High Impact Assessment Practices in Higher Education

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify high impact assessment feedback practices within higher education (HE). In this paper we will argue that assessment is the lynchpin in facilitating high impact pedagogies within higher education and that practices that emphasize meaningful assessment where assessment practice is aligned to capture and reward a shared understanding of what constitutes 'deep' within a discipline are fundamental (Evans, Muijs, & Tomlinson, 2015). At a time when considerable emphasis is being placed on notions of teaching effectiveness and learning gain within HE, this paper is timely in its emphasis on what constitutes meaningful assessment practice in 21st century learning environments.

Using thematic analysis key characteristics of effective assessment practice derived from a systematic review of the literature (2005-2015) exploring high impact pedagogies across disciplines within HE are outlined along with a discussion of important considerations in moving assessment practice forward.

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Keywords: Assessment; Higher Education; Systematic Review; High Impact

Theoretical frameworks

A variety of frameworks were drawn upon to consider what constitutes high impact pedagogy; to inform methodology and methods; and in analyzing the findings and exploring ways forward with HE assessment practice.

In exploring high impact assessment practices we draw on the work of Evans (2013) and principles of effective assessment practice informed by constructivist, social cultural and socio-critical perspectives. We also draw on a range of perspectives to ensure a holistic perspective regarding high impact that considers students' abilities to integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge (Kuh, 2008), to be able to use and adapt feedback beyond a course of study and to be able to feed-up into professional practice. Interpretations of high impact go beyond a focus on student retention and completion (Kuh, 2008) to considering more nuanced interpretations of what constitutes meaningful assessment in 21st century learning environments building on the work of Barnett (2011) and that of Entwistle and Mc Cune (2011) in considering notions

such as the 'will to offer' and 'dispositions to learn'. Importantly, we utilise Boud's work (2000) in considering sustainable assessment practice that encompasses students' abilities to regulate their own learning through an enhanced capacity to seek and use feedback effectively, and to engage in accurate self-assessment (Evans, 2014). As part of this agenda, the ability of students' to apply assessment lessons to the solving of real world issues beyond the immediate programmes of study in the pursuit of meaningful learning is important (Das, 2012).

The quality of research was assessed using the following parameters: *pedagogical clarity; methodological transparency; methodological congruence; evidence-based; accessibility of findings; and transferability* of the articles. The choice of constructs is informed by the work of Cools et al. (2011); Gibbs (2010); Gilbert et al., (2011); Kuh (2008); Parsons et al., (2012).

We also build on Biggs' (2003) notion of constructive alignment. Pedagogies aimed at developing deeper approaches to learning are most successful when assessment practice is aligned to capture and reward a shared understanding of what constitutes 'deep' within a discipline. Ironically, current drivers aimed at enhancing student satisfaction and quality of assessment and feedback within HE may be undermining effective practice (e.g. emphasis on fast turn-around times for marking and feedback may lead to less meaningful assessment practice; rubrics and explicit guidance on assessment and feedback may encourage an instrumental approach if self-regulatory practice is not built into the process). Assessment practice needs to keep pace with the changing nature of knowledge and requirements within the disciplines to also ensure meaningful learning. To meet these needs institutional policies and procedures need to be able to respond quickly to the requirements of module and programme level assessment to ensure currency and alignment of practice. Reducing the burden of assessment and ensuring congruence between module and programme level assessment are important in supporting an integrated and holistic approach to assessment.

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Methods

The systematic review involved the analysis of articles from January 2005 to March 2015. Five search engines were used (Education Research Complete; ERIC; ISI Web of Science; Psych INFO, and Scopus). Papers included empirical (qualitative and/or quantitative) and theoretical papers. Search terms were comprehensive and included:

Pedagogy (OR teaching OR teaching and learning OR discipline specific teaching and learning OR curriculum OR teaching methods OR teaching approaches OR (high impact) pedagogy OR signature pedagogy(ies) OR disciplinary pedagogies OR educational practices OR assessment OR

high impact educational practices); AND Student Engagement (OR learning task engagement OR student voice OR learning gain OR educational gain OR effectiveness OR performance OR student development OR student self-regulation OR learning transfer OR student partnerships/cooperation OR students as partners OR co-production OR deep approach to learning OR active/collaborative learning OR academic challenge); AND Higher education (OR postsecondary OR post-compulsory OR University OR College).

From a potential 21,055 articles selected, checking and rechecking resulted in 1741 articles being selected for further analysis. This article focuses on an initial first stage analysis of 273 full articles and reports specifically on one of the key themes identified within the review: that of high impact assessment practices.

Research articles were graded A – C using the following criteria: *pedagogical clarity; methodological transparency; methodological congruence; evidence-based; accessibility of findings; and transferability* of the articles. By using a classification system drawing on the approach used by Gilbert et al., (2011) we identified pedagogies that had strong and robust evidence bases for their effectiveness. Regular moderation check points were established throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure intra- and inter-rater reliability in assessment of articles by members of the research team. The findings reported are indicative rather than representative of the field given the sheer size of the data base.

Descriptive statistics were used to provide an overview of the nature of the studies by discipline; pedagogical focus; research design; theoretical framework; methodology and methods (including measures of reliability and validity); sample nature and size; evidence of how effectiveness is measured; transparency of design; clarity of findings implications for practice; evidence of replication of approach. A *thematic content analytic approach* (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Krippendorf, 1980) was used to analyse the literature using a number of stages. This article reports on one of the key themes identified, that of high impact assessment practices, and the key dimensions of such practices.
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Findings

The role of assessment in supporting innovative pedagogy and student learning is crucial and particularly in the following areas: student self-assessment; students as partners; guided support; and authentic assessment. Salient to these discussions is the nature of the role of the student in the assessment process. A key feature of effective practice was the integrated nature of assessment. While principles of assessment practice have been clearly outlined (e.g. Evans, 2013) there are nuanced approaches to assessment practice that warrant specific mention that

include notions of appropriate assessment; real world foci; and sustainability. Key themes identified include:

- e*xplicitly guiding students through the assessment process –provision of a clear route map;*
- *timely feedback to* enable learners to make the necessary amendments to satisfy the requirements of summative assessment;
- *the formative value of focused questioning and inquiry, flipped, and just-in-time approaches; .*
- *appropriate use of technology to enable real-time feedback;*
- *feeding up where* summative assessment becomes formative in preparing students for what comes next;
- *self- and co-assessment to develop student capacity to* make judgements about their work;
- *assessment geared to supporting collaboration* rather than competition: *the greater potential of peer engagement over peer assessment approaches in supporting learning;*
- *quality products: authentic and meaningful assessment focusing on translation into practice;*
- *students as producers* working with the community engaged in the production of meaningful outputs/research;
- *assessment alignment ensuring that the* mode of assessment can and does adequately assess the knowledge and skills promoted in new learning environments;
- *appropriate diversification of assessment and sensitivity of assessment to student needs* to ensure that students' diverse needs are attended to.

To maximise the potential of pedagogical innovations, assessment is the lynchpin as it must keep pace with what disciplinary knowledge is seen as valuable and relevant within HE and wider contexts and needs to accurately measure meaningful learning.

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