

Assessment within Postgraduate Teaching: Who or What is Being Assessed

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ABSTRACT Emphasis on postgraduate studies within the South African higher education system has been increasing over the last decade and a half. The reasons for this increased emphasis are many and varied, and they include issues of funding, vision and mission statements of institutions and world rankings. Within the context of this increasing emphasis on postgraduate studies, this article explores assessment within postgraduate teaching. Drawing on self-reflections on assessment and teaching in a postgraduate Master's module it is argued that assessment in its current conception is inappropriate and meaningless, and this article proposes that assessment is moment-driven, relative and tentative, and sustained by care and support within postgraduate studies.

INTRODUCTION

The world, and in particular South Africa, has in recent times been obsessed with assessments and evaluations. This is evident in the media hype around assessment in relation to school education and national literacy and numeracy testing. As a result, teaching and learning has become a heightened focus of politicians, educationists, institutions of learning and Government.

The outcome of the most recent national assessment of literacy and numeracy (in 2011) at different levels of school education has cast aspersions on the quality of education within South Africa (Spaull, 2011). Whereas politicians blamed teachers for the low outcome of assessments at school level, education experts blamed it on a whole host of things related to education. These included the following: poor leadership within Departments and Ministries of Education, lack of appropriately qualified teachers in the school systems, and continual curriculum changes being experienced at school level.

How did assessment lead to this state of questionable quality of school education? How does assessment relate to teaching, learning and competence? This article attempts to put these questions under the spotlight by considering the assessment and teaching of research in postgraduate studies within a higher education institution.

A critical review of literature on assessment within curriculum is therefore presented, fol-

lowed by a descriptive analysis of a case example of teaching research to postgraduate students, paying particular attention to how assessment is conceptualised and used in teaching within postgraduate study programmes. Drawing on this case example, assessment for learning as a teaching strategy is explored in a way that interrogates the 'taken for granted' notion of assessment in teaching. In addition, the relevance of assessment in postgraduate teaching is also challenged.

The article concludes by arguing that the concept of assessment as it is currently conceptualised in South Africa is inappropriate and meaningless in postgraduate study programmes. It also argues that perhaps we are now at an appropriate junction to re-imagine postgraduate teaching and assessment in a way that suggests a state of being rather than an objectifiable position.

Assessment Within Education

The literature on assessment is quite expansive, especially within the context of school education, but is less so at the higher education level, being very sparse at the postgraduate level of education. Drawing from the literature on assessment within the context of schooling, one can delineate the streams of focus on assessment into forms of assessment, tools for assessment, purposes and critique of assessment and, more recently, assessment and learning. Hence

a landscape of the literature on assessment is presented, with special emphasis on the critique of assessment which has relevance for this article's intention and intellectualisation.

Broadly speaking, Crooks (2001) suggests that, cutting to the core, assessment can be viewed as any process that provides information about the thinking, achievement or progress of students. This broadly accepted definition of assessment has within it the integration of purpose, tools and process, suggesting that assessment is a complex phenomenon that cannot be understood, used and critiqued in silos. Rather, one needs to take a holistic approach to assessment. In this respect, Black and Wiliam (2004) argue that assessment includes all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by learners in assessing themselves, adding that assessment is also not unidirectional (where the teacher assesses the learner) but circular and inclusive, and provides information to all involved.

Traditional forms of assessment have largely been summative assessment, where the focus was on assessing what had been learnt for the purpose of grading (Sax 1997). This usually took place at the end of a learning episode, either at the end of an academic year or at the end of a unit of learning. The criticisms levelled against summative assessment have been well documented. They predominantly pertain to issues associated with delayed knowledge and intervention (Sax 1997), delayed remediation processes with questionable outcomes (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001), a limited evaluative scope of summative assessment (Stiggins 2005; Sax 1997), the ills associated with assessing merely for accountability, and the adverse effects that such assessment forms could have on learners (Kotze 2002).

Based on the harsh critique of summative assessment, one can surmise that this form of assessment is largely for accountability - as evident in the current preoccupation with assessment - and which is becoming the central driver for curriculum renewal in South Africa. Evidence of this is clearly discerned from the soon to be introduced Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) framework for school education in South Africa, the precursor of which was the National Curriculum Statement (NCS).

In addition to curriculum concerns, social concerns on summative forms of assessment are also being played out. Grading learners accord-

ing to summative scores widens the disparity between low and high achievers (Linn and Gronlund 2000; Sax 1997), often resulting in judgments being passed on learning (Newton 2007), creating hierarchies of learners which extends into communities and social settings. The critique on summative assessment will not cease in the near future, since our school curriculum and that of higher education is still largely driven by summative assessment forms. (In fact, not just on summative assessment but on assessment in general, irrespective of forms and purposes, as the concept of assessment becomes interrogated outside of its silo and as practised.)

Formative assessment, with its rapid current popularity in teaching and learning processes, is not insulated from the critique levelled against summative assessment. However, the critique is less harsh and is largely with a focus that is supportive of the learning process. According to Black and Wiliam (1998), essentially formative assessment includes all activities undertaken by teachers and learners to provide ongoing information in the learning process that they are engaged in. In this iteration of assessment the focus is on assessment for learning - which is conceptually different from assessment of learning - suggesting that the emphasis of assessment is not on the outcome of the learning process, but rather on how assessment can contribute to the process of learning. Formative assessment's popularity is located within the notion of deep learning through immediate intervention in the learning process, rather than in recollection and memory at the end of a learning cycle (so typical of summative assessment strategies).

The critical elements of information, feedback, pedagogy, timing, inclusiveness and sustainability over a period of time serve to highlight the complexity of formative means of assessment (Lidz 1995; Black and Wiliam 1998; Boud 2000; Leitch et al. 2006). In fact, proponents of assessment for learning view assessment as an inclusive learning process where the conditions for learning are negotiated and set out in advance of the learning act, and that learning and assessment are integrated in the curriculum process (Earl 2003; Chappuis 2005). Within the context of assessment for learning, assessments are viewed as developmental, as they encourage a form of self-reflection and perceptual shift that gives rise to higher orders of aware-

ness (Davydov 1995; Taylor and Marienau 1997). Moreover, proponents of 'assessment for learning' advocate use of various assessment methods to provide learners, teachers and parents with an ongoing spate of evidence of the learner's progress with regard to achieving the competencies that underpin the curriculum (Black and Wiliam 2003).

This is in line with the thinking that by using a variety of assessment methods, teachers will provide a more complete picture of students' progress and developmental needs. It is envisaged that by employing such a multi-mode strategy of assessment the learning experience becomes more meaningful and enriching for learners (Sax 1997; Linn and Gronlund 2000), suggesting that assessment should take on a more enriching and fearless approach.

The relationships that permeate the classroom context are critical to contextualising assessment, the most significant being between teacher and learner and learner and learner (Black and Wiliam, 2003). To this end, Chappuis (2005) highlights the human element in the process of assessment for learning, where teachers and learners come together to generate information about student learning and then use it effectively to promote even greater learning. An important tenet of assessment for learning is that learners along with teachers share responsibility for learning.

While the potential of assessment for deep learning is clearly evident, there are however substantial critiques of this form of assessment. These critiques relate to, among others, teacher preparedness for integrating assessment into the teaching process (Stiggins 2005), and the adequacy of teachers' knowledge and skills about assessment in being able to integrate assessment for learning into the learning process (McCallum et al. 1995; Pryor and Torrance 1997; Volante and Cherubini 2007). In addition, an understanding of the interrelationship between the three critical areas of assessment, curriculum and pedagogy is imperative in the use of formative assessment, and necessitates changes in curriculum and pedagogy (Klenowski 1996; McKellar 2002). This is further compounded by a diverse learner context.

While much of the literature on assessment has focused on school education, highlighting issues relating to learning, pedagogy and accountability, these issues are not uncommon to

higher education. Those working on curriculum reforms in higher education will attest to an increasing shift from predominantly an assessment of learning stance to where the summative form of assessment is but one of a range of assessment strategies in an integrated assessment focus incorporating this as well as formative assessment and authentic on-site assessment.

This article contributes to the discourse on assessment within higher education, with a specific focus on assessment in the postgraduate sector of higher education. It is theoretically located with the genre of assessment for learning offering alternative perspectives on assessment.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on my reflections of teaching a Master's module on research development and hence the methodology is at the intersection of a case study design and a self-study. Case studies are noted for understanding a phenomenon within a bounded system deeply located within its contextual realities, with the aim of illuminating and understanding the phenomenon as it plays out in the traditions and practices of the situation (Cohen et al. 2007; Babbie 2001).

In this article the researcher attempts to reflect on the practice of assessment within the traditions and context of a particular higher education institution that the researcher has a deep knowledge of and work within. Through this reflexive gaze, this self-study approach within a case study design was the most appropriate choice of methodology, since it attempts to illuminate issues of assessment in postgraduate teaching within a well-defined bounded context. This methodological process, however, limits the intellectualising of assessment to my process, thoughts and actions of teaching and assessment within a case example. Hence illumination (rather than confirmation and generalisation) is intended through this reflexive gaze.

The simple yet substantive critique of insider perspective and of fidelity of data is ominous in such a self-study approach, even more so within the confines of a case study design. These critiques are, however, addressed through taking a specific episode within the teaching and learning design of the module taught to a large group of students (over 70). The article is de-

veloped through recall and reflections of these specific episodes, the responses presented by the class as well as personal encounters with individual students in one-on-one interactions. The 2010 cohort of the Master's class was used as the reflexive medium for this article, while experiences over the previous two offerings of this module contributed to the authenticity of the claims made.

Assessment of the Knower Rather Than of the Known

In the recent past, and in line with the university's vision of being a research-led institution, a larger number of research students have been enrolled in postgraduate studies. Class sizes, for example in Education postgraduate studies, ranged from 4 to 100 students, the larger classes being core research development modules and the smaller ones being discipline focus modules. This case study relates to the core research development modules, where class enrolments were in excess of 70 students, often taught co-operatively by two or more staff. A colleague and the researcher taught the three core research development modules taken by all Master's coursework and dissertation programme students.

The modules taught were offered in different formats. One of the core modules was offered on a Wednesday afternoon from 16h00 to 18h30 every week for 15 weeks; another was offered in a mixture of block sessions over school vacation periods and on some Saturdays, with full-day lectures. The third was offered over five consecutive Saturdays in full-day workshop mode. All students that registered for the Master's by coursework and dissertation programme had to take all three core research development modules that focused on developing a research discourse, research methodologies and proposal writing.

This case descriptive analysis is based on the first core module that focused on developing a research discourse, together with my experiences over the three years of offering this module. Hence this reflective description extends across the three years of teaching.

Our first meeting with the students in the module focused, as usual, on laying the groundwork for the module engagement where details of the programme were presented, expectations

of lectures and students clarified and assessments discussed. For the remainder of the 15 weeks we watched the students' facial expressions change from excitement to confusion to curiosity and back to excitement about the possibilities. These facial expressions form the landscape for reflections. These students come into the programme through a competitive selection process that privileges competence shown in prior studies, and therefore one can assume that these students are bright and among the top achievers, many receiving distinctions in their prior studies.

We began the lectures with all of the students very excited about the possibilities of continuing their high levels of achievements. Midway through the first lecture, facial expressions began to change. The sketch below (as enacted by myself and my co-lecturer) and the ensuing discussions immediately set in motion among the students a sense of scepticism, either about us as teachers of the module or about themselves:

Teacher: *Good morning, or should I say evening [looking at the watch]. It's half past 9. School began at 8.00. Actually lessons begin at 8 but YOU are expected to be here at 7.45. Do you know how to read time?*

Learner: *Yes, I can read time. It's nearly 25 to 10 now.*

Teacher: *You ARE late! Don't you think you owe me an apology?*

Learner: *For what?*

Teacher: *Coming late to school.*

Learner: *But I'm not late.*

Teacher: *Listen here boy, don't you get fresh with me. School started almost 2 hours ago and that makes you late. I know what you boys get up to, smoking zol [cannabis], strolling along at your granny's time, hanging around at the café, playing cards and doing all kinds of nonsense. Do you think I'm stupid?*

Learner: *Yes ma'am. I planned to come to school at half-past 9. So I am on time.*

Teacher: *Good-for-nothing loafer. Suddenly you have the power to decide what time to come to school. That's the problem with today's youngsters, they know nothing, they do nothing and they say nothing, and the nothing is a justification. Daniel, take this boy to the office.*

The ensuing questions to the students and discussions put under scrutiny the notion of lateness as a phenomenon, the ontological as-

sumptions that students have about reality – what is reality and to whom – and the certainty of their current knowledge. This sketch for me was the most revealing episode in teaching and learning within the postgraduate programme. At first the students were all quite excited about the sketch, showing familiarity with the text as many of them, being teachers, had such experiences with their learners. The excitement was revealed through their overwhelming willingness to participate in the initial discussions about this sketch, many relating their experiences of such situations and feeling confident about their knowledge and about themselves. Their responses were largely driven from a practice perspective located deeply within their daily lives as teachers.

Slowly this excitement began to fade as our lecturer-led discussion began questioning the assumptions and taken-for-granted reality so evident at face value depicted in the above sketch. Questions about whose perspective of ‘late’ is being privileged – the school’s/teacher’s perspective or the learner’s perspective. If the learner had planned to come to school at a particular time based on his/her schedule, is s/he late? These kinds of questions were aimed at forcing students to explore other possibilities about the phenomenon of lateness.

Students became confused, raising questions that suggested a defence of their knowledge systems, as evident in the type of questions and contributions being made. Examples of these contributions by students to the discussion on the late episode included the following: *But all schools start early in the morning and the learner is certainly wrong; the schools have starting time and end time policy and all learners must abide by these times; and the teacher was right to reprimand the learner for coming in late as learners have lots of excuses.* The students were fixed in their version of reality, and our questioning of their knowledge brought some doubt into what they believed as “true knowledge”.

This first encounter of assessment in postgraduate teaching took on a very different form from what these students were used to. The assessment was not about what they know but more about an assessment of themselves as ‘knowers’. Stated differently, it is not about what I know in terms of content, but more about the state of my knowing – a tentative, as opposed

to a fixed state of knowing. Clearly this revelation brought about emotional reactions within students, as they were left after their first lecture in a state of confusion about themselves.

This kind of engagement was sustained for the next three or four lecture sessions, each one contributing to the students’ height of confusion and turmoil. The intention was to destabilise students in terms of their stereotyped thinking. The prolonged destabilisation resulted in some students wanting to quit the course. Some felt a sense of deep scepticism either about their ability to engage with a Master’s level of research discourse or about us as teachers not teaching them about research (the latter being their expectations of being taught by lecturers, as was their experiences in prior studies). Evidently, these divergent feelings among students needed a different kind of response from ourselves as lecturers – one of care, a phenomenon that will be picked up throughout this article and which will be discussed, leading to a pedagogy of care.

From Assessment of Learning to Assessment for Learning

A second episode during teaching of the first core research module related to information about assessment of the module. At the outset of the module the assessment tasks, criteria for assessment and process of marking and resubmissions were discussed with students. Our consistent ‘mantra’ to the students was that the module focused on developing a research discourse within them and was not content focused. In other words, the students would not learn theories, concepts, definitions and applications, but rather would learn how to take a position and argue for that position on an issue. Further, the arguments that students presented would not be considered as either right or wrong, but rather would be considered on a continuum from weak to strong.

In this conception of the assessment of argument, a clear shift from a categorical classification to a continuum with a focus on assisting students to develop stronger arguments is promoted. Associated with this notion of arguing for a position, an assessment mark is meaningless and is used specifically for indicating to the student their progress towards developing their argumentative skills. Assessment for learning

was the adopted purpose of assessment in this module. While these students, who were also teachers, were familiar with the assessment for learning concept, they had not previously experienced it themselves.

The following illustration outlines this. The first assessment task was explained to the students and the assessment criteria were discussed. In terms of university policy, a 50% pass mark would be required for the award of credits for a module. This means that across all three assessment tasks, an average of 50% was the minimum a student needed to achieve. Students enquired about resubmission of an assignment should they fail. Taking the stance of assessment for learning meant that students should be given opportunities for resubmission based on comments made on their first submission. Students were told that they would be allowed to resubmit, but that there would be a restriction on who would be allowed to resubmit. The restriction allowed students that received below 55% in their first submission to resubmit their assignment for reassessment after working through the comments made on their first submission. Further, the resubmitted assignment would receive a maximum of 55% in the remark process.

The main reason for this restriction was capacity and progression requirements rather than any academic rationale. The class size was large, and re-marking meant more marking time, and this was not possible within the time-frames available to us for the module. With respect to progression, the Faculty set a minimum 65% weighted average for a student to progress to higher qualifications, and students needed to have an opportunity to aspire towards this 65% average in order to apply for study towards a doctoral degree. Despite this rationale for limiting the remark assessment to 55%, the reason given to the students for the maximum of 55% on a remark was that the focus of the assessment was on learning and not about marks, since the mark allocated is meaningless in terms of development in this re-mark process. The comments given to students provided the basis for learning and were not an assessment of what they learnt.

The students were highly confused by these restrictions. Some questioned the unfairness of the resubmission opportunity, suggesting those students that resubmit had an advantage of receiving comments from the lecturers, and there-

fore it would not reflect the students' true worth. Let's examine this reasoning by the students.

If assessment of learning was privileged in the teaching of research to postgraduate students, then content knowledge would be the basis for assessment. However, in postgraduate academic study content knowledge is tentative and relative. It is tentative in that what we know now may be obsolete or incorrect in the future as new knowledge is found through ongoing research. This means that one cannot fix knowledge and assess it in its tentative state. Hence, assessment of knowledge is meaningless as an academic discourse within postgraduate teaching.

Content knowledge is also relative to positionality. This means that, depending upon where you stand paradigmatically or epistemologically, your vantage point on a phenomenon could vary. This point can be demonstrated quite easily. Imagine that on a hill there is a house midway up. If one is standing at the bottom of the hill, then this vantage point allows one to see the façade of the house. If one is standing at the top of the hill, then this vantage point allows one to see the roof of the house. Both these descriptions are different, yet it is the same object that is being observed. Both descriptions are correct, depending upon which vantage point you take in the observation. Hence, in this case assessing content knowledge is meaningless and inappropriate.

Another example that demonstrates this point quite easily is by observing a scene of two people sitting on a bench in a park, one male and one female. How would you describe their relationship epistemologically? From a positivist paradigm, one would tell whether the couple is in a romantic relationship if laboratory kinds of experiments were carried out. For example, you could test for increased hormone activity, sweating, brain impulses, etc., and on the basis of the results could develop an assertion that the couple is romantically involved or not, based on norm analysis. From an interpretivist paradigm, one could observe how the couple positioned themselves on the bench, look at posture, movement, eye contact, etc., and on the basis of these kinds of observations, could develop conjecture whether they are romantically involved or not. From a critical perspective, one could explore the power dynamics between these two individuals by asking crucial questions about

them like what brings them to this park bench? What is their relationship within their work environment? And so on.

Paradigmatically, the nature of knowledge is relative. Hence assessment of this knowledge is extremely difficult in the context of this relativity. Assessment then shifts from what we know to how we come to know; that is, a shift from content to process. This emphasis on thinking rather than knowing defines an academic study programme characteristic of postgraduate study programmes. In this conception, assessment of learning in terms of content knowledge is meaningless, because the content knowledge is dependent upon the process. The appropriate assessment strategy, therefore, would be assessment for learning since this strategy privileges individual and contextual learning. This means that each individual's learning is influenced by a range of factors, including the context within which the learning occurs.

Towards a Pedagogy of Care

The shifts in assessment in postgraduate studies, from knowing to 'knower' and from assessment of learning to assessment for learning, can be very traumatic for students, especially students that think that they are mature and enlightened. Recalling that in this particular institution access into postgraduate studies is limited through a selection process that privileges academic achievement, meant that students that did enroll were considered high achievers. If these students now achieved assessment percentages of 40% and lower, you can imagine the impact of this on their self-esteem, confidence and self-worth. This means that care (from the lecturers) in the form of sensitivity, rationalism and support becomes an equally important component of the teaching endeavour. The following engagement with some students demonstrates how care becomes an important vehicle to promote learning within postgraduate studies.

In discussing the assignments and assessment criteria with students during the initial parts of the module, different gradings of the assessment criteria were presented to the students. For example, for the assessment criterion on referencing techniques, the maximum mark allocated was 20% of the total marks. Students were told that they would either get the full 20% or 0%.

That is, for this criterion, and because it was technical in nature, no part marks were to be awarded. Students were highly confused by this categorical approach to this assessment criterion. They were used to the notion of part marks in line with the number of correct responses. This assessment criterion, however, was not focused on how many of the references were correctly presented in their assignment. Rather, it was about the confidence of being able to write references uniformly and consistently. Hence, the focus was not on writing references appropriately, but on confidence and consistency; therefore, in order to develop this competence, the maximum mark or a zero would be an appropriate assessment technique to assess this competence. The students on the module did not question this process of assessment at the time of the assignment discussions. However, when their first assignment was assessed, some students received zero for this assessment criterion. When the students were given their marked assignments back, some received below 50%, suggesting that they had failed the assignment. These students expressed disillusionment and were highly confused, some being quite upset and angry with the lecturers.

Despite the reasons presented to them during discussion time supporting our stance of assessment, these students were arguably traumatised for two broad reasons. First, these students were top-achieving students and their expectations were quite high. Obtaining a fail in the assignment 'dented' their confidence in themselves, more especially when they had worked extensively on this assignment, referenced so many readings and written so many pages of information. Secondly, they could not accept that the marking was categorical – either full marks or zero for this assessment criterion, as they were not used to this kind of marking, both in past assessments as well as being assessors in the teaching profession.

Being adult learners, it would be irresponsible of us as lecturers to ignore this situation. Some students in their private moments and with close friends literally cried. Some complained to the Deputy Dean of Research and Postgraduate Studies. Others wanted to quit their studies, citing reasons from embarrassment to not yet being ready for postgraduate studies to unfairness and hostility in the assessment process. Noting this, the normal approach to these stu-

dents would be inappropriate. Care for these students became our way of managing this situation.

Care emerged in two forms. Firstly, our engagement with the students during the feedback session was from a vantage point of awareness of students' feelings and that possibilities were available to students to almost immediately change their grading from a fail to a pass, just by attending to the technical aspects of the references. To support this, students' errors in the referencing were used as a teaching strategy to get students to understand where they erred in their referencing techniques within their assignment. Students then felt at ease, knowing that they could immediately change their category of pass by reviewing and re-submitting their assignments with the correct reference technique. This immediate gratification of passing was, to some extent, a show of a caring attitude for students and indicated that a doom and gloom situation could easily change.

A second form of care was displayed when students were invited to meet with us on an individual basis. It was during these individual sessions with students that we became aware of the complexities of students' lives, their concerns, fears and anxieties. Students revealed highly complex situations formed from a matrix of family, accountability, embarrassment and personal confidence, often resulting in students feeling worthless, wanting to permanently withdraw from their studies and disassociation from close relations with friends and fellow students. Care as a construct emerged as a means of managing these feeling. Delicately, each encounter with students individually required time, focus and appropriate responses, often exposing personal experiences and circumstances to students in a way to show that one identified with their feelings, and slowly shifting these negative feelings to empowerment and confidence building.

The element of care is therefore crucial in the assessment process, especially at the postgraduate level of teaching, since unintended outcomes need to be minimised. While care is crucial in assessment, it must be balanced with opportunities for learning. This means that students should not just be given care. Care needs to be accompanied by the creation of opportunities for learning and acting as a stimulus for learning. Hence the notion of a pedagogy of care in teaching, learning and assessment, especially

at the postgraduate level of study, becomes an adult education imperative that promotes a personal philosophy of 'I can do-ism'. Postgraduate studies promote individual intellectualism through self-confidence and argumentative articulation. The 'I can do-ism' instills such individual intellectualism, more so through a pedagogy of care that understands and respects individuals and simultaneously promotes learning within individuals.

Emerging Thoughts and Discussion Arising

The above three episodes of assessment within postgraduate teaching highlight three constructs about assessment that are crucial to evaluating the purpose of assessment at this level of study. These three constructs - "[assessment shifts] from knowing to knower"; "from assessment of learning to assessment for learning"; and a "pedagogy of care" - provide a platform to re-examine the assessment in postgraduate teaching in terms of the forms, purpose and outcomes of assessment. The forms of assessment at postgraduate level may be similar to those used at other levels of study, but the purpose of the assessment shapes how and when they are used. What gets assessed in postgraduate studies? Is it recall and applications of theories, findings and content? Why regurgitate or apply content when sense making, argument building, relational understanding, relevance, coherence, articulation and presentation are the key competences expected from postgraduate studies? The expectations are that these core competences will enable a researcher to identify a research focus, locate this focus within a body of existing current knowledge, systematically explore the phenomenon, and disseminate the findings in a way that they reflect trustworthiness, advance our knowledge and open up new directions for further research. Each student brings a distinct vantage point to these competences.

The purpose of assessment at postgraduate level, however, changes from assessment of content knowledge to assessment of the knower, where attention is placed on the individual as the knower in postgraduate study programmes. In this instance content knowledge at this level is an abstract and relative phenomenon. Let's think about this for a moment. What constitutes content knowledge at the postgraduate level,

where the nature of discourse is academic? Theories, concepts and ideas are relative to vantage points epistemologically. The nature of knowledge in a particular field, specialisation or focus area is influenced by a range of factors including, among others, the methodological approach employed in the production of knowledge, who the researcher is in terms of their biographical and experiential influences, and the context that frames such inquiry.

Hence, the idea of facts (within a positivist paradigm), interpretations (within a hermeneutic framework) and positionalities (within a critical and deconstructive framework) are in a state of tentativeness, or one can say knowledge is tentative until new knowledge is found. This idea therefore calls into question the notion of content knowledge at the academic level of study. Having no fixed idea of content knowledge at the postgraduate level disallows assessment of content knowledge at this level. Rather, the focus of assessment should now shift to the knower, and in this respect there is no categorical assessment criterion of right or wrong. A “continuum” understanding of assessment would be more appropriate.

In this conception the knower (in this case the postgraduate student) could be located at a point on the continuum extending from, for example, inadequate to adequate (or unsatisfactory to excellent). The position on the continuum then reflects the state of his or her knowing at that point in time (moment-driven) and that this state of knowing is tentative and could be influenced quite substantially in a moment of deep thought. Assessment is therefore momentary and is meaningless to an assessor.

Extending the above discussion on the tentativeness of content knowledge, knowledge in itself becomes a point of interrogation. One can categorise knowledge in terms of ‘what knowledge’ (which one may regard as content knowledge), ‘how knowledge’ (which one may regard as skills or process knowledge) and ‘where knowledge’ (which one may regard as contextual knowledge). One can also explore knowledge in relation to practice, and in this instance, Day and Sachs (2004) present a succinct overview of Cochrane-Smith and Lytle’s (1999) three conceptions of knowledge and practice: knowledge for practice, where formal knowledge is produced to inform practice; knowledge in practice, where knowledge is derived from a systemic inquiry of

practice; and knowledge of practice, where new forms of knowledge are produced through critical reflections on practice.

A further exploration of knowledge and learning could relate to learning for practice, learning in practice and learning from practice, which suggests that knowledge exists in states of knowing. One learns about a practice to provide entry skills and knowledge about that practice. While in practice, new learning emerges that influences the knowledge of the knower by understanding how contextual realities influence the practice. By reflecting post-practice, new insights develop that require further explorations, leading to new knowledge, starting a new cycle of learning and suggesting that learning and knowledge spiral canonically. These three illustrations of the relativity of knowledge suggest that knowledge is dependent upon a range of perspectives and therefore, in postgraduate studies, one cannot assess content without locating it within a perspective, making content knowledge relative and assessment thereof meaningless if it is content-based.

The outcomes of assessment within the postgraduate study programme extend this relativity of knowledge and the knower by re-examining assessment of learning. Assessment of learning, as alluded to in the literature, is largely a summative exercise where the focus is on recall (memory) of what has been learnt or the extent to which one can apply or use what has been learnt within a context. In this instance, this form of assessment is meaningless as the focus of the postgraduate is on thinking and on scholarship - in other words, on an academic discourse. It makes very little sense to recall or know a specific unit of knowledge if one cannot appropriate this unit of knowledge into one’s intellectualism. It makes more sense if the student is guided in his/her intellectualism. Assessment for learning becomes more meaningful to this student as s/he builds upon her/his intellectual capacity building processes based on feedback to direct learning, which is a key conception of assessment for learning.

Feedback in the assessment for learning conception, then, becomes a key component in the assessment process. Care as a humanist trait is one that forms and develops relationships and provides comfort to those that are in need. Care is also a theoretical construct that is increasingly being found to be an efficient intervention

process to addressing a range of social, health and economic issues affecting our society. Care in education has been noted as essential since the early 1980s (Amin 2012). Care brings together the human and social aspects of assessment in a way that provides comfort to students, by encouraging them not to give up.

While care is a crucial element in the assessment process, it is also crucial how one provides this element of care. Hence a pedagogy of care is necessary to provide care in assessment. Inappropriate responses to students as feedback could be as disastrous as receiving their unmediated written feedback. Hence, the teaching and learning about care in assessment is an equally important construct in postgraduate teaching, learning and assessment for lecturers and students.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to present my reflections on my experiences in assessment within a postgraduate Master's course. Through this experience three assessment constructs emerged that questioned the purpose and form of assessment within postgraduate study programmes. Exploration of these three constructs led to a re-examination of assessment, and the researcher suggests that assessment as currently conceptualised is inappropriate and meaningless in postgraduate study programmes. This self-reflection on assessment clearly signals the need to re-imagine assessment for learning in the postgraduate study programme. The article argues for three spheres of re-imaging, which include what we assess (the content or the individual state of knowing); how we assess; and the location of assessment within a humanistic discourse rather than an accountability discourse.

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