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Assessment might dictate the curriculum, but what dictates assessment?

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Almost all tertiary educators make assessment choices, for example, when they create an assessment task, design a rubric, or write multiple-choice items. Educators potentially have access to a variety of evidence and materials regarding good assessment practice but may not choose to consult them or be successful in translating these into practice. In this article, we propose a new challenge for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: the need to study the disjunction between proposals for assessment "best practice" and assessment in practice by examining the assessment decision-making of teachers. We suggest that assessment decision-making involves almost all university teachers, occurs at multiple levels, and is influenced by expertise, trust, culture, and policy. Assessment may dictate the curriculum from the student's perspective, and we argue that assessment decision-making dictates assessment.

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Assessment might dictate the curriculum, but what dictates assessment?

Abstract

Almost every tertiary educator makes assessment choices: when they create an assessment task, design a rubric, provide feedback on an essay, or write multiple-choice items. Educators might potentially have access to a variety of evidence and materials regarding good assessment practice but may not choose to consult them, or be successful in translating these into practice. In this article we propose a new challenge for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: a study of the disjunction between proposals for assessment 'best practice' and assessment in practice through examining the assessment decision-making of teachers. We suggest that assessment decision-making: involves almost all university teachers; occurs at multiple levels; and is influenced by expertise, trust, culture, policy and flexibility. Assessment may dictate the curriculum from the student's perspective, and we argue that assessment decision-making dictates assessment.

Assessment is a core concern of SOTL as it represents a somewhat unavoidable part of a university teacher's life, and it is similarly inescapable for students; as Boud (1995, p. 35) states: "Students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot (by definition if they want to graduate) escape the effects of poor assessment." It is also a particularly demanding part of academic life, even when not recognised as such. As Price, et al. (2011) note "achieving a balance between summative and formative assessment requires complex, contextual thinking". They contend that part of the problem with current assessment thinking may be "oversimplified or poor decision-making". Aside from highly routine tasks like marking multiple-choice questions, almost every assessment act requires some sort of judgement on the teacher's part. We view these judgements as decisions, and argue that they operate at three levels, occur at quite different points of time and sometimes by different people:

1. Curriculum level (*for course planning*)
2. Pedagogy level (*for subject design and subject outlines*)
3. Operational level (*marking and feedback relating to a particular task*)

These judgements are not currently well understood, and are often taken for granted on a day-to-day basis. Not all academics have the freedom or responsibility to make decisions at each level. If we include sessional/part-time tutors or teaching assistants, a substantial body of university teachers might only make decisions at an operational level. Decisions at the curriculum and pedagogy levels might be deferred to more

experienced, tenured or full-time university teachers. Conversely, some of these more senior academics might have insulated themselves from decisions at the operational level by engaging the services of these sessional staff. Students are subject to a cascade of decisions about assessment, yet we know little about the nature of these decisions.

The rudimentary research into specific forces that shape educational decisions within higher education and how they are weighted provides some insight into what is happening in practice. Eley (2006) empirically studied the gap between educational theory and enacted educational decision making, describing the emphasis on the local immediate context rather than accessing idealised notions of practice. This has been echoed by recent case studies in assessment ‘thinking’ in higher education; changed thinking about assessment did not lead to changed assessment practices (Offerdahl & Tomanek 2011). This work underlines the issue that understanding a particular conception of education in a theoretical sense, is not the same as its application within a particular local context.

Decision-making is a core concern of many fields of research, prefaced by classical models such as rational-choice theory and social exchange theory (Cook & Rice, 2006), which view decisions as rational considerations of costs and benefits. A parallel body of research exists within health professions research around clinical decision-making, which privileges practitioner knowledge, rules-of-thumb, pattern matching, heuristics and biases as the influences of decisions (Eva, 2005; Sque, Chipulu & McGonigle,

2009; Norman, 2005). Good clinicians might make good clinical decisions, but how do good teachers make good assessment decisions?

If we consider Kreber's (2002) categories of excellent, expert, and scholarly teachers, we might expect 'good' teachers to make assessment decisions differently based on what makes them good teachers. Kreber suggests that excellent teachers make somewhat intuitive decisions, informed by their experiences, whereas expert teachers are able to articulate the (often scholarly) evidence or rationale that informs their choices. Scholarly teachers advance beyond expert teachers by sharing and systematising their decisions. Our own practice suggests that scholarly teachers – sometimes even those who are assessment researchers themselves – do not necessarily always implement evidence-based assessment practices in their own teaching. Knowledge of ideal assessment practices therefore is not enough; the decision to implement strategies known to be sub-optimum must be shaped by some other factors. Kreber argues that incentives for excellent practice are often not substantial enough for teachers to move beyond 'good enough' practice, and we suspect that this influences assessment decisions.

A deviation from clinical or professional decision-making is the contention around the purpose of assessment. If university teachers were unconstrained and able to make what they perceived to be a perfect operational/pedagogical/curriculum decision, what would be the function of assessment? Assessment always performs multiple functions (Boud, 2000): in addition to its stated aims of assessing specified learning outcomes, it

acts as an enculturator, communicating what is valued by a profession or discipline. In addition to its summative, certifying and credentialing role, assessment serves formative and developmental ends. While these are not mutually exclusive outcomes of an assessment decision, an individual university teacher's concept of assessment might shape how they weight these roles of assessment. Unconscious or unstated assumptions about the purpose of assessment might influence the decisions even an otherwise unconstrained teacher would make. Teacher decisions are rarely made in an unconstrained environment however.

Institutional policy documents don't uniformly contain an enlightened conception of assessment that privileges learning, instead an emphasis is placed on rigorous credentialing (Boud, 2007). While we can critique these policies, we don't precisely know the degree to which they affect assessment decisions made by university teachers. Emerging research with Australian university teachers suggests they have a "reasonable scope to make important decisions about what and how they teach" and that this flexibility extends to assessment decisions (Bennett, et al. 2011, p. 164). Are these decisions made in accord with policy or in spite of it?

Price, et al. (2011) identify a difficulty working within assessment frameworks which must meet institutional requirements: they are often set well in advance and are unresponsive to changes in practice. Additionally, any assessment regime must also be sustained over time and across different personnel; some assessment strategies may be more demanding on teacher or student than is practicable. Decisions about

assessment may also be driven by increases in student numbers and reductions in funding. The trend towards modularised programs may reduce opportunities for formative assessment because tasks must be slotted into shorter teaching blocks. While there appear to be few studies that consider the time implications for teachers of various assessment options, we anticipate that expectations of time and marking load might factor into how assessment is designed. These complications increase the difficulty of what are already complex assessment decision-making tasks.

Trust further complicates the informed-yet-constrained assessment decisions of teachers. Carless (2009) argues that we sometimes shy away from more innovative forms of assessment in favor of traditional forms because proven methods are perceived trustworthy and reliable. But Carless also finds that (mis)trust exists between students, students/teachers, and amongst teachers and their management. Cultures of managerialism and accountability weaken trust, discourage risk taking and encourage “defensive assessment practices” (p. 82). Conversely, trust can positively influence assessment, particularly when it leads to shared decision-making involving on-the-ground academics and assessment leaders (Carless, 2009).

Ramsden (1992) popularized the notion that assessment defines the actual curriculum for students, but we argue here that assessment decision-making is the antecedent of this. Assessment is mediated by decisions that are currently poorly understood, but may be influenced by a variety of factors, some of which are within educational institutions’ control. We urge scholars of learning and teaching to move beyond the study of ideal

assessment practices to also examine the decisions that lead to them – and the pragmatic decisions to avoid them.

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