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Chinese whispers? Investigating the consistency of the assessment tasks and criteria provided to students and tutors by a distance learning institution

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Ensuring the fairness of assessment is important in all areas of Higher Education, but particularly so in distance education, where the communication around assessment and feedback is a principal method of supporting learning, and even more so when the students are at the entry point into Higher Education. This research explores the nature of the language used in explaining the purpose and process of assessment on an Access programme at The Open University UK from the perspective of the module team, the tutors and the students. It takes a qualitative approach to examining the clarity and consistency of assessment tasks, assessment guidance and tutor marking guidelines. Analysis revealed inconsistencies in the language used in relation to assessment, which has led to a revision of how assessment tasks and guidance are communicated to students and tutors.

Keywords: Assessment; inclusive language; marking guidelines; Access to Higher Education; widening participation

Document Type: Research Article

Introduction

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of assessment in supporting student motivation and learning (Rowntree, 1977), there has also been recognition of the gap between assessment and provision of feedback, on the one hand, and a student's ability to improve on the other. In his seminal paper on formative assessment, Sadler (1989) identified the teacher-student assessment interaction as key to a student's ability to improve as a result of the assessment and feedback process and pointed to three conditions necessary for improvement, namely that students "(a) possess a concept of the standard ... being aimed at, (b) compare their actual or current level of performance with the standard and engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap" (Sadler, 1989, p. 21). In other words, students need to be given "advice for action" in order to facilitate learner improvement (Whitelock, 2011, p. 335). Despite the nearly thirty years since Sadler's paper, the transparency and clarity required of the assessment process has been identified as a major concern in the United Kingdom Higher Education sector. As such, there has been an increasing focus on the need for 'rigour, probity and fairness' (QAA, 2012) in assessment and an acknowledgement that not all students are treated equitably in assessment processes.

The rigour, probity and fairness of assessment and feedback in distance education is particularly important. In an educational setting where interaction between tutor and student is primarily text-based, and where there is less opportunity for interactive teacher-student dialogue (Bloxham and Campbell, 2010), ensuring the clarity of the initial assessment task and the quality of the subsequent feedback is vital in enabling students to learn from the assessment process. Despite this, there has been little research on the clarity of the language used in assessment in either campus-based or distance learning. Of particular relevance to distance education, there is also a dearth of

research into the consistency of the language used in assessment tasks and the marking guidelines given to tutors who provide this feedback. The research reported here was part of a larger project on the Open University Access programme, which had the overarching objective of reviewing the key concepts of inclusivity in Higher Education through the lens of assessment language. This particular part of the project focussed on the following key research questions:

- What is the nature of the language used in guidance provided to tutors charged with marking assessment tasks?
- How consistent is this language with that used in the guidance provided to students?

The Open University context

The Open University is a large distance education institution with 75,000 part-time students. It has a mission to promote educational opportunity and social justice, attracting students from a wide range of social and educational backgrounds. Since October 2013, the Open University has offered three inter-disciplinary Access modules at level 0 (NQF level 3), intended to provide students from widening participation backgrounds with a route to entry into Higher Education.

The Open University's Access modules are appropriate for students who have a qualification level lower than 2 A-levels (NQF level 3), who lack confidence in studentship skills, or have not studied for a number of years. They are designed by a Module team consisting of subject and study skills specialists to build confidence in the knowledge and skills which are considered necessary for successful progress towards a qualification. All Open University undergraduate qualifications have a designated

Access module as an optional starting point for students requiring additional preparation before embarking on a degree.

There are currently three Access modules:

- Arts and languages (Y031)
- People, work and society (Y032)
- Science, technology and maths (Y033)

Each Access module runs for 30 weeks and can be started in either February or October each year. Each student is allocated to a tutor (Associate Lecturer) who provides proactive one-to-one telephone support and written feedback on three formative Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs). In addition, each module has an optional online student forum, moderated by a member of the Access module team. There are also six short computer-marked assignments (iCMAs). Summative assessment is via an end-of-module assessment (EMA) but the three TMAs are compulsory, and students must also submit four of the iCMAs.

In order to maintain a coherent approach to assessment on the Access programme, the Access module team produces a 'skeleton' Assessment Guide, consisting of a number of generic core features relevant across the programme, including an explanation of the learning outcomes and the type of assessment used on the module, the assessment criteria, what to do and to avoid when writing assignments, and how to submit assignments through the electronic assignment submission system. Module specific guidance and assessment tasks devised by subject specialists are then added to this generic information and guidance to produce the Assessment Guide for each module. These module-specific Assessment Guides are written for students and

are also provided to tutors, who then mark assignments and provide feedback to their students.

In order to support tutors, the Access module team also produces Tutor Marking Guidelines (TMGs). These guidelines are intended to be used in conjunction with the Assessment Guides and assessment criteria, and provide additional information about the module, the purpose of assessment, and how to provide feedback to students. They are not intended to be shared with students. Again, the bulk of the guidelines is in the form of a generic ‘skeleton’, to be used across each of the modules, complemented by subject specific guidance on key concepts of relevance to the module and an indication of how to allocate grades.

The nature of this communication around assessment is summarised in the diagram below:

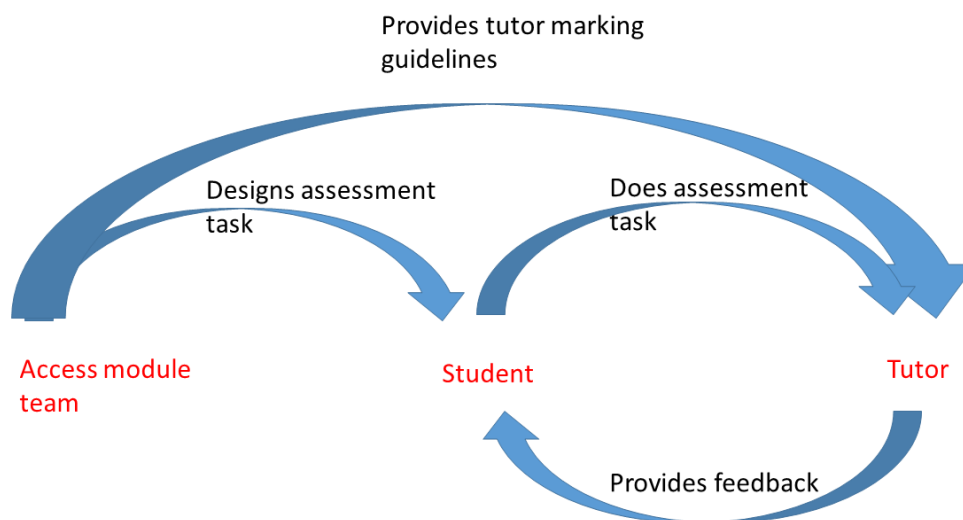


Figure 1 – Nature of assessment-related communication at the Open University

The purpose of these centrally devised Assessment Guides and Tutor Marking Guidelines is two-fold: to provide a coherent approach to assessment across the Access programme, and ensure the consistency of marking and feedback provided by the tutors on each module. However, a report from one of our external examiners on the Access programme indicated that the language used for assessment tasks, and to explain the purpose of assessment, was clearer and more straightforward in the Assessment Guide for the Science, technology and maths module (Y033) than the other two Access modules. This suggested that, despite our best intentions, there was inconsistency in the language of assessment used across the Access programme, and therefore the potential for unfair treatment of students on the different modules. This was the impetus for an internally funded research project into the language of assessment on the Access programme, which began in February 2015, and for this particular research which focusses on the consistency of the language of assessment when communicated to both students and tutors.

Literature review

With an increasingly diverse student population in the United Kingdom, there has been an increased emphasis on the notion of equity and fairness in assessment. The QAA (2012) identifies two fundamental principles of assessment. These are ‘validity and reliability’ and ‘rigour, probity and fairness’. Validity and reliability mean that “the process of assessment must be designed and carried out in such a way that it is effective in enabling students to demonstrate their achievement of the intended learning outcomes” (QAA, 2012, p. 6). Rigour, probity and fairness means that assessment should ensure that “all students are treated equitably, and that they are all given equivalent opportunities to demonstrate their achievement of the required standards”

(QAA, 2012, p. 6).

The importance of language in the assessment process was identified by Sadler (1989) who highlighted the existence of “fuzzy criteria”, particularly within the Arts and Humanities subject, which he defines as “abstract mental constructs denoted by a linguistic term which has no absolute and unambiguous meaning independent of its context” (Sadler, 1989, p. 124). In the intervening years, however, there has been very little research on the specific role of language in assessment or on how its use relates to the rigour, probity and fairness, or the validity and reliability, of the assessment process (Butcher et al, 2010; Donohue and Coffin, 2014; Richards and Pilcher, 2015; Williams, 2008).

Butcher et al (2010, p. 37) call for “advice about ‘inclusive’ wording of assessment tasks to become university policy”. However, there is no investigation in this study on the specific wording of assessment tasks, and therefore what wording would be considered inclusive. Williams’ (2008) study of student understanding of assignment task verbs is one of the few which specifically investigates the language used in assignments, in this case in Chemistry. He found that students adhere to a “common sense” understanding of many of the verbs used in assignment, compared to the teachers’ use of the same verbs as members of the “Discourse of assessment in Chemistry” (Williams, 2008, p. 167), suggesting that, even within the Sciences, “fuzzy” criteria exist. More broadly, Halliday, cited in Donohue and Coffin, (2014) identify this contextualised knowledge shared by the teachers, but not students, as the “uncommonsense” knowledge associated with Higher Education

The implications are that where students and teachers do not share this knowledge about the purpose and language of assessment, the process becomes inequitable:

An equitable assessment of knowledge in science assumes that the question is understood in the same way by all students and the task perceived by the students matches the assessor's perceptions. ... [A]ssessment procedures are invalid if they fail to elicit knowledge from students who in fact possess the knowledge" (Logan and Hazel (1999, p. 55).

Of particular relevance to the issue of inclusivity, Lizzio and Wilson (2013) highlight the need to understand the perceptions of assessment held by students "relatively unfamiliar with the culture and context of university-level assessment" (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013, p. 389). A response to this has been the notion of 'assessment literacy', which draws directly on Sadler's work, by which students develop an understanding of the purposes of assessment and the processes surrounding assessment through an emphasis on "criterion referenced assessment methods including the development and use of assessment rubrics (grids), grade descriptors and benchmark statements" (Smith et al, 2013, p. 45). They also advocate a consistency in the choice of language by teachers through the assessment process.

The majority of the research on the language of assessment has focussed on the student experience, rather than on the assessors. However, as Smith et al make clear, the language used by teachers in the "terms, tasks and expectations" of assessment (Smith et al, 2013, p. 45) is an important factor in developing student understanding. As those imbued with the 'uncommonsense knowledge' of Higher Education, it might be assumed, therefore, that lecturers responsible for devising and marking assessment tasks are familiar with both the purpose and language of assessment. However, Forsyth et al (2015) point to a lack of assessment literacy amongst lecturers, and, in a study of Science lecturers, Taras and Davies (2013) found that there was widespread misunderstanding of apparently basic assessment terms such as 'formative' and 'summative'. They highlight that the absence of a "clear, cogent, coherent and shared"

(Taras and Davies, 2013, p. 58) understanding of assessment may lead lecturers to develop their own understanding. The implications can be seen in Bloxham et al's (2016) study of the variability of the interpretation of assessment criteria by assessors, who may choose to either ignore the established criteria or use their own personal criteria.

The consequences for the consistency of assessment practices in any University are clear. They are even more accentuated in the context of distance education, where those who mark assignments are often not the same people who devise the assessment tasks, and where written feedback, particularly that which is personalised and future-altering, serves an important function in motivating and supporting students (Hughes et al, 2014; Walker, 2009). There has, however, been very little research into the nature of the marking guidelines given to distance tutors to provide effective feedback (Chetwynd and Dobbyn, 2011; Epasa and Meneses, 2010) or, with the exception of Chetwynd and Dobbyn, on the relationship between the guidelines given to tutors and the feedback the tutors provide to students. In relation to the notion of equitable assessment (Logan and Hazel 1999), there has been no research into the nature of the language used in the marking guidelines and the extent to which it contributes to a shared understanding by students and assessors of the purpose of assessment more broadly and assessment tasks specifically.

Method

As the literature review makes clear, the language of assessment is a broad term which is used a variety of ways to include, at one end of specificity, the vocabulary used in assessment tasks, and, at the other, the notion of a subject discourse community. This research focussed on the specifics of the terms used in the Assessment Guides and Tutor Marking Guidelines for the three Access modules in relation to:

- how the purpose of assessment was described and the specific assessment tasks identified in the Assessment Guides
- the nature of the information provided to tutors in the Tutor Marking Guidelines, relating to the purpose of assessment and specific assessment tasks
- the consistency of the language used in the Assessment Guides and Tutor Marking Guidelines

The research team examined each of the Assessment Guides and Tutor Marking Guidelines manually, identifying where the language used to describe either the purpose of assessment or the assessment task was the same or different in each module. In addition, the ‘find’ tool was used in electronic versions of both booklets to search for the use of specific terms related to assessment across each of the modules. To gain a broader perspective, groups of tutors were asked to explore the clarity of the language of used in an unfamiliar module’s Assessment Guide. Two groups of Y033 tutors examined TMA01 from Y031, three from Y031 examined Y032, and three from Y032 examined Y033.

Once this initial data were collected, a comparative analysis was undertaken on the patterns of language identified in each of Assessment Guides and Tutor marking Guidelines, with Logan and Hazel (1999)’s assumption of equitable assessment, that the task perceived by students matches the assessor’s perceptions, used as a guiding principle.

In order to be able to bench mark against future changes, the Assessment Guides and Tutor Marking Guidelines for the October 2014 presentations of each of the modules were used for analysis.

Findings

The Tutor Marking Guidelines for all the Access modules made a clear link between the assessment tasks and the learning outcomes and for each module, tutors were referred to relevant sections of the corresponding Assessment Guide. However, there was considerable repetition of sections of the Assessment Guide, rather than a specific focus on how to allocate marks on TMAs. There was also considerable repetition of more general guidance which is readily available to all Open University tutors, such as how to provide feedback to students, how students can submit assignment in hard copy, and how to use paper-based feedback forms.

The broader research into the nature of the language used in Assessment Guides identified inconsistencies in the use of disciplinary language, even within each module, an over-abundance of explanation and guidance, and a lack of clarity about the meaning of specific assessment terminology (Authors, 2017). However, variance between the Assessment Guides and the Tutor Marking Guidelines was found not so much in terms of the assessment terminology used, but rather in relation to differences in the amount of information provided to tutors and students.

An issue common to each of the Tutor Marking Guidelines was the focus on the importance of the ‘dummy’ TMA00 as a means for students to get to grips with the electronic submission system. With the exception of Y032, this was not mentioned in the Assessment Guides. A particular issue in the Tutor Marking Guidelines for Y031 and Y032 is that tutors are advised to give students credit for providing a “thoughtful response”. It is not made clear what a thoughtful responses would look like or, indeed, what an unthoughtful response would look like. There is no mention of “thoughtful” in the assessment criteria or the Assessment Guide.

There were also found to be inconsistencies in the guidance provided to students and tutors. On Y031, students are asked to say where in a poem a particular technique can be found. In contrast, tutors are advised to give credit for the use of quotations from the poem. On the same module, tutors are told to give credit to student who 'use their own words', a phrase which is not used or explained in the Assessment Guide. Specific guidance on the presentation of assignments was also inconsistent. On Y033, students are asked to provide a summary 'as a series of main points', whereas tutors are advised that students should submit a bullet point list. Tutors are also advised not to penalise students who submit their summary as a spay diagram, in contrast to the Assessment Guide where students are told they can use a spray diagram.

Specific issues in relation to each of the module are identified below:

Description of task and criteria used in the Tutor Marking Guidelines	Description of task and criteria used in the Assessment Guide
<p>TMA00 Tutors are advised to encourage their students to submit a draft of their learning plan as part of TMA00, a ‘dummy’ assignment designed to encourage students to use the electronic assignment submission system.</p>	<p>There is no mention of TMA00, and no advice to submit the plan early or the importance of receiving feedback on it.</p>
<p>TM01 For students who are unable to hear the recording, tutors are advised to reassure students that they can focus on comprehension activities in a broader sense.</p>	<p>The TMA guidance advises students to contact their tutors if they are unable to access the recorded passage and to “think about reading the passage”. This guidance does not make it clear that the TMA can be done by reading the transcripts, and so does not have the same reassuring tone as the Tutor Marking Guidelines.</p>
<p>TMA02 Tutors are advised that credit should be given to students who “use their own words to a greater extent”.</p> <p>Tutors are told that students should name the technique used and “cite the part of the poem” where the technique occurs.</p> <p>Tutors are advised that “Students who have written about the module content rather than their skills might find the explanation particularly difficult.”</p>	<p>There is no mention of writing in their own words in the TMA guidance and it does not appear in the assessment criteria.</p> <p>Students are told that they should indicate “where, in the abstract from the poem, you find these techniques”. This is not the same as citing.</p> <p>Although the example provided to students is based on skills, there is no specific guidance to focus on skills rather than content. As such, the students would have to surmise this.</p>
<p>TMA03 In the guidance to tutors on the plan, they are told that “no particular style of planning should be imposed”.</p> <p>Tutors should “give students credit for their use of evidence in the form of a quotation from the lyric.”</p>	<p>The TMA task and guidance begins with the word “write” which does suggest a particular approach to essay planning, rather than, for example, bullet points or diagrams.</p> <p>Students are told, “Do not forget to support your analysis with a carefully considered selection of the evidence and examples”. There is no specific reference to citing from the lyric.</p>

People, work and society (Y032)

Description of task and criteria used in the Tutor Marking Guidelines	Description of task and criteria used in the Assessment Guide
<i>TMA00</i> Y032 is the only module where TMA00 is referred to in the Assessment Guide.	The guidance given to tutors about the value of submitting the dummy TMA and receiving feedback is not repeated in the Assessment Guide.
<i>TMA02</i> Tutors are advised that students are “given a suggested essay plan”.	The term “essay plan” is not used in the TMA guidance but instead “step by step approach/ checklist” is used. It is not clear why the term “essay plan” isn’t used.

Science, technology and maths (Y033)

Description of task and criteria used in the Tutor Marking Guidelines	Description of task and criteria used in the Assessment Guide
<i>TMA00</i> Tutors are referred to TMA00.	There is no reference to TMA00.
<i>TMA01</i> Tutors are advised that students are asked to “produce the notes as bullet points” Tutors are advised that students “should not be penalised if they choose to present them in another way such as a spray diagram”.	Students are advised to present their summary “as a series of main points”, which is not quite the same as bullet points. The guidance to students is that “you could present your answers as a spray diagram”.
<i>TMA03</i> Tutors are given some examples, in bullet point form, of student responses to look for in the submitted TMA.	The guidance to students is to write in “full sentences and not in bullet points”. Examples are provided in a bullet point list.

Reflection on findings

The purpose of the Tutor Marking Guidelines is to support the process of marking and so the specifics of mark allocation would not be shared with students. However, the Tutor Marking Guidelines for all modules provide additional information about the expected requirement of the TMAs to tutors than that provided to students. This raises the question of whether students are indeed able to understand the question in the same

way as the assessor. For example, in the Assessment Guide for Y031 the guidance to identify where a technique can be found may not necessarily imply to a student that they need to quote or cite directly from the text, rather than indicate a line number or the start, middle or end of the lyrics. Students are therefore left to surmise what is expected of them, based purely on their commonsense understanding, but are judged academically against ‘fuzzy’ criteria of which are not made aware. Similarly, reference to terms such as ‘thoughtful response’ in the Tutor Marking Guidelines raises the issue of whether tutors themselves have a shared understanding of what a specific term means, let alone whether students are able to produce an answer which provides evidence of this. Whilst it may be the case that the difference between ‘main point’ and ‘bullet points’ appears to be relatively small, within the context of academic writing the two are not the same, and the association of main point with bullet point may cause confusion for the student when faced with a similar task in a later assignment or module.

This lack of shared understanding around the specific requirements of assessment tasks and the use of fuzzy criteria not shared with students could be detrimental to weaker students, but potentially also to the development of all students’ assessment literacy as they progress through their studies.

Next steps

Findings from the research around inconsistency of assessment tasks and criteria gave the team the confidence to embark on a major reconceptualization of the module Assessment Guides, not only in the practical sense of altering the structure and reducing the number of pages, but also in thinking about how they could modify the language used so that it would have positive (for learning), rather than negative (of learning),

connotations. As a result of the specific research reported here, a number of generic changes were made to both the Tutor Marking Guidelines and the Assessment Guides:

- Information from the Assessment Guide was removed from the Tutor Marking Guidelines, and tutors were advised to explicitly refer to the Assessment Guide for information on the assessment tasks
- The non-Access specific content on assessment and provision of feedback was removed from the Tutor Marking Guidelines, and tutors were referred to generic Open University guidance.
- A table of contents was provided in the Tutor Marking Guidelines, to provide easier navigation, and a summary of changes to both the Assessment Guide and Tutor Marking Guidelines included
- A generic section on the ‘dummy’ TMA00 was introduced to all Assessment Guides and Tutor Marking Guidelines

Changes were also made at a module level, particularly relating to the inconsistencies between the guidance provided to tutors and that provided to students. On Y031, there is now explicit guidance to students that they can complete the recorded TMA01 recording activity with the use of a transcript provided by their tutors. Tutors are informed about the existence of the transcript and asked to reassure their students that the assignment can be completed successfully by using it. In TMA02 there is explicit guidance about “writing in your own words” in the Assessment Guide, to complement the Tutor Marking Guidelines. TMA03 now contains more detailed guidance on essay planning, again to complement the Tutor Marking Guidelines. On Y033, the use of “main point” and “spray diagram” is common to both the Assessment Guide and Tutor Marking Guidelines, and more guidance is provided to students on what a “main point” is.

There are, however, issues which remain. The ‘fuzzy’ phrase “thoughtful response” remains in place on Y031, whilst it has been replaced on Y032 by “focussed academic content”. The discrepancies around “quotation”, “example” and “evidence” also remain on Y031, as does the conflicting guidance on the use of sources. On Y032, “step-by-step structure” is still used, and bullet points are still used as examples on Y033. This suggests that the process of overcoming inconsistencies has not been effective as it could have been, and highlights the need for an on-going and systematic review of assessment tasks and criteria. A mid-life review of the Access programme, currently being undertaken, is therefore the next point at which the Assessment Guides and Tutor Marking Guidelines will be revisited

Conclusion

The impetus for this research came from an acknowledgment of disparities in the language used for assessment in each of the Access modules. However, what began as a relatively narrow focus on the language used in the Assessment Guides, became, in the case of this research questions investigated in this specific project, an investigation focussed specifically on the guidance provided to tutors and the consistency of that guidance when compared to that provided to students, and by extension, the nature of communication around assessment to both groups. In particular, the finding that Tutor Marking Guidelines provided information about assessment tasks, and used assessment-specific language, which were not made available to students undermines the assumption that the task as perceived by the students matches the assessor’s perceptions (Logan and Hazel, 1999). Without this shared understanding, the teacher-student assessment interaction which underpins the functioning of formative assessment, is weakened. Therefore, despite the clear focus of the Access programme on inclusivity

and widening participation, and the assumption that students may well not be familiar with the “culture and context of university-level assessment” (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013, p. 389). , assessment processes were found to be inequitable and therefore potentially invalid. The changes that have already been made to assessment processes on the Access programme as a result of this this project demonstrate how equity and fairness can be introduced to the assessment process, but also, particularly within the context of distance education, what remains to be done. What has been achieved, however, is that inclusivity and widening participation are now more meaningful and specific in terms of the implication they have for assessment in general, and for the language of assessment, in particular.

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