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Students' experience of assessment: what don't we know?

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It is commonly held that students' experience of assessment exercises a very strong influence on how they go about learning. Three sociologically-based studies conducted between the mid 60s and early 70s are frequently cited to support this belief. However, these studies have serious limitations arising from their particular contexts, small sample sizes, and research methods used. At the same time, studies within the student approaches to learning tradition have failed to support the possibility of improving approaches to learning simply by changing assessment. It seems that we may know less about assessment and its effect on student learning than is commonly thought. In light of this, an agenda for research into assessment and learning address, inter alia, a series of questions based on a clear understanding of past work and focused on contemporary students' experience of assessment and its influence on their study.

Keywords: assessment, learning, research

Introduction

The belief that assessment drives students' learning is widespread, long standing, and deeply held in higher education circles. Students' experience of assessment has been the focus of many important and rightly influential studies that leave no doubt about the centrality of assessment in students' lives. However, the empirical basis of this belief is rarely articulated and, moreover, important research is often misrepresented in the literature.

This short paper seeks to reopen debate about the role of assessment in student learning through a reconsideration of three pivotal studies. It will be argued that these studies are commonly misunderstood, that generalisations drawn from them are often not warranted, and that new research is required to determine the extent to which, and in what ways, students' experience of assessment influences their patterns of and approaches to study.

Three classic studies, published within 6 years of each other, are at the heart of this exploration: Becker, Geer and Hughes' *Making the Grade: The Academic Side of College Life* (1968; republished in 1995); Snyder's *The Hidden Curriculum* (1971); and Miller and Parlett's *Up to the Mark: A Study of the Examination Game* (1974).

In this paper:

1. the widespread use of these works will be noted;
2. each study will be summarised according to its context, methodology, sample, findings and generalisability;
3. related research in the 'student approaches to learning' tradition will be noted; and
4. a new research agenda to explore contemporary student experience of assessment will be proposed.

The ubiquity of the works

These three works have been widely cited since their respective publications, and the central ideas have been acknowledged in numerous influential publications:

- Most key texts on assessment in higher education published in the UK make reference to one or more of these works: Rowntree's *Assessing Students: How Shall we Know Them* (Rowntree, 1987); Ramsden's *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* (Ramsden, 1993); Brown and Knight's *Assessing Learners in Higher Education* (Brown & Knight, 1994); *The Student Assessment Handbook* (Dunn et al., 2004); and Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle's *The Experience of Learning* (1997) are simply examples.
- They have been frequently and consistently cited since their publication. For example, a 'cited reference' search of the leading journals in the ISI Web of Knowledge data base listed 223 citations of *Making the Grade* spreads more or less evenly across the past three decades.
- After at least 35 years, they continue to be cited as frequently as ever. The following, again, are merely some recent examples of work referring to one or more of these works: Orrell (2006); Hawe (2007); Kvale (2007); Dochy and colleagues (2007); Nespor (2007); Titus (2008); and Etten et al. (2008).

A short summary of the three works

But what do these works have to say? Here each will be briefly summarised, in note form, in the order of their publication.

Making the Grade (1968)

Author: Becker, Geer and Hughes were sociologists with well established reputations and had previously authored an influential study of medical education (*Men in White Coats*).

Context: The University of Kansas, 1969-1961, with its 7004 residential undergraduates across seven professional schools and a liberal arts school.

Sample: Not specified, but apparently across all schools.

Finding: 'The GPA perspective' – grades as the major institutionalized valuable of the campus, with only a small minority of students valuing learning for its own sake.

Limitation: The research method assumed "collective actions of a relatively homogenous group" (p.5) and therefore tended towards a single outcome. Variation, which we now know is prevalent in student experience, was unlikely to be detected.

Generalisability: The authors are adamant that this perspective represents an *institutionalization* process characteristic of the particular university studied and that they would not expect all campuses to be like it. Moreover, they state that "on a campus where something other than grades was the major institutionalized form of value, we would not expect the GPA perspective to exist at all" (p.122).

Let us be clear ... about what we mean. We do not mean that all students invariably undertake the actions we have described, or that students never have any other motive than getting good grades. We particularly do not mean that the perspective is the only possible way for students to deal with the academic side of campus life. (p.121)

The Hidden Curriculum (1971)

Author: Snyder was a psychiatrist and Dean of Institute Relations at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Context: MIT. A five-year 'study' presumably based on observations from the mid 1960s. MIT operated on 'severe selectivity' so students were highly able and highly motivated, with a demanding curriculum, work overload, and apparent reward for 'measured achievement'. The author states that he also considered students at Wellesley College, a small (2000 student) elite (top 5% of students) institution for women.

Sample: First year students. 75% of the population were engineering or science students. A 'random' sample of 54 was interviewed – no details of the sample are provided. Five students were selected to represent the range of responses – 4 were outstandingly successful, one dropped out. No information is provided regarding Wellesley students

Method: No details of the research method are provided, other than it involved (a) interviews of the MIT students and (b) a reliance on the author's 10-year old memories of students at Wellesley College.

Findings: 'The hidden curriculum': while assessment tasks are stated explicitly, there is a parallel set of expectations based on the social context and the assumptions and expectations of both teachers and students. "Each student figures out what is actually expected as opposed to what is formally required" (p.9) and adapts their studying accordingly.

Limitations: The sample is dominated by male engineering and science students at an elite institution characterised by an expectation of high achievement. The research method is not specified, it relies in part on 10-year old memory, and, somewhat extraordinarily, the only data presented is drawn from a sample of five students.

Generalisability: While the notion of the 'hidden curriculum' has resonated strongly with higher education teachers, it is difficult to justify any generalisation of this study's findings to any wider population of students.

Up to the Mark: A Study of the Examination Game (1974)

Authors: An experimental psychologist and an educational researcher.

Context: University of Edinburgh Law Faculty, final year honours students preparing for their final examination. Small class (34) with close contact between staff and students. An elite and highly selective university. The study covered four aspects of assessment. The relevant section of the report constitutes 22 of its 128 pages.

Sample: 30-31 final year law students.

Method: Illuminative, "broadly in the symbolic interactionist tradition" and influenced by Becker et al and Snyder. Interviews, questionnaires, observations, document analysis. A rigorous and well documented method.

Findings: This study introduced the term 'cue-consciousness' as an extension of the notion of 'the hidden curriculum'. Five (out of 30) were cue –seekers; 11 were cue-conscious', 14 were cue-deaf.

Limitations: A small group of elite students at an elite university, in a single discipline, studying under highly personalised conditions, and preparing for a particularly intensive form of high stakes exam.

Generalisability: The authors note that each department within the university is different in terms of assessment, and that universities differ from each other, yet claim that the issues they address are common. The sample is narrow and small, and the number of 'cue-seekers' (5) is dangerously so for anyone trying to generalise about cue-seeking behaviour beyond the sample studied. While the largest number of the sample were cue-deaf, this study is often cited to support the claim that students tend to be cue-seekers or cue-conscious.

Related research

The Formative Assessment in Science Teaching (FAST) Project in the UK, the paper on 'Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004-05) which provides the conceptual framework to that project, and the Assessment Experience Questionnaire developed from that framework, represent an attempt, amongst other things, to operationalise the concepts of the hidden curriculum and cue-consciousness in wide-scale research across universities. Initial testing of the AEQ (Dunbar-Goddett, Gibbs, Law & Rust, 2006; Gibbs, 2006) supports the proposition that assessment does influence students' distribution of effort and their coverage of the syllabus, though the strength of this influence and whether it applies to some students more than to others is unclear. One research study, using a Chinese version of the AEQ and involving 108 education students in Hong Kong produced contradictory findings, leaving it unclear whether students tended to believe that assessment allowed them to be selective in what they studied or required them to cover the entire syllabus (Joughin, 2006). While the AEQ-based research and associated studies are still embryonic and not widely reported, they do promise to offer useful insights into how students' patterns and foci of study develop in light of their assessment. At present, however, findings are equivocal and do not permit us to make blanket statements – the influence of assessment on students' study patterns and foci may well vary significantly from student to student.

Another strand of research and literature, located within the student approaches to learning tradition and its predecessors, has sought to establish the influence of assessment types on students' tendencies to adopt either surface or deep approaches to learning. Thus Nightingale and colleagues: "student learning research has repeatedly demonstrated the impact of assessment on students' approaches to learning" (Nightingale & O'Neil, quoted by Nightingale et al., 1996, p. 6), while numerous authors have cited with approval Elton and Laurillard's aphorism that "the quickest way to change student learning is to change the assessment system" (Elton & Laurillard, 1979, p. 100). Space does not permit even a brief summary of the research in this area. The sobering conclusion of Marton & Säljö (and echoed more recently by Struyven and colleagues, 2006) must suffice:

It is obviously quite easy to induce a surface approach and enhance the tendency to take a reproductive attitude when learning from texts. However, when attempting to induce a deep approach the difficulties seem quite profound.
(Marton & Säljö, 1997, p. 53)

A new research agenda?

The conviction that assessment exerts a strong, even determinative, influence on our students' learning continues to be widely, perhaps even universally, held by teachers in higher education. The empirical research noted in this paper and which is often used by educational writers to support this conviction, does not do so unequivocally. The limitations of this research, and the contrasts between the higher education contexts of the late 2000s in which we now teach and our students learn, and that of late 1960s when the research reported here began, suggests that a renewed research effort is required.

Replication of the classic studies is not in order. They emerged from a particular research paradigm, were time- and resource-intensive, and led to conclusions that were of limited applicability beyond their immediate contexts. A new research agenda would need to consider

at least the following questions:

1. What does a careful reading of research to date tell us about the influence of assessment on learning? A thorough meta-analysis of the research in higher education, akin to the pivotal survey of Black and William (1998) which focused largely, but not exclusively, on the school sector, would do much to establish a stable foundation for further research by clearly establishing what we can be confident about, where the evidence is equivocal, and what commonly held beliefs about assessment and learning simply lack empirical support.
2. What do we as teachers now believe about the influence of assessment on learning? While the literature is replete with authors' assertions about assessment and learning, few studies have sought to examine what teachers believe about this relationship, thus leaving a large pool of experience and wisdom untapped.
3. How do contemporary students perceive the role of assessment in their lives as students? What variation is present in these perceptions? Of course, these are the questions of the three classic studies and, while long-term nature of these studies and their sociological frameworks make it unlikely that they could be replicated, these questions remain central to our understanding of, and efforts to enhance, students' experience of learning. Small scale qualitative studies focused on how students experience the influence of assessment on their study, preferably from a range of research perspectives and utilising different methodologies, are essential to developing our understanding. Further refinement and application of the Assessment Experience Questionnaire may offer the best prospect for large-scale quantitative studies across contrasting contexts.
4. Can 'hidden curricula' be made explicit? If so, how can teacher expectations and student perceptions of assessment tasks be brought into alignment? Of course, these are pedagogical rather than research questions, and they assume that 'the hidden curriculum' is a contemporary phenomenon. If this assumption is correct, however, these are the questions that drive the search for understanding inherent in all of the questions above.

In pursuing these and related questions, the need for researchers to carefully and critically read the primary reports of past research should now go without saying.

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