# Developing Assessment Use for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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**Introduction**

### Current debates about educational assessment refer to research evidence that suggests assessment as a regular element of classroom work holds the key to better learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Broadfoot et al., 2001, Atkinson, 2003). Much of this evidence is derived from research conducted at primary and secondary school levels. A central aim of this project is to assess the relevance of such assessment theory to postgraduate level work.

Shepard (2000) talks of an emergent constructivist paradigm of teaching, learning and assessment. In this paradigm the model of learning underpinning assessment requires more student centred approaches. Teachers’ close assessment of students’ understanding, feedback from peers, and student self-assessments are a central part of the social processes that mediate the development of intellectual abilities, construction of knowledge and formation of students’ identities. In pursuing the goals of effective assessment use for teaching and learning in Higher Education we found it was fundamental for us, as learners and teachers, together with our course participants to grow in a community of practice. Through our pedagogic practices we wished to create for our students a community of assessment practice where participation, as a way of learning, enables the course participant to understand and contribute to the culture of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1996).

Nothing in the assessment process should be hidden and all hurdles need to be understood clearly and explicitly. However, in establishing such an approach and community of shared understanding there are many tensions and issues that emerge. This project has contributed to our awareness of these issues and has helped us in our pursuit of assessment practice that aligns with intended learning at Masters (M) level.

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A small grant from ESCalate (<http://www.escalate.ac.uk>) provided the financial support needed to conduct this research. The Higher Education Funding Council funds ESCalate that is part of the Learning and Teaching Support Network. Initiatives to develop teaching and learning, such as this project, are supported. In our proposal we aimed to disseminate our research findings and establish networks with colleagues who shared similar values and research interests.

### Purpose and Focus

Our main focus was the development and refinement of our current assessment and pedagogic practices to facilitate postgraduate learning. The study builds on the findings of four action research projects and two recent studies that have contributed to our understanding of educational assessment practices and their impact on learning. The purpose of this research was to refine and develop these assessment and pedagogic practices, which incorporate the use of self and peer-assessment, learning portfolios and learning groups. Another related purpose was to develop further the process for sharing understanding of assessment criteria and standards for assessment.

**Intended Outcomes**

At the outset the intended outcomes included:

* A contribution to current debates about the value of educational assessment as a regular element of classroom teaching for learning in HE;
* Guidance for the use of assessment practices and resources used at Masters level teaching and learning developed after discussion, debate and feedback from colleagues at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, Bristol;
* An evidenced based report on the relevance and usefulness of the assessment practices and resources to help colleagues facilitate learning and assessment at Masters level.

**Background**

Institutions of Higher Education are under pressure to improve teaching and assessment practices through the expectations of the Quality Assurance Agency’s *Code of Practice* and *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ) (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/Cop/COPaosfinal>) and the discipline audit trails conducted to assess the standard of student achievement. At the same time learner centred approaches to assessment are becoming increasingly valued in Higher Education and post-compulsory education (Rust, 2002; Brown, 2003). This context suggests that continued action research and development of formative assessment and pedagogic practices that connect with theory are needed.

As teachers and researchers in the field of educational assessment with a strong professional interest in evaluating practices that constitute effective educational assessment in the classroom we have been engaged in action research projects for the past five years to investigate our teaching of assessment and evaluation, at postgraduate level (Elwood and Klenowski, 2002; Klenowski and Coate 2003).

In 1999 Elwood and Klenowski (2002) co-taught the subject assessment at Masters level at the Institute of Education, University of London. The focus of this first action research project was to integrate research evidence within educational assessment into our professional practice. The development of formative assessment practice required us to integrate processes and procedures into our pedagogic practice to enable our students to reach a shared understanding of the published criteria and assessment quality for masters level coursework held by this community of assessors.

In 2001 Klenowski and Coate (2003) conducted another action research project funded by the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF). This study examined tutors’ and students’ perspectives of the value of learning groups as part of pedagogic practice to promote better learning. The purpose was to determine the effectiveness of learning groups in helping the students’ learning, with a view to strengthening practices around group work strategies. We identified a range of purposes of learning groups and the importance of the tutor’s role and group organisation. The strategies to maximise the potential of learning groups and the hindrances to effective practice were reported. A CD ROM was produced which demonstrates the learning groups in action and students’ perceptions of the value of learning groups.

Klenowski and Elwood in 2002 continued to explore their teaching of assessment and/or evaluation but were now working in different contexts. Elwood had moved to the Graduate School of Education, Queen’s University where she took up the post of Professor and continued to evaluate and develop assessment practices. She was particularly interested in ways to integrate peer and self-assessment practice. Klenowski (2002a) also continued to explore ways to develop formative assessment practice and focused on the use of the portfolio. The learning portfolio was introduced to scaffold the development of intended learning outcomes such as critique, reflection, independent thinking, well-argued, well-constructed writing. The portfolio pedagogy that developed made use of group work that centres around tasks that guides discussion and helps students attend to learning goals.

In 2003 Klenowski continued researching the learning portfolio in collaboration with Askew and Carnell, who were also interested in exploring pedagogic and formative assessment practices to enhance learning (Askew, Carnell and Klenowski, 2003). These action research projects were conducted at postgraduate level at the Institute of Education, University of London in the School of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment (<http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/schools/mst/LTU/LTUConf/links.htm>)

A seminar was arranged in the Graduate School of Education (GSoE), Bristol University, to disseminate findings from the above projects to colleagues in another context and to explore the possibilities of working collaboratively. Elwood and Klenowski presented their findings from action research projects conducted in the Autumn Term of 2003 that provide the basis for this report.

## Methodology

This project was based on action research conducted in two Masters modules concerned with the teaching of assessment in two different Universities, The Institute of Education, University of London and Queen’s University, Belfast. The general aims of the modules are that participants learn about assessment through practice of a range of assessment approaches and methods that include self-assessment, peer assessment and learning portfolios.

The research was conducted in three phases, utilising qualitative data collection methods of interview, questionnaires and document analyses.

#### Phase One

Course participants, from the two Masters modules, completed questionnaires which sought their views on the work taught and assessed. They also completed self-assessments of their learning during and upon completion of the module studied. Course members completed evaluations of the assessment and pedagogic practices they experienced. In one module interviews were conducted with sixteen of the eighteen participants.

The two tutors involved in this phase of the project discussed the suitability of the techniques and resources for their particular contexts.

#### Phase Two

The two tutors exchanged their experiences and views of the practices and approaches for development and evaluative purposes. A comparative analysis of students’ self-assessments and evaluations of the approaches was made for reporting and dissemination purposes.

#### Phase Three

A seminar was held in Bristol to present the findings from this research and to seek views on the techniques and materials developed for assessment and learning at postgraduate level. Participants were able to assess the appropriateness and transferability of these techniques.

### Seminar

The principal aim of the action research projects had been to develop a better understanding of the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment so that changes could be made to existing practices to improve learning for students at postgraduate level. The resources, practices and processes that emerged from the action research in the different higher education contexts included:

* Summarised reviews about the use of self assessment and peer assessment
* Training programmes and practices for self and peer assessment
* Process accounts for clarifying assessment criteria
* Pedagogic practices to promote a community of understanding of criteria for assessment
* Strategies for the use of learning groups
* Processes for developing learning communities
* Procedures and processes for developing a community of shared practice.

We believed that these outcomes needed to be:

* Presented and shared more widely
* Developed further through collaboration with other colleagues
* Evaluated and practised by other colleagues and course participants.

A seminar to present these findings to colleagues at the Graduate School of Education (GSoE), University of Bristol took place on 28 February 2003. The seminar combined input from the three institutions, first colleagues from Bristol were interested as part of their Teaching and Learning Programme to explore assessment practices across the GSoE creatively, taking into account their diverse student population and the particular needs of students with disabilities. Elwood shared assessment practices that incorporated self and peer assessment, pedagogic practice to develop a community of shared understanding of published criteria for assessment, and process accounts for clarifying these criteria. Klenowski presented strategies for the use of learning groups, developing learning communities and procedures and processes for developing learning portfolios.

What follows are the findings from the studies conducted at the Institute of Education, University of London and the Graduate School of Education, Queen’s University in the academic year of 2002/2003. The findings pertaining to the use of the learning portfolio (Institute of Education, University of London) are presented first and those that relate to the use of peer and self-assessment (Graduate School of Education, Queen’s University) follow. To conclude we draw out the key messages from our collective research and the review of the literature.

### Findings

#### The learning portfolio

One of the crucial elements of any portfolio is **reflection** (Lyons, Hyland, & Ryan, 2002; Klenowski, 2002b; Bailey and Guskey, 2001; Jarvinen and Kohonen, 1995). In the context of teaching portfolios Lyons et al. (ibid:17) state:

Through reflections, a teacher revisits and inquiries into his/her own teaching, assessing what succeeded or failed and why. In this reflective interrogation, teachers uncover the meanings and interpretations they make of their own practice. Through a portfolio documentation they can make this knowledge public and open to scrutiny. Thus the portfolio can be both the means of inquiring into teaching and a way of recording the results of that process.

We would argue the same is true for the learners and their use of the learning portfolio. Through reflections on their own learning and assessment practices they come to understand and know their own learning: what they know, how they think and when and why to apply certain knowledge or strategies.

In this case study one of the dominant ways that participants used the learning portfolio to support their learning was through reflection. Their reflective thinking comprised thoughts on issues written up during, or at the end of, each session or thoughts that occurred during the time between sessions. These included thoughts and ideas about their own classroom practice of assessment.

Portfolios were used to record ideas to help organise the structure and content of written assignments. Such ideas included the premises for their arguments, their beliefs and position taken on particular assessment related issues. Records of group discussions, handouts and readings given in the sessions were included in the portfolio but their own thoughts, notes on readings and personal thoughts recorded during the sessions were considered most helpful. Questions (Appendix 1) to help course participants read critically were given early on in the course and responses to these questions were included in some portfolios.

As summed up by one interviewee:

I included reflections on what I was reading, on the way it was relating to my own beliefs and to my experience. Connections I would make with other readings; reflections on my reflections even disparate words that would reflect my thoughts and reactions as I was trying to understand what was behind them. Everything that I considered was helping me understand the concepts and the way in which I was going about understanding them. Recordings of what I think were epiphanies.

The learning portfolio appeared to encourage the processes of learning and reflection but also offered a way of recording and structuring those processes. One interviewee suggested that the learning portfolio provided both **process and structure** for her learning:

The portfolio put order into chaos. It prompted me to structure my learning and build a book that enabled me to access all readings, thoughts, pre-session preparation and reviews easily. When it came to writing an assignment I was able to travel through all the ideas presented and use these as sources. I can lift it now … There it is a book of all my thoughts and the sources that prompted that thinking.

The portfolio as product functioned as a **recorder** and reminder for the participants of their thoughts while the portfolio reflective writing process helped to **transform** the thoughts into written words. As stated by two interviewees:

We don’t know what we think until we have to wrestle with ourselves, and this is what I was doing while writing in my portfolio. Its role was that of prompter, organiser of thoughts.

And

It gave structure to my papers and so to my thoughts. This enabled me to keep my thoughts moving in ordered manner. It helped me face the issues. To reflect upon and develop my thinking on each of the issues.

Writing in the portfolio also helped to **clarify thinking**.

I can see that there were lots of gaps in my thinking. And I hadn’t really considered the role assessment had on learning. I filled a gap. I can go back to academic sources to reflect on what I and others are attempting to do with assessment. The portfolio has allowed me to build the steps in pushing my own learning on and now see those steps.

Another of the key **roles of the learning portfolio** as identified by the participants was a record of learning. Participants were able to assess and evaluate their **progress** over time:

… reading through the portfolio, … it did surprise me the way I was thinking and it made me work out what kind of learner I am generally, in that I like to do things, I can see the relevance … after it’s been done rather than while I’m doing it and I found out an awful lot about me as a person and that’s come about from doing the portfolio, just from reading some of the comments I’ve written in sessions.

It is important to understand the place of emotions in learning (Claxton, 1999). The learning portfolio allowed students to express their **emotions** about their learning and to learn from this as the following examples imply:

I was able to commit some of my frustrations onto paper!!

However, an issue emerged when the tutor collected reflections on learning for formative purposes. The tutor wanted to understand the learning of the participants but also wanted to assess the value of the learning activities and the teaching. For some learners the impact on expressing their emotions in their learning portfolios was as follows:

I must say the ones that [the tutor] collected I was aware that someone else was going to read it so they were perhaps a little different. … if I’d been given the opportunity to write a really confidential reflection to put into my portfolio, I probably would have recorded how I’d felt at that time[[1]](#endnote-1), whereas I alluded because I knew that [the tutor] was going to read it, but I didn’t actually write how I really felt. I think that’s it, just sometimes a sensitive issue comes up, it’s just the nature of things. Certainly not wanting to blame anybody or make them feel bad. But it’s nice actually, it helps, if somebody’s going to put all their reflections together as I did, little comments like that (confidential reflections) along the way when they look back on their portfolio. If they haven't had the opportunity to put those in they might have lost the opportunity for those reflections in future.

**Collaboration** with others was encouraged and fostered by the portfolio pedagogy that included peer and self assessment.

I enjoyed and learned a lot working and talking with my colleagues. … I liked the diversity of the group. We were all there with a purpose but not a common purpose. I enjoyed assessing others’ assignments particularly one piece which I judged as brilliant! I hated having to listen when others were negatively critical of my work. All of it had a real positive impact on my learning.

When asked to assess the **extent to which their learning had progressed** by looking back over the evidence in the portfolio one of the participants commented:

It is like a spiral as I seem to always return to previous issues from a slightly different, more learned perspective, which gives deeper understanding of both the concepts and the way in which my thinking was unfolding.

And

It was when we were asked to reflect on our reflections that I really keyed into these and started to truly reflect on the change on my learning.

When tutors devise questions to inspire discussion and reflection they often focus on content rather than the learner. The portfolio helps to shift the focus back onto the learner in the context of their learning about the particular subject and related concepts and issues. The portfolio process helps empower participants in their own learning and provides **a vehicle for learning**. For example, when responses were analysed the following were found to be typical: “it has developed my ability to be more reflective” or “I was able to take more ownership of the learning I was doing”.

Many participants felt that the learning gained from the portfolio process was empowering:

I think the learner who is developing a portfolio should be somehow helped to become aware of the value it has, of the impact and role it plays in enhancing learning, learning that empowers and builds skills that can be applied to all learning contexts in life. I don’t know how this could be done in a better way than it happened with us. I think it takes time and patience and experienced guidance through carefully chosen issues to reflect upon, like we had during the module and it definitely takes willingness on the part of the learner, which comes from an understanding of the concepts.

Another participant had this to say in her final assignment:

Before embarking on this course I had given little thought to how I learn and respond as a learner. On reflection, as a learner, I am a little cross that I have in the past willingly given up my self-regulation and allowed others to monitor my learning, accepting their judgements about my capability and capacity to learn. I have allowed others to measure my worth as a learner and to set targets to be achieved by me. What seems surprising to me now is that I allowed this to happen. (Extract from Assessment for Learning Assignment, 2003)

## *Issues Raised*

One of the key issues to emerge from the study is the need to identify the **purpose** of the portfolio at the outset. As identified by Forster and Masters (1996) there is no one portfolio, there are many portfolios appropriate for, different educational contexts (Klenowski, 2002). In this case study the key purpose for the learning portfolio was for learning and for understanding learning by collecting evidence, selecting and reflecting on learning by annotating and analysing that learning over time. In this case the participants were involved in making connections, summarsing their understanding of key issues and drawing these out from their portfolios for their summative assessments. Analysis and reflection are integral and ongoing processes that are facilitated by tutors carefully constructing questions that push the learning through the cycle of doing, reviewing, learning and applying that understanding (Carnell and Lodge, 2002). Participants can benefit from some explicit detail about the **purpose** of the learning portfolio and how others have made use of it for learning purposes.

Another key issue relates to the importance of **ethics and confidentiality** in the learning process that involves the use of a portfolio. At the outset of the course it is important that the concept of the learning portfolio is explained. It is also useful to explain that the process is not straightforward and that participants need to work out what works for them. There is no one way to develop a portfolio for learning purposes, it is a process that evolves according to the needs of the individual. If as tutors we value the expression of **emotions** and see these as important in the learning process then we need to be sensitive to participants’ needs to express these emotions explicitly and confidentially. We need to honour the learner’s need to decide the extent to which they wish to share these expressions of emotion and related insights more publicly.

The pedagogy that is associated with portfolio use involves a paradigm shift in both teaching and learning. Such an approach is based on a **co-construction** theory of learning where values are shared and learning involves collaboration by learners in critical investigation, analysis, interpretation and reorganisation of knowledge in reflective processes and in areas that have meaning in learners’ lives. **Dialogue** is fundamental and ‘the responsibility for learning shifts from individuals to emphasise collaboration in the construction of knowledge’ (Carnell and Lodge, 2002: 14). With the use of learning portfolios the tutor is responsible for facilitating dialogue through the development of essential questions to guide the learning through the curriculum and the organisation of opportunities for feedback dialogue through self, peer and tutor formative assessments.

A portfolio has often been described as ‘a collection’ (Arter and Spandel, 1992; Forster and Masters, 1996). What has become apparent in the use of a portfolio for learning purposes is the need to shift the emphasis from the collection of evidence to a focus on the analysis and integration of learning. The learning processes are of paramount importance. The learning portfolio enables inquiry into learning by the learner through integration of understanding from active engagement in dialogue and collaboration with the tutor and other participants followed by reflection on these processes. Self-assessment is an integral and fundamental process to such learning.

*Self-Assessment*

A recent action research study undertaken by Atkinson (2003) found that pupils (aged 11) valued a range of assessment practices that were based on self- and peer-assessment. She found that these pupils appreciated the value of assessment and discussion about it when assessment was integrated into the process of learning. The value of self-assessment has been recognised (Klenowski, 1995, Black and Wiliam, 1998b). In the study, conducted in the Graduate School of Education, Queen’s University, an element of the masters level was a 500 word self-assessment (Appendix 2). This element had been introduced to the assignment in recognition that for “formative assessment to be productive, [course participants] should be trained in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve” (ibid: 10).

Researchers such as Boud (1995) and Taras (2003) have conducted research of the use of self assessment in Higher Education. Boud’s work illustrates that self-assessment is an important skill that contributes to improvement and autonomy in learning. Self-assessment has been used both formatively (Boud 1988 and 1995) and summatively (Taras 1999, 2001) in this context. In this project self-assessment was summative in purpose. The aim was to get course participants to write a personal account of their learning through writing the assignments and how they felt they met the criteria set out in the grade descriptions. It was not intended that they should make a judgement about the grade that they think they achieved but judgements about how they think they met the criteria (Appendix 3). The self-assessment fulfilled a formative function in that it provided an opportunity for the course participants to reflect on how they would improve their own learning for future assignments within the Masters programme and beyond. To illustrate this point data from a selection of course participants’ self assessments follows:

… on the subject of formative assessment, I feel it is worth mentioning that, despite my belief in the valuable contribution that self-assessment can make to learning for pupils, I was initially perturbed at the thought of carrying out this evaluation. However, this has been a useful part of my own learning process and there is a lot of information here to inform my ‘next steps’.

And

I feel that the stronger part of the essay is the first half which deals with reliability and validity of the National Curriculum testing. The second half is weaker which deals with gender and assessment for learning. The essay would be improved by a greater insight into these two areas with as much depth as the first part including further reference to published literature and linking these two areas more stringently to the whole area of National Testing.

Course participants were prepared for this self assessment exercise through a workshop on the sharing and understanding of criteria. The workshop started with discussion, debate and analyis of the criteria for assessment. Furthermore an opportunity was provided for further analysis of the criteria when course participants were required to assess exemplar assignments completed by course participants from a previous year. Sadler (1989) and Boud (1986) concur that students need to engage with the criteria prior to carrying out self-assessment.

In requiring this self-assessment, the aim was to facilitate the development of course participants’ metacognitive strategies. The exercise enabled the tutor to give extra support for those who had underestimated their achievement and to raise confidence in their attainments and in themselves as learners. This is considered important for adults in continuing professional development contexts who may have particular anxieties about assessment tasks as they return to formal learning situations. This self-assessment exercise also gave insights into gendered approaches to learning. Reflecting on course participants’ self-assessments we acknowledged a gender dimension in under/over estimation of achievement with perhaps female participants, stereotypically, under-estimating their attainment while male students over-estimated the range of criteria evident in their assignments. Self-assessment can create awareness amongst teachers of their students’ views of their own learning which can then be acted upon by the teacher in order to enhance students’ future learning.

We are aware of the difficulties and unintended consequences of formal self-assessment situations and tasks that are related to, for example, gender, ethnic origin, ability and past experience. Some of the bias that may be generated by self-assessment can be addressed through the teaching and learning strategies that we suggest below.

**Key Messages from the Research**

The key messages that emerged from the research relate to pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. Pedagogically it was important to shift to a more learner-centred approach with plenty of opportunities for participation and active engagement in learning about assessment through the practice of these assessment strategies. A learning curriculum was also developed that again provided opportunities for peer dialogue and collaborative learning. The assessment content and processes were integrated throughout the learning programme. The curriculum, pedagogy and assessment intersected, however, for analytical and discursive reasons important messages are presented below under the three domains.

#### Pedagogy

We found it necessary to provide contexts and opportunities for students to become aware of their own learning strategies and to take responsibility for them. This was achieved through a combination of teaching and assessment strategies that we incorporated into our practice. For example, at the Institute of Education, University of London, the learning portfolio was used with the participants in the MA programme. The concept of a learning portfolio had been researched previously (Klenowski, 2002a[[2]](#endnote-2)) but not in the curriculum context of assessment for learning. The learning intentions of this MA module are to enhance practitioners’ professional assessment practice.

The course aims, topics to guide reading, preparation for each session and the assessment requirements were given to participants in the programme. Participants were encouraged to reflect critically on their own learning, and the learning process itself, through the use of learning portfolios. The lead tutor provided participants with questions and suggestions about how they could record their reflections on their learning. Such questions included:

* What have you learnt?
* How did your learning happen today?
* What helped your learning?
* What hindered your learning?
* How has your learning progressed/transformed/developed?
* How can you develop your learning further?
* What questions do you have for learning?

Other questions to guide reflection include:

* Describe the process you went through to complete this assignment. Include where you got ideas, how you explored the subject, what problems you encountered, and what revision strategies you used.
* List the points made by peer assessment of your assignment. Describe your response to each and describe whether you agree or disagree. Give your reasons. What did you do as the result of your feedback?
* What makes your most effective piece different from your least effective piece? (Based on, Arter and Spandel, 1992:40)

We encouraged participants to be independent in their learning and to develop their metacognitive strategies. We aimed to facilitate this development through the use of the learning portfolio for formative assessment purposes. Participants were told that the aims of the portfolio were to encourage learning and development of deep and reflective understanding of concepts, theories and issues related to assessment for learning and analytical and critical thinking skills. We explained that through reflecting on their own learning accumulated in the portfolio that they would have the opportunity to develop: an independent perspective; the capacity to reflect and critique; and metacognitive skills including identification of what supports and what hinders their own learning.

Suggestions as to what the portfolio might include were offered: the learning tasks; thoughts about own learning and/or assessments that occurred throughout the module. At Masters level it is important that participants develop a critical capacity in their reading and writing and therefore they were encouraged to include critical analyses of readings; plans, working drafts of assignments; evaluations of own learning, reflection on the readings and critical reviews.

#### Curriculum

A learning curriculum meant that as teachers we were more facilitators of learning and participants were encouraged to demonstrate their learning. This was achieved both through the strategy of the learning portfolio and the use of self-assessment. Opportunities for participants to peer and self-assess were provided throughout the course. They were prepared through teaching strategies that were designed to teach the assessment concepts related to criterion assessment and which engaged then in sharing and understanding the assessment criteria to be used in the assessment of their assignments. Exemplars of assignments completed by previous participants of the course were used to illustrate the standard of work required at Masters level.

As teachers we provided opportunities for students to not only self-assess but also to peer assess. In this assessment of peers’ work it was apparent that participants were gaining an insight from others about how to structure a response to the assignment tasks. They were also gaining an awareness of the different approaches to and perspectives on the assessment issues and problems raised in their peers’ assignments. There were issues that emerged to do with equity, fairness and reliability that were important in the context of the assessment curriculum and practice of the module.

Group and pair work was encouraged with the establishment of learning groups and networks during the sessions and throughout the course. Learning groups were identified with student-centred learning, collaborative learning and peer assisted learning. They proved beneficial to the development of teamwork and communication. In addition active learning was encouraged and there appeared to be increased motivation and confidence. Learning groups proved challenging for some participants who indicated development in higher cognitive skills. Students also valued the learning groups for the following reasons:

* Clarifying their own understanding through discussion with others;
* Listening to others’ opinions and perspectives;
* Supportive group learning;
* ‘Deepening’ their understanding of the assessment literature;
* ‘Broadening’ their perspectives through discussion.

The factors that appeared to facilitate these outcomes were the development of structured focused tasks that were grounded in the curriculum content. Supportive feedback from tutors was another important factor together with group organisation that enabled relationships between group members to develop over time.

Other aspects of the learning curriculum include the important participant-teacher dialogue about the participant’s learning that took place during feedback sessions and the one-to-one tutorials on draft assignments. Support and collaboration were consistently available throughout the programme.

#### Assessment

An approach to assessment practice that had been adopted previously (Elwood and Klenowski, 2002) was the development of a procedure for analysing and clarifying assessment criteria with participants. We were now extending its use to new contexts. By involving participants in the processes of assessment for learning we were modelling ways in which they might use a similar process in their own classrooms. We believe that the procedure developed could be used in any classroom or learning context where a teacher wished to use assessment for teaching and learning purposes and share the criteria on which that assessment was based. It is important to remember that criteria are the dimensions or characteristics on which the quality of a performance or assignment is judged. The standards indicate the levels of quality or excellence on a developmental scale (Maxwell, 1993; Sadler, 1989).

First we presented participants with standards and asked them to consider the criteria, indicating the relationship between them. Second, participants were asked to indicate individually what they thought the important criteria were and what they understood the meaning of the criteria to be. We then allowed discussion with others to help integrate understanding. Participants shared their understandings in pairs and then with other members of their learning group. In these groups they reached consensus related to identified, important criteria and their meaning and at this stage were prepared to share this understanding with the entire group. Finally they were required to demonstrate their understanding of the criteria by grading an assignment. It was at this stage that they could evaluate whether additional criteria emerged and needed to be considered. There was an important discussion that included debate, clarification, affirmation and integration of understanding after the assessment exercise. This sort of preparation and understanding is important when engaging course participants in self and peer assessment.

### Where to from here?

Funding for this ESCalate project has enabled us to improve our current teaching and to engage in innovative assessment processes in a political context where it is exceedingly difficult to experiment because of internal and external quality control procedures that foster conformity rather than originality. We have developed networks across three institutions through sharing our learning in the pursuit of agreed aims for the improvement of our teaching, assessment and pedagogic practices.

We now intend to disseminate our findings more widely through presenting papers at conferences (BERA, AEA-Europe) and publications for refereed journals. Although there are political and institutional pressures to conform and standardise practices we are looking for the creative spaces to work collaboratively to continue our meaningful conversations related to our professional aims, our values in relation to teaching and learning, theories of educational assessment and implementing those theories of educational assessment into practice.

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**Appendix 1**

Questions, to help guide critical reading, given to course participants studying the module Assessment for Learning on the Masters programme in 2003 at the Institute of Education, University of London

Use the following questions to help you write a critical review of the reading for this session:

* How would you describe the text: a review, a research report, a position paper?
* Who are the authors? What do you know about their purpose and context? What is the author’s stance to the topic/subject? (academic? practitioner? researcher?) Who is their intended audience?
* What is the main topic or problem addressed? How does this relate to any body of knowledge or particular audience? How does this relate to your own experience/context/
* What are the author’s basic premises? What issues are raised or what themes emerge?
* What are the author’s basic points/argument?
* What assumptions underpin this text?
* What sort of information/evidence do the authors present to support their points/argument? Why have they selected this information/evidence? Why are they assumed to be important?
* Is the evidence/information convincing, controversial, factual, one-sided etc.? How might it be contradicted?
* Which aspects of the text are effective/least effective? Why?
* What is omitted?
* How did you find yourself responding to the text on first reading? How did you find yourself responding after considering these questions?

### Appendix 2

An example of a self-assessment completed by a course participant on the Masters course offered in 2003 at the Graduate School of Education, Queen’s University, Belfast.

**Personal Assessment**

I found this module interesting and stimulating although at times I found the material challenging. The whole issue of assessment is so wide that it was difficult at times to focus on a particular issue. I found that I had read a lot of material to which I did not refer in the assignment and in retrospect it might have been better to focus attention on fewer issues and concentrate on depth rather than breadth.

I feel that the assignment I have produced is fairly well structured, logical and coherent and deals fairly comprehensively with the issues raised in the rubric. I have addressed the issues of reliability and validity and have chosen as the other key concepts standards and impact of testing. I have shown evidence of relevant reading although I admit that this has focused on national rather than international literature. I have sought to substantiate my ideas with reference to the literature.

In the literature, the theories discussed are, in my opinion, linked to the accepted practice in schools and to my own professional experience. However I feel that I have not always made this link clear and have not often enough used professional experience as an illustration or example. This is an aspect of writing which I find difficult to balance. If you talk about personal or professional experience too much, there is a danger that the assignment is too anecdotal and lack (sic) academic rigour. The trick is in the balancing and it is something which I have not yet mastered. I regret not having made more of this aspect as my work for this assignment has had a profound influence on the way I look at assessment. I am more concerned with the purpose of assessment, why am I giving my pupils this piece of work or that test, what is it going to tell me about their learning? What is the impact of testing on pupils, positive and negative? How much of the assessment I carry out is for record keeping? I am very interested in the issues raised by the authors of ‘Inside the Black Box’ and ‘Beyond the Black Box’. Certainly these two texts have had and will continue to have an influence on what goes on my own classroom. Assessment FOR learning is something that could even be taken as a whole school issue.

I have sought to treat the issues with sufficient depth and to analyse the arguments presented in the literature. I think my presentation of the National Curriculum assessment model is detailed and comprehensive.

My main problem lies with the evaluation aspect of the assignment. I do not think I have really grasped what ‘critically evaluate’ actually means. To this extent my assignment is more superficial than I would have wished.

With regard referencing, I have tried to be careful but acknowledge that I referred to an article by Please but was unable to provide the appropriate referencing.

### Appendix 3

**Minimum Criteria for Masters Level[[3]](#endnote-3).**

Students submitting assignments are requested to check that their work conforms to the following **minimum criteria:**

* typed or word-processed, 1.5 or 2.0 line-spaced on one side of A4 page only;
* has been completed within the specified word limits;
* has been proof-read for grammatical, punctuation and spelling errors;
* has an accurate bibliography attached set out according to academic convention;
* has a fully completed coursework coversheet attached;
* has a signed and accurately completed academic integrity sheet appended.

In circumstances where the content of an assignment is satisfactory but where the minimum criteria are not met, the work will be graded as fail with a requirement to upgrade and resubmit.

### Specific Grade Criteria

There are general criteria of assessment at masters level which are linked to the objectives of the masters programme. Depending on the type of coursework set, these criteria may be elaborated or complemented in individual modules by module tutors.

For the awards of Grades A-C, a coursework assignment needs to demonstrate a significant fit against the characteristics listed under the appropriate grades below:

### Grade A

For a grade A assessment, a coursework element should conform to all the criteria listed below under B and in addition will demonstrate:

* a very clear conceptual framework;
* a lucid confident style of writing with a sustained high level argument;
* wide and analytical reading;
* high level analysis, synthesis and evaluation of literature and topic/issues;
* an evaluative approach which is evident in internal consistency of arguments and use of external criteria;
* evidence of capacity to apply learning to this and other areas of experience;
* a clear exposition of any theory-practice links;
* multi-level exploration and reflection on personal/professional experience;
* signs of flair, originality and insight;
* careful attention to academic conventions (re: references, quotations etc).

### Grade B

For a grade B assessment, the coursework element should demonstrate a good fit against with following set of characteristics:

* a balanced structure, where elements are integrated, interrelated;
* arguments which move smoothly from point to point;
* a comprehensive coverage of topic/issue;
* evidence of depth and breadth of appropriate reading;
* an analytical approach to literature which is related to the topics and issues;
* sufficient depth of treatment of the topics and issues;
* a substantive element of analysis and synthesis of arguments/issues;
* exploration of any theory/practice links;
* engaged reflection on personal or professional experience which is appropriately related to literature;
* careful attention to academic conventions.

**Grade C**

For a grade C assessment, a coursework element should demonstrate a good fit against the following set of characteristics:

* a coherent framework for the analysis of topic/issues;
* a focus on the question or task set;
* arguments presented in a coherent and logical manner;
* an acceptable level of written expression;
* evidence of sufficient reading;
* a broad coverage of the topic or issues with no important omissions;
* ideas substantiated with reference to the literature;
* personal or professional experience used as an illustration or example;
* an element of analysis, comment or reflection;
* capacity to follow academic conventions.

**Grade D**

For the award or a grade D, a coursework assignment will be judged to be unsatisfactory and not to have reached an appropriate level for Masters degree. The assignment will not have met the minimum criteria or will provide evidence of a significant number of the following:

* a poor structure or organisation;
* a lack of clear focus on the topic or issue;
* inadequate reading and referencing in text or misrepresentation of literature;
* major defects in writing and expression;
* superficial description with little understanding of issues involved;
* a lack of reference to practice or practice that is irrelevant to the topic;
* little or no evidence of personal reflection or opinion presented as reflection without further evidence or consideration;
* a misunderstanding or misapplication of academic conventions.

1. During the first feedback session when participants were involved in a feedback dialogue about their first assignments this participant was disappointed and felt s/he didn’t get feedback that helped her/his learning. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The previous research found that at the outset participants want greater negotiation and involvement in the design of the portfolio and the development of criteria for formative assessment purposes. Participants and the tutors need to clarify their expectations at the commencement of the course and these should be sustained throughout the ten weeks of study. The learning tasks and group activities need to be designed to support deep learning. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Minimum criteria for Masters level work at the Graduate School of Education, Queen’s University, Belfast. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)