

## Assessment as a locus for engagement: priorities and practicalities

### La valutazione come locus per il coinvolgimento: priorità e aspetti pratici

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This paper considers how assessment can productively act as a locus for engagement. It focuses on the important case being made by diverse global assessment experts who argue that we would do well to rethink assessment such that learning, rather than quality assurance and measurement, becomes the main priority of assessment design in higher education settings. New discourses of assessment have emerged internationally to capture this important conceptual shift. These are briefly indicated and linked to key design features and indicative practices whereby assessment and feedback environments can be enhanced to promote and foster learner engagement. The paper highlights the importance of incorporating assessment for learning (AFL) approaches which are authentic to the ways of thinking and practising of the subject-community within a given field of study. It proposes that advancing the assessment and feedback literacy and capabilities of assesseees through authentic assessment and dialogic approaches are vital, but these need to be embedded in the disciplinary content and inherently viewed as pedagogic practices, rather than piecemeal approaches or bolt-on additions to the extant curriculum. It puts forward suggestions for effective implementation, but concludes that the development of staff assessment literacy, underpinned by academics' familiarity with new assessment discourses, is a fundamental prerequisite for effective AFL environments. This is highlighted as one of the key contextual challenges that must be acknowledged and addressed if AFL is to be scaled up meaningfully as a locus of learner engagement.

**Keywords:** Assessment for learning, assessment design, authentic assessment, assessment literacy, feedback literacy, assessment discourse

Questo articolo considera in che modo la valutazione possa agire in modo produttivo come locus di coinvolgimento. Esso si focalizza sull'importante posizione presa da diversi esperti di valutazione a livello globale, che sostiene che la necessità di ripensare la valutazione come apprendimento, piuttosto che come assicurazione e misurazione della qualità, sia oggi la priorità principale nel progettare processi di valutazione nei contesti dell'istruzione superiore. Nuovi "discorsi" sulla valutazione sono emersi a livello internazionale per argomentare questo importante cambiamento concettuale. Essi sono qui proposti brevemente, unitamente a modalità progettuali e indicazioni pratiche per migliorare gli ambienti di valutazione e di feedback al fine di promuovere e favorire il coinvolgimento degli studenti. L'articolo sottolinea l'importanza di integrare approcci di valutazione per l'apprendimento (AFL), autentici, nelle modalità di pensare e praticare delle comunità disciplinari dei diversi campi di studio. Esso sostiene che sia vitale promuovere la literacy valutativa e di elaborazione di feedback e accrescere le capacità dei valutati attraverso l'utilizzo della valutazione autentica e di approcci dialogici, tuttavia essi devono essere incorporati nel contenuto disciplinare e interpretati intrinsecamente come pratiche pedagogiche, piuttosto che come approcci frammentari o aggiunte esterne alla programmazione esistente. L'articolo offre suggerimenti per l'effettiva attuazione di tali pratiche, ma sottolinea anche che lo sviluppo della literacy valutativa dei docenti universitari, sostenuta da una conoscenza dei nuovi "discorsi" in tema di valutazione, sia un prerequisito fondamentale per costruire ambienti AFL efficaci. Questa è presentata come una delle sfide chiave da riconoscere e affrontare se si vuole proporre AFL come locus significativo di coinvolgimento degli studenti.

**Parole chiave:** Valutazione per l'apprendimento, progettazione della valutazione, valutazione autentica, literacy valutativa e di feedback, "discorsi" sulla valutazione

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# Assessment as a locus for engagement: priorities and practicalities

## Introduction

Higher Education in the twenty-first century requires *fit-for-purpose* assessment (Brown & Knight, 1994) that uses a coherent approach and relies on the effective interplay of purposes of assessment, orientation, methodology, agency, and timing. It is also crucial that, overall, assessment processes are seen to be *fair*, since students become demotivated and disengaged if they do not have faith in assessment systems (Flint & Johnson, 2011); *reliable*, so that all concerned have confidence that work of an equivalent standard is assessed at the same level; *valid* so that what is assessed is seen as a good representation of what is outlined in learning outcomes; and *authentic*, to ensure that we are assessing meaningfully rather than through proxy measures (Brown & Race, 2012; Fook & Sidhu, 2010).

There is, however, growing evidence to indicate that assessment systems are falling short of these ideals, and the case for improving assessment practices is mounting globally (Carless *et al*, 2017). As the UK Higher Education Academy argued in their influential publication 'A Marked Improvement':

Assessment of student learning is a fundamental function of higher education. It is the means by which we assure and express academic standards and has a vital impact on student behaviour, staff time, university reputations, league tables and, most of all, students' future lives. The [UK] National Student Survey, despite its limitations, has made more visible what researchers in the field have known for many years: assessment in our universities is far from perfect.' (HEA, 2012 p.7)

In what follows, we aim to explore how assessment and feedback processes can genuinely become integrated with learning in ways that engage students and encourage success, while ensuring that quality standards are met or exceeded. We will highlight some key priorities which underpin assessment as a productive locus for engagement, together with associated indicative practices. This may, however, require considerable re-orientation by both universities and the staff they employ to assess students, especially in relation to improving the authenticity of students' assessment experiences. We argue that by providing



opportunities to foster assessment-related literacy both for assessors and assessees, we might open up productive dialogues to make assessment activities and processes more meaningful and constructive, while considering along the way some of the core challenges faced by those following this course of action.

## 1. Towards assessment for and as learning

More than two decades of research in higher education has indicated that assessment is a powerful driver for learning (Brown & Knight, 1994 Gibbs, 1999). Assessment exerts a profound impact on the student experience that goes well beyond the supposedly simple activity of evaluating the quality of students' performance of tasks and assignments set by their university staff. It has a strong bearing on how teachers teach and how students learn. This is often referred to as the 'backwash effect' (Dysthe, 2008) and this phenomenon has led to widespread attempts to alter the social meanings of assessment to incorporate assessment as a positive and integral part of teaching and learning, rather than a separate event after learning and teaching have taken place.

The prominence that is now widely afforded to socio-constructivist perspectives on learning and teaching imply that a concomitant shift in assessment theory and practice is required (Birenbaum, 2003). New paradigms assume that assessment needs to be redefined from a unilateral act by teachers *on* students towards a dialogic process which, to some degree, actively involves students themselves. This cultural shift requires a redefinition of the social meanings of assessment: away from a technique for controlling student learning towards a means of communicating to students what counts as valid, worthwhile knowledge and developing learners' insights into how they are progressing. In other words, assessment primarily becomes a tool for learning (Sambell *et al.*, 2013) rather than simply a means of judging and selecting students.

The assessment for learning movement (Boud & Falchikov, 2007) in higher education has involved concerted attempts to encourage and support academics to shift their assessment priorities to foreground learning and transform their assessment and feedback practices accordingly. One important aim has been to develop and value assessment practices which stimulate student engagement. This entails redesigning assessment practices to foster individual engagement in learning activities and subject matter, but also involves the development of assessment practices whereby students learn via participation and the



development of identity (Sambell, 2013a). Another important goal has been to foster student autonomy, such that students learn not to become overly dependent on their teachers to oversee and steer their action. This dimension entails re-engineering assessment practices, such that students are supported to exercise increasing levels of control over their own learning by progressively developing their capabilities in self-monitoring and self-regulation (Nicol & MacFarlane Dick, 2006). This type of engagement in assessment and feedback processes is important not just to equip students for academic success within the context of the immediate programme of study, but also to equip them well for the longer term (Boud, 2014) and a lifetime of learning in the complex and changing world beyond graduation (McLean, 2018; Tai *et al.*, 2018). Race (2009) importantly draws attention to the way in which engaging assessment becomes synonymous with an opportunity to learn, so assessment functions *as* learning.



## 2. Rethinking the meanings of assessment and feedback

There have been a number of book-length treatments of assessment and feedback in higher education in line with this new thinking. Often the terminology in their titles prominently signals the paradigm shifts which underpin reformist moves away from testing cultures toward-snew assessment for learning cultures. They include, for instance, landmark texts such as Boud and Falchikov's edited collection (2006) *Rethinking Assessment in Higher Education; Learning for the longer term* and Merry *et al's* (2007) *Reconceptualising feedback in higher education: developing dialogue with students*.

There have also been a number of large-scale pedagogic initiatives, such as the Re-Engineering Assessment Practices (REAP) project in Scotland. Led by David Nicol, REA Pactively sought to redefine the role of assessment in student learning by prioritising practices to promote self-regulation. Other attempts to radically reconfigure the conceptual approaches of important stakeholders include Carless *et al's* (2006) hugely influential and positive efforts to promote what they termed 'learning-oriented assessment' (LOA). This project coined the new terminology of 'learning-oriented assessment' in an effort to overcome what the instigators discovered were key confusions and doubts amongst teaching staff in their institution, especially in relation to 'formative assessment.' Some saw formative assessment as planned activity embodied by formal structured tasks whereas others saw it as mainly informal, adhoc opportunities that were embedded implicitly in good

interactive teaching. These conceptual differences were unhelpful, as they constrained institution-wide discussions about enhancing practice and prompted concerns among many stakeholders that, firstly, teachers did not have time to conduct formative assessments or that, secondly, students would not engage with tasks that accrued no marks. To surmount the barriers to future change that emanated from these concerns and definitional confusions, Carless coined a new term. LOA sought to reconfigure assessment thinking in a productive way by emphasising assessment processes which emphasised learning elements more than measurement ones. The starting point for reconfiguring assessment was to strengthen academics' sense of the overlap between learning and measurement elements, with the belief that this helpfully could be achieved through summative or formative assessments, as long as the focus was on engineering tasks which focussed, first and foremost, on creating productive student learning.

The learning-oriented model emphasised three core strands:

- First, framing assessment tasks as primarily learning tasks, such that students, when approaching assessment tasks, engage in worthwhile, long-term learning and deep approaches to learning which are aligned with the relevant ways of thinking and practising of the subject domain, rather than short-term cramming and memorisation;
- Second, student involvement in assessment processes through activities which enable learners to engage productively with learning goals, criteria and standards of quality;
- Third, "...for assessment to promote learning, students need to receive appropriate feedback which they can use to 'feedforward' into future work. Feedback in itself may not promote learning, unless students engage with it and act upon it.... Timeliness and promoting student engagement with feedback are thus key aspects" (Carless p. 13).

The principles of learning-oriented assessment resonate strongly with the six evidence-informed core conditions we also developed to drive conceptual change and an institutional culture shift via our large-scale Assessment for Learning (AFL) initiative in the £4.5 million Centre For Excellence (Sambell, McDowell & Montgomery, 2013). Our approach was also underpinned by the twin ideals of empowerment and engagement in an effort to move assessment much more firmly into the hands of students, as active, engaged and committed partners within university learning and assessment process. This approach meant rethinking some commonly-held assumptions about assessment and feedback, on the part of staff and students alike, rather than simply



inserting a few new techniques or tactics. In this sense, our view of AfL sought to represent a paradigm shift in overall thinking, and a reframing of staff-student relationships in terms of shared responsibility and partnership. In other words, seen through this lens, AfL became a way of thinking, akin to a philosophy, which thrives in environments where assessment practices are discussed, reflected upon, shared and negotiated in the more radical *spirit* of assessment for learning, rather than becoming routine procedures which are carried out to the letter or simply dropped into existing practices.

Given this, our AfL model was designed to act as a broad framework to support the development of assessment designs that promote good learning. The framework was based on six conditions, drawn from an extensive review of the literature and evidence-based practice, which offered opportunities for reflection and facilitated design-based dialogues. The six principles became, in effect, key questions for practitioners to ask themselves as they (re) designed learning environments with integrated and aligned assessment as part of the overall picture. To this end the model is best seen as a series of inter-linking aspects which characterise effective AfL environments, so that ideally *all* are in play. In other words, it should not be seen as a discrete set of components. In addition, our model of assessment for learning should not be viewed as necessarily teacher-directed, and it prioritises the engagement of students in processes which help to develop learners' evaluative judgement, which Boud (2000) refers to as sustainable assessment.

The model we developed called for an overall curriculum design that:

1. Emphasizes authenticity and complexity in the content and methods of assessment rather than reproduction of knowledge and reductive measurement;
2. Uses high stakes summative assessment rigorously but sparingly rather than as the main driver for learning;
3. Offers students extensive opportunities to engage in the kinds of tasks that develop and demonstrate their learning, thus building their confidence and capabilities before they are summatively assessed;
4. Is rich in feedback derived from formal mechanisms e.g. tutor comments on assignments, clickers in class;
5. Is rich in informal feedback e.g. peer discussions of work-in-progress, collaborative project work, which provides students with a continuous flow of feedback on 'how they are doing';



6. Develops students' abilities to direct their own learning, evaluate their own progress and attainments and support the learning of others.

## 2.1 *Rethinking Assessment Design for Learning*

Assessment can be a powerful means of focusing student effort and enhancing achievement if it is well designed and constructively aligned (Biggs & Tang, 2011) so curriculum designers need to deploy a diverse range of tactics to ensure that assessment designs work to enhance and extend student learning, rather than just measure outputs. Sometimes AfL is viewed as almost entirely synonymous with formative assessment, and while we acknowledge this dimension as a vitally important one, it is also important to remain mindful of the massive impact that summative assessment tasks can have on students' approaches to learning. Our views of fit-for-purpose assessment (Race, 2009; Brown, 2014) and our model of Assessment for Learning (Sambell *et al*, 2013; Sambell *et al*, 2017) equally emphasise the vital importance of investing time, expertise and energy into the skilful design of productive, worthwhile summative assessment tasks in order to promote meaningful, long-lasting learning in higher education. Research has indicated that all-too-often the effect of these in higher education is deleterious, rather than beneficial, and, despite academics' best intentions, students see and experience some of the most traditional and ubiquitous assessment tasks as simply a matter of accruing marks, jumping through hoops, or cramming material into their short-term memory in order to regurgitate it to satisfy the marker (Sambell *et al*, 1997). In the words of one of our own students, preparing for a raft of exams was mainly a matter of:

remembering enough information that I could spew out during the exam – almost regardless of the questions asked. My thinking was that if I threw enough jelly at the wall during the exam, some of it would stick and get me enough marks to get by! Luckily, it worked and I did enough to get over the line! But it wasn't an interesting or enjoyable experience, and to be honest, it hasn't come in [helped me] much since!"

The graphic metaphors that students often use to illustrate the backwash messages that assessment tasks implicitly convey can be salutary. Our early empirical research into the impact of assessment (Sambell *et al*, 1997) began to foreground the salience of students' interpretations, and underpinned our paper on the consequential validity





of assessment, in which we highlighted the importance of attending to what we alluded to as the unintended hidden curriculum of assessment (Sambell & McDowell, 1998). Students act in line with their own constructions of what an assessment task requires or expects of them, rather than what their teachers imagine the assessment task is all about. With this in mind, we argue strongly for a more holistic approach to assessment design, which, as far as possible, frames assessment *as* learning; where the ideal goal is to make assessment act *primarily* as a learning opportunity in its own right. When designing curriculum content, then, we need to consider carefully our conceptualisations of curriculum (Bovill & Woolmer, 2018), the purposes, make-up and scope of taught material and design assessment accordingly. The purposes of curriculum content might include for example, raising awareness of particular issues, providing an overview, getting students excited about a topic, prompting deep engagement with the material, putting forward contrasting viewpoints, exploring challenging ideas and debates, explaining difficult concepts, enthusing students with a passion for the subject, piquing personal passions and lines of enquiry, giving students data they need to undertake a task and so on, as well as conveying accepted forms of knowledge to learn so they can pass exams.

## 2.2. *The importance of making summative tasks meaningful*

Ideally, students are learning through engaging actively with assessment, whether that involvement is via developing their own capacities for exercising evaluative judgement or engaging in assessed tasks which seem meaningful in the longer term. From this perspective, the notion of authentic assessment (Villaroel *et al*, 2018) is often employed to connote a students' sense of valuable relevance and meaning which inheres in a learning-oriented assessment task. We now turn particular attention to this feature of productive summative assessment tasks.

Authentic assessment designs can help to address or at least begin to ameliorate a range of common challenges lecturers often face. Probably the most important one we have already alluded to: students' all-too-frequent sense that assessment is exclusively a matter of credentialism, with very little inherent learning benefit. From this perspective, assessment is viewed as a necessary evil or a chore to be endured, as implied in the following student quote:

Normal assignments have no audience. I don't know what happens when they go in: they get read and they get sent back.



This student's feelings of alienation from the assessment process, both in terms of producing something for a faceless, distant audience and of submitting work into a void and waiting passively to get it marked and returned, is palpable.

In stark contrast, engaging assessment tasks, which students view as meaningful or relevant beyond 'being marked,' are a major feature of effective AfL environments (Sambell, 2016). Students receive powerful backwash messages from authentic assessment tasks, as illustrated by the next quote. It is the same student, but this time she is discussing a project which offered her a high degree of choice and flexibility in the topic she decided to investigate; enabled her to choose whether to work individually or in self-selecting pairs or small groups; and gave her the chance to specify her chosen audience for an authoritative, evidence-informed yet practical guide on her topic area. This flexibility had an important impact on her approach to learning:

It's thinking.... You're more analytical, because you're trying to get the message across. We definitely discovered working together you're giving so much more. You're pulling things out of each other you didn't realise you had!

On similar lines, Engineering students who were working on a design project perceived the connection of this way of working to longer term professional practices in the future workplace.

[With this] you have to see for yourself. Make decisions. You've got some techniques and you have to think about whether you use them or not, and what kind. I think that's what you have to do in your job. The boss doesn't come and say 'Come on, I will now explain to you how to do this.' You... have to find out how to do it. And so I think it's more helpful for reality.

Burton (2011), however, sounds a note of caution about authentic assessment's tendency to overly focus on workplace scenarios. Given the fast-pace of change in many industries, particular knowledge and skills may not be relevant in future and soon become outmoded. With this in mind it may be wise to think of authenticity more broadly with regard to assessment, as "a relative notion contingent on what happens in practice, which varies across disciplines." Perhaps this most readily relates to the ways of thinking and practising (Meyer & Land, 2005) which are inherent in disciplinary cultures or more generally to critical thinking, information literacy, and working with 'messy' knowledge in



practice (Burton, 2011). But research is usefully illuminating broader spheres, too. Productive assessment regimes may, for instance, link to an idea of stewardship (Mclean, 2018) or to research cultures or cultures of inquiry (Fung, 2017); or to personal constructions (Davison, 2011). Davison's work is particularly interesting, as it focused explicitly on the challenges lecturers face when trying to create authentic assessment tasks in courses that were not tightly tied to a vocational area (such as literary studies, or history). Davison (2011) explored students' 'definitions' of authenticity in these areas and illuminated a series of views as follows:

- Authentic to the subject or discipline – *“doing this I feel like a real [sociologist/historian..]”*
- Authentic to the real world – *“when you're walking about you notice things and you can put them in to your work. You see how your subject applies to everyday life.”*
- Authentic to personal interests – *“when you're following your interests you're more keen and you can get to feel like an expert”*
- Authentic in process – *“It's more realistic to pool your ideas as a group.”*



### 2.3 Prioritising assessment and feedback as a curriculum design issue

The scope and extent of curriculum content also needs careful consideration, as does the way it is ordered, so that students can make sense of disparate elements and recognise the coherence of what they are learning. Many would argue for a progressive, iterative approach where big ideas and difficult concepts are introduced progressively, although in a poorly-aligned curriculum where separate modules or programmes are delivered by different academics who don't communicate with one another, this is often not the case. Atomised structures create particular problems for making coherent and developmental links between assessment and feedback across the programme. When assessment and feedback are not designed as a coherent whole, this can impact significantly on student learning (Jessop *et al*, 2014), making it difficult for students to engage productively in the sense-making process which enables them to comprehend appropriate criteria and standards for quality work which is often called their assessment literacy (Price *et al*, 2012). Similarly, sound, developmental and iterative feedback processes need to be carefully designed to encourage uptake (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Carless 2018), if feedback is to be more than one-way transmission or, in Sadler's (1989) terminology 'dangling data.'

### 3. Rethinking feedback processes and developing feedback literacy

It is becoming widely accepted that commonplace ways of thinking about feedback also need to shift, away from being thought of predominantly as the teacher's business to 'deliver' feedback and towards conceptualisations which equally emphasise learner engagement with the feedback process. Effective feedback processes are best supported by careful dialogic designs which are embedded holistically and introduced gradually to support and enhance students' feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018). Strategies which support students to recognise the value of feedback and understand their vital role in the process are highly prized from this perspective, as are tactics which help students manage the affective dimension; help them learn to make (not just receive) judgments, so that they become actively engaged in applying criteria and generating feedback. Opportunities for students to take action, which is crucial to closing a feedback loop, rely on careful designs (Carless, 2018) which enable students to see the application of comments on one task to other tasks in the future. Feedback literacy can be boosted significantly by pedagogic tactics which, for instance, involve students in peer review, or in dialogic analysis of exemplars. In such instances learning emanates from engaging with, discussing and comparing notions of quality so that the capability for making judgments become progressively refined in accordance with the particular context or community of practice. In our experience, feedback literacy can also be boosted by involving students as co-researchers or co-creators of support materials and guidance for others on the topics of AfL or feedback (Sambell & Graham, 2011; Sambell, 2013b).



### 4. The importance of developing students' feedback literacy in authentic contexts

Increasingly it is considered valuable to help students to develop their feedback literacy during the first few weeks of studying at university. Ideally, relevant opportunities for newcomers should be systematically made available for all. It is important to recognise, though, that feedback literacy is a highly contextualised phenomenon, rather than a generic skill. In other words, feedback literacy must, to some degree, be embedded in the curriculum content via authentic and engaging pedagogic practices which students encounter on their courses. It can, and arguably *should*, be rooted in low-stakes, non-threatening practice

settings (Sadler, 2010) and *informal* as well as formal feedback environments (Sambell *et al.*, 2013).

Hence, pedagogic activities that are intended to develop students' feedback literacy need to be designed, delivered and discussed by subject experts. First, subject experts have become steeped in the signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) and the ways of thinking and practising (Land *et al.*, 2016) of their disciplinary communities. Secondly, they have also developed nuanced understandings of what counts as quality in their particular subject domain. Because these understandings tend to reside in a community of expertise which has been developed over time, via gradual immersion in a set of shared academic practices, assumptions tend to be tacitly held (Price *et al.*, 2012). This, of course, makes them difficult to explicate and, moreover, even more challenging for outsiders and newcomers to notice. Therefore most students need considerable time and ample dialogue, especially with experts, to help them learn to 'see' (Sadler, 2010) quality from an assessor's standpoint in the subject domain, because without these insights their capacity to use external feedback and adjust their own approaches are constrained. Simply giving students written checklists and grids is rarely enough to communicate the tacit knowledge that underpin notions of academic quality (O'Donovan, 2017). Furthermore, experienced teachers have also developed, again typically over time, a strong sense of aspects which novices commonly find difficult, or where confusion often arises.

For all these reasons, feedback literacy is almost bound to be gradually and progressively developed, rather than a sudden revelation. This implies that students need support to gradually encounter formative opportunities which enable them to work actively with, discuss and analyse their work and that of others as they progress through their programmes of study. Curriculum designs that afford and enable these multiple developmental opportunities, are, therefore, to be welcomed (Sadler, 1989; Boud & Molloy, 2013). Crucially, they underpin a student's capacity to successfully monitor and regulate their own learning.

This all means that we can usefully involve students in a spectrum of activities situated in an authentic pedagogic context; that is, one that engages students actively with our subject material. These might include, for example:

- Self- and peer-review activities, especially where a range of low, sound-standard and high-quality answers can be supplied which enable students to develop a sense of their own progress in comparison with very good approaches as they are moving towards desirable learning goals;



- Self- and peer-evaluation, where students make judgments about the quality of the work presented and generate feedback against agreed criteria;
- Students having opportunities to evaluate, articulate and justify their views of students' work-in-progress in other groups (intra-peer assessment) and their own group (inter-peer assessment).

All these activities, carefully designed and skilfully orchestrated by pedagogically-informed and knowledgeable teachers, can help students become better at judging the quality of their own work *during its actual production*. Our own empirical research has recently borne this out in the field of Childhood Studies (Sambell *et al.*, 2018). Whole group in-class activities involving the dialogic analysis of examples of a formative task (which required students to compare their own work with a range of samples of formative writing about an important threshold concept) were used. Once students became fully engaged in the co-construction of criteria which they subsequently used in the analysis of the samples, they were able to gauge the relative quality of the samples and, hence, build a robust sense of quality against which to benchmark and compare their own developing work. For nearly 50% of the students ( $n=91$ ) this prompted important consequent action plans, because they realised they had not yet sufficiently developed an adequate grasp of some fundamental principles or had mistakenly referred to another similar-sounding concept. This spurred many to change their learning strategies mid-module, as the following illustrative comment from a learner indicates:

When we discussed the task in class I realised that what I had written didn't focus on the question! It was this that made me read around the subject more.

## Conclusion

We have been outlining what we view as a valuable shift towards sustainable assessment for learning cultures (Grion & Serbati, 2018) and throughout our paper we have drawn attention to the shifting discourses of assessment and feedback which underpin the so-called new paradigms. One of the key challenges, though, concerns staff development such that more academics – not simply the pioneering enthusiasts – have opportunity to engage with the ideas, language, concepts and models, values and ideological principles underpinning the shifts in



thinking about assessment and feedback we have alluded to throughout this article.

We recognise this, however, is a challenging and complex enterprise. According to Northedge (2003), academics are like the sherpas in the foothills of disciplinary discourse, helping students begin to navigate-subject-specific cultures and language and every discipline has its own tribes and territories (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Scaling up assessment for learning in higher education (Carless et al, 2017) will not, therefore, be straightforward, as it necessarily calls into play diverse definitions of curriculum (Bovill & Woolmer, 2018), diverse signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) and the different ways individual teachers frame the role of students. Additionally, Medland (2016) sounds a salutary warning about the inhibitory role of the dominant discourse of assessment, which is persistently typically associated with measurement and the testing culture rather than the promotion of learning and an assessment for learning culture. But assessment is a territory which has changed considerably in the last three decades because of the multiple shifts in thinking we have outlined here, so the drivers for positive change while emergent remain highly relevant and crucial for the enhancement of the student experience.



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