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## **Student Engagement in Assessment for Learning**

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### *Abstract*

Student engagement has become a frequently used term in the vocabulary of Higher Education, and particularly among those involved in research associated with teaching and learning. Although the term is a complex and broad one, for the purpose of this paper it is defined as “the extent to which students are actively involved in a variety of educational activities that are likely to lead to high quality learning” (Coates, 2005, p.26). It should be noted that student engagement in assessment is a novel practice, which is slowly making its way into Higher Education pedagogy.

The aim of this paper is to present an evaluative study of student engagement in assessment for learning conducted on a final-year undergraduate class (n=22) undertaking a module on the development of writing skills in Spanish through, a) reflection on written texts and b) the production of a variety of texts in Spanish. The first part of this paper describes how learners were involved in the development of assessment criteria to be adopted in the assessment of their work by the teacher, as well as in self- and peer-assessment practices. It is followed by an analysis of the impact that engaging students in assessment had on their learning, based on the students’ evaluation of the module and on a short survey conducted at the end of the semester. The findings indicate that students valued positively the experience; they also acknowledged that engagement in assessment had a great beneficial impact on their learning. Some possible shortcomings are also identified. Finally, a number of pedagogical implications arising from the experience of student engagement in assessment for learning in level education are also outlined.

Key words: Student engagement, learning-oriented assessment

## **I. Introduction**

The concept of student engagement has recently attracted considerable attention among educators, particularly in higher education where students are more diversified in terms of their ability, cultural background and motivation (Brown, 2005; Biggs, 2003; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Student engagement is a broad term, often perceived to encompass academic and non-academic features of the student learning experience, including active and collaborative learning or feeling supported by university learning communities (Coates, 2007). For the purpose of this paper, student engagement is defined as “the extent to which students are actively involved in a variety of educational activities that are likely to lead to high quality learning” (Coates, 2005, p.26). As stated by the organisers of this conference, “Engaging students -throughout their educational process- has become the greatest challenge facing educators today”.

Against this general background, the specific concern of my contribution is the effective use of assessment designed to engage students in the learning process. Thus, when thinking about assessment, it is necessary to consider not only *what* and *how* we are assessing, but also *why* (Race, Brown and Smith, 2005; Brown, 2005, Falchikov, 2005, Rowntree, 1987). Attempts to engage students in the process of assessment mean that learning is placed at the centre of assessment (Keppell and Carless, 2006). Therefore, assessment is learning oriented to the extent that the judgement of students’ work entails supporting them in their learning processes (Joughin, 2004). In this regard, the role of the teacher has been acknowledged as significant in contributing to increase students’ engagement either at the level of a learning-oriented task (Bryson and Hand 2007) or, I also want to argue, in facilitating students’ learning that extends beyond the confines of the classroom (Hernández, 2008).

Questions often arise about the degree to which students take an active participation in the assessment process, apart from being subjected to the methods imposed on them by the lecturers or their institutions, in order to ascertain the extent of their learning. Promoting learning, along with measuring students’ achievements, is the focus of a learning-oriented approach to assessment where the learning function of assessment is emphasised. The three components of a learning-oriented approach to assessment are:

- the use of assessment tasks that encourage appropriate learning processes;
- the involvement of students in the process of assessing their work, including the development of assessment criteria;
- the effective use of feedback and feedforward.

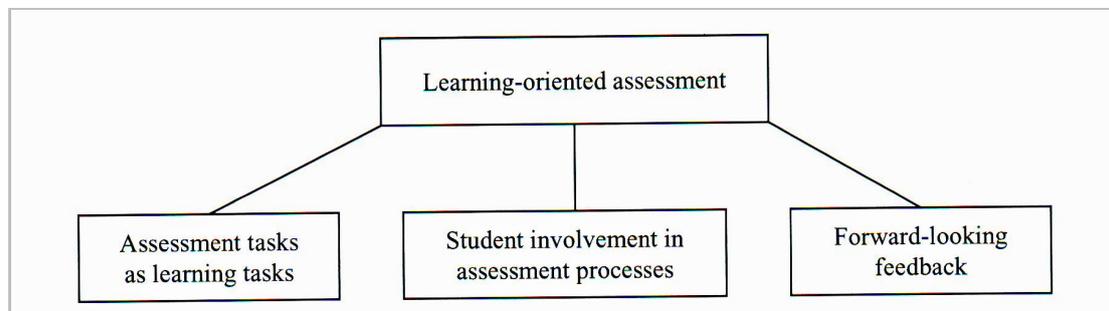


Figure 1. Source: Keppell and Carless, 2006, p.181

The present study involves the three elements of learning-oriented assessment framework but, for the purpose of this paper, special attention is given to the second attribute, namely the learners' involvement in the assessment process, particularly their involvement in the development and understanding of assessment criteria and their active participation in self- and peer-assessment practices.

The purpose of this paper is to present an evaluative study of student engagement in assessment for learning conducted on a final-year level 3 undergraduate class (n=22) undertaking a module in Hispanic Studies at University College Dublin.

## II. Description of the Module

The study undertaken involved a group of students participating in a semester-long module in Spanish language, comprising a total of twenty-four teaching hours, at University College Dublin during the academic year 2007-08. *Expresión Escrita*<sup>1</sup> is a final-year level 3 undergraduate option module offered to students of Hispanic Studies. This module can also be taken as an elective by students of Hispanic Studies or by students from other programmes across the university. The number of students taking this module was limited to 22. The students were registered in a variety of programmes: BA, BA (International), BComm (International), BA in Computer Science and Erasmus students.

<sup>1</sup> A proposed translation into English of the title of the module might be 'Becoming a Writer in a Foreign Language'.

The overall aim of this module is to enhance learners' communicative competence by engaging in writing a variety of texts (e.g. journalistic, creative, functional) in Spanish and by reflecting about texts already written by competent writers or by the students themselves. Special attention is given to the process of writing. The specific learning tasks aim at engaging students in the production of a variety of texts written in Spanish, promoting their participation in self- and peer-assessment of the written tasks and encouraging student reflection on their learning process. Thus, the module focuses on the development of cognitive and meta-cognitive competences, as well as on students' affective dispositions. Spanish is the prescribed language of instruction and assessment in this module, and the target language is used by the students and by the teacher at all times. The teaching methodology adopted promotes students' participation in class, and the teacher is perceived as a facilitator of learning.

The module is assessed summatively through a written portfolio and a learning journal submitted by the students at the end of the semester. However, students are provided with the necessary support throughout the semester by embedding formative assessment practices in the learning-oriented activities undertaken during the semester and through scaffolding of their learning, according to their needs. Only a selection of learning-oriented activities can be discussed in this paper.

### **III. Student engagement in the understanding and development of assessment criteria**

The engagement of student in the understanding and development of assessment criteria happened at two levels. Firstly, students were presented with the criteria considered appropriate to assess their portfolios and their learning journals. The criteria were explained by the teacher and some examples of previously submitted portfolios and learning journals were examined under the proposed criteria. That activity allowed students "hands on" in assessing the work of other students. It allowed them to internalise the criteria, and to break the ice gently towards adopting peer-assessment as an integral part of this module. The fact that the portfolios and the learning journals were from students that had participated in this module in previous years made the activity less threatening to the students than if they had been asked to assess the work of another student in the class.

The engagement of the students in the development of the assessment criteria was further explored as part of a class activity. The purpose of the exercise was to agree on a set of criteria that would be applied in the assessment of the written tasks produced by the students throughout the semester. The class was divided into groups of 4-5 students and each group was given the task to come up with criteria that would be used to assess the written texts produced by the students. All the groups reported on the agreed criteria and a fuller list was compiled with the input from all the groups and from the teacher's intervention, to ensure that essential aspects had not been omitted. The criteria agreed at the end of the session were adopted by both the teacher and the students to assess students' work during the duration of the module and regular references to the negotiated criteria were made throughout the semester.

The criteria template also provided the frame to offer feedback to students after each written task was completed. The written feedback was provided either by the teacher or by the students' classmates. Then, students were invited to engage in dialogue with the teacher to explore orally some of the issues arisen from the written feedback. The purpose of the feedback was to offer students ideas on how to improve their writing skills in Spanish and the opportunity to reflect about their learning by writing a reflective entry in their journals. The initial written tasks were considered drafts and together with new versions they constituted part of the portfolio produced by the students at the end of the module.

#### **IV. Student engagement in peer-assessment practices**

A written activity that involved students in assessing the work of their peers was undertaken after students had produced a written text that instead of being assessed by the teacher was proposed to be assessed by the students.

Students had been given instructions to write a short story that was going to be published by a local magazine aiming at disseminating the work of young writers. All instructions were given to the students, including the theme, the approximate length of the story and the submission date. Students were also asked to submit the story electronically to the teacher. Once all the written stories had been submitted, the

teacher removed the names of the students and numbered them from 1 to 22. The stories were grouped by the teacher (four or five stories in each group) ensuring that among them there was a mixture of stories whose quality was excellent, mediocre and poor. Only the teacher knew who the authors of the stories were. During the next class, students were divided into five groups by the teacher and their task was to act as jury of the stories by agreeing on what was the best and the worse story, applying the assessment criteria that had been adopted to assess previous tasks. The teacher ensured that the members of the groups were different from those whose stories were distributed so that none of the stories allocated to them belonged to any member of the group. By doing that, not only was anonymity ensured but it also allowed students to engage in the assessment process without being embarrassed by confronting them with the assessment of their own story in a public domain. One of the students in each group acted as spokesperson on behalf of the group and he/she had to report to the rest of the class the recommendations of the group and the reasons that brought them to choose the best and the worse piece of work. Written recommendations were also produced. In the case of the best story the jury had to argue what were its best qualities and in the case of the worse story they had to offer recommendations to the anonymous author on what needed to be improved. A portion of class-time was given to reporting orally from each group, focusing on key aspects of the best and worse stories and on a short discussion by the whole class on the value of them being involved in the assessment exercise. Students were also encouraged to continue their reflection about the peer-assessment experience by way of writing about it in their learning journals.

The two examples of student engagement described above are a brief indication of the type of learning-oriented assessment practices that were embedded in this module throughout the semester. The remainder of this paper focuses on presenting some data collected from the students during the last class of the semester in a group evaluation exercise and from a short anonymous survey conducted at the end of the semester. The paper will conclude with an analysis of the data and will outline some pedagogical implications arising from this educational experience.

## **V. Views of the students about the module**

The evaluation of this module departed significantly from what is one of the most common practices in the university, i.e. to distribute an end of module questionnaire, with a number of statements on a Likert-type scale and some room for open comments. This module was evaluated by each student in a threefold manner; firstly, as an on-going activity by way of reflecting on his/her learning; secondly, in a more structured manner halfway through the semester by the completion of a self-assessment instrument developed by the teacher; thirdly, this process was followed up by a one-to-one meeting between each student and the teacher. The purpose of such evaluation was wider than assessing the effectiveness of the module. It was also intended to assess students' progress in relation to the intended learning outcomes, and to provide a relaxed atmosphere in which the student could open up to the teacher if he/she was experiencing any difficulties in relation to his/her engagement in the module.

The end of module evaluation was done as a snowballing activity in which students were given an evaluation sheet with a number of teaching and learning issues that students were asked to classify as positive or negative in relation to the module, and to provide reasons for their classification. They engaged in the evaluation firstly on their own, and then by bringing their ideas to a small group (4-5 students) in order to reach the consensus of the group and to present their results to the whole class<sup>2</sup>.

A point of departure from the use of Spanish as the language of expression was introduced for the end of module evaluation. The use of English was justified as the students had given their consent to the teacher for this module to be used as an example of research-led teaching and that the outcomes of the study were intended to be disseminated by the teacher at public conferences and/or publications. For that reason, it was agreed by all the students that conducting the evaluation in English would be more appropriate.

Some of the positive ideas emerging from the group session on the evaluation of the module were related to students' satisfaction with the wide range of texts produced,

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<sup>2</sup> The individual evaluations were placed in the portfolio submitted by the students.

the opportunity to work in pairs and in groups and the provision of written and oral feedback. Among the more negative aspects of the module were that the writing of the learning journal was time consuming and a number of students would have preferred to receive a grade for the first drafts of the texts submitted.

Nineteen of the twenty-two students that participated in the module submitted an anonymous end of semester questionnaire that was part of a wider project on student engagement undertaken by the teacher. All of the respondents (n=19) answered affirmatively to a question specifically asking them if they would recommend the module to other students. The reasons given by the students can be grouped under three categories, namely that the module contributed to the development of their language skills, that it was a different and challenging module and that it provided a relaxed learning environment. The following extracts from the students illustrate the above points.

***(a) The module contributes to the development of language skills***

Thirteen students made references in their comments about how their written and oral skills had significantly improved because of the module:

*“It allows students to develop their written and spoken language. There is not much opportunity for this elsewhere”* (Student B)

*“It does improve your Spanish and helps use the language in other ways than just merely translating”* (Student K)

***(b) This is a different and challenging module***

Several students stated that this module was different and more challenging than others they studied at UCD:

*“It is very different from other modules offered in not only the Spanish department but other language departments in the university. It’s a very interactive method of learning, which I personally found to be very beneficial”* (Student M)

*“It’s a more practical module where the focus is taken away from rote learning and it provides a more fun, challenging learning approach, relaxed atmosphere”* (Student G)

*“It’s by far the best and most relevant of all the Spanish final-year modules on offer”* (Student C)

***(c) There is a relaxed learning environment***

Ten of the nineteen students mentioned in a variety of ways that the module was interesting and enjoyable:

*“It is a very interesting and fun module and gives you the possibility to get involved and be creative”* (Student N)

Some of the students also highlighted the relaxed atmosphere created in this module:

*“The classes were very interesting and there was a great atmosphere”*  
(Student P)

*“Enjoyable atmosphere and broad learning”* (Student R)

**VI. Views of the students on learning-oriented assessment practices**

Eighteen of the nineteen respondents thought that using assessment for learning in this module was a good idea. The reasons provided by the students reflected one of the core focus of this module, namely the development of cognitive and meta-cognitive competences, as well as the students’ affective dispositions.

In relation to the cognitive domain, students expressed that this module facilitated deep learning:

*“It encourages you to work on what we have learnt in class and ultimately to learn more”* (Student B)

*“It allows you to understand where your faults are and how to improve them. It enables you to gauge how much you are improving and what kind of return you’re getting for the amount of work done”* (Student E)

Learning-oriented assessment practices appeared to make students more responsible for their own learning and seemed to have contributed to the development of students’ self-regulation:

*“It’s a good idea because it makes you work regularly and implement new things that we have learned”* (Student F)

*“Reflecting back on one’s own work allows a student to target the specific areas he and she needs to, it’s a very honest method of learning for want of a better word”* (Student M)

*“Makes you work independently”* (Student N)

The development of students' confidence and self-esteem became apparent also in the responses given by the students:

*"It motivates students"* (Student I)

*"I feel my written Spanish has improved. This will benefit me greatly next semester"* (Student S)

The only student that thought that using assessment for learning was not a good idea justified his/her answer by saying that:

*"It is too hard to judge ourselves"* (Student H)

## **VII. Analysis and conclusions**

The evidence from this study shows that student engagement in assessment for learning was achieved in this module by a combination of factors that were embedded in the teaching and learning pedagogy driving the module. Ensuring that students feel comfortable with their involvement in the process of assessment is one of those factors. The engagement of students cannot be rushed; it is necessary to begin by building trust between the students and the teacher and among the students, and by creating a relaxed atmosphere where collaborative learning can take place. It is also important to provide students with feedback that motivates them to improve their learning.

The involvement of students in the understanding and development of assessment criteria had a very positive effect in helping them to internalise the criteria. This resulted in a deeper awareness of features of written texts and in a better understanding of the features that characterised different written texts. The most significant outcome of students' engagement in the development of assessment criteria was the positive impact the criteria had in contributing to students' reflection on their work and on the work of their classmates, which was one of the main aims of this module.

Although this study demonstrates that the students perceived that their engagement in the learning-oriented assessment process led to deep learning, it did not examine the possible link between student engagement and achievement. However, other research studies have shown that students who engage in their learning in terms of self-

regulation, reflection on their learning, and by acting on feedback from formative assessment tend to achieve better grades (Brown and Hirschfeld, 2008; Hernández, 2007). Nevertheless, the engagement of students in learning-oriented assessment practices may not always result in an enhancement of student learning. Further research is needed to examine the extent to which student engagement results on better achievement.

One cannot underestimate the challenges that student engagement in learning-oriented assessment practices entail. This approach to teaching has pedagogical implications that need to be considered by the teacher. Sporadic class attendance may have a detrimental effect for the students as they might find it difficult to engage in the process of assessment. The “cramming” mentality that some students adopt when the assessment of their learning focuses on the traditional end of year/semester written examination will also result in very poor grades if adopted in this module. An early intervention of the teacher is essential to ensure that students understand the importance of student engagement in the process, as assessment is embedded in teaching. Another challenge facing the teacher when using formative assessment with no grades associated is the fact that students seem to value their learning mostly in terms of grades, which makes it very difficult to depart from that traditional practice.

Although the Virtual Learning Environment of the university (Blackboard) was used to communicate with the students and to distribute documents and learning resources for this module, a wider use of the VLE will be made in the academic year 2008-09 as a forum for discussion will be introduced in an attempt to further develop student engagement and peer-assessment.

This paper has explored student engagement in the context of a module with a limited intake of students, but educators need to consider to what extent those challenges can be applied to the teaching of large number of students. Nonetheless, there are a number of issues associated with large-group teaching that are not encountered when teaching in small-groups. This study is only an attempt to shift educational thinking into a student-centred approach that would allow educators to apply that approach to engage students in their learning process in whatever teaching situation they are faced with.

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