



## Commentary: The Wider Context of Programme-Level Enhancement of Assessment

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The most important principle that should guide our design of higher education programmes is that formative assessment has learning power. Formative assessment involves a judgment of the quality of work, which should be informed by explicit criteria, and might be made by a tutor, by a peer, or be a self-assessment. This judgment should provide information for the learner on how to improve their work and to academic staff on how to improve their teaching. I will return to this key issue of formative assessment, but first I want to discuss three wider issues around programme enhancement work: the neoliberal policy framework; graduate attributes; and our (over)dependence on learning outcomes for programme design.

### Key Insight: Formative assessment has learning power.

In the higher education sector internationally, we are living in an age of accountability and need to acknowledge that. As George Monbiot suggests, 'imagine if the people of the Soviet Union had never heard of communism' (Monbiot, 2016). In the Western world since the 1980s, neoliberalism has had a huge influence on educational policies and systems by emphasising parent/student choice as 'customers', high stakes inspection, student evaluative feedback, performativity of staff, league tables and inevitable washback from this policy framework into teaching, learning and assessment practice and even into how tutors and students

work together. Within this 'age of accountability', we need to consider the student's position; expected to be entrepreneurial, setting off into the world by investing in their own higher education. They have come through a schooling system obsessed with testing, grading and target-setting – so who would be surprised if they tend to adopt surface or strategic approaches to learning when arriving in higher education. We also need to consider the academic staff, subjected to high accountability policies and procedures on recruitment, teaching, and assessment, not to mention research outputs and/or high teaching workloads – who would be surprised if these academics tend to be sceptical or cautious when asked to pursue a collaborative programme-level inquiry into assessment of, for and as learning. An action research approach, including its ethical framework, can help to provide a 'safe' learning environment for teaching teams. As academics, we need to more powerfully articulate and design for the wider aims of education and Gert Biesta proposes three overlapping purposes of qualification, socialisation and subjectification. His meaning for socialisation includes preparation to be a citizen and family member as well as an employee. And 'subjectification' relates to education enabling a student to become a unique human being, to respond to the curriculum in creative and personalised ways that might surprise tutors.

Within the challenging wider context, a programme level approach is particularly helpful in enhancing assessment strategies and practices because there is a tendency, especially in modularised systems, for us to forget that the award of a degree is a public declaration of the student's demonstration of programme-level requirements. These programme-level requirements include subject discipline knowledge, understanding and skills, but also 'graduate attributes'. In recent times, under the influence of the neoliberal policy framework, higher education institutions have particularly focused on 'employability'. A key challenge for teaching teams is to integrate these institutional requirements fully into their programmes within the subject discipline or professional field. Failure to embrace and integrate such programme-level requirements could lead to the imposition of 'bolt-on' modules or student experiences and even lead to pick-and-mix programme structures that lose the traditional and valuable student experience of socialisation into the discipline or field – the experience I enjoyed of gradually 'becoming a geographer' during my first degree.



Currently in education we tend to design and assess learning using 'learning outcomes'. It is arguable that the paradigmatic dependence on well-defined and thus measurable 'learning outcomes' is a consequence of the wider policy context. Learning outcomes are the cutting edge of neoliberal education policy. In reviewing programme-level aims, learning outcomes, and assessment strategies, we might consider how the programme provides sufficient space for subjectification. On a practical level and working within current constraints, it is possible to take a step towards this by ensuring that at least one of our learning outcomes, for each module or course we design, is open-ended enough to give some degree of autonomy to students, to invite creative and innovative responses. Alternatives to the over-emphasis on learning outcomes include a focus on key concepts, but this approach would have to avoid the perils of a content-based approach to programme planning. There is an interesting ongoing international debate around the school curriculum that provides some useful insight, building on the thinking of Durkheim and Bernstein around social realist perspectives of knowledge, with contributions from Michael F. D. Young (2008) among others. The focus on learning outcomes links to approaches to grading student work and providing written feedback. It tends to encourage the idea that grading can be criteria-based and analytic, as if an academic could evaluate a complex assignment such as an essay against five learning outcomes. In practice, at least in the light of my own research with Sue Bloxham, many academics tend to make holistic judgments that involve an element of norm referencing. They will perhaps refer to the published assessment criteria to confirm boundary judgments or provide some key words to ensure that the written feedback matches the grade awarded. A key challenge for us within a high accountability context is to consider to what extent we admit to students that holistic judgment by subject discipline experts is a big part of assessment in higher education. We would be acknowledging publicly that learning outcomes, assessment criteria and transparency are useful tools but have their limits.

I began this discussion by emphasising the learning power of formative assessment. In place of 'formative' I prefer the term 'low stakes' assessment because it better captures the significance of a safe learning environment in which struggle and mistakes are welcomed as learning opportunities. For students to benefit from formative assessment they need to believe that they can improve through effort (developing a growth mindset) and yet their experience of education in the age of accountability may have included much labelling of learners using incoherent terms such as 'ability'. Perhaps an even greater challenge is that academic staff must also believe in the malleable intelligence of their students, avoiding labelling and setting high expectations for all. Both academic staff and students need a 'safe' learning environment within our age of accountability.

**Key Question:**  
To what degree do we welcome struggle and mistakes as learning opportunities within programmes?

## References

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