

Exploring 'assessment literacy' and its use value in practice

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A keynote in three movements:

- 1. An exploration of the complexity and challenge of assessment in HE***
- 2. An examination of assessment literacy and its potential to address some of these challenges***
- 3. An exploration of some of the practical issues in the development of assessment literacy***



The complexity of assessment in HE

- ❑ Assessment as ‘the deliberate gathering of evidence of learning’ (Stobart, 2008, p.5) has become increasingly complex (Bloxham and Boyd 2007; Gilbert 2012).
- ❑ A diversity of purposes:
 - Capturing student time and attention
 - Generating learning activity
 - Providing feedback
 - Helping students to internalize the discipline’s standards
 - Testing: making judgements for award making processes with a strong relationship between numbers, targets and league tables.
 - Quality assurance: evidence of appropriateness of standards.

(Gardner 2012; Stobart, 2008; Gibbs 1999;)

A challenging context

□ Assessment practice in HE is under intense and often contradictory pressures:

- Massification and diversification
- Marketisation and commodification
- Ranking and accountability
- Fragmentation and standardisation
- Student as consumer and the importance of ‘satisfaction’



(Bloxham and Boyd, 2012; Crossouard 2010; O’Byrne and Bond, 2014)

The position we find ourselves in

- ❑ Need to meet stakeholder expectations
- ❑ High impact of satisfaction surveys, league tables etc. (with generally low scores for assessment and feedback scales).
- ❑ Emphasis on student voice
- ❑ Students largely in a passive role EXCEPT as evaluators



Question

Are students equipped to be effective evaluators of assessment and feedback practice?



Student satisfaction

Student satisfaction (and thereby meeting student expectations) matters more than ever within an increasingly competitive and commercial HE sector (Arambewela and Hall, 2013; O'Donovan, 2017)

To attract and retain students 'universities are compelled to pursue market orientation strategies placing greater emphasis on meeting student expectations' (Arambewela and Hall, 2013, p. 972)

However, student satisfaction is not always a good indicator of educational quality (Gibbs, 2010).

Many educational theorists argue that learning is likely to be uncomfortable at times as learner's meaning schemes are disrupted within a cycle of change and development (see for instance Kegan 1982, p. 8; Baxter Magolda 1992).

Student as evaluators

Epistemic assumptions influence students expectations and perspectives on the quality of learning teaching and assessment processes (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Chan 2003; Hofer 2004; Lucas & Meyer 2005; Cano 2005, O'Donovan, 2017)

Such notions of quality not only affect student achievement but also their satisfaction with learning, teaching and assessment (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Chan, 2003; Hofer, 2004; Lucas and Meyer, 2005) and frequently find expression in student satisfaction surveys.

Sadler (1989, 2009) suggests that an indispensable condition for students to improve their academic performance is to for them to hold the same conceptions of quality as held by their tutors.

The starting point – first year beliefs

A good teacher knows lots of 'right answers' and can:

- 1. Make things simple*
- 2. Help students memorise key points in interesting ways*

Different views between experts are due to misinformation or misunderstanding

Good teaching is preparation for assessment which is about measurement and should be FAIR.

Knowledge is certain and uncontested

There are 'correct answers' and 'key points' that students must memorise

The teacher should know everything – authority dependence

Discussion with peers can be both muddling and time wasting

(O'Donovan, 2010)



But, they're only first years...



Yet many research findings indicate a declining use of deep approaches to study as students' progress through their degree programmes (Gow and Kember, 1990; Zhang and Watkins, 2001; Wise et al., 2004).

Almost despairingly, Gow and Kember (1990) note that it can almost be seen as a brilliant achievement if students' deep approach scores do *not* decline.

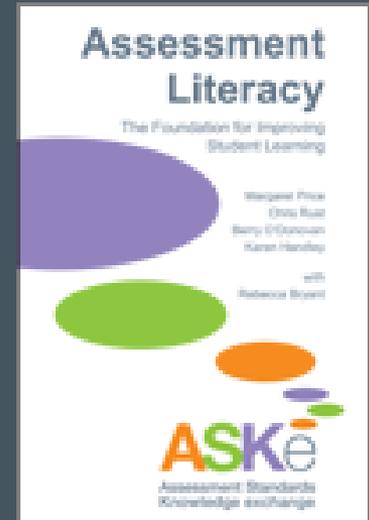


Assessment literacy



Assessment literacy: essential skill or just another fad?

- ❑ appreciation of assessment's relationship to learning;
- ❑ conceptual understanding of assessment
- ❑ Understanding the nature, meaning and level of assessment criteria and standards;
- ❑ skills in self- and peer assessment;
- ❑ familiarity with technical approaches to assessment
- ❑ possession of the ability to select and apply appropriate approaches and techniques to assessed tasks



(Price et al, 2012)

What does assessment literacy involve?

Understanding:

- Relationship between assessment and learning
- Different purposes of assessment
- Standards used in assessment
- Assessment skills
- Assessment methods
- Discussions about assessment within the learning community



What can we do to develop AL?

The intentional development of assessment literacy

1. At programme level
2. At module level
 - Pre-assessment
 - Assessment activity
 - Post assessment (Feedback)
3. Beyond the programme



1. Take a programme view

- Staff teams *require* a programme view
 - Where there is a greater sense of the holistic programme, students are more likely to achieve the learning outcomes than students on programmes with a more fragmented sense of the programme.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SsVWloTKko>
- Importance of interaction and participation in learning communities

(Havnes, 2007)

(Astin, 1993; Gibbs, 2007)

However, there is a fundamental challenge

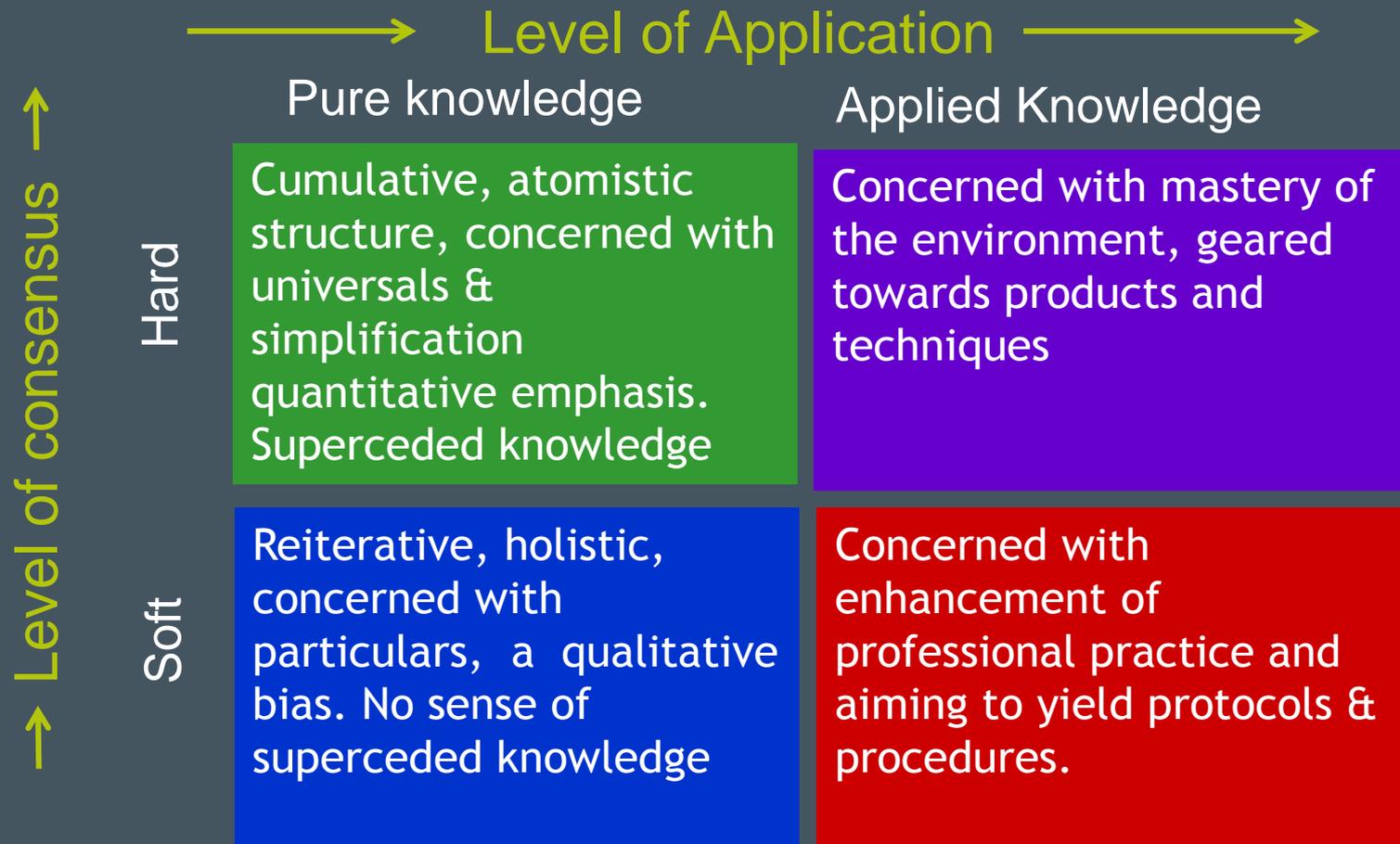
Disciplines are seen as clusters of research methods, sets of problems or practices, or as bodies of knowledge brought together by any of these (Lattuca, 2001)

However, many course seeking high levels of employability tend to be multidisciplinary.

Business and Management:-
“A mongrel of a discipline”
(Hurst, 2013)



With stark subject differences



Particularly in modular contexts

Collection vs. Integrated courses

Collection type where the individual disciplinary components remain insulated from each other

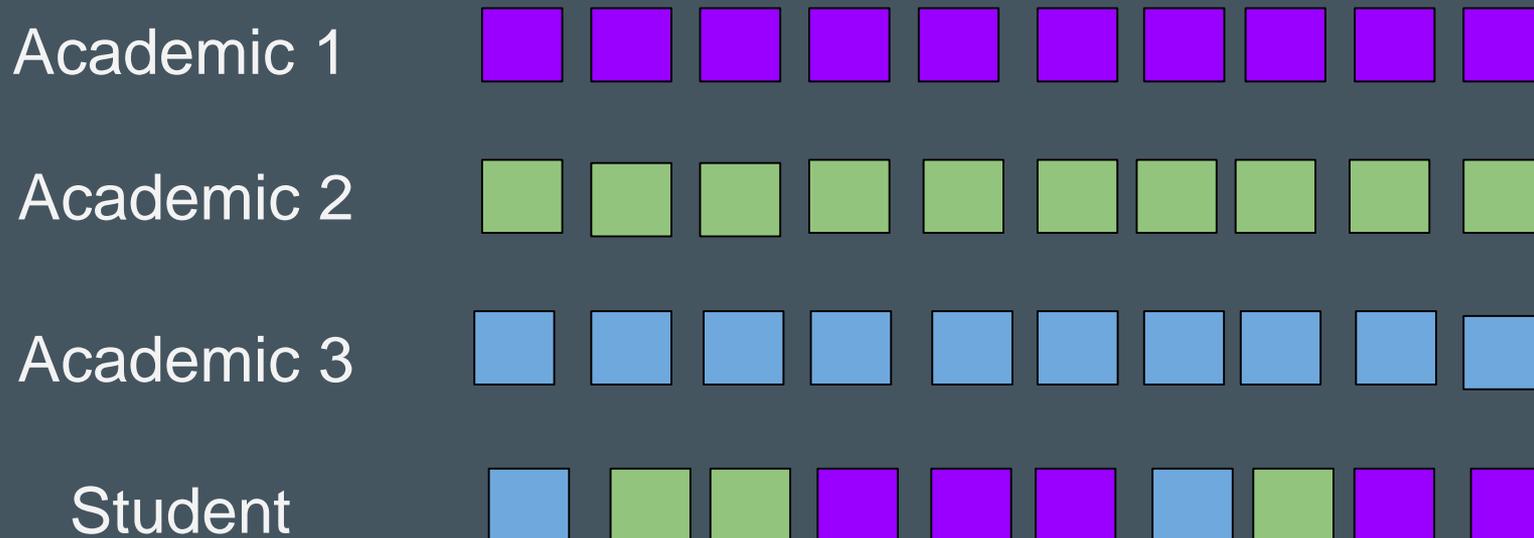
Integrated type where different disciplinary components are brought together in consideration of multidisciplinary problems



(Bernstein, 1996)

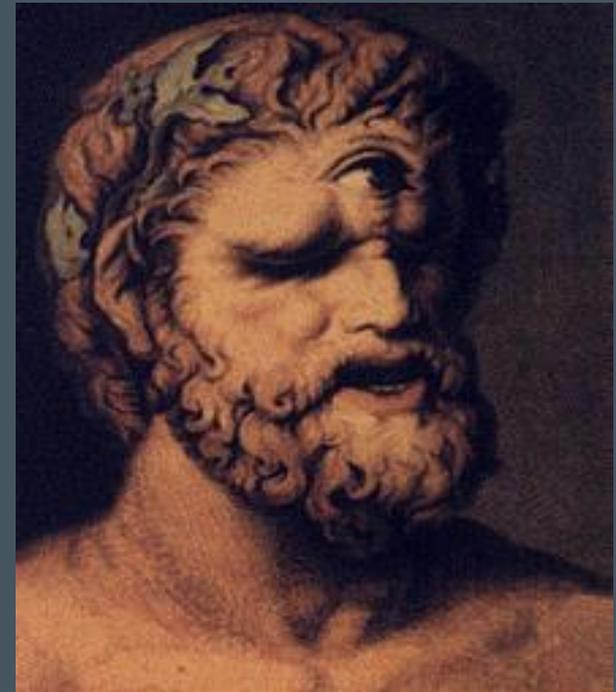
The Student Experience

We tend to organise into disciplinary departments/clusters (particularly for research) so our experience is normally more uniform than that of the student LTA experience.



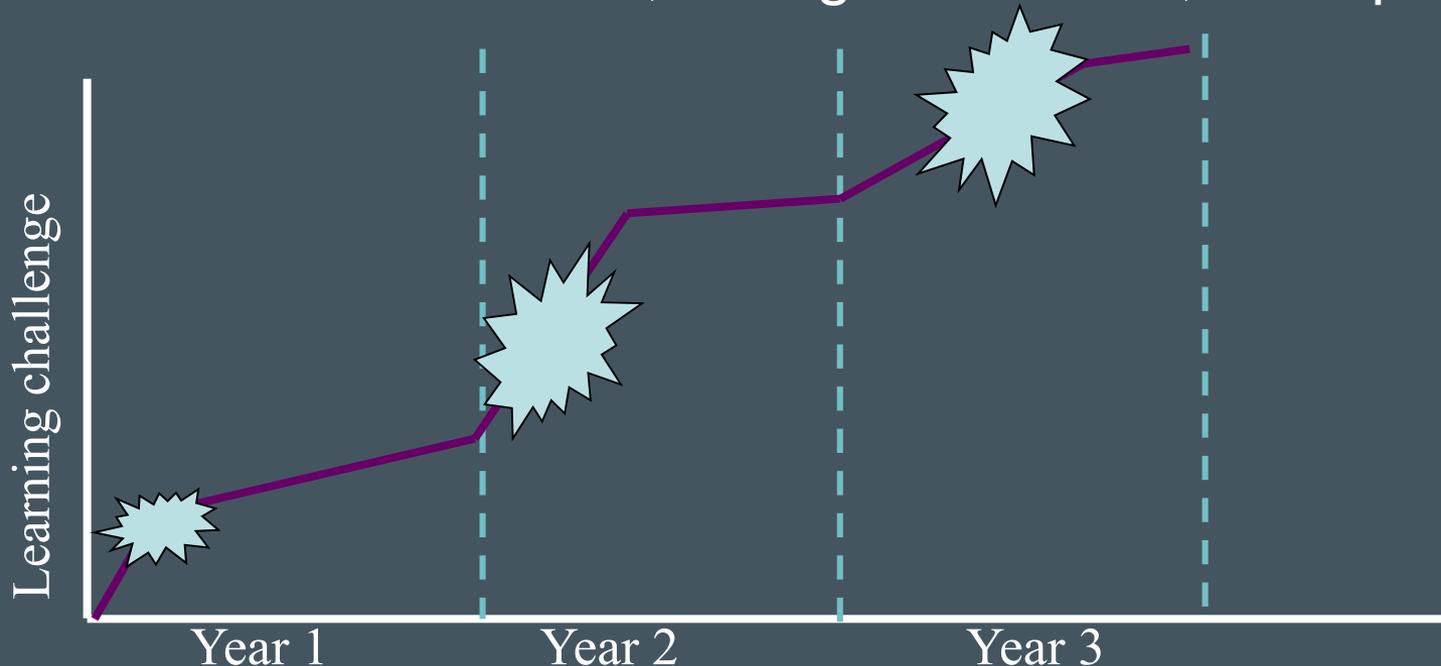
Programme Assessment Strategies

- ❑ We generally need to accept that true programme coherence may not be possible or even desirable
- ❑ Seek ways to highlight variation as legitimate, *even valuable*
- ❑ Be more explicit about the epistemic assumptions in play within our units of study particularly where there are radical changes in epistemic assumptions



Programme assessment strategies

- Focus on the programme ‘what is happening here?’
- Understanding where disciplinary / subject expectations radically change.
- Formative feedback, dialogic feedback, exemplars



Programme assessment strategies

Reduce variation in assessment tasks

Variety in assessment is not *always* a good thing

“It is clear how disconcerting students find a large range of assessment activities. It is far better to limit these so students get better at using the feedback to improve performance.” (Gibbs, 2011)

Some skills, literacies, conceptual understandings are ‘slowly learnt’ and need rehearsal throughout a programme” (Yorke, 2004)

Developing assessment literacy: pre-assessment

Students need to

- know how to negotiate the assignment task
- understand expectations
- develop their self-efficacy to enable a sense of joint responsibility, ultimately independence

Communicate assessment standards and criteria

A key issue in assessment is that students often do not understand what is a better piece of work and do not understand what is being asked of them particularly in terms of standards and criteria.

(O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2001)

Assessment judgements rely on local, contextualised interpretations of quality underpinned by tacit understanding of 'quality' shared by members of an assessment community

(Knight, 2006)

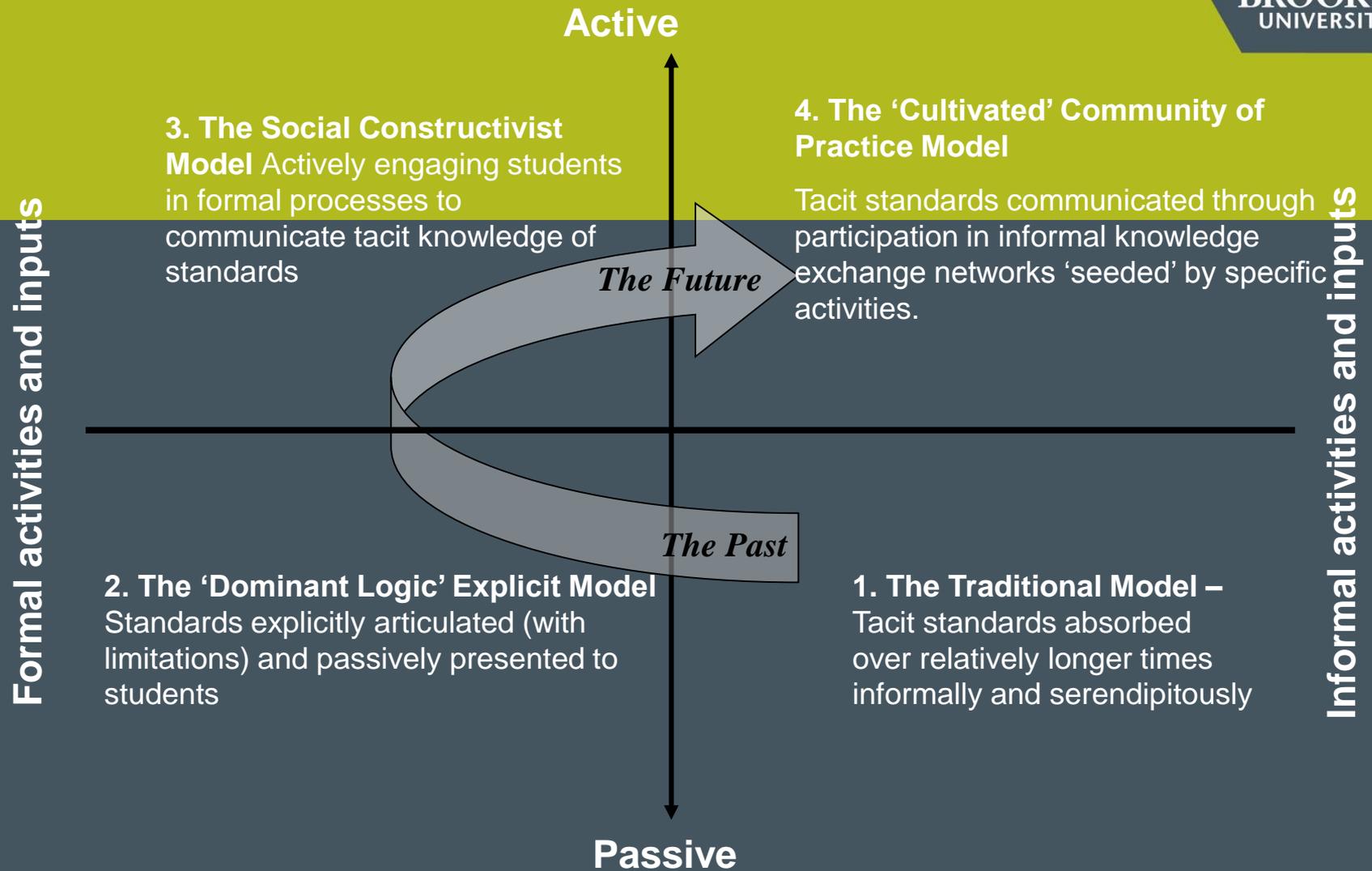
Assessment standards and criteria are challenging to communicate

Assessors apply different interpretations of key words and phrases within written 'standards' (Saunders and Davis 1998; Ecclestone, 2001, Webster et al., 2000)

“Standards are not conceptualised as having an existence or relevance separately from the context of the teaching team, the course as it was taught and its current students” (Sadler 2005 p190)

Greater precision is inherently self defeating (O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2004)

Written specifications cannot be applied mechanistically, judgement is required (Bloxham 2009)



Developing assessment literacy: assessment activity

Students must learn to and identify their performance gap for themselves

'in the act of production itself' (Sadler, 1989, p121).

Self assessment

Drafting and redrafting

Peer review

Peer assessment

Developing assessment literacy post assessment: Feedback

1. Put yourself out of a job – nurture self/peer assessment and feedback (Carless and Boud, 2018)
2. Be clear about the purpose of the feedback i.e. what should students expect to get from it in particular instances (Price et al., 2010)
3. Ensure students had sufficient support in understanding criteria and standards prior to assessment in order to relate to the feedback provided (Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003)
4. Use exemplars (Rust et al., 2003; Price et al., 2011)
5. Require students to use generic feedback to self assess against generic/cohort feedback (O'Donovan, et al., 2016)

Feedback contd.

5. Model the process of feeding forward for the students, e.g. require students to demonstrate how they have used feedback in subsequent work (Price et al., 2011)
6. Encourage students to appreciate feedback (Carless and Boud, 2018) including how much time you have taken to create it!
7. Be mindful of the emotional affect that feedback can generate (Carless and Boud, 2018).

Developing assessment literacy beyond the programme

Engage students in the academic community (O'Donovan, Price and Rust, 2008), For example:

- ❑ Ensure students are seriously included in discussions about the complexity of assessment e.g. in programme committees, student forums etc.
- ❑ Encourage students to be members of periodic review panels (considering evidence of assessment strategy and standards).
- ❑ Set up schemes for 'senior' students to support 'junior' students.

Beyond the programme

Change *our* discourse from that of transactional 'use value', the 'gym' analogy is still relevant, educational should be transformational but it takes both informed students and staff to make it so.



Concluding thoughts

Assessment literacy:

- Supports student learning and performance,
- Acknowledges role of professional judgement
- Nudges change in culture of HE,
(rules and regs, role of communities, allocation of resources, professionalisation of teachers).
- Allows students to go beyond rating the satisfaction with assessment and feedback 'service' to evaluating the effect on their learning.

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