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ENGAGING TERTIARY EDUCATORS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR ASSESSMENT LITERACY

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Abstract

Using assessment to inform teaching and to measure learning outcomes is of critical importance in higher education. However, many tertiary educators are not sufficiently knowledgeable or prepared to do this confidently. This paper suggests that tertiary educators could be given tools and encouraged to exert agency in their own assessment literacy development. It examines the application of one potential tool, the SALRubric (Edwards, 2017), which describes stages of development in ten dimensions of summative assessment literacy. The tool's structure and intent make it possible for the rubric to be modified to incorporate other content and context-dependent dimensions of assessment within a tertiary setting. A process through which appropriate dimensions could be identified is described so that the resulting co-constructed rubric could be used for both peer assessment and self-assessment by tertiary educators. Initial work using the SALRubric indicates that this has the potential to lead tertiary educators to an increased awareness of dimensions of assessment literacy and more active engagement in their teaching, thereby enhancing learning for their students.

Keywords

Assessment literacy; tertiary assessment; rubric; higher education

Using assessment to inform teaching and to measure learning outcomes is of critical importance in higher education. That being said, over the last ten years there have been shifts in the variety and purposes of assessment used in higher education institutions (Kilgour et al., 2020; Medland, 2016; Quesada et al., 2019). The move to focus on assessments which serve multiple purposes, the increasing use of standards based assessment instead of norm referenced tasks, and the introduction of innovative assessment involving digital technologies are just three examples of these shifts. Many universities, including my own, are exploring ways to assess student learning in ways that better support learning. This may lead, in our case, to a major reduction in the use of final examinations, for example. Additionally, there is a growing expectation that formative assessment practices become integrated into teaching in the tertiary sector (Carless, 2007; López-Pastor & Sicilia-Camacho, 2017).

Within the milieu of this changing assessment context, educators working in contemporary higher education are therefore facing increasing pressures to improve their assessment knowledge and capability in order to better assess students and support learning. Tertiary educators require increased levels of assessment literacy. Medland (2019) describes the difficulty in clearly defining assessment literacy, and notes that “the concept is still in its infancy in higher education and poorly understood” (p. 570). From a sociocultural perspective, assessment literacy is viewed as a social practice in which contextual and cultural influences interact and are acknowledged. Willis et al. (2013) describe it as follows:

Assessment literacy is a dynamic context dependent social practice that involves teachers articulating and negotiating classroom and cultural knowledges with one another and with learners, in the initiation, development and practice of assessment to achieve the learning goals of students. (p. 242)

It is important for tertiary educators to develop their assessment literacy, developing dispositions, capacities and shared understandings in order to make sense of and use assessment effectively.

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Literature shows the benefit of increasing assessment literacy, but currently there is little focus on the development of assessment literacy for tertiary educators.

Setting the scene

Traditionally, assessment in higher education has largely focussed on summative assessment. However, within the sector there are two competing drivers. Firstly, there is a concerning increase in accountability and surveillance, leading to distrust and the rise of an audit culture. Low trust environs tend to lead to people being less likely to take risks, or develop innovations in assessment that have potential. These contexts also tend to lead to minimal encouragement of flexible approaches to assessment (Carless, 2009). Secondly, there is a call for assessment in higher education to move to being learning-oriented, formative, flexible and responsive, alongside a global shift in the tertiary sector to focus on explicit standards and learning outcomes (Carless, 2007; O'Neill et al., 2020). Assessment for learning, defined as “any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students’ learning” (Black et al., 2004, p. 10), is now recognised as an important contributor to learning in higher education. Moreover, the role learners can play in assessment for learning and assessment practice from the outset is increasingly being acknowledged as valuable (Harvey et al., 2019; Kilgour et al., 2020; Quesada et al., 2019). Ongoing work continues on learner agency in higher education assessment, in which the positioning or orientations of both teachers and learners are being explored (Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020; Rajala & Kumpulainen, 2017). Consequently, tertiary assessment is reorienting, at least in part, to focus on promoting productive and effective learning (Boud, 2017).

Most academic and teaching staff in higher education are specialists in their own subject areas and have, at most, limited training in how to teach, with cursory attention paid to how to assess. They are more likely to be interested in content within their subject specialisation and are likely to have low levels of assessment literacy (Norton et al., 2013; Price et al., 2012). This raises a real challenge in the current tertiary environment and suggests that tertiary institutions and educators need to do something about increasing their assessment literacy levels. The challenge of implementing change, however, is not straightforward. As suggested, “effective change is embedded in its context and comes when those involved make it their own through use and adaptation to local histories and contexts” (Bamber et al., 2009, p. 2). This would imply that assessment literacy development involving educators in locally focussed initiatives could facilitate this change.

Promoting agency in the development of assessment literacy

Carless (2017) argues that the development of assessment literacy would better enable teachers in the tertiary sector to use assessment for learning in ways that reflect the needs of their students and their contexts. By its nature, assessment literacy is not static but is dynamic, indicating that educators are not at some point deemed as assessment literate, or having “got there”. Instead, their assessment literacy continues to develop and respond to changing contextual and cultural influences over time.

The use of a rubric

The development and use of a rubric is one social process that teachers in higher education can use to become more aware of and increase their assessment literacy. This process gives teachers agency as it actively involves the co-development of a context specific rubric. The rubric is then used to provide awareness of potential trajectories in their assessment literacy development, feedback on specific aspects of assessment literacy, and as a self-assessment and peer assessment tool.

Rubrics can be used as a professional practice tool to track developmental trajectories (e.g., Cendan et al., 2015; Edwards, 2017; Keister et al., 2012; Lasater, 2007; Lyon, 2013). They have been used for supporting assessment for learning for those in medical professions (Lasater, 2007) and by students in most levels of education. However, rubrics have been used less often as a tool for reflection in practice and self-regulation by those teaching in higher education. The SALRubric (Edwards, 2017) is an example of an analytic rubric developed to describe elements of summative assessment literacy. This

rubric was developed in New Zealand in the secondary schooling sector, with a focus on summative assessment. The SALRubric identified ten dimensions of summative assessment literacy that were particularly salient for secondary science teachers:

- Knowledge of assessment:
Ability to define assessment,
Knowledge of purposes of summative assessment,
Knowledge of what to assess,
Knowledge of strategies and design,
Knowledge of assessment interpretation.
- Understanding the context for assessment:
NCEA assessment,
Preparing students for standards-based assessment,
Using summative assessment formatively.
- Recognising the impact of assessment:
Understanding assessment consequences,
Fairness.

(Edwards, 2017)

For each dimension, descriptors were developed for five levels of expertise, from novice to expert. Secondary teachers were able to score themselves or be scored against this rubric over time to provide an indication of their assessment literacy development.

The SALRubric was utilised in a recent trial, in which a group of university lecturers from a range of subject areas were engaged in a facilitated discussion about assessment literacy. After they articulated their assessment knowledge and the challenges they faced when assessing student work, they were given the SALRubric as a context specific rubric for some dimensions of assessment literacy. The SALRubric was found to be useful as a ‘starter rubric’ to raise awareness about assessment literacy with academic and teaching staff. The university lecturers were initially asked to read the descriptors and to self-assess using the rubric, then to discuss their ratings with a colleague. This initial task introduced them to a new tool and to the concept of assessment literacy as a progression of expertise. It also raised awareness about elements of assessment literacy, some of which they had not considered before. A self-assessment exercise is non-threatening as it is not a public event, and university lecturers are able to consider their own practice in very real terms.

Following the initial exposure to ideas of assessment literacy through the use of the SALRubric, groups of staff then considered the relevance of this rubric to their contexts, and began to engage in a process where they identified other dimensions that were also relevant in a tertiary setting (e.g., a dimension on providing useful student feedback was suggested). This co-designing process provided a means for teacher agency as they started to develop dimensions for a context specific rubric for themselves. This led on to their consideration of levels of expertise from novice to mastery for these dimensions. Working together as a group enables a shared understanding to be built by group members. Over time, a context-specific purpose-built rubric can be co-constructed by academic and teaching staff. Descriptors that specify knowledge and skills relevant to the tertiary setting can be refined. This ‘home grown’ rubric may then be a useful and accessible tool for self and peer assessment and be used as a tool which may enhance self-regulated learning for those assessing at a tertiary level.

Looking back and moving forward

It has been established that tertiary educators require ongoing development in their assessment literacy, but what this consists of is currently ill-defined for the sector, partly because of the contextual differences that exist between various institutions and jurisdictions. It has been observed that too little attention is paid to the role of assessment by those who design and teach in tertiary programmes and that there are hindrances in the development of assessment literacy and professionalism (Glofcheski, 2017; Norton et al., 2019). Although summative assessment is a powerful imperative within the tertiary sector, increasingly voices are calling for an increase in the breadth, depth and ownership of assessment

for learning practices within a more transparent assessment system (Carless, 2017), and this requires a greater level of assessment literacy from those teaching in higher education.

A focus on the benefits and development of assessment literacy, rather than on accountability or measurement, is more likely to engage tertiary educators, particularly if they have agency in the process. As has been illustrated in the description of the pilot above, educators can be given agency through involvement in the development of a rubric, in this case by using the SALRubric as a ‘starter rubric’ from which to identify and develop dimensions that are particularly salient for their context. Through this process of active engagement there is likely to be better buy-in to the eventual use of the “home grown” rubric. The social element of articulating and negotiating classroom and cultural knowledges with one another through this process helps educators view assessment literacy development as a collaborative social practice rather than simply as garnering a set of skills.

A rubric designed by and for tertiary educators has potential for raising awareness and enhancing both shorter term assessment performance as well providing a tool that can be used in tertiary educators’ self-regulation of learning. The benefits of this joint enterprise is that all involved develop a deeper understanding of the criteria and levels for the dimensions they are considering (e.g., Kocakulah, 2010). Its use for self and peer assessment is an immediate application, and the benefits of these strategies are well documented (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam & Thompson, 2008). However, there is currently a lack of evidence that rubrics are being used for developmental purposes by tertiary educators (i.e., they use rubrics when assessing their students but not for assessing themselves). Some use of rubrics to trace development and trajectories have been published in medical professions (e.g. Cendan et al. 2015, Lasater, 2007), but beyond this the evidence is scarce.

This paper promotes innovation through the development of rubrics that educators working in higher education can use to increase levels of assessment literacy. Such development allows educators to be agentic in their assessment literacy development in order to better meet the needs of their students. My contention is that tertiary educators who are likely to have well-honed research skills in their area of expertise as well as a level of critical thought are well placed to take agency in this important area of their development as an educator. There is a wealth of literature which focusses on assessment for learning as well as innovative summative assessment, and this is available to further inform the work in which these educators engage. The social nature of the engagement is important to develop a shared and deeper understanding of what assessment literacy entails. This avenue for actively involving tertiary educators in their own assessment literacy development has great potential. Initial work using the SALRubric indicates that this may lead to an increased awareness of dimensions of assessment literacy as well as more active engagement in their teaching, thereby enhancing learning for their students.

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