difficult to change the way assessment is done. As the process has already been decided for them, you cannot let the students in on the process" (P3). This is in contrast to McConnell (2007) who emphasises the participatory element as a means of being able to understand the process of knowledge construction in a collaborative environment. Knowledge is social, and without the collaborative process through participation with others, students will not gain a deeper understanding of concepts and ideas. It is by means of collaboration that students master a domain of knowledge (McConnell, 2007).

One teacher spoke of the Bologna process, where exams and degrees are constructed in order to streamline the transfer of students as well as professionals within the European Community. In a joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education in 1999, it was declared that: "Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system." (Bologna Declaration, 1999). The Bologna process echoes Biggs' (1999) constructive alignment, whereby the course content is aligned with the assessment. Under this process, courses must be constructed so that what has been taught and how it has been assessed is clear for anyone to follow. Thereby, the learning process disregards the students almost entirely. "The assessment has to relate to what they do in the course" (P2). In addition, the teachers in their interviews all thought that there was no room for letting the students participate in the assessment as there were too many constraints, both administrative and logistical, with so many students going through the system in a very short time. "Large numbers of students make it harder to let them be part of the process" (P1). "Time constraints lead to what are perceived as manageable solutions to assessing students" (P3). Bereiter & Scardamalia (2008) describe this as the notion of weak knowledge, leading to a construction that is considered as a concoction, to a certain extent, of fairly adequate instruction and not enough total collaborative inquiry in the learning process. This scale, from one end containing instructions in building blocks (behaviouristic theory) at undergraduate level to the co-construction of knowledge (social constructivist theory) at postgraduate level, is something that the teachers keep coming back to in the interviews. Laurillard holds that "instructional design theory is logically principled, not empirically based, and therefore unable to build teaching in a knowledge of students" (2002, p. 77).

Regarding assessment online, the teachers were more concerned with upholding the rigour of assessment criteria set by the curriculum. Online learning, regardless of whether it was asynchronous, using a learning platform, or synchronous, using Skype or videoconferencing, must follow the same rigours as traditional campus courses. All three teachers agreed that their assessment was more towards unilateral teacher-centred assessment than a

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ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2

collaborative assessment process with students. However, the teachers interviewed have used formative assessment during their courses, mainly by using group work, short papers or short tests as a means of assessing students' knowledge. As for the dimension of asynchronous communication in their online learning, courses using an element of reflective learning were difficult to achieve as the courses were short, which was detrimental to using reflective assessment processes as described in McConnell (2006).

All three teachers had used some form of peer reviews as part of their teaching. They had, for training purposes, let their students assess other students' work in order to teach the students how peer reviews are done and how, through others, the students could improve their own work. However, two of the teachers use peer reviews and evaluation of students' own work as a way of deepening their learning but do not use it as an assessment tool more than to some degree. Using collaborative assessment methods was something they had all used but only as part of students reflecting on what they had achieved rather than as part of any grading process. Following on the discussion in McConnell (2006) about assessment as a learning event, only the interview subject most experienced in the use of networked learning had used collaborative assessment, and never for more than 30% of the total assessment criteria. An interesting observation is that the teacher with most experience in using online learning tools was more inclined to try different approaches than the teachers with less experience. Understanding the environment meant that he was able to experiment and incorporate peer and self-assessment when deemed appropriate. The others employed traditional assessment methods, such as tests or written papers.

In the interviews, the notion of a beginner advancing through the system to becoming an expert in due course was a view held by all three. Thomas S. Kuhn in his influential work on paradigms, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" (1970), argues that a person is fostered into a community, or paradigm, by assimilating that paradigm's knowledge. By starting off as a beginner, the student will eventually be able to understand more and more of that paradigm until they themselves can produce their own work.

A similar view to that of Kuhn is held by Bourdieu, who sees a member of a community as committed to a particular field. Bourdieu's ' field ' is a self-constituted social group, i.e. community of practice, whose shared interest is central to each member. The member is assimilated through education and culture. The community has a shared commitment to common assumptions and habits of thought. Committing to a particular field of science or community of practice gives the appearance of a game (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). The prevalent notion was that the students must be assimilated through the courses at the university before being able to make judgments about learning outcomes in others in, for example, peer and self assessment in a networked learning environment.

Laurillard (2002) comments that cramming knowledge into students, either traditionally or in new ways using TEL, leads to more of a behaviouristic method of learning. The one thing we can agree on, according to Laurillard, is that there are different ways of conceptualising content; something teachers should be made aware of. The participants interviewed all have the idea that you have to cram knowledge into the students before you can let them lead the process of, for example, peer reviewing.

One teacher, at the end of the interview, said that she had no idea that her assessment methods were so instructor led and governed by the subject. She was also the least experienced in running courses online.

Conclusion

One of the conclusions of this paper is that studies into the teachers' views of assessment in HE should be investigated further. Only tentative conclusions can be drawn in this work-in-progress paper. The main reason for this statement is that this limited project demonstrates that there are several aspects intertwined, making it problematic to include students in the assessment process, the importance of which research has underlined where a deeper understanding of a subject is to be attained.

In an attempt to check that students have understood the content of a course, the teachers resort to traditional testing methods. It seems that the Bologna process has accentuated instructional design and behaviouristic influences. Another reason is logistics; large classes in undergraduate courses lead to more traditional testing as teachers are less inclined to test new assessment methods. A major reason given by the teachers is also that students need to know about the subject area in more depth before being given responsibility for assessment. Being gradually acculturated and assimilated into the research community in the form of an apprenticeship is part of that process. This is supported by the notion of apprenticeship and assimilation of the subject area of many researchers. Bourdieu called it a game, Kuhn talked about paradigms and Goodyear & Zenios termed it

Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Networked Learning 2010, Edited by: Dirckinck-Holmfeld L, Hodgson V, Jones C, de Laat M, McConnell D & Ryberg T

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ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2

'epistemic fluency'. All conform in one way or another to the notion that students need to be 'taught' in their subject before being trusted with assessing their work. This seems also to be true when it comes to the interview subjects' understanding of the networked learning environments. The one most experienced with running online courses was also the one most inclined to trying out peer and self assessment as part of his online course.

In order to change unilateral teacher-centred assessment to collaborative student-assessment practices, the focus has to change from content to learning processes, where assessment should be seen as a continuous process. A tentative conclusion is that less experienced teachers in online learning resort to a behaviouristic pedagogy, which leads to surface learning. In order to bring about change, teachers need to be made aware of different ways of conceptualising the content and assessment procedures in networked learning environments. A line of research worth pursuing is whether teachers that are comfortable within network learning environments are more likely to incorporate peer and self assessment.

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Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Networked Learning 2010, Edited by: Dirckinck-Holmfeld L, Hodgson V, Jones C, de Laat M, McConnell D & Ryberg T

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ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2