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This is the way to teach: insights from academics and students about assessment that supports learning

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ABSTRACT

In this study, assessment and learning is reconceptualised as an integrated and dialogic process. Positioned in a sociocultural framework, the experiences of academics and students at an Australian university were examined to understand how they think about and participate in formative assessment to support learning. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to investigate the lived experience, individual meanings and context of participants. The sociocultural issues that participants emphasised were highlighted through a power, risk and reconceptualisation analytical framework. Findings showed that academics and students give high value to dialogue as a device of trust and power for building learner capacity through assessment, and that academics' familiarity with students' individual learning reinforces student trust in the integrity and reliability of assessment. This study contributes to understandings of learning and assessment by offering their reconceptualisation as an integrated and dialogic whole when considered from sociocultural perspectives of the lived experience and context. Importantly, the study proposes that the design of intended learning experiences in assessment can also facilitate development of specific dispositions for thinking and being in students as learners and future citizens.

KEYWORDS

Assessment for learning;
dialogue; experience;
sociocultural

Background

Despite questions about the suitability of conventional summative assessment for preparing students for a complex and globalised society, practices and policies for formative assessment that supports learning are not widely applied in higher education. This paper reports on a study taking the view that pedagogy and assessment should be integrated and holistically aligned to initiate deep and authentic learning. The research investigated the lived experience of academics and students to understand the contextual aspects of formative assessment, and, in doing so, reconceptualises learning and assessment as an integrated dialogic process.

When considered from a sociocultural stance, assessment is an educative and social process (Gipps 1999). 'Assessment that supports learning' accordingly conceptualises an integrated and holistic relationship where learning and assessment are purposeful and enabling for learners (Biggs and Tang 2011; Birenbaum 2003). The term draws on existing nomenclature, 'assessment for learning' (Earl 2003; Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2012) and 'assessment as learning' (Dann 2014; Earl 2003), where students are provided with formative feedback to progress their learning and development

as self-regulated learners (Biggs and Tang 2011; Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2012), and to develop disciplinary knowledge for their immediate studies and futures as professionals and lifelong learners (Boud 2000; Boud and Falchikov 2006; Carless 2007). When framed in a sociocultural construct, assessment and learning embody the cohesive design of meaningful activities with learners' active and continued engagement with rich feedback to develop independence to navigate a complex world. In this way, assessment and learning become an integrated social and dialogic process that develops learners holistically (Hawe and Dixon 2016).

There are strong arguments in the learning and assessment literature for designing assessment to better facilitate learning in higher education. Research shows that formative assessment improves learning (Black and Wiliam 1998; Hattie and Timperley 2007; Sadler 1998), and students enjoy innovative modes of assessment (Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens 2005). However, the adoption of assessment to support learning is not widespread in institutional policy and individual practice in higher education (Birenbaum 2003; Boud 2007; Boud and Soler 2016; Meyer et al. 2010). Furthermore, universities have a long history of using assessment for purposes of certification, selection or motivating learning (Biggs and Tang 2011; Boud 2000; Kvale 2007; Ramsden 2003). Academics are also known to be inconsistent in designing assessment to enable student learning (Bloxham and Boyd 2007; Boud 2000, 2007). The powerful potential of assessment to positively impact learning is yet to be fully embraced in higher education.

The study reported here examined the lived experiences of academics, who were proficient teachers who engaged in assessment that supports learning strategies, and their final year students. It differs from most current studies about assessment and learning in higher education that typically do not acknowledge the social and contextual issues that influence learning and assessment. The study used this approach to comprehend sociocultural issues and assumptions that academics and students had about learning and assessment, and the actions they took to sustain their engagement and relationships as learners and teachers. Their experiences depicted the interpretation and personal significance they gave to a lived situation (Illeris 2004; Jay 2005), and, from their accounts, the expression of change to self, understanding and action that 'cannot leave you where you began' (Jay 2005, 7). A power, risk and reconceptualisation (PRR) analytical framework derived from Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery (2012), and extended with an additional lens of experience (Jay 2005), was used to organise issues that emerged from academic and student perspectives, and provide insights into sociocultural issues entwined in assessment and learning that can influence practice.

Assessment, learning and higher education

It is widely understood that assessment, rather than teaching, shapes the experience of learning (Bloxham and Boyd 2007; Ramsden 2003). Assessment is influential in what and how students learn (Biggs and Tang 2011; Ramsden 2003). Formative assessment scaffolds learners to modify and improve their learning by developing knowledge and skills through comprehensible and coaching feedback (Black and Wiliam 1998; Sadler 1998). In contrast, high-stakes summative assessment has little function for supporting deep learning because there is low provision for feedback, other than 'feed-out' in the form of a grade or mark (Knight and Yorke 2003a). Assessment that supports rather than measures learning therefore reorients a sociocultural relationship between learning and assessment through dialogic strategies, including feedback, peer review and self-assessment, to scaffold learners for future independence (Boud 2000; Carless 2007; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2014; Sadler 1998).

Higher education aims to develop learners who can flourish intellectually and actively contribute to an increasingly complex social world (Barnett 2004), or, from a neoliberal orientation, produce graduates who will be competent agents for national economic growth in expanding global markets (Bradley et al. 2008). Whichever value drives the cultivation of learning, the key purpose of higher education is to develop students' lifelong learning abilities for sophisticated relativist thinking and autonomous complex decision-making by drawing on solutions from a range of knowledge areas (Biggs and Tang

2011; Boud 2000; Boud and Falchikov 2006; Knight and Yorke 2003a, 2003b). Developing this independence as thinkers and problem solvers empowers learners to be vigilant to the unexpected, make moral judgments and act ethically in unpredictable situations that our globalised and complicated world routinely generates (Barnett 2004; Knight and Yorke 2003a, 2003b). Such intricate capabilities require sophisticated and well-designed learning and assessment strategies to help students develop disciplinary knowledge, cognitive and personal growth and reflexivity.

Despite arguments in the literature and compelling evidence from stakeholders, assessment is typically conducted within a certifying and measuring paradigm in higher education. In turn, the underlying values express specific views that learning is transmissive, and assessment is controlling and competitive (Birenbaum 2003; Broadfoot 1996; Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2012). However, conflicting paradigms and beliefs in the educational practice, experience and institutional management of assessment are confusing the purpose of assessment (Price et al. 2011). These confusions are enmeshed in the dichotomy of 'assessment for learning' as an overt constructivist practice pushing against ingrained legacies of educational measurement and neoliberal management accountabilities (Fuller 2012). These tensions contribute to inconsistent application of assessment that supports learning in higher education (Boud 2000; Meyer et al. 2010).

While there is a clear need for assessment that supports learning to be incorporated in higher education to enhance student learning, additional barriers appear to inhibit uptake or impede consistent practice by academics. Some barriers are related to academics' capabilities, such that they replicate the same model of didactic teaching and summative assessment they experienced as undergraduates (Bloxham and Boyd 2007). Academics may also have strong learner-centred conceptions of learning and teaching but their practices may not reflect these beliefs due to personal and contextual factors that affect academics' abilities for sustained change (Dixon, Hawe, and Parr 2011; Norton et al. 2005, 2010). Others may not use assessment effectively because of lack of knowledge, experience or motivation (Bloxham and Boyd 2007; Boud 2007; Medland 2014; Rust 2007).

Further barriers to academics' practice of assessment that supports learning are institutional or systemic. Institutional policies may not support principles of integrated assessment and learning (Boud 2007), or may stipulate but not consistently implement such principles (Meyer et al. 2010). On a systemic level, workloads have increased over time and academics are required to do 'more with less' in their teaching practice. There is also the strong perception that learning and teaching is not valued or supported to the same extent that research activity is given priority and time for staff to undertake, thus dampening individual motivation to integrate innovative learning and assessment practices (Collini 2012).

Concurrently, the way students engage with their studies can also influence their participation in assessment. Even though assessment may not be a key determinant of students' decisions to engage in their overall university experience, it sets the tone and sends messages about what is important to learn and how (Boud 1995). The perceived reliability, relevance and fairness of assessment influence how students approach their studies (Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens 2005). Students' commitment to their study is also shaped by the nature of motivation, teaching and interactions with peers and academics that they experience (Zepke, Leach, and Butler 2014). Similarly, social and economic factors introduce competing lifestyle responsibilities that change the ways that students participate in their academic study (McInnis 2003).

While there are theoretical frameworks and conceptions that surround practice and engagement with assessment and learning, we have not yet researched understanding of the lived experience of assessment practices that support learning to comprehend the contextual and social issues that are present in formative assessment settings in higher education. Therefore, to help fill this knowledge gap and contribute to successful and consistent implementation of learning and assessment approaches that differ to or challenge conventional perspectives, this study sought to understand the ways that academics and students think about and engage with the practice of assessment that supports learning.

Methodology

The study was designed to explore the contextual and sociocultural issues that were important factors in the individual experiences of academics and students in learning and assessment. It used an instrumental case study methodology (Stake 1995), grounded in theoretical perspectives of constructionism and interpretivism (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Crotty 1998). Data collection methods comprised interviews to access individual voices and analysis of policy and curriculum documents to contextualise participants' accounts. The study investigated the key research question: *What insights do higher education academics and their final year students provide of their experience with assessment that supports learning?*

Additional questions guided the research to focus on specific sociocultural values and beliefs about the context that influence personal interactions and engagement, and thus give meaning to experience. These explored issues of power, risk and how assessment was reconceptualised by participants, as well as the motivations of academics to teach in this way.

The research was set in an Australian metropolitan-based university of 60,000 students. The institution brands itself as providing learning with clear professional application that enables students to be work ready and globally aware. The case study was designed around the disciplines of education, industrial design and international studies to offer a sense of sameness and coherence in their nature as 'soft applied' disciplines in the broad area of social sciences and design. Simultaneously, these disciplines presented sufficient scope and distinctiveness in their pedagogical, disciplinary and professional approaches to provide notable differences and nuance in the perceptions of participants.

The study had university ethics approval and involved seven experienced academics and 14 final year undergraduate students who were purposefully selected (Patton 2002). The academics used assessment strategies that precluded conventional formats and were recognised by colleagues as doing innovative learning and teaching. They consisted of five men and two women, and had been lecturing for at least ten years and up to 25 years. Some had prior teaching experience in the compulsory education sector, while four had begun their academic careers overseas. Students who had engaged in one or more courses taught by any of the participating academics throughout their study were invited to participate. Final year students were involved due to their increased capacity to critically evaluate and reflect in hindsight and with some foresight on the relevance of their experiences. The students comprised 13 women and one man. Two students were mature, aged mid 20s and early 40s.

The study aims were explained to all participants. They signed consent forms giving permission to record conversations, and understood that disclosures were in confidence and they could leave the study at any stage. No inducements were offered for participating; however, students received a movie voucher after the interviews. Students were assured that participation would not influence any assessment outcomes, both with academics involved in the study or any part of their programmes. Names of participants and courses were changed in the write-up of results.

Data collection methods

Questions based on the key research question were provided in advance for the semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded and conducted with individual participants or small groups of students (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Minichiello, Aroni, and Hays 2008; Spradley 1979). Interview questions prompted participants to describe and reflect on assessment events, and the roles, intentions and actions that they perceived occurred around learning. Interviews were designed as friendly conversations with the explicit purpose to produce research data based on participants' stories and meanings, allowing them to construct their own narratives and respond in unexpected ways. Academics and students were interviewed separately. Group interviews of two to four participants were used with some students, providing settings for them to converse with each other and expand views that may not have been possible in individual interviews, and prompt their recollection of events (Minichiello, Aroni, and Hays 2008). The interviews were transcribed by the author and transcriptions shared with participants to check for accuracy of representation.

Institutional policy, strategic plans and curriculum documents were analysed as products of social interaction to determine richer contextual issues relevant to the setting (Merriam 1998; Yin 2009). These data sources provided evidence of institutional discourse about learning, teaching and assessment within the university at the time of the study. Factors such as authorship, intent and audience were considered to affirm their authenticity and accuracy.

Analysis

The analysis was intuitive (Merriam 1998) and located 'in the middle of things' (Morehouse 2012, 85) to capture the contextualised and socially situated responses of participants. The interpretations of experience and emerging analytical insights were analysed for themes that aligned with the research questions and current literature. The power, risk and reconceptualisation (PRR) framework (Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2012) was selected because it provided a suitable existing sociocultural lens to organise the emergent analysis. Patterns were inductively identified and codes generated, guided by PRR framework elements. Codes were condensed and aggregated to collate themes. The PRR elements and qualities of 'experience' were used to converge codes and to create themes (Miles and Huberman 1994) that aligned with but also extended the analytical framework. The significance of themes was confirmed by considering the coherence and consistency of evidence, the extent that findings deepened and increased understanding, resonance with other knowledge, and overall usefulness (Patton 2002).

Findings

Five themes emerged that inform understanding of assessment that supports learning as a sociocultural practice and experience for academics and students, namely: empowering dialogue, trust of teachers, motivations of academics, learning for social change, and integrated learning and assessment.

Empowering dialogue

First, academics and students give high value to dialogue as a device of trust and power for building learner capacity. Academics conceptualised learning and teaching with students as a dialogic rather than transmissive construct. Their intention was for dialogue to enable informed and mutually constructed understandings of learners' needs and to collaboratively work with students to actively develop learner independence and empowerment. Richard (International Studies academic) referred to relating with learners as:

getting to know your students and where they're going and working with them.

Dialogic activities, including peer review, peer assessment and self-assessment, were purposefully integrated to cultivate trust and power in the learning relationship. These strategies provided platforms for conversations about learning, allowing students to develop and practise their feedback, review and reflection skills and develop their own dialogic engagement, as Sean (Industrial Design academic) noted:

when they're reviewing somebody else's work and how they've done a project... you can see their mind is whirring saying 'oh, they did this really well' or 'I could have done this better'.

Sarah (Education student) referred to the motivating and coaching power of formative feedback she received that inspired and activated her to go beyond her usual limits:

it pushed me to work harder and to step out and challenge myself rather than 'OK, I'm just going to half-arse this and get a pass'.

Trust of teachers

Second, academics' familiarity with students' individual learning reinforces student trust in the integrity and reliability of learning and assessment. Most students expected that academics would care about students' individual learning. Personal contact that students had with academics boosted their personal worth as individuals, learners and emerging professionals. Feeling respected enhanced their trust of the learning that academics designed, as Jessica (Education) inferred:

I'd really look forward to her classes because she made you feel like we were all going to make a big difference.

Overall, students gave academics authority in the learning, assessment and grading process. However, Industrial Design students trusted, rather than assumed, that teacher authority. They perceived that, through academics' close involvement in their learning projects, lecturers intimately understood the development processes that students experienced and would make informed and credible evaluations about their learning. Justin summed it up as:

you have far more respect for the mark they give you, or ultimate feedback, because you feel they were quite involved in your project.

Students also trusted that academics would provide relevant and dependable advice and guidance for their distinct needs, as Rebecca (Industrial Design) commented:

the teachers know people well enough to know where to guide them and how to assist them and I think that's important.

Motivations of academics

Third, academics are intrinsically motivated to engage in assessment that supports learning to cultivate specific learning dispositions. The academics set assessment tasks that were novel and unconventional, but deliberately conformant with personal learning and learning philosophies to encourage learner independence. This alignment engendered them with high trust in the integrity and intent of their practice. Richard (International Studies), was decidedly confident in the veracity of his pedagogical decisions, as he reflected:

I don't see myself going back to teaching in a top down, 'memorise this' way... my role means you facilitate learning... I just think this is the way to teach.

Similarly, Education academics were motivated to meaningfully challenge students to learn, think and feel in new ways. They therefore purposefully used integrated learning and assessment activities to disturb and shift students' perspectives about learning, as Sally commented:

I'm trying to make them comfortable with being uncomfortable and that's hard work because they don't like it.

Learning for social change

Fourth, alongside skills and knowledge for employability, academics wanted students to develop dispositions of stewardship and engaging with complexity to generate reform for others. Academics wanted to prepare students to interact competently with, perform and influence social outcomes in a complex and constantly changing world. They were compelled to change the conservative practice they perceived in their disciplinary professions by guiding students to think and act in ways of stewardship to influence longer term social change for others. Each discipline promoted a specific stewardship disposition. Richard (International Studies academic) captured the essence when describing characteristics that he aspired for students as:

learning that is engaged and grounded in the realities of where people are coming from and helps in the transformation, of not just the individual, but society and the community they are working with.

Integrated learning and assessment

Finally, academics and students conceptualised learning and assessment in a sociocultural framework whereby processes and activities were entwined and explicit to achieve learning that was purposeful, holistic and applied. Academics described sophisticated formative assessment strategies such as peer review as processes for developing independence in learning and reflection. The review and evaluation of peers' work was typically designed to provoke explicit discussion about quality and standards of work. As Sally (Education academic) described:

they explain why they are giving that grade... I say 'I don't understand this grade because you've marked them very high and your comments don't match', so the real learning is HOW to assess.

Jack (Industrial Design academic) similarly explained that these activities provided meaningful content to explicitly reinforce the skills and ways of thinking he wanted students to develop:

I build mechanisms where they can slowly build more confidence... to make judgments to steer their own work and others.

Students perceived that assessment activities were purposeful opportunities to contextually apply and rehearse skills and knowledge for future practice, as Jessica (Education) explained:

we've had a trial run so it's reassuring to have an idea of what we'll be doing... just like in the workforce.

Students also recognised that the interactive feedback and peer review processes that they experienced were important for developing self-agency and identity, as Hannah (Industrial Design) indicated:

it's really important to be aware of what you're doing and why and be able to question that because you're not going to always get someone hovering over your shoulder telling you.

These findings reveal issues relevant to the relational and personal aspects of students and academics in learning and assessment situations. The themes also reinforce features of constructivist and sociocultural learning theories as the framework for understanding practice and associated experiences as lived and meaningful events.

Discussion

As shown by the analysis, the academics and students engaged with assessment as a concept and practice in ways that diverge considerably from conventional experiences in higher education. The PRR framework revealed beliefs and actions that emphasised key values and their associated power and importance in the social contexts and relationships that comprise learning and teaching in higher education.

The utility of dialogue to manifest and maintain trust and power

Due to its problematic nature in current neoliberal contexts, assessment is a continuous balance of trust and power between academics and students. In a sociocultural framework, this state is more obvious when emphasis is given to social encounters and dynamics of learning and teaching (Gipps 1999). Dialogic interactions underpinning feedback are opportunities for extended engagement, ideally between teacher and learner and peer to peer, rather than just a monologic transmission delivered by teachers (Nicol 2010). Dialogue between learners and teachers therefore needs to actively construct and mediate knowledge, and, from a sociocultural stance, be framed by a respectful relationship for learning together (Gravett and Petersen 2002). Acknowledging the associated social-affective nuances of that relationship means that dialogue is thus experienced as a relational process where interactions aim to promote learner agency and self-regulation in trusting and respectful environments, requiring teachers to suspend their role of authority and power (Gravett and Petersen 2002; Yang and Carless 2013).

For academics in this study, dialogue was a crucial device for managing dynamics and imparting power to students by cultivating awareness and trust in assessment processes. Strategies were often openly discussed to make the implicit knowledge and skills underlying assessment processes explicit.

The academics wanted to demystify the assessment process for students, identifying tacit knowledge (Rust, Price, and O'Donovan 2003) and nurturing the assessment literacy (Smith et al. 2013) required for undertaking assessment activities, and thus securing students' personal power and confidence by reducing uncertainty. Students engaged in dialogic processes designed to allow them to interact and speak about their work to increase certainty, ensure clarity of expectations and give more choice and control over how they could action and demonstrate their learning. In other words, academics used dialogic processes to initiate the disclosure and negotiation of 'epistemological power', the tacit and assumed knowledge present in learning and assessment situations (Tan 2009).

Students referred to dialogue as a device that provided meaningful support and empowerment in their engagement and academic learning with lecturers and peers. They identified that personalised feedback and 'as-needed' conversations performed important relational and learning functions to encourage, probe, guide and benchmark their work and thinking. Some students referred to internal feedback dialogues about standards and expectations, thus demonstrating emerging self-regulation and agency (Smith et al. 2013). These dialogic strategies are instrumental for enhancing learners' knowledge, skills and independence (Hawe and Dixon 2016). They also ensure that tacit knowledge associated with learning and assessment can be more transparent and explicitly shared, thus increasing individuals' power and trust in assessment processes (Tan 2009). The assimilation of this necessary assessment knowledge of standards and behaviours is a social process (Price et al. 2008; Rust, O'Donovan, and Price 2005), and best enculturated in a dialogically rich community of learners and teachers who can share, scaffold and practise the subtleties and idiosyncrasies involved.

Trust of learning and assessment based on teachers' familiarity with learners

It is typical that students trust or give authority to academics in learning and teaching relationships (Curzon-Hobson 2002; Sadler 1998). Through a sociocultural lens, this may play out as the teacher role perceived as 'authoritative' or 'authoritarian' (Freire 1996). Academics in this study perceived themselves as facilitators of learning, and thus adopted an 'authoritative' stance whereby their strategies for relating with students were student-centred and facilitative, characterised by guiding learners and respectfully evaluating learning (Broughan and Grantham 2012; Curzon-Hobson 2002). Students trusted the guidance and support that academics provided for learning because dialogic processes with academics existed to define, scaffold and respect the individual learning that students experienced (Broughan and Grantham 2012). Similarly, the power relationships described by participants came from an 'authoritative' base where learners trusted teachers to set up learning, guide and recommend development and then respectfully assess learning (Freire 1996).

Students gave high value to social and personalised interactions with academics to guide learning. Personal contact and exchanges developed and nurtured in dialogues further enhanced the trust and credibility that students held (Yang and Carless 2013). Students placed high importance and meaning on conversations and feedback shared with academics because they felt respected and understood as individual learners (Slate et al. 2011). This sincerity and their feeling of acceptance into a broader disciplinary community inspired them to work hard and aim for high standards. This study suggests that to meet set high standards, students need to trust the academics who challenge them (Curzon-Hobson 2002), and that this trust, like the foundation of all social relationships, is built on dialogue involving individual contact and feeling personally valued.

Motivations of personal philosophies and aspirations for student learning

The academics described personal philosophies of learning and teaching that they constructed from educational theories and scholarly self-reflection on their teaching practice, and experiences as undergraduates. Overall, they were personally inspired to use learner-centred strategies that supported all learners and aligned with constructivist notions of knowledge and truth. They used assessment to thoughtfully motivate, guide and reward students to participate in ways that were pedagogically aligned

to personal learning and teaching principles, best practice, along with university policies and procedures. The academics were experienced teachers and purposefully selected as practitioners engaging in innovative assessment, which possibly accounts for their deeper understanding of assessment practice, which is not always the case (Bloxham and Boyd 2007).

Findings of this study extend established notions that academics use specific approaches to learning and assessment that sit within a teacher or learner centred continuum (Postareff et al. 2012; Samuelowicz and Bain 2002). The academics aligned their assessment designs with their own pedagogical signatures for learning and knowledge. Their strategies were shaped by personal values that learning is intended to bring about change for, and eventually by, learners, and that learning is community-based, participatory, uncomfortable or involves multiple ways of knowing. Their assessment design meant that there was alignment between course learning aims and tasks, as well as with the personal signature of engaging with knowledge they nurtured in each course.

High value given to dispositions for stewardship and engaging with complexity

In staking a broader purpose of learning in higher education, the academics evoked an orientation of ‘stewardship for social reform’, typified by a commitment to the morality of caring for others and respecting the value of human life (Mazur and Sechler 1997), further charged with humanistic consciousness to bring about change for betterment and improvement (Aloni 2011) while engaging in activities associated with supporting the social world.

This learning disposition was intended to position students to ethically participate and contribute to the social improvement and betterment of others in increasingly complex and disruptive contexts (Barnett 2004), knowing and acting with integrity on their best understandings of the world (Bailey 2010). Similar intentions are defined in the Citizen Scholar graduate proficiencies (Arvanitakis and Hornsby 2016). Such tendencies for learning signal engagement that is deep, reflective and abstract, and gives emphasis to learning as an awareness of ‘being’ as a learner and person (Barnett 2004) rather than ‘having’ a degree to facilitate ‘future material affluence’ (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009, 280). A stewardship disposition is inherently characteristic of the disciplines in the study and, as such, provides stark contrast to the marketisation rhetoric in higher education that emphasises learning to improve self for employability.

Rethinking assessment for learning in higher education

Assessment was reconceptualised as a formative and developmental process to purposefully progress learners’ skills and knowledge through ongoing social interactions. Strategies for assessment and learning were blurred as both process and content in learning designs (Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2012). By integrating assessment strategies as learning activities, students were positioned to develop assessment literacies that enhanced their disciplinary and professional knowledge and skills, and extended their abilities and vocabulary for improving future work (Boud and Soler 2016; Smith et al. 2013). In this vein, learning and assessment supported the development and demonstration of an extensive range of cognitive abilities and skills relevant to academic, professional and civic contexts.

Thus, learning content was not solely based on comprehensive disciplinary concepts but comprised knowledge and skills, derived from academic, professional and social sources, and ‘mashed’ in line with individual cognitive engagement and interest. The consideration of what is assessed also extends beyond disciplinary threshold concepts and professional knowledge to incorporate less tangible reflexive dispositions for learning and ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ (Barnett 2004). Academics and students referred to providing and experiencing learning that involved shaping assumptions, ways of thinking and identities as future contributors to the lives of people associated with their relevant industries and broader social fields, thus engendering content with developing a greater sense of personal presence and contribution to the community (Arvanitakis and Hornsby 2016).

Limitations

This study was conducted in a university where assessment that supports learning was endorsed through policy and strategically supported as practice. The specificity of the site thus reduces the comparison of experiences and practices with another university culture where assessment has a different orientation. However, consideration was given to these conceivable limitations when designing the study and diversity was achieved by selecting disciplines that had notable variation in their pedagogical approaches and professional orientations.

The study had a small number of participants, which meant that the views expressed may have been too similar or highly varied and specific, thus increasing the risk in analysis of settling on common issues or focusing on extreme outlier perspectives. However, in line with qualitative research practice, rigorous analysis processes were applied that verified themes that gave voice to specifics and particularities that emerged in the individual settings of the study.

Conclusions and implications

The aim of this research was to investigate the lived experience of academics and students in the sociocultural and contextual aspects of assessment that supports learning. Academics perceived that assessment could not be separated from learning. Assessment processes were dialogically entwined in how learners engaged and learned. Learning and assessment were therefore reconceptualised as integrated and dialogical processes in teaching.

There are possibilities for further research emanating from this study. Conceptually, dialogic assessment deserves further investigation to frame our understanding of the sociocultural experience of assessment and consider more deeply the impact of feedback and other dialogic methods for supporting learners in their induction to academic and disciplinary ways of thinking and being. The process of dialogue in formative assessment for supporting the development of dispositions such as stewardship for social reform needs exploration in further depth. A longitudinal study of students engaging in integrated learning and assessment practices that compares and evaluates their development and insights over the duration of their programme would also contribute to better understanding of the learning experience for students.

Further probing is needed to enhance understanding of the tensions and undercurrents that exist for diverse student cohorts who are not familiar with ways and expectations of learning that underpin assessment that supports learning, or have difficulty in transitioning to unfamiliar integrated learning and assessment practices. Specific contextual investigations arising from this study include understanding the experience of international students, commencing students, students from other disciplines or students unwilling to undertake the learning and assessment activities that academics design. If, as educators, we are to be inclusive in our practice and give all learners maximum opportunities to reach their potential, understanding the experience of diverse or unwilling learners is an imperative.

Further development of the PRR framework as an academic development tool to support the implementation of change and development of strategies for teachers and learners should be considered. This instrument can approach change management from the stance of building trust and examining beliefs to enhance the specific professional development and knowledge required to position and skill academics and students for best practice.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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