

# Sowing the seeds

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*Reasons for wanting to engage learners more directly in assessment are plentiful. These include the ability for learners to make judgements of their own work, as this capacity will be essential for learners' future lives and careers (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Excellent guides on how and why this might be done already exist (Falchikov 2005). A puzzle exists, therefore, in why we see so little evidence of assessment practices that engage the learner more directly. To encourage the wider adoption of these practices we must understand the challenges teachers face when considering significant changes to assessment. There are good reasons for believing that the most effective way to transform assessment practices would be to take a whole-of-program approach, with decisions about what, how, and where something is assessed being made after careful consideration of the program's structure and intended learning outcomes. Whole-of-program opportunities, however, are infrequent, and even when they occur, they are not always recognised as opportunities for major refocusing of assessment. The reality for most courses is that choices about assessment are made by teachers on a local basis, within their subject silos, and without much consideration of program-level issues. This paper focuses on ways of engaging teachers in discussion of assessment using the work of Rust, Price & O'Donovan (2003), and of Boud & Falchikov (2006), to develop activities that engage the student directly in assessment by developing their ability to provide and respond to feedback. Contextualised support for teachers undertaking changes to assessment can be very effective in helping teachers negotiate the inevitable missteps and hiccups of unfamiliar assessment activities. This support is also sowing the seeds for a future occasion when their developing understandings of assessment can be employed to influence choices about assessment when whole-of-program opportunities arise.*

**Keywords:** *graduate attributes, assessment criteria, feedback, whole-of-program responses, subject silos*

## Introduction

In this paper I reflect on the puzzle of why we see so little evidence of teachers engaging students more directly in assessment, despite the extensive reasons for doing so. I suggest the outlines of a more strategic response to the challenge of engaging students in assessment as a foil to the few, localised examples that we see. These localised examples are still important in the overall scheme even though they cannot achieve the transformations of assessment practices that we might hope for across whole programs. They are important because of the opportunities afforded to teachers to develop an understanding of the challenges and benefits of more direct student involvement in assessment practices — sowing the seeds, if you like, for a time when an opportunity for a program-wide response presents itself. Furthermore, the challenge of embedding graduate attributes within a program provides some underutilised rationales for motivating individual teachers to take the step and start engaging students more directly in assessment. Drawing on this material I will

provide an example of how a common assessment activity, the essay, could be recast to engage the learner more directly.

Ways to engage students more directly in assessment, and reasons for so doing, have been written about at length in recent works by Falchikov (2001, 2005), Boud and Falchikov (2006), Knight and Yorke (2003) and others. Hounsell, discussing student feedback and learning, writes that

The rationale for student involvement is essentially that it encourages greater learner autonomy and self-direction, principally by nourishing a more profound understanding of the criteria relevant to work of high quality, and by furthering the capacity to apply these criteria to arrive at informed judgements. (Hounsell, 2003, p.74)

The approach taken here to explore these issues is that of the scholarship of teaching. For Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin and Prosser (2000, p.164), attributes of a scholarly approach to teaching include engaging with the literature on teaching and learning, investigating one's practice, reflecting on teaching from their own and their students' perspectives, and communicating ideas and practice with peers. An adjustment of viewpoint from that of teacher to that of academic developer is also needed.

### **The puzzle**

With so many examples of engaging students in assessment available to us in the literature we need to ask why it is that we see so little of these practices in use. Whilst I have no hard data on the extent of assessment practices in my institution, I have many opportunities to discuss assessment with teachers in my work as an academic developer. My observation is that there are not many assessment activities that could be characterised as engaging students in the sense of Falchikov and Boud (2006). There is much scope for reworking conventional assessment activities to engage the learner directly, although all too often there is little interest in doing so.

There are a number of plausible reasons for this lack of interest. The person responsible for the development of assessment activities within a subject, our teacher, may not know what could be done to change assessment so that learners are more active in the process. Most teachers are unfamiliar with the specialist assessment literature. For many, their interest in assessment matters resides chiefly in the managing of the resource constraints within which their students are to be assessed. A partial solution here would be to give teachers examples of how others have changed assessment, or to run workshops where these issues can be explored. I have some reservations that a lack of knowledge is the primary barrier here. Another possible factor is that teachers don't know why they should be engaging students more directly in assessment. They might argue that current assessment regimes are basically sound. They might say that there is always room for improvement, and that resource constraints make it impossible to make substantial changes to assessment practices. And, they might argue that if there are substantial problems with assessment then this will show up in the end-of-semester student feedback surveys, or in the Course Experience Questionnaires responses from new graduates—so, in the absence of problems, we'll leave well enough alone! A third factor is that the teachers may not know how to interpret and adapt examples from other contexts to their own circumstances. Changing assessment practice is always going to involve risk and uncertainty. When those changes involve reallocation of roles and responsibilities from the sure hands of the teacher to the uncertain hands of the learner, as more direct

engagement of the learner in assessment implies, then the perceived risk is higher still.

How closely these and other possible reasons come to accounting for the absence of take-up is a subject for further investigation. There are other factors militating against the development of learner engagement in assessment, including external accreditation constraints, the pressure produced by the growth in student numbers, and an inordinate focus on the summative, judgemental aspects of assessments in the belief of maintaining standards. Addressing these more systemic factors requires a different approach.

### **A strategic response**

An obvious response to the challenge of engaging students would be to take a whole-of-program view - one that moves away from the common situation of teachers being left to themselves within their subject silos, where the choice and focus of assessment practice is left largely unremarked by colleagues as long as the failure rates and appeals aren't excessive.

A team with responsibility for creating a cohesive program that provides learners with adequate developmental teaching, learning and assessment activities would need to map the extent and nature of assessment across the program to ensure that the common problems of assessment are avoided. These problems include over-assessment of declarative knowledge (*knowing that*, a feature of most quizzes and many exams); attention to the summative, or judgemental aspect of assessment over the formative, developmental roles (wide scale use of exams devoid of feedback); and under-assessment of more complex performances (*knowing how*) reflecting authentic professional attainments, and that may require more intensive resourcing. Most importantly, a program-wide view is needed to ensure that the claims being made for a program, often described as graduate attributes, are actually addressed.

Opportunities for whole-of-program reviews occur during program reaccreditation processes, and when new programs are being developed. They can also be triggered by one-off initiatives such as embedding graduate attributes.

However, these events are not always recognised by the program team as opportunities to implement substantial changes in assessment practices. Short time lines, external deadlines, and heavy work commitments often conspire to reduce the time available to program teams for reflection and exploration of possibilities, and for drawing perspectives other than those of the teachers in the program under review. In many cases, a pragmatic attitude of "If it ain't broken, don't fix it!" prevails.

### **Graduate attributes**

The perception that things aren't in need of fixing presumes, of course, that assessment activities follow content, and that getting the content right is the principal business of a program review. This is where the significance of graduate attributes begins to come into focus in the argument. Briefly, graduate attributes are statements about the knowledge, skills and attributes that a successful graduate can be expected to have attained in the course of their degree, and that equip them for learning beyond the university - see for example Hager and Holland (2006), Knight and Yorke (2003), Barrie (2006). Many institutions have undertaken initiatives within the last decade to develop graduate attributes and to embed them within their programs.

At my institution, development of attributes starts with generalised statements that are then contextualised at faculty level, and if appropriate, down at the program level. In several of our faculties the process of articulation of graduate attributes has taken place outside of program development or review cycles.

The concept of ‘sustainable assessment’ was introduced by Boud (2000) to describe assessment that addresses “the immediate needs of certification or feedback to students on their current learning, but also contribute in some way to their prospective learning” (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 400). Boud and Falchikov argue that at the heart of graduate attributes lies the fundamental ability of the learner to make complex judgements about their own performance, for the learner is unlikely to be taking exams or writing academic essays after graduating. Rather, they “will be puzzling over what counts as good work and how they will be able to discern whether they are producing it.” (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 403.) I am using the term ‘sustainable assessment’ in this paper in Boud’s sense, as a cover for the sort of assessment activities that might be used in the development of graduate attributes where learner autonomy is a central focus.

An interesting implication about graduate attributes is that they haven’t, in general, been constructed to fit into existing programs, and therefore, these programs are likely to require strategies for developing and assessing the attributes that are not addressed in the existing structure. The strategies likely to be missing are the ones that engage the student more directly in assessment, ones that develop the ability to form complex judgements about performance.

Lastly, we note that external quality assurance processes, like the AUQA audits, are driving improvements in internal review processes. Reaccreditation cycles are generating demands for evidence that program-based claims are actually been delivered. Sooner or later, the gaps between existing teaching and assessment practices, and the graduate attribute claims will need to be closed.

### **A role for the local response**

In what follows, a familiar assessment activity—the academic essay—is adapted in a way that engages the student more directly. An essay task exhibits a characteristic range of problems and challenges. The adaptation along sustainable assessment lines addresses a number of these problems. The idea for this activity is taken straight from Rust et al. (2003) and is described here again so that the reader can see the link that I am making between the assessment activity, and the development of learner autonomy.

In our fictional second year subject there are 60 students. The single-topic essay (2000 words) is due in week 8 of the 14-week semester, and is worth 30%. Diligent students would start work in week 4, although many leave it to week 7. The essay activity was inherited, with the subject, from a recently retired colleague. Students were given the assessment criteria at the start of semester. The criteria were: critical thinking; quality of argument; number and quality of references; spelling, grammar & expression. The essays usually take two weeks to mark and feedback comments are written in the page margins. Many of the marked essays are never collected.

The two aspects of the essay process we will work on are students’ understanding of the assessment criteria, and of their feedback.

### **Understanding the criteria**

Students need to understand what they're being asked to do in an assessment task. This is communicated by the criteria. Our essay's criteria are inadequate. We need to rewrite and expand the criteria so that our students have a chance of understanding what we're asking for. Let us assume that we have done this. We now have something for students to engage with, and I propose an activity for which there is good research-based evidence of effectiveness.

Rust et al. (2003) report on a two-year project to develop student understanding of assessment criteria. Their conclusions are that students showed significant improvement in their ability to understand and apply the assessment criteria, and in their learning outcomes, and that "this improvement may last over time and be transferable, at least within similar contexts." The intervention entailed giving students two sample assignments with criteria and mark sheets, which they were asked to complete before attending an optional 90-minute workshop. During the workshop, students discussed their sample grading in small groups followed by tutor-led comparison between groups and explanation of each criterion. (Refer to paper for details.)

An activity like this should be well within reach of most teachers, and if outcomes are similar, of lasting benefit to students.

### **The feedback activity**

The role of feedback on performance to improve learning has been written about at length, most comprehensively in Black and Wiliam (1998). For feedback to be effective it has to be timely, it has to be understood, and it has to be applied. It should also be forward looking in that it should describe the level of performance attained and explain what needs to be done to reach the level desired. Feedback on uncollected essays is a waste of effort. Feedback received two weeks after essay completion is probably too far removed to be of much value. Few teachers can provide resubmission options for assessment, for understandable reasons.

I propose a stepped process that brings the feedback forward in the assessment cycle. Ask students to opt in to the feedback process. Those who opt out are not expected to attend the feedback sessions and will receive limited comments on their essay. For the students opting in we would schedule one or more peer-review sessions. For these sessions a feedback sheet is prepared and distributed to participants. The contents of the sheet is a series of questions about the big-picture components of the essay – is the structure clear? (introduction, question, evidence, interpretation, conclusions, references) Is the language of the essay appropriate? (colloquialisms, complete sentences, consistent case, etc) Are references provided and correctly cited? Is it easy to read? And so on. A chance to engage with samples as in Rust, et al. (2003) would be very useful. Students first self-assess their work, and then swap their incomplete essay with a peer and then carry out the same review. Students swap their draft with a peer and then attempt to apply their understanding of the questions to their peer's paper. The process of providing a peer with feedback develops the student's ability to apply the process to themselves. Students are then asked to address their peer's feedback (even if only to argue that they don't believe it was right, citing reasons why) for the next review session. The circulating tutor is also making quick written comments. Timely feedback, even if imperfect, is better than no feedback at all. Of course peer-reviewers aren't always going to get it right. Just like conventional

markers, and proof, surely, of the need for more practice at giving feedback. Final drafts are submitted with peer-review sheets. Students nominate which 2 aspects of the essay they want marker feedback on.

There are many questions raised and unanswered in this brief outline but observe that by the time the essay is submitted the students will have received and responded to feedback multiple times. The efficacy of the approach will depend on the quality of the feedback questions and the samples, the students' understanding of essay structure and other relevant points, and how much time they commit to the process.

## Conclusion

Reworking of an academic essay assessment activity along the lines described is worthwhile for three particular reasons. Improved feedback processes for the student are likely to lead to a richer understanding of what is expected and higher grades for the student. The approach utilised draws the student into the process of developing their ability to make complex judgements by comparing their own work with that of peers and through application of criteria to discern what has been achieved and what has not yet been achieved — a small example of Boud's sustainable assessment in practice. And finally, it is doing something about assessing an aspect of the graduate attributes. This opportunity for the teacher to develop a richer understanding of assessment's practice and purpose, will also contribute to the sea change required for the development of a whole-of-program approach that is capable of engaging students in the development of their abilities and become effective, autonomous learners beyond university.

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