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Promoting Students' Assessment Literacy

Margaret Price, Director of the ASKe Pedagogy Research Centre and Professor of Assessment and Learning, Oxford Brookes University

Why is assessment literacy important . . . ?

Oh no not another literacy! Higher education seems to be awash with literacies (academic, digital, information to name but a few) so why do we need another? And why promote students' assessment literacy: surely it is a staff rather than student domain?

The importance of assessment and feedback for encouraging and guiding students learning is without doubt, but there is much evidence of problems and dissatisfaction with many aspects of the assessment process. Efforts have been made to resolve those problems but they have been made within established beliefs about the nature and operation of assessment that were founded in higher education of a different era. Higher education now operates in a dynamic and changing environment with higher participation rates, broader curricula, diversified programmes and different student expectations. Therefore we need to take a different perspective on assessment and although there have been several calls for educational professionals to have a better understanding of assessment, this misses out the other partner in assessment - the student.

. . . and what has it got to do with students?

Not only do the mechanics of assessment need to be right, but students need to understand the rationale for the selected assessment design, as well as the quality characteristics that tutors seek in their assessed work—they need to have crossed the assessment literacy threshold in order to engage with the standards at this deeper level. As Sadler (1989, p.121) explains, an indispensable condition for students doing well is that they have the same understanding as their tutor of what constitutes a good assignment, so that they can imbue their work with the requisite qualities 'in the act of production itself'. Boud (2007) goes even further, suggesting that not only do students require such self-evaluative abilities within their academic context, but the ability to make informed judgements about one's own work and that of one's peers is an important graduate attribute and employability skill.

Assessment literacy: roles and responsibilities

Assessment literacy takes a holistic view of assessment with a strong focus on learning and emphasis on the interconnectedness of assessment, feedback, standards, community and student self-regulation. It looks differently at the roles of staff and students within the assessment process. Promoting student assessment literacy will enable students to recognise and take responsibility for their role in assessment and improve their assessed performance.

For a fuller discussion, see the ASKe video
Joint Responsibility
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/MultimediaResources/

Being assessment-literate

Assessment literacy is not about developing the strategic learner nor merely encouraging students to be cue seekers (Miller and Parlett 1974). Assessment literacy (much like linguistic literacy) involves a combination of knowledge, skills and competencies, including knowledge of a vocabulary and a grammar. And, like linguistic literacy, it goes beyond knowing the meaning of specific words (basic principles) and the rules of grammatical construction (technical approaches). Just as being literate enables one to read and appreciate Shakespeare's plays or Jane Austen's novels, so being assessment-literate equips one with an appreciation of the purpose and processes of assessment, which enables one to engage deeply with assessment standards, to make a choice about which skill or which area of knowledge to apply, to appreciate which are/are not appropriate to a particular task, and why.

Thus, when assessment literate students undertake an assessment task, they will already be familiar with the appropriate assessment standards; they do not discover the standards through doing the task (although they may well learn more about both the subject and assessment itself by doing the task). In this way, both linguistic and assessment literacy are enablers (gateways or thresholds): they enable one to go beyond a grasp of basic principles towards a deeper understanding and engagement.

More specifically, assessment literacy encompasses:

- an appreciation of assessment's relationship to learning;

- a conceptual understanding of assessment (i.e. understanding of the basic principles of valid assessment and feedback practice, including the terminology used);

- understanding of the nature, meaning and level of assessment criteria and standards;

- skills in self- and peer assessment;

- familiarity with technical approaches to assessment (i.e. familiarity with pertinent assessment and feedback skills, techniques, and methods, including their purpose and efficacy); and

- possession of the intellectual ability to select and apply appropriate approaches and techniques to assessed tasks (not only does one have the requisite skills,

In other words students should come to understand assessment and all aspects of the assessment process as a teaching professional would.

For a fuller discussion, see the ASKe video
The importance of being assessment-literate
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/MultimediaResources/

Supporting students to develop assessment literacy

There are five areas to focus on: taking a programme perspective; pre-assessment activity; assessment activity; post assessment activity (feedback); and involvement in community.

Taking a programme perspective

Students enrol on and experience whole degree programmes (rather than simply a selection of modules), so a programme must be planned to provide scheduled, structured activities with a focus on enabling students to construct understandings of assessment and appreciate the imaportance of that understanding for their learning and performance. This may mean students have to 'unlearn' what they thought they understood about assessment, perhaps developed during prior education when assessment was only about measurement and there was a focus on one right answer. Students quickly need to grasp that higher education assessment becomes, correspondingly, less about measuring what you know and more about guiding and judging how knowledge is selected and applied to novel, often ill-structured, situations and problems (King and Kitchener 1994).

For a fuller discussion, see the ASKe video
Integration of assessment within a programme
http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/MultimediaResources/

Consequently, whatever the character of discipline being assessed, the development of assessment literacy amongst students must take place early in

their programmes in order to quickly establish new understandings and behaviours. Integrated within their programme of study must be activities that support them to examine the nature of the assessment task, grasp its purpose and the various possible ways of responding to it and understand the standard of work expected of them. They need to see how assessment relates to the rest of the programme and their learning, and need to engage with and make use of feedback.

For a Review Tool to help programme teams evaluate how they are developing their students' assessment literacy, see the Higher Education Academy booklet *A Marked Improvement* pp. 37 ff.

Much of what students need to understand is tacit knowledge that is held in the heads of their teachers, but tacit knowledge can never really be codified or made explicit (Tsoukas, 2003). So it is seldom sufficient to communicate these understandings simply by 'telling', however carefully considered the wording. The best approach to assessment literacy development is through a social constructivist approach where students are actively engaged in assessment processes. Effective activities include discussion of assessment criteria and exemplars, marking workshops, self and peer assessment, and specific application of feedback to subsequent work. These techniques should be used before, during, and after assessment activity as described below.


For the ASKe 123 leaflet on taking a social constructivist approach, go to http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/documents/SocialConst.pdf

Pre assessment activity

An assessment literate student will be able to monitor the quality of their work as they produce it. To make that possible they need to have a good idea of what is meant by good quality work. Unfortunately neither an assignment brief nor criteria and level descriptors can communicate expectations of quality well enough to help students. Like us, students need to see examples of work to help them develop ideas about quality. We see a lot of students' work which helps us. We often can't describe a good piece of work in detail but we know one when we see it. So prior to students working on their assessment tasks they should be able to see and discuss examples of good work or, even better, be given an opportunity to participate in a marking activity.
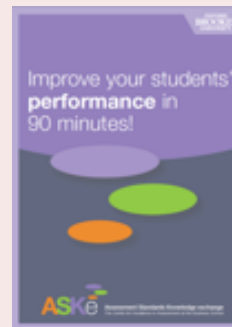
For a way to do this, see the ASKe 123 leaflet on improving student performance http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/documents/2576_123-Improve90Mins.pdf

The good news is that this type of activity is not necessary for every assignment, but just at strategic points in the programme where standards change (i.e. activities need to be planned from a programme perspective). Having a better idea of the standards that they are expected to reach means that students are not working 'in the dark', and can focus on learning and produce better work rather than worrying about the whether they are on the right track. Only if you develop students' understandings of required standards and quality can you expect them to be able to use techniques during assessment activity to gauge the quality of their work.

During assessment activity

Making accurate judgements about one's own work takes practice. We don't always write the perfect article for publication without seeing a lots of good examples in previous editions of the journal or feedback from reviewers. We therefore shouldn't expect students to be able to judge the quality of their work without practice in making those judgements.

We can provide opportunities for practice as students work on their assessment tasks. One approach is to give students feedback on drafts — and not just to the keen students who are proactive, but through requiring all students early in the programme to produce draft work so they can get a better idea of the standards and begin to see how they can improve their work. Feedback doesn't have to come from the teacher. Peer review processes provide feedback but their real value to a student comes from reviewing

their own work having evaluated someone else's. As students develop their confidence in making judgements, peer assessment (but still early in the programme) can be introduced.

Another technique is peer assisted learning where senior students (one year above and more assessment-literate) help students to develop their understanding of quality, not by teaching them but by discussing their approaches to assessment tasks and study techniques.

To embed the habit of self-evaluation it is good practice to expect students to provide their self-assessment of their work and the marker can comment on its efficacy.

For a fuller discussion, see the ASKe video *Assessment Standards* http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/MultimediaResources/

## Post assessment activity (using feedback)

The assessment-literate student will be less dependent on their teacher to mark their work because they are able to judge the quality of their own work. They should be able to judge the extent to which they have understood the topic of study, how well they have produced work required, and if they have communicated their understanding and skill. However providing feedback still remains a critical part of not only developing understanding of the subject but also further developing assessment literacy. It provides information about the level of understanding of quality, as well as advice about ways of approaching assessment that will improve its quality.

Involvement in community

The literature tells us that community plays a key role in engaging students and enhancing their learning, yet it contains few practical examples of how to cultivate

either a sense of community, or indeed a community of practice. However a good starting point is to share with students our assessment work that is often hidden from them. This would encompass the work that goes into assessment design and planning, how we try to share expected assessment standards among teams of markers, and the moderation processes we use. We have a different perspective on assessment from students and by discussing it with them we start to invite them into the subject communities in which we operate.

And the basic underlying enabler of assessment literacy (for both staff and students) is community. After all, it is very difficult to plan an effective programme-wide approach to assessment (or to engage students in pre-assessment activity; or to design effective assessment tasks; or to mark consistently and fairly; or to provide meaningful, engaging feedback) in the absence of a supportive and inclusive community of academic practice whose members interact and share an understanding of the role and nature of assessment.
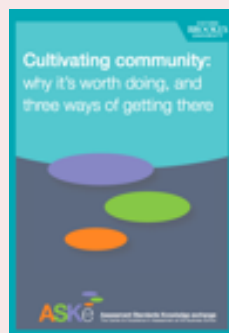
For the ASKe 123 leaflet on cultivating community, go to http://www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/documents/5317-Obu_123-CultComm_v3[1].pdf

Final words

It is important for both staff and students to develop assessment literacy. Given the complexity of assessment, that development journey is unceasing. So it is vital to start early and to continue to encourage and support students' growth in assessment literacy. Some aspects of it are slowly learnt, but once grasped, they can transform students' capacity to learn and improve their work. They will be enabled to become truly independent learners.

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