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Keys to transforming assessment at institutional level: selected debates from AHE2016

Panel review session
Selected presentations from AHE Seminar, Manchester, UK, 30 June 2016

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Transforming Assessment and Feedback in Higher Education on a wider scale: the challenge of change at institutional level

Panel review session 13 July 2016
Selected presentations from AHE Seminar Manchester, UK, 30 June 2016

AHE
Leading Assessment for Learning in Higher Education
CENTRAL CHALLENGES IN TRANSFORMING ASSESSMENT AT DEPARTMENTAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

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AHE
Leading Assessment for Learning in Higher Education
Transforming Assessment and Feedback in Higher Education on a wider scale: the challenge of change at institutional level

Today’s presenters

1. **Sally Brown** (Leeds Beckett University) & **Kay Sambell** (Northumbria University): 'Changing practice on feedback at an institutional level'

2. **Amanda Sykes** (University of Glasgow) & **David Morrison** (Plymouth University): 'Half as Much but Twice as Good: Constructing Effective Written Feedback in Any Subject'

3. **Juliet Williams** (University of Winchester): 'Changing colours: what happens when you make enhancement an imperative?’
Changing feedback practice at an institutional level

Kay Sambell and Sally Brown
Rationale

• Concentrating on giving students detailed and developmental feedback is the single most useful thing we can do for our students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may not understand the rules of the HE game (Brown, 2015).

• As researchers who have worked to change assessment practices at an institutional level at Northumbria (Sambell and Brown), Leeds Beckett (Brown) and Anglia Ruskin (Brown, working with Margaret Price and Sharon Waller on ARU's major assessment improvement strategy), we argue that changing feedback at an institutional level is possible if such change is approached strategically, supported by evidence-based scholarship and led with passion and persuasiveness.

• Building on our almost 20 years of work together, initially on the Impact of Assessment Project (Sambell et al, 1997), which included work on innovative feedback mechanisms, we will in this short session outline our strategies to build good practice across whole universities, and how we can review impact in the short, medium and long term.
Approaches to changing feedback practice at 3 HEIs

1. The **University of Northumbria**, which hosted the HEFCE-funded Assessment for Learning (AfL) CETL from 2005-2010;

2. **Leeds Met (now Beckett) University** where Sally was PVC from 2005-2010;

3. **Anglia Ruskin University**, where a project (now in its 3rd year) led by Sharon Waller & Erica Morris (with consultants Sally Brown and Margaret Price) aims to transform feedback as a key locus for improvement.
1. The Northumbria CETL: background

• CETL Funding
  – Northumbria awarded £1.3 million capital and £500,000 recurrent funding for 5 years, prior expertise key

• CETL AfL
  – cross-disciplinary focus, (led by Liz McDowell and Kay Sambell; core team of 5 subject specialists)
  – Very close links with/support from senior managers, QA & QE
  – Feedback seen as part of holistic model of AfL (Sambell et al, 2013)
NU activities and impact

• Developed staff and student assessment literacy/expertise
  – E.g. 100+ Associates; 3 NTFs; 7 internal promotions; student AfL officers

• Promoted engagement with AfL across NU
  – Ran events and development activities (e.g. ‘Focus on Feedback’ series; reading group); funded joint projects; created support materials for staff e.g. Red Guides, student-authored publications (e.g. The F Word); CPD module

• Wider dissemination and conceptual development
  – E.g. Northumbria/EARLI Assessment conferences, 2007, 2010; practitioner focused publications on revisioning feedback e.g. Sambell 2011, 2013; Sambell & Graham, 2009

• Research and development programme
  – E.g. Quantified impact on students (McDowell et al, 2011 ); investigated impact on Associates (Reimann & Wilson, 2012);
2. Transforming feedback practice at Leeds Met (now Beckett)

- PVC-led changes to the university’s Assessment, Learning and Teaching strategy made return of feedback within 3 working weeks for continuing students mandatory;
- Compliance was tightly monitored by Associate deans (ALT) in each faculty;
- Emphasis was placed on improving the quality of feedback using evidence-based scholarship and encouraging students to make good use of it.
Impact of changes at Leeds Met

• Monitoring data suggested that 80%+ staff returned feedback within the required 3 weeks;
• **Student satisfaction** as demonstrated in module evaluations and NSS improved significantly;
• The culture of the university changed to some extent, with many more *conversations, led by Teaching Fellows*, about the importance of feedback in fostering engagement and success;
• The work continues led by Prof Ruth Pickford.
3. The ARU Transforming Assessment project

- Based on the work of the HEA ‘Marked improvement’ project on transforming assessment in Higher Education;
- ARU was not one of the 8 HEIs supported in the HEA pilot, but chose to use 2 consultants who had worked on it to build on the framework at ARU;
- Activities included a whole-HEI conference, themed workshops, Faculty away-days and targeted course team development;
- The work was seen as an ongoing project over several years.
Impact and outcomes of the ongoing ARU project

- **Student comments** on feedback and assessment has **significantly improved** (up more than 15 points in NSS!);

- Within each faculty, **assessment conversations** are now common and there is increased commitment to improving feedback;

- The Anglia Assessment **Album of resources** is in the process of being built for ongoing support.

- The university continues to invest in the project (See paper by Sharon Waller and Erica Morris at SEDA May 2016 conference).
How to develop staff feedback literacy?

• Assessment literacy is emerging as a concept for describing student (and staff) **familiarity with the language and process of assessment**; Price *et al.* (2012)
  – The term ‘literacy’ conveys a sense of operating with fluency, confidence and competence within the identified domain

• How to enhance staff feedback literacy?

• Especially conceptual shift to **developmental** feedback?
To become literate requires.....

• Access to resources/new ideas/conceptual models/expertise?
  – People (as change agents/leaders/champions)?

• Time on task, dialogue and participation
  – Events? (enabling extended dialogue/shared ideas)
    • Away days
    • Conferences
    • Showcases
So what generic learning points would we propose?

- **Slow transformative development** has more impact than attempts at quick fixes;
- Having money to support activities and personnel is important, but large amounts of cash doesn’t necessarily lead to major long-term impact;
- Long-term **ownership by senior managers** is essential for sustainability.
- To have **credibility**, activities need to be based on **evidence-based scholarship**;
- **Committed, passionate and convincing change agents** achieve more than top-down directives;
Resources?

- ESCalate
- Books
- Gibbs’ guide
- Principles from feedback projects
  - e.g. Nicol (2006),
  - Gibbs and Simpson (2006)
Websites?

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References


Brown, S. (2011) Bringing about positive change in higher education; a case study *Quality Assurance in Education* Vol 19 No 3 p195-207 Emerald Bingley


Half as Much but Twice as Good

Constructing Effective Written Feedback in Any Subject
“To improve efficiency and effectiveness of assessment and feedback by looking at full programmes and comparing practice across subjects and universities”
1. Feedback and Consistency
2. Feedback and Timeliness
3. Student Engagement with Feedback
4. What can we do about it?
Feedback Consistency:

“I’ve had good feedback, but also an essay that just said ‘NO!’ on the top, and that’s it.”

“The marking system of this program is pretty different with other programs (such as engineering or politics).”

“Some assessments I have been given a lower mark than expected with no explanation, only the word 'Good' at the top of the page.”

“Some members of staff put a lot of effort into giving constructive feedback while others give very little.”

“In second year I got my lowest grade so far and received no feedback other than the grade, with no opportunity to go to the marker to ask for more.”
Consistent feedback *format*

– Asked for by students in *every* subject

– Across assignments, markers, modules *and* disciplines
Timely feedback is more important than detailed feedback.
“Feedback is absent - or too late.”

“Need... feedback which is delivered in a timely manner!”

“It’s our job to hand it in on time. It’s their job to get it back on time. They should do better than us.”

Feedback is too late when:

“it is right before/after exams” (x19)
“When there is insufficient time to make changes”
“months after it was handed in”
“when there is no time to study”
National Student Survey

Q8: “I have received detailed comments on my work.”

- Mistakes quantity for quality

“...Q8 might not encourage HE institutions to act in ways which enhance students’ academic experiences”

“Recommended revised question: ‘I have received helpful comments on my work’”

(HEFCE 2014 Review of the National Student Survey)
Reading signs at high speed?

Students are as busy as you are
Less feedback can be more effective

If a student only reads your feedback for 30 seconds, what do you want them to take away?
‘Executive Summary’

- Universal *format*
- Universal *location*
- Quick, clear, consistent
3-5 MOST helpful points

• Actionable (can be acted on)
• Positive (can be improved)
• Feed-forward (can help in future)
• Clear (no unfamiliar jargon)
• Connected (to criteria / ILOs)
Where are we now...

Feedback: essentials for learning must be...

1. Timely, so students have the opportunity to improve their next assignment.

2. Positive, with a focus on what was done well, not only what was done badly or overlooked

3. Constructive, with pointers on how to improve future performance

4. Clear, without unfamiliar jargon

http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/learningteaching/aftoolkit/
Changing Colours: What happens when you make enhancement an imperative?
TESTA at Winchester

- ‘Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment’ (TESTA)
- National Teaching Fellowship Project 2009–2012
- TESTA as a ‘step-change’ in thinking about assessment in the UK sector
- More than 50 UK universities also use TESTA
Enthusiastic programme teams across the University engaged with TESTA on an ‘opt-in’ basis early on.

TESTA provided rich programme-level evidence about assessment and feedback, that programme teams could use as a catalyst to make strategic changes.
In 2014, TESTA scaled up and became embedded in the university’s periodic review process.

What if TESTA’s colours change?

10 undergraduate programmes have undertaken TESTA as part of their programme re-validation.

4 more programmes will undergo TESTA as part of the re-validations in 2016/17.
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<th>Programme</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
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<td>No. Formative</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Proportion of exams</td>
<td>11.6% (5/43)</td>
<td>6.4% (2/31)</td>
<td>4.2% (1/24)</td>
<td>13.8% (5/36)</td>
<td>8% (4/50)</td>
<td>4% (2/50)</td>
<td>11.6% (5/43)</td>
<td>6.2% (3/48)</td>
<td>6.8% (3/44)</td>
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<td>Time to return feedback (days)</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>Vol. Oral feedback (minutes)</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>353</td>
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<td>Vol. Written feedback (words)</td>
<td>19,356</td>
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<td>7,409</td>
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What does the data tell us?

- High number of total assessment tasks – ranging from 28–85 assessments across a 3 year degree
- Ratio of formative to summative assessment is proportionately very low
- Varieties of assessment range from 9–27
- Are we over assessing our students? Should we be giving them more opportunities for formative feedback and mastery?
Feedback from programme teams

- TESTA allowed for the rebalancing of formative and summative assessment and was addressed through the moves toward programmatic assessment, the shift in emphasis to single, high-impact assessments and the embedding of formative work in lecture patterns to this end.

- Following TESTA the sequence of the assessments has been considered so that feedback from one assignment informs the next assessment to facilitate student learning and development.

- As a team, we met to discuss the [TESTA results] and have worked to implement formative tasks... and reduced the sheer number of individual assessments, from 50 to 36.
It was good for us to hear how connected much of the work you do on the programme is, and this was backed up by the student TESTA data.

The TESTA process and its outcomes have provided useful reference point for all the discussions and considerations that are now part of the preparations for the revalidation of the programme.

There has been a heightened awareness about the various approaches to learning and teaching in relation to students’ progression from their entry at Level 4 to their graduation subsequent to Level 6.
Feedback from programme teams

- The team has sought to provide a more evenly balanced approach to assessment patterns across the programme in response to the issues of feedback and student perceptions of goals and standards that the TESTA audit outcome highlighted.

- A reduction in the number of summative assessments and an increase in formative assessment is reflected in a number of module outlines in the revised programmes. Summative assessments will be supported by one or more formative assessments to enable students to practise different approaches to assessment and receive feedback on their progress.
TESTA’s impact

- TESTA has had a tangible impact on the re-design of assessment and feedback on programmes undergoing revalidation.

- Re-balancing formative and summative assessment;
- Re-thinking assessment patterns;
- Providing students with more opportunities for formative feedback.
Why TESTA hasn’t changed its colours

- Programme teams understand that TESTA is an enhancement approach;
- It builds into an existing assurance process the opportunity for evidence-based enhancement;
- It offers a supportive space in which teams can reflect, re-think and re-shape assessment and feedback design;
- Findings allow programmes to make strategic changes that best suit the needs of students.
References

Thank you

@TESTAWin

Testa Winchester

www.testa.ac.uk
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Questions, comments, discussion:
Transforming assessment at the institutional level
Chaired by Sally Jordan and with contributions from today’s speakers:

- **Sally Brown**: 'Changing practice on feedback at an institutional level'
- **Amanda Sykes & David Morrison**: 'Half as Much but Twice as Good: Constructing Effective Written Feedback in Any Subject'
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Webinar Session feedback:

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Recording available
http://transformingassessment.com