

The Value of Formative Assessment in Higher Education

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Abstract:

Within the higher education sector, there has been significant discussion of the need for a shift from tutor-centred education to student-centred education, where students take more ownership of their learning. Higher education institutions need to support this change and provide a proactive learning environment, which will encourage students to take this ownership. In the last two decades much work has been done in the area of formative assessment which provides evidence that the use of formative assessment can enhance student achievement. Formative assessment is useful to a student, but is also useful to a tutor, in the teaching and learning process. For the purposes of this study Formative Assessment can be defined as:

“Encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (Black & Williams, 199).

The University of Huddersfield has recently embarked on three-year TQEF research project on Formative Assessment. The purpose of this project is to provide more co-ordinated and effective approaches to formative assessment. This is to be placed at the centre of quality enhancement in the curriculum, thus promoting learning and encouraging students to excel, recognising the variety of needs in a diverse student body. The project will be exploring student and staff attitudes to formative assessment and the place of ICT in effective approaches. Tutors’ attitudes towards and use of formative assessment were collected via questionnaire and in-depth interview, whilst students’ attitudes and understanding of formative assessment were captured through focus groups.

The Workshop

This workshop was an interactive session which enabled a discussion between the presenters and participants and an opportunity for the participants to share ideas and experiences in small groups.

The aims of the session

1. inform the participants of the nature of the TQEF project on Formative Assessment
2. To inform participants of how the project will develop in the future
3. To enable the participants to give their views as to the meaning and use of formative assessment
4. To share information with the participants on the use of information technology

There were fifteen participants in this workshop and they were split into groups of three. After the general introduction and explaining aims 1 and 2 of the session, the main focus was on aim 3 above. Aim 3 was the central activity where there was discussion between the presenters and the participants and an opportunity for the participants to work in small groups and share thoughts on the meaning of formative assessment and its use.

The presenters’ starting point was with the question: What is assessment? To illustrate the point the definition that was provided was by Brown *et al.* who stated that “assessment consists of, essentially, taking a sample of what students do, making inferences and estimating the worth of their actions”. (Brown *et al.*, 199, p.8).

As a result of the discussions between the presenters and the participants it became evident that the participants were aware of what formative assessment was (also known as assessment for learning), how it differentiates from summative assessment (assessment of learning) and how important it was to use formative assessment as a learning tool for the students. The issue that was considered at some length was the meaning of formative assessment. In their small groups the participants were asked to provide a definition of formative assessment and then each definition was discussed with the group as a whole. What was clear from the discussions of the groups was that the definitions had a common thread. The following are a few examples of the terms that were commonly used by the groups: provide feedback; opportunities to make mistakes; during the learning process; improve and enhance.

Research evidence suggests that there is no common understanding of the term ‘formative assessment’. However there are a number of interpretations of the term. For example: “Encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and

learning activities in which they are engaged” (Black & Williams, 1998). Another widely quoted and influential idea of formative assessment comes from Roy Sadler who defines it as:

“In assessment for learning, the learner’s task is to close the gap between the present state of understanding and learning goal. Self-assessment is essential if the learner is to do this. The teacher’s role is to communicate appropriate goals and promote self-assessment, as pupils work towards the goals. Feedback in the classroom should operate from teacher to pupils and from pupils to teacher” (Sadler, 1989).

The workshop proceeded with considering the use of formative assessment. The presenters suggested that there were a range of activities that tutors use within their teaching which could be used for formative purposes. For example, they suggested being asking a question in class and receiving feedback.

“Formative assessment is concerned with how judgments about the quality of student responses (performance, pieces, or works) can be used to shape and improve the student’s competence by short-circuiting the randomness and inefficiency of trial-and-error learning.The primary distinction between formative and summative assessment relates to purpose and effect, not to timing” (Sadler, (1989), p.120).

The majority of the participants pointed out that they use formative assessment within their courses and recognised the benefits of formative assessment for students. However, as formative assessment does not give grades or marks that should be counted towards the student’s end of year mark or grade, student engagement can be an issue. Some participants commented that if the formative assessment is part of a tutor’s curriculum and part of the teaching and learning process then there should not be an issue of student engagement. Other participants commented that one way of encouraging student engagement is to make formative assessment ‘low stake’, whereby students receive a small percentage of marks which count towards the end of year marks. The issue of perceived additional workload on staff who engage in formative assessment as a disincentive was also identified as an issue.

During the discussion the presenters highlighted that tutors don’t realise that they do far more formative assessment than they identify. Formative assessment can be formal and structured, for example, timed essays or mock exams or it can be informal and spontaneous for example classroom questioning and feedback. Formative assessment is a useful tool for tutors, as it helps tutors to see how the students are coping with their learning and provide guidance and support but more importantly it can help develop their curricula. The workshop participants considered that this was an important aspect of formative assessment not often recognised.

The use of information technology was also discussed. Information technology has advanced so much in recent years that it is an integral part of many students’ lives. There was a brief discussion on use of a virtual learning environment and Blackboard in particular as tool to be used for formative assessment purposes. The workshop presenters outlined the current use of a mc-dip website as an interactive repository for formative assessment intended to be accessed by academic staff looking to introduce or use new approaches to formative assessment. The next phase of the project was then explained. This will involve the identification of six pilot year 1 UG modules across the Business School where there are issues of student retention, progression or achievement. The aim is to use formative assessment in a variety of ways with the new approach on each module, rationalised with the underlying theories and approaches identified from the literature review. The use of peer assessment and IT approaches will be included in this pilot in order to explore the effectiveness of these in promoting to staff that formative assessment need not necessarily be resource intensive.

Conclusion.

The workshop highlighted that formative assessment is an important learning tool and has value for the higher education sector. The benefits of formative assessment are not purely for students but also for the tutors and the universities as a whole. The presenters welcome involvement of interested staff from other institutions so that practices and experiences in this area could be shared.

References

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