

A Dialogical Approach to developing professional competence in assessment

Francesca Lorenzi & Justin Rami,

Introduction

This chapter presents the outcomes of a three-year research process that has led to the development of an innovative dialogical assessment model. Specifically the research demonstrates that an Assessment Model that enables students to make sense of knowledge through reflection, professional decision-making and engagement can encourage the development of deep and sustainable learning. This innovative model may help students develop a positive attitude towards assessment and can initiate reflection and equip student teachers with knowledge transferable to professional contexts.

Improving the students learning experience is closely connected with the promotion and implementation of an assessment strategy whose effectiveness relies on the quality of the formative process. Learning should continue beyond assessment and it should meet the needs of the present, while preparing students to meet their own future learning needs (Boud, 2000, p. 151). This research conducted over three years aimed to use the following research parameters to implement a sustainable assessment strategy for trainee teachers in the School of Education Studies in Dublin City University, Ireland .

1. *A shift of emphasis from assessment product to assessment process*
2. *The development of a shared understanding of assessment criteria*
3. *The establishment of a mutual relationship between assessors and assesses based on commitment and trust*
4. *A heightened students' and teachers' self-awareness both in personal (efficacy) and professional (competence) terms*

Theoretical underpinnings

Several authors cite the importance of teacher educators' modelling of constructivist approaches that engage students in interdisciplinary exploration, collaborative activity, and field-based opportunities for experiential learning, reflection, and self-examination (Kaufman, 1996; pp.40-49 Kroll & LaBosky, 1996, pp.63-72). Constructivism maintains that individuals create or construct their own new understanding through exploring what they already know (Richardson, 1997, pp.3-14). Also for Dewey (1916; 1938) knowledge emerges only from situations in which learners have to draw it out of meaningful experiences. This assessment model is situated within the constructivist-learning domain.

Recent writers have advocated the encouragement of dialogue within learning and assessment studies (Hyatt, 2005; Juwah et al., 2004; Bryan & Clegg; 2006; Swinthenby, Brown, Glover, Mills, Stevens & Hughes, 2005). Pedagogical dialogue and formative assessment share common principles such as the emphasis on the process (MacDonald, 1991), the need for negotiation of meaning and shared understanding of assessment

criteria (Chanok 2000; Harrington & Elander 2003; Harrington & al. 2005; Sambell & McDowell 1998; Higgins Hatley & Skelton, 2001; Norton, 2004; Price & Rust, 1999; O'Donovan, Price & Rust 2000; Rust, Price & O'Donovan, 2003), and the development of a reciprocal commitment between assessors and assessees (Hyland 2000; Taras, 2001). Current research on formative assessment (Sadler, 1989; Juwah et. al., 2004; Swinthenby & al. 2005; Chanock, 2000) stresses the importance of incorporating a feedback loop in assessment. However, for feedback to become effective, it must connect with students (Sadler, 1998; Higgins, Hartley & Skeleton, 2002; Hyatt, 2005), and it should promote and encourage reflection. It is therefore important that pre-service teachers are introduced to scenarios that reproduce professional real life contexts with reflection at the heart of this process. Such learning scenarios should require students not only to perform skilfully but it should also encourage students to express their creativity, individuality, and most importantly their principled judgement.

Table 1: *Population, Scope and Respondent chrarateristics*

Year	Module	Characteristics
1	Curriculum Assessment (ES204) Bsc Education & Training: <i>Final Yr</i> (part-time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large group (77 students) • Mixed groups of students(<i>mature and traditional undergraduate</i>) • NQT (Non Qualified Teacher) staus • Little or no experience
1	Curriculum Assessment (ES222) BSc. Education. & Training (part-time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group Mature students • Part-time (27 students) • Professional experience (training)
2	Curriculum Assessment (ES204) BSc. Education & Training <i>2nd Yr</i> (full-time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large group (78 Students) • Mixed groups of students(<i>mature and traditional undergraduate</i>) • NQT (Non Qualified Teacher) status • Little or no experience
2	Curriculum Assessment (ES222) Bsc Education & Training <i>2nd Yr</i> (part-time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group Mature students • Part-time (28 students) • Professional experience (training)
3	Philosophical perspectives... (ES402) Bsc Education & Training: <i>Final Yr</i> (part-time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group Mature students • Part-time (27 students) • Professional experience (training)

3	Philosophy of Education (ES556) Graduate Diploma in Education: <i>Final Yr</i> (part-time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large group (63 students) • HDip Post-Primary Teachers • Mature students, Part-time • All second level teachers
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subject areas, it is important to point out the diversity between the content of the modules (curriculum). While the module “Curriculum Assessment” (ES204/ES222) combines theory and assessment practice, modules “Philosophical Perspectives on Education” and “Philosophy of Education” (ES402/ES556) are theoretical modules relating to general theories in the context of philosophical reflection on educational topics. On one hand modules ES204/ES222 aim to develop future teachers’ professional competence in assessment through some practical assessment experience. These modules have a meta-dimension: students learn about assessment through assessment. They encourage students to reflect on the concept of curriculum assessment itself through engaging in different aspects of assessment design and implementation. On the other hand modules ES402/ES556 are inquiry-based modules, which focus on reflection of core educational themes and encourage students to develop self-awareness in terms of their professional role as educators. The assessment process itself does not relate to the central discourse of the module content as in modules ES204/ES222.

Description of the Dialogical Assessment model: Year 1 & 2

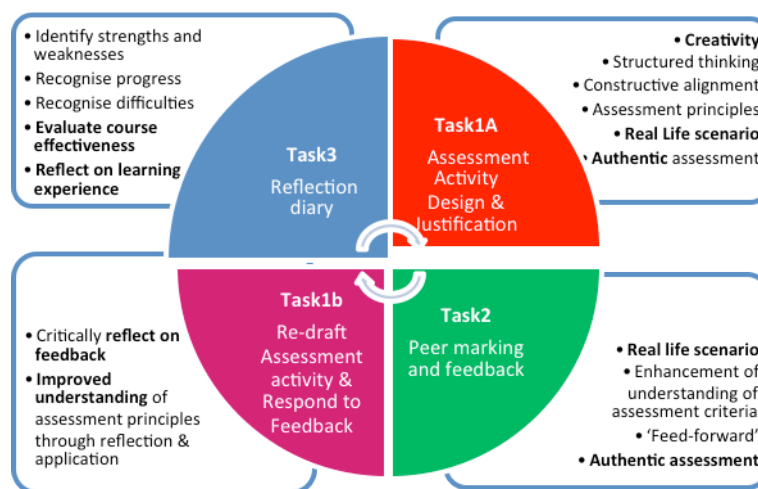
Biggs and Tang (1999) suggest most of university knowledge tends to be declarative knowledge “that refers to knowing about things or knowing-what” (p. 40-41) whereas it should also produce a functional shift, by enabling learners “how” to use and interact with the acquired knowledge. The importance given to meaning making in education influences the level of reflection and active involvement that is required of students. An education that requires only a surface approach is not concerned with meaning making. Conversely education that fosters meaning making processes requires active engagement with the learning content and greater control and ownership over learning.

In developing the original Assessment Model (in terms of rationale and structure) the research parameters relating to: relationship between assessors and assessees, as well as students and teachers’ self-awareness both in personal (efficacy) and professional (competence) (see Table 1) were essential hinges within the new model. The concept of dialogical feedback rests on the opportunities afforded to students to respond to and learn from feedback. A dialogical feedback model places its emphasis on the process of learning and on the relationship-building capacity of the dialogical exchange through feedback practice. The extent to which education allows for meaning to emerge without imposition is all too little. If students are not offered the opportunity to contribute to the meaning that is generated through the teaching and learning relationship we can witness a dissociation of meaning from learning. This, therefore, suggests that active engagement with course content and feedback and reflection on learning are necessary to foster such sustainability for students aiming to become professional educators.

Years One and Two: the development and modification of the model

The assessment model developed for the module ‘Curriculum Assessment’ builds on these theoretical foundations and pays attention to the need for progressive, reflection-led processes that help students to attach meaning and derive sustainable learning from the educational activity. It is structured as a portfolio, which aims to foster a dialogical relationship between teaching and learning and progressive transfer of responsibility for learning from lecturers to students. Portfolios are process-oriented forms of assessment and due to their multi-activity format allow for the incorporation of feedback cycles within the process. The original portfolio format presented in 2008-2009 consisted of four tasks as shown by Figure 2.

Figure 2: Year 1: 2008-2009 Portfolio format



The model was designed so the students could experience different elements of assessment from the perspective of the teacher as well as that of the assessee. A dialogical cycle between assessment design and improvement of the design via responding to the feedback received informs the design of the portfolio model. The response to feedback is a reflective process that encourages students to critically consider their strengths and weaknesses and consider the options for improvement.

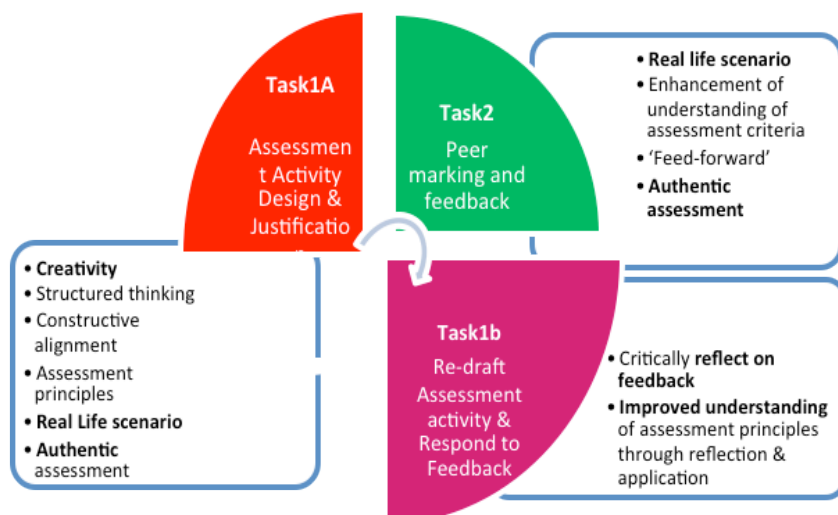
Task 1 is subdivided into two tasks, Task 1a and Task 1b. Task 1a consists of the design of an assessment activity for a syllabus and a potential group of learners identified by the students themselves. This task requires students to match the learning objectives for the chosen syllabus with an assessment activity that it is suited for the identified. Students are asked to prepare guidelines, design and structure the assessment activity and specify assessment and marking criteria. The task simulates a real life scenario and allows students to express their creativity. It also raises students’ awareness of key assessment concepts such as transparency, clarity and fairness and also constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999) and validity. By designing an assessment activity these concepts are embedded in practice and the experience gained enables students to transfer the knowledge acquired to current and future professional contexts.

Task 1b is a ‘re-drafting’ activity in response to the feedback received from peers as part of Task 2. The redrafting of the assessment activity requires students to react constructively to the feedback received and to reflect on the advice in order to decide what changes should be made to improve the quality of the design. For Task 2, students mark and provide feedback to peers on Task 1a. They bear the responsibility for giving useful advice and ensuring that their evaluation is fair and transparent. This task enables students to assume a simultaneous dual role: that of teacher and of student. The research demonstrated that this task in particular appears to cause attitudinal shift and unease with such shift generally occurs. Students need to be mindful of the wellbeing of their peers while at the same time ensuring reliability of marking. Nevertheless marking is a daunting task for many students. Their skills and knowledge are still developing and the quality of feedback they are able to provide is still relatively limited and directly linked to their level of understanding of assessment theory and practice. For this reason Task 1b is not a straightforward task. Students receive feedback from their peers on how to redraft their assessment activity. They are not simply asked to implement the recommendations received, but to firstly make a decision on the pedagogical soundness of the advice received from peers and then to implement what, on reflection they consider appropriate. The structure is intrinsically dialogical, as it requires active engagement and a critical response to feedback.

Finally Task 3 is a reflective diary in which students are asked to record after the completion of each task their thoughts and experiences on what they have learnt from the specific task, what difficulties they have encountered and what aspects of the tasks they felt should be improved for further development.

As shown by Figure 3, in 2009-2010 due to restrictions imposed by the reduced duration of the module the assessment portfolio was modified. It was considered important to maintain the three-step format (design-feedback-revised design). In essence this was how the dialogical process became a dialogical assessment.

Figure 3: Year 2: Year 2 Portfolio format



In the second year the format had to be amended. The modules “Curriculum Assessment” and “Curriculum Evaluation” were merged and this resulted in a halved number of hours allocated to teaching of “Curriculum Assessment” course content. Unfortunately Task 3 (the reflective diary) had to be removed to ensure that the assessment workload was proportional to the reduced number of teaching hours associated with this assessment. However an element of reflection was still incorporated in the response that students are asked to give to peer feedback. To make up for the absence of Task 3 further reflection was elicited within the classroom interaction and the opportunity for students to contribute to the evaluation was maintained through responses to the end of module questionnaire.

Year Three: transferability & sustainability of the model

The encouraging outcomes emerging from Year 1 and reconfirmed in Year 2, prompted reflection on the transferability of the model to other subject domains, as this can be considered as a means of confirming the soundness of the dialogical process. “Curriculum Assessment” is a module aimed at educating pre-service teachers on assessment and as such the assessment for this module presented a meta-dimension: teaching about assessment through assessment. The positive reaction to the assessment format and the improvement recorded may have been linked to the embedding of the assessment format in the module content. This may have led students to see the relevance of the assessment to their professional development and prompted them to maximise the benefits arising from it. This therefore may have provided evidence of the impact of perceived relevance on the motivation to perform well in assessment rather than supporting the validity of the dialogical feedback model per se. It was therefore necessary to demonstrate whether the dialogical model, even when dissociated from such meta-dimensions, could lead to learning progression and deeper engagement with course content. This reflection led to redrafting the assessment model to suit different modules. The new format aimed to reflect the original research parameters (see Table 1). Firstly, it aimed to demonstrate the pedagogical value of the model regardless of the module content. Secondly, it initiated a process of transfer of the model to other modular contexts and in so doing it aimed to show the sustainability and the practical viability of the principles that inform it.

The new portfolio assessment model comprises of 3 tasks. Task 1 and Task 2 are short essays that require students to answer two separate questions of their choice from among those addressed during the lectures for this module. The third task is a Teaching Philosophy Statement. This is a brief reflective piece in which students link the course content to their professional experience and aspirations. Within the same cohort, the format was further modified to take into account the different size of the two groups: a large GDED2 group (over 60 students) and a small BET3 group (27 students). As illustrated by Figure 4 the GDED2 students were asked to submit the first Task/Essay on a group basis, with groups of 5 to 7 students. Figure 5 shows that, thanks to the small BET3 group size, it was possible to allow students to submit all tasks on an individual basis.

Figure 4: Portfolio assessment for module ES556: Philosophy of Education

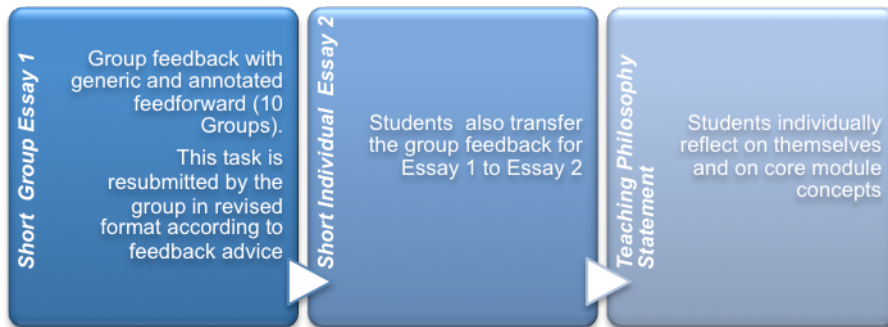
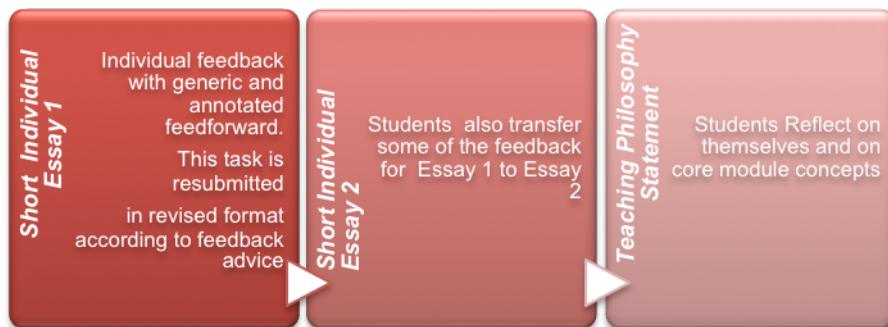


Figure 5: Portfolio assessment for module ES402: Philosophical Perspectives on Education



Students were encouraged, on a voluntary basis, to submit a complete draft of Essay 1 for formative purposes. GDED2 received group feedback on their formative draft whereas BET3 students received individual feedback.

The purpose of this format was to provide students with guidance for redrafting essay 1 but also for them to obtain feedback advice also transferable to essay 2. The introduction of a draft submission of essay one was intended as a means to establish a climate of reciprocal co-operation between lecturer and students and among students themselves, while also easing anxiety associated with a new subject domain and its requirements. The feedback on the formative draft enabled students to try out the new unfamiliar format with lessened fear of failure. One important difference between the original model and the revised model is that the lecturer in this revised model gave feedback rather than the students' peers. The original model was educating pre-service teachers about assessment (as a pedagogic subject) and therefore it was important for them to actively experience as many aspects of assessment as possible in the dual roles of teacher and students. This meant also giving control of feedback over to students in Task 2. Peer feedback, albeit in lecturer-monitored form, was giving students the opportunity to embrace a teaching role and therefore to enact a professional scenario. This was a valuable, yet problematic aspect, of the original model as it generated a great deal of anxiety among students who felt uncomfortable offering feedback to peers. As modules in Year 3 of the study do not present this meta-dimension (learning about assessment

through assessment), lecturer feedback was considered more appropriate, particularly in recognition of the unfamiliarity of the subject domain for all students.

Results and Findings

Year one and year two results

Analysis of the evaluative data helped the researchers develop the assessment model in preparation for Year 3. The key findings within the data of Year 1 and 2 are outlined in Tables 2 and 3. The following Figures (6 & 7) show the performance behaviours of the students. Highlighted specifically is the difference in performance between Task 1 and Task 2 after the feedforward had been introduced in between the tasks. This data was quantitative in its nature; though the findings were only used to identify trends which helped frame further questions used in the qualitative research stages.

Figure 6: *Student Improvement & Grade distribution 2008-2009*

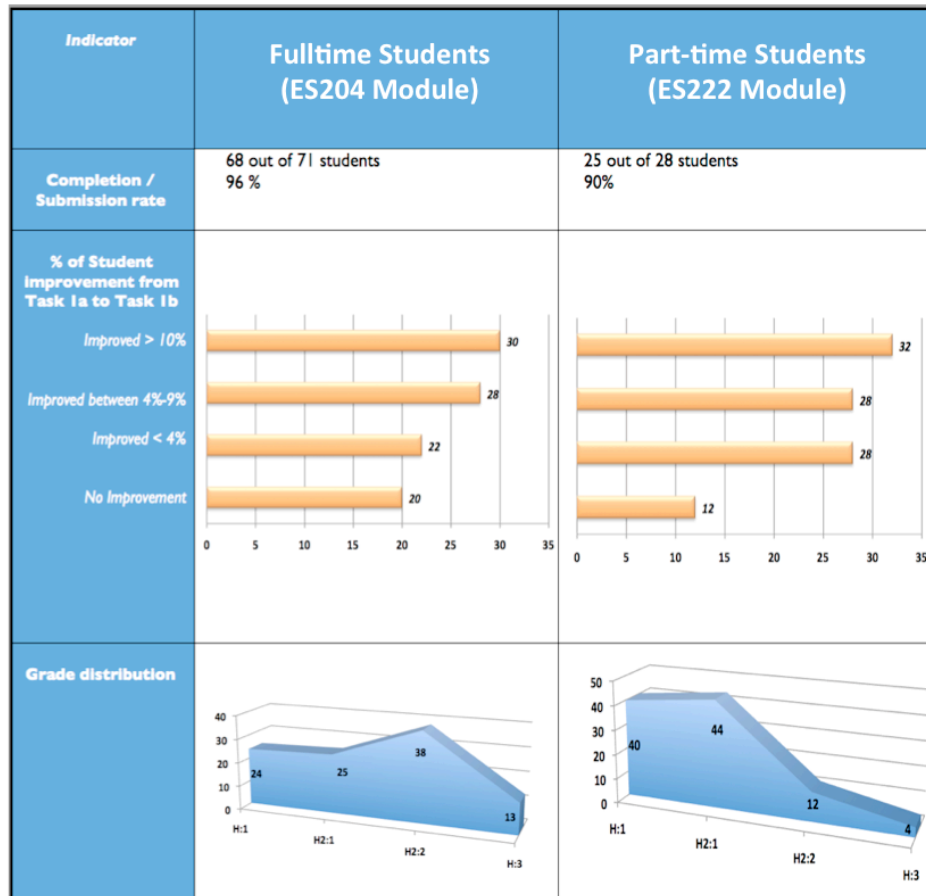
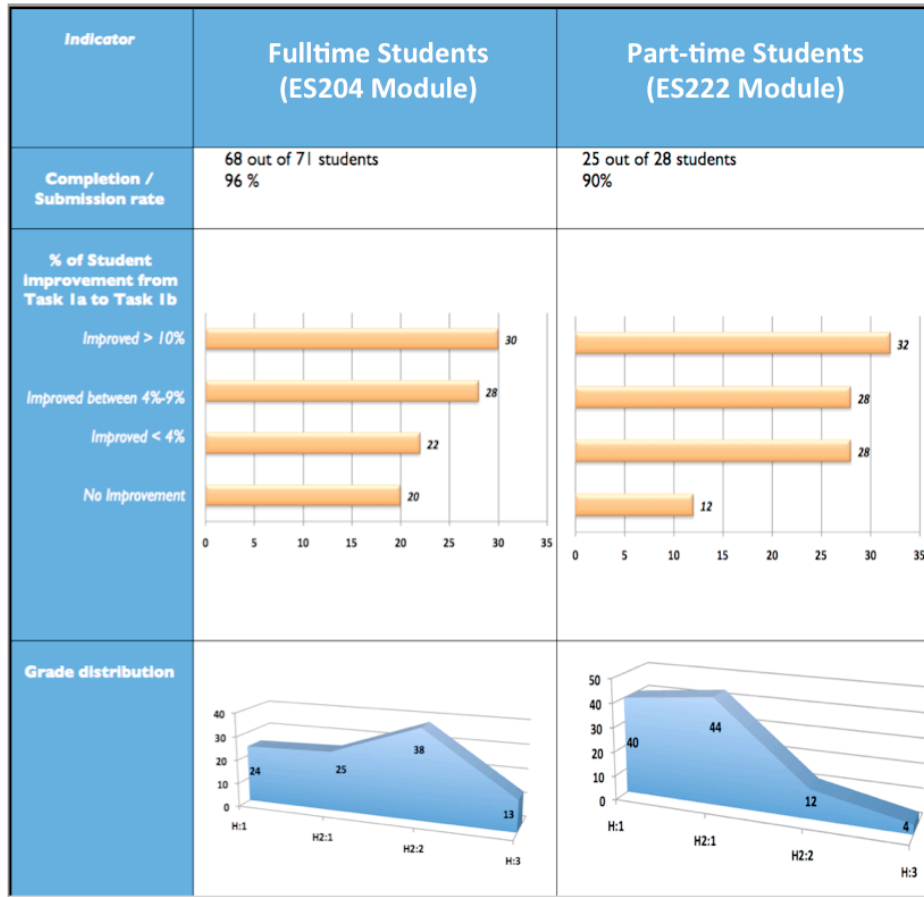


Figure 7: Student Improvement & Grade distribution 2009-2010



The results show that the dialogical format helped to foster greater awareness of the formative value of assessment and encouraged students to design and implement learner-centred approaches in their own professional contexts. The data also suggested that the importance of the role of the learner in the assessment process appears to have been understood and captured by students as it emerges from the answers summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Perspectives on the role of the learner in assessment

Have your views on the role of the learner in the assessment process changed as a result of undertaking this module?	Year 2 %	Year 2 N	Year 1 %	Year 1 N
Through feedback learners have more control and motivation	29.17	7	11.77	2
More focus on diverse learners' needs & views	29.17	7	41.18	7
Clearer assessment criteria empower learners	8.33	2	5.88	1
Greater communication and empathy between assessor and learner	4.17	1	11.76	2
Learners should be enabled to showcase their learning	8.33	2	17.65	3
No answer	20.83	5	11.76	2
Total answers	100	24	100	17

These tables show a consistent pattern in terms of values expressed by the students. They also show different student emphasis between the years, by the two lecturers engaged in this research. Notably, as shown by Table 3, students acknowledge greater emphasis on feedback theory and practice in 2008-2009 and the importance of design and marking guidelines emerges from the answers of students from the 2009-2010 cohort.

Table 3: Contribution to the learning experience

Has your perception and attitude towards assessment changed as a result of undertaking this module?	Year 2 %	Year 2 N	Year 1 %	Year 1 N
Better understanding of the importance of formative assessment	3.45	1	0	0
Importance of clear guidelines and marking criteria	13.79	4	5	1
I appreciate and understand more the importance of assessment	41.38	12	10	2
I can be more creative in designing assessment	3.45	1	5	1

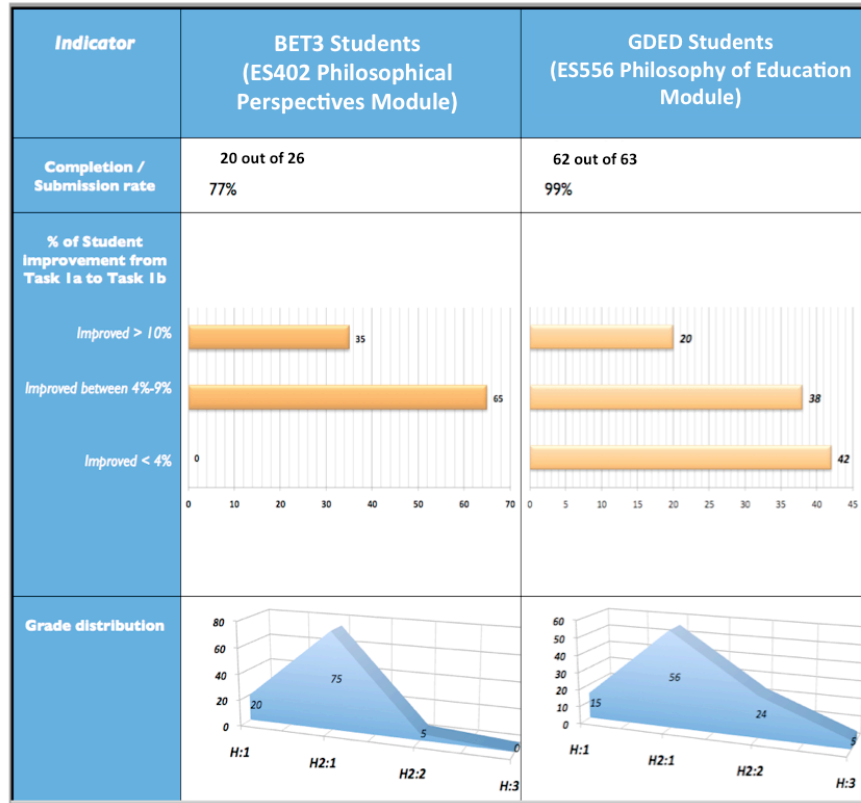
I understand the effect that assessment has on learning	10.34	3	20	4
I have learnt about constructive feedback	0	0	20	4
I have realised the amount of work and responsibility that teachers have to put in assessment	10.34	3	15	3
I am no longer scared of assessment	0	0	5	1
Importance of constructive alignment	0	0	20	4
I understand the terminology better	3.45	1	0	0
It has given me practical experience to design assessment	6.9	2	0	0
It has had an impact on my practice	3.45	1	0	0
No answer	3.45	1	0	0
Total answers	100	29	100	20

One of the main findings in Years 1 and 2 of the research was that students who engaged with the tasks experienced a type of ‘practice shock’ normally witnessed in authentic work environments (Wehlage, Newmann, & Secada, 1996). The anxiety caused by being asked to relinquish the student role and adopt the teacher’s role is expressed in comments emphasising the unease of being ‘unqualified’. Unease seems to arise with being asked to assume a dual role as teacher and student and being faced with a considerably new learning experience (Tisani, 2008).

Year three results

Year 3 research findings show how the dialogical aspects of the assessment model could be transferred to other teacher training modules (curricula) and contexts. This research demonstrated that assessment should be viewed as a tripartite relationship between assessor, assessee and the assessment material, therefore these relationships should be seen as a progressive pedagogy (Dewey, 1938) embracing previously outlined research parameters and the values related to constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) and constructivism as a whole. Feedback therefore should be viewed as part of the learning process and can aid students transcend from surface to deep learning (Marton and Saljo (1984). Figure 8 shows the performance behaviours of the respondents in Year 3 of the research during the transferability stage. Highlighted specifically is the difference in performance between Task 1 and Task 2 after the feedforward had been introduced between tasks.

Figure 8: Phase 3: Student Improvement & Grade distribution 2010-2011



Students from both GDED2 and BET3 classes were asked to evaluate the assessment model and respond to a series of statements. On the whole there is agreement that the assessment facilitated engagement with the course content, albeit with stronger levels of agreement with the BET3 respondents. 50% of the GDED2 students and the majority of BET3 students agree that the assessment format was also helpful in building a teaching and learning relationship with the lecturer.

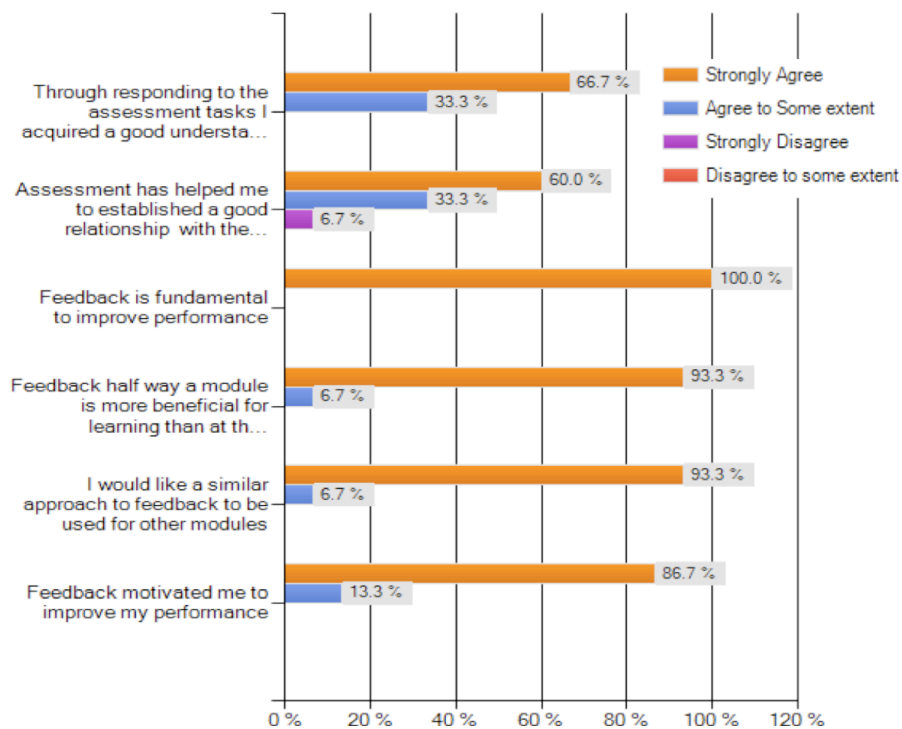


Figure 9: BET3 Evaluation of Assessment format & feedback

Table 4 shows an interesting observation in that the majority of students from both cohorts were able to transfer feedback advice from Task 1 to Task 2 therefore highlighting the transferability of advice and sustainability of learning. This highlights the embedded nature of the *Dialogical Assessment Model*.

Table 4: Transfer of feedback advice from Task1 to Task2

	BET3 Total respondents: 15		GDED2 Total respondents: 15	
	%	N	%	N
All of it	46.7	7	24	6
50% or more	53.3	8	53.3	8
Less than 50%	0	0	6.7	1
None	0	0	0	0

This emerging scenario is further reinforced by comments made by students in response to the open-ended questions via the online questionnaire. The dialogical feedback also appears to have helped with clarifying the specifics of philosophical argumentation. Interestingly one GDED2 student also commented on how the group had used the questions raised in the feedback comments as the basis for group discussion, helping the group to progress with their understanding of the course content.

Summary

This research began in 2008 when a planned intervention regarding the assessment of one module within a teacher education programme was selected to be revised and amended. This process continued for three years in trying to construct an integrated assessment module that could:

- *Shift the emphasis from assessment product to assessment process;*
- *Create a shared understanding of assessment criteria;*
- *Establish a mutual relationship between assessors and assessees based on commitment and trust;*
- *Increase students' and teachers' self-awareness both in personal (efficacy) and professional (competence) terms.*

assessment model can enable students to make sense of knowledge through reflection; professional decision-making and engagement that in turn can foster transformative and sustainable learning (Delors et al., (1996). The research also shows how the model can help students develop a positive attitude towards assessment, initiate reflective processes, and equip student teachers with knowledge transferable to professional practice.

The result of the research is the creation of a dialogical assessment model. As Uhlman (1995) points out, students as 'stakeholders' need to be also participating in and transformed by the contextual dialogue of teaching & learning initiated and developed around the teacher's reflective practice and research.

Conclusion

At the heart of assessment feedback there should be an embedded dialogical process, which not only aids self-reflection and critical thinking but also demonstrates the nuanced relationship between the teacher and the student. Without this dialogical relationship learning can get lost and students revert to a surface model of curriculum engagement.

In recent years there has been a change in the way student learning is viewed. Increasingly within higher education the focus has moved from teaching to learning, with the emphasis shifting from what is taught, to what has been learned and more importantly how it is learned. This three-year research process posits the argument that a further step needs to be taken in order to ensure that learning, once initiated, becomes sustainable and transformative (Mezirow, 1997). A transformation needs to happen among assessment stakeholders. It is not sufficient to modify assessment formats.

Attitudes need to be shifted and assessment roles need to be reconceived. As teacher trainers we have a responsibility to foster change and improve practice. It is therefore essential that our own practice fosters sustainable learning and models future practice in a wider educational context. Noddings (2004, p. 161) argues that 'it is not the job of teachers simply to secure demonstrable learning on a pre-specified set of objectives' and that the teacher role cannot be reduced merely to a set of skills. Hogan (2004, p. 20) adds that teaching is to be understood as a 'human practice, not just as a repertoire of competencies to be mastered, transmitted and shared'. In order for student teachers to become lifelong learners and continue with their professional development it is essential they reject the concepts of surface learning and engage, as educators and learners, with the learning and assessment process in a deep meaningful way. For this to occur the research demonstrated that a staged approach to assessment, that involved critical engagement, reflection and intrapersonal analysis, benefits the learning process and the learner through dialogical engagement with feedback.

Freire (1993) suggests that the starting point in 'education for liberation' is dialogue, as opposed to the hierarchal 'banking education'. He goes on to suggest that dialogue begins with the experiences of learners. Experiential learning means investigating our thinking and asking why we think the way we do. This chapter outlines how dialogue requires an equalitarian and reciprocated relationship between teacher and student, in which knowledge is not a commodity to be passed down but is something to be negotiated.

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