

Factors Influencing the Assessment Perceptions of Training Teachers

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The paper describes a study revealing a number of factors that influence how Bachelor of Education students perceive assessment. These factors include personal histories, student teacher relationships, opportunities for personalisation and deep learning, notions of relevance, and anxiety issues. 'Personal histories', as a term used to describe students' previous experiences, provided participants with an experiential reference point for thinking and talking about aspects of the assessment process. However, the learning and assessment context together with individual motivations, rather than personal histories, seemed to determine the learning approach adopted. The paper is likely to be of interest to those involved in designing assessments for training teachers.

Assessment, student perceptions, innovative assessment,
student-teacher relationships, assessment anxiety

INTRODUCTION

The paper describes a small qualitative study undertaken in one Australian university. The study revealed a number of factors that influenced how Bachelor of Education students perceived assessment. The findings indicated that personal histories, student teacher relationships, opportunities for personalisation and deep learning, notions of relevance, and anxiety issues all influenced how students perceived assessment. 'Personal histories', as a term used to describe students' previous experiences, provided participants with an experiential reference point for thinking and talking about aspects of the assessment process. However, the learning and assessment context together with individual motivations, rather than personal histories, seemed to determine the learning approach adopted.

The main motivation for conducting a qualitative research study into how training teachers perceive assessment lies in the profound influence student perceptions have on learning (Entwistle, Thompson and Tait, 1992; McDowell, 1996; Race, 1999; Ramsden, 1988a). In addition, exploring the intentions of training teachers today may well provide some insights into the classrooms of tomorrow.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature not only provides a rationale for eliciting student perceptions but also contributes to discussions about how these perceptions of assessment are connected to learning approaches, previous assessment experiences, notions of relevance and student teacher relationships.

A Rationale for Considering Student Perceptions of Assessment

Since student teachers are experienced consumers of assessment, their perceptions should make a useful contribution to discussions about curriculum design in university schools of education. Whether or not students are "systematically silenced" as, "insiders and experts" (Erickson and

Shultz, 1992), the call from notable sources to discover more about student perceptions is compelling (Boud and Griffin, 1987; Brown and Knight, 1994; Stefani, 1998). Insights into student perceptions would confer greater legitimacy upon student knowledge (Carspecken and Apple, 1992), encourage partnerships with learners and address suggestions that teachers tend to be unilateral decision makers in matters of assessment (Hughes, 1998; Williams and Norris, 1985).

The notion of asking students to share their perceptions of assessment has occurred during what appears to be a major paradigm shift in the literature, focusing on learning rather more than a technical orientation towards measurement (Birenbaum and Dochy, 1996; Orrell, 1997). Research characterising this shift has revealed the importance of student autonomy, the diversity of ways individuals engage in learning and the consequent need for a greater variety of assessments (Hughes, 1998). Most significantly, there now seems little doubt that student perceptions of assessment profoundly influence learning (Entwistle, Thompson and Tait, 1992; McDowell, 1996; Ramsden, 1988a).

Learning Approaches

Undergraduates consciously adopt either a deep or surface learning approach depending upon their perception of the assessment context (Ramsden, 1992). A learning approach describes the relationship between the learner, their motivation and the modifiable teaching context (Biggs and Moore, 1993; Marton and Ramsden, 1988). Deep learning approaches for example, encourage a personal, active, critical, internally motivated and positive response to learning (Entwistle et al. 1992; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 1992), while surface learning approaches reputedly engender memorisation and a lack of reflection on meaning (Biggs and Moore, 1993).

The Influence of Student Assessment Histories on Current Perceptions

Although research has identified a connection between personal assessment histories and current assessment perceptions (Biggs and Moore, 1993; Hughes, 1998; Schmeck, 1988), there seems little elaboration on how exactly this might occur. Instead, we find an emerging, somewhat simplistic polarisation of views on whether it is student histories or the learning context that determines how students perceive assessment and learning (Ramsden, 1988b). Some theorists maintain that perceptions are influenced by motivations such as fear, resulting from past painful experiences that may create a kind of assessment avoidance behaviour or the development of defence mechanisms attributing failure to assessment irrelevance, for example (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). However, we cannot assume causal links between assessment events and student perceptions because our judgments are influenced by many factors other than the original experience (Strawson, 1979).

Student Perceptions of Assessment Relevance

Stensaker (1999) maintained that more attention should be paid to perceptions of relevance in assessment design and for good reason since assessments that make relevant connections with the world of work, for example, appear to have a positive influence on student learning (Huff and Sireci, 2001; Unwin and Caraher, 2000). However, there is some suggestion that these findings do not extend to particular kinds of traditional assessment that present fewer opportunities for students to realise personal relevance in learning and assessment (Grzelkowski, 1987 cited in Grauerholz, 2002).

Student -Teacher Relationships Influencing Assessment Perceptions

Positive student–teacher relationships enhance cognitive learning outcomes and also determine whether both parties attain their goals, dependant as they are upon negotiation, conflict resolution and sharing authority (Bainbridge and Houser, 2000; Oylar and Becker, 1977 cited in Mishna and Rasmussen, 2001). However, few studies have explored how students perceive their relationships with teachers and fewer still focus on how such relationships might impact upon student perceptions of assessment.

RESEARCH METHOD

This small research study drew upon data collected from participants enrolled in a Bachelor of Education program in one Australian university. The methods involved a recorded semi-structured interview, a recorded so-called ‘think-aloud’ card sorting activity eliciting participant assessment preferences, and a written response to a question about the kinds of issues participants would keep in mind when designing assessments as future teachers. These data collection activities lent themselves well to complex, rich, in-depth qualitative research focusing on subjective, student perspectives and beliefs (Laurillard, 1984).

The constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1994) was used to analyse data. Units of meaning were grouped, compared and coded (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Codes, were continually created, changed or refined, depending on their relationship to data as they were received (Fingfeld, 1999; Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Eventually core codes were identified from categories that appeared to be more central or occurred more frequently though disconfirming evidence was also sought (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The potential for bias in a study using only one major researcher was also reduced by the recruitment of two volunteer research consultants who assisted in checking coding practices and sample transcriptions against recordings. Methodological triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing three methods of data collection. Participant verification of transcriptions also contributed to triangulation by providing multiple perspectives in interpreting the data (Denzin, 1978 cited in Patton, 1990). Ethical procedures were approved by the Social and Behavioural Ethics Committee of the university where the research was undertaken.

Given the small-scale nature of the research some limitations were evident. For example, significant variables such as socio-economic factors, learning styles and intelligences, could not be explored in a small study but were likely to have affected the research outcomes. Secondly, it was recognised that interviews could be problematic in that they did not necessarily provide evidence of covert perceptions (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). Furthermore, the researcher could not assume that participants were aware of the reason why they thought or behaved in certain ways (Foddy, 1999). Finally, as most university staff would hope, it was likely that as student teachers, the participants were influenced by the literature and theories of learning and assessment to which they had been exposed during the course of their training as teachers. Indeed a number of perceptions were reminiscent of theories concerning the relationship between assessment and surface and deep learning (Biggs and Moore, 1993) or the negative effects of traditional assessment upon learning (Entwistle et al. 1992; McDowell, 1996; Race, 1999; Ramsden, 1988) or the rapid decay of learned content (Powell, 1985).

THE FINDINGS

Although student perceptions of assessment were clearly influenced by past experiences, other factors were also identified, including student-teacher relationships, anxiety, student notions of relevance and opportunities for deep learning. The assessment context, however, together with individual motivation, rather than past experiences determined the learning approach adopted. Support for assessment encouraging deep learning approaches was also apparent and confirmed in

data relating to training teachers' future professional intentions. Data from the interview, the card sorting activity and the reflective written response have been combined in the reporting the findings since analysis and coding suggested a high level of consistency between the data collection methods. Participant comments have occasionally been used to illustrate some of the issues raised in the discussion.

Past Histories

Participants used historical experiences to explain current negative perceptions of assessments citing incidents of failure and disappointment, anxiety and perceived unfair grading practices. These incidents often appeared to be connected to a kind of assessment avoidance behaviour (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). For example, Kisumu remarked; *"I definitely wouldn't want to be assessed on that"*, recalling a high school group project where she *"resented"* being given a lower grade than peers. Consistent with theories that student perceptions were influenced by the familiarity of past experience (Nisbett and Ross, 1980), some participants in the study maintained that they would not enrol in a course where the assessment was unknown to them or indeed where they had had no previous experience of success. For example, Nancy commented, *"[I]...stick with things I know and things I do well at"*.

However, since a number of factors may simultaneously influence a perception these examples are unlikely to be sufficient to suggest that there is a direct correlation between past histories and current perceptions (Strawson, 1979). While Lina, for instance, acknowledged the unpleasant experiences of weekly school quizzes and felt that these kinds of assessment were ineffective, she added, *"So...my previous experiences have had some influence but I wouldn't say, yes, I feel this way because of that"*. Similarly, another participant's rejection of multiple-choice assessment could be related either to a previous experience of failure or her view that such assessments did not ascertain understanding.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Student assessment perceptions appeared to be influenced by previous experiences of teachers who ultimately became role models. Powerful illustrations of an apprenticeship process were evident in the data and this process appeared to have begun with teaching and learning experiences that occurred long before their enrolment in the university program. The apprenticeship process that was loosely defined as learning by observation of teacher practice did not appear to draw upon negative observations any more than positive ones. An analysis of the data revealed that student observations of teacher practice influenced student perceptions of assessment and their intentions for personal future practice. It was also clear that inconsistencies between theory and teacher practice were noted in academically critical ways.

One individual traced descriptions of poor relationships with teachers and their impact upon assessment perceptions stretching back to kindergarten. The account represented a sorry tale of personality clashes, grudges, lack of trust and feelings of victimisation that impinged upon assessment issues. Feedback was considered useful for finding out, *"... what they [teachers] think of you"*, emphasising the influence of relationships in the process rather than professional observations designed for the improvement of the critically reflective student. Where such patterns of unsatisfactory relationships occurred, it was tempting to consider them as a kind of negative 'primacy effect' in perception formation (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). Teacher and student relationships appeared to be one factor influencing how individuals perceived assessment and this finding was in keeping with the work of Bainbridge and Houser (2000) who suggested that these relationships affected learning more generally. It should be noted, however, that the connection between teacher-student relationships and assessment experiences also applied in positive ways where participants attributed their motivation and assessment success to worthwhile and affirming

relationships. The data therefore indicated that whether for good or ill, student relationships with teachers was an important factor in the formation of assessment perceptions.

Consumerist Perceptions of Assessment Practices

Consumerist tendencies influenced participant assessment perceptions where dissatisfactions were couched in comments such as, “...we are paying money as well” and “I shouldn’t be having to be wasting my money here and my time, on something that is not going to be applicable or relevant”. In addition, some participants perceived summative peer assessment (graded) as poor value for money because students were considered ill qualified or too influenced by personal relationships to make the necessary impartial and fair evaluations. Remarks included, “I think teachers should have that job” and “I think it is down to the people who are paid to ...do that”.

However, consumerist and negative perceptions were not present when referring to formative peer assessment (ungraded) and were therefore more consistent with Kagan’s (1994, cited in Johnston, 2001) findings suggesting a positive perception of peer assessment. Formative assessments, by contrast to summative peer assessments were perceived as encouraging, “...cooperation, interaction...creativity [and] imagination” and preparing students for future teaching roles as well as minimising the effect of teacher bias. A tentative conclusion was therefore drawn that consumerist perceptions may be more closely linked to whether an assessment is summative or formative, rather than being a phenomenon inherent to the kinds of assessments specified.

Assessment Anxiety

While the study bore out the conviction that basically the existence of any kind of assessment is likely to be threatening to many students (Biggs, 1991), vivas, examinations, oral presentations and laboratory assessments, seemed to cause higher levels of anxiety than others. These kinds of assessment were described as “nerve racking”, “daunting”, with “...images of being beaten down with the light shining on your face”, along with “intimidating, very threatening and confronting”.

Most participants preferred courses without examinations. As Ann explained, for her, it was the avoidance of the “do or die”, terminal, high stakes approach that others maintained only served to encourage cramming, lack of sleep and stress. ‘Knowing’ rather than ‘understanding’ was perceived as the examinational credo where ‘knowing’ equated to “regurgitated” details without “...very much comprehension” but nevertheless attracting high grades. Lou attributed the anxiety she felt about assessments such as examinations, vivas and lab experiments to the fact that “you just have to know something in that space of time”. Such stressful assessments involved the delivering and communicating of learning in real time. Given extensive “evidence of the negative effects of test anxiety on academic performance” (Hancock, 2001), the concept and implications of ‘live’ or ‘real time’ assessment needs to be explored further.

Some Implications for Learning Approaches

After having failed an examination, Maria consciously changed her, “learning style”, probably more correctly defined here as a learning ‘approach,’ (Biggs and Moore, 1993; Marton and Ramsden, 1988). As a result, she became, “...more focused towards what is expected...rather than what I would like to learn” and began to view grades as an “important ...prerequisite to moving on”. Maria’s experience therefore embodied the theory that undergraduates adopt a learning approach depending upon their perception of the context (Laurillard, n.d., cited in Ramsden, 1988b; Ramsden, 1992).

Three students, Bridget, Lina and Kisumu appeared to have transformed their learning experience when one compared current approaches and perceptions with somewhat chequered academic histories of deliberate failure, apathy and dropping out. They seemed to be highly motivated in the

desire to become teachers, maintained very high grade point averages, were goal orientated and enthusiastic, typified by Bridget's comments, "*I've learned so much! Just cool stuff*".

The success of these three students could be attributable to the fact that as one student suggested, "*mature age students are renowned for putting in a lot of effort*" but their learning approaches may also have implications. Bridget and Kisumu displayed some characteristics of what Biggs (1991) describes as an "*achieving approach*" in that they appeared to adopt either surface or deep approaches to learning, depending upon the context. As Kisumu commented, "*I just want this end result so I do what comes up to get there*".

Secondly, they also allocated time to assessment activities depending upon their perceived importance (Biggs, 1991). As Bridget commented, "*Well there were just far too many [assessments]...and far too much work and the work was just worth nothing and in the end you are doing something worth four per cent*". The achieving approach is also characterised by a preoccupation with grades. Kisumu's account, for example, had many references along these lines: "*I was getting really good grades...and my grades have just dropped*", "*I was sitting on a credit*" and "*I really enjoyed the exams ..it bumped my grade up to a distinction*". Thus, it appears that the extrinsic motivation to succeed in becoming teachers had resulted in the adoption of an achieving approach, not previously evident in accounts of these participant histories.

In the case of Lina, anecdotal evidence of past assessment experiences suggested a surface approach as compared to the deep approach currently adopted. She reflected on her previous learning experiences and how through cramming she became "*very good at learning how to pass exams*" but not very "*good at learning*." As a school student, she concentrated on "*just passing enough to be an average student*" and "*get by*". By contrast, she later came to believe assessment should "*be built into the whole learning thing and not made into a separate identity*". She also preferred "*innovative assessments*" that required a personal response and made a number of positive comments regarding her teaching and learning experience, a characteristic of those adopting a deep approach. In contrast to students using an achieving approach (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 1992), Lina showed little interest in grades, remarking, "*I suppose I don't like grades, full stop*".

Given the associations identified here between learning approaches and outcomes, it appears clear that some relationship between the two exists. Nevertheless since academic performance rests on a multiplicity of unique factors related to both context and individual there is a reluctance to infer causal relationships.

Perceptions of Assessment Relevance

The data reflected Hadzigeorgiou's (2001) contention that establishing relevance was crucial to learning. Lack of relevance in assessment reportedly engendered "*jumping through hoops*" in time wasting activities that endowed experiences with an ephemeral quality; "*They're gone now...There was not much point in them...the assessments just come – they're gone – who remembers?*" or as Lina asked, "*So where did that go?*"

Students interpreted relevance in different ways. For some, it was established when assessments were applicable to other contexts, or as Race (1999, p.25) put it, "*they were authentic because they prepared students for dealing with real situations*". Consistent with previous research (Wilson and Johnson, 2000), some participants viewed assessment that did not contribute towards their final grade, as less relevant to learning. Ungraded formative assessment was disparagingly described as "*...busy work*" that "*wasn't... being marked or anything*".

Work related assessments linked to field experience were perceived as particularly relevant, confirming the findings of Donald and Denison (2001) and LaMaster (2001). Some of the

participants were employed in the private sector or were working part time as teacher assistants and would have welcomed opportunities for negotiating assessments related to these working experiences in their Bachelor of Education program.

Opportunities for Personalisation in Assessment

Participants clearly expressed enthusiasm for assessment that allowed for independent exploration and were negative about those that were, as one participant suggested, “*totally prescribed by the academic*”. The opportunity to express personal beliefs in assessments such as journals was perceived positively though the difficulties involved in creating valid criteria for graded assessment of arbitrary personal beliefs was not overlooked. However, consistent with other research (Laurillard, 1984; Ramsden, 1992), participants expressed doubt about the advisability of expressing independent thought in assessment when confronted with tensions between personal and academically sanctioned responses. Tom’s commentary is a useful example:

...it’s just a matter...of trying to work out what people want...and then mixed with that, is that [it] might be against what I actually believe [and] people are saying to me, you should be saying [such and such] because this is what they want to hear and I think, well, it’s selling yourself short...

Participants also desired more personalised assessment feedback rather than leaving them feeling little more than ‘a number’. The assessment process was therefore perceived as deeply personal, both in the development of assignments and in how students expected teachers to relate to their work, as extensions of themselves.

CONCLUSION

The data from this small study has attempted to draw attention to some interesting assessment issues that other researchers might consider within their own contexts. The research has also raised a number of questions that need further exploration. What are the implications of greater consumerism being evident in graded rather than non-graded assessment? How can student notions of relevance and opportunities for personalisation be utilised to maximise some positive aspects of assessment perceptions? If participants view the expression of personal opinions as, ‘risky business’ when they run counter to the perceived sanctioned knowledge and perspectives of their teachers, what does this tell us about how power relationships are related to perceptions of assessment? Given Stegman’s (2000) research indicating the significant impact of personal beliefs on classroom learning and presumably assessment, this is certainly an area worth pursuing. Finally, since academic performance is impaired by anxiety (Hancock, 2001), the concept and implications of ‘live’ or ‘real time’ assessment is also worthy of further research and discussion.

The data appeared to support the theory that learning approaches are adopted depending on how assessments are perceived (Laurillard, n.d., cited in Ramsden, 1988b; Ramsden, 1992) and that motivational factors can result in dramatic, Pygmalion-like changes in both learning approach and performance. However, a causal relationship cannot be inferred between learning approaches and outcomes, given that academic performance and perception rests on a multiplicity of factors as Trigwell and Prosser (1991) have indicated.

The significance of connections between student histories and current perceptions in this study has been confirmed in the anecdotal fabric of most issues arising from the data. Student histories provided an experiential reference point for thinking and talking about how student-teacher relationships, notions of relevance and anxiety, for example, influenced perceptions of assessment. However, the learning and assessment context together with individual motivations, rather than personal histories, determined the learning approach adopted. The overarching conclusion of the study has been that while student histories are influential and anecdotally

illustrative in determining current perceptions of assessment, they remain one factor among others, in the multifaceted, dynamic and unique process of perception formation.

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