

Using assessment to drive the learning – but what about the learners?

In Higher Education we have been encouraged to diversify assessment and use innovative approaches to ensure that our students pay attention to the right things, put in time and effort and learn appropriately. Assessment as a driver for learning is at the heart of Biggs' (2003) idea of 'constructive alignment' which is widely used in higher education. In general the emphasis in module or course design is on summative assessment, where grades are awarded, supported by formative assessment usually in the form of feedback to students.

The use of assessment to promote learning seems eminently reasonable as, according to many lecturers, "students won't do anything unless it has marks attached". There tends to be an assumption that students are "just like that" – perhaps more so than in the past because of the financial and other pressures on today's students. However, is it possible that by trying to entrap students into behaving in certain ways through the carrot and stick of grades, we are creating, or at the very least reinforcing, the idea that grades are the main point of learning at university and that this might have some unintended impacts on our students?

Psychologist Carol Dweck (2000) makes a distinction between a student who is working towards performance goals and is fixed on the end-point of getting the grade or passing the course, in comparison with a student pursuing learning goals, who is aiming to get to grips with content of learning. This may seem nothing new but Dweck relates these two kinds of goals to students' views of themselves as learners and also to the ways that we manage learning in education.

Some students have the idea that their intelligence or ability is fixed – 'something you were just born with'. Such students gain satisfaction from good marks but may lack confidence because every new task presents a challenge to prove their ability and any set back or poor mark threatens their sense of themselves. As a consequence students may be risk-averse, playing safe and sticking to approaches that have worked for them so far. They try to 'look good' by covering up things that they don't understand, giving lecturers what they want and appearing to be competent.

In other cases students view ability as something you can develop. They assume that you may need to put effort in if you want to learn. Set backs or poor grades are not exactly welcome but the student believes that they may be able to overcome such difficulties if they work at it and use feedback and guidance from their lecturers. Such students tend to gain satisfaction from the process of learning and developing their understanding and confidence. They may be prepared to admit to difficulties or take risks, if it seems likely to help them learn – after all they do not see poor performance as a final judgement on their overall ability or intelligence.

Dweck suggests that individuals *tend towards* one of the two views above. However, the ways in which we teach and, in particular, assess students can make a difference. A developmental rather than a fixed view of ability is more helpful to learning in the long term. Unfortunately the focus in HE on: grades as reward, on ever-more detailed specifications of requirements to be met in the form of learning outcomes and assessment criteria; on the organisation of teaching and learning around summative assessment activities; and the (semi) public knowledge of the hierarchy of achievement in a student cohort, all push students towards performance goals and reinforce a fixed view of ability.

On the other hand we might: encourage students to find value and see the point of learning tasks; build in practice and rehearsal before students are summatively assessed so that they can see their progress; provide guidance, feedback and feed-

forward; and encourage collaborative learning with peers. In this case there are good grounds to suggest that we will promote student engagement with learning goals and reinforce a view of themselves as people who can learn, develop and achieve. Can this happen in our marks-driven contexts?

We have evidence from our own practices in 'assessment for learning' (see http://northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl/) that students are prepared to engaged in quite a lot of learning activities that are not directly rewarded by grades and that this brings many benefits to the teaching and learning. However, it requires a re-engineering of the environment for learning to shift the 'rules of engagement' and calling a halt to an ever more detailed manipulation of student behaviour through sophisticated and innovative use of summative tasks and grade allocations.

(764 words)

References

Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Second edition. Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press

Dweck, C. S. (2000) *Self theories: their roles in motivation, personality and development* Philadelphia, Psychology Press

See also:

Yorke, M. & Knight, P. (2004) Self-theories: some implications for teaching and learning in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29 (1), pp. 25 – 37

CETL Assessment for Learning website: http://northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl/