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## ***Pedagogical dialogue and feedforward with large classes in a teacher education programme in Ireland***

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### ***Abstract***

*Improving the students' learning experience is closely connected with the promotion and implementation of an assessment strategy whose effectiveness relies on the quality of the formative aspect. In some contexts, such as large cohort groups there may necessarily be greater reliance on written rather than in-person feedback and this may hinder dialogue (Nicol, 2010). Assessment can promote or hinder learning and it is therefore a powerful force to be reckoned with in education. The literature on assessment makes it quite clear that assessment shapes and drives learning in powerful, though not always helpful, ways (Ramsden, 1997). This paper echoes Trigwell and Prosser's (2004) view that learning may not be hindered when teaching large classes if appropriate qualitative approaches are implemented. This challenges Cuseo's (2007) view about surface and deep learning (Marton and Säljö (1976) when teaching large classes.*

**Keywords:** *Pedagogical dialogue; Shared understanding; Constructivist approaches to assessment; Formative assessment; Feedforward; Sustainable assessment; Marking assessment in large classes*

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## **1. Description of Teaching/ Learning Context**

This paper presents the outcomes of the introduction of an assessment and feedback strategy within a module (unit of learning) on a Vocational Education and Training (VET)/Further Education (FE) Teaching Council approved, teacher education programme in DCUs Institute of Education in Ireland. The paper outlines how the process is informed by constructivist and dialogical principles and aimed at the development of professional competence among pre-service Further Education and Training teachers. This paper is based on research of a redesign of an assessment strategy for a module programme. The programme is delivered on a full and part-time basis. Although the module learning outcomes are the same the student profiles differ quite considerably. The fulltime (daytime) students tend to be school leavers with little experience of assessment design, the part-time (evening/weekend) students tend to be post-experience adults already working as teachers or trainees mainly in the non-formal education field. For the purpose of this paper the results have been aggregated between the sample cohorts.

In previous years the module was assessed using a final summative written exam. Although pass-rates were quite high, initial research highlighted that the content of the module was not scaffolded with any other parts of existing knowledge, therefore students were learning at a relatively surface level. That is to say that students approached the assessment in the traditional mode of memorisation without much consideration to developing their own attitudes to assessment as a teaching and learning methodology. Initial research showed us that there was an opportunity to redesign the whole module and accent the learning process more effectively. This paper brings the research up to date and highlights the concepts of dialogical assessment and feedback through a feedforward process.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### ***2.1. Feedforward or Feedback?***

The term feedforward is used within this paper in the absence of an opportunity to elaborate further and deconstruct the contested nature of this terminology. In recent years much has been written about the term *feedforward* and its intended meaning is not universally accepted. The term is used here in the context of feedback loops (Sadler, 1998) and is probably more closely related to feedback spirals (Careless, 2019) which aim to enhance the dialogical process, viewing learners as agents within a socio-constructivist perspective (Carless et al. 2011). Feedback should be future-oriented (Carless 2006; Sadler 2010; Orsmond et al. 2013; Carless and Boud 2018). Handley, Price, and Millar (2011) suggest that learners frequently report frustration about the transferability of feedback to future work which can then lead to disengagement (p.893). Constructivism is at the heart of this theoretical framework both as process of shared understanding between the learner and the educator and also in the design

of revised assessment and feedback framework using a fit-for-purpose constructive alignment model (Biggs, 1999). The acknowledgement of learner involvement in this process has its roots in the literature on discovery learning, knowledge creation, experiential learning and particularly from the work of people such as Piaget (1972) and Freire (1970; 1970b), all of whom helped influence the dialogical model.

John Dewey (1916, 1938) suggested that knowledge emerges only from situations in which learners have to draw them out of meaningful experiences. From these meaningful experiences feedback can be provided, accepted, taken-up, interpreted (meaning-making) and utilized by the learner in preparation for another 'loop'. Opening and closing these 'feedback loops' (Sadler, 1998) creates opportunities for the evaluative judgements (Tai et al, 2018) within the feedback process in order to use the information for future work both at generic and content specific level, this is closing the loop.

## ***2.2. Pedagogical Dialogue and Formative Assessment***

Pedagogical dialogue and formative assessment share common principles such as the emphasis on the process and the need for negotiation of meaning and shared understanding of assessment criteria (Boud, 1992; Harrington & Elander, 2003; Sambell & McDowell, 1998; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001; Norton, 2004; Price & Rust, 1999; O'Donovan, Price & Rust 2000; Rust, Price & O'Donovan, 2003). A dialogical model is drawn out of the development of the reciprocal commitment between assessors and assessees (Hyland 2000; Taras, 2001), and is based on trust (Carless, 2013). Seminal work in 2013 by David Carless and Min Yang advocated that the concept of dialogue is also rooted in the notion of social-constructivism. They discuss three dimensions which influence the discipline of feedback and devised a 'feedback triangle' to support and articulate this model (Figure 4.) They outlined the themes within the triangle as the cognitive, social-affective and structural elements. The notion of pedagogical dialogue and feedforward/back are echoed here in this paper in the context of the social-affective dimension (Yang & Carless, 2013).

Research on formative assessment (Sadler, 1989; Juwah et al., 2004; Swinthenby et al. 2005; Chanock, 2000) stresses the importance of incorporating a feedback loop in assessment. If the loop is closed assessment becomes formative. A number of authors have advocated the encouragement of dialogue around learning and assessment as a means to enhance the formative aspect of assessment (Steen-Utheim & Foldnes, 2018; Merry et al, 2013; Careless, 2013; 2016; Juwah et al., 2004; Bryan & Clegg; 2006; Swinthenby et al, 2005; Nicol, 2010; Torrance & Pryor, 1998; 2001).

The assessment design outlined in this paper is set within the context of formative processes therefore formative assessment is at the centre of the concept of leaning - Assessment As Learning (Black & Wiliam 1998; 2006). The dominant mode of assessment in higher education focuses on summative assessment (Assessment Of Learning) which is thought by

Broadbent et al. insufficient to enhance student learning (2018). These assessment practices turn into powerful pedagogical elements when used with formative and sustainable purposes.

When both are combined, a balanced use should result in a more powerful learning environment, one in which summative and formative practices are aligned, and students can have a sense that what is actually being promoted is their learning rather than simply recording their performance (e.g. grade) (Broadbent et al, 2018: p.319)

That is not to say that summative assessment does not have a role to play in the formation of formative processes. Using a multiplicity of assessment and feedback methods can only enhance the validity and reliability of the task(s) (Lalor, Rami & McNamara, 2007).

### **2.3 Feedback as Dialogue (Peer and Teacher)**

Echoing the sentiment for this years HEAd conference and the PHELC symposium, it is worth once again turning our attention to the concept of deep and surface learning (Biggs, 1999; Marton & Säljö, 1997; Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse 1999). These notions, related to deep and sustainable learning, are tied up in the concept of feedback, shared-understanding and social-constructivism. High-quality learning outcomes, such as analytical and conceptual thinking skills, may not be achieved unless students are encouraged to adopt deep approaches to learning (Filius et al , 2019: p.608). Students who take a deep approach have the intention of understanding, engaging with, operating in, and valuing the subject (ibid). The Dewey philosophy of students gaining from, and drawing learning out of '*meaningful experiences*' (1938) coupled with Sadler's '*opening and closing of feedback loops*' (1999) all support the concept of feedback within a constructivist paradigm being a dialogical process.

Feedback is dialogical when fore-fronting the relationship between assessors and assessees, as well as students and teachers' self-awareness both in personal (efficacy) and professional (competence). The concept of dialogical feedback rests on the opportunities afforded to students to respond to and learn from feedback (Rami & Lorenzi, 2012). A dialogical feedback model places its emphasis on the process of learning and on the relationship-building capacity of the dialogical exchange through feedback practice. The extent to which education allows for meaning to emerge without imposition is all too little.

If students are not offered the opportunity to contribute to the meaning that is generated through the teaching and learning relationship we can witness a dissociation of meaning from learning. This, therefore, suggests that active engagement with course content and feedback and reflection on learning are necessary to foster such sustainability for students aiming to become professional educators (Lorenzi & Rami, 2012: p.7)

In their study about *peer audio feedback*, Filius et al (2019) stated that peer feedback, 'can lead to a deep approach to learning and that this is triggered by three mechanisms: feeling personally committed, probing back and forth, and understanding one's own learning

process' (p.617). Feedback as dialogical process can help the learner visualise what they need to do and where they need to go next. This research adopted a model that linked the closing of feedback loops to social-constructivism and embedded the learner in the process as an equal partner as part of a two-way communication process as *dialogue*. Figure 1 outlines the link between the learner, the feedback loop and the dialogic nature of the process - Dialogue as *dia-logos* a two-way communication process.

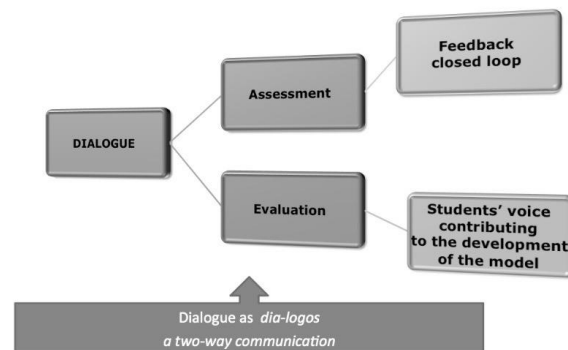


Figure 1. Dialogue as Dia-Logos

Further elaboration of the model embeds the other social-constructivist aspects as well as being deeply influenced by Freire's (1989) work on dialogue, which embeds the notion of trust, mutual respect and care which are at the heart of the dialogical process (Figure 2).

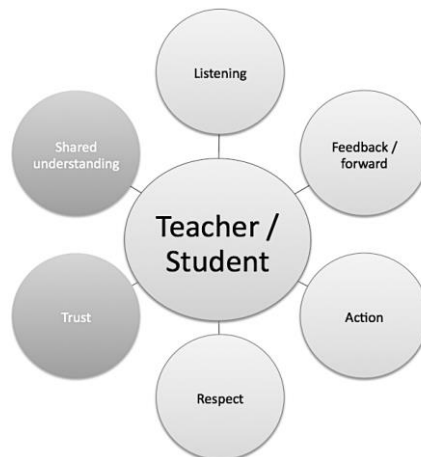


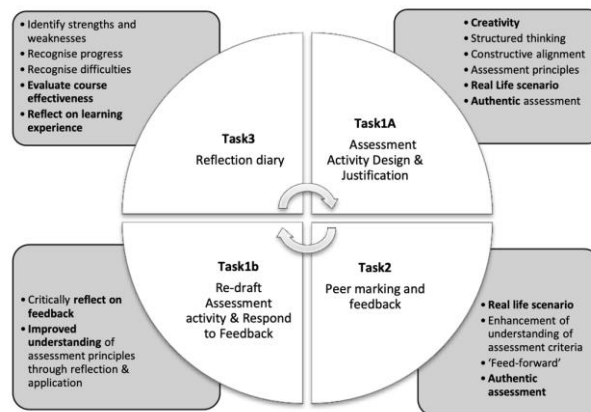
Figure 2. Dialogical feedback model

### 3. The Research

This study outlines a design change in the formation of an assessment and feedback framework. The collective elements of the student's assessment items are defined in the context of a portfolio. Portfolios can be thought of as a form of *embedded assessment*; that is, the assessment tasks are a part of instruction (Rami & Lorenzi, 2012). This brings deep and true meaning to the concept of assessment as a learning tool - Assessment As Learning (Black & Wiliam 1998).

#### 3.1 *The Development of a Dialogical Assessment and Feedback Design*

The collection of staged assessments tasks were described as a portfolio and consisted of four tasks as shown in Figure 3 . The model was designed for stakeholders to experience different elements of assessment from the perspective of the teacher as well as that of the student. A dialogical cycle between assessment design and improvement of the design via responding to the feedback received, informed the design of a dialogical model in the research process. The response to feedback is a reflective exercise that encourages the student to critically consider his/her strengths and weaknesses and identify options for improvement.



*Figure 3: Assessment & feedback design*

This feedback loop ensures that the 'feedback triangle' (Yang & Carless, 2013) and the 'dynamic interplay' (p.287) between its elements are activated. That is to say that the assessment and feedback loop is closed as the evaluative function of the design is also built into the model ensuring the student is part of this process. This also reflects Yang & Carless feedback triangle model (see figure 4), which includes the social, content and organisational dimensions.

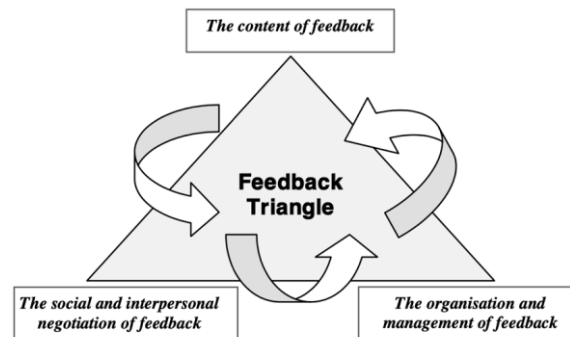


Figure 4: Feedback triangle (source: Yang & Carless, 2013: p.287)

Task 1 is subdivided into two tasks, Task 1a and Task 1b. Task 1a is the first task students complete and consists of the design of a hypothetical assessment activity for a syllabus using a potential group of hypothetical students identified by the students themselves. This task requires students to match the learning outcomes for the chosen syllabus with an assessment activity that is culturally, age and stage appropriate for their specific group of students. Students were asked to prepare guidelines, design and structure an assessment activity and specify assessment design choices, guided by specific marking criteria. This task simulates a real-life scenario (Wiggins, 1993; 1998; Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000) and allows students to express their creativity as well as their knowledge of assessment and feedback theory. It also raises students' awareness of key assessment concepts such as transparency, clarity, equity, fairness, constructive alignment (Biggs, 1998) and validity. By designing an assessment activity, these concepts are embedded in practice and the experience through the dialogical feedback process enables students to transfer the knowledge acquired to current and future professional contexts – ie: as a teacher.

For Task 2, students mark and provide feedback to peers on their Task 1a. They bear the responsibility for giving useful advice and ensuring that their evaluation is fair and transparent whilst acknowledging Liu and Carless (2006) that empathy and trust are key components of the dialogical process (Värlander 2008). This task enables students to assume a dual role at once: that of teacher and of student. In addressing the issues of large classes the process of peer assessment is also used to reduce teacher workload but to again place the model in an integrated framework of pedagogical dialogue.

Task 1b is a re-drafting activity in response to the feedback received from peers as part of Task 2. The redrafting of the assessment activity requires students to react constructively to the feedback received and to critically reflect on the advice in order to decide what changes should be made to improve the quality of the original assessment design. Task 1b is not a straightforward task. Students receiving feedback advising them on how to redraft their

assessment activity are not simply asked to implement the recommendations received, but to first make a decision on the pedagogical soundness of the advice received from peers and then to implement what, on reflection, they consider appropriate. Taking on this advice can be one of the many challenges associated with peer assessment and feedback. Liu and Carless (2006) state that a productive strategy must involve, dealing sensitively with issues related to peer marking. Though peer making can help the processes of assessing and providing feedback to large classes, one must also be cognisant of the many associated challenges. Issues related to reliability, perceived expertise, power relations and time (ibid, p.285-286) all need to be considered. From the students' reflective diaries issues such as, confidence, competence and power-relations (fairness) were among some of the dominant research findings.

Finally, Task 3 is a reflection (reflective) diary in which students were asked to record, after the completion of each task, their thoughts on what they have learnt from the specific task, what difficulties they have encountered and what aspects of the tasks they felt should be improved for further development of the dialogical feedback model. At the end of the module (12 weeks) students were also asked to reflect on the module as a whole and to offer advice on improving its structure and design. Cognisant of ethical issues and considering that the reflections were contributing to the overall module mark, the reliability of the information collected from this source could be questioned and for this reason data collected from the diary was triangulated with data collected from the questionnaire and from the analysis of performance trends in order to increase validity. Our experience has shown that reflective diaries are often completed in an either perfunctory or compliant fashion when their scope and value is not fully appreciated by students. Yet, the overall picture that emerges from the diaries, from both cohorts, is that of an honest, albeit mostly emotional, response to a challenging learning process. On the whole, the data collected from reflective diaries reconfirm the positive view expressed in relation to the learning experience in the online questionnaire, but also provide further detail to identify further specific differences between the two groups which are further discussed in other related papers.

#### **4. Findings**

The outcomes of the research led to the identification of six main findings: firstly,

- The development of a shared understanding of assessment criteria
- A shift in emphasis from assessment-*product* to assessment-*process*
- The establishment of a mutual relationship between assessors and assessees based on commitment and trust



- A heightened self-awareness both in personal (efficacy) and professional (competence) terms.
- Student implementation – utility
- Negotiation of meaning

## **5. Reflection on Implications for Practice**

This study demonstrates that a dialogical assessment model that enables students to make sense of knowledge through reflection, professional decision-making and engagement. Furthermore, it demonstrates even with large classes, how a dialogical approach to assessment and feedback can initiate a reflective process which may equip student teachers with knowledge transferable to professional practice. The authors agree with Kopoonen et al. (2016) that a strong dialogic feedback culture, together with the developmental role of feedback, form part of future working life skills. Their importance warrants greater integration into the higher education curricula as part of the development of expertise.

This research shows that, despite the widely documented challenges posed by portfolio assessment, it can be effective in promoting deeper learning. In this research, portfolio assessment offered a framework for the acquisition of knowledge in a structured and applied fashion. Knowledge was not simply transmitted, and its acquisition verified through assessment. Students were allowed to construct a personal understanding of the topic studied through experiencing various aspects of assessment and embracing different dimensions of the teaching profession. Assessment is a powerful driving force behind many forms of learning. Because of its power over learning it is crucial to ensure that assessment promotes rather than hinders learning (Lalor, Lorenzi & Rami, 2012). Furthermore, learning should continue beyond assessment and it should meet the needs of the present while preparing students to meet their own future learning needs (Boud, 2000, p. 151).

The implications of these findings look firstly to the learner embarking on a professional teacher education programme where the development of professional competence is at the heart of their future careers. Secondly the research proves that engagement with the curriculum drives the process of developing this competence in a structured reflective process adhering to the Liu & Carless' feedback triangle (2013). Curriculum designers within teacher education in HE could look towards this model, as its strength lies in the parallel process of learning and teaching which can lead to the holistic development of teacher professional competence. The research demonstrates providing quality and utilitarian feedback to large classes is possible through a thoughtful and balanced framework. The use of peer assessment and feedback has a dual role in both personal (efficacy) and professional (competence) terms.

Similarly, the attitudinal changes which resulted from engaging in the various tasks of the module presented opportunities for the students to reflect on the role of the teacher in assessment design. Students gained an understanding of the complexity of this role and of the importance of designing assessment approaches and feedback mechanisms that are beneficial to the student and which are mindful of the impact of such approaches on students. These experiences may also contribute to the development of trainee-teacher competence and help enable capacity building.

#### **4.1 Future Research**

Further development of the model seeks to increase the level of peer feedback. The possibility of enabling what Carless described a Peer feedback helpdesk (at his Masterclass at the AHE conference in Manchester in 2019), may be one possibility. For this to happen measures would need to be put in place within the curriculum for an increase in the modular content focussing on feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018). The overall result of this research outlines the need for a paradigmatic shift from information to action, succinctly described by Winstone and Carless (2020) in their recent book. Lastly another recommendation for future research on the dialogical framework would be to re-examine the nature of teacher feedback, learning lessons from the use of audio feedback from Filius et al (2019). With the increase in the use of virtual tutorials and feedback sessions the next phase of the research will focus on the impact, benefits and barriers to recorded or live feedback using video as part of the dialogical process for large classes. At the heart of the theoretical framework is the learner-teacher relationship, therefore any future design of an integrated dialogical model would have to ensure that the student is part of this process and that there are shared responsibilities (Winstone et al, 2017) between the learner, the peers and the teachers for this to be an equitable process and result in a sustainable model.

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