
Formative assessment, the internet and academic identity

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Introduction

Significant amounts of teaching and learning in UK universities is conducted at master's level through one-to-one contact; and at doctoral level this type of interaction predominates. Tutorials or supervision sessions are focused particularly on the production of written work for summative assessment of dissertations, theses and term papers. During this kind of tutorial, tutor and student collaborate over the planning, drafting and redrafting of a text. Tutors will comment first on students' ideas and later often on a draft. Although there may be other educative processes taking place, the major function will therefore be formative assessment, that is, assessment that seeks not just to give a judgement on work, but to improve it. Formative assessment also occurs of course in group situations where tutors and students comment on each other's work and attempt to build their understanding through this discussion.

However, with the increasing availability of internet connection not only on campuses but also in students' homes there has been an increasing tendency, even within traditional face-to-face courses, for at least part of the communication to be accomplished through computers, either with email or increasingly via a virtual learning environment (VLE). Email communication between teachers and learners has been the subject of a small but growing amount of research (e.g. Le Cornu and White, 2000), but there has been little attempt to situate it within the context of formative assessment. This may be because, formative assessment has been seen, especially within higher education, as the relatively unproblematic precursor to summative assessment. Moreover, until recently, formative assessment itself has been under-theorized especially with respect to interpretations that draw on constructivist, socio-cultural or situationist theories of learning (Gipps 1999).

However, in the last few years, several studies have subjected formative assessment to more theoretical scrutiny, such that a body of literature is beginning to emerge which attempts to locate it within contemporary theories of learning, (see for example Sadler 1989; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Gipps 1999; Assessment Reform Group 1999; Shephard 2000). I have been working in this are for the last ten years and with collaborators have been working on a theory of formative assessment (Pryor & Torrance 1996; Torrance & Pryor 1998; 2001; Ecclestone & Pryor 2003). Some of this work has been basic research, some has involved intervention, but it has diverged from much other work on assessment, by adopting a more sociological perspective (using for example ideas derived from Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu et al. 1993). Although this research has been mainly focused on students in schools, the ideas have also been extended to FE and HE contexts (see for example Ecclestone 2002), and as a university teacher I have attempted to develop praxis consistent with the emergent theory.

This paper derives from my current research project investigating formative assessment within a professional doctorate, part of a wider EU funded project investigating Internet Based Assessment. As tutor and director of the doctoral programme I have been a practitioner researcher. My colleague Barbara Crossouard has worked as researcher on the project without an overt teaching role. Former director of the EdD and one of the co-proposers, Harry Torrance has been working as advisor to the project and researcher in the early stages. Our main activity has been to introduce a VLE to the teaching programme this academic year thus allowing 'blended learning'. Our research programme in particular has looked at ways in which the VLE and email are used as a medium for formative assessment. Whilst we have been informed by current formative assessment theory we have been seeking in the project to appraise it critically in this context with a view to extending the theoretical work. In this paper I shall describe briefly the theoretical basis of the work and then present data derived from postings on the VLE and interviews with students that Barbara conducted both at the start of and after the main

teaching module where the blended environment was introduced. This involves some evaluation of formative assessment praxis. However the theoretical extension remains work in progress.

Theoretical Model Developed from Previous Work

In developing a thick description of formative assessment, we identified two 'ideal-typical' approaches to formative assessment. These might be seen as forming different ends of a continuum along which teachers and students move in accomplishing assessment. Although these ideal types seem to be associated with actors' differing views of learning and of the relationship of assessment to the process of intervening to support learning, in practice they do not appear mutually exclusive, and in deed we would argue are complementary.

Figure 1

CONVERGENT ASSESSMENT	DIVERGENT ASSESSMENT
<p>Assessment which aims to discover <i>if</i> the learner knows, understands or can do a predetermined thing. This is characterised by:</p> <p>Practical Implications</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> precise planning by the teacher and an intention to stick to it; recording via check lists and can-do statements; closed or pseudo-open teacher questioning and tasks; a focus on contrasting errors with correct responses; authoritative judgmental or quantitative feedback, feedback focussed on the successful completion of the task in hand successfully. involvement of the learner as recipient of assessments. <p>Theoretical Implications</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> an analysis of the interaction of the learner and the curriculum from the point of view of the curriculum; a behaviourist view of education; an intention to teach or assess the next predetermined thing in a linear progression; an interaction embedded within an Initiation – Response –Feedback (IRF) sequence. a view of assessment as accomplished by the teacher. <p>This view of assessment might be seen less as formative assessment, rather as repeated summative assessment or continuous assessment.</p>	<p>Assessment which aims to discover <i>what</i> the learner knows, understands or can do. This is characterised by:</p> <p>Practical Implications</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> flexible planning or complex planning which incorporates alternatives; open forms of recording (narrative, quotations etc.); primarily open tasks with questioning by teachers and learners directed at 'helping' rather than testing; a focus on miscues - aspects of learners' work which yield insights into their current understanding - and on prompting metacognition. exploratory, provisional or provocative descriptive feedback aimed at prompting further engagement from the learners; discussion prompting reflection on the task and its context with a view to constructing understanding of future situations in which new knowledge might be applied. involvement of the learners as initiators of assessments as well as recipients. <p>Theoretical Implications</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> an analysis of the interaction of the learners and the curriculum from the point of view both of the learners and of the curriculum; a constructivist or socio-cultural view of education and an acknowledgement of the importance of the context for the assessment; an intention to teach in the zone of proximal development; part of an on-going dialogue between and amongst learners and teachers where learners initiate as well as respond, ask questions as well reply; a view of assessment as a collaboration between and amongst teachers and learners. <p>This view of assessment could be said to attend more closely to contemporary theories of learning and accept the complexity of formative assessment.</p>

Convergent Assessment, is concerned with establishing *if* the learner knows, understands or can do a predetermined thing. It is often characterized by detailed planning on the part of the teacher, who generally has a very clear end point in mind. It is usually and most efficiently accomplished by closed or pseudo-openquestioning and tasks. The interaction of the learner with the curriculum is seen from the point of view of the curriculum – the extent to which the learner’s performances measure up to an ideal. The theoretical origins of such an approach seem at least implicitly to be behaviourist, fitting well with mastery-learning models. Fundamentally convergent approaches involve assessment *of* the learner *by* the teacher. *Divergent Assessment*, on the other hand, emphasises the learner’s understanding rather than the agenda of the assessor. It seeks to discover *what* the learner knows, understands and can do as a basis for further action. It is characterized by less detailed planning, where open-ended questioning and tasks are of more relevance. The implications of divergent assessment are that a constructivist view of learning is adopted, with an intention to teach in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1986). As a result, assessment is seen as accomplished jointly by the teacher and the student, and oriented more to future development rather than measurement of past or current achievement. Unless it is very tightly teacher directed, peer and self assessment come within this frame and articulate more easily with other divergent approaches. Figure 1, adapted from Torrance & Pryor (2001) summarizes convergent and divergent assessment.

We worked with practitioner researchers seeking to develop their formative assessment practice, who recognized both ideal types as familiar. However they saw divergent assessment as offering much more educationally exciting possibilities: it seemed to accord more closely with their considered understanding of what constituted good learning and also with what they saw as satisfying teaching. In particular, it appeared to offer possibilities both to encourage students to engage with what really mattered, where the cognitive demand was higher, and to focus the assessment on the complexities of the task at hand. Moreover, they found that it gave opportunities for them to intervene in learning activities in a much more pointed and productive way. Nevertheless, they found divergent assessment difficult to accomplish and to sustain, especially with larger teaching groups. This was not only because it was technically more demanding, but also because divergent assessment proved to be more complex socially and linguistically. Most importantly issues of power emerged which were problematic both for teachers and learners to address. On a procedural level the idea of drafting (either literal or figurative) was important, and was accomplished through negotiation. This work emphasised the importance of reflection on both the cognitive and the social aspects of performance as a crucial element in making the most of divergent possibilities. However, divergent assessment was not a replacement for convergent assessment but a more interesting and potentially more educationally rewarding complement.

Figure 2. shows the model of formative assessment which emerged from this development action research. The processes of formative assessment within a learning activity or event are represented by the figures on the left at the top. Teachers, and increasingly students when moving towards to the divergent end of the spectrum, engage in the key activities of questioning, and responding to these through giving feedback and making judgements. However, the central place in this diagram is given to the idea of clarifying criteria. We found it useful to make a distinction between task criteria, which define what students should be doing and quality criteria, the basis for deciding what is good and how they might improve what they are doing. Here the observations of Sadler (1989:119) are pertinent. He states that:

for students to be able to improve, they must develop the capacity to monitor the quality of their own work during actual production. This in turn requires that students possess an appreciation of what high quality work is, that they have the evaluative skill necessary for them to compare with some objectivity the quality of what they are producing in relation to the higher standard, and that they develop a store of tactics or moves which can be drawn upon to modify their own work.

However, in practice this is problematic. First as Sadler (1989:119) himself goes on to suggest:

even when teachers provide students with valid and reliable judgements about the quality of their, improvement does not necessarily follow. Students often show little or no...development despite regular, accurate feedback (p.119).

Second, the idea of the communication of valid and reliable judgements and of objective judgement sit rather awkwardly with constructivist approaches to education and with divergent assessment. For quality criteria to

have meaning they cannot just be blandly stated in an absolute and decontextualized way, but have to be worked out over time, through a process of dialogue involving drafting and negotiation. This might take the form of overt social interaction amongst a group of learners and/or one or more teachers, (social) interaction through non-spoken text selected or composed by the actors in the learning, or even internal dialogue that is prompted by these social interactions. Thus, in the model, the purpose of the practices on the outside of the circle is for students to develop ideas about quality criteria and how to address them.

Successful formative assessment might result in better student performances. This fits well with Vygotsky's (1978) model where socially accomplished activity, which the individual might not be able to manage alone is the basis for learning. However according to Vygotsky learning only happens when the new ideas are 'internalized'. Metacognition, is advocated as a potent way of facilitating this (Wertsch , Bruner) and was also adopted as a key strategy by the practitioners we worked with.

However, as we have seen, issues of power, which are often taken-for granted in classrooms are brought to the fore by divergent assessment practices and the way that this and other social issues are worked out is inevitably problematic. Our development work showed that entering into discussion with students and getting them to reflect on the social aspects of learning events was both micropolitically beneficial and seemed to address other problems with learning. Bernstein (1996)¹ suggested that in order to succeed educationally a student needs to both know how to do what is required, 'the realization rule' and to understand when to deploy this knowledge 'the recognition rule'. Bernstein's complex theory was concerned to explicate the mechanisms of social and educational reproduction. Within this, the realization rule was seen as playing an important part in educational failure: often it was not that the student did not understand the substantive concepts, but that they were unable to recognize the situations in which they could apply their knowledge. This might be compared with Bourdieu's (1990) field theory, whereby education like other fields, is so structured that students have different degrees of 'feel of the game' dependent on the capital – in this case mostly cultural capital- they can draw on.

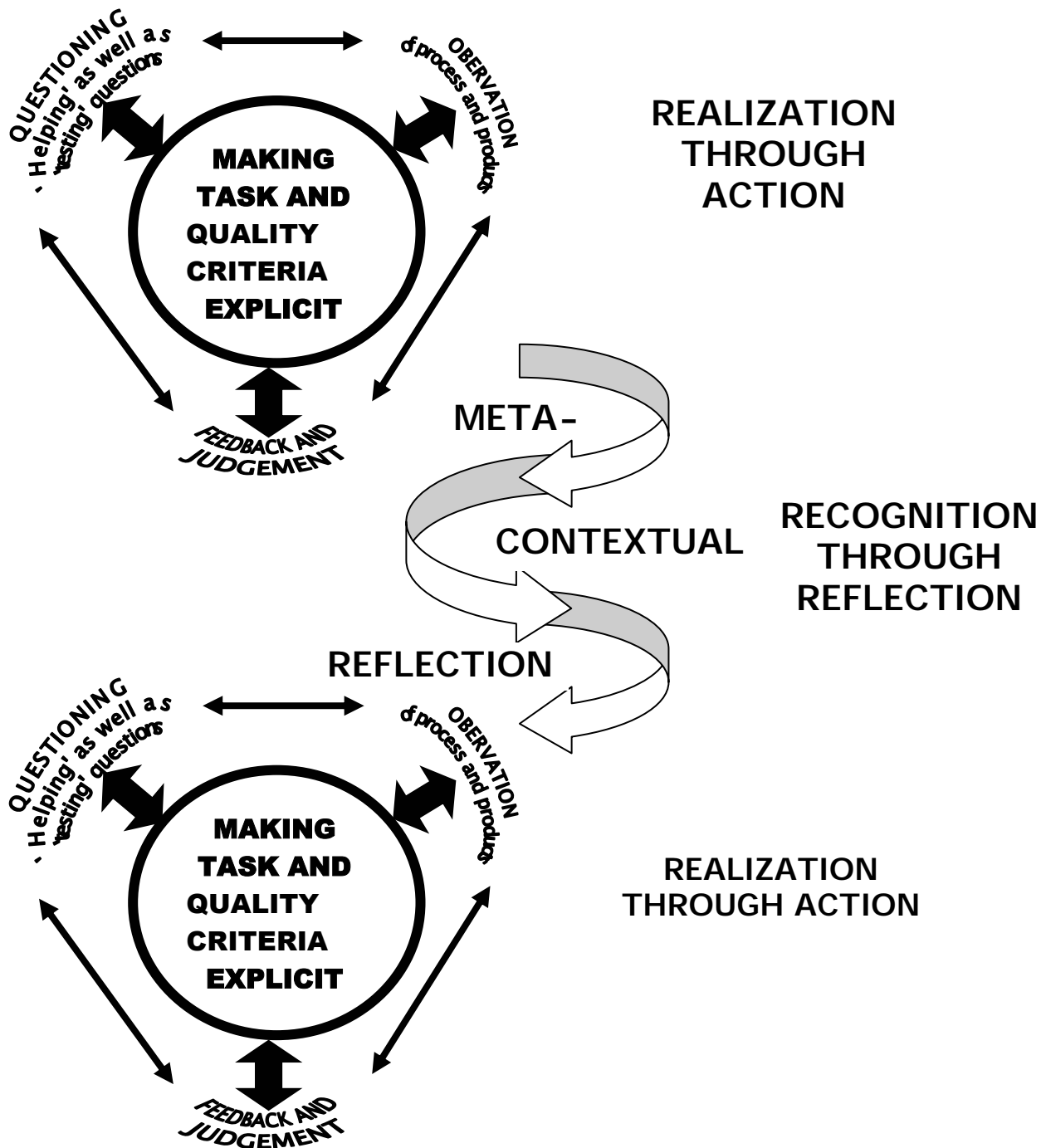
Over the years it has proved very difficult to counter these problems - there is obviously no magic answer. However, if there are rules that are more obvious to some than others, it appears imperative that these should not only be held as problematic, but should become an explicit subject for discussion. Moreover, rather than discussing them in a decontextualized way, the social practices that constitute the current or recent teaching and learning activities can provide the basis for this work. Thus, talking about the micro-social interaction including especially focusing on the issues of power, but relating it also to wider macro-social horizons might provide a way of problematizing and making more accessible to all students the hidden and elusive rules.

In the diagram therefore the notion of metacontextual reflection involves:

- metacognition: thinking about the process of thinking within oneself and curiosity about this process within the other actors;
- meta-social reflection: thinking about power relations and the social rules of the context of the interactions, the media through which these are transacted (usually language) and how they relate to wider social contexts;
- affective reflection: consideration of the way that the interaction shapes and is shaped by the emotional response of the actors.

¹ Citing Bernstein was always a hazardous operation as it often laid one open to accusations of misrecognition, dilettantism or worse (Dowling 1999). In particular he was very sensitive to comparisons with Bourdieu. In a short paper such this, where there is little opportunity to develop ideas, I recognize that his theory is somewhat bowdlerized; however, since he is now dead I think I can feel safe!

Figure 2



In this project we were attempting to construct a praxis, which I not only developed my practice as a tutor, but also to evaluate and further develop the theory. The task of the professional doctorate programme is to work with experienced, often senior, professionals who one assumes habitually deploy extensive professional (practical) knowledge. However, at the end of the programme they will be assessed on the basis of their knowledge and understanding of research and its role in professional life. Thus, the tension is throughout between the professional and the researcher. Drawing on situationist understandings of learning, my intention has been to emphasize learning as a process of becoming – that is, developing an identity as a researcher (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Beyond the specific published criteria for the doctoral assignments I was concerned therefore seek to emphasize to the students my understandings of the wider criteria of the academy and to contrast it with professional values. I wished then to problematize these ideas by reference to

issues of power within society and the university. In what follows below I address particularly the fit between the theory and the blended learning environment, addressing in particular the extent to which the online learning aided the process of formative assessment as I have come to understand it.

Data and discussion

Peer Assessment

There were two aspects of online formative assessment – peer assessment through the VLE and tutor assessment. Some kind of peer assessment often takes place in face-to-face teaching through students commenting on and responding to each other's contributions to discussion. However, peer assessment through a discussion forum, not only makes the invitation to comment explicit, but it also makes failure to do so apparent. In the main focus for our research students were asked to upload outlines, plans and drafts and to comment on at least one of them. There were deadlines, which in the context of the busyness of these part time working students' lives, was often to difficult to comply with. Davina² commented

there were too many deadlines for things and what happened is that I switched off in the end. I thought 'right, when does my assignment need to be in?'. you know, that's what's being marked, my assignment's being marked.. when does it need to be in? right, that's what I'm working to. ... if putting that piece of work in had been an assessed piece of work and was going to be marked and was going to form.

However this also points to another problem, the fact that peer assessment was seen by this student and some others as too divergent. Since comments were coming from fellow students she felt that they did not give her access to authoritative substantive knowledge, and I would suggest tsimilarly authoritative understanding of the quality criteria.

they weren't informed, they were opinions and there wasn't an opinion that I adopted and that ... It sounds egotistical but there wasn't a single bit of feedback I got on anything that made me think 'yeah, actually you really have a point there.'

Here she also seems to be suggesting that tutor's feedback, are something epistemologically 'more' than an opinion. Another student, Leo, gave this a more social dimension:

In John's role he can be more critical. He can say.. I you know.. 'this is not the way' because he knows what the criteria is, whereas my colleagues they will say 'yes, this is nice but...' you know, they will try.. it's almost like being nice. Even if I read somebody's draft or something and I didn't like it, I wouldn't say that. I might to point to other things that could be improved but I have to make it sensitive to people's needs and their feelings and you know.

Many students however, did value the comments they received. For example Eileen said:

it's getting an outside view which, you know, sometimes is very useful and sometimes less useful. But it's still good to be able to look at what somebody said and think 'are they right about that? No I don't think they are'. But at least you've been challenged.

As we can see and particularly in Leo's case, receiving peer assessment via the VLE does seem to have encouraged some metasocial reflection, though this may only have been made explicit for some students by having been interviewed.

On the whole, students reacted favourably the idea of their colleagues commenting on their work, but as is often the case with peer assessment, making contributions rather than receiving them appeared to be more significant. In this too most were positive. There seem to be have been several elements to this. First, their activity as students in following an assignment brief inevitably led to a focusing, which therefore precluded other forms of activity. Just being given fuller access to texts prepared by peers enabled them to experience other possibilities and other interpretations of the brief. For example Felicity commented on how useful it was:

looking at the way other people had actually done their work and seeing the various approaches and I think that was very interesting for me because some people had very different approaches to me, very,

² All names are anonymized.

very different. [...] , I think it was part of the learning process to be able to see how you could tackle things.

Engaging further with other people's work led to further benefits. For some the forum provided a setting for practising the sort of skills that are needed for literature review. However, it was less daunting critiquing peers than established experts. Carol said:

[...] if you can make some critical analysis of somebody else's piece of work then those skills in critically analysing and appraising, you can read that when you read published research literature.. so there's that learning.

In this, the fact that the discussions were on-line rather than face to face made them seem 'safer'. This effect was amplified when the critique was received positively by the fellow student and led to added confidence in *"being able to see the shortcomings of a particular chapter or a book, but be able to feel confident that actually I do have a valued opinion and that I can make that opinion."* Carol saw being actively involved in the forum as a way of finding her voice, *"enabling her participate more full"ly* in the face to face setting. Most significantly in terms of what I was trying to achieve as a tutor; she said that it *"adds to your development as a researcher"*. Thus, for her at least, the notion of formative peer assessment, especially in the role of assessor, seemed to be effective as a means of embracing this new identity.

However, in a minority of cases making contributions was problematic. As well as Eileen's issue of time mentioned above, Jackie also saw the style of interaction over the internet as difficult:

there's not the same kind of etiquette on the web so it's difficult to say things on the web without you feeling that you're coming over as pompous or stupid. You know, it's because you don't get any feedback...[...] you're putting something in the ether.

There seem to be two elements of this, first that written comments hardened the social judgement and second that online communication for her felt monologic rather than dialogic.

However, as we have seen in the quotation from Felicity above, other students saw the VLE in a much more positive light, and for many of them it was precisely the dialogic nature of the interaction that proved most valuable. Even where it seemed difficult to go public, some of the students continued to talk to each other direct. Hugh said that for one of the people who had commented on his work *"the public forum had catalysed a sort of deeper level of interaction."* Indeed, the peer assessment 'required' through the VLE led later on to 'voluntary' exchange of drafts via email amongst some of the students.

Without the facility of the VLE, it is very unlikely that this kind of peer assessment would have taken place. Moreover, had the interactions been oral and happening face to face, they would have been more ephemeral. Instant response in such settings is not difficult, though for many, as we have seen, it is socially easier online. Nevertheless, the data suggest that more deliberative reflection is aided both by the concrete nature of the online forum, which enables it to re-read, and by the asynchronicity, which enables it happen when convenient. Moreover, the fact that as a peer assessor one is engaging with a task that one has done or is doing oneself means that the reflection takes place on a meta level (see the metacognitive elements of the quotation from Eileen above and the metasocial reflection of Leo. The VLE seemed at least for some to act as a kind of signifier for the cohort, an embodiment of a new collective identity. As Inga said. *"if someone else is reading what you're writing and you're reading someone else's writing and you can communicate over the internet, it does feel more involved."* Hugh used another striking metaphor:

regardless of how much I used the website, it's nice to have it there, if you like. It's a town hall you can go to, if you know it's there then that's nice. [...] It makes the bond stronger with my colleagues, which is a nice and important thing and I like that.

Online tutor assessment in a blended learning context

Data from the discourse analysis of tutor feedback to students show a qualitative difference from that of the peer assessment. The form of the feedback indicates much more authority, with high truth and

obligation/necessity values evident in the modality of the work (Haliday 1994). This was seen also in the content of the public feedback (postings in the discussion forum). As the author of these comments I was surprised at extent of the definitive and declarative nature of these comments. However, what was significant was that they seem to be explicitly addressing the official task and quality criteria. Even though they were not always phrased in terms of academic norms, I did on several occasions draw attention to my role as representative of the academy rather than just making a personal judgement.

Many of these contributions can be seen as examples of convergent assessment and it is significant that these forum contributions tended to be at the end of a discussion and thus were partly summative in nature. However my role as a assessor was generally not seen by the students in convergent terms. Hugh for example said described it as:

I think a large part of it, like I said, is the tone that John sets for the course. This issue of reflexivity, which he continually emphasises and identity, which is really kind of useful. It's about who you are as a researcher and a practitioner and the course is about helping you along that path, and that's a very kind of exploratory process.

Despite this, previous expectations and indeed it would appear their own practice as assessors, led some of the students to desire an even more authoritative and normative approach. Ken, for example, in the absence of marks or grades was unsure to what extent his work was acceptable or needed '*almost shredding and starting again*'.

Nevertheless, as opposed to the more equivocal position with the peer assessment, all the students indicated that the online tutor assessment had been successful for them. Some of the issues seen in the peer assessment were also evident in formative tutor assessment. In particular once again, the written nature of the interaction was important. This was quite evident when students talked about what had been intellectual turning points for them. Davina, for example said that:

they've just been really short little bits that have almost been casually thrown in that's really sent me off on this major line of enquiry or a major line of learning. Like, John said in one of his things 'this strikes me as more of a case study approach' and I said 'what the hell is case study approach then? [...]. Just a tiny little throw-away word that he put in there and it was a big source of important learning for me

From my perspective as assessor, the remark about the case study was decidedly not a 'throw-away'. However, the fact that Davina saw it in this light suggests that, had it occurred in a face to face tutorial or group, she might not have attended to it. It seems once again that the assessment dialogue when conducted online is, at least for some students a more deliberative and reflective one. Eileen contrasted this with face to face experiences she had had:

you talk to somebody and you come out and you're not actually quite sure if you've got any.. if you've actually got anything solid out of it. You know, you get a general idea that they think this is good and that was good but unless you take notes during your own interview you come out sometimes with not very much.

Nevertheless, some students managed to get this also from the combination of live tutorials and online feedback. Leo for example, who was perhaps the least familiar with using ICTs referred to a tutorial he had had:

You thought you were on the right path but he comes up with some ideas that make you think "oh god I need to consider that [...]" and he said "in that work you're doing I will need to read something about [topic]" and I thought "of course" and then you think of it afterwards "Yes, how can I talk about this topic without including issues about [that]"

Indeed this mix of online and face-to-face interaction complicated matters. The researcher, Barbara, noted while observing that I sometimes repeated advice that didn't seem to have been heard. In two cases where students spoke of uncertainties about their feedback, the differences appeared to be over relative importance, but through dialogue this led to revised understandings. For example, one student recognized as especially important a continued dialogue via face-to-face and email exchanges. Another referred to the moment '*when the penny dropped*' having happened in a face-to-face peer and tutor review of issues arising from the

assignment, when other students' reports and the tutor's formative feedback led to new understandings. But this penny had already been inserted in the online assessment. This seems to be an example when divergent assessment through dialogic encounter where students were able to voice different perspectives was important.

Indeed the negotiation of criteria and changes to text did not always involve student compliance. As Felicity remarked that "*I took most of his advice but I certainly didn't take all of his advice.*" Leo adopted a similar strategy and reflected on it also in terms of power relations:

if he said 'you should do this' and I stuck with my original plan, then I need to come up with some reason why I'm sticking with that original bit because at the end of the day... this is an academic bit of work and it's a power issue as well. John has power, he reads that, you know... and he will remember that he told me, that he made comments.. I mean he will remember that bit, you know. 'I did tell this student to change that and now it's reappeared' you know.

A perennial problem in formative assessment is that, although critique and disagreement create the discursive space in which students might develop their understanding, hearing criticism sometimes provokes emotions which make it difficult to attend to the substantive points and to respond appropriately. Felicity expressed this clearly:

if it was bad news, being remote is actually quite a nice thing isn't it? [laughs] So if somebody actually says to you 'Actually, your piece of work wasn't [inaudible word] or you know, it's really, really poor', then obviously that's quite an uncomfortable thing to have to sit and listen to. Whereas if you get feedback which is less than good via the website or via email then you can actually sort of give yourself a bit of space and take a deep breath, you know, before you start to deal with the emotions that that kind of response would have.

Ken also said that he was "*much more amenable to what is written there.*"

However, within the blended environment, it is clear that the notion of remoteness is a slightly problematic one. Several of the students talked about the importance of knowing the people involved so that it was not impersonal. Leo sa

when I'm getting email fr id:om John I'm imagining I'm talking to John. [...] You can imagine... I know, I can almost imagine John's body language.

This 'presence in distance' was seen as being generally helpful to the students.

The whole formative assessment and the work with peers and tutors in terms of the email exchange is also very useful. It's very nice to have a community of practice, a sense of community of practice or community of learning.

Conclusion

All in all, the use of the blended environment has been very useful to me in my formative assessment practices and appears to have generally worked well for the students. It seems to offer good possibilities and to have a good fit with the theory of formative assessment that has been developed.

What I am disappointed about as a teacher is that although there are examples of the meta-contextual reflection they appear to mostly on the micro level. Discussion at the more macro level which I remember as taking place in the face to face sessions was not recorded and, without prompting, did not emerge for these students as an important aspect of their formative assessment. Of course, this may not mean that it was any less useful to them, but as a practitioner it makes me think I might be more explicit about this in future. My agenda about the notion of becoming a researcher and the tension between the professional identity of the students and their emergent research identity was often expressed. It was mentioned by some of the students and indeed given prominence by several. However, I never made it explicit that this was part of the praxis of formative assessment. Indeed, I avoided talking about it too explicitly, possibly out of misplaced delicacy derived from an approach to empirical which I left behind long ago about not contaminating the data and partly not to steal my own thunder from when I shall do a seminar on it as part of the second year course.

Having both peer assessment and tutor assessment was important, because the differences between them created a space for stimulating reflection on the processes of the formative assessment. However, my invitation to engage in metacontextual discussion was taken up differentially. Once again, it appeared that some saw the possibility and addressed it, whereas others did not. Significantly, the assignments that were rated more highly by the examiners (of whom of course I was one) were from those who engaged more clearly in these reflections. It is unclear whether this is a question of the effectiveness of the metacontextual reflection or whether it is indeed once more an issue of social reproduction as even the deconstruction of the rules demands the 'right' kind of habitus on the part of the student.

This paper has been a frustrating one to write at this stage and I am not giving it more than draft status, as the most important discussion stage needs to be added. I am left as a practitioner with a fairly satisfactory state of affairs where my practice has generally been endorsed by the students in their interviews with Barbara. However, as a researcher, having had only an initial trawl through the data, I find this unsatisfactory, since it has not yet taken me much further theoretically. What I therefore intend to do is to work in more detail with the data and to look much more critically at the practice. I will position it more clearly within situated cognition, but then review this from a more sociological perspective to put some tension on what has come to be rather a romantic approach.

If you wish to be kept in touch with this next stage please email me on j.b.pryor@ussex.ac.uk

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