

'Quit school and become a taxi driver': Reframing 1st year students' expectations of assessment on an academic writing course at UKZN

An Action research project
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Introduction

- Ongoing Action research into use of formative assessment on an academic writing course for 1st year students on a 4-year extended curriculum in Social Sciences at UKZN
- In first two cycles of the research the lecturers had investigated and improved their formative feedback practices but later discovered that the students were still not using their comments constructively
- This 3rd cycle of the research makes sense of why this is happening and attempts to address the problem
- I designed an 'assessment week' as part of 1st semester curriculum and included a peer assessment task.
- Would this help to make formative comments more useable?

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Theoretical perspectives:

Why even good formative feedback can be un-useable

- Black and William (1998) claim that strengthening formative feedback offers substantial learning gains.
But no 'magic bullet' – requires radical change in educator's pedagogy over a sustained period and change in students' attitudes too!
- Framing Theory (Tannen, 1993). Frames are "structures of expectations" that we bring to any communicative event. They are socio-cultural and we develop new frames by making connections with what we already know.
So I investigated the 'socio-cultural framing' for assessment that the students were bring with them into the academy. Considered the lecturers' 'framing' for assessment too – from Genre theory?
- Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) --- Wertsch's idea of different types of 'regulation': object-regulation, other-regulation and self-regulation.
Our students were 'object' regulated, but needed to become increasingly other and self-regulated in their writing if they are to succeed as writers in the Social Sciences.

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More useful theories!

- Tardy's (2006) idea of 'appropriation' – feedback can appropriate students' writing, forcing meanings and identities in overly directive ways. Students could feel disempowered, passive, resentful
- Feedback does not have to be 'unidirectional' – can be 'cross directional' – more dialogic and democratic
- Lecturers 'frames' for assessment = they are cultural informants/experts, guiding novices/apprentices into powerful new discourses? (Genre Theory)
- Could peer assessment challenge this model and allow students to 'self-regulate' more?

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Designing the classes (See Handout)

- **Stage 1:** students reflect on their experiences of learning and assessment from school – *this promoted meta-awareness of their inherited frames*
- **Stage 2:** Initial summative peer-assessment of a writing task
- **Stage 3:** Criteria for assessment should be based on learning outcomes of course. Decided on 5/6 assessment criteria as the 'goals' for the task
- **Stage 4:** Formative/summative assessment – the idea that writing can be a recursive, mentored process. Formative advice should be offered in a spirit of collegiality, according to Sadler's principles (1989) of effective feedback : '*desired goals*' / '*present state of knowledge*' / '*information about how to close the gap*'
- **Stage 5:** After giving formative assessment on a peer's assignment, rewrote their own and reflected on what they had learnt from the classes

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The research participants

- 73 students currently registered for the 4-year Extended Curriculum on PMB campus (a case study)
- All share similar backgrounds:
 - Had not met university's minimum requirements for a admission but were deemed to have potential given integrated academic support
 - From poorly resourced school backgrounds
 - Families could not support their tertiary studies – most on Financial Aid
 - Mostly isiZulu speakers, often with poorly developed 'CALP' (Cummins, 1996, Taylor and Vinjevold, 1999)

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Collecting and analysing the data

- Three sets of data were collected:
 - Memories of school experiences of assessment and peer group learning
 - All comments on peers' draft assignments
 - Students' reflection papers
- They were analysed as follows:
 - *How and how often* was their writing assessed?
 - Teacher feedback – *what kind?*
 - Peer group experiences
 - Students' feedback – *shifting frames?*
 - *Evidence of more self-regulation? Resisting appropriation?*

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School learning: the 'frames'

- Assessments had been meager and infrequent. Reports of never getting work back from teachers
- Feedback comments vague/generalised, impersonal and sometimes abusive:
 - 'Quit school and become and taxi driver'*
- Mostly summative: assessment meant a 'number'
- Formative advice offered, but mostly in a oral, group context
- Assessments were never based on clear criteria:
 - 'No, we didn't understand why we had failed and the teachers never explained'* or
 - 'Nasty comments, low marks and not being told where I had gone wrong'.*

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A positive learning frame: the peer group

- Informal, oral peer group learning = normative
- Organised in friendship groups mostly by learners themselves, although the teachers appear to have encouraged/relied on the practice: *'The teacher organised it after realising the lack of information and low performance'*
- *Shared homework problems, practised past papers, corrected each other's mistakes, simplified notes: 'Taught each other what we lacked'.*
- Easier to ask questions, peer explained better, used home language, small groups: *other regulation?*
- Some reports of turning to off-task behaviours: *object regulation?*

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2. The feedback comments: shifting frames?

- Some examples of bland, misleading frames
- But **more** examples of a new, discursive, collegial tone in the feedback: *'When we reference we do not use first names. So you reference like this; (Meyer and Jackson, 2007)'. 'In content you have some errors like saying spoken language is usually formal and written language is informal. Did you mean that spoken language is informal and written language is formal?'*
- Suggestions around particular issues related to criteria:
 - 'It is very important that you reference because you could be accused of cheating and lose a lot of marks'*
- Often frame their comments with the language constructions we had taught in Stage 4: *'I suggest that you ...' 'You could change this by ...'.* Mushfak?

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3. The students' reflection papers: more self-regulation?

- Some students had a clear, theoretical grasp of the differences between formative and summative assessment and criterion- versus norm-based assessment, but most had internalised the ideas on a personal, experiential level: eg
 - 'Summative assessment is very bad because it does not let me learn'*
 - 'I hate making mistakes ... Formative assessment helps you to find a solution'*
 - 'It is ... like you have something to look for when you do the task'*
 - 'Criteria guide you ... So you can do as you are told'*
 - 'Criteria can help you to state your work so you can get more marks'.*
- Some were unconvinced by the value of their peers' comments believing that 'the teacher knew better': but some realised that they could trust because:
 - 'Yes, I did trust my peer because she was using criterion-based assessment'.*

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More students' reflections

- Some students resisted their peers' comments: Eg,
 - 'I was offended because he wanted me to write in his way' and '... he said my topic sentences were not interesting but I did not change them because I thought there was nothing wrong with them'.*
- These students = 'resisting appropriation' (Tardy, 2007)
- Peer advice is not always useable, so what are the gains?
- Opportunities to offer 'other regulation' and to 'self-regulate' more: become more independent
- Meta-language to understand assessment and thereby to discover some important principles about writing in SocSci.

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The lecturer's reflections: real change?

- Action research should generate change: did it?
- Many students (not all) were developing new frames for understanding writing in the SocSci via the medium of assessment:
 - Writing is not a one-off product, arbitrarily judged
 - Supported, mentored process
 - So role of assessor changes
 - Writing recursive, developmental (thinking process)
 - Based on principles which can and should be explicit ('goal-driven') and attainable.
- Employed an already normative socio-cultural practice, but in a more scaffolded way.
- Peer assessment is not successful as a 'stand-alone' practice, but as one helpful aspect of a whole staged writing process. Integrated into curriculum.

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Final reflections

- SocSci disciplines also not sites of excellent, developmental assessment practices – school-like? Further research needed?
- But these 'frames' are useful for everyone learning to write in a different way, particularly for our students
- Raises meta-awareness and makes the students more powerful to resist poor assessments when they encounter them: gives them more of a 'voice'.
- Need to reinforce these frames elsewhere in the 1st year curriculum (Black and Wiliam).
- Need to train the students more explicitly in the giving of useable comments.

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Lecturers need to change!

- Written formative assessment is not always a self-evidently 'good': to make it useable, it needs careful mediation in the socio-cultural context in which it is offered. Can be given in other media – whole class? Oral? Post-summative? Peer training? We need to be more creative
- Lecturers can appropriate and colonise students' writing in deflating ways. They need to revisit their own frames: need not always be 'experts' guiding 'novices' into the 'target practices' but can train students to apprentice each other and maybe encourage other learning gains in the process. Eg, students becoming less passive, dependent learners.

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SO ...

- Our students must NOT ...
'Quit school and become taxi drivers ...'
But become good Social Scientists instead!

THE END

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