Learning about assessment: the impact of two courses for higher education staff

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Abstract

This interview-based study investigated the impact of two academic development courses about assessment. Participants learnt concepts and terminology which enabled them to better understand and communicate about assessment. The courses also stimulated critical thinking about assessment practices and conceptual change, with 'assessment for learning' emerging as significant with the qualities of a threshold concept. Certain learning activities stood out as transformational as they supported the examination of assessment from different perspectives and the integration of implicit with explicit knowledge, but only if participants had sufficient workplace experience that they could link to the formal knowledge taught in the courses.

Academic development, assessment, course, threshold concept

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Background

Formal credit-bearing teacher development courses at postgraduate certificate and masters' level have become standard components of academic development in several European countries and beyond (Pleschová & Simon, 2013; Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009). The study reported in this article investigated the impact of two such courses which specifically focused on assessment, rather than teacher development more broadly: a course on assessment (and learner support, not considered in this paper) compulsory for early career academics (ECAs), and a course on assessment for learning (AfL) available as continuing professional development for experienced staff. Within both courses participants were introduced to the following model of AfL:

AfL…

- Emphasises authentic and complex assessment tasks,

- Uses high stakes summative assessment rigorously but sparingly,

- Offers extensive 'low stakes' confidence building opportunities and practice,

- Is rich in formal feedback (e.g. tutor comment, self-review logs),

- Is rich in informal feedback (e.g. peer review of draft writing, collaborative project work),

- Develops students' abilities to evaluate own progress, direct own learning

(see Sambell, McDowell & Montgomery, 2013, p. 5, for an amended, published version).

The course on AfL was a year-long 20-credit module comprising a notional 200 learning and teaching hours. It could be taken by all university staff who teach and/or support learning, either to contribute to a postgraduate award in academic practice, or as free standing, non credit-bearing professional development. The course, which was designed,

taught and assessed by a team of staff with expertise in AfL including the author, focused on examining the conditions included in the AfL model and developing participants' practice in line with them. It was taught through on-line individual and group activities coupled with two-monthly face-to-face sessions, and summatively assessed by a portfolio of evidence selected from the module's learning activities. The course for ECAs had the same credit rating and learning and teaching hours, but was part of the university's postgraduate certificate on learning and teaching in higher education (HE), and taught in weekly two-hour sessions held over one semester. It addressed assessment more widely including AfL and other aspects, e.g. contrasting purposes and models of assessment, marking, standards, assessment criteria and practical methods for enhancing and engaging students with assessment such as the use of exemplars. It was taught by one academic developer, with minor contributions by others, including the author, and assessed through a written critique of participants' own assessment practice.

Literature review

Several publications have drawn attention to the ongoing debate and conflicting evidence about the impact of academic development on learning, teaching and assessment practice in HE. Both Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels and Van Petegem's (2010) and Parsons, Hill, Holland and Willis' (2012) reviews conclude that the evidence base is relatively fragmented and its quality extremely variable. When considering impact on teacher behaviour, Stes et al. (2010) found that academic development extending over time was more effective than one-time events; when impact on students was considered, 'collective course-like' academic development had more impact than alternative formats. Due to the numbers and foci of the studies reviewed, these conclusions remain tentative. Whilst there are studies that have shown that courses do make a difference (e.g. Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Ho, Watkins

& Kelly, 2001; Rust, 2000), other research suggests that HE teachers mainly learn informally through social practice in the workplace and that learning from courses is mediated by institutional microcultures and the networks and informal conversations they facilitate (Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015; Thomson, 2015).

Much of the research examining courses focuses on their impact on HE teachers themselves (Stes et al., 2010), and the research on conceptions of teaching has been particularly influential, not only by directing research on HE teachers' learning, but also by providing an evidence-base for practical academic development activities. Various studies have demonstrated a link between the conceptions of teaching which teachers hold (teaching as transmission of information versus conceptual change) and their approaches to teaching (learning-focused versus content-focused strategies) (e.g. Trigwell, Prosser, & Taylor, 1994), and some studies have also found an association between teachers' approaches to teaching and their students' approaches to learning (Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999). There is some debate whether a change in conception is a prerequisite for a change to teaching strategies, or vice-versa (e.g. Devlin, 2006; Sadler, 2012), and the implications this has for courses. Some studies of academic development courses have demonstrated their effect on conceptions of teaching (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Hanbury, Prosser, & Rickinson, 2008; Knight, 2006; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007), but overall the evidence is inconclusive.

De Rijdt, Stes, Van der Vleuten, and Dochy (2013) and Stes et al. (2010) draw attention to the fact that the research to date offers limited insight into the precise nature of academic development interventions since publications do not include much detail, apart from whether the intervention is a course, its duration and target group. Peseta (2011) argues that academic developers should devote more attention to content, i.e. the ideas and concepts

used in academic development. Kandlbinder and Peseta's (2009) empirical study identified a range of key concepts taught in postgraduate certificates in HE teaching and learning. They found a surprising similarity in the concepts that are included in courses situated in different institutional and national contexts. However, whilst the idea that assessment drives learning seemed to be important content, there was no specific concept associated with assessment. Which concepts do and should feature in academic development has also been raised by Land (2011) who suggests that academic developers would benefit from engaging with the notion of threshold concepts (TCs). Coming to terms with a TC involves entering a new conceptual space which opens up previously inaccessible ways of conceptualising a phenomenon and transforms thinking and practice, involving a liminal transition phase during which new understandings are integrated and prior conceptualisations discarded. This has raised the question of whether there are threshold concepts in academic development (King & Felten, 2012).

The current study focuses on courses about assessment rather than learning and teaching in general. Relatively little research specifically investigates *learning* about assessment and becoming an assessor, and we could not identify any studies which focus on the role of courses. Jawitz (2007) highlights the importance of relationships within and between departmental communities of practice for the way in which ECAs learn about assessment in the workplace. In a similar vein Handley, den Outer and Price's (2013) research on marking demonstrates that learning how to assess student work appears to happen through 'doing the job' and informal interactions rather than formal training. Samuelowicz and Bain (2002) show that there are parallels between orientations to assessment and orientations to teaching and learning, and that different beliefs about assessment result in corresponding assessment practices. Maclellan (2001) and Norton, Norton, Shannon and Philips (2009), on the other hand, draw attention to discrepancies between espoused theories

of assessment and reported assessment practices. This suggests that in the area of assessment there is even less evidence and agreement about the relationship between conceptions and practices and about the potential of academic development to influence conceptions of assessment and assessment practices.

The literature review has highlighted that although academic development courses have been well researched, less attention has been paid to their finer details. Little is therefore known about the ways in which courses support learning about assessment and which concepts or learning activities may be particularly transformational. These are the gaps which this paper aims to address.

Method and data analysis

Holliday (2016) advocates research that benefits from opportunities arising in cultures and social settings. As AfL was a strategic priority at the institution under consideration, the study combined the evaluation of the courses with researching their impact on staff understanding of assessment and their reported assessment practices. 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Eight ECAs out of 49 course participants volunteered to be interviewed, including lecturers in law, social work, biomedical science (2x), forensic sciences, architecture, a clinical educator and a member of staff in a student support role, all bar one with approximately one year of undergraduate and/or postgraduate teaching or student support experience. The six interviewees from the AfL module comprised staff with two to 25 years of experience in HE, including lecturers in computing, accountancy, fashion, physiotherapy, nursing and one individual in a student support role. This group had a wide range of backgrounds and roles at undergraduate and/or postgraduate level, such as programme leader. Six of the seven AfL module participants volunteered to be interviewed.

The differences between the proportion of volunteers may be due to the compulsory nature of the course for ECAs (the AfL module was taken voluntarily). Interviewees were asked to comment on the benefits of their respective course, the learning activities undertaken, changes in their understanding of assessment, changes in their assessment practices, and the content and delivery of the course.

The analysis was influenced by Holliday's (2016) principles for thematic analysis. Data from the two courses were initially analysed separately and then together, considering similarities and differences, and particular attention was paid to evidence of conceptual change and transformation. Interview statements were organised under broad thematic headings which comprised 'what was learnt about assessment', 'how it was learnt' distinguishing further between learning 'through the course' and 'through everyday practice', and 'other contributions of the course'. Looking for patterns within and between these themes, whilst at the same time not losing sight of the data more holistically as recommended by Holliday, generated sub-themes from which the argument presented in this article gradually unfolded.

Findings

The analysis resulted in the following findings:

1. The learning afforded by the courses can be characterised as:

    1.1. An ability to understand and apply assessment-specific concepts and terminology in order to make sense of and discuss assessment practices;

    1.2. A transformation of (some) participants' understanding of assessment and their practices through the notion of AfL;

1.3. An ability to take a critical stance towards assessment practices, both participants'

own and those of others.

2. Certain learning activities stood out as transformational. These included: interviewing

students about their experiences of assessment; presenting and critically reviewing

disciplinary assessment practices with course participants from other disciplines;

redesigning a module drawing on the principles taught on the courses.

The sections that follow outline these findings in more detail.

1. Learning afforded by the courses

1.1 Understanding assessment-specific concepts and terminology

The experienced members of staff on the AfL module in particular emphasised the

way in which the course provided them with conceptual underpinnings for their assessment

practice and opened up new ways of thinking about it. The concepts appeared to offer a lens

which allowed them to make sense of and analyse what they were doing, confirming or

critiquing practices and pointing towards alternatives.

> Your reading lists were like a light going on for me so I was able to read more about the
> things (…) that I was already doing, so ideas that I had about changing modules or
> reflecting on student feedback; the reading lists on the units within the module helped me
> to, I suppose, reflect and frame what I was doing. (AfL3)

For some, applying assessment concepts to their practice validated existing practices.

The interviewee quoted below discussed this within the context of a new module they had

developed and noted that this module incorporated the principles of AfL as introduced in the

course, albeit implicitly and without having been aware of AfL as a concept:

> [The AfL module] formalised a lot of the things that I was thinking. (…) [The design of a module] (…) was drawing on some of the principles I now know as AfL, but not knowing that's what they were at the time. (AfL6)

Although this was predominantly expressed by experienced members of staff, it was also reported by an ECA:

> I was able to see that some of the stuff I'd attempted to do in semester one, some of what I felt intuitively was right, is backed up by some of the theory. (PGCert5)

The concepts introduced in the course also provided the participants with relevant language which enabled them to position themselves, describe and analyse their practice more clearly and explicitly. ECAs in particular focused on the way in which the course gave them access to assessment-specific terminology:

> The terminology. You sort of feel, okay, I understand. (…) It's just about interpreting what's going on around you. (…) It puts it in some sort of structure for you and you can express it. (…) You can say to someone in that way 'This is what I think I'm having a problem with' and it gives you the language to be able to communicate it. (PGCert2)

Through engaging participants with assessment principles and terminology, the two courses seemed to provide conceptual and discursive resources which opened up new ways of thinking and communicating about practice, with both of these aspects being inextricably linked. The terms interviewees used in order to describe the relationship between assessment concepts and assessment practice, such as 'formalised', 'construed', ''framed', 'backed up by theory', 'put into some sort of structure' suggest that taking the course enabled them to make the tacit knowledge gained in the academic workplace explicit. This suggests that implicit and explicit knowledge interact, something which Tynläjä (2008) highlights as crucial for the development of expertise. However, this did not apply to all interviewees. One ECA stated

that the absence of practical experience made it impossible to make sense of the ideas encountered in the course:

> I have struggled a little with [the PGCert] and I think it's because I'm not teaching academically. So for everything that I'm being taught in [the PGCert], I haven't anything to pin it on. I can't apply it to working practice because I'm not doing that job. So for me, it's quite difficult and all very theoretical. (PGCert8)

Another ECA criticised their course for providing insufficient opportunities to 'kick the material around' and develop abstract principles into something more practical:

> All I've seen on that is this kind of theoretical basis. For myself now, trying to translate that in is quite difficult. (…) You have all the information and some of it provides some good ideas, but how I kind of take the next step and nail that all together, for me seems to be the tricky part, like an urchin grasping in the dark. There's something shiny there, so how do you turn it into something that works. (PGCert1)

The lack of integration between explicit and implicit knowledge (Tynläjä, 2008) appears be an issue for those novice academics who may not have developed sufficient experiential knowledge with which to link formal knowledge provided by the course. It also raises the question whether courses actively support such integration.

1.2 The notion of 'assessment for learning' as a vehicle for conceptual change

The notion of AfL emerged as particularly significant for some course participants who described it as having transformed their understanding of assessment. The ways in which they discuss this experience strongly suggests conceptual change, which is illustrated by the following excerpts:

> The whole assessment for learning idea (…) made me think about assessment in a way that I haven't before, so using assessment as a tool for learning rather than just a means of students achieving a mark. (…) It was like a light bulb suddenly switched on. (PGCert6)

Interviewer: Whether your understanding of assessment has changed…

Dramatically so, yes.

Interviewer: And what triggered that change? (…)

I think it's engaging with the concept. Assessment for learning. Before I came, was about 'assessing'; nice and simple! Have they learnt and therefore have they passed? The fairly lumpen understanding of assessment. The idea of it being used other than vaguely to encourage students to learn, you know, we've always put in homeworks because small amounts of work, therefore they'll learn little bits and because they're small bits, they'll do them. But (…) it's been on the basis that it's all right for us. And it's a clever little tool we've thought of to push them along. But (…) I've never thought about that wider picture. (AfL1)

One strength of the notion of AfL appeared to lie in the way in which it instigated a conceptualisation of assessment which focused on the student perspective:

I've tried my best to look at it from the student perspective and actually think about the way that we assess students, whether it's a) any good for them as students or if it's too stressful, does it reflect what they're going to do out there in practice (…) and b) does it correlate well with the subject matter? (…) That's my idea of the term assessment for learning. (PGCert3)

The AfL module did not only comprise academic staff but also someone in a student support role. Initially they had wondered about the relevance of the module to their practice; however, in the interview they stressed the way in which the notion of AfL subsequently provided them with an opportunity to (re-)conceptualise their work with students as assessment:

I perhaps realised that I was offering more in terms of formative assessment than I'd realised. And I think this links into (…) the idea that students just think assessment is (…) the grade they get on a piece of work. (…) So I thought, well that's where I'm fitting in because I'm actually part of giving feedback to students, that could be construed as some form of formative assessment. (AfL4)

The analysis suggests that the notion of AfL might be a transformative concept which generates new ways of thinking about assessment and corresponding practices.

1.3 Becoming critical

The impact of the courses on participants' ability to take a critical stance towards existing assessment practices particularly, but not exclusively emerged from the interviews with ECAs. They discussed how learning to assess means being informally inducted and socialised into discipline and context-specific practices, which can involve 'doing' without having a clear rationale or being aware of alternatives. One interviewee contrasted this with the critical examination of practice which they perceived to be facilitated by the course:

> When I started off, I was given certain jobs to do and we do them because we're told and then as you go along, during the process you can really learn on the job. But [in the course] to sit down and put any thought into the matter, into what we are doing and why we are doing it, I think it really helped me quite a lot. (PGCert4)

Interviewees mentioned not only having become critical of their own assessment practices, but also of practices in their local context:

> I do now look at colleagues who are assessing their students with exams or tests and think 'Well, that's a bit strange. How does that work?' and it seems not relevant to the subject and doesn't seem to add anything either for the students or for the teaching staff, and I guess it's just the way it's always been done. (PGCert5)

The possibility of questioning and going beyond 'the way it's always been done' was also emphasised by other interviewees. The interviewee quoted below referred to disciplinary assessment practices which had previously been taken for granted:

> It has made me think about it more, rather than just accepting that the way it is, that's it. If someone says 'This is the way we assess on this course' (…), being able to think about and challenge, in my own mind, whether it can actually be changed. (PGCert2)

A critical attitude can also result in action and change which are beyond an ECA's own individual practice. In the example below the understanding of assessment gained through the course provided the interviewee with the confidence to challenge a senior colleague:

> It [the module for ECAs] opened my eyes to what an internal moderator should be doing. And I think I surprised my head of division because he was very pleased at the manner in which I'd carried it out. He said 'You were very thorough!' (…) I was going to this internal moderation (…) The marking criteria, I wasn't sure if it had been provided to the students before the exam or not. And then I was going through the manner in which it had been marked or assessed and the same assessor had given a 10 out of 10 to one student for mentioning the same thing, and to another he had given 6 out of 10 (…). He's quite a senior lecturer but he was a little surprised that I actually questioned him on that, but I think it made me look at a new way at which we assess students. (PGCert4)

The evidence discussed in this section has highlighted that the courses enabled staff to become critical about their own assessment practices, those of their colleagues and disciplinary practices more widely. Informal learning in the workplace can result in 'bad habits and dysfunctional practices' (Tynläjä, 2008, p. 140). Therefore the critical stance towards existing workplace practices developed through a course has the potential to result in more considered, well founded assessment practices.

2. *Transformational learning activities*

Certain learning activities within the two courses stood out as having a particularly strong impact on the qualitative changes in thinking and practice discussed above. One of the first units of the AfL module focused on the student perspective by introducing research on students' experiences of assessment. Module participants were then asked to interview a student about their experiences of assessment and post their analysis of the interview in the virtual learning environment; some also chose to include the analysis in their portfolio

(summative assessment). Some participants described this learning activity as opening up an unexpected student-focused perspective on their practice:

> I interviewed a student about a module that (…) I thought was (…) absolutely perfect, that just didn't work very well. And that (…) pulled me up quite sharp. And I was thinking that, 'Well the students just haven't engaged with that' and then I talked to a student who'd had a good experience of it but even her positive comments made me think about where the gaps were in the module and where I just hadn't perhaps designed the module as well as I thought I had. And that was very interesting, listening to a student. (AfL3)

> I interviewed 4 students. (…) One of the students that didn't pass the module was a very, very bright person with a PhD and they'd just really gone off on a tangent with it. (…) Students weren't coming for supervision in that module and I couldn't understand why. But the interviews actually highlighted the fact that as graduates, they felt there was a tension between being a graduate and being a novice.
> (AfL6)

Another learning activity with considerable impact involved participants of the ECA module in working in subject-specific groups on presentations which discussed an assessment practice 'typical' of their own subject area. Applying principles such as validity, reliability, equity, transparency introduced in previous sessions, another group then provided them with critical feedback about this practice. The impact of this activity was mentioned by several interviewees.

> One of the most beneficial parts of the course (…) was when we did our presentation on all the different kinds of assessment, and I found that really interesting looking at how other areas assess, and especially when us as a [subject] group talked about competency based [subject], (…) there was some negative feedback really. (PGCert3)

The effect of this activity was attributed to the critical comments made by colleagues, in particular as they came from different disciplinary backgrounds and faculties and challenged the presenters on what they took for granted.

> We were actually challenged a great deal in that presentation. (…) My colleague came away with the idea that we've always assumed coursework is right because it's what we all did when we were [Subject] students ourselves, and it seems like a fairly bog standard approach to assessment for [faculty] students. (…) People did say it sounded very harsh, things like 'Do we get to see the question in advance?' or 'Do they just get the coursework and three weeks to answer it?' And from our perspective, we were very defensive in saying, 'Well they've got three weeks to deal with the question so why would they need it in advance?' and people were saying, 'Sounds like a very difficult assessment for students' and 'Are you sure it meets the objectives and the assessment criteria?' so it did give us a lot of food for thought. (PGCert3)

Designing a (simulated) study skills module in groups was another activity whose impact was highlighted by AfL module participants. The design of the module had to incorporate a range of principles introduced on the course, most notably the conditions of AfL shown on page [?]. They were then given the optional task to examine and redesign a module from their own practice using the same principles. This activity seemed to be particularly effective when participants applied it to their own modules that genuinely needed development. The following excerpt is an example of this task stimulating the authentic redesign of a module which was subsequently brought to validation in the 'real world':

> We had to take a module and kind of reinvent it really, a module that maybe needed lots of work doing to it, so I took the [subject] module from Level 3 and looked at what was good and not so good about it, and then completely rewrote it. (…) If I hadn't been doing the [AfL] module then we maybe wouldn't have passed… (…) We wouldn't have done what we have done to the same extent because we've completely changed it. (AfL5)

The interviewee went on to discuss the way in which their confidence in the rationale for the changes gained through the AfL module allowed them to defend them convincingly to the panel that validated the changes.

Discussion and conclusion

On one level, the present study has provided some additional evidence for the impact of academic development courses, thus contributing to the findings of prior research (e.g. Gibbs & Coffey, 2007; Ho et al., 2001; Postareff et al., 2007; Rust, 2000). However, more importantly perhaps, it highlights the need to move beyond the 'informal versus formal learning' debate and instead examine the ways in which transformation can be achieved, both through the content and the learning activities of courses.

The study has generated some, admittedly modest, insights about the nature of transformative learning activities within such courses. One key aspect appears to be the way in which activities foster the integration between formal and informal learning. In the courses under consideration learning seemed to be particularly effective when there were opportunities for formal and informal learning to interact. In her review of research on workplace learning Tynjälä (2008) stresses the importance of the interaction and integration of explicit, conceptual with tacit, practical knowledge for the development of expertise. In the present study there was evidence that the courses facilitated such integration, but only if there was sufficient relevant practical workplace experience to link with the conceptual knowledge taught in the courses. Critically examining workplace experience through the presentations and actively using the knowledge gained on the course to take action in the real-world workplace through the module design task seemed to be strategies that had the potential to enable such integration. Similarly, Thomson (2015) suggests incorporating opportunities for

informal conversations into academic development programmes in order to strengthen the relationship between informal and formal learning. A different characteristic of transformational learning activities concerned the way in which they enabled participants to examine assessment from different perspectives. Being confronted with perspectives from other disciplines and the resulting need to question the taken-for-granted was most notable in the presentation activity, while deeper engagement with the student perspective was a consequence of course participants interviewing students. This resonates with Samuelowicz & Bain's (2002) research in which a focus on student learning was a key distinguishing characteristic of orientations to assessment practice which emphasise knowledge construction and transformation rather than reproduction.

The focus of this study on assessment has also brought the conceptual content of courses to the fore (Peseta, 2011). In the courses under investigation, it was the notion of AfL which turned out to be a concept with the potential to engender change in participants' understanding of assessment and associated changes in their assessment practice. Once understood, it opened up a new way of conceptualising assessment which appeared to have the qualities of a TC (Land, 2011). These included letting go of previously held conceptions of assessment as end-point-testing and grading, and coming to terms with the initially alien and counter-intuitive notion of assessment as an intrinsic component of instruction. Recently Land (2016) has stressed transformation and integration as non-negotiable characteristics of TCs, and in the present study coming to understand AfL led to a conception of assessment in which learning, teaching and assessment were closely integrated. This transformational potential of AfL has important implications for academic development. Kandlbinder and Peseta's (2009) research demonstrated that there was a certain lack of agreement and conceptual clarity in relation to assessment-specific concepts, and the present study suggests that AfL should feature more prominently in the curriculum of academic development

courses. The literature on such courses tends to consider learning and teaching more broadly; by pointing towards AfL as a possible TC, however, this study highlights the potential of academic development research which focuses on specific conceptual areas. This also raises the question of whether there is a need to better understand academic development in areas other than assessment and, in line with King and Felten's (2012) work, which other concepts have the qualities of a TC and should therefore feature more prominently in academic development courses.

The current study is not without limitations. It is small scale, situated in one institutional setting and did not set out to investigate AfL as a TC. In addition, the involvement of the researcher in teaching the courses under consideration and the reliance on self-reported data may have resulted in an undue focus on research participants' espoused theories, to which Norton et al. (2009) and Maclellan (2001) have drawn attention. Further research using different methodologies and examining a wider range of courses, contexts, cultures as well as conceptual areas is therefore needed.

Biography

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