

**Reflections on Assessment in Higher Education 1998-2016 \***Marion Palmer<sup>†</sup><sup>†</sup>IADT

This paper is an exploration of my journey in assessment theory and practice as a teacher, lecturer, and an educational developer. When I moved to higher education eighteen years ago I promised myself that I would explore assessment and put theory into practice. In October 1998 I went from not being allowed to assess my own students to being required to do so in one day. This is a reflection on the consequences of that step in the form of a narrative of the theoretical and practical learning across that eighteen year period.

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## 1. Introduction

Writing about assessment as I end my career as a lecturer is very satisfying. When I moved to higher education eighteen years ago I promised myself that I would explore assessment and put theory into practice. In October 1998 I went from not being allowed to assess my own students to being required to do so in one day. I was a second level physics teacher who became a third level lecturer. This shift in my professional work was a paradigm change in so many ways, particularly in terms of assessment.

The short story is I did a physics degree in the 1970s and became a physics teacher for about twenty years. As a teacher I assessed my students through classroom assessment, school tests and prepared them for the state examinations mostly the Leaving Certificate but also the Junior (and Intermediate) certificates. It was essentially formative assessment with the system managing the summative assessment. My formative assessment mirrored the state exams and enabled me to prepare students through modelling the questions and reviewing the answers.

During my career as a physics teacher I was an examiner for initially Intermediate Certificate Science and then Ordinary and Higher Level Physics and in the mid-1980s I did a master's degree in education. As an examiner I saw the care and thought that went into the assessment of students' work. Through the study of education I began in a small way to read about assessment. However in reality assessment through examination (and tests) was the status quo and I worked within and as part of the system.

This paper is an exploration of my journey in assessment theory and practice as a teacher, lecturer, and an educational developer.

## 2. Assessment 1998

I joined IADT in October 1998 to develop the area of science education and developed a number of short unassessed courses for primary and second level teachers. However I had to earn my keep as a lecturer. At this stage courses were validated by the National Council for Educational Awards NCEA and it was custom and practice to have two main modes of assessment – examinations and continuous assessment. The balance was often 70% exam and 30% continuous assessment. The continuous assessment was often two or three tests.

At this time higher education was moving into modules and semesters and we were developing an understanding of learning outcomes compared to learning objectives and our current approach to curriculum development. Courses were (and are validated) by panels of peers. At this stage I had read Freeman and Lewis (1998) and was keen to put theory into practice. Freeman and Lewis (1998, p. 314) define assessment as

Any process that aims to judge the extent of student learning.

As part of the team that developed an electronics technician certificate course I proposed that presentations should be part of the assessment for a physics module. This was vetoed by the panel as not the norm (and it wasn't). This made me more determined to explore assessment and to understand its theory and how best to apply theory to practice.

### **3. Assessment In Higher Education Literature**

Inside the Black Box (1998) was a seminal work in science education. Black and William argued on the basis of research in schools that formative assessment (or assessment for learning) used well had an impact on student learning and it changed perceptions about assessment, tests and measurement. This made me think about assessment in science classrooms but also about what we did in higher education. I was struck by how little we all understood assessment and how much it seemed to be tests and exams. What was assessment in higher education and what was the relevance of assessment for learning?

I started to explore the literature in higher education, particularly the work by educational developers. Writers such as Knight were explored particularly for what they said about assessment. The outcomes from my reading was immediate. I decided to learn assessment terms so that I could argue for appropriate assessment at course validation panels. Using Freeman and Lewis as a base I developed a set of assessment terms that I use today with some updates and amendments. Their definition of assessment enabled me to focus on the subjective nature of assessment and how diverse activities can be very suitable for assessment depending on the learning required.

Biggs (2003) argued for constructive alignment in higher education – that the assessment should match the learning. This focus on learning objectives or outcomes in terms of assessment was almost revolutionary and yet so obvious. This shift from teacher to the outcome for the learning was one of the paradigm shifts for me as a teacher. The awareness that 1998 act required fair and

consistent assessment for learners was also seminal.

These key learnings from the literature on diversity in assessment, that we could learn assessment theory (and terms) and use it to justify assessment decisions and the matching of learning outcomes to assessment were and are important. The challenge was to put the learning into our everyday work on assessment. One way was to work with colleagues in higher education and in Dr Anne Jordan of Waterford Institute of Technology I found a mentor and an ally in the development of assessment in higher education. Anne's impact will be evident later.

#### **4. Formal Studies In Assessment**

Parallel to my informal reading I was studying for a doctorate in education at Queen's University Belfast. I did a module on assessment with Prof Janette Elwood. It provided a theoretical foundation at a high level in assessment and an opportunity to analyse assessment in a module I taught. The formal research required for the EdD assignment in 2003/4 meant that I had to focus on assessment in a systematic and rigorous way. The reading changed the way I think about assessment and enabled me to question custom and practice not necessarily changing it. I used theory to analyse my assessment practice in the physics module mentioned earlier.

One of the standard assessments in the sciences is the practical write up and we generally expect students to do a lot of practical work and then to write it up for assessment. On interviewing one of the students I was confronted with the argument that repetition of the task ten times during a year did not lead to learning. As was said 'with all due respect Marion, if I can't do after two or three times I am unlikely to do it at all' (Student, 2003). This challenged my conceptions of assessment of the module in many ways. What was the purpose of practical work, how it was best assessed, what was its relation to the learning outcomes of the module? Was there too much assessment? All these questions were raised and had to be explored. The rigour required for doctorate level study required me to explore my practice, question my taken for granted assumptions and identify how to improve it. It changed my understanding of assessment in a profound way.

Subsequently I explored assessment as part of a problem based learning course in UCD in 2006 and in a DCU Online Assessment and Feedback module in 2011-2012. There is no doubt that my formal studies in assessment have made me engage with the assessment literature and explore concepts that I have subsequently put into practice. Working in the online environment as a student and a teacher enabled me to explore rubrics and see how they can be used well in higher education.

## 5. Assessment as a Lecturer

All this time I was a lecturer in IADT. I was trying to put assessment theory into practice with my modules. I focused on designing assessment that enabled students to provide evidence of their learning. Initially I was teaching physics and science modules at first year level. In 2003 I started teaching a 4<sup>th</sup> Year module on instructional design to psychology students.

Thinking about assessment and trying to have a range of assessments to give learners diversity in assessment almost certainly led to over assessment. It is instructive to compare my third level experience of assessment with exams at the end of the year and possibly the option to repeat with the range of assessment opportunities that I provided for students. However if all work in a module is for summative assessment then where is the opportunity to learn, to make mistakes and to retrieve a situation. I have long been an advocate for active learning for the engagement of students in relevant learning activities. How did I balance it with formative assessment and feedback and diverse summative assessment? It often felt like squaring the circle.

At this stage there were two changes that had an impact. I started seeing assessment as an integral part of my role of the lecturer not just something I had to do as an add-on to the teaching. I started thinking about module learning outcomes and what was the appropriate assessment for them. I also slowly starting seeing how the module contributed to the programme and which programme learning outcomes were relevant. I started planning the assessment from the start of the module, allowing myself time to plan and design the assessment. Then I would work with the students as they did the assessment and ensure that I assessed it as quickly as possible to get students feedback.

In 2009 the Higher Education Training and Awards Council issued Assessment and Standards (QQI, 2013) its ground breaking document on assessment that the Institutes of Technology were and are required to adhere to. Institutions could adopt either a grade based approach i.e. module results were reported to students as one of a specific set of grades or as percentages. IADT at some stage and no one quite knows when adopted the grade based approach. Realising this and what it meant enabled me to take the second step.

This second change was exploring analytical and holistic marking. Biggs (2003) is one of the few writers who talks about marking in this way. I changed from using a marking scheme, common practice in the sciences and engineering to using assessment criteria attached to grades, a holistic approach. This was eye opening. I could argue clearly whether student's work was a grade B or B+ but any attempt to distinguish between 64 and 65 was difficult to sustain given what I read about marking and the 'halo' effect (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007, p. 94) among others. Through this approach I started developing rubrics for assignments and implementing the requirement that students should know the assessment criteria before they do the assignment (QQI, 2013). This

change was easier when teaching final year applied psychology students than it might have been teaching physics. The different natures of the disciplines has an impact on assessment practices.

My assessment practice is now based on a clear set of principles. I aim to make sure that I am assessing the module learning outcomes and that the assessment is supporting student achievement of the programme learning outcomes. Secondly I aim to make students partners in assessment, asking them to critique and review the assessment and assessment criteria as they do it and making sure that I respond to reasonable arguments and am flexible about assessment. This approach helps learners take ownership of their work and do good work. Finally I aim to get feedback to learners as soon as is feasible and then respond to any questions or argument. When a student comes to me and says I made a mess of that assignment, may I resubmit, I always say aim to yes as it such evidence of learning.

## **6. Working with Colleagues on Assessment**

Parallel to exploring assessment as a lecturer with the students when teaching a module I began to work with colleagues on aspects of teaching and learning. I started with informal workshops for colleagues on assessment and exams in 2003. This informal approach enabled me to explore assessment and develop resources I use to this day.

Dr Anne Jordan of Waterford Institute of Technology has been an inspiration. Initially I was invited in 2001 to present some different methods of assessment for science. Then she invited me to work with her on an assessment and evaluation module at WIT. The story of the module is for another day.

During programmatic review at IADT in 2005 a colleague and I developed an exemplar module descriptor to enable staff to write learning outcomes and assess them. This driving module is one of my resources when working with staff on assessment and module planning.

The second colleague with whom I have worked is Dr Jen Harvey of DIT. She initially invited me to run a workshop at DIT and then we worked together combining our approaches for workshops and presentations on assessment and evaluation.

Another piece of the jigsaw was engaging with the formal documents on assessment. I was a member of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council from 2007 to 2012. Assessment and Standards (QQI, 2013) changed my conception of assessment in a number of ways. My definition of assessment became

Any process that aims to judge the extent of students' learning by comparison with a standard based on evidence from students.

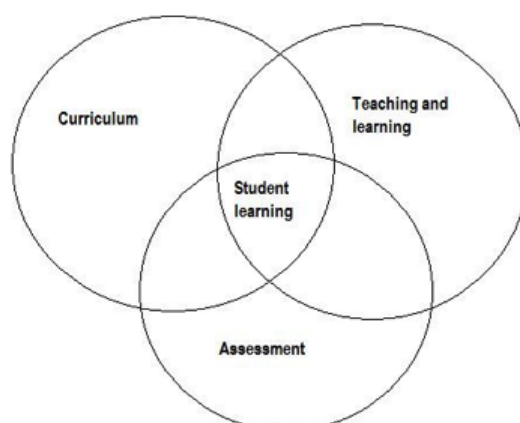
This combines both Freeman and Lewis's language (1998) and that of QQI (2013). The focus on programme and module assessment strategies in the document has been pivotal. I now focus on working with module and programme teams to develop coherent programme and module assessment strategies.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has been a reflection of my assessment journey as a teacher, lecturer and as an educational developer. I worked as a Head of Department between 2007 and 2016 and that is another assessment story.

As a lecturer I am happy to see the changes in my own approach to assessment and the changes in the approach to assessment across IADT. We now see assessment as integral to student learning and a key element of our work as shown in the diagram below.

Figure 1 A view of student learning (Palmer, 2010).



The change in our knowledge and understanding of assessment is evident in our assessment practices and programmes teams are slowly developing and implementing programme assessment strategies.

As an educational developer I am surprised to find that between 2003 and 2016 I have led 14 workshops for colleagues on assessment across the institutes of technology and DIT. Jen Harvey and I have done 4 joint workshops and I have contributed and/or led 11 accredited modules on assessment, mainly the Assessment and Evaluation module that Anne Jordan of WIT originally developed. I have worked with colleagues in Dun Laoghaire, Athlone, Sligo, Limerick, Galway-Mayo, Carlow and DIT. Parallel to this I have presented on assessment at conferences a number of times both on my own and with Jen Harvey.

Over the last eighteen years I have seen assessment change in higher education. There has been robust debate and discussion. This for me has been the most enjoyable part of my assessment journey, challenging myself and my colleagues and both agreeing and disagreeing about the issues.

Assessment and particularly student feedback will always pose a challenge but I think that we as lecturers and educational developers can improve assessment for our learners and ourselves.



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