Editorial

(Re)positioning assessment in higher education: the case of Geography in South Africa

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Abstract

Using three recent publications on the state of Geography in higher education in South Africa, this article attempts to (re)introduce ideas focused on supporting quality learning and teaching. Quality learning and teaching require moving beyond assessment processes that are safe and predictable, that are fixed and non-negotiable, measurement-driven and framed in a lecturer-centred approach. While recognising the changing nature of society and that quality is a more complex concept than traditional assessment criteria can acknowledge, I am convinced that sustainable learning and teaching depend on a conceptual shift to develop and use assessment information in collaboration with students to guide current learning and teaching with the aim of self-regulation in future.

Over the past decade three accounts on the state of Geography in higher education in South Africa have appeared in leading international and national academic journals. The first by Etienne Nel appeared in the *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (1998, 7–8). It captured reflections of the position and role of Geography in the context of the ‘euphoria of political transition and the miracle of the “peaceful revolution of the 1990s”’ in South Africa. Within the changed socio-political climate at the time, the subject had a new opportunity and responsibility to reposition itself constructively to educate the more multiracial South African learner corps through its academic offering and socially relevant research to contribute to a more socio-environmentally just and sustainable world.

The second article, by Ramutsindela, was published in the *Norwegian Journal of Geography* (2001, 34–37). It dealt in depth with the curriculum changes (mostly in terms of content) that Geography will have to embark on in order to meet the demands of the new outcomes-based education system and to contribute to a broader agenda of
national reconstruction. He specifically highlights how the introduction of environmental education, which is already well-established in South African higher education, can open up new opportunities to advance geographical knowledge at school level.

As part of an NRF-funded and initiated project, the Society for South African Geographers researched the status and role of geography as an academic discipline in South Africa. The report/paper in the *South African Geographical Journal* (Fairhurst et al. 2003, 81–89) highlights significant growth and transformation in areas ranging from the discipline’s epistemological roots and development, its higher education structures and organisation to its curriculum provision at different levels. It also emphasises recognition of the subject not only as an academic discipline, but also as an integrative applied science as well as its involvement in geographical education in the school context.

It is significant, however, that in none of the mentioned papers is any substantial reference made to assessment and its role in delivering a quality Geography curriculum and accompanying effective methodologies of teaching and learning. These are methodologies that emphasise the integration of assessment and instruction in support of better student learning. Dochy et al. (Clegg and Bryan 2006, 217) characterise such an assessment culture as one in which:

- students construct knowledge (rather than reproduce it);
- assessment focuses on the application of knowledge to actual cases;
- assessment instruments ask for multiple perspectives and context sensitivity;
- students are actively involved in the assessment process – they discuss criteria and engage in self- and/or peer assessment;
- assessments are integrated within the learning process and congruent with the teaching method and learning environment.

How the discipline is mediated to students and especially how students learn and are supported in that process is not investigated in these reports. This is contrary to the increasing recognition in the literature on higher education of the pivotal role that assessment can play in enhancing the quality of the provision of education (Brown and Glasner 1999). This seems to be characteristic of a South African higher education in which the focus is still too much on what we teach, and on testing this knowledge and understanding, while ignoring the opportunities and challenges of developing and using assessment to support high-level learning. Thus it is easy to lose sight of the pedagogic role that assessment can and should play in improving learning.

In analysing the changing views of assessment in higher education, Boud (Knight 1995, 35–48) identifies different stages that emerged during particular time periods through which ideas of assessment evolved:

- *Conventional assessment* in which assessment normally follows teaching. The purpose of assessment is to discover how much has been learned. ‘Learning was
viewed quantitatively in terms of the amount of teaching which had been observed’ (Knight 1995, 40). Despite the introduction of alternative forms of assessment, such as reports, essays and short tests as part of continuous assessment, recording of marks remained the principal focus of the assessment activity.

- **Educational measurement**, while building on the underlying premises of conventional assessment, focused on making assessment ‘more rational, efficient and technically defensible’ (Knight 1995, 41). Multiple-choice testing is regarded by Boud as one of the only assessment methods reminiscent of this stage that impacted on higher education and which highlighted issues of reliability and validity and the notion of question difficulty.

- **Competency and authentic assessment**, based on the quest to ensure a genuine correlation between what is assessed and the real competence of the student, brought to the fore the use of criterion-referenced assessment as well as a ‘closer correspondence between higher education courses and professional practice’ (Gonczi 1994).

On analysing what is current practice in Geography teaching at most higher education institutions in South Africa, based on researching academic programmes as stated in university year books, it becomes clear that assessment models used are either focused on one of these particular stages or they reflect conceptions of two or all three – in most cases involving the first two stages. This highlights what Orrell (2006) calls a ‘higher education problem’; she quotes Tierney (1999, 172) who argues that ‘Many of the major problems academic organisations experience today are due to a habit of clinging to past practices and organisational structures’. Despite being regarded in South Africa as one of the vehicles of educational reform, change in assessment practice remains stifled by tradition, common practice and ignoring the relationship with both teaching and learning – as is also evident in the lack of research on assessment in Geography in higher education in South Africa. Assessment should not only inform the lecturer and student about their achievements, but it should create the important and necessary reciprocal interaction between teaching and learning that opens up opportunities and possibilities to ensure the best possible teaching and learning. According to Mercer (2002, 152) ‘the quality of education cannot be explained in terms of “learning” or “teaching” as separate processes, but rather in terms of the interactive process of “teaching-and-learning”’. Quality teaching and learning can therefore be seen as teaching and learning which is embedded in and synchronised by the valid interpretations made on the evidence gained from different forms of assessment. In order to ensure quality tuition/training in Geography in higher education, we are left with no other responsible response than to move this debate beyond merely advocating assessment processes that are safe and predictable, that are fixed and non-negotiable, and framed in a teacher-centred approach. In doing that, I would like to flag elements of an alternative assessment regime that should be considered.
While recognising that the distinction between summative and formative assessment is blurred (Taras 2005, 468) as all formative assessment is based on a summative judgement, assessment in higher education is still to a large extent dominated by summative assessment practices. These end-of-learning-programme assessments are usually high-stake activities and designed to sum up achievement as a grade or mark on which promotion or certification is based. From these activities only marks are generated, which do not improve learning or teaching but lead mostly to feedout. The situation is aggravated by the modularisation of courses in which marks/grades obtained through in-module/course assessments, that were intentionally designed to have a formative purpose (part of continuous assessment), but are eventually only used summatively to contribute to a mark on which a final competence judgment is based at the end of the study unit. In this sense, assessment has more to do with accountability and quality control, ‘. . . almost exclusively as an act of measurement that occurs after learning has been completed, not as a fundamental part of teaching and learning itself’ (Bryan and Clegg 2006, xviii). Although strong arguments have been developed for the place of summative assessment in higher education, the reality is that this dominant discourse constructs pedagogical practices within and beyond courses that do not address the essence of higher education, namely teaching and learning. I would argue that a more critical analysis of the place of summative assessment is needed as quality teaching and learning are not dependent on a discourse of which summative assessment is a part.

Instead of strengthening summative assessment as the dominant evaluative process in South African higher education, we should instead focus on the learning processes and on supporting students to take ownership of their own learning. Currently ‘assessment is not sufficiently equipping students to learn in situations in which teachers and examinations are not present to focus their attention’ and in so doing ‘. . . we [are] failing to prepare them for the rest of their lives’ (Boud and Falchikov 2007, 3). What is needed is a counter-discourse which underpins a reframing of assessment with the emphasis on its formative purpose. The rise of a knowledge economy necessitates assessment that can provide feedback to students and lecturers about the correctness of their learning in order to support efficient learning (and teaching) for more students for a longer time (Kvale 2007, 69). But feedback per se is not unproblematic nor a guarantee that learning will occur. Literature (Bell 2005, 129) indicates that feedback is more effective in improving learning outcomes when it is about the substance of the work and not superficial aspects. This is realised when the feedback is linked with setting goals, when it recognises and uses the student’s strengths and weaknesses in doing the task, rather than being linked to the self in the form of praise. Furthermore, it may also involve comparing the student’s achievement or performance to that of other students’ (norm-referenced), assessment standards or learning outcomes (criterion-referenced) or the student’s previous performance (ipsative). Black et al. (2003, 122), however, argue that feedback can only fully serve learning ‘if it involves both the evoking of evidence and a response to that evidence by using it in some way to improve learning. So it is
in what is called *feedforward* that lecturers or supportive others scaffold further steps in helping the student to close the gap between what they know and can do (actual level) and what is required in terms of the learning outcomes (desired level). Formative assessment therefore can create better opportunities for both students and lecturers to recognise and respond to student learning with the aim of enhancing that learning and teaching, during learning and teaching (Bell and Cowie 2001, 8).

Reframing assessment to be primarily used to support more efficient learning – that is developing the ability to use useful and timely feedback in order to understand and recognise quality with the aim of improving performance and fostering self-regulation – will open up possibilities for lecturers to develop a better understanding of students’ learning and to reflect on the effectiveness of the teaching practice involved. The validity of assessment does not only lie in what Killen (2003, 12–13) calls the ‘historical view that valid test items are those that test what they were intended to test’, but rather ‘to construct test items, administer tests, mark and interpret results in ways that will allow valid inferences to be made about student learning’. It is thus the quality of the interpretation (professional judgement) of the evidence provided by the assessment that will, to a large extent, determine the quality of the renewed learning and teaching processes. Scaffolding the students’ journey to reach their potential level along the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978, 86) demands not only a reflection on actual teaching practice and making informed adaptations to the pedagogical practice, but also taking into account students’ thinking and views about the teaching and how they progress. The formative aspect of assessment therefore occurs in the interaction between student and lecturer. It is at this intersection of teaching and learning that formative assessment is integrated in the curriculum (Bell and Cowie 2001, 539).

Raising these issues with regard to a rethinking of assessment practices is not done without realising the structural as well as human constraints that hinder more innovative assessment. Additionally, Bryan and Clegg (2006, 3) remind us that: ‘It is time we recognised the changing nature of society and acknowledged that quality is a more complex concept than traditional assessment criteria suggest – quality cannot be reduced to a set of easily quantified learning outcomes.’ The complexity of assessment in higher education is not particular to South Africa but is a global challenge. South Africa is experiencing similar issues that influence assessment practices to some of those which Knight and Yorke (2003, 190) raised about the United Kingdom and Australia:

- The changing nature of the student body and its engagement with the learning process;
- The significance of assessment requirements in establishing expectations and guiding student learning;
- The prominence attached to the development of ‘generic skills’;
- The need for staff to find assessment methods that are time- and cost-effective, and applicable to cohorts of increasing size and diversity;
• The emergence of new technological possibilities for assessment;
• The threat of plagiarism.

It is clear that the promotion of sustainable learning and teaching through assessment in higher education in South Africa in general and in Geography teaching in particular is not unproblematic and straightforward. Fundamental in this process (especially in dealing with the first three student-related issues) is shifting the conceptual understanding of assessment from the use of assessment results to support administrative functions towards developing and using assessment information in collaboration with students to guide current learning with the aim of self-regulation in future. This, according to Banta and Associates (2002), will depend largely on the development of a scholarship of assessment which is described as a ‘systematic enquiry about assessment’ (x), ‘sophisticated thinking about assessment’ (242), building on scholarly assessment, that is, ‘practice of assessment’ (242). I would like to support this argument, provided it is a scholarship developed by both lecturer and student.

Addressing the last three institution-related issues demands creative thinking and action that stretch beyond the borders and confines of institutional management and cultures. Westerheijden (2003, 541), in making the point that assessment practice is broad but not deep, underlines the necessity that higher education institutions need to address these challenges in collaboration with other local and global institutions as well as government. Furthermore, this also calls for bringing institutional values and culture into alignment with the needs of the individuals, communities and the world that depend on them.

Starting to infuse some of these ideas into providing Geography teaching programmes at higher education institutions in South Africa might spearhead the establishment of a new assessment culture which is focused on the integration of assessment and instruction borne out of the need to align learning and instruction more with assessment. The nature of such a process is collaborative implying that the power differential between lecturer and student is broken down as both take ownership of their ‘profession’ and become more efficient in focussing on the quality of what they do and get out of the process. Banta (2002, 287), however, warns that the collaborative skills required are not characteristic of academics: ‘we study alone to make the grades required for graduate school, in graduate school we develop our knowledge of a narrow area as individuals, then we are hired as faculty members on the basis of our area of specialization, we teach and conduct much of our research alone, and ultimately we are rewarded primarily for our individual achievements’. Therefore, to operate effectively and in support of such an assessment regime will require a serious reflection on our own pedagogical practices, on the effectiveness of our current assessment and teaching practices and the concomitant lecturer-student relationship.

This may mean that the much-used feedback phrase ‘could do better’ should also be applied to us as practitioners. Instead of just using assessment for summative
purposes, it should rather become part of a productive pedagogy focused on enhancing the skills, abilities and capabilities of students. It is about using informed professional judgement(s) formatively as we ‘sit beside’ (translated from the Latin word *assidere* from which the word ‘assessment’ is derived) our students as they navigate their way across the academic plains of the current and the future world.

REFERENCES


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