



transforming  
assessment

# Students' Engagement in the Development of Criteria to Assess Written Tasks

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## OVERVIEW

This case study describes the process of engaging students in the development of criteria to be adopted in teacher, peer and self-assessment practices. The study was undertaken with undergraduate students of Hispanic Studies participating in a semester-long module whose main aim is the development of students' written competence in Spanish. The involvement of students in the development of assessment criteria was an attempt to move into a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, and to integrate alternative assessment practices with the teaching experience. This case study is interesting because the involvement of students in the development of criteria to be adopted for self-, peer, and teacher assessment of their learning, is an influential exercise that empowers learners to take an active role in the assessment process. This exercise also contributes to the development of students' ownership of their learning through assessment.

## Keywords

Great designs for assessment, Hispanic Studies, Student-generated criteria, Peer assessment, Reflection on learning.

## INFORMATION ABOUT THE MODULE

This case study has been conducted with a group of students taking Hispanic Studies as part of their bachelor degree at University College Dublin during the first semester of the academic year 2006-07. Relevant information about the case study is presented below:

- The module where the case study was undertaken is called *Expresión Escrita*;
- It is a semester-long module (12 weeks duration and a total of 24 teaching hours);
- This module is taken by undergraduate students of Hispanic Studies;
- It is an option module within their programme of studies at University College Dublin;
- The module is offered to Level 3 students (last year of their undergraduate programme) and the number of students taking this module is limited to 20.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

*Expresión Escrita* is a module that aims at the development of the learners' communicative competence in written Spanish by engaging students in:

- production of a variety of texts written in Spanish;
- participation in self- and peer assessment of written activities;
- reflection on their learning process.



Three specific learning tasks form the basis to attain the overall aim of the module: written activities, a learning journal and a written portfolio. The case study presented here focuses on the development of assessment criteria to be applied to their written tasks. The process requires students to:

- a) get involved in the development of assessment criteria;
- b) work co-operatively and negotiate among themselves;
- c) apply the agreed criteria to assess the work of their peers;
- d) reflect about their learning.

The engagement of the students in the development of the assessment criteria was presented as part of a class activity. The class was divided into groups of 4-5 students and each group was given the task to agree on the criteria that they would consider important to apply for the assessment of the written texts that constitute the focus of the module. All the groups reported on the agreed criteria and a discussion with the whole class provided an opportunity to clarify the meaning of the criteria that had arisen from the different groups. A list of assessment characteristics was compiled with the input from all the groups and from the teacher's intervention, to ensure that essential aspects had not been omitted. Such list was distributed to all students. It was adopted by both the teacher and the students as criteria to assess students' work during the duration of the module, and regular references to the agreed criteria were made throughout the semester.

There are plenty of opportunities during the duration of the module to use the criteria developed by the students:

Regularly, when the teacher returns written work to students during a class, written feedback is provided by the teacher based on the criteria and students are invited to engage in dialogue with the teacher to explore some of the issues arisen from the written feedback.

Sometimes, class time is devoted to peer assessment exercises where students are given anonymous written tasks produced by other students from the class and they have to provide written feedback using the assessment criteria adopted.

In week 6 a tutorial session is organised between the teacher and each student to discuss their learning progress based on a reflective self-evaluation template completed by each student and on samples of their learning journal.

All the written activities are assessed formatively and that is why the feedback provided to students on how to improve those activities is very important. Those written tasks are considered drafts and together with new versions they constitute part of the portfolio produced by the learners at the end of the module. The portfolio is assessed summatively.

The feedback provided to students after each written task has been completed, either by the teacher or by their classmates, provides learners with the opportunity to reflect about their learning by writing a reflective entry in their journals. This takes place outside the classroom environment.

## **RATIONALE IN TERMS OF EDUCATIONAL IDEAS**

Traditionally, assessment has been associated with teachers making judgements about the performance or work produced by learners (Brown and Glasner, 1999). However, Birenbaum (1996) makes explicit the role of learners in the assessment process when she describes the attributes of a new assessment culture, which include students' active participation in the process of assessment, in the development of assessment criteria and in documenting their work through reflections. Studies involving negotiation of assessment criteria between



students and teachers (Jordan, 1999) or those in which students draw up their criteria for assessment (Falchikov, 1995) are usually linked to practices of self- and peer assessment. Often when students are involved in self- and peer assessment practices, they are provided with a set of criteria and their task is to rate themselves or their classmates against the criteria provided (Brew, 1999). Questions often arise about the degree to which students take an active participation in the assessment process, apart from being subjected to the methods imposed on them by the lecturers or their institutions, in order to ascertain the extent of their learning.

The theoretical underpinnings for this study were two-fold. First, it was informed by a constructivist perspective of learning, together with the attributes of that assessment culture as described by Birenbaum (1996). Constructivist theories of learning emphasise that learners are actively involved in making sense of the experiences around them (Williams & Burden, 1997). Consequently, it can be inferred that learners should play an active role in the process of learning and assessment. Second, it was influenced by a review of research on formative assessment conducted by Black and William (1998), which ascertained that formative assessment can enhance learning when students are provided with quality feedback and guidance on what they can do to improve their learning. The significance of feedback was further supported by considering certain conditions of assessment that facilitate students' learning (Gibbs, G. & Simpson, C., 2004).

This case study reflects quite well the principles of good assessment design that inform the work of the Reengineering Assessment Practices (REAP) project:

1. Engage students actively in identifying or formulating criteria
2. Facilitate opportunities for self-assessment and reflection
3. Deliver feedback that helps students self-correct
4. Provide opportunities for feedback dialogue (peer and tutor-student)
5. Encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
6. Provide opportunities to apply what is learned in new tasks
7. Yield information that teachers can use to help shape teaching "engagement"
8. Capture sufficient study time and effort in and out of class
9. Distribute students' effort evenly across topics and weeks.
10. Engage students in deep not just shallow learning activity
11. Communicates clear and high expectations to students.

Adapted from [Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick \(2006\)](#) and [Gibbs and Simpson \(2004\)](#)

The first principle that informs the work of the REAP project provides the springboard to this case study. It is through the engagement of students in the formulation of criteria that the other principles gain significance in the learning environment. The active engagement of students in the development of criteria was considered an important step in order to provide the transition from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach to teaching, learning and assessment.

## EVALUATION

The data collected for this study comes from a variety of sources: a) analysis of students' journals, b) the teacher's reflection on how conscious the students were of the criteria adopted, c) a short student survey once the module was completed, and d) the overall grades obtained by the students at the end of the module. One of the limitations of this approach is the subjectivity of the data and its interpretation, given that the teacher of the module was also the researcher carrying out the study. On the other hand, the study was not intrusive in that the students were not aware that it was being undertaken until the module was completed, when they were asked to provide the researcher with some data in



a short survey. This, it is believed, provided a more natural environment in which to conduct the research work. Although the study takes place in a very specific context and focuses on a module that may not be a typical one within the humanities programmes, there are nevertheless principles of general relevance that can be drawn from the study.

Student responses in the survey showed that being involved in the development and negotiation of assessment criteria was highly beneficial because they perceived it as being more democratic than when the criteria are imposed on them and therefore they were happier to co-operate with criteria that they had chosen. The fairness of the exercise was often highlighted in contrast to their experience of other less democratic assessment practices employed by lecturers and teachers. It was pointed out that because the students are the ones being assessed, it is only fair that they have a say in the way assessment is being done. Linked to that point is the idea that students felt that their opinions were valued by lecturers when they were involved in the development of assessment criteria.

A further benefit stated by the students was that being involved in the development of criteria helped them to have a personal interest in and a connection to the module, making the subject more enjoyable and beneficial. They often linked the issue of having an idea of what was expected with the motivation to work much harder during the duration of the module, rather than cramming all their efforts for an examination. It also motivated them to work harder because they were fully aware of how their work was being assessed.

Most students did not see any drawbacks in being involved in the development of criteria. However, a few concerns were pointed out. One such concern was to ensure that students take the exercise seriously so that the best criteria are adopted. A similar drawback was that the criteria chosen might not be the preferred of all concerned. Another limitation of using the criteria agreed by the group was that no grades were provided in the assessment of their written texts, either by the teacher or by their peers, and one student thought that it made it hard to determine her standard as she was used to get grades in other modules.

Reflecting on the impact that active participation of students on assessment practices had, three key findings are highlighted by reflecting on evidence arising from the learners themselves.

#### **a. Collaborative learning**

When teachers share with students the process of assessment, assessment becomes something 'done with' learners rather than 'done to' learners (Harris and Bell, 1994). This, in turn, could contribute to an increase in learners' intrinsic motivation so that they adopt a deep approach to learning. However, it is necessary to build trust among students and between the teacher and the students to be able to create a relaxed atmosphere where collaborative learning can take place (Fallows and Chandramohan, 2001). Excerpts from students' journals (translated from Spanish into English by the teacher) corroborate that:

*'This module has provided me with the opportunity to work with others (pair and group work), and to learn from others as well as from the teacher'*

*'It is good to receive feedback from others. You learn a lot from reading and assessing somebody else's work'*

#### **b. Self-regulation**

It is not easy to encourage learners' autonomy and responsibility for their own learning (Davies and Jones, 2001). However, there were abundant references in the students' journals that indicate how students' involvement in the process of assessment has had other positive effects on the way they learn:



*'Now I think before I start writing; I imagine that I am the reader and I try to see how I would react'*  
*'I have learnt a lot. It has allowed me to reflect about aspects of learning that I had not thought about before'*  
*'Now I am conscious about what I write, and about the readers of what I write'*

### **c. Self-confidence and life-long learning skills**

The involvement of students in the negotiation of assessment criteria may have been a factor in contributing to the enhancement of learners' confidence and self-esteem and to the development of life-long learning skills, as the following statements from the learners confirm:

*'At the beginning of the module I could not see myself as a writer. Now I have confidence in myself and in the way I can express myself in Spanish'*  
*'The module has allowed me to develop my confidence and my self-esteem'*  
*'I can transfer what I have learnt in this module to other modules and to other situations outside the university'*

Involving students in formulating criteria to assess their own written work and that of their peers may be difficult to implement in a large classroom set up as the process of developing criteria may take too much time. Another limitation that arises from sharing the power of assessment with the students is that the linguistic ability of the learners in the group may be limited and weaker students may not be able to improve their writing if the teacher does not point out to them how to do it. This limitation may not apply to other disciplines where the process of formulating and applying criteria is done in the students' mother tongue.

The success of engaging students in the assessment process may not always result in an enhancement of student learning. However, this study shows that a significant number of students obtained higher final grades that were expected at the beginning of the module. On the other hand, two students obtained lower grades on account of their poor involvement in the assessment process. When self-, peer and teacher assessment practices are an integral part of the module there is no possibility of cramming at the end of the course because the process and the product of learning are assessed. Thus, the early intervention of the teacher is crucial when such assessment practices are adopted. Much thought and consideration need to be given to the introduction of the described practices.

This case study demonstrates that involving students in the negotiation of assessment criteria has contributed positively to the enhancement of their learning in a way that complements or offers an alternative to more traditional practices of assessment as the students themselves have pointed out:

*'I think that getting students involved in the development of assessment criteria is definitely a good idea'*

*'It takes time for students to get used to this approach to assessment, but I believe it is a step in the right direction'*

*'This class was undoubtedly the most student-orientated class I have ever been in, in terms of participation and evaluations. We were involved in almost every aspect of the class and this allowed us to feel more attached and involved, and thus want to be there.'*



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