Student engagement in learning-oriented assessment: A case study

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Abstract
Although ‘student engagement’ has become a frequently used term particularly among those involved in research associated with teaching and learning, it should be noted that student engagement in assessment for learning is a novel practice, which is slowly making its way into higher education pedagogy. This article presents an evaluative analysis of student engagement in assessment for learning conducted on a group of undergraduate students from an Irish university, on the basis of qualitative data gathered from their written journals and feedback exercises. The findings indicate that students valued positively the experience; they also acknowledge that engagement in assessment had a great beneficial impact on their learning. Some limitations of the process are also identified. Finally, a number of pedagogical implications arising from the experience of student engagement in assessment for learning in third level education are also outlined.

Keywords: Student engagement, learning-oriented assessment, peer assessment, assessment criteria, reflection on learning

Introduction
The concept of student engagement has recently attracted considerable attention among educators as a factor contributing significantly to the quality of higher education (Coates, 2005; Kuh, 2003). ‘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 study, 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).

Against this general background, the specific concern of this article is the effective use of assessment designed to engage students in the learning process. The strong links between student engagement and assessment of student learning (Stefani, 2008) bring us to the consideration that when thinking about assessment, it is
necessary to reflect about not only what and how we are assessing, but also why (Brown, 2005; Falchikov, 2005; Race, Brown & Smith, 2005; Rowntree, 1987). Attempts to engage students in the process of assessment mean that learning is placed at the centre of assessment (Keppell & 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 important in contributing to an increase in student engagement either at the level of a learning-oriented task (Bryson & Hand, 2007) or, as I shall argue, in facilitating students’ learning that extends beyond the confines of the classroom context (Hernández, 2007b). The building of trust among students, and between the teacher and the learners (Carless, 2009) is essential to create a relaxed atmosphere where learning-oriented assessment can take place.

Questions often arise about the degree to which students take an active role 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 adapted from Carless (2007) 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’ (i.e. acting on the feedback).

The present study offers an overview of the three elements of the above learning-oriented assessment framework, but the analysis focuses on the second attribute, namely, the learners’ involvement in the assessment process. More specifically, it focuses on student involvement in the development and understanding of assessment criteria as well as on their active participation in self- and peer-assessment practices. The purpose of this article is to provide an evaluative study of student engagement in the assessment of their learning.

**Context for the Study**
The study undertaken involved a group of students (n= 25) participating in a semester-long module in Spanish language at University College Dublin, comprising a total of 24 teaching hours during the academic year 2009-10. *Expresión Escrita* (a proposed translation into English of the title of the module might be ‘Becoming a Writer in a Foreign Language’) 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 overall intake in this module is 25 students. The students were from a variety of programmes: BA, BA (International), BComm (International), and Erasmus students.

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, etc.) in Spanish and by reflecting about texts already written by competent writers, by their peers or by 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 (Oxford, 1990). Furthermore, this module emphasises the social dimension of learning as many classroom activities have a group component (Williams & Burden, 1997). 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.

An action research methodology (Feldman & Minstrell, 2000) has been used to ascertain student engagement with assessment. Such methodology implies that teachers engage in research as part of their normal practices. Action research methods have appeared to be particularly suitable for exploring assessment practices in higher education (McDowell & Sambell, 1999, McDowell et al., 2004). Therefore, this article will focus, firstly, on the implementation of a learning-oriented approach to assessment in the classroom and on a group activity to evaluate the module overall. Then, the findings from the student learning journals in light of the learning-oriented approach will be presented.
Implementation of a Learning-oriented Approach to Assessment

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 to reflect about the learning-oriented activities undertaken during the semester and through the scaffolding of their learning, according to their needs. Only a selection of learning-oriented activities can be discussed in this article.

1) Engagement in understanding and development of assessment criteria

The engagement of students 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 teacher explained the criteria and some examples of previously submitted portfolios and learning journals were examined under the proposed criteria. That activity allowed students a ‘hands on’ approach when 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. Permission to use the portfolios submitted by past students of the module had been obtained by the teacher.

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 four or five. Each group was given the task of coming 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. This ensured 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 which arose 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.

2) Engagement in peer assessment activities
Students completed a written task outside the classroom. They had been given instructions to write a short story that was going to be published by a local magazine aimed at disseminating the work of young writers. All instructions were given to the students, including 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 from them and numbered them from 1 to 25. The teacher read the stories and organised them in six sets – four/five stories in each set - ensuring that in each set there was a mixture of stories whose quality was excellent, good, mediocre or poor. Only the teacher knew who the authors of the stories were.

The students were involved in a peer-assessment activity in class. During the next class, the teacher divided students into six groups and the task of each group was to act as jury of the stories by agreeing on selecting the best and the worst 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 worst 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 worst story they had to offer recommendations to the anonymous author on what needed to be
improved. An amount of class-time was given to reporting orally from each group, focusing on key aspects of the best and worst stories. There was time also for a short discussion by the whole class on the value of students (themselves) being involved in the assessment exercise. Students were then encouraged to continue their reflection about the peer assessment experience by way of writing about it in their learning journals.

3) Engaging students in the evaluation of the module

This module was evaluated throughout the semester 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 semester evaluation of this module followed the practices in the university by which students have to complete an online anonymous survey. However, adding to the online survey method, 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 items 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 sharing their ideas in pairs and then with another set of pairs in order to reach the consensus of the group (four students) and to present their results to the whole class. The individual evaluations were placed in the end of semester portfolio submitted by the students.

Although Spanish had been the language of expression during the semester, the students and the teacher agreed that for the purpose of the snowballing activity the discussion would take place in English. 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. Thus, the outcomes of the study would be disseminated 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. Students’ permission to audio-record the session was given to the teacher.

The three 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 article focuses on presenting some data collected from the students during the last class of the semester through the group evaluation exercise described above, and from the students’ learning journal submitted at the end of the semester. Discussion and analysis of the data will follow and, on the basis of the results, conclusions will be drawn outlining some pedagogical implications arising from this educational experience.

Results
Coding student responses
A content analysis arising from the individual comments made by the students in their learning journals at the end of the semester and during the snowballing activity in class was undertaken. As the journals were written in Spanish, a translation of the relevant extracts will be provided. The qualitative analysis method used aimed at generating meaning, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The first stage involved reading and listening to the participants’ responses and grouping them into preliminary categories. The categories were refined and potential ambiguous responses were furthered considered.

Three categories were used to exemplify how the learning-oriented approach to assessment contributed to student engagement. These are: a) cognitive competences, b) meta-cognitive strategies and c) students’ affective dispositions. The majority of the students (75%) made comments related to all three categories. Below are samples from each of the categories:

a) Cognitive competences. In relation to the cognitive domain, students expressed that this approach to assessment facilitated deep learning:

- It allows you to understand where your faults are and how to improve them. (Student F)
- 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)
- It encourages you to work on what we have learned in class and ultimately to learn more. (Student B)
I feel my written Spanish has improved. This will benefit me greatly next semester. (Student C)

**b) Meta-cognitive-strategies.** 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, although some students expressed difficulties in assessing the work of their peers:

- It’s a good idea because it makes you work regularly and implement new things that we have learned. (Student A)
- 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)
- It is too hard to judge ourselves. (Student H)

**c) Students' affective dispositions.** The development of students’ confidence and self-esteem became apparent also in the responses given by the students:

- I am more confident about my ability to write in Spanish. (Student D)
- I have gained a lot of confidence and I take more risks in the way I write in Spanish. (Student L)

In order to strengthen the validity of the above results, related to the students’ experiences regarding their engagement with assessment, it is worth providing a brief account about the students’ views on the module overall. The data emerging from the group session on the evaluation of the module were mainly positive and related to students’ satisfaction with the wide range of texts produced, the opportunity to work in pairs and in groups, and the provision of written and oral feedback. The writing of the learning journal emerged among the more negative aspects of the module because some students reported that writing it was time consuming. Another negative comment expressed was that a number of students would have preferred to receive a grade for the first drafts of the texts submitted.

Satisfaction with the module was further stated through the individual entries in the journal, reflecting about their learning experiences. Most students said that they would recommend the module to other students. The analysis of the data from the journals illustrated further the positive views of the students about how this module significantly contributed to their learning. More specifically, the positive attitudes arose from the methodology used as the students were fully engaged in assessment activities that made them aware of their learning and of how to improve their writing skills in Spanish. 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 provided a relaxed learning environment; and that it was a different and challenging module. The following extracts, translated into English by the teacher from the original Spanish entries in the journals, illustrate the above points.

**a) Development of language skills**
The majority of the students (90%) 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) A relaxed learning environment**
Eighty five per cent of the 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)

It provides a more fun learning approach and relaxed atmosphere. (Student G)

A significant number of students also highlighted the relaxed atmosphere created in this module:

The classes were very interesting and there was a great atmosphere. (Student P)

There was an enjoyable atmosphere and broad learning. (Student R)

**c) A different and challenging module**
Almost all students (98%) stated that this module was different and more challenging than others they have studied at the university:

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 challenging learning approach. (Student G)

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

It motivates students. (Student I)

**Discussion and Conclusions**
The evidence from this study shows that student engagement in learning-oriented assessment 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, as argued by Carless (2009), 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 appears to have 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 majority of 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. Some 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 & Hirschfeld, 2008). However, the engagement of students in learning-oriented assessment practices need not always result in an enhancement of student learning as there are other factors (i.e. aptitude) that also contribute to students’ achieving (Hernández, 2007a). Further research is required in order to examine the conditions under which student engagement does result in better achievement.

It is important to note that a learning-oriented approach to assessment may not be favourable by all students. 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. Early intervention by 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, when no grades are provided on the drafts, 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.

This article has presented an investigation into student engagement in the context of a module with a limited intake of students. Nevertheless, educators need to consider to what extent those challenges can be applied to the teaching of large number of students. Clearly, there are a number of issues associated with large-group teaching that are not encountered when teaching in small-groups. However, this study has demonstrated that a learning-oriented approach to assessment provides students with ample opportunities to actively engage in their learning, in our case by writing, evaluating and reflecting about their work and that of their peers. This study aims to contribute to the current educational thinking into a student-centred approach. When educators adopt a student-centred approach they will be able to develop modes of engaging students in learning-oriented assessment practices embedded in the learning process, no matter what teaching situation (large or small group) they are faced with.

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References


