



Title: A collaborative assessment of students' placement learning.

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* on 11/09/2015 available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/02602938.2015.1083093>

First Published Online: 11/09/2015

Published in Journal: 2017

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2015.1083093>

Reference: Cooper, Susan (2015) *A collaborative assessment of students' placement learning*. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42 (1). pp. 61-76. ISSN 0260-2938

First Published Online: 11/09/2015

Published in Journal: 2017

A collaborative assessment of students' placement learning

Abstract

The research informing this paper set out to investigate the qualitative experiences of students, supervisors and tutors involved in a summative collaborative assessment of placement learning on an undergraduate professionally qualifying programme in the UK. Analysis of data gathered through semi-structured interviews provides valuable insights into its use. In particular, engagement in a collaborative assessment brings a degree of exposure for all concerned. Participants need to feel 'able' to participate and ability to participate is linked to notions of agency and autonomy. Collaborative assessment design needs to acknowledge power relations and include strategies to reduce imbalances. The importance of recognising and working with the complexities of assessment should not be underestimated. Criterion referencing offers a guide to support consistency but can also falsely present assessment as mechanistic and instrumental. Importantly, this research has shown that it is in the 'doing' of assessment that a 'shared language' is developed. Finally this research demonstrates the value of active student engagement in assessment in relation to the construction and use of theory, developing reflective practice and assessment literacy. Additionally the collaborative assessment provides students with the opportunity to experience a 'performance of understanding' in a community of practice that whilst pressured, reflects 'real' professional life.

Introduction

Assessment is a central feature of teaching and learning in higher education, Boud et al. (2010) argue that it is "one of the most significant influences on students' experience and all that they gain from it". Questions have been raised as to whether traditional forms of assessment adequately address the needs of students (Falchikov and Boud 2008, Higher Education Academy 2012) and calls made for improvement in assessment, feedback and preparation for the world of work (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011). The 2014 National Student Survey (NSS) results show that whilst overall satisfaction among student is good (86 per cent of students at UK institutions were satisfied overall with their

course), satisfaction with assessment remains significantly less with only 72 percent expressing this level of satisfaction. The current emphasis on employability which requires graduates to apply knowledge in different contexts (HEA 2012) further supports the need to rethink assessment to enable students to prepare for the challenges of lifelong learning necessary in a rapidly changing knowledge environment.

The emerging 'students-as-partners' agenda, with its more democratic approach in which student engagement in the process of assessment is seen as essential can be seen as a catalyst for change. Alternative approaches that seek to engage the learner with the complexity of assessment, to re-position the student as an active participant in rather than a passive object of assessment are gaining ground (Falchikov and Boud 2008, Tan 2008, Higher Education Academy 2012). These approaches place value on the students' development of assessment literacy, by enabling them to understand assessment grading criteria and standards through actively engaging with the assessment process (O'Donovan, Price and Rust 2008, Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2013). Whilst much has been written about self assessment and peer assessment there is only limited literature in regards to the development of collaborative assessment to which this paper seeks to add.

The emerging interest in collaborative assessment tends to be associated with professional education contexts (Crisp, Green Lister and Dutton 2006, Hargreaves 2007, Lorente-Catalan and Kirk 2014). Collaborative assessment is defined as a participatory process that engages key stakeholders (O'Sullivan 2004) and is promoted as one that is able to meet the needs of students, employers and society as a whole (Somervell 1993, Rourke 2013). In professionally qualifying courses it can be seen as a way to support closer engagement between academia and professional practice (McNamara 2013) as well as a process that stimulates the development of professional competencies including self-evaluation and professional judgement (Nevo 2006).

It is important to recognise the challenges facing those wishing to adopt these alternative forms of assessment. The accountability agenda, with its focus on standardisation, conformity and comparison is at odds with the 'students-as-partners' agenda. In the UK, key drivers such the National Student Survey (NSS), Key Information Sets (KIS) and institutional key performance indicators emphasise the importance of collecting and disseminating quantifiable information and the achievement of specific outcomes whereas a partnership approach places value on a creative process that results in unexpected outcomes (Healey,

Flint and Harrington 2014). These competing agendas produce multiple barriers to assessment reform; at institutional level, poorly conceived regulation can focus staff on the minutiae, diverting their attention from assessment as a whole process. Inflexible regulation can provide reluctant staff with reasons to resist change and can prevent others from being innovative. Some may be wary about using more diverse assessment methods because of the perception that they are not easily subject to external moderation (Higher Education Academy 2012).

Further challenges arise from the changing nature of the learning relationship as a consequence of the 'consumerisation' of higher education which has impacted on student expectations. Increasing class sizes resulting from economies of scale module-sharing place practical limits on what is possible and manageable. The response to the ever-present 'panic' about declining assessment standards seems to bring about entrenchment rather than fostering innovative assessment practices, the dual purposes of stimulating learning and testing achievement are interdependent and yet are often experienced as being at odds with each other (Price et al. 2011).

In 2011 we introduced a summative collaborative assessment to assess a professional practice module at level 5 on a professionally qualifying BA (Hons) Youth & Community Work programme. The assessment process was informed by the socio-cultural paradigm (Dysthe 2008) in that it sought to identify the quality of the students' participation and sense-making in a 'community of practice'. The assessment process included three 'stakeholders', the student on placement, the fieldwork supervisor and the university placement tutor. Our rationale for adopting a collaborative assessment process included a desire to enable students to make judgements about their own learning and performance on placement (Crisp 2012) and to be able to apply their understanding and engage in 'sense-making' within a community of practice.

The collaborative assessment, developed through a three year action research project involving students, fieldwork supervisors and university tutors (See Cooper and Ord 2014), takes place in the final three-way meeting in the placement setting and relates to a specific, distinct practice project undertaken by the student. As part of their block placement, students are required to plan, deliver and evaluate a six week youth work intervention appropriate to their setting, for example a sexual health project, a residential activity, a campaign project. The assessment focuses on the student's planning, delivery and evaluation of this project

together with a critique of the methods they used, rather than the project itself. A set of grading criteria which was developed as part of the original action research project is provided to students and supervisors at the beginning of the placement and discussed in the first two three-way meetings. Students are prepared for the collaborative assessment in a pre-placement workshop where the criteria and process are explored in depth and new supervisors are informed of the process at briefing meetings held annually.

Essentially the collaborative assessment begins with the student talking about their placement project, detailing their approach to needs assessment, their planning process including the identification of the aims and objectives, how they implemented this in practice including a description of the various processes and interventions and how they evaluated the effectiveness of these processes and interventions in relation to aims and objectives, and relevant theory. This part of the assessment usually takes between twenty and thirty minutes. Following this, the process develops into a 'professional discussion' about the 'quality' of the student's practice in which all three stakeholders participate. Generally this part is initiated by the supervisor and tutor raising questions, but importantly, these are not purely questions for clarification but also generative questions which seek to open a macro level dialogue. It is within this dialogue that students are enabled to demonstrate their sense-making abilities, moving away from the micro level of what they actually did in practice to consideration of what they might do in the future. At the end of this discussion, each participant independently decides on and then declares their mark using the grading criteria, in a specific and prescribed order – student, fieldwork supervisor and then university tutor. It concludes with a negotiation to agree on a final mark based on the grading criteria.

There is a degree of tension inherent in collaborative assessment arising from the shift in power that is embedded in this more democratic form of assessment. The 'giving up' of control by the tutor in what is a summative assessment may be of concern for some (Cousin and Deepwell 2005, Tan 2008). The replacement of norm referencing by the now preferred criterion referencing approach to assessment in higher education was seen as an enabling factor in relation to ensuring consistency of marking given the number of people involved in the marking process. In norm referencing the student's mark is dependent on others in the cohort whereas in criterion referencing students' work is judged against explicit criteria. Despite the fact that criteria are subject to interpretation and may be interpreted differently by tutors, supervisors and students (Orr 2008), grade data across three years of using the

collaborative assessment evidence a consistency between grades awarded by tutors and supervisors with 72% of cases in 2012/13 differing by only 5% or less. The difference between student and tutor grades was more pronounced, with 56% of cases within the 5% margin, in the remaining 46% of cases, half graded themselves higher and half graded themselves lower than the tutor (see Cooper and Ord 2014).

Whilst there is a body of knowledge relating to alternative forms of assessment such as peer and self assessment, there is limited literature that relates to collaborative assessment. To further our understanding we wanted to investigate the lived experience of the stakeholders involved in the process (the students, the fieldwork supervisors and the university tutors). Understanding more about the experiences of these stakeholder groups potentially enables the process of the collaborative assessment to be improved further within this particularly university as well as potentially adding to emerging literature on collaborative assessment *per se*. An application for an internal departmental research award was successful enabling the small scale research project that informs this paper.

Methodology

The empirical research informing this paper took place in 2014 in a university based in the UK. A qualitative approach was taken as the aim was to develop understanding of the ways in which students, supervisors and tutors experienced the collaborative assessment. Ethical approval for the study was gained from the university's ethics panel prior to commencement. Eighteen students completed the collaborative assessment in the academic year 2012/13. Resource limitations meant it was impossible to study whole students, fieldwork supervisors and university tutors populations. Within these constraints it was practical to include nine participants; three students, three fieldwork supervisors and three university tutors. A different sampling process was used to identify the student participants than that used to identify the fieldwork supervisors and university tutors.

The process of sampling students involved two stages: firstly the student cohort ($n = 18$) was grouped in accordance to whether their final agreed grade for the collaborative assessment was higher than the grade they awarded themselves ($n = 6$), lower than grade they awarded themselves ($n = 3$) or similar, here defined as grades being within three percentage points of each other ($n = 9$). One student was then randomly selected from each of these three groups and invited to participate, all those selected agreed to participate in the research.

This approach to sampling student participants was a conscious attempt to access a variety of experiences. This was based on the assumption that the nature of the difference (or similarity) of the final grade and the student's self-assessed grade may be indicative of the student's level of engagement in the process, the extent to which they felt the process had successfully 'measured' their achievement and their perceptions of the benefits (or not) of collaborative assessment. Table 1 provided information about the selected student participants.

[Insert Table 1]

Supervisor and tutor participants were identified using a purposive sampling approach based on Spradley's (1979) notion of 'key informants'. This approach to sampling identifies participants who are 'experts' in the topic under study and who are thus in the position to provide expert information on that topic. Key informants were identified on the basis of experience, identifying those who had most involvement in the collaborative assessment over a three years period (2011 - 2014) as shown in table 2. All those invited to participate in the research consented to do so.

[Insert Table 2]

The research set out to develop understanding of people's experience of engaging in the collaborative assessment and thus the most appropriate method of generating data was via interviews. Interviewing as a means of generating data, can be understood as a process between two people whose exchanges lead to a collaborative effort (Fontana and Frey 2005, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), rather than a neutral process of asking and answering of questions. Rubin and Rubin (2005) use the term 'responsive interviewing' to indicate that qualitative interviewing is a dynamic and iterative process, and state that 'qualitative interviewing is not simply learning about a topic but also learning what is important to those being studied' (ibid: 15). This approach to interviewing was congruent with the research aim to develop understanding of the ways in which students, supervisors and tutors experienced the collaborative assessment. A semi-structured interview schedule was used as this is widely recognised to offer a balance between free-flow conversation and time restrictions (see appendix 1). Nine 1:1 in-depth interviews were conducted in a venue chosen by the participant, each lasting for approximately one hour. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and transcripts were returned to the participants for checking and amending.

A thematic approach was taken to data analysis. Each transcript was read and re-read to ‘get a feel for the text’ and to begin the process of identifying ideas /issues that were significant in relation to the participants’ experience of the collaborative assessment and which addressed the research questions. Basic themes were highlighted and captured in code tables. Codes were then checked to eliminate repetition and similar codes were grouped to develop organising themes. These themes were then checked within and across the data sets (student / supervisor /tutor transcripts).

Findings

Three themes stood out in the data that offer useful insights into the use of collaborative assessment; In the spotlight, Getting it right and Student learning through participation.

In the Spotlight

Collaborative assessment, by its very nature, involves multiple players and whilst this can be seen as a positive aspect, it comes with a higher degree of exposure for those involved than other more traditional forms of assessment. Students, supervisors and, to a lesser degree, tutors all made reference to a sense of exposure which resulted in differing degrees of anxiety. Students’ feelings of anxiety were related to their central role and likely to be influenced by the fact that this was their first experience of collaborative assessment. The student who graded herself higher than the final negotiated grade talked about her experience negatively

“It was all eyes on me ... I knew what I wanted to say but I couldn’t say it ... I didn’t do myself justice... I hit that mental block ... I felt under a lot of pressure”

The student who graded herself similar to the final negotiated grade, on the other hand, without prompt, talked about *not* being anxious, *“I wasn’t too worried at all”*. For her, it was a good experience. She described it as one of the easiest assessment she done and put this down to the fact that she was talking about something she had a passion for. The student who graded himself lower than the final negotiated grade found the experience to be *“quite nerve-wracking to begin with...I was feeling really nervous to be honest”*. Interestingly, however for him, the setting and the format of the collaborative assessment seemed to help him move beyond his initial anxiety;

“I liked the informal bit of it...it was good having it in my location and the tutor coming to me...like this is my turf... It went all right, well it went really well actually”

Clearly the fact that the assessment took place in the placement setting had influenced his sense of power; his phrase “this is my turf” is indicative of this. The decision to hold the assessment in placement settings was deliberate in trying to address the power imbalance between the student and supervisor and tutor.

Supervisors have always held an assessment role, judging whether or not students on placement have successfully achieved the required level of professional competence according to the National Occupational Standards. As such the collaborative assessment process did not require a major change in their role, however the requirement to grade rather than make a pass/fail decision did challenge the supervisors. Supervisor 1 expressed “*a bit of trepidation... You want to do it well...you’re carrying quiet a lot of responsibility*” and Supervisor 2 talked of it being “*quiet an exciting process if a little bit nerve-wracking...it’s the responsibility of putting a grade on somebody’s work*”. This perception of increased responsibility is interesting. Costley and Armsby (2007) found that whilst supervisors may be happy mentoring or training, they often do not see it a part of their role to formally assess. This sense of increased responsibility may relate to a view that grading students’ work is the role of university tutors, not of supervisors.

Whilst Supervisor 3 shared his peers’ view in relation to being anxious about his role in the collaborative assessment, he also experienced a degree of anxiety which was linked directly to the student’s performance during the collaborative assessment;

“you go into the process with a certain amount of anxiety yourself...the anxiety is that they won’t articulate themselves well enough...they won’t have a grasp of what this assessment process requires”

This quotation is perhaps indicative of the close relationship that forms between supervisor and student during a twelve week block placement. It is likely that the supervisor will have developed an informed sense of the quality and depth of the student’s understanding through the supervisory process and fear that student will not be able to perform well on the day either because of their understanding of the assessment requirements or because of their nervousness at being assessed.

Supervisor 2, on the other hand, alludes to a sense of being judged herself;

“you’re a little bit worried because you think if they haven’t taken your advice...what’s the tutor going to think you’ve been doing...it questions your supervisory role and whether you’ve done it properly”

This quotation provides another example of the power dynamic present in the collaborative assessment process. Her concern that the tutor may conflate her supervisory process or ability with the student’s performance is indicative of an imbalance of power, positioning the tutor as ‘expert’ able to make such judgements.

Tutors’ feelings of anxiety were less evident, only Tutor 2 made reference to it when she talked of experiencing ‘a *weird feeling*’ when it came to declaring the grades. Both Tutor 1 and Tutor 3 talked about their sense that supervisors felt anxious about assigning a grade to the student’s performance. Tutor 1 believed that supervisors were “*keen to get through it, to get to the end so they can get that mark bit over.*” Tutor 3 identified the issue of power in judgement as a key source of supervisors’ anxiety;

“it’s daunting for supervisors, I think that as university tutors we can take for granted our position, our power in grading and we can sometimes forget that it’s actually a really big thing.”

The absence of reference to feelings of exposure by tutors is interesting. With traditional forms of assessments the marking of student work is much less open to scrutiny, particular in terms of being ‘open’ to view by those outside academia.

In summary, engagement in the collaborative assessment brings a degree of exposure for all concerned. Participants need to feel ‘able’ to participate and this will require a sense of agency and autonomy. Power relations need to be acknowledged and thought given as to how imbalances can be reduced. In the collaborative assessment process, the setting was seen as an important aspect. Continual attention needs to be given to making the assessment process as transparent as possible.

Getting it right: The use of criterion-referencing in assessing performance

The collaborative assessment stimulated students’ self-evaluation (Nevo 2006) in various ways. All three students had used the grade criteria to decide on their mark and all had engaged in discussion about the grading criteria with their supervisors prior to the collaborative assessment. The student who graded herself higher than the final negotiated grade, for example felt that her ‘project’ was worthy of a 62% mark, however she was clear

that her 'performance' on the day was not and she attributed this as the reason for the difference between her grade and that of the supervisor and tutor. The following description of her use of the grading criteria "*I looked at the criteria, thought about what I did in my project, done that, done that*" confirms that her focus when using the grade criteria was on her youth work practice rather than her 'performance' during the collaborative assessment process.

In contrast, the student who graded herself similar to the final negotiated grade seemed to be more aware of the grade being about the performance, rather than the 'project' itself;

"I knew what I wanted to achieve before I started it [the collaborative assessment], I'd read it [the criteria] several times, I decided what I thought I deserved, I thought if I do this, I should get somewhere around that score"

She talked about the importance of the criteria in relation to students being able to give themselves "*a fair mark*".

The experience of the student who graded himself lower than the final negotiated grade is interesting in that he raised the question of interpretation; the other two students made no reference to this. He wanted to be "*a 100% sure*" that he had achieved a particular level before he claimed it. He expresses his struggle in the extract below;

"I always find the interpretation of something difficult.. I can interpret like I think I've met a really high standard of that whereas other people might say well I don't think it is that high standard, trying to judge the higher ones it's hard to say "yeah, I definitely did that" whereas if you look at the lower ones, you can say "I'm a 100% I did that so I'm just going to give myself that" that's what I did"

Issues of self-doubt seemed to be influencing his decision-making, his need for certainty an indication of a fragile professional confidence perhaps. Despite identifying his 'problem with accepting' positive feedback, he indicated that he had enjoyed hearing his supervisor explain to his tutor why they had graded as they did. It does appear however that the collaborative assessment did enable him to recognise his development as shown by his comment that

"you don't actually know how well you're doing until something like that [the collaborative assessment], the tutor and the supervisor said I'd marked myself far too low and that I needed to be more confident in my work, well it is true and I am trying to do that"

The collaborative assessment engages students with the complexity of assessment. Through their active participation there is potential for the development of assessment literacy as part of the process. It is clear that students engaged more fully with the grade criteria than they would normally and it is hoped that this engagement is something they take forwards in the continuation of their studies and beyond.

In requiring supervisors to engage in summative assessment of students we must recognise the complexities inherent in assessment of high level learning. Whilst tutors may accept that assessment is largely dependent on holistic judgement rather than exact and mechanistic processes (Higher Education Academy 2012), supervisors may not perceive it in this way. Supervisor 1 talked about his first experience of grading;

“the very first one I did, I over-scored compared to the others and then I had to listen to what they [the tutor] had to say, and that helped me get closer in the marking in the latter ones”

This suggests that whilst Supervisor 1 had engaged in discussions with the tutor (and student) about the grade criteria prior to the collaborative assessment, these discussions had not led to a shared understanding. This understanding developed in the practice of assessment. It is interesting to note that it is highly likely that the latter assessments he refers to would have been with different tutors, in other words, this shared understanding was not just between two people but constitutes an emerging ‘common language’ which enables valid and supportable judgements to be made.

Supervisor 2 identified a direct correlation between her increasing understanding of the grading criteria and her increasing competence as an assessor;

“I’ve done it a few times now, I think it has become easier and the more I do it, the more qualified I feel to mark because I know what they[students] need to do in a more detailed way”

Supervisor 3’s comments provide an example of how grading criteria can be used to support student learning;

“For me, my learning has been in recognising where their [students] strengths lie in relation to the marking criteria and to give them [students] the most effective feedback I can in those areas, maybe I need to understand better how I articulate the essence of those criteria”

These comments may be indicative of a more nuanced understanding of assessment in higher education. Supervisors may start with a perception that assessment in higher education is similar to assessment of high level NVQs, where a practice task being performed is actually examined. Through the ‘doing’ of the collaborative assessment, this view may change as they come to understand that the assessment is less about the student’s everyday practice, and more about their ability to think about their practice at a higher level and their ability to demonstrate the application of that thinking in relation to developing interventions that have been researched, analysed, critiqued and evaluated (Costley and Armsby 2007).

The supervisor-student relationship is different to the tutor- student relationship. Supervisors spend more time in direct contact with students, working alongside them for twelve weeks. They witness firsthand the student’s learning journeys, and they see their highs and lows in practice. The tutor will have much less prior knowledge of the student’s placement learning, having only met with the student (and supervisor) at two three-way meetings during the placement prior to the collaborative assessment. The influence of these relationships, between student and supervisor and between student and tutor, cannot be excluded from the assessment process. Supervisor 2 commented on the way in which she felt her grading was influenced by her relationship with the student and the additional knowledge she had of the student’s learning:

“you always question the way you are scoring...I think as a supervisor, you’re always coming at it from a different place so as much as you’d want to be objective it’s difficult to do that...I guess the tutor is able to give a more balanced mark”

She seems to be concerned about her subjectivity and this is likely to be a consequence of the notion that this will result in bias. Supervisor 3 was more explicit in his description of a collaborative assessment in which he felt he had not graded ‘correctly’ as a consequence of his relationship with the student. He describes his motivation to declare a higher mark than he later felt was justified;

“it was something about the supervisor-student dynamic, my decision was influenced by wanting to compensate...I came away feeling quiet unprofessional...as the relationship with the student develops, you connect as practitioners and as people... Then I’m going to judge them, I’m going to put a number against it...I will always be pulled as a supervisor in different directions, there will be other things influencing the way I behave as part of that process.”

He makes an interesting link between ‘being unprofessional’ and being subjective. Notions of objectivity and subjectivity are contested, we are all informed by our social and historical standpoints and as such, objectivity is illusory or impossible to achieve (Smith and Hodkinson 2005). Despite this, the desire to appear objective remains strong and the development of criterion referencing was heralded as way to reduce subjectivity in assessment however in practice, tutors, supervisors and students will draw on a ‘network of contending influences’ that include reference to students’ cultural and personal circumstances (Orr 2008). We are human beings, not automatons, so rather than striving for objectivity, our focus is better placed on developing our reflexivity. Clearly both Supervisor 2 and Supervisor 3 had reflected on their role in the collaborative assessment and the possible influences on their judgement-making; this awareness will allow them to reduce the level of any bias.

In summary, the importance of recognising and working with the complexities of assessment should not be underestimated. Criterion referencing can be seen to both enable and disable the process; on the one hand it provides a set of standards to be used as a guide to support consistency whilst, on the other hand it can falsely present assessment as mechanistic and instrumental. There is also the question of interpretation, and as shown here, the practice of assessment itself is perhaps the most useful way to develop the ‘shared language’ required for collaborative assessment.

Student learning through participation

The collaborative assessment is specifically designed to enable students to be active participants in the assessment of their learning. The twin aim of providing students with the opportunity to participation in verbal presentation and a ‘professional discussion’ was to further extend their knowledge through the assessment process. Involving students as partners in the collaborative assessment provides a ‘real time’ experience of a process that can stimulate learning (Nevo 2006) and lead to the development of assessment literacy (Higher Education Academy 2012).

As stated earlier, the experience of the student who graded herself higher than the final negotiated grade was not particularly positive. From the beginning she had felt spotlighted, and this sense increased as the collaborative assessment moved into the ‘professional discussion’ stage;

“what threw me was when they asked questions, I knew what I wanted to say but I couldn’t word it... I got really frustrated and I didn’t want to do it anymore”

In her view, she felt she would have achieved a higher grade in a more traditional assessment such as an essay as she felt she was better at writing things down than verbalising them, and when she had more time to think. This preference may be linked to her approach to learning; it may be she is more comfortable with assessment process which requires a re-presenting of conceptual knowledge and understanding. She may have been concerned with trying to say the ‘right thing’, suggesting she may hold a view of knowledge as certain and thus felt adrift when faced by unexpected questions. This view is further supported by the fact that she made no reference to reflection in her interview whereas the other two students highlighted reflection as a key learning element of the collaborative assessment. The collaborative assessment supports a deeper approach to learning as it requires students to reshape, expand on, extrapolate from, and apply their knowledge and understanding. It requires active critical thinking.

The student who graded herself similar to the final negotiated grade found the collaborative assessment to be a positive experience, the fact that she had enjoyed her placement and felt very comfortable with both her supervisor and her tutor had enabled her to fully participate in the process. Her account of the ‘profession conversation’ was quite different to the previously mentioned student, and she seemed un-phased by the uncertainty of this part of the assessment;

“the tutor had some questions, one of the questions I couldn’t answer so it was more of a discussion rather than just “what’s the answer to this? That was quite good”

The discussion element of the assessment provides an opportunity for collective reflection on aspects of practice emerging from the narrative account of the student’s practice, and can lead to transformation of ideas and practice (Leach, Neutze and Zepke 2001). This student was clear that the collaborative assessment process and the preparation for it had supported and extended her learning;

“it makes you go back and think about why you’ve done things...it extends it and it does make you reflect on your practice, I think it’s more reflective than your reflective diary...it adds up, it makes sense”

The student who graded himself lower than the final negotiated grade felt that the collaborative assessment differed from the more traditional forms of assessment in the way that it positioned the theory – practice relationship;

“The theory was important but I didn’t feel I had to whack loads in, it was about giving a grounded understanding of what you’re talking about”

This is significant in relation to vocational and professionally qualifying courses as potentially, this form of assessment promotes students’ development of a deeper understanding of the ways in which theory and practice intersect. Theory is often presented and received as something abstract that students then have to locate in their practice. The collaborative assessment encourages students to develop a more nuanced understanding, seeing theory as “fundamentally related to their own experience of practice and more importantly, still to be constructed and made sense of in practice” (Cooper and Ord 2014, 531).

He felt that his preparation for the collaborative assessment had enhanced his reflective practice, and he related the collaborative assessment to an associated placement assessment task, the Reflective Diary. On a previous placement he had found completing a diary very difficult, mainly because he experienced this task as somehow removed from practice, an additional thing to do at the end of a hard day. His process of reflection for the collaborative assessment was very different as shown by this extract;

“in my collaborative assessment I came up with these massive mind maps, that worked really well for me and that was probably one of my biggest outcomes, I found a method that worked for me, I had a white board in the office and I’d just go in for an hour or two and write about my project, identifying the areas that needed review. Other members of staff wrote on it for me, one of the guys was like have you tried that? Like read that? So it would be like everyone was helping, and that went into my collaborative assessment”

He found the other more traditional placement assessments (the placement file, the Reflective Diary and the Evaluative Recordings) ‘*alright but they felt drab*’ in comparison. He felt that the talking and conversation aspects were more aligned with what youth workers do in practice and, for him, the collaborative assessment was a more authentic form of assessment. This demonstrates the importance of designing assessments that resemble situations that starting professionals face in their working lives (Gulikers, Bastiaens and Kirchner 2008).

Supervisors and tutors also felt the collaborative assessment had encouraged deep learning through reflection and evaluation of practice. Both Supervisor 1 and Tutor 3 saw the collaborative assessment as an assessment form that gave space for production of knowledge (Dysthe 2008). Supervisor 1 commented on the value of the ‘profession conversation’ element in particular as shown in this extract;

“because the students don’t know what questions either the tutor or myself is going to ask them, they have to be able to think in their feet a bit more, and that makes them think about their practice, the theory and the values that underpin it”

Tutor 3 believed it was a combination of elements that led to students engaging with the theory –practice continuum in a more meaningful way;

“students have real ownership of their projects, it’s something they’ve ‘lived and breathed’, it starts with their practice and then they connect it to theory and policy...it allows them to develop their own theories of practice by doing it and actively presenting it.”

For Supervisor 3, the ‘live’ nature of the assessment process was significant;

“you bring it off the paper, you make it multi-dimensional, you bring it to life...it’s a live exchange... It can be unpacked... feedback is receive in a very real way... it fixes a key moment, a significant time, in their developmental memory.”

An additional benefit of the collaborative assessment can be seen in relation to the way it can enable student professionals to develop their own sense of who they are as professionals. It supports their professional identity formation by providing a space for students to express themselves and their emerging identities in a collaborative environment (Dysthe 2008).

In summary, it is important to note that students are not an homogenous group, preferences for different assessment approaches will vary and will depend on a number of factors including the students’ paradigmatic positioning, their level of development and their learning style. It is clear that two out of the three student participants in this study found their active engagement in their own assessment had furthered their learning.

Discussion

The aim of the collaborative assessment was to encourage the active engagement of students in the assessment process and it is argued that the process was able to do that. The collaborative assessment can be considered a form of ‘performance of understanding’ (Blythe

et al. 1998). Students make their thinking 'visible' by publically demonstrating it in their talk and further developing it in the 'professional discussion' element. This can be a very daunting experience, especially for those students who are less confident in articulating their thoughts 'in the moment'. Their ability to 'perform' will be influenced by where they are on their developmental journey (Hodge et al. 2008), for example at foundation level students tend to view knowledge as certain, rely on external sources of knowledge and act in relationships to seek approval. Students at this level may be overly-occupied in trying to say the 'right thing' and presenting themselves in the 'right light'. At intermediate level, students tend to have a developing awareness of multiple perspectives and uncertainty and an evolving awareness of their own values and identity. Students at this level will be less concerned with meeting approval but may find themselves 'tripping up' or feeling overwhelmed as they struggle with the notion of uncertainty and multiple perspectives. Self-authorship is seen as the optimum development level in the model; students here have an awareness of knowledge as contextual and have developed an internal belief system and sense of self capacity to engage in authentic, interdependent relationships. For these students the collaborative assessment is likely to be experienced as a much more authentic mode of assessment than the more traditional modes such as exams or essays. It is important to recognise that while extreme anxiety disables learning, as seems the case with the student who graded herself higher than the final negotiated grade, the fact that students find the collaborative assessment daunting should not deter its use as some degree of anxiety is necessary for learning (Gabriel and Griffiths 2002).

In this collaborative assessment, whilst they may be centre stage, students are not the only 'performers'. Supervisors also have a role in the process, and they also may experience a degree of nervousness about taking on the role, particularly in the assigning of a grade to the student's performance. The use of standardised grading criteria provides a sound starting point, but there is a need to recognise that these alone do not necessarily develop confidence or competence. The development of a shared understanding of the interpretation of criteria comes about through the practice of assessing, through dialogue within the community of practice. If those 'outside' higher education are to be enabled to participate in assessment processes, there is also a need to open the dialogue about the subjective nature of assessment, to recognise the relational aspects which intersect with judgement-making.

The benefits of collaborative assessment for students' learning are clear in relation to re-designing the link between theory and practice, in developing reflective practice and in enabling students to experience a performance of understanding in a community of practice that whilst pressured, reflects 'real' professional life. Additionally, their participation in the grading process potentially increasing their assessment literacy, through encouraging a more concrete engagement with the grading criteria. Importantly, when the focus is on the students' capacity to make sound and defensible judgement of their learning, the sustainability of assessment beyond the program of study is foregrounded (Tan 2008).

Conclusion

Whilst it is not possible to draw any precise conclusions from this small scale study, this research does provide valuable insights into one particular form of collaborative assessment. It draws on the qualitative experience of student, supervisors and tutors in relation to their involvement in a summative collaborative assessment of placement learning. A number of key benefits for student learning have been highlighted as well as some areas for consideration for those contemplating the development and use of collaborative assessments. By owning their practice, speaking to it and valuing it through the grading process students become active partners in the assessment process. The involvement of supervisors in summative assessment of students on placement is innovative, and the research illuminates some of their concerns about taking on this role. It demonstrates that assessment competence and confidence is developed through the 'practice' of assessment itself as it is through this that a shared understanding can be reached. Importantly, this research has highlighted the need for on-going discussion and debate in relation to the complexities of assessment, in particular the objective –subjective dimension. This paper provides a useful addition to an emerging body of literature, that, to date has focused on formative self and peer.

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[Insert Table 3]