***Towards Assessment as Learning* (Phil Race)**

**Intended learning outcomes**

After studying this paper, and the works referred to herein, you should be better able to:

1. Explore how assessment has become ‘broken’ in higher education at present.
2. Review ‘what the gurus tell us’ about assessment and feedback in higher education.
3. Interrogate a particular assessment element of your own, regarding how well it links to how students really learn, and validity, reliability, transparency, authenticity, and manageability.
4. Use student self-assessment to initiate student-tutor dialogues, and make our feedback more useful to students.

**Some useful sources on assessment and feedback**

* Knight, P and Yorke, M (2003) *Assessment, learning and employability* Maidenhead, UK SRHE/Open University Press.
* Bowl, M (2003) *Non-traditional entrants to higher education ‘they talk about people like me’* Stoke on Trent, UK, Trentham Books.
* Flint, N R and Johnson, B (2011) *Towards fairer university assessment – recognising the concerns of students* London: Routledge.
* Gibbs, G (2010) *Using assessment to support student learning* Leeds: Leeds Met Press.
* Boud, D and Associates (2010) *Assessment 2020: seven propositions for assessment reform in higher education* Sydney: Australian Learning and Teaching Council.
* Joughin, G (2010) A short guide to oral assessment Leeds: Leeds Met Press.
* Blue Skies (2011) *New thinking about the future of higher education*: download from <http://pearsonblueskies.com/>
* Race P (2010) *Making learning happen: 2nd edition* London: Sage Publications.
* Race, P and Pickford, R (2007) *Making teaching Work* London: Sage Publications.
* Race, P (2007) *How to get a good degree: 2nd edition* Maidenhead: Open University Press.
* Race, P (2006) *The Lecturer’s Toolkit: 3rd edition* London: Routledge.

**The power of face-to-face communication**When explaining assessment criteria to students, and when linking these to evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes, we need to make the most of face-to-face whole group contexts and actively employ:

* Tone of voice
* Body language
* Facial expression
* Eye contact
* The chance to repeat things
* The chance to respond to puzzled looks

Assessment criteria, the real meaning of learning outcomes, and details of evidence of achievement just don’t work nearly so well just on paper (e.g. module handbooks) or on screens (e.g. course web-pages). Therefore, every time you see your students in whole-class contexts, *talk assessment*. Let students see your lips and hear your voices so they know what the targets are and what standards to aim towards. Make the whole-group context the only place where you answer their questions about assessment – to be fair to everyone.

**The changing roles of higher-education institutions**

Now is the decade of our dis-content! Never mind the content – feel the learning. We need to help students make the transition from spoon-fed, expectant learners, to self regulating learners. Sally and I predict a move of higher education institutions away from being the guardians of content, (where everything was about delivery), towards two major functions:

* Recognising and accrediting achievement, wherever learning has taken place – getting the assessment right;
* Supporting student learning and engagement – getting the feedback right.

So now, it’s time to re-think:

1. How students really learn – and how we can help make learning happen for them;
2. How to make feedback really work for students;
3. How best to measure and accredit students’ achievement (not just more of the same old tired methods).

One of my main worries is that we still tend to try to measure what’s in students’ heads, and what they can do with what’s there in terms of the (unsatisfactory) proxies of what comes out of students’ pens in exams and out of their keyboards in essays and reports. I argue that Assessment and feedback are broken in higher education! We desperately need to make assessment and feedback work better. In the UK we know from the National Student Survey that since 2005 the evidence suggests that students nationally find assessment and feedback among the least satisfactory elements of their experience of higher education. We also know that assessment and feedback take up ever more of our time and energy. How have assessment and feedback come to be broken?

* Student numbers have grown: we can’t use the same processes and instruments for a system where getting on for 50% of the 18-30 year old population study in post-compulsory education, compared to 5% a couple of decades ago.
* The world has opened up, so that our feedback and assessment processes and practices need to be more compatible with those in quite different cultures and traditions.
* It is widely accepted now that assessment is the major driver for student learning, and if assessment is not working as a *good* driver for learning, the effectiveness of our entire higher education provision is jeopardised.
* We need to continue to diversify the assessment processes and instruments we use, so that no students are repeatedly disadvantaged by the predominance of particular assessment formats.

In short,

We assess far too much, using the same old ways far too often, and assessment takes far too much of our time – and far too much time of our students, and we drive down the quality of learning by our assessment. And what’s wrong with feedback? Students get it too late. Too often, it’s just words on paper. They tell us it doesn’t help them enough. And we reply that they often don’t take enough notice of it.But what’s *really* wrong with feedback? It’s too often one-way – monologic, from us to them. What students want is dialogue. They want to talk to us about their work. But they’re scared to talk to us, in case it leads to lower marks; in case they’re ‘found out’; and in case they feel stupid.

**What students think about assessment (Flint and Johnson, 2011, p.2)**

Student evaluations frequently reveal poor assessment practices that:

1. Lack authenticity and relevance to real world tasks;
2. Make unreasonable demands on students;
3. Are narrow in scope;
4. Have little long-term benefit;
5. Fail to reward genuine effort;
6. Have unclear expectations and assessment criteria;
7. Fail to provide adequate feedback to students;
8. Rely heavily on factual recall rather than on higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills.

Can you look at 1-8 above, without any guilt?

**What the gurus tell us on assessment, feedback and learning**

Having established that ‘assessment is broken’, what can we do to mend it? Those researching the area are in agreement, and are telling us the same things. The extracts below by no means cover all of the messages they give, but are sufficiently to give us some key themes to address in our efforts to make assessment and feedback fit for purpose, and to help students develop themselves into learners who are much more autonomous and successful.

**Albert Einstein**

“It is simply madness to keep doing the same thing, and expect different results.” In other words, we won’t mend assessment and feedback just by trying harder to do what we’ve always done.

**Sally Brown**

“Concentrating on giving students detailed and developmental formative feedback is the single most useful thing we can do for our students, particularly those who have had a struggle to achieve entry to higher education. Assessment and feedback are two of the best tools available to us, to support student achievement, progression and retention.Assessment is a far more complex, nuanced and intricate activity than universities recognise. To make it fit-for-purpose we need to take account of context, level, learning environment, students’ background, and learning content to ensure that standards of outcomes are assured. Most universities design assessments which respond to only a subset of those, and additionally fail to take account of students’ own individual differences”.

**Phil Race**

Assessment is broken in higher education today. We spend far too long *not* measuring the right things. Therefore, it has never been more urgent to look analytically and calmly at how we can make assessment, as Sally says, “Fit-for-Purpose”. We need to use assessment as learning, so that it addresses seven main factors which underpin successful learning:

1. Strive to enhance our students’ want to learn;
2. Help students to develop ownership of the need to learn;
3. Keep students learn by doing, practice, trial-and-error, repetition;
4. Ensure students get quick and useful feedback – from us and from each other;
5. Help students to make sense of what they learn.
6. Get students deepening their learning by coaching other students, explaining things to them.
7. Allow students to further deepen their learning by assessing their own learning, and assessing others’ learning – making informed judgements.

Life is too short to spend time and energy writing feedback which won’t actually be used by students (sometimes not even collected by them). We are wasting our energy when we write feedback just for external examiners to see, and when we approach giving feedback only in the ‘read-write’ dimension, when many students gain more from it through auditory, or visual, or kinaesthetic channels. (See Neil Fleming’s excellent (and free!) ‘VARK’ work on [www.vark-learn.com](http://www.vark-learn.com)). We have dug ourselves deep into a ‘read-write problem’ in fact. Higher education has become a read-write industry! Yet only since 1791, since the first written exam was set in Cambridge, have we been using written exams and written feedback. I argue that feedback on paper is probably the most time-wasting, least effective and most dangerous way to give students feedback (for more details, please see ‘Making Learning Happen, Phil Race, 2010). There is still a lot going for oral assessment and feedback – see Joughin 2010.

**Graham Gibbs, 2010: tactics to improve student learning**

1. Capture student time and effort, distributing that effort appropriately across topics and weeks.
2. Generate high-quality learning effort, oriented towards clear and high standards.
3. Provide sufficient feedback, often enough, and in enough detail.
4. Focus feedback on students’ performance, on actions under their control, rather than on students themselves or their characteristics.
5. Make feedback timely, while it still matters to students, in time for them to use it towards further learning, or to receive further assistance.
6. Link feedback to what students believe they are supposed to be doing.
7. Ensure that feedback is not only received, but is attended to, so that students act on it to change their future learning and performance.

**David Boud *et al* 2010: ‘Assessment 2020’**

Perhaps the most important thing about the seven propositions below are that the large group which agreed on them contains representatives from every university in Australia, and many more.

Boud et al propose that assessment has most effect when...:

1. It is used to engage students in learning that is productive.
2. Feedback is used to actively improve student learning.
3. Students and teachers become responsible partners in learning and assessment.
4. Students are inducted into the assessment practices and cultures of higher education.
5. Assessment for learning is placed at the centre of subject and program design.
6. Assessment for learning is a focus for staff and institutional development.
7. Assessment provides inclusive and trustworthy representation of student achievement.

**David Nicol and Debra Macfarlane Dick (2006)**

Good feedback practice:

1. Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);

2. Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;

3. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning;

4. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;

5. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;

6. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;

7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

(Nicol, D. J. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education (2006), Vol 31(2), 199-218*).

**Royce Sadler**

Way back in 1989, Sadler wrote: “The indispensable conditions for improvement are that the student comes to hold a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teacher, is able to monitor continuously the quality of what is being produced ***during the act of production itself***, and has a repertoire of alternative moves or strategies from which to draw at any given point. In other words, students have to be able to judge the quality of what they are producing and be able to regulate what they are doing ***during the doing of it***” (Sadler 1989), my italics).

Since then, he has become the most cited author on formative feedback, listed below are just some of his more recent works:

* Sadler, D R (2009) Indeterminacy in the use of preset criteria for assessment and grading *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 34:2 159-179
* Sadler, D R (2009) Grade integrity and the representation of academic achievement *Studies in Higher Education,* 34:7, 807-826
* Sadler, D R (2007) Perils in the meticulous specification of goals and assessment criteria *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice* 14 387-392.
* Sadler, D R (2005) Interpretations of criteria-based assessment and grading in higher education *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 30 175-194.
* Sadler, D R (2002) Ah! ... So that’s ‘Quality’ In Schartz, P and Webb, G (eds) *Assessment Case Studies: experience and practice from higher education*  London, Kogan Page.

In 2010, Sadler began his paper on ‘Beyond feedback: developing student capability in complex appraisal’ as follows:

“Giving students detailed feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of their work, with suggestions for improvement, is becoming common practice in higher education. However, for many students, feedback seems to have little or no impact, despite the considerable time and effort put into its production. With a view to increasing its effectiveness, extensive theoretical and empirical research has been carried out into its structure, timing and other parameters. For students to be able to apply feedback, they need to understand the meaning of the feedback statements. They also need to identify, with near certainty, the particular aspects of their work that need attention. For these to occur, students must possess critical background knowledge. This article sets out the nature of that knowledge and how students can acquire it. They must appropriate for themselves three fundamental concepts - task compliance, quality and criteria - and also develop a cache of relevant tacit knowledge”.

**The Weston Manor Group 2007**  
This group, convened by the ASKe CETL of Oxford Brookes University, produced an ‘Assessment Manifesto for Change’, containing the following recommendations:

1. The debate on standards needs to focus on how high standards of learning can be achieved through assessment. This requires a greater emphasis on assessment *for* learning rather than assessment *of* learning.
2. When it comes to the assessment *of* learning, we need to move beyond systems focused on marks and grades towards the valid assessment of the achievement of intended programme outcomes.
3. Limits to the extent that standards can be articulated explicitly must be recognised since ever more detailed specificity and striving for reliability, all too frequently, diminish the learning experience and threaten its validity. There are important benefits of higher education which are not amenable either to the precise specification of standards or to objective assessment.
4. Assessment standards are socially constructed so there must be a greater emphasis on assessment and feedback processes that actively engage both staff and students in dialogue about standards. It is when learners share an understanding of academic and professional standards in an atmosphere of mutual trust that learning works best.
5. Active engagement with assessment standards needs to be an integral and seamless part of course design and the learning process in order to allow students to develop their own, internalised conceptions of standards, and to monitor and supervise their own learning.
6. Assessment is largely dependent upon professional judgement, and confidence in such judgement requires the establishment of appropriate forums for the development and sharing of standards within and between disciplinary and professional communities.

**Towards assessment as learning**

Last century, we had lots of assessment of learning. We still need to do some of this, e.g. For fitness to practice. Some institutions have moved a long way towards assessment for learning. I believe we need to make the final jump straightaway – assessment as learning.

Why do we need to think again about assessment methods? Not least, because 'normal' ones like exams, essays and reports too often fall short regarding validity, reliability, authenticity, inclusivity, manageability, and transparency, and sometimes have precious little bearing on employability. I invite you to challenge the status quo of assessment, and identifying with the need to change how we go about it, as part of making learners self-regulating and not expectant of spoon-feeding. Chapter 4 of ‘Making Learning Happen’ contains an exercise to help you to interrogate an assessment element of your own choice against how well it links to learning, and against reliability, validity and so on.

**Ten practical steps towards making assessment faster and better**

1. Reduce the total amount of assessment by a factor of three, but make it much higher in ‘quality’...
2. Pay much more attention to validity, reliability, transparency, authenticity, and inclusivity with what assessment is left.
3. Assess more ‘need to know’ and less ‘nice to know’ (and stop assessing ‘nuts to know’!).
4. Let students right into assessment criteria – talk assessment every time you see them.
5. Use much shorter (but better) assessments.
6. Make most assessment formative, use much less summative assessment.
7. Don’t keep assessing the same things repeatedly.
8. Use technology for what technology does well.
9. Get away from too much ‘read-write’ assessment. (c.f. VARK)
10. Get students making informed judgements, in self- and peer-assessment.

**Assessment as learning: getting students to self-assess their work**

At the point of handing it in to us! We can use student self-assessment to deepen their learning, and to make tutor-marking more effective, and efficient – and to start initiate tutor-student dialogues This is a way to getting students to really reflect. It allows us to evidence good feedback practice for inspection purposes. It can help us to avoid wasting our time – and students’ time, and makes sure students actually read your feedback. Moreover, we can give our students the feedback they want as well as the feedback they need;

Here are five questions to consider for self-assessment-tutor dialogues: now think of better ones.

1. What do you honestly consider will be a fair score or grade for the work you are handing in?
2. What do you think was the thing you did best in this assignment?
3. If you had the chance to do the assignment again from scratch, how (if at all) might you decide to go about it differently?
4. What did you find the hardest aspect of this assignment?
5. Please jot down three short questions you would like me to answer about this example of your work:

These five questions are just meant to indicate a starting point towards helping students to make informed judgements on their work as they are doing it (as Sadler suggests), and opening up a real feedback dialogue with them (as Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick suggest).

**Conclusions**

There is abundant evidence that assessment and feedback are broken as practised in higher education today. Yet the people who have researched assessment and feedback are in complete agreement about what can be done to make assessment and feedback work well, and take their rightful places as important steps in making learning happen for our students. Our task is to take due notice of all the research which has been done, and change our ways.