

Assessment *as* Dialogue, *through* Dialogue, *for* Dialogue

Volume 1 of 2

By

Francesca Lorenzi, Laurea in Filosofia, M.Phil.

NUI Maynooth
Department of Education

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Head of Department: Professor Aiden Mulkeen

Supervisor: Dr. Pádraig Hogan

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Summary

This thesis proposes that dialogue should be seen as a core element of education, from practice to theory and research.

The research arose from a concern, not for a generic concept of education but for specific educational practices in association to dialogue. When the focus of the analysis narrows on certain educational practices the association between dialogue and education becomes problematic. If education is seen as dialogue and if assessment is an educational practice then the association of dialogue to assessment should be reasonably straightforward. Yet this is precisely where a contradiction emerges that highlights that it *should be* possible to associate educational practices with dialogue but too often this *is not* the case.

This research set out to examine the possibility of associating dialogue with assessment through the development of a set of dialogical principles derived from the literature and from professional experience in two contexts, namely Distance Education and conventional Third Level Education courses at undergraduate and post-graduate level.

The research is a multi-phase study which utilises a Multi-faceted Design-Based research approach to investigate through cycles of design-implementation and evaluation two assessment interventions (a new feedback report form and a dialogically-oriented assessment portfolio) designed to infuse dialogical principles in assessment practice.

The research undertaken for this thesis has led to the disclosure of the tri-dimensional nature of the association of dialogue with assessment. The thesis proposes that ontologically, assessment should be seen **as** dialogue, ethically it should act as a catalyst **for** dialogue, and methodologically this should be achieved in educational practice **through** dialogue, understood as multi-form method. A model of dialogically-infused assessment has been generated which, thanks to its non-prescriptive formulation, offers a flexible framework for practitioners who may wish to stir their assessment practice in a dialogical direction.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents who, despite all the difficulties they have encountered, always supported me in my efforts. My mother has been a beacon of light. Despite coming from a family of illiterates she broke a mould of disadvantage and became a dedicated and inspirational teacher. She has been a very difficult act to follow. My father, despite his illness, has never lost his faith in me and his pride in my achievements meant that I could not let him down.

I would also like to dedicate my thesis to Ruarc, my husband. Being the husband of a PhD student is a hard job that takes patience and understanding and he had both in abundance.

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List of abbreviations & Glossary

AFA	Advice for future Assessment (feedback comments enhancing learning capacity)
AfL	Assessment for Learning
AFS	Annotated feedback system (feedback comments entered on the margin of an assessed script)
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BET2	Bachelor of Education and Training – year 2 (evening version)
BET3	Bachelor of Education and Training – year 3 (evening version)
DBR	Design Based Research
DBRC	Design Based Research Collective
DCU	Dublin City University
ES402	Code for ET3 & BET3 module Philosophical Perspectives in Education
ES556	Code for GDED2 module Philosophy of Education
ES204	Code for ET2 module Curriculum Assessment and Evaluation
ES222	Code for BET2 module Curriculum Assessment and Evaluation
GDED2	Graduate Diploma in Education –year 2 (Qualifying for teaching in secondary schools in Ireland; equivalent to Higher Diploma in Education, term more widely used by other Irish Third Level Institutions)
HIS	History
ET2	Bachelor of Education and Training – year 2 (full-time)
ET3	Bachelor of Education and Training – year 3 (part-time version)
FAST	Formative Assessment in Science Teaching
FDTL	Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (UK)
LIT	Literature
NSS	National Student Survey (UK)
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
Oscail	Distance Education centre based at Dublin City University (formerly known as National Distance Education Centre; the Irish term <i>oscail</i> means “open”)
PHIL	Philosophy
PSY	Psychology
REAP	Re-engineering Assessment Practices in Higher Education
SM	Summary Comments
SOC	Sociology
TMA	Tutor Marked Assessment
T	tutor
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Please note

For coding abbreviations used in Chapter six and seven please refer to Appendix D included in volume two.

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

A fog of forgetfulness is looming over education. Forgotten in the fog, is that education is about human beings. And as schools are places where human beings get together, we have also forgotten that education is primarily about human beings who are in relation with one another.

(Bingham et al., 2004, p. 4)

Ethical dialogue can lead to an unexpected and uneasy connection between lack of understanding and acceptance of the other as different

(Foster, 2007, p.17)

Introduction

This thesis proposes that dialogue should be seen as a core element of education, from practice to theory and research. Arising from this premise it proposes that dialogue should not be regarded simply as a complementary –beneficial but unnecessary- aspect of education. Not only it is necessary to promote dialogical practice, but also to unveil dialogical features already present in educational practice.

Education should be intrinsically linked to the cultivation of personhood (Carr, 2003) should lead to an increased ability to understand the world (Barrow & Woods, 2006) and should be conceived as a never ending journey which constantly challenges our perspectives and views (Peters, 1966). If education presents such characteristics then it is also intrinsically connected to dialogue or, as Kazepides (2011) suggests, can be seen **as dialogue**¹. Education **for dialogue** (Wegerif, 2012) and education *as* dialogue, rather than simply *through* dialogue, are fundamental principles informing the research undertaken for this thesis.

The proposition that education should be permeated by dialogue is not *per se* original as it can be seen by the insights offered by the above mentioned authors. The originality of arguments advanced by this thesis is to be found in the concern, not for a generic concept of education but for specific educational practices in association to dialogue. While the association of

¹ Kazepides contends that “in all things related to human development and experience, in the beginning is dialogue” (2011,p.1) and therefore is an authoritative ally in the advancement of dialogue as an all-encompassing dimension of education as proposed by this thesis.

dialogue to education in theoretical terms is *per se* valuable it tends to relegate dialogue to a rather ethereal philosophical reflection on education. Too often it is unsatisfactory when it ignores the day-to-day reality of educational practice. As an educator I consider myself first and foremost a practitioner. As a practitioner with a background in Philosophy I would like to think of myself as an educational practitioner with insight and with a cultivated ability to capture the theoretical in the practical and the practical in the theoretical. For this reason the research presented in this thesis has a dual purpose: firstly that of illuminating the connection between education and dialogue at theoretical level, through the exploration of the implications of dialogue as perhaps the most fundamental component of education; secondly that of developing educational practice as a result of this heightened awareness of the centrality of dialogue in education.

It is therefore necessary to investigate how dialogue can be infused in educational practice. In the context of this thesis assessment practice has been chosen as the area of investigation.

Given the many pressures on assessment not only of an educational nature, the association of dialogue and assessment may appear as an almost impossible task. Yet, if one is committed to education as dialogue, not purely in an instrumental sense- a view leading to regard dialogue simply as a tool- the principles which constitute the core of pedagogical dialogue should permeate all dimensions of education, including assessment.

When the focus of the analysis narrows on certain educational practices the association between dialogue and education becomes more problematic. If education is seen as dialogue and if assessment is an educational practice then the association of dialogue to assessment should be reasonably straightforward. Yet if we consider some of the core dimensions of dialogue in detail, it would seem that most of these dimensions would sit rather unhappily with assessment. A contradiction emerges that highlights that it *should be* possible to associate educational practices with dialogue but too often this *is not* the case. Unless some demonstration of the possibility of actualising dialogue in specific educational practice is achieved the whole association could be called into question or perhaps simply be depicted as an aspirational goal for education.

Education is a relational activity and the quality of the relationship established through pedagogical activities is a one of the fundamental factors influencing learning and development. By emphasising the core nexus between education and dialogue a particular

type of relationship is encouraged, namely one that presents as its main characteristics openness, respect across differences, trust, care, reciprocity and willingness to engage in a process of shared disclosure of meaning.

In 2004 a collective of authors, including Nel Noddings, Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin among others, published a book titled *No Education without Relation* and proposed what they termed “relational pedagogy”. They captured the core principles in a set of relational propositions which have been particularly influential for the development of the theoretical basis for this thesis. Their manifesto contains, among others, the following two propositions, which have led to consider assessment beyond the mere quick fix improvement of practice. The Relational pedagogy collective write (2004):

Relations are complex; they may not be described in single utterances. To describe a relation is to produce a multi-voiced text.

Relations are primary; actions are secondary. Human words and actions have no authentic meaning; they acquire meaning only in a context of specific relations (p.7)

It can be contended that relations are expressed through action; therefore to speak in hierarchical terms of relations and actions may be misguided. Nevertheless the Relational pedagogy collective is justified in highlighting the importance of thinking relationally when engaging in action. The first principle points at the intrinsically dialogical nature of education, the second principle has far reaching implications for educational practice. It highlights that unless the type of relation that is established through an educational activity has not been carefully considered first, technical and instrumental attempts to make educational activities work may ultimately be perfunctory and may not lead to long term educational gain. Considering that a large proportion of the literature on assessment still seems to take a technicist view and to be geared towards the development of toolkits, techniques and the production of an inventory of “effective” case studies, the ethical and relational dimension of assessment seem to have been pushed into the background.

In a recent article Sutton (2009)² perceptively proposes that making feedback to students on their work more dialogical involves engaging with both the epistemological and ontological dimension of learning and teaching. At ontological level dialogue is constitutive of human

² While Sutton (2009) speaks of dialogical feedback his description seems to indicate that he sees feedback as a springboard for dialogue as he states: “My concern is with those conditions that either enable or prevent tutor and student entering into a meaningful and effective academic dialogue” (p. 2). Hence the use of the term ‘dialogical feedback’ seems only partially justified.

existence (Sidorkin, 1999) in the same way as difference is. Through dialogue we become ourselves (Holquist, 1990). Therefore if dialogue is embedded in feedback it has implications for the development of one's own identity (Crossouard & Pryor, 2010). At epistemological level the openness of dialogue is beautifully expressed by Batkhin (1981)

There is neither a first nor a last word and there can be no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into boundless past and the boundless future) (p.170).

If dialogue is embedded in assessment and feedback it ***opens new avenues of exploration and growth*** rather than simply ***closing*** performance gaps ³.

However neither the epistemological nor the ontological dimensions are sufficient to establish the full and proper association of dialogue with assessment and feedback. If dialogue is to be successfully embedded in feedback a third dimension is also essential: the ethical dimension. The ethical dimension of dialogical assessment represents precisely the recognition that values such as respect across the differences, openness, trust, care, equity, transparency, mutuality and responsibility of those involved in the relation. These values are also primary conditions for entering in and sustaining a dialogical relation through assessment.

Ultimately by recognising the value-leadeness of educational practice it is possible to overcome the current instrumental and technicist *impasse* (Lunsford, 1997; Race, P. et al., 2005; 2003; Gedye, 2009; Allin & Fishwick, 2009), which has led to focus on tools as performative quick-fix solutions to problematic issues in assessment practice.

1.1 An ethical drop in the assessment ocean

A vast amount of literature on assessment exists. The neophyte entering the assessment research area finds it difficult to carve a niche of originality as most aspects of the practice of assessment have been covered in one form or another. Yet despite the abundant research

³ The literature on assessment and feedback has been dominated in the past 10 years by the concept of feedback loop proposed by Royston Sadler in 1987. One of the core principles of his proposition is that a cycle linking feedback and student performance should be established in assessment practice. He advocates closing the feedback loop as an educational objective. Closing the loop is achieved when the student has reached the expected or desired level of performance set by his/her assessor.

literature on assessment in education in recent decades there is little on the ethical aspects of assessment. More particularly, there is a dearth of explicit research on how different forms of assessment influence the ethical character (literally the *ethos*) of learning environments.

When the initial literature surveys for this thesis were undertaken in 2004 assessment feedback as a topic of investigation was only becoming to emerge. At that time the literature on assessment was dominated- particularly in the UK- by the rise in popularity of the AfL (Assessment for Learning) and much attention was devoted by the research literature to the specification the parameters of Assessment for Learning in contrast with Assessment of Learning. Feedback at the time was mostly mentioned as one of the practices associated with assessment for learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Critical voices such as that of Juwah et. al. (2004) were starting to emerge. Building on the concept of Formative feedback presented by Royston Sadler (1983) - they argued that the connection between Assessment for Learning and feedback could not be simply assumed. Juwah et al. proposed that feedback in order to be formative needed to present specific characteristics. In 2005 the term “feed-forward” was popularised in the UK by large projects such as FAST (Formative Assessment in Science Teaching) –which builds on the work of Merry, Stephen & Reiling (2002) and on literature reviews carried out by Gibbs and Simpson (2004). Such studies signal the necessity to provide forward-looking feedback commentary, helping students to improve their future performance. This surge in interest in research on feedback was motivated by what at the time Gibbs & Simpson (2004) described as a decline of the archetypal Oxford or Cambridge University model of feedback “where students wrote an essay a week and read it out to their tutor in a one-to-one tutorial, gaining immediate and detailed oral feedback on their understanding as revealed in the essay” (p.8). Such model was almost exclusively kept alive by distance educators of the UK Open University, which had replaced the oral with a written format.

Feedback was fast becoming a popular topic of investigation and during the period between 2005 and 2010 it becomes one the most researched topics in assessment in the UK and elsewhere– notably thanks to the work done by David Boud in Australia and by David Carless in Hong Kong. Such a flurry of research activity on feedback has resulted in a number of principles for good assessment practice (Nicol & Macfarlane Dick, 2006; FDTL5 Project, 2008; Assessment 2020, 2010).However the translation into practice of the numerous lists of good feedback practice principles seems to still lag behind.

Despite the attention given to feedback the connection between dialogue and feedback, was largely ignored, with two notable exceptions. In 2000 Askew and Lodge (2000, p.1) took a broad view and defined feedback as “all dialogue to support learning in both formal and informal situations”. In 2004 Juwah et al. presented a list of formative feedback principles, the sixth of which advocates interaction and dialogue around learning. While Askew and Lodge saw feedback *as* dialogue, Juwah et al. imply that dialogue is *supplemental to* feedback. The latter appears to have become dominant in the more recent literature (2005-2012).

Recent literature (Nicol, 2010; Carless et al., 2010 and Price et. al, 2010) tends to see dialogue primarily as a tool instrumental to the improvement of feedback practice and fostering learning development, rather than as a principle that informs the relationship established by teachers and students through assessment, with specific ethical implications.

Despite earlier conceptualisations of feedback in broader terms (Askew and Lodge, 2000), more recent sources identify dialogue primarily as a form of oral communication (FDL5- “Engaging students with feedback, 2008; Nicol, 2010). Oral dialogue is also intended as a means to overcome the deficiencies identified in written feedback, too simplistically dismissed as potentially misleading (Price, 2007). Nicol (2010) -who is the driving force behind the recent University of Strathclyde “Feedback is dialogue “⁴campaign (REAP – 2009)-argues that the many diverse expressions of dissatisfaction with written feedback both by students and teachers can be interpreted as symptoms of impoverished and fractured dialogue. He suggests that mass higher education is squeezing out dialogue with the result that written feedback- which he sees essentially as a monologue- has become the main locus for teacher-student interaction.

Despite such recent interest in the association of dialogue with assessment feedback however, the underpinning concept of dialogue is presented in rather unproblematic terms. This thesis will seek to make explicit and to investigate as a manifold research theme precisely what uncritical readings of dialogue in the research literature tend to overlook.

⁴ Despite the promising title of this campaign, it does not mark a departure from the instrumental concept of dialogue in its association with feedback. Little information is available on the campaign itself, except for two leaflets - one for students and the other for teaching staff- reiterating in extended form principles for formative feedback practice previously stated in other research presented by Nicol and other REAP (RE-engineering educational assessment project) members.

Firstly, the frequent association of dialogue and feedback in the research literature seems to denote what Sidorkin (1999, p.3) termed a “lack of theoretical language”. He suggests that, in first place, it is necessary to have an ontological understanding of dialogue, thus going beyond its definition as a form of communication and reconnecting it with a way of being human in a world shared with other humans. If this proposition is taken seriously, one needs to consider what dialogue means and entails before coming to rushed associations.

Secondly, much of the assessment literature –even within the Assessment for Learning tradition- seems to be still firmly anchored to the concept of performance gap proposed by Sadler in 1987. In closing an assessment gap the student aims at a pre-determined end point. The predetermination of the end point is *per se* a form closure. Pryor & Crossuard (2010, p.3), - in agreement with Biesta (2009)- argue that it cannot be assumed that criteria can become transparent simply from being stated in a handbook, or that feedback can be meaningful in any superficial ‘sender-receiver’ way. Language and communication should be seen as slippery and value-laden. From this they conclude that “meaning making and identity formation arise relationally across differences which are to be welcomed rather than needing to be overcome” (ibid.). It is therefore unlikely that a truly dialogical feedback interaction can be associated with a perspective that precludes openness and difference. Unless difference and divergence are acknowledged and valued, assessment and its associated practices are likely to remain monological.

Thirdly, despite an emergent concern for the importance of relations as a pre-condition of students’ engagement with feedback (Millar, 2010), it is not clear what the characteristics of such relations are. In 2008 the FDTL5 “Engaging students with assessment feedback” project carried out by researchers at Oxford Brooks University, UK was published. The authors acknowledge that “students’ willingness to engage in a dialogue about feedback is strongly influenced by the relational dimension of the feedback process” (p.6). Furthermore the authors recommend “preparing students for engaging with feedback and dialogue” (ibid) and point out that “the relational dimension involves dynamics of trust and of credibility of the tutor’s grasp of the content (p.12). The FDTL5 project seems to imply that the only basis for trust is an epistemological one as they refer to trust in the knowledge of the assessor (rather than trust in the ability of the assessor to guide students in a pedagogically sound and morally acceptable manner), but building of relationships requires more than simply trust in knowledge. Trust in the person to whom I am relating is also important. As a student I might find a particular lecturer very knowledgeable. Therefore I might trust his knowledge, but if

such knowledge is communicated in an authoritarian manner which results in un-approachability, this may make other forms of trust impossible. Not surprisingly Millar states that feedback relationships appear to have the tendency to be seen as negative by students. Unless time and effort is invested in first place in addressing how relationships are constructed and what principles inform them, they are not necessarily going to be beneficial to students' development. Furthermore if we think of relations and of dialogue in ethical terms, we enter in the value-based zone of communication (Foster, 2007, p.16). Such dialogue then calls for a deeper attitude of openness, inclusion receptivity to the other person" (Foster, 2007, p. 18) and of care for the wellbeing and pedagogical development of the student. Therefore feedback as dialogue is not a gift from the more knowledgeable to the student but an act of joint meaning disclosure that aims to exploit asymmetries in roles and knowledge between assessor and assessee respectfully and productively.

Finally the association between feedback and dialogue does not necessarily require oral interaction. Wegerif (2012, online) comments that

one important defining feature of a dialogue is the presence of the other on the inside of the formation of my utterances even before I open my mouth to speak.
(<http://elac.ex.ac.uk/dialogiceducation/userfiles/Wegerifselfbook.pdf>)

As signalled by Wegerif one of the core characteristics of dialogue is the orientation towards each other of those engaging in such communication. Oral feedback may be quite monological if the student is not allowed to interact on more equitable grounds. Foster (2007,p.22) aptly points out that " the power of evaluation to control, limit, dominate and silence students is one area the teacher must open up" and adds that the challenge is that of finding the line of demarcation between respect and the role of assessor. This seems to be more the crux of the matter than the form in which dialogue is expressed.

1.2 Genesis of this thesis

It is rather difficult- and perhaps not advisable- to separate who we are from what we see, look at or notice. Our values, experiences and knowledge shape who we are not only as human beings but also as researchers. The PhD journey has been a journey of discovery not only of the topic of investigation but also of self-discovery. In order to pinpoint what has led me, as a

researcher to associate dialogue with assessment, it is necessary to take few steps back in time and consider my background, particularly in academic and professional terms.

My varied academic background proved useful. I completed a primary degree in Philosophy in Italy with a thesis in Moral Philosophy at the very beginning of the 1990s and despite an initial interest in pursuing further studies in Philosophy I grew increasingly dissatisfied with purely theoretical analysis. This shift in my own perspective led me to gradually enter the teaching profession, initially in secondary schools in Italy and gradually as an Italian language teacher in both Italy and Ireland in vocational and further education contexts. This professional experience brought about an interest in the linkage between educational theory and practice which culminated in an M.Phil. in Applied Linguistics in 1998. Through my applied linguistics studies I learnt to appreciate the importance of teacher-student relationships, negotiation and co-construction of meaning and importance of the development of learners' autonomy (which was one of the core themes of my M. Phil. Dissertation).

My professional career took another turn in 2000 which led me to secure a job as academic co-ordinator in the then National Distance Education Centre, OSCAIL based in Dublin City University. It was within this context that my initial PhD application was originally submitted. I had brought from previous experiences the concern for autonomy and the necessity to share meaning. While working in distance education, I had become acutely aware of the difficulties in establishing relations and "transactional presence" in a context with limited physical interaction between students and tutors. In distance education the communication through feedback comments was personalised and allowed a response by the student either through phone calls or later on with emails to tutors, but also through transfer of advice for the completion of subsequent assessment tasks. Assessment was a process and such process was sustained by a to and fro between tutors and students which elicited reflection on my part on the potential of framing such relation in dialogical terms.

At the time the use of technology in distance education was only starting to emerge and the learning experience of many distance education students was one of isolation and often of misunderstandings. I decided to take two challenges at once: firstly to consider ways to exploit the available means to create a stronger sense of tutor presence as a means to establish a deeper relationship with students. Secondly I saw that assessment feedback was effectively increasing transactional presence and relationship-building, as it allowed tutors and students to interact on a one-to-one basis. Crucially, feedback was establishing a relationship within

assessment, a context within which the literature mostly documents broken rather than successful relationships. This was particularly interesting as it seemed to open up a new avenue of exploration of feedback, including its unexploited relationship-building potential. I felt that such potential needed to be maximised by emphasising dialogical components of feedback, which I saw as intrinsically connected with the strengthening of the relationship between assessors and assessees.

My position as academic co-ordinator of the BA in Humanities programme allowed me to introduce changes in the format of the feedback provided and to brief tutors on the principles informing the new format, with the hope that this would strengthen features of the interactions associated with pedagogical dialogue. Nevertheless, despite the thought given to such restructuring, the results obtained in the analysis of post-intervention efforts were much less satisfactory than it had been hoped. At that point I was ready to try alternative measures within the same context, such as the use of technology in assessment feedback to increase transactional presence and dialogical engagement, but an opportunity had arisen which brought a significant change in my professional life and which resulted in a change of direction in the investigation of the association of dialogue to assessment. In 2009 I secured a position as lecturer in Education in the School of Education Studies in Dublin City University. In research terms this meant a change in role –from non-participant observer to participant action researcher- and in context of the research - from distance education to conventional face-to-face University Education.

Precisely because as researchers we bring who we are to the research, this made possible translating the concept that had given rise to the thesis to a different context and a broader range of educational activities. It also offered an invaluable opportunity to experience the role of the assessor in first person and provided me with some insights in relation to how assessors should see their role and responsibility if assessment can be seen as a form of dialogue. This was particularly important because the only modest improvement brought about by the earlier intervention implemented in the distance education context had been mostly traced back to the limited engagement of tutors with the principles informing the new feedback format and with the overall mildly positive attitude towards the intervention. The opportunity to translate dialogical values and principles in my own assessment practice was an ultimate test to verify whether the association of assessment with dialogue was simply aspirational and informed by romantic ideals or had some potential for sustainable educational practice.

1.3 Overview of the research process

This research sets out to examine the possibility of associating dialogue with assessment through the development of a set of dialogical principles derived from the literature and from professional experience. The research is a multi-phase mixed-method study which utilises a Multi-faceted Design-Based research approach to investigate through cycles of design-implementation and evaluation two assessment interventions (a new feedback report form and a dialogically-oriented assessment portfolio) designed to infuse dialogical principles in assessment practice. Consistent with the principles of Design-based research, the investigation aimed to develop assessment practice while also contributing theoretically to the discussion of the association of dialogue with assessment. The research was carried out in two different educational contexts, namely, within the context of the BA in Humanities through Distance education offered by Oscail (the Distance education centre based in Dublin City University) and within conventional third level education courses at undergraduate (BSc. in education and Training) and post-graduate level (Graduate Diploma in Education) offered by the School of Education and Training also based in Dublin City University. As a result of the research process the dialogical principles identified at the beginning of the research were refined and organised in a charter and the above-mentioned assessment interventions were also modified and improved. Furthermore upon reflection on the pedagogical interventions the initial theorisation of the association between assessment and dialogue was further clarified. This has led to its specification in ontological (assessment as dialogue), ethical (assessment for dialogue) and methodological terms (assessment through dialogue).

1.4 Contribution of this thesis

I intend my thesis to be a contribution to both practice-focused assessment research and to educational knowledge. The thesis pieces together in a novel way, insights from Philosophy of Education, insights from educational practice and insights gained from monitored educational innovation. Dewey (1964, p.201) argued that ‘unless practice is based upon rational principles, upon insights into facts and their meaning ‘experience’ only fixes incorrect acts into wrong habits”. Certainly experience can sharpen one’s ability to efficiently interact in

particular contexts of practice. However to paraphrase a well known Kantian precept, experience is blind without reason –and I would add moral- principles, permeating practice and rational principles without experience may be empty if their translation into practice is neither viable nor sustainable. In the past 15 years the literature on assessment has been dominated by toolkits, skills manuals and recipes for good practice. While such literature has provided useful techniques on how to assess for time-poor educators, it has also contributed to over-emphasising the technical aspect of assessment. While incorrect assessment acts may be more readily fixed, habits in the way assessors see their and their students’ roles require a more fundamental reflection on educational roles and the purpose of education. The Assessment for Learning (AfL) movement has contributed to re-conceiving the function of assessment, but has devoted much less attention to the ethical relations within assessment.

The relationship between theory and practice in education is notoriously a controversial matter. Speaking of “embedment” of dialogue in assessment practice rather than as a principle informing practice represents a departure from current literature on assessment theory and practice on two counts. Firstly dialogue can only be embedded in assessment practice if the relationship between assessor and assessee is reconceived in more democratic and inclusive terms. Therefore it is not simply a matter of infusing some theoretical concepts into practice but rather of rethinking the values expressed through educational practice. Hence practice needs to be reconceived in much more substantial terms. Secondly, recent literature on assessment refers to dialogue as a tool and as a means to enhance clarity, transparency and fairness. While such principles also inform the concept of dialogue discussed in this thesis a fundamental difference remains. Unless the relationship between assessor and assessee is in first place reconceived in more equalitarian terms, even a well intentioned dialogue-tool may become perfunctory.

This thesis explores how dialogue’s core principles have been embedded in assessment practice in the form of a dialogical assessment model. The model represents a flexible framework that in-builds dialogical principles characterised by an emphasis on process, openness, autonomy and judgment and the need for continuous negotiation of meaning. Furthermore research for this thesis has demonstrated that the original framework is sufficiently adaptable to be transferable to different subject domains and that it can be expanded and narrowed according to the specific characteristics of the context within which is being incorporated. I believe that this original account demonstrates my ethical, epistemological and ontological commitment to dialogue within assessment.

The thesis also contributes to assessment research with the development of a dialogical assessment charter which is not simply a tool kit for improving practice – the assessment literature is replete with these- nor a set of prescriptions. Rather, it represents both an epistemological and ethical point of departure by which assessors can reflect on the type of relationships they establish with their students through assessment. While as an action researcher, the charter helped me to reconsider my own relationship with students, for other assessors it may prompt a dialectical reaction, which may result in the charter being redrafted and reconceived. Nevertheless it is hoped that it will elicit a reflection on one’s own personal and professional values.

1.5 Chapter structure and content

This thesis contains 11 chapters. The concerns of each chapter are briefly illustrated below.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the thesis. It outlines the theoretical underpinning of the thesis and the contribution to knowledge made through the research undertaken. Furthermore it describes the genesis of the thesis and the research process.

Chapter 2 presents the research methodology. It outlines the philosophical paradigm underpinning the research and details the models and methods of research utilized. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the validity and reliability of the research and of the ethical safeguards put in place.

Chapter 3 is the first of two literature review chapters. It illustrates the relevance of the philosophical concept of dialogue to educational practice and in particular establishes a first link between dialogue and assessment as a form educational practice. The chapter focuses on the identification of the theoretical foundations of dialogue; it traces the history and development of dialogue in the educational tradition. It argues that, after an eclipse in Western educational history of Socratic forms of dialogue, forms of pedagogical dialogue were kept alive in the work of figures like Erasmus, Montaigne, Rousseau and Pestalozzi. Finally, the chapter reviews how, in our own age, pedagogical dialogue has come into prominence again through the work of constructivist thinkers.

Chapter 4 is the second literature review chapter. It offers an overview of recent developments in assessment theory and of recent associations of assessment with dialogue. It outlines the development of the concept of assessment for learning and of formative feedback which are seen as strictly connected to the model of dialogical feedback developed in this thesis. The chapter also reviews some of the core literature in relation to distance and adult education. The purpose of this review is to offer some elucidation of the specific characteristics of the initial context for the research. Such attention to context was considered important as the research came to be carried out in two specific contexts, namely distance education and conventional university education. Distance education in particular is still relatively under-researched and the discussion of its contextual dimensions warranted specific attention. In particular, written feedback and the limitations imposed on the establishment of pedagogical relationships in distance education are explored in this chapter.

Chapter 5 is a theoretical chapter. It adds a further dimension to the theoretical framework for the development of a model of assessment feedback as pedagogical dialogue by focusing on limits and possibilities offered by language and interpretation in communicating and sharing meaning. It outlines the role of meaning-making in education and the implications that multiplicity of meanings can have when such process of sharing is mediated through the written word, as in assessment feedback. Furthermore it highlights the dangers of undemocratic practices associated with one-sided validation of meanings. It argues that if the meaning put forward by assessors is the only meaning validated this ultimately prevents engagement in dialogical exchanges through assessment.

Chapter 6 and **7** are interconnected data analysis chapters. They present the outcomes of the data analysis in the first context of investigation—namely Distance Education. Chapter 6 presents the findings derived from the analysis of feedback provision by Oscail BA in Humanities tutors. It charts patterns of feedback provision in relation to dialogical principles identified as a result of the literature review carried out in chapters 3 to 5. This process results in the construction of a coding matrix and to the identification of deficiencies in current feedback provision in relation to the dialogical principles identified. Chapter 7 builds on the analysis carried out in chapter 6. A case study has been devised to evaluate the feedback provided by five Oscail tutors once a new feedback format is specifically designed to address the deficiencies identified in chapter 6. The chapter concludes that the mixed results highlight a further deficiency which had been under-estimated, namely the lack of ownership by tutors

of the new assessment feedback resulting in variable levels of commitment to dialogical principles in the use of the feedback form.

Chapter 8 takes account of the findings of the empirical research presented in chapters 6 and 7 and this resulted in a reconsideration of dialogical principles for assessment practice. The varying degrees of engagement with dialogical principles which emerged from chapter 7 prompted a process of self-reflection in the researcher, which led me to re-evaluate some of the dialogical principles but also to consider at a theoretical level some of the reasons that may have given rise to the findings discussed in chapter 7. The chapter investigates the question of responsibility in assessment practice and contrasts responsibility with demands placed on assessment by accountability. Furthermore it reaffirms in theoretical terms the necessity of engaging in pedagogical dialogue through assessment practices that contrast with current trends towards depersonalisation and convergence.

Chapter 9 is another theoretical chapter which builds on chapter 8 and suggests that assessment should be seen not only as a pedagogical but as an ethical activity. It calls for the embedment of professional care in assessment practice in order for assessors and assessment to truly engage in dialogical exchanges which are built upon values of respect, empathy, mutuality and openness. Furthermore it proposes that feedback as a specific pedagogical activity has the capacity to amplify the ethical potential of assessment as it escapes pressure imposed by accountability without compromising academic standards.

Chapter 10 returns to empirical analysis in the second context of investigation, traditional face-to-face third level education. It draws on the insights from the first two empirical analysis phases and also on the subsequent theoretical reflection and further revises the framework for dialogical interaction which had been also previously reconsidered in chapter 7. The analysis translates the principles for dialogical assessment practice –initially proposed in chapter 2- in a charter. The charter informs the development of the dialogically oriented assessment portfolio model presented in this chapter. The outcomes of three year cycle of development and implementation of the new model are also presented and discussed.

Chapter 11 presents the conclusions derived from all the phases of the research. The chapter sums up some of the key findings and discusses the implications of the findings for future dialogical assessment practice and research. Furthermore it also elaborates a refined

framework for dialogical assessment practice derived from the reflection on both the literature and assessment practice.

Introduction

The research undertaken for this thesis explores the association of assessment with dialogue, through the infusion of democratic and equalitarian principles in assessment practice and with the aim to improve students' pedagogical experience as a whole. Such aims have been addressed by developing a research strategy which has led to the simultaneous development of pedagogical theory and practice. This chapter illustrates the methodology employed for the overall research undertaken for the thesis. In section 2.1 an outline of the overall research framework identifying the various components and stages of the research project is presented. This serves as a conceptual map for the reader at the outset. Section 2.2 addresses the epistemological basis for the knowledge claims advanced in the thesis. It locates this basis in a pragmatist paradigm (informed particularly by Peirce and Dewey). A pragmatist paradigm is particularly attentive to the connections between thought and action and facilitates a number of research approaches. Design-based research (DBR) has been chosen as the main approach and this is explored in section 2.3. The reason for choosing DBR is because this approach accommodates the recurring interplay of philosophical, empirical and action-research concerns that mark the conduct of the research from its start to its completion. Section 2.4 briefly outlines the dialogical principles that have emerged from a reflection on scholarly literature and from personal and professional values of the researcher. The same sources also led to the formulation of the research questions presented in this section. Section 2.5 details the research process and its phases. The role of the researcher in each of the phases is outlined. In the same section the methodological approaches taken are explained and situated within specific educational practice contexts and phases. Section 2.6 illustrates the measures adopted to ensure research rigour and to demonstrate that the analysis has been carried out in a reliable and valid fashion. Finally section 2.7 discusses ethical concerns raised by this research and what safeguards have been put in place to ensure that anonymity and benefits to participants have been achieved.

2.1 The research framework

Table 2.1 offers an overview of the research framework employed for the thesis as a whole. The table also represents and map for this chapter (progressing from left to right). As illustrated by Table 2.1 the research undertaken for this thesis finds its epistemological foundations in Pragmatist philosophy. An adapted form of Design-based research (DBR) has been chosen to translate the Pragmatist epistemological stance into a research approach suited to the empirical research undertaken for this thesis. While a more detailed presentation of DBR will be offered in section 2.3, it can be noted that DBR implies a simultaneous development of educational theory and practice. This is achieved through cycles of design-implementation-evaluation (Practice Stream) of specific pedagogical interventions developed to address a research problem first identified and addressed in theoretical terms (Knowledge Stream). Accordingly the empirical dimension of the research serves a dual purpose of developing pedagogical interventions with an immediate and practical use and to generate an enhanced understanding of the issue that in first place had given rise to the investigation. A core question was first generated to address the research problem. As the problem was investigated through empirical research a set of questions helping to elucidate the research question in practical terms was also devised. This in turn led to a final specification in revised form of the research question, in order to reflect the enhanced understanding of the problem that had been achieved through the research process itself. The research process itself has been specified in a set of steps corresponding to specific actions undertaken during the research. A dual classification of the actions is presented in the table. In the fifth column the classification proposed by the original proponents –the DBR Collective (abbreviated as DBRC) in 2003 is included. A further and more detailed classification has been proposed by Andriessen in 2006. The latter offers the opportunity to account for each research activity in more specific terms⁵, whereas the earlier classification gives a clearer indication of the purposes of each step. For this reason it was considered valuable for the reader to have access to both classifications. Finally the table shows the specific research methods employed in the various phases of the research. The last column groups the phases according to the context of practice in which they took place and specifies the role of the research in each context.

⁵It should be noted that Andriessen proposed a cycle of Diagnosis, Action Planning, Action Taking, Evaluation, Specifying learning for each of the research cycles (referred to as phases in this thesis). As it will be discussed more in detail in section 2.5, the research was undertaken in two contexts and organised in 5 phases. Since phases 1 and 2 related to context 1 and phase 3-5 relate to context 2 the step “specifying learning” rather than referring to the outcomes of one cycle/phase it refers cumulatively to all the cycles/phase within each context. This format was considered preferable as each cycle builds upon the previous ones and the discussion of outcomes for each phase/cycle would have added unnecessary complexity to the discussion.

Table 2.1 summary of the research framework

Paradigm	DBR Stream	Problem Type	Research questions	DBRC, 2003 DBR steps	Andriessen, 2006 DBR steps	DBR steps in the thesis	Chapter	Methods	Phases	Approach	
Pragmatism	Knowledge Stream	Research Problem	Can assessment be conceived as a dialogue?	Awareness of the problem	Theorizing Agenda Setting	Defining dialogue Relating dialogue to assessment	Chs 4,5,8, 9				
	Practice Stream	Research Problem in practice	Can features that denote a dialogical orientation be found in current feedback practice?	Development	Diagnosis	Feedback is currently mostly monological	Ch 6	Mixed Methods (qualitative drive)	1	Case Study 1	
			1) Can a dialogically infused pedagogical intervention (the introduction of a new feedback form) bring about change in tutor feedback provision?		Action Planning	Design of new feedback form	Ch7		2	<i>Researcher as non-participant</i> in the context of Oscail BA in Humanities (Distance Education)	
			2) Can trends indicating learning development be found in students' performance?		Action Taking	Implementation of new feedback form	Ch7		2		
			3) Can the new feedback report form be an improvement on the previous one?	Evaluation	Evaluating	Evaluation of effectiveness of new feedback form	Ch 7		2		
			1) Can a dialogical assessment model incorporating the new feedback format be a viable pedagogical practice?	Development	Specifying learning	Draft Charter of principles for dialogical assessment practice	Ch 7		1 & 2		
			2) Can trends indicating learning development in response to the dialogic assessment model be found in students' performance?		Diagnosis	Assessment for module ES222/ES204 is a final exam-focus on end-product and monologically conceived	Ch 10		3		<i>Researcher as participant</i> in the context of BSc. in Education and Training & Graduate Diploma in Education (Face-to-face third Level education)
			3) Can a dialogic assessment model incorporating the new feedback form be a pedagogical practice transferable to other subject domains? (Phase 5 only)		Action Planning	Design dialogically infused assessment portfolio	Ch10		3		
				Action Taking	Implementation of dialogically infused assessment portfolio	Ch 10	3				
				Evaluation	Evaluating	Evaluation of dialogically infused assessment portfolio	Ch 10		3		
				Development	Diagnosis	Reduction of workload for ES222/ES204 portfolio is necessary	Ch 10		4		
					Action Planning	Design dialogically infused assessment portfolio	Ch10		4		
					Action Taking	Implementation of dialogically infused assessment portfolio	Ch 10		4		
				Evaluation	Evaluating	Evaluation of dialogically infused assessment portfolio	Ch10		4		
				Development	Diagnosis	Model of dialogic portfolio needs to be adapted to suit other subjects	Ch 10		5		
	Action Planning	Design dialogically infused assessment portfolio	Ch 10		5						
	Action Taking	Implementation of dialogically infused assessment portfolio	Ch 10		5						
	Evaluation	Evaluating	Evaluation of dialogically infused assessment portfolio	Ch 10	5						
		Specifying learning	Final draft of principles for dialogic assessment practice	Ch 10	3,4,5						
Knowledge Stream	Revised Research Problem	Can assessment be conceived <i>as</i> dialogue, as a catalyst <i>for</i> dialogue and lead to transform educational practice <i>through</i> the implementation of dialogically infused models of assessment?	Conclusion	Reflecting Developing Knowledge	Cumulative reflection on all the phases Assessment as dialogue, for dialogue and through dialogue	Ch 11 Ch11					

2.2 The Research Paradigm: Pragmatism

The researches of Thomas Kuhn (1996, p.46) have highlighted the point that “scientists work from models acquired through education and through subsequent exposure to the literature”. Such background leads to the generation of what he terms “paradigms”. Drawing on the work of Kuhn, Denzin & Lincoln (2005) suggested paradigms are “overreaching philosophical systems denoting particular ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies” (p.6). As suggested by Guba (1990) paradigms therefore present four core dimensions: ontological (What is the nature of being?/ What is reality?), epistemological (How do I know the world?), axiological (How will I be as a moral person in the world?) and all are translated into research practice through the fourth dimension which is methodological approach. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) argue that differences between quantitative oriented paradigms such as positivism, post-positivism, and qualitatively oriented paradigms such for instance as constructivism have resulted in paradigm wars. Without entering such debate a third way between the Scylla of positivistic determinism and Charibdys of extreme subjectivism can be identified in Pragmatism as a paradigm for research. Dewey (1930, p.30) describes Pragmatism as a philosophy of experience, a philosophy which accepts that social and moral existences, like physical existences, are in a state of continuous if obscure change. Pragmatic philosophy is thought *in* action and thought *being shaped by* action. Pragmatic action therefore is thoughtful, critical and experimental. Dewey, in commenting on Pierce’s philosophy (1925, p. 4), argues that in order to be able to attribute meaning to concepts one must be able to apply them to existence and it is by means of action that this is made possible. Precisely because of the interplay of thought and action, simultaneously thinking itself deepens and actions become more carefully crafted to address the purposes they are meant to serve.

To take a Pragmatic approach inherently means to be courageous in accepting the organic nature of research. But it also means acknowledging, with Pierce, that concepts are clarified and understood only through action. The dual process of clarification of ideas and modification of existence that characterises Pragmatism also resonates closely with DBR which – as it will be explained in section 2.3 – aims to simultaneously develop theory and practice.

Pragmatism offers a suitable framework for this thesis in relation to all four paradigmatic dimensions. Firstly, it affirms at an ontological level the plurality of being. Secondly, at an epistemological level the plurality of meanings arising from interpretation of the nature of

being is also duly recognised. Thirdly, at a methodological level a Pragmatist approach allows one to frame research as a developmental process. Accordingly through the research process itself, not only can greater understanding of the phenomenon investigated occur, but also the researcher's ability to investigate and understand the phenomenon can be greatly enhanced. Furthermore the research undertaken for this thesis represents what Robson (2002, p. 5) calls *real world enquiry*. Robson explains that this is characterised by flexible designs that require only minor pre-specification at the beginning of the research process but that evolve and unfold as the research proceeds. Furthermore within the pragmatist tradition the choice of analytical methods is dictated by what is best suited to investigate a particular problem and a particular context and the primacy of the context of analysis is affirmed. Fourthly, at an axiological level the pragmatist principles are hospitable to research as a participatory process where those being researched influence the outcome of the research and are the beneficiary of such research. "Knowing for the world" rather than "knowing the world" is considered a primary emphasis of this research. With Dewey (1925, p.12) it is proposed that action should render life more reasonable and increase its value.

The pragmatist investigation undertaken for this thesis has uncovered a plurality of unanticipated meaning and has resulted in a tri-fold definition of dialogue as ontological, as ethical and as methodological. At the same time, as later chapters will show, the embedment of dialogue in assessment practice has led to a modification of the researcher's own assessment practice.

2.3 The Research Approach: Design-based research

DBR has been described as an emerging new paradigm (DBRC, 2003), as a method (Anderson, 2011), as a high methodological orientation (Bell, 2004), and as research approach (Andriessen, 2006). Andriessen proposes that (2006):

Design-based research is a particular type of research that (a) is aimed at answering design questions, (b) that can be based on a variety of conceptions of reality, (c) that is based on pragmatic epistemology, (d) and that can make use of different research methodologies. (p. 3)

At an ontological level, design-based researchers are comfortable with the 'messiness' of multiple realities found in contexts of practice (Vaishnavi & Kuechler, 2004) and with the

acknowledgment of plurality. Such openness to plurality aligned DBR to post-positivism and constructivism at an ontological level. However in the original formulation of DBR (DBRC, 2003) the investigation of multiple realities was carried out according to parameters of experimental design. Hence at epistemological level DBR was aligned more closely to empiricism even to positivism.

Holland (2006) - in referring to the original DBR model- highlighted that the approach created a dichotomy between ontological and epistemological principles. She resolved this philosophical tension by proposing a hybrid model of DBR which favoured the progressive emergence of knowledge –both practical and theoretical- through a developmental and iterative process of design and evaluation thus aligning DBR to Action Research processes.

More recent proponents of DBR suggest that DBR is an *approach* rather than a paradigm. More importantly DBR has become decoupled from its earlier, almost exclusive association with positivist epistemology. Andriessen, for instance, supports the view that DBR can be associated with “the ontology of embodied realism and constructivism and epistemology of pragmatism” (2006, p. 1). Similarly the researcher sees DBR not as a separate paradigm but as an approach within the pragmatist tradition.

Table 2.2 summarises the main characteristics of DBR. The table shows that DBR allows emergent responses to research activities initiate further interventions *alongside* the development of a new and emergent theory. At a methodological level, the DBR approach is flexible, context-sensitive and can be associated with both qualitative and quantitative methods. The choice of methods is made on the basis of the appropriateness of the method to best capture the phenomenon under investigation. The attention to the context, the priority of transferability over generalisability and also the claim that there is no single design-research method, characterise DBR.

Table 2:2 Conventional Design-based research characteristics (adapted from Source: <http://www.lancasterphd.org.uk/dbr/comparisons.html>)

Characteristics	Design- Based research
Environment	Mainly conducted in the field
Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional tool or strategy developed for trial in educational setting. • Revised based on data collected during trial. • Process repeated iteratively until intervention is effective
Data Collection	Method produces evidence (e.g. tests, observations or artefacts (data) of student work) that show that students have learned what the tool is expected to help them learn.
Utility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows student learning occurs. • Takes place in real-world messy context providing high ecological validity. • Recognises the need for complex and extended interventions due to messy settings.
Trustworthiness	Based on evidence of iterative activities.
Timing of variable control	Controlled over time
Intervention alteration	If an intervention does not work as well as expected and data gathered point to source as lying in some characteristic of the setting, it is possible to adapt the intervention to accommodate that characteristic.

DBRC (2003) affirm the importance of context as a determining factor for the specific characteristics of the intervention. Unlike positivist and more conventional empirical approaches this approach allows for the transfer of the essence of a particular intervention to different contexts as a reinterpretation that preserves this original essence. But crucially it tailors the activity to the needs and characteristics of the particular context.

Anderson (2011) sees DBR as intrinsically associated with mixed-methods research. He regards the close attention to the context and its complexity and the focus on improvement of practice through iterative design development as having a special appeal for the practitioner. The Research Based Design Collective (2003) describe DBR it as a means to reconnect directly educational research with problems of practice. They see as one of its core goals the designing of learning environments while simultaneously developing theories. Such a dual goal is achieved through continuous cycles of design, enactment, analysis and redesign (Cobb, et al. (2003). From this it can be seen that a DBR approach can readily accommodate a range of methodologies consistent with action research.

DBR provides a procedurally effective way to translate the interplay of thought and action advocated by Pragmatists into a step-by-step research process. More importantly it also aspires to generate new knowledge that extends beyond reflection on specific practice. Such aspiration is particularly attractive in relation to the purposes of the research undertaken for this thesis. This thesis aims to contribute to the development of assessment practice while at the same time helping to expand the concept of pedagogical dialogue in theoretical terms. This dual purpose is suitably supported by the DBR approach. The research described in the following pages can be viewed as a revised form of DBR. It takes into account the criticism put forward by Holland to the original model and -consistently with Andriessen -proposes to term the revised approach as “multi-faceted design-based research.” This accounts for the multi-voiced and multi-phased structure of the research framework. The new model takes the format illustrated on the right hand side of figure 2.1.⁶

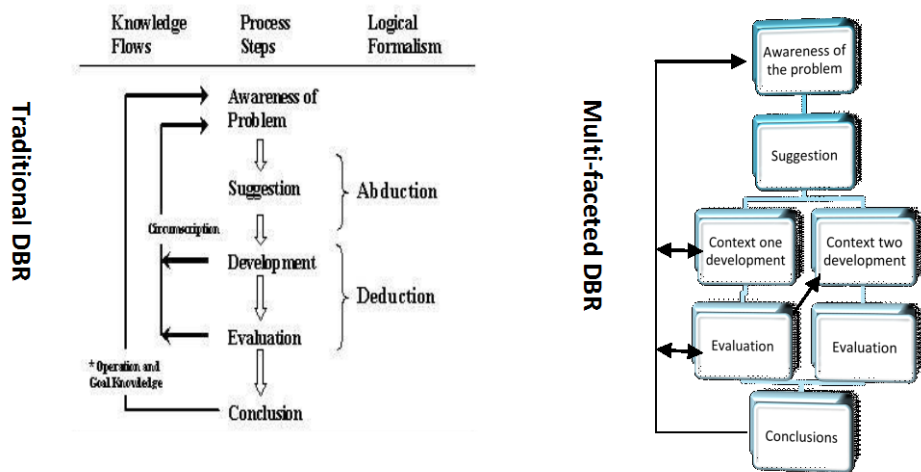


Figure 2.1 Traditional DBR (DBRC2003) compared to Multi-faceted DBR (Read from top downwards)

While in a traditional DBR framework the various cycles of design and evaluation led to some conclusions for each development-evaluation cycle, in the case of this study conclusions are also drawn cumulatively, and as a result of the design and implementation of different assessment interventions interlinked by a conceptual framework.

⁶ The figure on the left hand side shows the traditional DBR format. The terms “abduction” and “logical formulation” are used in the original diagram. It is proposed that they should respectively be replaced with “induction” and “logical form”.

2.4 The research questions

The simultaneous advancement of theory and practice is a primary purpose of the research undertaken for this thesis. As pointed out in section 2.2 a similar concern was shared by Pragmatist philosophers. An initial prompt to the research undertaken was Pierce's "maxim of Pragmatism":

Consider the practical effects of the objects of your conception. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object (Pierce, C.S., 1878, online)

Pierce prompts us to consider the practical implications of concepts and ideas and to investigate their effects in practice, thus also achieving a more rounded perspective on the concepts themselves.

Through professional experience working as academic co-ordinator in Oscail, the distance education centre based in Dublin City University, it had become clear to me that assessment feedback was one of the few one-to-one forms of interaction with their tutor that students were experiencing as distance education students. However this form of exchange was too often unsatisfactory in pedagogical and relationship-building terms. The exchange was too often unidirectional as students, through feedback comments, were simply told what they had done wrong rather than being helped to engage in new avenues of exploration. The unidirectional orientation of the communication was disempowering for students while also been ineffective in pedagogical terms. This reflection, coupled with engagement with the research literature in philosophy of education, assessment, adult and distance education and linguistics theory, led me to conclude that such a retrospective and unidirectional emphasis in feedback was not beneficial to students. It presented the features of a monological orientation in education. It was necessary to rebalance roles in the assessment and to consider ways in which a better balance could be achieved. Therefore the research sets as its primary practical goal exploring the embedment of dialogical principles in assessment practice in order to enhance the overall learning experience and establish more equalitarian relationships between assessors and assesses. The monological tendencies that had anecdotally emerged from the observation of assessment practice necessitated a more rigorous exploration but also the development of an intervention addressing the problem that had been identified. Thus the core question was initially formulated as

Can assessment be conceived as pedagogical dialogue?

The question assumes that dialogue is a rich pedagogical concept and that the association of pedagogical dialogue with assessment is beneficial to assessment practice. In asking whether assessment can be associated with dialogue it is implicitly also assumed that assessment practice will be enhanced as a result of this association. Thus the question presents two layers of meaning. It asks at once: a) whether an association of pedagogical dialogue and assessment is possible and b) whether it can be verified in some way that such association yields rich pedagogical power, therefore also confirming the overall value of the whole research enterprise. It is necessary to return to Pierce's pragmatist maxim to understand how the question and its two-fold meaning has been addressed through the research process. It was felt necessary to explore the practical implications of the association of the concept of dialogue with assessment practice in order to determine whether a) the connection was purely of a dialectical⁷ nature or b) it had the potential to influence future practice. The value of the association of pedagogical dialogue and assessment was questioned in two contexts of practice (Distance Education and face-to-face education). The dual focus of the question led to the development and implementation of two pedagogical interventions, namely a Feedback Report Form and of a Dialogically-oriented Assessment Portfolio.

A sub-set of questions which addresses the practice stream and practice dimension of DBR – as illustrated in Table 2.1 – was specifically designed for the first context of the research, namely distance education (2005-2007). The purpose of these questions was to evaluate the extent to which the association of dialogue and assessment was successful.

The following question –addressed in chapter six – specifically aims to ascertain if any evidence of dialogical orientation could be found in the then current feedback practice (at the start of the research) by classifying feedback provision according to the dialogical principles which will be illustrated in section 2.4.1.

- 1) *Can features of feedback that denote a dialogical orientation be found in the current feedback practice?*

⁷ Here is reference to the distinction between *dialogic* and *dialectic* proposed by Wegerif (2008) is made. Dialectic concepts of education lead to convergence of views between students and educators. Dialogic education can accommodate diversity and divergence.

In response to the outcomes emerging from chapter 6 the following questions are asked in chapter seven.

- 1) *Can a dialogically infused pedagogical intervention (the introduction of the new feedback report form) bring about change in tutors' feedback provision in the direction of more dialogical practice?*
- 2) *Can trends indicating learning development be found in students' performance (in response to feedback received using the new feedback report format)?*
- 3) *Can the new Feedback Report Form be considered an improvement on the previous one in terms of promotion of the infusion of dialogical principles in feedback practice?*

Question 1 led to examining feedback provision styles and their effectiveness in helping to promote learning. Question 2 led to an investigation of whether a dialogically-infused feedback can also highlight trends of improved performance, thus verifying pedagogical dialogue as intrinsically formative. Finally, in trading the old of traditional assessment for the new of a dialogically-infused assessment practice it should be possible to ascertain if students gain both in personal and pedagogical terms. The third question prompts an evaluation of the pedagogical intervention through a consultation with the assessment stakeholders.

In moving to the second context of research, namely face to face third level education (2008-2011) practice -discussed in chapter ten-three further questions were asked, the second of which mirrors the second question asked in the first context. Questions 1 and 3 raise the issue of the viability, sustainability and transferability of dialogical assessment principles.

- 1) *Can a dialogical assessment model incorporating the new feedback format be a viable pedagogical practice?*
- 2) *Can trends indicating learning development in response to the dialogic assessment model be found in students' performance?*
- 3) *Can a dialogical assessment model incorporating the new feedback format be a pedagogical practice transferable to other subject domains?*

Too often philosophically and pedagogically inspiring ideas end up being shelved because of the unrealistic demands they place on educators. Therefore there needs to be a (phronetic) trade-off between pedagogical value and viability.

Throughout the process, and in particular in the transition between context 1 and context 2 of the research, it had become apparent that the concept of dialogue had been under-theorised. The analysis of the association of dialogue and assessment had too narrowly focused on the development of a methodological approach but not sufficiently on reframing the ethical and ontological dimensions of the dialogical relations established through assessment. As the research for the first context was drawing to an end (2008), it was becoming apparent that in investigating the association of dialogue with assessment the question needed to be reformulated. The question was therefore represented in the following form.

Can assessment

- be conceived **as** dialogue,
- act as a catalyst **for** dialogue and
- lead to transformation in educational practice **through** the implementation of dialogically infused models of assessment?

The reframing of the core question resulted in revisiting the literature and in the addition of a specific section in chapter 3 to account for the three dimensions of dialogue. Furthermore two additional literature chapters were added (Chapter eight and nine) specifically to address the ethical and ontological dimensions of the association of dialogue and assessment. Finally the data analysis chapters were reconsidered to evaluate whether outcomes of the analysis could be more clearly linked to the specific dimensions of the revised core question.

2.4.1 The identification of the dialogical principles

The association of dialogue and assessment may at first appear an unlikely one. Traditionally assessment has been experienced by students as a controlled by the assessor, unidirectional, final, and, as such, also disempowering. Such connotations denote a monological orientation as they silence the voice of the student and limit the possibilities for learning development. The thesis proposes that dialogue is not simply a tool to improve educational practice but is one of the core constituents of pedagogical relations. One of the greatest challenges for the research has been the translation of dialogue as a philosophical concept into viable educational practice. As shown by Figure 2.2, from the analysis of the literature that has offered the theoretical foundations for this thesis, seven core dialogical principles have been identified.



Figure 2.2: Dialogical assessment: seven core principles

In order for a tutor/lecturer and student to engage with each other in a dialogical manner there should be, in first place and on the part of both, the willingness to share meaning. A cycle whereby students and tutors learn to respond and to listen to each other should be initiated. Shared meaning should pave the way to responsive teaching and student engagement. Through a process of interpretation motivated to achieve reciprocal understanding, assessors through feedback can provide students with information more closely tailored to their needs and students can be enabled to respond to the advice received through feedback more effectively. Sharing of meaning is therefore linked to the concept of transparency and clarity. Also connected to transparency and clarity is the concept of “ostensiveness⁸”. An ostensive activity is one that has a demonstrative purpose. Hence ostensiveness is transparency and clarity in action as it translates these principles into specific *examples* to enhance their pedagogical potential.

⁸ Ostensiveness is more commonly associated with verbal dialogical interaction, where demonstration can be done by physically pointing at an object in the vicinity. In written feedback a similar function is satisfied by providing specific examples that clarify the assessor’s expectation. This can be done through selecting a portion of writing produced by the student and exemplifying how the assessment criteria can be best met by rephrasing it, commenting on it, expanding on or exemplifying.

Finally, as two-way communicative exchanges tend to be fluid, the interaction itself is a process rather than only a product. To view feedback as a process means conceiving it as a dynamic activity where a relationship between student performance and feedback received acts as a springboard for enhancement and the emphasis is placed firmly on learning as a process.

As will be discussed in chapter four, an array of good feedback principles (particularly in relation to feedback) can be found in the literature, and particularly influential have been those proposed by Gibbs et al. (2003) and by Nicol et al. (2006) summarised in table 2.3. The dialogical principles identified here relate closely to the principles presented by these core studies but place greater emphasis on the relational and ethical dimension of assessment.

Table 2.3 Dialogical framework compared to prevalent good feedback practice principles

Gibbs et. al (2003)	Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick (2006)	Dialogical principles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback is linked to the purpose of the assignment and to criteria 	Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)	Transparency and clarity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback is understandable to students given their sophistication 	Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)	Sharing of meaning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sufficient feedback is provided often enough and in enough detail 	Delivers high-quality information to students about their learning	Ostensiveness
	Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning	Responsive teaching
	Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem	
	Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning	Mutual student and teacher engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback focuses on learning rather than on marks or students. Feedback is provided quickly enough to be useful to students 	Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance	Process orientation

These influential models clearly show a strong pedagogical focus, but not necessarily a dialogical one. The intersection of dialogue and assessment calls specific attention to the type of relations that are established through assessment. In chapter seven and in chapter ten it will be shown that as the research unfolded the primacy of the ethical dimension became more evident and the principles were modified to reflect this increased emphasis (see principles charter in chapter seven and in further modified form in chapter ten).

2.5 The Research Process

Given the multiple methods used in this research, it is necessary to situate the methods within the research process, to offer the reader an overview of the research strategy and of the appropriateness of the various methods to the phases and contexts of the research. The research was carried out in two different contexts over a seven year period – from 2005 to 2011 – and it was subdivided in five research phases. Table 2.4 provides an overview of the phases of the research, of the methods and data collection instruments utilised in each phase. Furthermore it outlines the role of the researcher in each phase.

Table 2.4 Research phases, methods⁹ and data collection instruments

Context	Phase	Period	Professional & research roles	Focus	Data collected and analysed
Context 1 Third Level Distance Education	1	2005-2006	Academic Co-ordinator (without teaching or assessing capacity)	Generating an overview of patterns of feedback provision in order to identify possible areas for intervention	Research Population: 90 students 30 tutors 231 summary and 185 annotated feedback comments
	2	2007-2008	Researcher as non-participant observer	Evaluation of an intervention restructuring feedback provision informed by dialogical principles	Research Population: 63 students 5 tutors 189 feedback comments 5 interviews transcripts with the tutors 287 (39% response rate) responses to a student questionnaire Performance patterns for all 63 students Assessment external examiners reports for each tutor
Context 2 Conventional face to face third level education	3	2008-2009	Lecturer with teaching and assessing functions Lecturer with teaching and assessing functions Researcher as active participant	First introduction of an assessment portfolio based on dialogical principles and evaluation	Research Population: 99 students 104 Reflection diaries Performance trends for 2 groups 48 Responses to student questionnaire (response rate 46%) Observation of learning behaviours
	4	2009-2010		Revision of assessment portfolio based on dialogical principles and evaluation	Research Population: 93 students Performance trends 51 Responses to student questionnaire (48% response rate)

⁹ For a more detailed description of the specific tools and their purposes refer also to appendix E.

				Comparison between phase 4 and Phase 3 Observation of learning behaviours
	5	2010-2011	Sustainability of the model through development of a new assessment portfolio for other modules	Research Population: 82 students Performance trends 43 Responses to student questionnaire (37.4% response rate) Comparison with phases 3 and 4

A multi-faceted design-based approach allowed providing a framework to a complex research process. Given the multi-context dimension of this study it was necessary to devise interventions and their iterative implementation in a manner suited to the specific context of the practice. At the same time it was important to maintain common thread (the translation of dialogical principles into assessment practice) running through all interventions. Multi-faceted Design-based research allows for iteration but also for transfer of outcomes from different contexts.

Each phase is also compared to the previous ones, in line with the tenets of Design-based research. This requires an iterative approach to the development of pedagogical artefacts through reflection and evaluation of previous cycles of implementation. Within phases 2,3,4 and 5 concurrent methods were employed to better understand the specific issues within a particular phase by converging both quantitative (broad numeric trends) and qualitative (detailed views) data.

Participants were selected according to a purposeful sampling strategy in all phases. In phase one 'maximum variation' sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006) was utilised because obtaining a comprehensive picture of feedback provision by different tutors within a variety of module levels was considered important. In phase 2 – a case study- only students who had completed all three assessment tasks were selected, with a view to focus on the analysis of the assessment process (rather than on individual assessment products). The sampling approach adopted in this phase can be described as 'critical case' sampling., This strategy allowed for the investigation of a small group of students and their tutors. It aimed to derive insights on the impact of a new dialogically infused feedback format on the learning process. The data collection strategy utilised in phases 3-5 was largely 'opportunistic'. All students who completed the modules investigated were analysed in order to allow new leads and unexpected outcomes to emerge from the data themselves (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Research contexts one and two are connected by the core principles presented in figure 2.2. While context one focuses exclusively on feedback provision, context two integrates the approach to feedback developed in phase two into a broader assessment strategy and therefore broadens the focus of the analysis to allow for dialogically framed feedback to be incorporated in an assessment portfolio. On whole the methodological strategy can be as multi-phase mixed method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Although some numeric data are collected the analysis is carried out mostly in qualitative terms. As a result of the interconnectedness of all the phases, it was possible to translate the contributions from each phase to the next one in context sensitive manner. Further elucidation of the contribution from each context is presented in Figure 2.3.

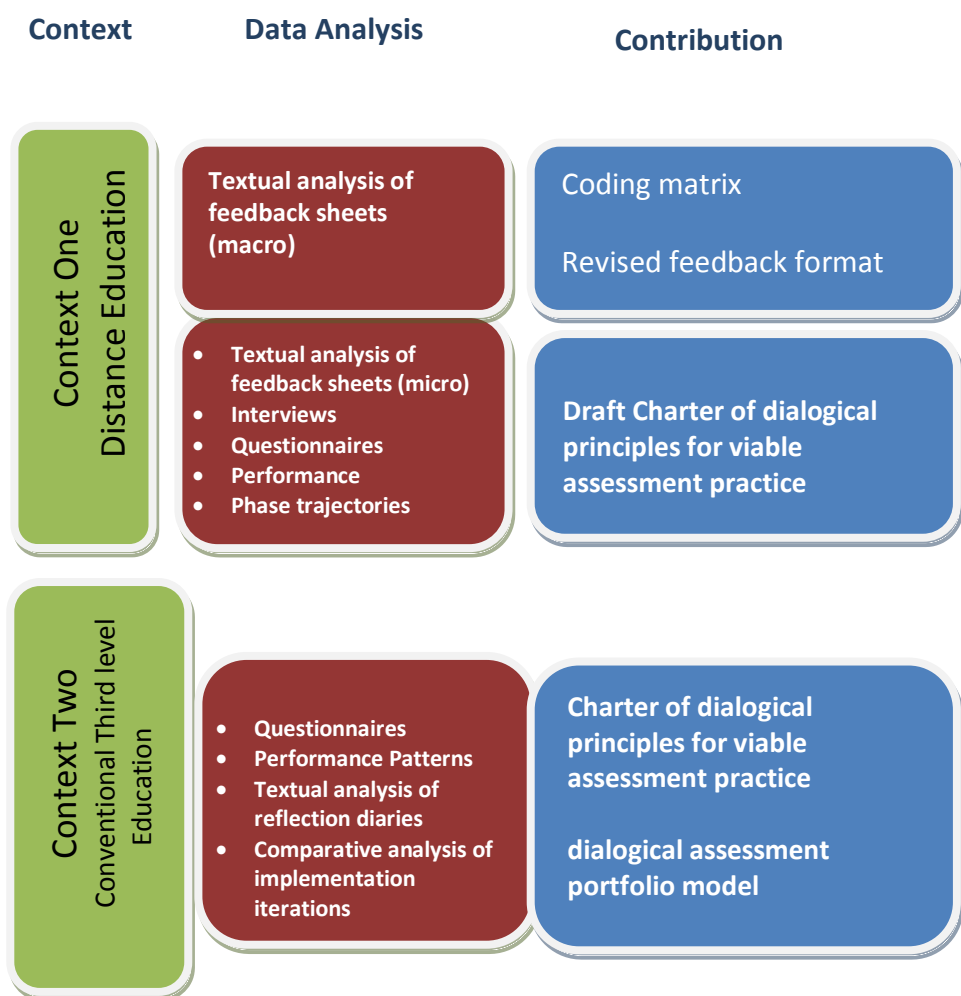


Figure 2.3 Illustration of the contribution resulting from each of the contexts of research

The translation of the multi-faceted design-based research is further illustrated by the flowchart presented in figure 2.4. In order to read the flowchart effectively it should be noted that the boxes in green represent the phases of the multi-faceted DBR approach. The boxes in brown contain the various research questions. The boxes in dark blue show at what point the literature has influenced the research process. Finally, the boxes in light blue show at what point specific research outputs were generated. Given that the core research question was reformulated it can be seen that a brown box containing the revised version has been included at the end of the process. The process should have been represented as an ascending spiral¹⁰ rather than as a linear process, but for the sake of clarity in the visual representation it was preferred to show the steps in process in linear fashion.

¹⁰ The same graphic representation will also be used in chapter five to discuss how the response to feedback should enable enhanced understanding.

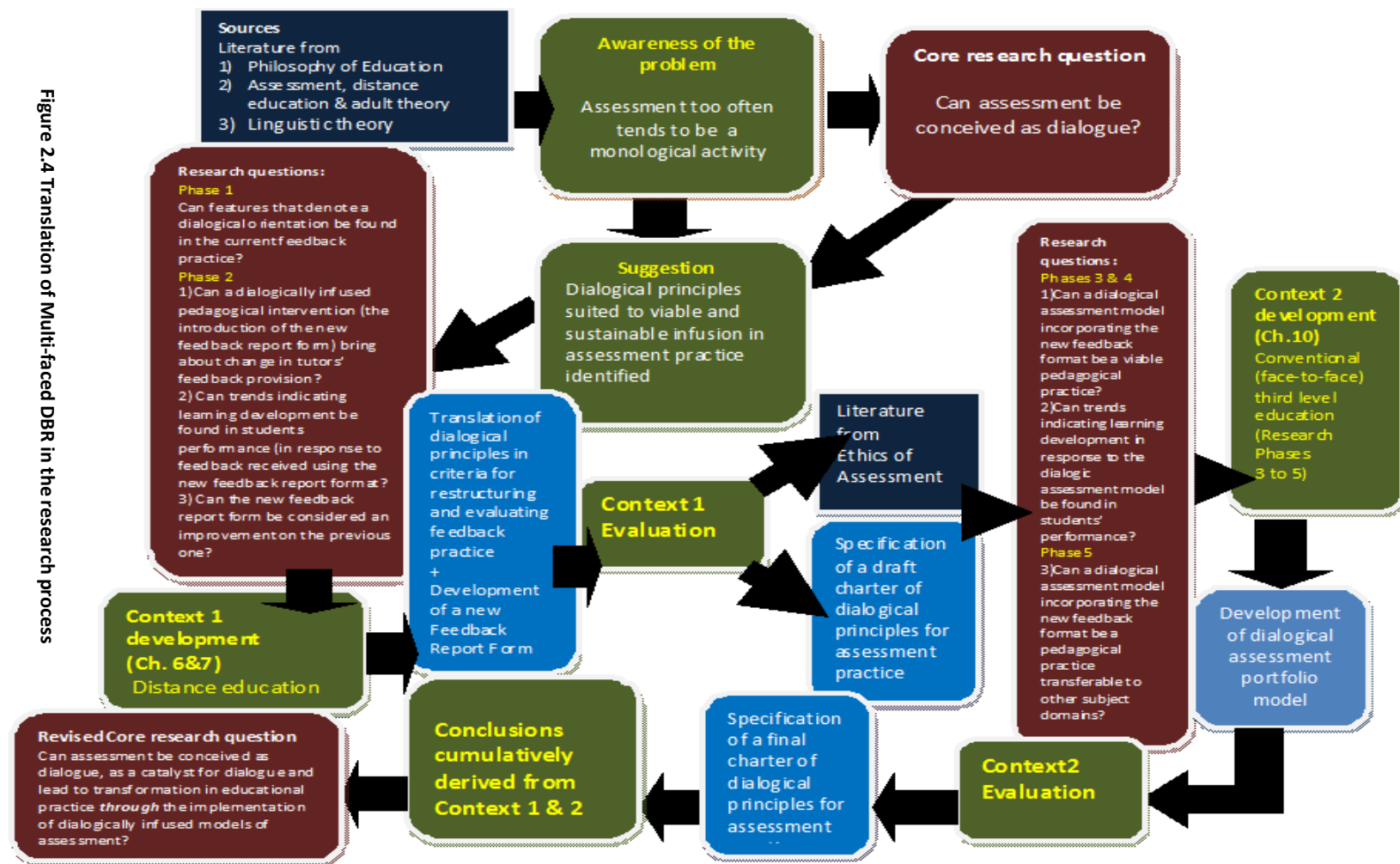


Figure 2.4 Translation of Multi-faced DBR in the research process

2.5.1 The role of the researcher

In order to make sense of the design of the research it is also necessary to give a brief account of the personal and professional roles assumed by the researcher. Such explanation may help the reader to understand the contextual transitions, but also some of the unanticipated axiological shifts which have occurred during the research process that resulted in a reformulation of the core question. The researcher started her journey in a semi-administrative educational management role in a distance education context and moved to an academic role in a conventional¹¹ Education Studies department of the same third level education institution, Dublin City University. This professional role change had a profound impact, not only in contextual terms but also in terms of the research function assumed by the researcher and in terms of understanding the intricacies of the relationship between assessors and assessees. In context 1 the semi-administrative role afforded the opportunity to observe without participating in the pedagogical activities, including assessment and feedback provision. In context 2 the assumption of an academic role entailed first-person experience of designing and delivering assessment and providing feedback, hence assuming a participant and practitioner role. The latter role presented the challenge of seeing oneself as other than oneself in order to be able to account for the reality under investigation, hence adding an external dimension to the investigation. The former role presented the challenge of accounting for a particular reality partially as an outsider¹². The constraint of only partially capturing a reality seen from outside was the core challenge in the first research context.

2.5.2 Phase 1 (2005-2006) Methodological approach

As shown by table 2.4 the study starts with a qualitative exploration of feedback practice in distance education resulting in the generation of a coding matrix for feedback comments also informed by an initial theoretical framework. Phase one is a baseline study which presents macro-analysis of feedback given within 5 different subject domains by 30 tutors. Feedback comments were coded using Framework Analysis.

¹¹Conventional in this context is intended as “face to face” and contra-posed to distance and online education. It does not denote a set of values endorsed by the DCU School of Education Studies.

¹² While the researcher was part of Oscail, she was not a tutor, hence she accounts for the experience of tutors as an outsider.

While coding is frequently associated with Grounded Theory the approach taken by this study is more consistent with principles of Framework Analysis. According to Strauss and Corbin (1996, p.101) –who are among the key proponents of Grounded Theory- concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered and derived from the data themselves and theory is also generated directly from data. Srivastava and Thomson (2009), in describing Framework Analysis, explain that it is a qualitative method of research that has specific questions, and some a priori issues already identified prior to the start of the data analysis. In the analysis, data are sifted, charted and sorted in accordance with key issues and themes using five steps: familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation. According to Ritchie & Spencer (1994) framework analysis is flexible during the analysis process in that it allows the user to either collect all the data and then analyze it or do data analysis during the collection process. Furthermore Ritchie & Spencer (1994) clarify that while framework analysis may generate theories, the prime concern is to describe and interpret what is happening in a particular setting. Given that the primary purpose of the coding process in phase 1 was to provide a snapshot of current feedback practice, Framework Analysis provides a particularly well-suited approach to coding and analysis. Archer et al. (2005) emphasise that Framework Analysis allows keeping close contact with the data as it is a dynamic and generative framework that allows the change or addition or amendment throughout the process. Furthermore, Srivastava and Thomson (2009, p.77) suggest that framework analysis allows “within-case and between-case analysis: it enables comparisons between, and associations within, cases to be made” and this was deemed a particularly useful feature given that a comparative analysis of coded feedback in phase 1 and phase 2 of the research is a component of the research process for this thesis.

As shown in section 2.4 the research project already had an initial conceptual framework. While the openness to emerging concepts which characterises grounded theorising was considered valuable, it was also felt that retaining a close link with the core themes of the research topic was necessary and this was better safeguarded by Framework Analysis.

2.5.3 Phase 2 (2006-2007) Methodological approach

Phase 2 is a micro-analysis as the focus narrows on one subject domain (History). Feedback comments provided by the 5 tutors were coded using a newly developed coding matrix, and feedback provided in phase 1 and 2 for these 5 tutors was compared to identify whether the introduction of a new feedback report format had positively impacted on feedback provision.

Within this context the researcher was a non-participant observer who had nevertheless designed and driven the implementation of the new feedback format. The intervention is evaluated by eliciting the views of stakeholders through qualitative methods (interviews and tutor and student questionnaires), and of students also through numeric data (appeals statistics and graphs charting student performance) in order to triangulate findings from different data sets.

2.5.4 Phase 3 to 5 (2008-2011) Methodological approach

Phases 3 to 5 refer to the second context of research namely, conventional face-to-face third level education. In this context the researcher becomes an active participant in the research as a lecturer for Modules ES222/204 Curriculum Assessment and Evaluation, ES402 Philosophical Perspectives in education and ES556 Philosophy of Education modules. Modules ES204/ES222 and ES402 are offered as part of a BSc in Education and Training and ES556 Philosophy of Education as part of the Graduate Diploma in Education (a post-graduate programme qualifying secondary school teachers). Research becomes a participatory process where the researcher is directly involved in the delivery of the modules in which the pedagogical interventions takes place and students become active stakeholders in the evaluation and development of the intervention.

As in phase 2 questionnaires and student performance trends were analysed and outcomes of each phase were compared.

2.5.5 Phases 1 & 2 (2005-2007- i.e. Context 1) Data collection and analysis

Distance education (Context 1) presents specific challenges in relation to the investigation of teaching and learning but also for research. This is because of the geographical dispersion of the stakeholders and the limited face-to-face contact between tutors and students and between researcher and research participants¹³. These constraints account for some of the limitations outlined in the data collections presented in this section. In particular incomplete feedback data sets were collected in Phase 1 and in Phase 2. It was necessary to discard data from a student questionnaire in Phase 2 due to a particularly low response rate.¹⁴

¹³ It is documented in the literature that inaccessibility of research participants or the unavailability of data which often result in poor distance education research output quality (Jegede,1999).

¹⁴ The researcher had attempted to survey the 63 students whose feedback was analysed in Phase 2. A questionnaire was circulated firstly electronically. After two circulations of the questionnaire by post resulting in a

2.5.5.1 The development of a coding matrix and its application to analyse patterns in feedback provision (Phase 1 &2)

Written feedback comments¹⁵ were collected, coded and analysed using a Framework Analysis procedure (for a more detailed presentation of the data sets collected in this phase please refer to chapter six, section 6.2). In line with Framework Analysis the initial conceptual framework, based around the seven dialogical assessment practice principles, provided the starting point for the generation of initial codes. The coding procedure was repeated four times, approximately every two weeks, in order to refine codes, eliminate ill-fitting ones, and avoid as much as possible overlaps between different codes. A detailed presentation of the development of the coding matrix, including an exemplification and detailed explanation of each of the codes used, is included in Appendix B.

Further analysis of the codes led to the identification of common features for patterning and eventually led to the saturation of the overall coding scheme and to the generation of the coding matrix shown by Appendix B. The coding and analysis process was structured in 4 distinct phases (a detailed presentation of all the coding phases is presented in Appendix B.2):

- 1) *Coding cycle 1 familiarization; identifying a thematic framework.* The first coding cycle was an initial process of sorting of sections of feedback comments according to their relevance to the core dialogical principles shown in Figure 2.2. The feedback comments were coded line by line and within each line units of meaning were identified. During this cycle the analytical parameter “function” emerged. Functions represent a means to typify feedback comments in terms of their *pedagogical value*.
- 2) *Coding Cycle 2: Indexing and charting.* A hierarchy of functions was constructed to determine which ones were likely to yield higher learning development power while also being more strictly connected with dialogical principles. Cycle two was a micro-

10% response rate it was decided that the low response rate did not warrant inclusion of the responses in the data analysis. However as a general student questionnaire (further details on the responses to this questionnaire are included in section 7.5.1—including also specific questions relating to Phase 2 intervention)- had already been administered) and had resulted in a more satisfactory response rate, it was felt that further attempts at surveying this specific group of 63 students were unnecessary.

¹⁵ During the period in which the research was carried out (2005-2007) Oscail students received written feedback entered in Feedback report forms. While Summary comments were entered in the form annotated comments were also entered by tutors/assessors directly on the margins of the essays. In 2005 the original hard copy of the essay together with a carbon copy of the Feedback report form was sent back approximately 3 weeks after submission by the student by surface mail. From 2006 feedback is entered by tutors in a revised Feedback Form electronically and also sent back to students via e-mail.

analysis. As in cycle one “line by line” analysis of tutors’ feedback comments was carried out. This had as its goal the hierarchical classification of feedback comments according to their *pedagogical strength*. An analytical parameter called “level” was then devised to hierarchically organise functions.

- 3) *Coding cycle 3: mapping and specification*. The third phase was a further specification and served the purpose of saturating codes used for functions with the identification of sub-codes (see appendix B.4 for sample of memo aiding the process of code clarification and saturation).
- 4) *Coding cycle 4: disambiguation and interpretation*. The fourth and final cycle had as its goal to remove as much as possible ambiguity in the definition of the codes and overlaps between different codes. This phase was also a final check to ensure that the application of codes had been consistent.

The coding matrix was also utilised for the analysis of feedback selected for Phase 2 of the research (see appendices B.5, B.6 and F for examples of coded feedback in Phase 1 and 2 and Appendices D and F for a sample of coded feedback and for the outcomes of the coding process in Phase 2). The analysis of feedback provided by 5 History tutors in both Phase 1 and Phase 2, using the same coding matrix, allowed for a comparison to be made. The purpose here was to determine whether the introduction of the new feedback report form had an impact on tutors’ feedback provision style and whether some learning styles were more likely to help students to progress with their learning.

2.5.5.2 Performance trajectories (Phase 2)

To further ascertain whether the data could offer an indication that the use of a dialogically infused feedback format could also positively influence student learning, results of the students allocated to the 5 tutors examined during this research phase were collected.

Oscail students complete three assignments for each module. As can be seen from Appendix G, the marks obtained by each student have been plotted onto a graph and a three-point trajectory has been drawn for each student. The analysis of performance trends was used to compare performance for the groups allocated to the 5 tutors participating in this phase of the research. The comparative analysis was a means to establish whether some correlation

between optimal use of the new feedback report form could highlight more marked trends of students' performance. Marking evaluation reports prepared by an external monitor were examined in conjunction with analysis of performance trends to determine the accuracy of the marking from which performance trends are derived. Nevertheless it should be noted that given the small size of the student population allocated to each tutor (ranging from 9 to 15) and the unavailability of information on other factors impinging on student performance, evidence derived from analysis of performance cannot be considered conclusive, but simply offers an indication of a trend for the specific population observed.

2.5.5.3 Interviews (Phase 2)

While the tutor questionnaire (Appendix H.2) evaluated the response of the whole Oscail tutor population, tutor interviews were conducted (see appendix L) with the purpose to investigate specifically the attitudes and perceptions of the 5 tutors involved in the case study for Phase 2. Due to the geographical dispersion of the 5 tutors, interviews were conducted telephonically, recorded with an electronic device, and transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews present a semi-structured format in order to allow for the emergence of unexpected directions in the conversation while at the same time maintaining focus on the topic being investigated.

Participants were briefed ahead of the interviews (see appendix L.2). A list of questions was also provided (see appendix L.1), with the proviso that the listing was only indicative and that both the order of the questions and the questions themselves could be modified to suit the flow of the interview. Informed consent was also received from each of the participants.

2.5.5.4 Questionnaires (Phase 2)

Postal questionnaires containing a mix of open-ended and closed questions (see Appendix H) were used to gauge the level of students' and tutors' satisfaction with the revised feedback format. It is normal practice for Oscail to survey their students to evaluate their programmes. Instead of sending an additional survey a section specifically addressing assessment and the introduction of the new feedback form was included in the usual end-of-year students' questionnaire. In parallel a similar questionnaire was also posted out to all Oscail tutors.

It has been documented (*Cartwright, 1986; Williams, 2003*) that postal surveys incur the risk of poor response rates. This tends to be particularly problematic in distance education contexts (*Nash, 2005*) where respondents tend to be very geographically dispersed. Respondents may have little contact with the researcher who designs the questionnaire and this may result in poor engagement of respondents with the questionnaire, an element deemed essential by Sid Nair et. al. (2006) for the success of surveys. Sid Nair et. al. (2006) also highlight that over-surveying may have a negative impact on response rates. The relatively low response rate obtained for this questionnaire denotes the above mentioned difficulties (more detailed information on the outcomes of the questionnaire is presented in chapter seven, section 7.5). While the response rate is in line with the literature concerning postal surveys, the representativeness of the answers needs to be read cautiously. However, given that the core dimension of this thesis is dialogue, and that dialogue requires attentiveness and responsiveness to all the parties engaged in the dialogical interaction, it was felt that it was important to retain the students' voice as an element of the evaluation.

2.5.5.5 Appeals statistics (Phase 2)

Statistical information on the number of assignment appeals received by Oscail, before and after the introduction of the new feedback form, was plotted onto a graph.

As will be outlined in more detail in chapter 7, Oscail students historically have used the appeal mechanism as means to voice their dissatisfaction with the mark and feedback obtained in their assignments. In the researcher's experience as Academic Co-ordinator appeals have been lodged also to clarify the basis of the assessment judgment that has led to a specific mark allocation. Therefore the inclusion of the analysis appeals patterns –before and after the introduction of the new feedback format – was considered useful in terms of gauging whether the new feedback form resulted in greater student satisfaction with the feedback received.

2.5.6 Phases 3-5 (2008-2011 – i.e. Context 2) Data collection and analysis

Context two presented challenges in relation to the comparability of data collected in different phases. Firstly the format was modified from Phase 3 to Phase 4 and one of the newly developed portfolio's tasks (the reflection diary) had to be dropped in Phase 4. The task was dropped due to a reduction in the number of teaching hours allocated to the module as part of the restructuring of the BSc. in Education and Training within which it was offered. This meant

that rich information obtained in Phase 3 through reflection diaries was no longer available in Phase 4. Furthermore, given that Phase 5 transfers the dialogically-oriented portfolio model to different modules, the structure of the portfolio itself is comparable to the earlier version but also rather different. This means that while comparisons are appropriate (given that the same dialogical principles were at the basis of the development of both portfolios) their comparison needs to take into consideration such difference.

2.5.6.1 Observation of performance patterns (Phases 3,4,5)

Similar to context 1, the performance of students for modules ES204, ES222, ES556, ES402 was plotted onto graphs to determine whether evidence of learning development could be found. As it can be seen from Appendix M and P both portfolio briefs require students to submit a task draft on which they receive feedback – either peer (ES204/ES222) or lecturer-given (ES402/ES556). In tracking students' development the marks recorded for the draft submission and the final submission have been compared to ascertain whether the feedback has had an impact on the redrafted version of the same task.

2.5.6.2 Student questionnaires (Phases 3,4,5)

As for context 1, questionnaires with a mix of open-ended and multiple-choice questions were designed and administered (see appendices O and Q). However, unlike previous questionnaires, which were incorporated in routine Oscail evaluation surveys, the ones for Phases 3 to 5 were designed specifically to evaluate the portfolio. Furthermore, in order to obtain more satisfactory response rates than those recorded in response to postal surveys for context 1; electronic based questionnaires were availed of, using SurveyMonkey. On the whole, the electronic format elicited a better response rate than obtained previously, as will be outlined in more detail in Chapter ten.

2.5.6.3 Reflection diaries (Phase 3)

During the first implementation cycle (Phase 3) of the ES222/204 portfolio it was deemed important to collect the views of the full cohort of students, rather than simply relying on information obtained from the electronic surveys. For this reason all the research diaries submitted by students (see appendix M) as part of the portfolio were also analysed using

content analysis. Emerging themes (Robson, 2006) were identified as recording units and sorted into categories. Furthermore the thematic organisation was cross-checked by the other lecturer who was also involved in the delivery and monitoring of the assessment for module ES222/ES204. This was done in order to ensure greater consistency in the categorisation and to minimise the potential for biased readings of the texts. It should however be noted that as the reflection diaries were assessed as part of the portfolio the evaluations presented by the students may need to be read cautiously. Despite having been reassured that in the assessment process honesty and ability to think critically were valued, students may have been reluctant to express negative judgments on the assessment, fearing that this would affect their mark allocation.

Finally it should also be noted that due to restructuring of the module, dictated by factors outside the researcher control, the number of hours allocated to the module were reduced and such reduction needed also to be reflected in the assessment workload. As a result of this change, the reflection diary was dropped as an element of the portfolio and therefore it was not possible to collect data through this means in phase 4.

2.6 Ensuring research rigour

It is assumed that research rigour should be upheld as a necessary characteristic of any scientifically sound enterprise and this thesis is no exception.

In order to ensure that results were valid and reliable the following protocols were put in place.

- Reliability is seen as strictly connected to **auditability** of the research procedures, and with methodological consistency during the research process. Verbatim accounts from research participants have been included in chapters 7 and 10 and full transcripts of interviews carried out for phase 2 have been included in the appendices. Furthermore samples of all data collection tools and responses to questionnaires for phases 3-5 have also been included in the appendices.
- Objectivity is conceived as “relative neutrality and reasonable freedom from acknowledged researcher biases (Miles and Huberman, 1994, 278). Objectivity has also been safeguarded through ‘**strong reflexivity**’ (Spencer, 2001, p.450). Nevertheless

given the suggestion by Dempster (2005), that representational and analytical objectivity cannot be fully guaranteed in qualitative research. Efforts have been made to ensure achievement data **recording objectivity** (linked to traceability inferences from data). A **Reflection Journal** (extract shown in appendix b.4) was used. This is a “continuous record of the decisions made during the emergent design and rationale” (p. McMillan and Schumacher, 2006, p.329). The authors also state that this validity protocol allows for justification because it also allows to trace the development researcher’s ideas and personal reactions throughout the field work”. In the case of Phase 1 research the Reflection Journal allowed to record the emergence of codes. Codes have been differentiated as the research process progressed and comments that have led to specific differentiations have been recorded in this Reflection Journal. The recording of these reflections offers traceability of the reasons that have led to specific choices for the categorisation and patterning of feedback. An **ethical commitment to the trustworthiness** of the research has also been displayed through the “Inclusion of negative or discrepant information which runs counter to the themes, which, according to Cresswell (2003, p.196), adds credibility to the presentation of data.

- In order to increase the accuracy of interpretation of reflective diaries utilised as a data collection tool in phase 3 of the research, reading of data was cross-checked with another researcher who acted as an **external auditor**.
- The research departs from traditional DBR techniques for ensuring reliability and validity, such as thick descriptive data sets and systematic analysis of data with more often statistically designed measures. However it retains one core element of the traditional DBR process, namely the **re-iteration of the development-implementation-evaluation** cycles in various phases of the research as a means to ensure greater reliability. In order for the researcher to become aware of possible distortions and identify elements most relevant to the research questions, in phase 1 the iterative process of coding required **a prolonged engagement with data** (Lincon & Guba, 1985; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The use of four coding cycles, resulting in various degrees of specifications of codes and patterns, also offers an audit trail (including raw data, data analysis reductions such as coding matrixes, data reconstructions and process notes) for enhancing both dependability and confirmability of outcomes, hence also ensuring greater reliability. Similarly the comparison of outcomes in phases 3-5 also denotes a prolonged engagement with data and the similarity of outcomes

obtained in the three consecutive phases enhances the verifiability of the conclusions derived from the data collected.

- Phases 2-5 relied on **triangulation of data** as means for reliability and validity of outcomes. Cresswell (2003) refers to the use of **multi-method strategies** as a means to greater reliability of research outcomes. In these phases reliability also rests on verbatim accounts from participants (phases 2-5), multiple researchers cross-checking of data interpretation (phases 3-5), participant review of interview transcripts (Phase 2), and on mechanically recorded interviews (phase 2). The availability of these records allows for traceability of the information, hence also providing a further audit trail.
- Finally, some **transferability** of outcomes is incorporated within the research project itself. For instance it is shown that the coding matrix developed in phase 1 can also be re-used - albeit within the same context of practice –in Phase 2. More significantly, Phase 5 of the research accounts for the transferability of the dialogical assessment model developed in Phases 3 and 4 and shows that even within a different disciplinary context the same process developed to foster dialogical engagement produced similar results to those recorded in the previous phases.

2.7 Ethical considerations

As the research for this thesis arose not only from pedagogical but also from ethical concerns, research ethics was a primary focus for the researcher. One of the main aims of the research was to reframe assessment in dialogical terms so that students' learning experience could be enhanced. Therefore the research aimed to benefit participants through its outcomes.

Specific safeguards were also put in place to ensure that research ethical standards were also met. Firstly, ethical clearance was received from Dublin City University (DCU) Ethics Committee authorising to proceed with questionnaires for phases 2-5, analysis of reflection diaries for phase 3, and for interviews (Phase 2 only). As data collection for phase 1 was carried out prior to the establishment of such a committee in DCU, approval was sought from Oscail management. Furthermore, in order not to disadvantage participants, only assignments which were selected for assessment monitoring were also collected for research purposes, hence minimising the delays in returning feedback to students. While this had a negative impact on

the completeness of the data set collected, a trade-off between disadvantages to participants and data collection priorities had to be achieved.

In phase 2 informed consent was obtained from interview participants. Participants received a briefing documentation, a sample list of questions for the interview, and an informed consent form derived from a template provided from DCU Ethics Committee. Copies of transcripts of interviews were also made available to participants for participant review.

While participation was on a voluntary basis, tutor participants may have felt compelled to participate due to the dual role of the researcher as inquirer and as employer, particularly in consideration of the temporary nature of employment contracts for Oscail tutors. However participants had the opportunity to withdraw at any point during the research process and were reassured that non-participation was not going to impinge on re-employment prospects. It should also be noted that while the briefing documentation provided as detailed information as possible on the aims of the research, the research purposes have been amended during the 7 year process. However the information was accurate at the time of provision. An informed consent was also incorporated in the questionnaires for Phases 3-5. As questions for phase 2 were included in routine Oscail questionnaires which had already been cleared at institutional level no further ethical clearance was required.

Confidentiality of all participants in the research has been ensured by removing any information from questionnaire responses, feedback comments, interview transcripts and reflection diaries which could make individuals identifiable. In phase 2 students' and tutors' names have been replaced with sequential numbers. The only identification element that has been preserved is the subject membership for phase 1 and 2 and in phases 3-5 the class group membership. This information has allowed the researcher to establish meaningful comparisons that were considered to be beneficial to the overall reporting of research outcomes.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrates the various ingredients of what is a complex research design. Firstly the multi-contexts and multi-phases of the research process pose challenges for the coherence and consistency of the research strategy. But these challenges had to be accepted and negotiated in order to carry through the research project itself in its many interweaving dimensions. Secondly the organic nature of the research process seeks to allow for the

emergence of new theoretical insights concurrently with the development of the dialogically infused assessment interventions. This means that emerging outcomes had to be revisited periodically to take account of new insights as the research proceeded. Thirdly, the research design endeavours to enable the principles presented in the initial framework to be reformulated in successive phases as a result of interaction with emergent outcomes from the data. This design also seeks to provide a means for insights yielded by the research to be progressively incorporated into a promising, a defensible, yet a flexible model of assessment practice.

CHAPTER THREE: Literature Review: Investigating Dialogue and its role in Education

Introduction

This thesis seeks to uncover some insights into pedagogical dialogue with the aim of bringing to the fore the implicitly dialogical nature of educational practice. More specifically it also argues that pedagogical dialogue can offer a productive theoretical basis for re-conceiving the interaction between assessors and assessees in educational assessment in order to maximise students' development -both educational and personal.

Dialogue has been described as a method, a process, an activity, an ethical relation, a model of cognition, a semiotic exchange and a praxis. Its conceptualization varies greatly in terms of definition (what is dialogue?) and function (what is for?). This thesis proposes that pedagogical dialogue is in first place *a way of being* rather than a method. Therefore the anti-dialogical features which seem to denote prevalent forms of assessment can be addressed not by *tout court* dismissing the possibility of associating dialogue with assessment; neither by devising a method with apparently dialogical features intended as an antidote to monological orientation in assessment. Rather, a more profound and sustainable shift can be caused by in first place embracing dialogue at existential and ontological level. This entails the establishment of relations that foster mutuality, respect for difference, trust, reciprocity and shared –but not forced to converge -understanding through the means available in a particular context of practice. Influences that have led to the emergence (or better, re-emergence) of dialogue in education are hard to disentangle. It is however worth attempting to uncover the contribution of some key thinkers to the concept of pedagogical dialogue through an exploration of relevant literature.

Furthermore this thesis proposes that to achieve a substantial and sustainable reframing of the relationships established through assessment it is necessarily to consider dialogue not in merely instrumental terms, but rather as a constitutive element of education. Dialogue should be infused in all educational practices, including assessment. Yet, the connection between assessment and dialogue is not straightforward. Assessment and dialogue may be seen as antithetical in some quarters. Pedagogical dialogue and educational practice are activities necessarily situated in specific educational contexts. Therefore the contextual dimension of such practices plays an important role in their reconceptualisation. Idealised concepts of dialogue are unlikely to offer a productive framework from enhancing educational practice.

What is called for is a concept of pedagogical dialogue that enables educators to recognise the primacy of the values that underpin a defensible philosophical concept of dialogue, while at the same time offering them a viable route for infusing dialogical principles and values in day-to-day educational practice.

Some clarification and nuanced analysis is necessary to propose a definition of dialogue which is pedagogically viable and which does not preclude its association with specific educational practices, such as that of assessment. In order to arrive at a productive concept of pedagogical dialogue, this chapter traces a history of the theoretical foundations of dialogue. The chapter has as its core objective that of providing a wide-ranging exploration of the significance of dialogue in education rather than producing an overreaching definition of the essence of dialogue. For this purpose it is necessary to unpack the relationship between education and learning, and between learning and dialogue.

In first place it is necessary to justify whether dialogue has a defensible place in both educational theory and practice, particularly in the current climate of commodification of education. This discussion is succinctly presented in section 3.1. In section 3.2 some key aspects of the Socratic approach as the first and most influential example of a formative dialogic interaction are presented. The discussion proceeds in section 3.3 with an analysis of the eclipse of the dialogical during a long period of clerical monopoly of education, and explores the implications that such eclipse had on educational practice. Theorists such as Erasmus, Montaigne, Rousseau and Pestalozzi will be examined with the view to show how they have contributed to the re-emergence of dialogical practices in education by advocating a learner-centred and interactive approach to the teaching and learning relationship.

In section 3.4 it is illustrated how, in contemporary times, the emergence of social sciences has contributed to promoting pedagogical dialogue as a highly desirable construct. Dialogue is increasingly seen as a means to democratic participation in education, which enables learners to take an active role in the teaching and learning relationship and allows participants to share meaning.

Finally in section 3.5 the ontological, epistemological and ethical dimensions of dialogue are examined with the view to determining their implications for educational practice and for arriving at a philosophically defensible yet practically viable concept of pedagogical dialogue.

3.1 Justifying the value of dialogue in education

The term “education” is, in itself, controversial. On one hand more conservative conceptions of education have valued transmission of knowledge and skills. On the other hand progressive conceptions have placed their emphasis on personal growth and the fulfilment of human potential. At present, we are witnessing a prevalent neo-liberal “marketization” of education.

Today knowledge tends to be understood primarily as a product, as something that one possesses. The value of education in market-driven society is seen in qualifications and in the acknowledged value of the qualification in meeting labour/market requirements.

Marketization has led to an interpretation of learning “commodified as a private good and a national resource” (Macrae et al., 1997, P. 500 cited in Ecclestone, 2002, p.19) and assessment has become a means to “accumulating purposeful and measurable achievements”(Ecclestone, 2002, p. 19).

Dialogue is a laborious and transformative process. It calls into question how we see our being in relation to others. In order to engage in dialogue we need to know where we stand but we also need to open ourselves to others, whose views we might not endorse but with whom we should be willing to engage. In the product-driven perspective pedagogical dialogue can all too easily be seen as a time-consuming unnecessary means to reach the set goals. Large class sizes and distance education contexts offer limited opportunities for dialogue with individual students. Maximising measurable outputs while minimising the input efforts appears to be a pervasive attitude to the managing of the teaching and learning relationship.

It is therefore not surprising that in recent and current times dialogue has been eclipsed in education only to re-emerge almost exclusively in its instrumental form (REAP, 2009; Carless, 2010; Nicol, 2010; Price, 2010), as a means to the end of achieving better results in assessment.

Within this climate summative approaches to assessment prevail. Summative assessments are more easily administered and marked, and the value of the final product is expressed by a numeric value which can be easily recorded and ranked. This approach is high in accountability but may be rather low in pedagogical effectiveness.

Yet, amidst the prevalent market and product-oriented conceptions other voices which represent a “person-centred” (Carr, 2003) and process-oriented approach to education are still

present. Such views emphasise the promotion of learning, and identify learning as the foundation of education. But, as Carr suggests, it is not about focusing on learning alone (as much of educational psychology has done). “Learning presupposes learners” (Carr, 2003, p.4) and while this might sound tautological, effectively it suggests that we cannot speak about education without speaking of learning in terms of its actors. Carr also establishes a further link between learning and teaching and learners and teachers. Central to this relationship is the concept of human agency and intentionality which call for meaningful and active engagement in the learning activity. This particular interpretation lends itself well to support the value of pedagogical dialogue, as dialogue epitomises the need for education to engage its participants in a meaningful social activity aimed at personal and educational development.

Numerous writers from different disciplinary backgrounds have argued the importance of dialogue in promoting learning (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978; Leontiev, 1981; Elsom-Cook, 1992; Laurillard, 2002; Lipman, 1991; Jones and Mercer, 1993; Mercer 1995, 2000; Freire, 1981; Burbules, 1993; Pilkington and Mallen, 1996; Cook, 1998; Ravenscroft and Matheson, 2002; Wegerif, 2002; 2006; 2007; 2008) and this adds weight to claim that dialogue has an important role play in education. In the age of increasing commodification, it is all more important to examine the distinctiveness and merits of dialogue in education and to evaluate the contribution of various concepts of dialogue to the one put forward by this thesis.

3.2 The origins of dialogue

It is neither necessary nor desirable to come to a definition of the true essence of dialogue. As Burbules & Bruce (2001, p.1) suggest that “dialogue is a multiform approach to pedagogy” whose different forms denote specific assumptions about the nature of knowledge, of inquiry, of communication and of the ethical obligations that bind teachers and learners. As a result of this dialogue takes different forms which should prevent jumping to simplistic categorisations.

As the term dialogue derives from the Greek term *di-a-logos*, an exploration of dialogues in Greek philosophy is a necessary start. According to Hamilton (2002) etymologically, dialogue does *not* denote two people speaking with each other (the conventional use in English). Rather the Greek prefix *di* means ‘through’, thus explaining why diaphanous means ‘see-through’. *Logos* has a dual meaning. It can mean rationality but also communication or discourse. It can then be suggested that the combination of *dia* and *logos* means “reasoning-through” and the dual meaning of the term *logos* allows us to establish a link between reasoning and

communication. It seems therefore justifiable to propose that *Di-a-logos* signifies reasoning through interaction in a communicative manner and hence proposing that the emergence of rationality is mediated “through” interaction is one of its constitutive characteristics.

Following from this, a representation of *Di-a-logos*, as a model of cognition, has been put forward. Grant (1996) in particular speaks of cognitive dialogue and characterises it as a logical activity. Through this activity – in an educational context- students learn to follow the dictates of reason and to appreciate, evaluate and accept in an unforced manner the obligation to yield to a better argument. This characterisation only partially captures the nature of the process of “thinking together” which denotes dialogue in a broader sense, as it postulates the necessary convergence of the perspective of those engaging in such dialogue. What such description fails to acknowledge is that in dialogical interaction it is not simply a matter of surrendering one’s views in the recognition of the superiority of the argument put forward by others (a process more suited to describe debate as poignantly proposed by Taylor, 2011). Rather dialogue necessitates the duality of those interacting to be preserved.

Dialogue generates a new space where the views of the interlocutors respectfully join. An inter-subjective *third space* - can be created from which rigidly scripted teacher and learner roles can be abandoned. Cognition is more likely to develop through dialogue in the presence of difference that is cultivated and respected rather than overcome. While convergence of views may arise as a result of the dialogic relation, it is not forced. Such convergence is more likely to be a *fusion of horizons of understanding* (Gadamer, 1975) –where perspectives meet in a fleeting and ever developing manner and where a *dyadic oscillation* (Foster, 2007) in power between teacher and learner prevents one-sidedness.

According to Maranhão (1990, p. 10), “the phenomenal dimension of *logos* underlies any form of communication, and its isolation constitutes the first important step in the interpretation of dialogue”. While the means used to bring dialogue about can vary from oral to written, *logos* or knowledge/rationality as found in dialogue is combination of form (the expressive means) and content (meaning). If form and content are separated, the analysis of dialogue becomes a technical description.

This reading is particularly important for us to understand how the dialogue form was used in the Platonic dialogues. The connection between content and expressive form proves useful for identifying the differences between early Socratic dialogues and later Platonic dialogues. The intrinsic connection between form and content in early dialogues means that the content itself

emerges from the dialogue and it is not predetermined. Socrates offers a guiding input and one may be led to believe that he has a pre-established conclusion in mind when querying his interlocutors. Yet, he allows interlocutors to move the dialogue in a different direction and this provides evidence that the direction was not predetermined by Socrates himself. Gadamer (1980, p. 9), in his hermeneutical reading of Platonic/Socratic dialogues, describes the dynamic as that of an “eristic dialectic” which, according to Gadamer “only confounds and does not instruct”. But confounding is both a means to elicit some response from the interlocutor and also a way of admitting that the value of the dialogue as a heuristic (rather than eristic) form is in the search itself rather than in the final discovery. In the early dialogues of Plato Socrates is a co-investigator and places himself on the same level as his interlocutors in the search for the truth. In these dialogues, which end with *aporia*, there is no discovery, except for the fact of coming to the admission that the final truth of the matter in question is beyond human understanding. Watson (2005, p.79, quoted in Hare, 2009, p. 12) mistakenly associates *aporia* with scepticism, thus disregarding the educational value of leaving new avenues of exploration open and affirms:

The Socratic challenge is hopeless because it is endless; it leaves all the big questions looking ultimately insoluble...no amount of talking would help us agree on definitions of virtue or justice, and *aporia* can easily turn into a state of mind little different from total scepticism.

As Hogan and Smith (2003, p. 173) suggest, the “Socratic notion of an educated sense of one’s own ignorance” does not lead to “capitulation to relativism” but rather to “awareness of its own partiality”. Furthermore Hare (2009) aptly points out that Socrates is neither sceptical or relativist, but rather open-minded and fallibilist. In later dialogues the open-mindedness, which according to Hare (2009) characterises the work of Socrates, is replaced by a narrow teleological orientation. Such orientation restricts the scope of the inquiry to the uncovering of a specific end and the flexibility of roles presented in earlier dialogues is also greatly diminished. The notion of equality features hardly at all in the later dialogues, but an end product/knowledge is achieved in these dialogues.

Later dialogues of Plato, however, offer numerous examples of a dissociation of content and meaning and the dialogue form loses potency. They become stylistic devices for explaining theoretical concepts in detail and there is an undeniable teleological orientation in the presentation of a topic, even if masked by an apparent dialogue form. The dialogue form becomes then a technical and stylistic device.

The Socratic dialogical method has been subject to further criticism. It has been criticised for its “anti-dialogical features” (Laurillard, 2002) and Socrates’ views have been described as parochial, narrow and close-minded (Wilson, 2008, p.53). Laurillard argues that, on the surface, the Socratic dialogue is structured according to what we have come to describe as a dialogue, namely the oral interaction between two interlocutors (even if obviously we have access to its supposed written transposition). However, the uneven balance in participation of the two interlocutors in dialogues such as *Meno* or *The Symposium* has led authors such as Laurillard to interpret such dialogues as examples of “rhetorical bullying”¹⁶ (2002, p. 74). The “anti-dialogical” features are to be seen in the rigidly structured roles of the interlocutors and in teleological nature of the interaction, where the teacher has a firm hold on direction taken by the exchanges. Laurillard is critical of what she calls the “myth of Socratic teaching” (2002), claiming that it has been pushed forward under false premises. It should, however, be pointed out that Laurillard refers to *Meno*, one of middle-later dialogues, which, as discussed above represents a transition to a different use of the dialogue form. Dialogue as expressed in *Meno* may well be interpreted as “anti-dialogical” for the reasons that Laurillard presents, but *Meno* does not represent “the” *Socratic dialogue*. Burbules warns against a univocal characterization of the *Socratic Method* and suggests that “the” *Socratic Method* “can refer to several things” and it is best to describe it as a “repertoire of dialogical approaches” (Burbules, 1993, p. x). Laurillard’s critique fails to acknowledge the distinction between early and later dialogues and attaches a negative label to Socratic Method, rather than to a particular phase, or group, of the Platonic dialogues. While the apparent dynamic is similar in early and later dialogues, the outcome is very different. In earlier dialogues, even if Socrates takes the lead, he becomes equal among equals at the end of the dialogue, as he admits at the end of the discussion not to be any wiser than anyone else on the discussed topics. In later dialogue Socrates is a confident and at times arrogant rhetor (a description he explicitly abhors in earlier dialogues) who leads others to discover what he already knows and uses his rhetorical ability to show his superiority. “Rhetorical bullying” may thus be a justifiable description of this later approach.

Criticism should be more productively directed to unquestioned labelling of non-traditional teaching approaches as ‘Socratic method’, and to a certain extent, Laurillard acknowledges this erroneous labelling. This labelling has become fashionable in current educational practice, but it owes little to a firm understanding of Socratic dialogues. Interpretations and

¹⁶ Similar views on the very same dialogue are also expressed by Wegerif (in press) who labels the interaction between Socrates and the slave-boy in *Meno* as “intellectual bullying” and refers to Matuzov (2009, p.46.) who claims that he did not find “any evidence of Socrates seeking truth and learning something new in these dialogues. Rather he tried to bring other participants to something he already knew”.

misinterpretations of Socratic approaches are both present in current pedagogies, and too often almost anything goes, as critical scrutiny of what currently gets embraced as *Socratic Method* reveals. According to prevalent interpretations, embracing *Socratic Method* has become a synonym for engaging in a democratic, learner-centred process of knowledge construction. However, a concern for equality and for active learner involvement was not necessarily part of the original dialogic process in Socratic terms. In most Socratic dialogues, turn-taking is rather unbalanced, and to contemporary reader, this may be read as “inequality”. Maranhão (1990, p. 8) affirms that “from Socrates to Gadamer, symmetry of participation and goodwill have been regarded as indispensable conditions for the ideal dialogue” yet this symmetry, particularly in Socrates, never translates fully into equality as “no sooner is knowledge submitted to the scrutiny of the Socratic *maieutic* that it is revealed as ignorance” (Maranhão, 1990). However in educational exchanges productive asymmetries may be valuable to promote learning and lack of symmetry cannot constitute a sufficient basis for discarding an approach to dialogue that is faithfully Socratic.

When the equality criterion is applied to the interpretation of Socratic Method, it becomes evident that there is a high risk of producing a distorted analysis. This is not to deny the influence of Socratic dialogues on current pedagogical approaches, but it is necessary to clarify what the dialogical approach, as used in early Socratic dialogues, can bring to current pedagogical practice.

It is quite remarkable that the so called *Socratic Method* has been so influential in current teaching practices (Kessel & Korthagen, 1996; Paraskevas & Wickens, 2003; Strong, 1996; Tredway, 1995) considering that Socrates himself refused to be regarded as a teacher and was highly critical of sophists, rhetors and orators who were making a living out of teaching their skills. Yet, this unwillingness to teach makes him particularly attractive to the contemporary pedagogical reader. After a period of teacher centred and authoritarian approaches to teaching, which has lasted for several centuries, pedagogical theory has addressed the teaching and learning dynamics and has tried to re-balance the roles. Socrates uses dialogue as an exploratory form of search for knowledge and this helps to free up the roles.

The contemporary adoption of the ‘Socratic method’ appears to aim to combine features of early dialogues (flexibility of roles) with features in later dialogues (the achievement of knowledge/product). But the latter feature derives more from Plato than from Socrates himself. As Hogan & Smith suggest (2003, p.173), it is “Plato’s dissatisfaction with this recurring outcome [*aporia*], which was at least partially responsible for his decision *contra* Socrates, to

make dialogue yield pride of place in his thinking to metaphysics". The more didactic approach of the later Plato is focused largely on definite objectives. This fits well with the current preoccupation in national educational policies with demonstrable and quantifiable outcomes. This might explain why the knowledge-product emphasis of the later dialogues appears to be more popular among those who claim to adopt a Socratic method. Yet this "pick and mix" approach to the adoption of a Socratic method falls short of acknowledging intrinsic contradictions, at as these appear in the Socratic dialogues themselves.

A more fruitful contribution of Socratic dialogues to current pedagogical practice comes from the heuristic dimension of the earlier dialogues, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito* and the first book of the *Republic*. As suggested earlier in this section the heuristic value of the dialogue form is in the process itself. Learning is a process of meaning making. Gadamer (1980, p. 18) in relation to Socratic dialogues speaks of *oikeion* "an expression for that place where one feels at home, where one belongs and where everything is familiar". The learning process makes the new familiar by allowing the learner to make sense of what he/she has been exposed to. Socrates helps his interlocutors tease out concepts so that in the process of dissecting them they become familiar with what was previously puzzling or incomprehensible. The process therefore entails progression; progression towards further knowledge, but the acquisition of further knowledge does not necessarily entail the acquisition of an ultimate knowledge. Yet in engaging in such a dialogical process, learning happens, and this learning is more likely to stay with the learner as it has led to the emergence of something that, according to Gadamer "pertains" (1980) to the learner. This is a need for appropriation of knowledge which now is part of the knowledge repertoire of the learner because the unknown has become known. Yet Gadamer (1980) cautions that:

need does not cease when it is met, and that in which the need finds fulfilment does not cease to be dear to me. That which pertains to me and to which I belong, is a reliable and constant for me as everything in my household (p. 19).

A need for continuous search of new knowledge and understanding has been generated through the process. The learning that emerges from this process may not produce a quantifiable product but as Hogan and Smith suggest "neither philosophy nor education is like producing artefacts whose quality can be tested and assured in much the same way as the output of a factory" (2003, p.176).

Hogan (1995, p. 29) stresses the ethical orientation at the heart of Socratic dialogue. Socrates, he points out, believed that "what is most important for humans to learn – how we *ought* to

live- cannot be classed as the kind of knowledge that can be properly taught by instruction". But learning how to live is what makes learning worthwhile. In applying a genuine Socratic approach to educational practice, the emphasis on the inherent dynamics of the process of learning is crucial in disclosing the shortcomings of product- driven pedagogies.

The essence of the Socratic is continuous learning. If the Socratic influence is transferred to assessment practice so that assessment is seen as a dialogic form, such influence does not simply result in improved performance in terms of better grades, but in improved understanding and ultimately sustained learning.

3.3 Paternalistic conceptions of education and the eclipse of dialogue

The Socratic influence became a subterranean soon after Socrates' death. The Socratic heritage remained a significant legacy for later thinkers such as Erasmus, Montaigne, Rousseau, but mainstream educational practice moved in an antithetical direction. This movement started with Plato himself.

While the first book of Plato's *Republic* presents characteristics similar to those of other early "Socratic dialogues", already from the second book Plato's thinking comes to the fore as a rejection of the Socratic principles of dialogical interaction. Plato effectively establishes the basis for guardianship of education, by affirming that what children should be exposed to should not be decided by mothers but by an authority above them.

Then we must first of all, it seems, supervise the storytellers. We'll select their stories whenever they are fine or beautiful and reject them when they aren't. And we'll persuade nurses and mothers to tell their children the ones we have selected, since they will shape their children's souls with stories much more than they shape their bodies by handling them. Many of the stories they tell now, however, must be thrown out (*Republic* 377 c).

Plato probably offers the first example of an educational theory based authoritarian and hierarchical principles. Hogan (1995, p. 9) argues that the eclipse of the Socratic heritage "became associated at a crucial time with a conception of learning as a custodianship of heart and mind enforced by the spiritual and temporal authorities of Christendom".

According to Boyd & King (1975), the clerical monopoly of education was crucial during the period of transition between ancient and medieval and became so rooted that it lasted for

more than a thousand years. They (Boyd & King, 1975, p.101) conclude that the most obvious result of this monopoly was “the restriction of learning within the boundaries fixed by the Church’s interests and doctrines”. The scope of learning was restricted not only in terms of what the Church considered worth studying but also learning how one *ought to live* largely became learning the principles ordained by the Church¹⁷. During the long reign of this clerical ascendancy teaching was associated with authoritarian approaches and rote learning was the accepted practice¹⁸. This is far removed from the participatory engagement that dialogical interaction requires. Learning is associated more with acquiescence than with engagement and participation. However, despite the predominance of this approach a number of dissident voices emerged, with the intention of reaffirming the value of education as formation of men that had internal, not merely external sources. Those thinkers left a legacy which by the 18th Century Enlightenment managed to unsettle the predominant authoritarian and paternalistic practice.

The first dissident voice came from the Church itself. Augustine, in the fourth and fifth centuries, had advocated that the teacher should assist rather than instruct learners in their search for truth. In *The Teacher (1995)* Augustine affirms that there is an intrinsic connection between speaking and teaching and affirms that “we seek nothing by speaking except teaching” (p.94). The ensuing dialogue with his son Aedatus is an example of a process of negotiated disclosure of meaning where father and son collaboratively clarify concepts. According to Augustine students are not passive recipients of information.

Do teachers hold that it is their thoughts that are perceived and grasped rather than the very disciplines they take themselves to pass on by speaking? After all, who is so foolishly curious as to send his son to school to learn what the teacher thinks? When teachers have explained by means of words all the disciplines they profess to teach, even the disciplines of virtue and wisdom, then those who are called ‘students’ ***consider within themselves whether truths have been stated*** [emphasis added]. (1995, p.145)

If students are active participants in the pedagogical dialogue they have to interact with such information and evaluate it. This is a significant departure from the allegiance associated with authoritarian approaches to education.

Abelard, in 12th century Paris, had adopted the *disputatio* as his preferred method of teaching. The *disputatio* was in contraposition with the *lectio* which roughly corresponds to the current distinction between tutorials and lectures. The *disputatio* was reminiscent of the Socratic

¹⁷ Western Christianity largely became a form of institutionalized Platonism - springing from the seminal influence of works like Augustine’s *City of God*.

¹⁸ However it should be noted that, as signaled further down in this chapter, the “disputatio” was also an established approach to teaching and learning in some of the medieval universities.

practice as students/spectators were called to contribute to the development of the arguments presented. Aquinas also regarded the *disputatio* as an acceptable teaching method however, in his pedagogy the necessity of affirmation of the theological truth prevails despite the expansive room left for the presentation of contrasting arguments in his *Summa Theologiae*. This will characterise most of scholastic learning.

The Renaissance period did not manage to shake the prevailing clerical monopoly. The birth of European universities and the study of the classics did widen the educational offering but built on the past without significantly opening the way to new ideals. The evangelical humanism of Erasmus emerged as a voice in opposition to the orthodoxy. Erasmus resisted authoritarian approaches which diminished the opportunities for self-determination, self-knowledge and expression of autonomous power. While these ideals present similarities to the concept of freedom of conscience advocated by Luther and Protestantism, in reality Protestantism took a different direction by adopting a strong doctrinaire orientation. According to Erasmus, clerical authorities were concerned with interpreting “hidden mysteries to suit themselves” (*Praise of Folly*, 53) rather than to share knowledge with others. He was equally critical of those who learn prudence through books of antiquity (*Praise of Folly*, 29). Erasmus was promoting a fundamentally positive image of humankind and this reliance on nature was justified by his belief in intrinsic human perfectibility. More importantly he points at the necessity of sharing knowledge with others, a statement which signals a re-emergence of dialogically constructed meaning, rather than transmitted in authoritarian fashion. Men can be trusted to be masters of their own knowledge and in co-operation with each other.

During the latter half of the 16th century, the Catholic Church saw the ascent of the Jesuit movement which had been created to contain the spreading of the Reformed Church ideals. The Jesuit Movement was particularly keen to place itself against one of the core principles of the Reformed Church: the principle of self-determination. According to Boyd & King (1975)

the most distinctive feature of the Jesuit system was the deliberate attempt to suppress individual caprice, whether of teacher or pupil, by subjecting everyone to the authority of the order of the Church (p.206).

The so-called ‘individual caprice’ is a manifestation of difference and divergence from orthodoxy and its suppression signals an essentially anti-dialogical orientation in educational practice. A dialogical orientation requires self-determination and more equalitarian educational relationships built on the respect for difference. In Jesuit educational methodology lectures were the key means of instruction and students were forced “to memorize, repeat

and recapitulate, the lessons imposed on [them]" (Boyd & King, 1975, p. 207). The unidirectional orientation of lectures ensured that they remained monological activities which discouraged the emergence of dissenting voices and alternative views which could have a potentially destabilising impact on authority. This particular methodology has been prevalent up to the last century.

A number of thinkers reacted against this approach, particularly in relation to the basis on which the teacher and learner relationship should be established and how knowledge should be acquired. In the essay *On the education of children*, first published in 1595, Michel de Montaigne affirms that education should put good "morals and understanding before book-learning" (Montaigne, 1958, p. 54). This is presented as a new way of conceiving education, opposed to the usual way which is "to bawl into a pupil's ears as if one were pouring water into a funnel, and a boy's business is simply to repeat what he is told" (Montaigne, 1958 ed., p. 54). Montaigne proposes that education should start from the student, from where he or she is at, from his/her capacities. He refers to Socrates as a model of interaction with pupils "... give [a] pupil a turn and listen to him. Socrates, and after him Arcesilaus, made his pupils speak first and then spoke to them" (1958, p.55). An open criticism of the authoritarian approach is also clearly expressed by Montaigne (1958):

The authority of those who teach is very often a hindrance to those who wish to learn and he adds that

the tutor should make his pupil sift everything, and take nothing into his head on simple authority and trust (p.56).

The modernity of this conception is remarkable. Montaigne goes beyond the mere criticism of Jesuit and authoritarian approaches. He presents a theory which seeks to promote a more egalitarian relationship between teacher and student, which are based on a form of dialogue and which aims to promote understanding rather than regurgitation:

A tutor must demand an account not just of the words of his lesson, but of their meaning and substance, and must judge of its benefits to his pupils by the evidence not of the lad's memory but his life (ibid. p.53).

Not unlike Socrates, Montaigne regards the ultimate goal of education as learning how one ought to live, how to become a man, "instruction in right living [is] the most fruitful of all arts" (ibid. p.75).

Almost a century later, Rousseau in his *Emile* affirms that being humane is the first duty of men (1979 ed. P. 79). Rather than engaging in what he considers “our didactic and pedantic craze to teach children what they would learn much better by themselves” (1979, p. 102) teaching efforts would be better directed to “give our pupils only lessons in practice”. The outcome should be that “pupils are good rather than learned”. For Rousseau education is essentially linked to experience, he is highly critical of knowledge based on words, descriptions, terminology to which the child does not attach any meaning. The educator must begin with studying the child. Teaching should be age-appropriate and should give the child the opportunity to experience for himself/herself. Hence, the learner and his/her voice become central to the teacher-learner relationship, thus opening the relationship up to the multi-voicedness which characterises pedagogical dialogue.

Pestalozzi was greatly influenced by Rousseau, particularly by his child-centred and experiential approach (2004). His pedagogical ideas are mainly expressed in *Leonard and Gertrude*. This pedagogical novel depicts rural life in a small village at the end of the eighteenth century. Pestalozzi chooses as his main character and pedagogical exemplary figure, Gertrude, a mother of seven. The fact that a good example of teaching is epitomised by a mother rather than by a professional tutor is, *per se*, significant and diametrically opposed to Platonic disempowerment of mothers (*Republic 377c*) in the second book of the Republic.¹⁹ Gertrude offers an example of good practice through the education of her own children. Her children offer, with their behaviour, evidence of how successful her teaching has been. Evidence of good educational practice, then, does not come from professional educators but from a principled mother. Pestalozzi is keen to show that while Gertrude is unable to describe her method – and this is certainly a stylistic device to stress that she is not a “professional” educator – her method is highly developed. As for Montaigne and Rousseau, Pestalozzi points out that Gertrude’s “whole scheme of education embraced a true comprehension of life itself” (2004, p.130). Gertrude “never adopted the tone of instructor toward her children... [and] her verbal instruction seemed to vanish in the spirit of her real activity, in which it always had its source”. (1898 ed. p.130) In contemporary terms this methodology would be described as “learning by doing” and it is a fundamentally and empowering approach for learners.

Thinkers such as Augustine, Erasmus, Montaigne and Rousseau, more or less directly, propose a multi-voiced approach to education akin to pedagogical dialogue.

¹⁹ Plato also writes (*Republic 381e*): ‘Nor must mothers, believing bad stories about the gods wandering at night in the shapes of strangers for foreign lands, terrify their children with them’ hence assuming that mothers are not to be trusted with how they educate their children as they are likely to inculcate *doxa* rather than *episteme*.

3.4 Contemporary concepts of pedagogical dialogue

In the past philosophy has offered both an analytical key to the definition of dialogue and the means for its actualization, by using the dialogue form as a means for the development of philosophical analysis. In more recent times however, the rise of social sciences such as psychology and sociology have had a great impact on teaching and learning theory and have offered a wider basis for the interpretation and actualisation of pedagogical dialogue.

In psychological terms, dialogue incorporates activities aimed at shared knowledge construction; in sociological terms, dialogue is akin to interactive action, enabling learners to greater participation in society; in literary terms dialogue may entail interactive processes which open the reader to other perspectives and broaden the reader's conceptual horizon to enter into the dimension of the writer's intentionality. All of these activities necessitate, at least in some degree, the achievement of shared meaning.

One important contemporary contribution to the theorisation of pedagogical dialogue comes from the work of Nicholas Burbules. Burbules (1993) combines the developmental aspect present in constructivism with the contextualized element of Habermas and Freire's *praxis* that lead him to describes dialogue as a diachronic, developmental and situated process. He places his emphasis on bringing together theory and practice and, rather than talking of dialogue, he speaks of "dialogical practice" (1993, p. xi). In situating pedagogical dialogue within educational practice he also acknowledges the multi-faced nature of dialogue. He (1993; 2001) identifies 4 forms of pedagogical dialogue (inquiry, conversation, debate and instruction) and argues that specific context influences the actualization of dialogue in different forms and functions.

For Burbules dialogical practice is not a set of technical skills that enables communicative interaction. Whether dialogue is considered as a method, a process, an activity or a practice, the relationship of dialogue with its function should not encourage us to think of dialogue as "something we *do or use*" but rather like a "relation that we enter *into*" (Burbules, 1993, p. xii), thus emphasising the relational dimension of dialogue. This prevents us from regarding dialogue as a mere technical tool. Burbules warns that, while engaging in a dialogical relation requires mastering of certain skills, certain cognitive, emotional and pedagogical background conditions should also be in place in order to ensure that the means does not become the end.

Building on his earlier work and in co-operation with Bruce (2001), he further emphasises that dialogue not only is a multiform approach to pedagogy but also one that carries mutual ethical obligations. They reject Idealised norms of egalitarian, open-ended reciprocal communicative interaction and call for grounding pedagogical dialogue in the situational context, which is not simply a demise of democratic and equalitarian aspirations in terms of teachers and learners roles. Rather such features ensure that dialogue is “better attuned to the circumstances of pedagogical practice” (2001, p.17) while at the same time aiming to blur the teacher and learner roles as a result of mutual engagement in the dialogical process. Burbules and Bruce acknowledge the tension implicit in the interplay of dialogical and pedagogical relations characterised by the intention to retain difference while at same time aiming at the shared goal of learning within specific situational contexts. They sum up this tension in the following words:

We believe that educators need to think beyond these options [assimilation with dominant norms and beliefs versus rejection of what is common to preserve cultural elements and traditions at all costs], to an awareness of how a respect and tolerance for difference is necessary even when one is trying to pursue common learning goals and, conversely, how the melding and transformation of culture and language is inevitable in moments of discursive engagement (2001, p. 24)

Further contributions to the contemporary analysis of pedagogical dialogue come from the fields of adult education and distance education. These approaches have added a specific contextual dimension to the analysis of dialogue. Adult education has focused on the implications for adult learners entering an equalitarian pedagogical dialogue with their teachers (Merriam & Caffarella 1999; Brookfield, 1986). Distance education concentrated on developing educational tools and delivery modes that can reduce the transactional distance between teachers and learners. In this context dialogue has been seen as a powerful means to reduce the transactional distance and reduce the potential for misunderstandings (Keegan, 1990; Holmberg, 1991; Moore, 1997). Further analysis of the role of shared meaning in pedagogical dialogue will be more extensively presented in Chapter five.

3.4.1 Pedagogical dialogue, communication and democracy

Education is widely believed to have the power to shape society, and therefore it is not surprising that sociologists have a special interest in educational practices. Relationships in society often are an amplified version of the teaching and learning relationship.

It is important at this point to clarify the connection between education and democracy with the view to argue that the infusion of dialogue in education entails a democratisation of educational practices.

Portelli (2001) traces an important distinction between democracy as a form of government and democracy as a way of life, the latter being a key concept derived from John Dewey. He argues that these two concepts of democracy have resulted in two different forms of association between democracy and education, namely education *for* democracy and democracy *in* education. Furthermore Portelli suggests that:

While the notion of 'education for democracy' does not necessarily lend itself to democratic practices in education, the notion of 'democracy in education' implies that there is room for developing democratic practices and dispositions in education (ibid, p.280)

Therefore it can be proposed that democracy *in* education may also result in education *for* democracy, as a sort of dispositional modelling is enacted through democratic practices in education; ones that break down the barriers between formal educational environments and life. If democratic approaches to the teaching and learning dynamics are adopted in early formative years, individuals are likely to reproduce similar patterns later in life²⁰. Children who have been enabled to participate in the teaching and learning exchange more actively, have also been given experience of democratic participation, and are better equipped to successfully negotiate their participation in society.

Communication has been identified by writers such as Dewey, Habermas, and Freire as a core element of participation in society, democracy and of the teaching and learning relationship. However, communication, in order to be democratic, necessitates a two-way orientation. More significantly, such communication requires dialogue, which- unlike other forms of communicative exchanges such as debate- embodies this reciprocal orientation.

Dewey does not refer openly to dialogue, but it is possible to infer from the connection he establishes among education, communication, interaction and language – the latter understood as means for sharing experience- an unmistakably common ground with the concept pedagogical dialogue as presented in this thesis. This relationship needs to be unpacked further. For Dewey (1946), education is intrinsically connected to democracy

²⁰ Portelli and Vibert (2002), in discussing the *curriculum of life*, also point out the necessity to establish a continuum between school and life reminiscent of Dewey's theory and affirm that the curriculum of life "breaks down the walls between the school and the world. It is an approach that presupposes genuine respect for children's minds and experience - without romanticizing either"(p.39).

through communication. In *Experience & Education* (1963, p. 42) Dewey speaks at length about the need for interaction in educational processes, and considers this a characteristic of a progressive orientation. In Dewey's words: "education consists primarily in transmission through communication" (1946, p.9). This passage may appear to contradict the dialogical and democratic principle of two-way communication. However a careful reader can see that Dewey does not equate transmission to a one-way exchange. Nor should the term "transmission" be read in terms of power relationship between those in power transmitting knowledge and those receiving it as passive recipients.

Dewey acknowledges that a conception of teaching as pouring knowledge in an empty vessel should not be promoted, although he recognises that this was almost universal practice in America during most of his lifetime. He overcomes this limitation by affirming that the process of sharing experience –whether educational or not – modifies the disposition of both parties. Communication within education is therefore a shared activity and reciprocal action through which the parties involved also share meaning and influence each other. He advocates a use of language "more vital and fruitful by having its normal connection with shared activities" (1946, p.33). How the teaching and learning dynamics are structured has therefore clear implications for democratic participation in society. If shared activities have fossilized into certain habits of understanding that reinforce specific roles, there is a societal issue which is not dealt with at a deeper level and education is unable to resolve.

The impact of communication on the construction of a democratic society is also one of Habermas' main concerns. Habermas speaks of "communicative action whenever the plans of action of the actors involved are co-ordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding" (1981, p. 118). He emphasises the importance of "linguistic processes of reaching understanding (*sprachliche Verständigung*) communicative action, as the mechanism for co-ordinating action" (1981, p. 106). Communication is action and entails a democratic orientation. Interestingly, Habermas criticises Max Weber for what he describes as a "monologically conceived model of action" (1981, p. 113) which prevents him from introducing a concept of "sociological action". According to Habermas the main deficiency in Weber's conception is that social relationships are not the start of action, but rather his starting point is a means-end relation of teleologically conceived monological action" (1981, p. 114). While Habermas (1998, p.120) acknowledges that "reaching understanding is the *telos* of human language" he also warns that not all communication is aimed at reaching understanding. He differentiates between action oriented towards success- which he describes as "the occurrence in the world of a desired state" (p.118) -and action

oriented towards understanding. The former is strategic and instrumental action. The latter is what Habermas calls communicative action and is essentially social action. Action towards success is action aimed at the achievement of a specific individual goal and for this reason disregards interests of others. On the other hand in communicative action the actors overcome “egocentric calculations of success...participants are not primarily oriented towards their own individual successes” (1981, p.119). The communicative interaction requires “negotiation of definitions... [which] is an essential component of the interpretative accomplishments required for communicative action” (1981, p. 119). Habermas also brings to the fore that what appears to be social action is not necessarily action aimed at reaching understanding. An example of action that can be mistaken for social action is that of transmission-based lectures which are a social activity in the sense that they entail an audience as an essential ingredient for delivery but do not necessarily entail understanding.

Habermas’ communicative action can be regarded as closely connected to interpretation and Habermas himself regarded hermeneutics as a means to clarify, understand and interpret situations. Definitions do not arise in a vacuum but, as Habermas (1986) argues, they are generated from within a “lifeworld”. A lifeworld is an inter-subjective space and is “bound by the totality of interpretations presupposed by members as background knowledge” (ibid. 1986, p.13). Definitions can be understood and used to communicate among members of the same lifeworld because they all share “the background rules, assumptions, and commonsense understandings that structure how we perceive the world and how we communicate that perception to those around us” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 1141).

Habermas’s theory of communicative action has been read by adult education theorists such as Mezirow (1981) as clearly presenting emancipatory dimensions. Brookfield (2005) stresses the link between the theory of communicative action and human liberation through participation in equal discourse.

Mezirow (1997), building on Habermas’ theory of communicative action, generates a pedagogical-participatory definition of dialogue. Mezirow refers to a special type of dialogue that he calls “discourse” (1997). “Discourse”, as presented by Mezirow, follows the tradition of Habermas’ teaching, and is described as the method that enables us to “assess the reasons presented in support of competing interpretations, by critically examining evidence, arguments and alternative points of view (Mezirow, 1997, p.6). For both Habermas (1984) and Mezirow (1997) “discourse” enables participants to achieve shared understanding. Mezirow adds that “discourse” is particularly effective in adult education as it is “central to meaning-making” (1997, p.10) and adult education itself is a meaning making, discovery and re-framing

activity. For Habermas, discourse is rational and truthful communication which, when applied to education, has emancipatory power as it necessitates active engagement of participants in achieving a shared understanding.

Paulo Freire advocated the emancipatory power of education and of pedagogical dialogue as a means for bringing about active learners' participation. Freire provides a definition of dialogue as praxis and he sees it intrinsically connected to "reflection in action" (1981, p. 68). While "the word" represents the essence of dialogue, the word itself "deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers" (1981) and becomes empty *verbalism*. Human beings themselves are seen as beings of *praxis* (1981) as they can embody reflection in action. In educational terms human beings can bring about change and transformation by becoming active participants in the world through the knowledge they have acquired through dialogue.

Freire, from within the critical theory perspective, emphasises the tension of the dialectic relationship. In a sociological perspective partners in dialogue come for specific situational contexts that determine power relations in their exchanges. Freire (1981) offers a vivid account of how power relations can dominate pedagogical exchanges between teachers and students. His account arises from observation and intervention in the context of rural Brazil, but his observations go beyond the specific context of that analysis. For Freire "dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the word, in order to name the word" (1981, p.69). What defines the relationship between those engaging in dialogue is dialectical tension "between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those, whose right to speak has been denied" (1981). Denying the right to speak in Freire's terms means denying the opportunity to change the word and therefore to liberate the oppressed. Dialogue has as its goal "the commitment to transform" (1981, p. 68), but situational contexts determine the interactional patterns in terms of power. In education, on this account, the teacher is in a power position and his or her perspective on knowledge and sharing knowledge will determine the extent to which the student will be allowed to take an active role in the process. The societal structure pre-determines the shape and structure of the educational interaction and tensions within society are likely to be reflected in pedagogical exchanges.

3.4.2 Pedagogical dialogue and constructivism

Psychology has primarily focused on the cognitive and inter-subjective dimensions of dialogue. Educational and developmental psychologists have regarded dialogue as a means to promote cognitive development and have observed the interactional patterns of those participating in

dialogue in order to define the dynamics leading to development. Within the psychological tradition, dialogue has been associated with constructivism and social constructivism. From this perspective dialogue has been defined both as a process and as a model of cognition.

Vygotsky represents the most influential theorist of constructivism and his most groundbreaking contribution has been that of combining, in a singular way, mental with social processes. This led him to formulate a theory of learning as an inter-subjective process of knowledge construction. Vygotsky does not openly speak of dialogue. His key concept of *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD), which he describes as the “distance between the actual developmental level... and the potential development...” (1978, p. 86) is a process activated through interaction with others and therefore it has been interpreted as a process-oriented model of cognitive development. Pedagogical dialogue, because of the manner in which it entails a two-way interaction between teacher and student, presents similarities with the type of process described by Vygotsky for promoting cognitive development. Yet such similarities need to be carefully considered. Change and progression as the result of learning – the latter understood as a social activity- are key features of constructivism but also of pedagogical dialogue. Vygotsky establishes a clear link between learning, development and interaction, elements that constitute the foundations of concept of *Zone of Proximal Development*. Similarly pedagogical dialogue is an educational process in which differences between interlocutors are used productively to disclose, generate and share meaning and knowledge. Another shared feature between the Vygotskian perspective and the proposed concept of pedagogical dialogue is the attention given specifically to the learner. Vygotsky considers as the starting point of the educational relation between teachers and learner where the learner is at in terms of knowledge.

However Vygotsky's ZPD –unlike pedagogical dialogue- pays little attention to the values base of the relationship between teachers and students. This thesis proposes that pedagogical dialogue necessitates in first instance the establishment of a relationship between students and teachers based on mutual respect, trust and openness as a condition for development of learning. Without such a value base the interaction resembles more closely a mechanical -akin to behaviourist stimulus-response processes- rather than to an educational process.

Another element of Vygotsky's theory that opens it up to criticism from a dialogic perspective is the description of how the imbalance in knowledge and ability between teacher and learner is exploited to foster development. There is an implicit sense of the learner's dependency on a more capable peer, or on the teacher. While social interaction is present in Vygotsky's

constructivism, this is not expressed in sociological terms. Vygotsky refers to his theory as cultural-historical, but his analysis is more influenced by philosophy than by sociology. Vygotsky transfers the philosophical concept of development of human consciousness into his theory of cognitive development and he considers cultural and historical factors affecting the relationship between learner and teacher. However, he is not interested in a wider perspective on society. Even if he acknowledges that development and instruction are socially embedded, he is not concerned with what regulates the establishment of relationships in society. The concept of ZPD, for all its productive potential, is not framed in terms of democratic social interaction either. Vygotsky speaks of development which “proceeds not towards socialisation, but towards individualisation of social functions (transformation of social functions into psychological functions)” (1986, p. 61). Hence it seems more defensible to propose - unlike what is suggested by Bartholo et al. (2010) - that the emphasis is placed by Vygotsky primarily on the individual and cognitive rather than on the relational dimension of the interaction between teachers and students.

Similarly sociologically oriented writers such as O’Loughlin (1992) criticise constructivism (albeit without making specific reference to Vygotsky) for its anti-dialectic and anti-dialogical features. The social imbalance in the interactive process such as that presented by Vygotsky prompts O’Loughlin to argue that “differences in language usage between students and teachers, as well as inevitable imbalances in power between the two groups, make the notion of “active learning” extremely problematic” (1992, p.2). He goes on say that “despite apparently benevolent intentions, constructivism and other progressive pedagogies actually serve to *reproduce* rather than to *interrupt* inequality in our society” (1992, p.3). Interaction based on a power imbalance is considered anti-dialogical by O’Loughlin who advocates dialogue as a multi-voiced meaning- making activity. According to O’Loughlin and to many of the critical pedagogy theorists, educational conceptions which are not situated and contextualised tend to unintentionally reproduce inequalities by using the very means intended to help learning and progression. In line with O’Loughlin’s criticism Ellsworth (1989, p. 298) is concerned that even contexts which are apparently applying a dialogic approach to the classroom are “repressive myths that perpetuate relation of domination”.

Wegerif (2008) partially aligns himself with O’Loughlin in his criticism of Vygotsky’s theory. He agrees with O’Loughlin in his labelling of Vygotskian theory as anti-dialogical but he takes a more nuanced perspective and traces a distinction between *dialogical* and *dialectic* that allows him to reframe the ZPD as a dialectic process. He proposes that (p. 348) “the idea of dialogic, the idea that meaning always implies at least two voices, assumes underlying difference rather

than identity". Following Bakhtin and in contrast with Vygotsky (1986) he sees dialectic as 'a dynamic form of logic leading all apparent differences to be subsumed into identity in the form of a more complexly integrated synthesis'(p.351). He draws the conclusion that the Vygotsky of *Thinking and Speech* presents himself as a dialectic thinker who gives asymmetrical instructional dialogue between teachers a role in his theory of development. However in doing so, Wegerif fails to acknowledge the reality of educational relationships, where asymmetries exist and -if carefully exploited- may actually be productive.

It needs to be stressed that Vygotsky is primarily concerned with cognitive development and that it would be misplaced to read inequality in his theory in either ethical or political terms. Nevertheless it can be argued that the exercise of cognitive superiority may have strong ethical implications. Efforts should be directed at ensuring that the asymmetry in knowledge is exploited in such a way that does not force convergence or indoctrination, rather than at denying inequalities implicit in educational relations.

Criticism of Vygotsky's constructivism lays in the assumption that a critical awareness in terms of societal inequalities and power imbalances should have also characterized Vygotsky's model of pedagogical interaction. Critical theorists adopt an interpretative dimension which was not originally present in Vygotsky's thought, and, if a deficiency can be identified in Vygotsky's theory, it must necessarily be that of not having pushed his perspective beyond cognitive processes analysis. However, criticism of Vygotsky's constructivism can be sustained on one account. The development enabled during the teaching and learning relationship may not necessarily continue once the relationship has ceased unless a gradual movement towards autonomy is not built in the teacher-learner relationship.

In Vygotsky's conception "inequality" in terms of knowledge (he recognises that not only the teacher, but also "more capable peers" can be identified as those with greater knowledge) and therefore in cognitive terms, is what promotes development. Development, however, is not necessarily the equivalent of learning but rather affirms that this imbalance in knowledge is not sufficient. For development to occur "properly organised learning" is necessary and this in turn results "in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning" (1978, p.90). It can be added that properly organised learning is the product of the teacher's expertise and that that expertise enables the teacher to push the learner forward, hence productively exploiting his/her cognitive superiority.

If one accepts the view that equality –as a starting condition- is a necessary element of the teaching and learning relationship, and that a lack of equality is anti-dialogical, one would be prompted to think that, by virtue of this inequality, Vygotsky’s theory cannot support pedagogical dialogue. Yet, if we maintain that the main purpose of pedagogical dialogue is the development of knowledge and understanding, then, Vygotsky’s theory certainly promotes this development. While the teacher-learner relationship entails a certain degree of dependency of the learner on the teacher, it does not entirely negate the learner’s active participation in the process. What may usefully be questioned is the degree of autonomy left to the learner in the process. The extent to which the learner will be able to progress from a dependency on the teacher’s guidance to fully autonomous learning, once the teaching and learning relationship has ceased, can be queried. This is a problematic issue, particularly when Vygotsky’s constructivism is applied to adult learners.

Mercer (1995, p. 75) affirms that crucial to the quality of scaffolding activities –which are characteristic of Vygotsky’s theory - is the idea that support should be increased or withdrawn in response to the developing competence of the learner. Among Vygotsky’s critics, Ausubel (1968, cited in Yorke 2003 p. 492) speaks of “learned dependence” as a result of the Vygostkian perspective on the teaching and learning relationship. Ausubel advocates a more action-oriented version of the zone of proximal development, with the hope that the student will eventually operate more autonomously. Yorke (2003, p.492), in commenting on Ausubel’s perspective, adds that key to his conception was the idea that in order for teaching to be effective, teachers had to take into account the student’s level of cognitive development. Mezirow also speaks of the need to adopt a discourse-centred pedagogical approach to interaction between teachers and learners which takes as its starting point the “learner’s current level of understanding” (1997, p. 10).

Within constructivism, Bruner adds a more explicitly stated social dimension to the interpretation of pedagogical interactions. He conceives education as social intervention (1966, p. 38) and he links learning development to greater ability for participation in society. Black suggests (2000, p. 410) that “Bruner’s development of Vygotsky emphasises the importance of externalising one’s thoughts, producing objects or *oeuvres* which, being public, are accessible to reflection and dialogue, leading to enrichment through communal interaction”. Vygotsky had focused on “inner speech” as a way for the individual to establish a relationship between thought, language and the outside world. Bruner moves from the perspective of the isolated individual to that of the individual in community. Greater attention is paid to the learner’s involvement and level of cognitive development (which is not

necessarily to be read in terms of biological development). In Bruner's interpretation of education the joint effort of learners and teachers in the learning process plays a fundamental role. Bruner claims that:

so much of learning depends upon the need to achieve joint attention, to conduct enterprises jointly, to honour the social relationship that exists between the learner and the tutor, to generate possible words in which given propositions may be true or appropriate or even felicitous (2003, p. xiv).

Bruner's conception of education, and consequently of learning, is firmly rooted in the principle of inter-subjective interaction and for this reason learning is seen primarily as social activity.

Education is not simply a technical business of well-managed information processing, not even simply a matter of applying 'learning theories' to the classroom or using the results of subject centred 'achievement testing'. It is a complex pursuit of fitting a culture to the needs of its members, and its members and their ways of knowing to the needs of the culture (1996, p. 43).

Bruner shifts the focus from learning to the learner and the dialogue between teacher and learner also becomes a way for the teacher to become part of the student's internal dialogue. The learner is "somebody whose respect he wants, someone whose standards he wishes to make his own" (1966, p. 124). The Vygotskian inner speech is brought to surface and becomes part of the interaction between teacher and learner as the teacher makes a genuine effort to enter the learner's perspective. There is a sense of greater reciprocity in Bruner's constructivism, which lends itself to an egalitarian interpretation of dialogue even in sociological terms.

3.5 Towards a productive definition of pedagogical dialogue

The literature explored thus far shows that pedagogical dialogue is a multi-faceted concept that escapes straightforward definitions. Furthermore, attempts to define the true essence of dialogue may lead to idealistic concepts of what dialogue *should be* rather than productive accounts of what it *can be* in educational practice. This is not to say that the aspirational dimension of dialogue should be suppressed. Rather it is proposed that, from a pedagogical point of view, viability and sustainability of dialogical principles should also be considered without embracing a merely instrumental view of pedagogical dialogue.

The Socratic example offers once again a good starting point to examine the multi-dimensionality of dialogue. three core dialogic dimensions emerge from analysis of the *Socratic*. Firstly it presents an ontological dimension. At **ontologic** level dialogue is a way of being. Socrates refusal to go against his accusers and his decision to go through his execution is the ultimate test of the inseparability of views as expressed in dialogues and his existence as human being. Dialogue as embodied by Socrates and its perceived destabilizing influences on Athenian society were the cause of his death. Yet his essence as human being was dialogue and to renounce to dialogue was not to live as much as physical death.

Secondly dialogical being is being with others and the ontological dimension of dialogue necessarily intersects with the **ethical** in the Socratic essence. The probing questions asked by Socrates were not means for demonstrating cognitive superiority or to indoctrination. Such questions opened up new avenues of exploration rather than forcing convergence of views. The *aporetic* outcome of early Socratic dialogues is not simply a form of epistemic inconclusiveness, but rather it represents the recognition of limitations to human possibilities. That recognition is ethical. Socrates' partner in dialogue was left with the choice to come to his own conclusions once the dialogue has ended. The interlocutor was respected in the most fundamental way, in his difference.

Thirdly there is a **methodological** dimension in Socratic dialogues. Dialogue is not simply a stylistic form but rather a method. The interaction of Socrates and his interlocutors happens *through* dialogue. However this dimension –once dissociated from the ontologic and ethical in middle and late Platonic dialogues- becomes exclusively a stylistic device, and –as signalled earlier in this chapter- Socrates himself becomes simply a character in Platonic dialogues. For instance the imbalanced turn-taking in dialogues such *Meno*, and Socrates' interactions with the slave-boy, which forcedly lead the slave-boy to acknowledge foregone conclusions, signal the demise of the *dialogical*. Ethical relational openness, respect for difference, and divergence are lost, even within an apparently dialogical format. As signalled in section 3.2, Burbules (1993) perceptively points out that there is no single "Socratic method". It is proposed that speaking of "Socratic method' does not preclude acknowledging the possibility of its actualisation in different forms in educational practice. Rather the instrumentalisation of the methodological aspect of Socratic dialogues has led to their stereotyping and narrowing in form and scope. The instrumentalisation may have increased the appeal of the Socratic approach by reducing its form and meaning to a step-by-step dynamics. Yet the tool-like use of dialogue impoverishes the exchange and calls into question the long term value of learning resulting from such 'dialogic' exchanges.

The literature highlights a tension between authors who affirm the absolute primacy of ontological/ethical (Sidorkin, 1999; Foster, 2007; Kazepides, 2011) and those concerned mainly with instrumental dialogical practice (in relation to assessment in particular see Askew & Lodge, 2000; REAP, 2009; Carless et. al, 2010; Nicol, 2010; Price et., 2010). The positions proposed by Wegerif (online) and Burbules (2001) sit somewhere between the extremes of the ontological absolutists and instrumental practitioners. However Wegerif achieves some compromise by subsuming the methodological and the ethical under the ontological whereas Burbules takes as his starting point educational practice. He is concerned with infusing dialogical principles in educational practice.

Nevertheless Sidorkin (1999), Burbules (2001), Kezepides (2011) and Wegerif (online) all share similar views in their criticism of a purely instrumental perspective of dialogue but respond to instrumental tendencies differently.

Kezepides (2011), in arguing for education *as* dialogue affirms that ‘all learning is not learning *that* something is the case, or learning *how* to do something, but learning *to be* a certain kind of person’ (p.5). Declarative knowledge (knowledge-that), procedural knowledge (knowledge-how) are seen secondary in comparison to a more defensible ethical-ontological purpose for learning, thus underplaying the role that those forms of learning in contributing to “learning to be”. He situates his thought in the liberal education tradition and launches a critique against “instrumentalism which turns education into professional training” (p.12). Yet in affirming that “like genuine scientific inquiry, dialogue does not have predetermined objectives” (p.8), effectively he proposes a concept of dialogue which can only be partially infused in educational practice. Educational practice is driven by objectives and as long as those objectives are not narrowly specified, this does not constitute a difficulty in dialogical terms. Therefore, to completely dissociate dialogue from objectives, means limiting the viability of its infusion in educational practice. While his criticism of the prevalence of instrumental approaches to dialogue may well be justified a more subtle analysis more closely linked to educational practice is called for. Objectives may be predetermined, but objectives should not be quickly dismissed because of their pre-determination. If the objective of pedagogical dialogue is learning, this may well be pre-determined, but it can be hardly faulted in pedagogical terms. The narrowness of some pre-determined objectives may however justify criticism as it may impinge on the value base of dialogue he identifies and this is where the criticism can be more productively directed.

It is all too easy to launch criticism against instrumental approaches to dialogue. However whether such criticism is always fully justified should be examined. If we consider the term *instrumental* as meaning *providing an instrument towards a goal* and from this assume that dialogue should not be seen as an instrument towards a goal, then it can be argued that the instrument may be less problematic than the goal. If the use of a particular instrument results in learning and in the development of acceptable ways of being and of ethical dispositions, then the instrument appears less blameworthy. If the very fact of conceiving dialogue as an instrument is seen as sufficient to attract criticism, regardless to the purpose it is meant to serve, then this seems to disregard that the essence of an instrument is in its use. Also implicit in this criticism is that pedagogical dialogue should be non-teleological, and have no pre-determined purpose. Those like Sidorkin (1999) and Kezepides (2011) who affirm the primacy of the ontological dimension also appear to simultaneously affirm the necessity of non-teleological approaches to education and to criticise instrumentalism on this basis. Sidorkin (1999, p. 15) affirms that “dialogue that is being used for something ceases to be dialogue”. For Sidorkin giving a purpose to dialogue constitutes its reification. In paraphrasing Martin Buber, he affirms that a dialogue that has been used for a purpose becomes a type of I-it relationship, rather than I-Thou, the latter focusing on the relation established in the dialogical encounter whereas the former focuses on the object of the encounter. Sidorkin claims that he wants “education to revolve around the dialogical” (ibid, p.15) but in his 1993 book the explanation of how this might happen sounds more like a rather under-examined educational aim, too generic to inform educational practice.

The secret of dialogue is not in the dialogue itself. It is in the surrounding realities of everyday school life. The dialogical is a direct relation, but the road to it may only be indirect (1999, p.16)

To a certain extent then it is surprising that Wegerif associates himself to Sidorkin and states:

Dialogic is not simply a way for a subject to know about a world out there beyond the subject but it is also about a way of being in the world. Referring to an ontological interpretation of dialogic is another way of saying that dialogic education is education for dialogue as well as through dialogue in which dialogue not only is treated as a means to an end but also treated as an end in itself (see also Sidorkin, 1999)[the reference to Sidorkin appears in the original text](online, p.8)

By affirming that education *for* dialogue and *through* dialogue are facets of the ontological, he actually distances himself from Sidorkin and comes to a more productive description of the multifarious nature of pedagogical dialogue.

Burbules & Bruce (2001) criticise positions on dialogue conceived exclusively in ontological terms, which in their views 'have tended to arise from a priori assumptions that may or may not have been tested against studies of pedagogical practice' (p.2), and add

As a result, the prescriptive tradition has often neglected the ways in which idealized forms of interaction either may not be feasible in certain circumstances, or may have effects contrary to their intent (2001, p.2)

Not surprisingly Sidorkin argues that Burbules does not take the ontological dimension of dialogue seriously enough (1999). He affirms that despite writing that dialogue is a relation in which we enter rather than something that we do or use "writes a whole book about how to use dialogue in teaching" (1999, p.14). Equally it can be argued that Sidorkin does not take educational practice seriously enough.

Burbules' perspective does not dismiss the ontological dimension of dialogue completely, but rather casts doubts on a theorisation of dialogue that is disconnected from educational practice. Burbules' dialogue (2001) is firmly rooted in educational practice. This leads him and Bruce to acknowledge that dialogue "can be directed toward quite different purposes"...and different degrees of suitability for different subject matter" (p.23) offer the basis for more practically viable and pedagogically defensible concept of dialogue. It is therefore helpful to re-conceive dialogue as a discursive practice. Assessment as an educational practice should not be exempted from this aim.

It seems defensible to propose that education and pedagogical dialogue, as an educational activity, have a purpose and that this purpose is learning, in its multifaceted forms. Therefore to suggest that dialogue should not have an instrumental and teleological²¹ dimension means dissociating it from educational practice in an unproductive manner. The primacy of the ontological can be affirmed. However this should be done also with the acknowledgment that its association with the methodological/instrumental and ethical dimensions is possible.

²¹ It is acknowledged that for Aristotle, *telos* meant not just any end or purpose, but an end that was inherently linked to man's human nature. Furthermore for a Christianised Aristotelean philosophy, man's *telos* was salvation. However here teleological is used as synonym of purposeful. The term teleological was chosen as it makes comparison with Sidorkin and Burbules –who use this term in the quoted texts- more straightforward.

The history of education, as discussed in this chapter, shows that pedagogical dialogue is connected to three fundamental concepts: 1) the formation of men as an ultimate goal of education; 2) the emphasis on the continuous process of human betterment; 3) the fundamental need for inter-subjectivity as a condition enabling dialogue.

Conceiving education as a process of formation entails also emphasising the importance of human betterment. Among the factors that enable this process of development, certainly human agency is a fundamental one. Human agency in education translates as engagement in the teaching and learning process, but education is rarely a solitary enterprise and therefore engagement entails some form of interaction with others. The interaction with others - whether teacher to learner or learner to learner- is, therefore, a contributing factor to development, particularly if this interaction becomes partnership. The common background is the starting point for sharing meaning, but the establishment of an inter-subjective space necessitates co-intentionality. Dialogue epitomises this form of interaction where participants, in order to become partners in dialogue, need make a conscious effort to make themselves understood and understand what others are communicating.

Successful pedagogical dialogue then goes beyond mere communication as it entails a developmental orientation which affects all participants, teachers and learners. The communication between teachers and learners represents a conscious effort to move things forward and this effort is reflected in an educational practice that both enables and embodies such an orientation. In order to bring theory and practice closer together it is necessary to identify in what contexts and with which means this can be achieved.

The essence of the Socratic highlights the interplay of the ontological, ethical and methodological dimensions. Ontologically education should be seen **as** dialogue, ethically it should act as a catalyst **for** dialogue, and methodologically this should be achieved in educational practice **through** dialogue, understood as multi-form method. The interplay of these dimensions generates a framework not only for a theoretical model of dialogue but also for dialogical educational practice.

CHAPTER FOUR: Literature review: dialogue and educational practice

Introduction

While at a theoretical level it is widely acknowledged that dialogue in education can positively influence the relationship between educators and learners often the opportunities for dialogue are scarce. Predominantly assessment tends to come at the end of teaching and learning episodes and its finality severely limits the possibilities to engage in forms of interaction that resemble the kind of dialogue explored towards the end of the previous chapter. Combining the finality of predominant forms of assessment with the openness of dialogue seems a hopeless task. Dialogue may be criticized as being purely an “aspirational” concept in education, particularly when practice seems to be increasingly dictated by budgetary restrictions and pressure imposed by accountability demands.

Practitioners often are not consulted when theoretically driven changes are implemented and as a result tend to grow suspicious of pedagogical innovation that appears to ignore the day-to-day reality of educational practice. This thesis advocates a relationship of inter-dependence between theory and practice whereby practice serves as the basis for theory development while practice is also simultaneously being developed. In order to achieve this goal it is essential to pay specific attention to the characteristics of the context of practice and to consider how theory can be viably and sustainably infused in such a context. For this purpose, it is also important to raise awareness and appreciation among practitioners of the benefits of dialogue in education. In order to effectively analyse dialogue within assessment practice, it is necessary to further clarify the connection between dialogue and assessment and to explore the extent to which assessment can be productively and constructively associated with dialogue in the chosen contexts of investigation (distance education and in face-to-face third level education).

Section 4.1 reviews recent literature relating to assessment for learning in order to situate dialogic feedback within this assessment tradition. Section 4.2 outlines the increasing interest in feedback as a topic of investigation and in section 4.2.1 the focus narrows on the connection between feedback and pedagogical dialogue. In this section it is proposed that feedback is an assessment activity aimed at enhancing learning, and as such, it shares this common aim with pedagogical dialogue. Section 4.2.2 critically analyses recent developments in the association between feedback and dialogue emerging from the literature. The analysis examines these

recent developments through the lenses of the concept of pedagogical dialogue and education as proposed in chapter three.

In section 4.3 some contextual dimensions relevant to this thesis are explored. As the feedback analysed in first research context is given to adult distance education students, in section 4.3.1 the specific needs of adult learners are considered for the development of a dialogically infused assessment practice suited to the needs of this particular student group. Furthermore in section 4.3.2 the specific contextual limitations imposed on the establishment of relationships between distance educators and students are discussed. In this section it is also argued that problematic issues associated with “transactional distance” –which has been described by distance education theorists as one of the characterising features of distance education- are not exclusively found in distance education. “Transactional distance” can be equally found when educators interact with large groups (which constitute one of the primary dimensions of the second context of investigation of this thesis).

4.1 Pedagogical Dialogue and Assessment for Learning

From the literature a reassuring picture emerges. In a wider context educational assessment has undergone a major paradigm shift as concepts such as critical reflection, ‘learning to learn’, self-evaluation and ‘ownership of learning’ are gradually being incorporated into assessment strategies (Gipps, 1998), (Cowan, 1998), (Crooks, 2001), (Klenowski, 1996). These concepts have resulted in greater importance attributed to assessment *for* learning rather than simply assessment *of* learning (Crooks, 2001). A further differentiation has been advanced by the proponents of assessment as learning (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2006). The guidelines for classroom assessment drafted by the Manitoba department of Education describe assessment *as* learning in terms of its focus on students and the process of metacognition and self-assessment. Similar concepts are also put forward by key authors in the assessment *for* learning tradition (in particular the work of Cowan, 1998 and Boud, 1992). Given that the term assessment *for* learning has gained greater currency than the term assessment *as* learning, and considering the close similarities in the characterisation of these two assessment approaches, the ensuing analysis will refer exclusively to assessment *for* learning.

A terminological distinction between summative (assessment *of* learning) and formative assessment (assessment *for* learning) is, at this point, necessary to clarify the connection

between dialogue and formative assessment. According to Torrance & Pryor (1998) much of the differentiation between summative and formative assessment has focused on function and timing (why and when assessment happens). Summative assessment has been seen as the best means in terms of accountability for certification and formative assessment has been confined mainly to classroom activities (Black, et. al. 2003; Black & Wiliam, 1998b). While summative evaluation has mainly addressed assessment *of* learning in terms of description of student attainment at a particular time (Crooks, 2001), assessment *for* learning and formative evaluation- which can be considered interchangeable terms - have focused on learning development. Boud (2006) provides a broad definition of formative assessment as “aiding learning”, and he also places the emphasis on the developmental capacity that assessment can foster. Brown, Bull and Pendlebury (1997, p.9) affirm that assessment *for* learning “provides estimates of the person’s *current* status” and they make a distinction between assessment for judgmental and for developmental purposes. They draw a parallel between summative assessment and judgmental purposes on the one hand and formative assessment and developmental purposes on the other hand.

Studies show that the connection between learning and assessment and that the distinction between summative and formative evaluation are often unclear to practitioners. Torrance & Pryor in reporting (2001, p. 621) on a project aimed at promoting the development of formative classroom assessment and involving 10 primary school teachers, found that “teachers initially had great difficulty in relating assessment to theories of learning, or indeed in articulating personal theories of learning that they worked with in the classroom”. Similarly Hargreaves (2005) carried out a survey of 83 teachers to explore their concept of assessment for learning and 6 broad categories have emerged from his analysis. Assessment for learning in the teachers’ perspective meant 1) monitoring pupils’ performance against targets and objectives; 2) using assessment for informing next steps in teaching and learning; 3) teachers giving feedback for improvement; 4) learning about children’s learning; 5) children taking control over their learning and assessment & 6) turning assessment into a learning event. Hargreaves offers a definition in two broad categories: assessment as measurement and assessment as inquiry, where the former relates to the concept of performance and the latter to the concept of development. The definitions presented by Hargreaves are particularly interesting also because they bring to the surface teachers’ understanding of what they considered learning to be. While in the broad definition of assessment *for* learning the formative element appears to have been identified by all teachers, the link with learning development has only been established by those teachers who, according to Hargreaves, perceived assessment as a form of enquiry. The latter establishes some grounds for reinforcing

the point that if learning is seen as a process the emphasis is on how learning is brought about and on what can facilitate learning. The lack of clear appreciation of the possibility to associate assessment with learning is particularly worrying. If educators struggle to see the connection between learning and assessment, the association of dialogue with learning may take them a step too far. Therefore awareness of the benefits of the association of assessment with learning needs in first place to be raised through the promotion of assessment *for* learning, as a specific approach to assessment. This may in turn result in greater receptivity among educators towards the infusion of dialogue in assessment practice.

How learning is conceived however determines what type of assessment is chosen to fit a particular purpose. In clarifying the differences between summative and formative assessment a key distinction emerges between process and product. Learning conceived as product has led to the identification of learning as performance and of assessment as measurement of performance. Due to the growing concerns over performance-led learning among the proponents of Assessment *for* learning, this distinction has resulted in some quarters in a discarding of summative assessment in favour of purely formative assessment. Black (2000) however suggests that summative and formative assessment should become part of an integrated practice. It not unreasonable to assume that depending on how the relationship between formative and summative elements of assessment is framed will determine whether integration rather than opposition will result.

Assessment –depending on how it is structured, framed and presented to learners- has thus a strong potential to become a formative means. Race (1995, p.69) suggests that assessment for learning means that “assessment must be made part of the learning experience; if not it is time wasted”. Studies have shown (Norton, 2004; Biggs 2002) that when assessment criteria are used as learning criteria and when assessment criteria are constructively aligned with learning criteria there is virtually no separation between assessment and learning and assessment becomes seen as a form of learning. Norton (2004, p.693) affirms that:

assessment needs to be used to drive the learning process in a way that will encourage students to actually engage in meaningful learning rather than just perform the necessary assignments.

Torrance and Pryor (1998, p.8) point out that if we conceive assessment as a learning experience, this necessarily also entails focusing on the learners’ experience. Thus formative assessment, unlike summative assessment, breaks down the separation between assessment

and learning by encouraging learners and teachers to perceive assessment as an opportunity for learning.

Ultimately only assessment that has long standing effects on learners in terms of development and understanding has truly transformative power. Therefore it is not surprising that David Boud (2000) speaks of “sustainable assessment” when in fact he is referring to sustainable learning and lifelong learning. According to Boud (ibid. p. 151) sustainable assessment is “assessment that meets the needs of the present and prepares students to meet their own future learning needs”. Meeting students’ learning needs is therefore achieved through a form of assessment that enables learners to gradually gain control over their learning. Assessment in this perspective has the potential to set a process in motion that can lead to greater autonomy by promoting self-monitoring and ultimately transform those who engage in the process.

In the light of the discussion of theoretical frameworks for pedagogical dialogue as presented in chapter three, assessment *for* learning presents some points of contact between assessment and pedagogical dialogue. A closer look reveals that pedagogical dialogue and formative assessment share common principles such as the emphasis on the process (MacDonald, 1991; Carless, 2006) and the need for negotiation of meaning (Boud, 1992; Chanok 2000; Harrington & Elander, 2003; Harrington & al., 2005; Sambell & McDowell ,1998; Higgins et. al. , 2001, 2002). Negotiation of meaning in assessment takes the form of shared understanding of assessment criteria and goals (Norton, 2004; Price & Rust, 1999; O’Donovan, Price & Rust, 2000; Rust, Price & O’Donovan, 2003). Furthermore, in assessment terms, reciprocity of the process, means that both teacher and learner are affected by the negotiation process (Hyland, 1998; Taras, 2001).

It can be concluded that formative assessment and pedagogical dialogue then have a common purpose, and rather than suggesting that dialogue can be a tool or a means for formative assessment it is suggested that formative assessment, as an educational practice- should be seen *as* a form of pedagogical dialogue.

It should however be that noted some recent studies, despite fitting into the broad category of assessment for learning in terms general principles, have responded to the pressure for accountability in assessment and have brought back a narrow concept of performance which challenges the infusion of dialogue into assessment practice. Broadfoot (2002) warns against a tendency to think of quality in terms of performance and of performance as competition and

determining standards. She affirms that the “the vocabulary itself is rooted in models of industrial production” (ibid, p.287). This is a very pervasive attitude in assessment practices which equates performance to productivity. The focus on performance may produce an extrinsic motivation to meet externally imposed criteria and the closing of the performance gap may become a mechanistic activity. Assessment of performance has been associated with convergent, high-stake forms of assessment, with behaviouristically driven measurements, with ranking for selection and decision-making and last but not least with effectiveness of particular educational establishments. In practice the focus on performance is rarely formative in character and can easily foster a surface approach to learning. Students may be encouraged to meet performance criteria without internalising the criteria or learning from the assessment activities they have completed.

Watkins et al. point out (2001, p7. cited in Hargreaves 2005) that “... a focus on learning [processes] can enhance performance, whereas a focus on performance can depress learning”. At first the concept of performance appears to be in contradiction with formative assessment and, as we have seen, performance has become, in humanistic terms, a tainted word. However in recent studies performance has been connected with assessment criteria intended as learning criteria and this has promoted a conception of performance as regulative goal rather than simply as end product. This refined perspective on the concept of performance is more defensible in terms of formative assessment in its association with dialogue as it offers a broader and more fluid concept of achievement than narrow concepts of learning objectives, as it will be discussed in more detail in section 4.2.1.

Researchers like Price & Rust (1999) O’Donovan, Price & Rust (2000), Rust, Price & O’Donovan (2003), Harrington & Elander (2003) have concentrated their efforts on clarifying assessment criteria in order to increase transparency and improve performance. They have emphasised the need for closing a performance gap between actual and desired performance whereas others have focused on learners’ empowerment through improved ability for self-assessment and negotiation of meaning (Higgins Hartley& Skelton, 2001; Leach & al., 2001; Hyatt, 2005). Transparency may be empowering. It may allow the learner to engage more actively participate in the assessment process. As such should be a constitutive element of both formative assessment and pedagogical dialogue.

By focusing closely on the quality of the learner’s experience as part of the educational process, as advocated by Torrance and Pryor (2001), it is possible to rescue it from many of the negative connotations the concept has accumulated among educators. Improvement of

performance can be seen in terms of individual development. One of the teachers involved in the project led by Torrance & Pryor (2001) had rightly raised concerns in relation to the specification of quality of performance beyond the realistic levels of attainment of certain students and had suggested that the quality criteria should emerge from the dialogical interaction with individual students.

The abundance of terms such as formative evaluation, formative assessment, assessment for learning, feedback, and “formative feedback” (Juwah & al., 2004), calls for further clarification as, while close in purpose, these terms emphasise different aspects of assessment.

4.2 Pedagogical dialogue and assessment feedback

Feedback is a specific assessment activity aimed at promoting and improving learning. Precisely because of this function, it is seen as an ideal vehicle to infuse dialogical principles into assessment practice. In chapter eight it will be suggested that feedback also escapes from external accountability pressures due to its formative and non-numeric nature, hence making it an educational activity by which assessors can relate to their students more freely and equitably.

However in order to promote a dialogical approach to feedback it is essential to raise awareness among practitioners of the value and potential that such an approach may yield. As argued in chapter three, to take the *dialogical* seriously means not only to focus on methodological approaches suited to translating theory into practice. Rather it also requires raising awareness of the value of dialogue among practitioners. This entails asking them to reconsider how they build and develop relationships with their students through assessment (ethical dimension) and how they see their role in the assessment process (ontological & professional dimension). Dialogical feedback requires a substantial change in educational practice that is likely to be resisted by practitioners. Increasingly large classes and emphasis on greater productivity often limit the possibility for the establishment of quality relations among educators and students. This tends to militate against the endorsement of dialogical principles. Viability and sustainability of dialogical feedback- without compromising its ontological and ethical validity- are necessary aims that need to be inbuilt in the transformation of feedback practice.

Raising awareness of the importance of dialogue in education by implementing a viable and sustainable approach to the interaction may gradually result in greater openness and ability to engage in dialogue. Greater educators' ability to engage in dialogue may also result in a better capacity to understand learners and communicate with them, and most importantly to help them with their learning by taking their perspective into account. Furthermore if we interpret written feedback as a form of dialogue, the delayed nature of the exchange may also be used to shift the focus onto long term goals (rather than objectives) and onto the learning process rather than on the immediacy of the educational event (which is the "here and now" of face-to-face pedagogical exchanges). It is necessary to unpack the relationship between feedback and learning.

4.2.1 Feedback and learning

In the late 1990s early 2000s the term feedback started to emerge more consistently in the assessment literature. It was mostly mentioned as one of the practices associated with assessment for learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998) and it betrayed the underlying assumption that feedback was necessarily formative. In 2001 Crooks suggested that feedback intrinsically influences learners' self-perception in terms of perceived competence and efficacy and motivates them by re-engaging them with the learning process itself (Crooks, 2001), while Cowan (1998) claimed that feedback encourages a more focused learning experience.

From the late 1980's some issues, which led to problematise the unquestioned connection between feedback and learning, had started to emerge. Hounsell claimed that students were not reading feedback (1987) and this was attributed by some to the inability to understand and use feedback (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Lea and Street, 1998; McCune, 2004). In 2002 Higgins et al. were raising doubts on whether even meaningful feedback was making a difference in student learning as claimed by Black and Wiliam (1998), hence questioning the impact of feedback on performance. In 2004 the questioning of the connection between feedback and learning was brought to prominence notably by the work of Juwah et al. (2004) as part of the UK project *Student Enhanced Learning through Effective Feedback* (SENLEF), which developed a resource for practitioners wishing to improve their feedback practice.

It is at this point necessary to identify the roots of a simplistic connection between feedback and learning before examining how feedback has been reconceived in the literature to ensure to strengthen its formative power.

According to Falchikov (1995, p. 157) “the term ‘feedback’ was originally coined by Norbert Weiner in 1948 and introduced into social sciences by Lewin...”. Falchikov refers to Benne *et al.* (1964) who wrote of feedback:

it has been formally defined as signifying “verbal and non verbal responses from others to a unit of behaviour provided as close in time to the behaviour and capable of being perceived and utilised by the individual initiating the behaviour.

Despite having been written in 1964 the definition of Benne *et al.* encompassed some of the key elements that are part of the current research on feedback namely, the effects of feedback and the need for a timely response to maximize the effects.

However, in the above description, the term feedback is reminiscent of industrial and technical language and behaviour, and learning resembles a mechanical procedure. Torrance and Pryor (1998, p. 83) warned that the goal of assessment theory should not simply be construing a set of sequential procedures about formative assessment and feedback but rather shifting the focus onto the process of learning, hence moving away from narrowly conceived educational processes.

The surge in interest in research on feedback around the mid -2000, which eventually led to efforts to re-conceive feedback more defensibly in formative terms, was motivated by what at the time Gibbs & Simpson (2004) described as a decline of the archetypal Oxford or Cambridge University model of feedback “where students wrote an essay a week and read it out to their tutor in a one-to-one tutorial, gaining immediate and detailed oral feedback on their understanding as revealed in the essay”(p.8). Such a model was only kept alive by distance educators of the UK Open University, which had replaced the oral with a written format. In 2006 Weaver claimed that feedback was still an under-researched area, particularly in relation to students’ experience of feedback. Yet soon after feedback became a worthwhile topic of investigation and during the period between 2006 and 2010 it becomes one the most researched topics in assessment in the UK and elsewhere— notably thanks to the work done by David Boud in Australia and by David Carless in Hong Kong.

Yorke (2001) has argued that it is difficult to design effective feedback practices and to evaluate their effectiveness. In addition often teachers/lecturers are resistant to investing time in improving feedback as they feel that students are more interested in marks than in formative comments. Furthermore Hyland (1998) claimed that effectiveness of feedback in

improving student writing was been questioned by research and has highlighted that much of feedback is of poor quality (Price, 2007; Weaver, 2006).

While on the whole the benefits of feedback have been confirmed by research internationally (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Laurillard, 2002), the relationship between feedback and development of learning can only be described as a chicken and egg scenario. Poor feedback (i.e. with little detail and formative information) has little positive impact on students' learning, and this often underlies students' stances in attaching little importance to feedback comments in favour of marks and grades. Precisely the formative element of feedback is to be seen in the power of comments to affect future learning and completion of assessment activities.

Royston Sadler (1987, p.63) pointed out that only when the feedback loop is closed does it become formative. The feedback loop is closed when a circular process from assessment goals to learning goals is established and where feedback helps learners to move from assessment to learning via attending to recommendations made through feedback. Juwah et. al. (2004), building on the concept of formative feedback presented by Sadler (1987), further argued that the connection between assessment *for* learning and feedback could not be simply assumed and that feedback, in order to be formative, needed to present specific characteristics, which they specified in a list of principles intended to guide formative feedback practice.

Brookhart (2001, p.154) refers to the diagnostic aspect of formative assessment and points out that it provides "diagnostic information [which] can inform both students' studying and teachers' teaching". Following the line of thought of Black & William (1998), Brookhart suggests that assessment can be considered formative only if the information is used to improve performance. But also in line with Torrance & Pryor (2001), Brookhart emphasises the centrality of the role of the learner and the need for transparency in order to enable the learner to gain control over his own development and suggests:

A gap in knowledge is judged by explicit comparison to a known standard...The 'goal' is general improvement based on knowledge about what is 'out there' in academe or the workplace or life, but the application is actively sought, not deduced from a given learning target" (2001, p.168).

It is useful to think of closing the "performance gap" and the establishment of learning loops in terms of Vygotsky's influential concept of "zone of proximal of development" only if the gap is considered in terms of the development of the individual student, rather than in terms of

externally imposed performance standards. The externally imposed standard can act as regulative goal but the emphasis should be placed on the individual student's development.

Furthermore a loop is a one-dimensional figure. Rather than a loop an ascending spiral may be a more productive image of an educational process that fosters progression while at the same time continuously opening up new avenues of exploration and moving upward in terms of knowledge and understanding. However it should be acknowledged that feedback theorists should not shoulder all the blame for the narrowness of this concept. The narrowness in the formulations of learning aims into learning and assessment objectives which is now prevalent in educational practice calls for an *ad hoc* approach to feedback that fits within an already limited system. Hussey and Smith (2008) have argued that statements of learning outcomes have been misappropriated and adopted widely as devices for monitoring and audit. Furthermore Portelli and Vibert (2001, p.7) get to the core of the matter by highlighting that the root of the problem is an oversimplification of the workings of standards. They argue that such oversimplification "has given rise to movements like outcome-based education" which specifies outcomes in standardized and narrow fashion. Such standardization may lead to a neglect of the necessity to focus on students' individual learning trajectories and to favour guiding all students indiscriminately towards the same narrow objectives, which may be unattainable for some. If the emphasis is placed on the objective rather than on the individual, ironically this may depress learning.

If we read the concept of feedback loop through a dialogical lens it is problematic. On one hand having aims and goals to which to aspire may be productive. Hence providing a sense of direction to learners through feedback seems an acceptable educational goal. However in closing a loop there is a sense that once the loop has been closed an end point has been reached. It seems therefore contradictory to speak of learning as a process and to emphasise the need for forward-looking feedback if all that it does is simply to provide tools to a narrowly pre-determined objective. While certainly moving forward is desirable in education, it should be done in such a way that it does not preclude further movement.

Foster (2007) is then justified in speaking of "dialogic resistance" because in speaking of dialogue we necessarily go against such tendency to simply go with the flow of "one measure fits all". Then to associate pedagogical dialogue with feedback means to think of feedback as an opportunity to rethink the potential of feedback in a broader sense and to resist dominant attitudes and practices which reduce learning to achievement of narrow objectives.

Despite some criticisms the concept of feedback loop has been particularly influential for recent projects such as the UK inter-university FAST (Formative Assessment in Science Teaching)(2005) and the Higher Education Academy (UK) funded project “Enhancing student learning through effective formative feedback”(2006) which build on the work of Orsmond, Merry & Reiling (2002) and on the literature review carried out by Gibbs and Simpson (2004). Both projects exemplify the growing awareness of the importance of valuable feedback and the movement from feedback to formative feedback, where the addition of “formative” signifies the attention paid to the quality and effects of feedback. Both projects stress the need for translating feedback into what has been defined as “feed-forward”, where “formative assessment aids learning by generating information that is of benefit to students and teachers” (Juwah *at al.* 2004, p.3). The relatively new element added to the research into feedback promoted by these two projects is the conception of feedback not only as a retrospective activity but also and primarily as a pedagogical intervention aimed at promoting future learning by looking at where learners are at in terms of development and understanding. Feedback has been used for providing a picture of the current state of affairs in terms of students’ performance. Feed-forward, however, entails providing students with information that will help them to direct their future efforts selectively and effectively.

It has now become widely accepted that the connection between feedback and learning cannot be simply assumed. Improving the student’s learning experience is connected with the promotion of an assessment strategy whose effectiveness relies on the quality of its formative aspect. But feedback may not necessarily be formative. Higgins et al. (2002) argue that for feedback to work it must connect with students and it must promote self-analysis and reflection. Students themselves should engage with the evaluation process. Yet “students should be trained in how to interpret feedback... [and] it cannot simply be assumed that when students are ‘given feedback’ they will know what to do with it” (Sadler, D.R., 1998, p.2). Moreover “the feedback must be expressed by the teacher in language that is already known and understood by the learner” (ibid. p.5). In doing so the teacher is more likely to enable the learner to enter the dialogue, as the approachability and transparency of a language that is geared towards enabling the student to understand may be empowering and foster greater engagement. However a balance must be sought between engaging the learner and providing him with information that gives an accurate yet constructive perspective on the current level of learning displayed through assessment. Natriello (1987) aptly points out that, even if well intentioned- mixing together an uncritical appraisal of effort with an appraisal of performance may be detrimental to the advancement of learning.

In the past 10 years the flurry of feedback research activity has resulted in number of principles for good assessment practice (Nicol & Macfarlane Dick, 2006; Oxford Brooks FDTL5 Project, 2008; Assessment 2020, 2010). However the translation into practice of the numerous lists of good feedback practice principles still seems to lag behind. Gibbs & Simpson (2004) report on a study carried out by Maclellen (2001) who surveyed 130 students and 80 lecturers at the University of Strathclyde about their perceptions concerning assessment. Amongst the 40 questions asked, four were about feedback and these revealed wide discrepancies between students and lecturers. While most teachers responded that feedback is frequently helpful in detail, frequently helps students to understand and frequently helps learning, most students responded that feedback was only sometimes helpful in these ways. 30% of students reported that feedback never helps them to understand. While 63% of lecturers responded that feedback frequently prompts discussion with a tutor, only 2% of students responded the same way and 50% of students responded that feedback never prompted discussion. A general dissatisfaction with the quality of the feedback received was also recorded in the UK National Student Survey (NSS, 2005-2009; [http: www.unistats.com](http://www.unistats.com)) .

In 2012 a similar survey was carried out by Dublin City University Teaching and Learning committee, distributed to both teaching staff and students (127 staff and 216 student responses) across 4 faculties. It reveals that 14% of the student respondents did not receive any form of feedback and that 80% affirmed to have received feedback only through the provision of marks. Furthermore the student respondents commented that the feedback they receive is mostly unhelpful to improve performance. Unsurprisingly teaching staff report on their difficulties due to lack of time, large class sizes, but they also mention the lack of student engagement in receiving and using the feedback. As a result of these outcomes a working group was set up charged with the responsibility for drafting a University wide titled *Feedback to Support Student Learning Policy* to improve the quality and clarify the purpose and role of stakeholders in feedback provision. While it is certainly positive to see that the importance of feedback is being recognised and that action has been taken to devise guidelines to inform practice, nevertheless the outcomes from the surveys show that issues identified in the 2001 University of Strathclyde survey 11 years earlier and more recently in the UK National Student Survey are remarkably similar. The persistence of the issues clearly identified by the literature signals that a disconnect between theory and practice still exists. Margaret Price et al. in a recent article (2010) warn that while students are dissatisfied and staff are frustrated about the way the feedback process is working we should not rely simply on crude measures of effectiveness of feedback as those employed by external reviews or surveys as they tend to regard feedback merely as a 'service'. Interestingly Price et al.(2010) put forward that the

resolution “requires a dialogue between players in the process in order to share understandings of the purpose of feedback which are most relevant in higher education and how those can be met” (p. 288), hence advocating, in this case, a sort of systemic dialogue. Similarly Hounsell (2007) suggested feedback should be more fully embedded in institutional structures and strategies if its effectiveness is to be maximized and optimal use encouraged.

4.2.2 Towards dialogic feedback

A search on the Educational Database ERIC reveals that the connection between dialogue and feedback has remained largely ignored until around 2008. The emergence of the association of dialogue with feedback around this time appears to coincide with the persistent dissatisfaction among students with feedback, despite a saturation of research arena with lists of good practice principles. Prior to 2008 some researchers (Hyatt, 2005; Bryan & Clegg 2006; Swinthenby et. al.,2005; Torrance & Prior 2001) had advocated in generic terms the encouragement of dialogue in learning and assessment and had regarded feedback as a potentially dialogical process. However it is worthwhile concentrating on substantial contributions to the conceptualisation of feedback in dialogic terms.

In 2000 Askew & Lodge in the first chapters of their book titled *Feedback for Learning* suggest that writing a book on feedback, which at the time they described as “a small notion” (p.1), seemed as an almost unjustifiable enterprise. Yet not only they devote the whole book on the topic –albeit with a strong focus on classroom-based feedback and on feedback as a means to organizational school development- but they are among the first proponents of the connection between feedback and dialogue. They write:

we adopt a broad **definition of feedback which includes all dialogue** [emphasis added] to support learning in both formal and informal situations. We argue that this dialogue will be influenced by different views of learning and we need to explore feedback alongside associated beliefs about learning, to consider how feedback can be most effective in promoting learning (p.1).

In order to explain how feedback interacts with learning and dialogue they refer to three learning theories and they derive from each theory a specific model of feedback. They consider the *receptive-transmission* the dominant model and argue that feedback given within this framework tends to be exclusively judgmental and reliant of the teacher expertise. The teacher imparts knowledge and the underlying concept of learning is primarily cognitive-based and emphasis is placed on increasing understanding of new ideas and on practicing of new

skills. Feedback in this perspective is seen as a gift from the more knowledgeable. They also term this type feedback *killer feedback* as they do not see it as developmentally oriented. A more satisfactory framework, according to Askew and Lodge is offered by constructivism, as they see constructivism depending on the development of teacher-student relationships, and as such, as also oriented towards the more egalitarian interaction. The feedback provided within this framework is termed *ping pong*. Askew and Lodge acknowledge the dynamic relationship that constructivism entails and argue that feedback in this perspective “moves away from evaluative judgments” (p.10). However- like Wegerif (2008), they also suggest that the dominance of the teacher in the interaction with the students remain unchallenged and they see this as a deficiency in terms of moving towards a more dialogic practice. They see co-constructivism –which they associate perhaps too simplistically with Paulo Freire- as the true foundation of dialogic feedback and they argue that within this model.

there is a shift from stress on individual responsibility for learning to a more collaborative view, allowing learners to identify issues in their organization and society...and to act to bring about changes”(p.11)

They advocate replacing the interaction between teacher and students with peer interaction the most suited means to translate the dialogical in assessment practice. Within this perspective -which in Askew and Lodge leads to dialogic feedback and to reflective processes- interpretation and reorganization of knowledge, the teacher is almost entirely removed from the equation and his primary role is that of instigating dialogue between and with his students (p.12).

Feedback then is seen as “effective in supporting learning” and Askew and Lodge affirm that this feedback *is dialogue* and it formed by loops that connect all participants (p.5). The discussion presented by Askew and Lodge is interesting on different counts. Firstly, they criticise transmission models of feedback which over-rely on judgment and do little more than summing up performance. Secondly they highlight that constructivism, despite its merits, tends to hold on rigidly pre-determined roles. They see the reliance on the teacher as the centre of the educational relation as a problematic feature of constructivism and they point at the potential for creating student dependency implicit in this learning theory. Thirdly because they set dialogue as an ultimate goal and they see feedback *as* dialogue. However in their attempt to move towards feedback *as* dialogue they demand a Copernican revolution – requiring students becoming teachers and teachers becoming students- in terms of roles in the educational relation which may be only aspirational if more systemic changes do not happen in the surrounding educational environment. Furthermore the model of feedback *as* dialogue

that they propose seems more suited to classroom environments where such de-centering of the teacher's role can be more easily achieved through emphasizing peer-interaction. It also remains questionable whether the extent of de-centering they advocate is entirely desirable and viable. The teacher is part of the classroom activity in virtue of his/her knowledge and expertise. Concentrating on how this knowledge and expertise is put to the service of learning seems more crucial than almost completely removing the teacher from the feedback equation. The suggestions made by Askew and Lodge are nevertheless a significant contribution to the re-conceptualisation of feedback in dialogic terms but appear to fall short in offering a fully viable framework, particularly when feedback is considered beyond the context of classroom interaction.

In 2006 Juwah et al. build on Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick 's (2004) good feedback principles and once again re-propose the association of feedback and dialogue as part of the research carried out for the Higher Education Academy (UK) funded project "Enhancing student learning through effective formative feedback" (2006). Juwah *at al.* (2006. p.7) also take into account ideas presented by Askew and Lodge and affirm that:

one way of increasing the effectiveness of external feedback and the likelihood that the information provided is understood is to ***conceptualise feedback more as a dialogue rather than as information transmission*** [emphasis added]. Thus, the dialogical process arising from feedback is conceptualised as two-way arrows that links "external processes to those internal to the student" (*ibid.*, p.7).

However in a later explanation of the relationship between dialogue and assessment by some of the key authors of this project propose:

One way to increase the effectiveness of external feedback and the likelihood that information provided is understood is to conceptualise feedback more as dialogue rather than as information transmission. However with the current growth in class sizes, this can be difficult for the teacher to engage in dialogue. This is where technology can play a crucial role (Nicol & Milligan, 2006, p.70)

The ensuing discussion seems to shift onto discussing how technical means can be employed in the classroom to elicit a response from students and dialogue itself becomes gradually conceived as a tool. Nicol and Milligan add that "dialogue can also be used to make objective tests more effective when delivered in online contexts" (p.71) and go as far as stating that "samples of discussions"²², can be archived by the teacher to serve as a form of feedback as model answers with subsequent cohorts". Feedback in this description is far removed from

²² Please note that Nicol & Milligan treat the term "discussion" and "dialogue" as synonyms.

the dialogical advocated in chapter three. It is, exclusively instrumental, does not involve a relational component and fails to acknowledge that dialogue requires active participation and respect for the uniqueness of the individual student. Hence what is suited to one cohort of students may not be suited to the next one.

Dialogue also appears among the FAST (Formative Assessment in Science Teaching, 2005) codes used for categorising tutor feedback, building on the work done on feedback conditions by Gibbs et al. (2003) and on principles of good feedback provision by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004). Unlike Juwah *et al.* (2006)- who had chosen similar theoretical bases- dialogue is potentially seen as a feature -albeit in problematic terms- of feedback comments. However even in later elucidations of the tenets of this project by Brown and Glover- two of the main researchers of the FAST project- it is not clear how feedback (2006, p.84) encourages dialogue as they do not provide further clarification of how they conceive dialogue. While the contribution of the FAST project is valuable in terms of the association of written feedback with dialogue, dialogue has become something promoted through feedback. Hence the FAST project moves away from conceiving feedback *as* dialogue in the direction of feedback *for* dialogue, also implicitly affirming that dialogue is not an intrinsic dimension of feedback itself.

Recent developments on the association of dialogue and feedback seem to have moved in a similar direction. The 2008 UK project *Engaging students with assessment feedback*, places great emphasis on the relational dimension of learning and of feedback and implicitly affirms the primacy of the ethical dimension of education. Such dimension is further emphasized by more recent contributions by the authors of this project (Price & Millar, 2010). They propose that:

The relational dimension involves dynamics of trust and of credibility of the tutor's grasp of the content. A particularly important aspect of the relational dimension is the potential for dialogue...We argue that the relational dimension of feedback is just as important as the content of feedback (p.12)

In referring to feedback for dialogue however Price and Millar choose a narrow definition of dialogue as oral dialogues, hence precluding the possibility of conceiving written feedback as dialogue or for dialogue. This becomes evident when they affirm:

The risk for educationalists is that feedback may be over-simplified by being reduced to tangible products such as written feedback sheet to the neglect of the processual aspects such as dialogue.(ibid.)

Dialogic feedback appears to be advocated but when its description is unpacked it almost consistently emerge that it is a viable educational practice only if associated with oral interaction (Price,2007 and 2010) and with peer interaction (Nicol, 2006; 2009). Similarly Careless et. al. (2010) is critical of written feedback, which he labels as a one-way form of communication (p.2). He proposes what he terms “sustainable feedback” and explains that sustainability is linked to the gradual and increased ability of students to self-assess. He sees sustainable feedback to be intrinsically linked to “dialogic feedback”, which he describes as “an interactive exchange in which interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified” (p.3). The discussion he presents resonates with constructivist theory, which, as aptly pointed out by Askew and Lodge (2000) and in an earlier analysis presented in chapter 3 of Vygotskian tenets, is not without problems when associated with dialogic feedback and the development of self-directness.

A clear movement towards dialogic feedback emerges from recent literature. However the narrowness of the concept of dialogue found in these recent developments seems to indicate a neglect of the ontological dimension and only a partial acknowledgment (by some) of the ethical dimension of dialogue. Oral dialogues can be more conducive to the sharing of meaning and reciprocity advocated by the proponents of the association of dialogue and feedback. However educators’ orientation towards their students is more crucial to dialogical interaction than the means by which feedback is provided. By focusing on the means, the potential that feedback may yield is only partially exploited.

4.3 Contextual dimensions of dialogue

Both adult and distance education – two core dimensions of the first two phases of research for this thesis- reserve a special place to pedagogical dialogue. They both emphasise the importance of dialogical interaction between teachers and learners in order to foster life-long learning and establish communication among equals. Distance educators, out of necessity, have been resourceful in finding and exploiting opportunities for dialogue to overcome the barriers to communication generated by physical and temporal distance. The need to take down the barriers has meant that many of the distance education developments over the past four decades have been aimed at reducing the distance by increasing communication and dialogue between teachers and learners. Virtual learning environments have offered a great opportunity for increased transactional presence, but technological means do not represent

the only opportunity for effective communication in the interaction between distance educators and learners.

Similarly if we look at how adults learn, elements such as autonomy and personal control, prior learning experiences and the need for equalitarian and dialogical interactions with educators appear to be defining characteristics of the learning experience.

There is an increased need to incorporate elements of adult and distance education in more traditional third level environments. In recent times distance and adult education have gradually started to influence more traditional face-to-face learning. It can therefore be suggested that pedagogical dialogue as a core feature of distance education (Moore, 1986) may also become an increasingly influential concept in face-to-face education.

If we consider the interplay of adult and distance education with formative assessment and feedback, this is still a largely under-explored area of research. Most studies on formative assessment and its impact have focused on the teacher interaction with school children or with traditional undergraduate students (Torrance and Pryor 1998, Saddler ,1989, Black 1993, Wiliam & Black 1998b) where assumptions on prior knowledge and cognitive development are straightforward. In distance education contexts however, a large proportion of learners are adults, hence special attention needs to be paid to designing dialogically infused assessment practices that are also suited to the needs of this group of learners.

4.3.1 Dialogue and adult learning

Adults are often willing participants in dialogical interaction. Nevertheless dialogical interaction should allow adults to preserve their individuality hence not forcing convergence of views. This is particularly important in assessment where the power inequalities that characterize the relationship between assessors and assesses can negatively impact on both learning and self-affirmation of adults.

Merriam & Caffarella (1999, p. 399) suggest that “learning in adulthood can be distinguished from childhood learning by the way in which the learner, context, and some aspects of the learning process blend in adulthood”. There is greater complexity in adult learning which is often unacknowledged (Brookfield, 1986). Simpson (1980, cited in Brookfield 1986) clarifies that the two distinguishing characteristics of adult learning most frequently advanced by

theorists are the adults' autonomy of direction in the act of learning and the use of personal experience as a learning resource.

Knowles (1973), in the attempt to differentiate between pedagogy and adult education, proposed the influential concept of "Andragogy". The andragogical model was based on the basic assumption that different pedagogical approaches should be taken when addressing children and adult's learning. Knowles has attempted to identify the defining characteristics of adult learning in terms of adults' need to know, adults' self-concept, role of prior experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning and motivation. However his conception does not go beyond the provision of "principles of good practice" (Hartree, 1984, cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 273) and presents an unsophisticated conception of autonomy. Knowles links autonomy to self-direction and assumes self-direction an implicit condition for adult learners. But self-directness and autonomy cannot be assumed to be implicit characteristics of being an adult. In adult learners a dilemma between an assertion of autonomy and dependency on the teacher can be often witnessed and, as Brookfield affirms (1986, p. 26), "self-direction in learning is not an empirically verifiable concomitant of adulthood".

There is strong tension between the need for autonomy and the ability to exercise autonomy. Adults can be perfectly autonomous in terms of their ability to function in work and family and other social environments. But when it comes to structured learning environments, and particularly learning that entails any form of assessment as part of the learning process, it is common to witness a lack of confidence and self-reliance. Often adult learners bring with them a greater level of anxiety and insecurity, particularly if they are returning to learning after a long absence. The concept zone of proximal development, as proposed by Vygostky (1978) and discussed in chapter three, can be questionable in terms of its suitability in the context of learning experiences designed for adult learners. Its questionability can be derived from the potential of this approach to foster learner's dependency on the teacher, hence diminishing the potential for development of autonomy. Therefore assessment theories which originate from a Vygotskian perspective may result in unsuited approaches to assessment for this group of learners, if careful attention is not paid to learner autonomy as a constitutive element of adult education. This means that guided processes of knowledge-sharing and construction through assessment should carefully balance development and fostering of autonomy.

As argued by Mezirow, in order to foster autonomy in adulthood, it is important to design and implement learning scenarios that turn prior life experiences into opportunities for further learning. Mezirow (1997, p. 10) links learning to experience and in relation to the education of

adults argues that “to become meaningful learning requires that new information is incorporated by the learner into an already well-developed symbolic frame of reference”. Mezirow (ibid.) speaks of frames of reference as influencing adult learning and proposes that “frames of reference are primarily the result of cultural assimilation and the idiosyncratic influences of primary caregivers” (ibid. p.6). The frames of reference arise from one’s own life experience and may have a strong influence on the learning orientation.

Ultimately Mezirow aims to foster what he calls “transformative learning” which is a widening of frames of reference. Implicitly Mezirow suggests that transformative learning is more likely to be achieved through dialogic engagement with others, aimed at testing underlying assumptions of those engaged in pedagogical exchanges and at reaching an understanding of meaning. He affirms that (ibid. p.7) “we learn together by analysing the related experiences of others to arrive at a common understanding that holds until new evidence or arguments present themselves”. Learning is seen as a social phenomenon which is dialogically enabled and developmentally oriented. Transformation happens as a result of a process that starts from the current level of understanding of the learner and progresses through exposure to other frameworks of reference and reflective engagement.

Social learning theories that emphasise the need for dialogical approaches to teaching and learning have also established a strong link with life experience. According to Wildemeersch & Jansen (1997, p.2) “social learning is action- and experience oriented, it is critically reflective... it is interactive and communicative, which means that dialogue between people involved is of foremost importance”. Remarkably social learning brings together life experience as the basis for knowledge-oriented action through dialogic engagement. Wildemeersch & Jansen in their discussion of social learning identified the “dialogical principle” as one of the key principles. Social learning, given its multi-actor orientation, is based on co-operative principles of shared meaning construction, but meaning construction in adult education is seen as a ‘reflexive appropriation of reality’ (Hurrelmann, 1986, cited in Wildemeersch & Jansen 1997) that allows educators to adapt contextual elements to the needs of the learners. There is however a danger in a dialogically oriented activity of meaning construction. The sharing of meaning arises from heterogeneity of selves of those engaged in the pedagogical dialogue and teachers and learners may not share the same experiences. The dialogic interaction may fail. In adulthood there is a process of individuation (Moore, 1986, p.8), each adult has become a fully developed individual and each individual is different. This process of individuation needs to be safeguarded against educational practices which might force it towards homogeneity.

4.3.2. Dialogue in Distance Education

Distance education shares many core themes with adult education and vocational education. For over four decades it has borrowed theoretical frameworks from germane fields and has struggled to establish itself as a separate discipline and to produce sound theoretical frameworks of its own.

Originally, models of distance education were strongly influenced by industrial production techniques (Peters, 1994b), where the emphasis was not on pedagogical theories and their implementation, but rather on organisational concerns in terms of delivery of instruction. This has led to the proliferation of practice-based case studies poor in evaluative terms. This in turn has resulted in a deficient development of theoretical foundations of distance education. However it is significant that from the late '80s to mid '90s the contribution of theorists such as Holmberg (1986) and Moore & Kearsley (1996) and the appearance of interactive technological means have brought about a shift of focus from organisational concerns to educational issues associated with the teaching-learning transaction. Specifically, "concerns regarding real, sustained communication, as well as emerging communication technology to support sustained communication anytime, anywhere" (Garrison, 2000, p. 2) emerged.

Holmberg (1986, p. 7) theorised distance education as a communication process, and suggested that if the teaching-learning process had the character of a conversation, then the students would be more motivated and successful. Holmberg describes distance education as "guided didactic conversation" and refers to both self-instructional materials written with a dialogic approach and to interaction between teachers and students and among students. In his conception the guided didactic conversation is an effective response to the deficiencies of non-contiguous communication and "appears to be a type of education in its own right" (ibid. p.9). According to Holmberg "the presence of the typical traits of a conversation facilitates learning" and describes "dialogue between student and teacher as the critical defining aspect of distance education" (Holmberg 1996, p.202). For this reason, among others, an exploration of the various forms of dialogue in distance education is justified and might also shed light on the learning process. Garrison (2000, p.8) however gives a narrow reading of Holmberg's theory as he interprets the concept of "guided didactic conversation" as only applicable to written self-instructional texts. Accordingly, Garrison labels self-study learning as one-way communication and its dependence on written communication as seriously constraining and limiting the role of conversation. In Garrison's perspective the written word and two-way communication appear to be incompatible. Moore (1986) moves further away from

organisational concerns and with his theory of 'transactional distance' takes a psychological turn moving towards the establishment of a theory of distance education with more solid foundations. According to Moore (1997) in distance education:

the separation between teacher and learner is sufficiently significant that the special teaching-learning strategies and techniques they use can be identified as distinguishing characteristics of this family of educational practice (p.22).

One of the key features of distance education is that of flexibility, and flexibility in many distance education scenarios has meant no mandatory requirements for attendance to lectures or tutorials. This also means that teachers/tutors may never meet and the opportunity for pedagogical encounters can therefore be scarce. Distance education teachers/tutors in such circumstances have to be resourceful in exploiting any possible opportunity for teaching and communicating with learners. A great part of the communication between teachers and learners has its focus in assessment and distance education is no exception.

Moore affirms (1986 p.1) that distance education is defined on the basis of two critical factors: 1) structure and 2) dialogue. The interaction of these two variables determines the effectiveness of distance education and the effectiveness is evaluated in terms of reduction of transactional distance. Moore argues that distance education poses a particular challenge in terms of teaching and course delivery due to the separation in space and time between teachers and learners. The transactional distance is a space where the interplay between tutors and learners is mediated and delayed. This separation creates a transactional distance, a space for interaction between teacher and learners which can be filled with misunderstandings. What defines distance education is the combination of physical, temporal and psychological separation. According to Moore (1986, p. 4) the physical separation is not really the problem as "the meeting of teacher and learner ... does not have to be a physical meeting, but rather... a *meeting of minds*". The real problem, according to Moore, is that of a psychological separation. 'The establishment of bridges' is a particularly difficult concept in distance education as the physical distance leaves a communication gap, "a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the behaviours of instructors and those of the learners" (Moore & Kearsley 1996, p.200). Nevertheless it can also be argued that while physical distance may be seen as a defining characteristic of distance education psychological distance may also characterize the interaction between educators and students where, for instance, institutional roles of learner and teacher can lead to power relations negatively affecting the interaction, or where large class sizes limit the possibility for personal exchanges.

Physical distance does not necessarily result in psychological distance and physical presence does not result in greater psychological presence.

Shin (2003, p. 69) has turned around the concept of transactional distance presented by Moore and speaks of the need to foster “transactional presence”. In her model communication and dialogue in distance education should aim to create the perceptual illusion of non-mediation. It can be argued that a great part of the developments of distance education can be read in terms of the means to improve communication and dialogue. Advancements in technology and the growing use of virtual learning environments – both synchronous and asynchronous- in distance education offer greater opportunities for creating a perceptual illusion of non-mediation.

It is important to stress that distance poses limitations to the opportunity for teachers/tutors to get to know their learners and it makes the task of tailoring teaching to the learners’ needs more complex. However the need for transactional presence can be stressed regardless of the context of interaction. The introduction of a stronger emphasis on interaction between student and educator should improve learning while also intrinsically acting as a motivating factor and reducing the “transactional distance”.

Morgan & O'Reilly (1999) argue that distance learners are often being turned into essay processing machines and were forced into a sort of automatic product-oriented, routinised, grade-led study cycle. If their evaluation is accurate, then such tendency needs to be resisted, because it contradicts the principles of good adult education, formative assessment and ultimately of dialogic education. In the British and Irish distance education systems, despite the growing introduction of computer-mediated communication, the communication in the form of written feedback on assessment activities is still a key element of the teaching and learning activities of distance education educators. Written feedback is one of the main forms of one to one and personalised communication between distance educators and students. As such it has the potential to increase the transactional presence, and build relationships, particularly if a dialogic approach is adopted.

Conclusion

In order to establish a clear link between dialogue and assessment feedback in the particular context of analysis explored for this thesis, it is essential to expand the conventional concept

of dialogue and identify features shared by pedagogical dialogue and feedback. Dialogue, for the purposes of the current research study, is interpreted as a mediated and negotiated activity of knowledge construction, as in its original etymological definition of *reasoning through in co-operation with others*. While recent literature highlight a movement towards more dialogical practice, it has been argued that the concept of dialogue that underpins such practices is not sufficiently nuanced to substantially transform feedback practice.

Dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback practice among students signals that practice still lags behind and a more radical transformation is called for.

While knowledge itself is not solely constructed through dialogue, dialogue enables its participants to share knowledge and in so doing, helps to promote shared understanding. In most education contexts, a great part the communication between teachers and learners focuses on assessment. Often assessment drives learning and for this reason, rightly or wrongly, assessment is a core concern for both teachers and learners. In distance education and large face to face classes a great part of the exchanges between teachers and learners on assessment takes the form of written feedback comments on completed activities. Yet in many cases this is a missed opportunity for fostering a dialogue between teachers and learners.

As suggested by Yorke (2003, p.245) “The exchanges between teacher and student are – in an ideal world – mutually hermeneutic, in that each is seeking to interpret and understand the communications of the other with the aim that the student will become better equipped to deal with future challenges of varying kind”. Feedback on assessment has the potential to establish this hermeneutic relationship. But sharing meaning is often a problematic activity, particularly in distance education and with large face to face classes where the separation –not only physical- between teachers and learners leaves even greater room for misunderstandings.

According to Freire (1981, p.61) dialogical relations are indispensable to the capacity of cognitive actors to co-operate in perceiving the same cognizable object. But this entails a shared interest in achieving reciprocal understanding and willingness to share knowledge. Therefore the success of dialogical interactions in distance education is dependent of two key factors: 1) the orientation of those involved; 2) the ability and willingness to share knowledge.

This shared interest cannot be assumed from either part. It needs to be fostered by raising awareness among teachers and learners of the potential of pedagogical dialogue in breaking down the barriers and promoting life-long learning through assessment. Specific measures need to be put in place to initiate this process and the empirical research undertaken for this

thesis will outline in chapter six, seven and ten how the dialogical has been infused in assessment practices.

CHAPTER FIVE : Dialogue as disclosure of meaning

Introduction

Education and dialogue are social activities, and as such, they are carried out in exchange and collaboration with others. Dialogue epitomizes social activities enabled through language and in its pedagogical form is also a meaning-making (Wells, 1999) and a meaning-sharing activity. Interlocutors in pedagogical dialogue need to be capable of speech action that enables them “to understand a linguistic expression in an identical way” (Habermas, 1981, p. 142) in order to develop shared understanding. An exploration of how meaning is disclosed and shared is therefore important for the understanding of any communicative activity, but more so for the understanding educational processes where “making meaning” represents the essence of learning.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1996) suggest that education, more than any other activities, is a “manipulation of words”. The terminology used by Bordieu and Passeron reveals the critical tenor of their argument and their condemnation of what they conceive as dominant anti-democratic discourses in education. Nevertheless it also signals that language has an important role to play in education. How language is used is crucial to both the establishment of educational relations and to promoting learning. It is therefore necessary to devote specific attention to the role of language and its interplay with educational roles, processes, activities and contexts. It is also important to outline the linguistic considerations that need to be taken into account when moving towards dialogically infused assessment. The chapter proposes that in taking a dialogical approach to educational practice, pedagogical choices should be made in full awareness of the damages that an uncritical use of language may generate and which may ultimately contradict dialogical and democratic principles. Furthermore the discussion expands the traditional concept of dialogue as oral communication to also encompass the use of written language as a means for dialogical interaction within assessment practice.

This chapter builds on the discussion presented in chapters three and four and further contributes to setting the background for the development of a theoretical framework for dialogically infused assessment. Section 5.1 examines the interplay of language and meaning in order to identify how language facilitates but also influences learning experiences. In the same section, the analysis will then proceed with the exploration of factors that may interfere with meaning disclosure. The implications of such factors are examined in relation to disclosure of meaning in assessment. It will be shown that, despite the availability of many potential

meanings, education tends to validate a narrow repertoire of meanings, hence also potentially forcing convergence of interpretations. Section 5.2 focuses on the role of interpretation in disclosure and sharing of meaning. It expands the concept of pedagogical dialogue beyond oral communication and outlines the contribution of hermeneutics in elucidating how meaning is created and interpreted from written texts. Finally section 5.3 presents an initial exemplification of how the discussion on sharing of meaning and meaning-making can be drawn upon to embed dialogical features in assessment feedback. In this section it will be argued that assessment roles should be reconsidered in order to allow for greater flexibility and mutuality among those engaging in dialogic assessment relations.

5.1 Pedagogical dialogue and sharing meaning

If dialogic principles are taken seriously in education, the interaction between teachers and students should take the form of a dialogic and democratic two-way exchange. As pointed out in chapter three and four, this too often is not the case and the matter is further complicated by the fact that the type of dialogue that enables progression in education is not simple conversation. Unlike conventional conversation, pedagogical dialogue necessitates that “each step forward makes possible a further step forward” (Lipman, 2003, p.149), hence some planning and a sense of direction is inherent to it. Dialogue as a core dimension of pedagogical practice is a social, purposeful and structured²³ process. The *telos* of such process is learning and pedagogical dialogue, as an educational activity, therefore *is* intrinsically also a learning activity. Furthermore sharing of meaning is in first place necessary to activate and sustain the learning process. The creation of meaning, either through being exposed to teaching and peer interaction or through personal discovery, is then also fundamental to the learning experience.

Wells (1999) speaks of schooling as “semiotic apprenticeship” and while this can be a fair description of the relationship between learning and meaning-creation in school, it also points to the fact that the creation of meaning in schools does not just happen. Hence educators have an important role to play. Teaching and learning are connected by a process of semiotic mediation, whereby meanings are exchanged and the lowest common denominator is discovered and developed as the starting point for further learning. This is a rather delicate process as meanings are often not just discovered but also imposed. If students are not offered the opportunity to contribute to the meaning that is generated through the teaching

²³Structured here is not understood as *controlled exclusively by educators*, but as *focused on facilitating learning*. This does not preclude the openness required for dialogical interaction. Rather it aims to differentiate pedagogical dialogue from unfocused conversation with no specific educational purpose.

and learning relationship we can witness a dissociation of meaning from learning. Surface and perfunctory approaches do not require engagement with meaning, but may still lead to the acquisition of the form of knowledge that is sufficient to satisfy the requirements for passing end-of-year examinations. However whether this type of knowledge has a lasting effect on students may be reasonably questioned and in more general terms whether it is possible at all to speak of learning without meaning can also be raised.

If we accept Hallyday's (1978) suggestion that to mean linguistically is both to reflect and to act, we take a further step which leads to affirming that the act of learning through language is necessarily connected to making meaning and that meaning is actualized in the act of learning through reflection. Therefore, the importance given to meaning-making in education influences the level of reflection and active involvement that is required of students. An education that requires only a surface approach is not concerned with meaning-making. On the other hand, education that fosters meaning-making processes necessarily rejects transmission-passive reception models of education. In such a perspective it is extremely important to maximize the opportunities for meaning-making and to understand how meaning is created. The type of meaning that emerges from the educational interactions, how it emerges and how it is validated in a given educational setting are crucial factors affecting the success of the learning process.

5.1.1 Language and Meaning

When we explore education as a social process at closer range, it can be seen that language is used both as a tool for interaction but also as a means for creating and consolidating roles, relationships and values. Language has been described as a social semiotic (Saussure, 1983; Hallyday, 1978; Wells, 1999). When we unpack this definition we discover that language is both the product and the generator of social processes.

When using language, a choice from all possible meanings available for a particular linguistic situation is made in order to communicate a particular message through chosen channels and lexical means. Meaning is actualized in a particular linguistic choice that is appropriate for a given context. The appropriateness can be gauged by the ease in retrieving an intended meaning from the specific context. Saed (1997, p. 181) suggests that speakers make

“calculations of retrievability”²⁴: these are guesses about the level of knowledge possessed by hearers and about the extent to which their knowledge will allow them to retrieve the meaning the speaker had intended. According to Habermas (1998, p. 132) there should be an “inter-subjective recognition of a linguistic claim” and this recognition means that we consider the claim acceptable by having understood it.

Language is not, *per se*, a social semiotic. While it is certainly a semiotic means, the extent to which it becomes a social means is dependent on how it is used to communicate meaning. The intention of the speaker is essential. As Habermas suggests (1998), the intention of the actor is crucial to ensure that communication leads to shared understanding. If meaning is not communicated in a way that reaches the students the goal of promoting learning might be only achieved in some small degree. The speaker has therefore a key role in gauging the level of knowledge possessed by the hearers and their ability to retrieve meaning from a communicative exchange.

Calculations of retrievability of meaning are normally made in virtue of the membership of a particular community, but also on the basis of personal common grounds, from the experience that speaker and hearer have of each other. To a large extent then, the success of meaning exchanges depends on the accuracy of the assumptions made by the speaker on the interlocutor’s ability to retrieve meaning from the communicative exchange. However in all human relationships there is an element of “unknown” that will impair the accuracy of all calculations of retrievability. The level of knowledge that the speaker has of the hearer and the level of empathy may well be crucial factors in facilitating or impairing sharing of meaning through language. In educational language-based exchanges this may be extremely important for the successful progression of learning. Miscalculated assumptions may result in missed opportunities for learning which can go undetected by teachers.

In all educational settings, if the meaning communicated fails to connect with students, this may not be immediately apparent. This is probably even truer of distance education where the mediation and the delayed interaction mean that if failed communication becomes obvious it is often too late to take action. If a teacher does not realize that his/her efforts to

²⁴ Pedagogical use of language tends to be –albeit not always– the result of conscious and careful semantic choices. A particular aspect of the pedagogical choice of language is dictated by retrievability as it essential for educators to ensure that students can participate in educational activities. However outside of educational environments semantic and lexical choices may be made unconsciously and, as they are not underpinned by the intention to achieve a shared understanding, may even be designed to confound interlocutors.

communicate a particular meaning have not been pitched at the right level of knowledge development for his/her own students this might not foster learning progression.

Nowadays the availability of virtual learning environments and population migration mean that teachers and students may be even more geographically dispersed and may come from very different social and cultural backgrounds. Calculations in virtue of the membership a particular community can therefore be even weaker. Furthermore, as most distance education students are adults, the calculations of retrievability can be even more difficult as this type of student may come from very different life and learning experiences. Electronic and paper-based communication are often the only means available to students and teachers to get to know each other and a lack of immediacy and visual clues leaves spaces which may be filled by those participating in the educational exchange with inaccurate interpretations of meaning. The unavailability of an immediate response does not afford the opportunity to reconfirm the understanding and misunderstandings may become unnoticeably consolidated.

Until some verification of what students “have taken with them” from what the teacher had intended happens, the extent to which the communication has been successful remains unknown. Unfortunately, in many educational contexts, this verification takes the form of assessment and assessment tends to be final and fraught with power implications. Final assessment as a form of verification of learning rarely allows revisiting the territory and ascertaining to what extent grasping of meaning was impaired by faulty calculations of retrievability from the teacher’s part. Ideally, there should be a continuous process of verification, and this verification should allow the teacher to question his/her own assumptions about how meaning is received by the student when it is still possible to change direction and re-start if and where necessary. It should also enable students to move from a hearer position to a speaker position. This would also facilitate the process of verification. However, the function of language most commonly associated with education is that of transmission of knowledge.

Transmission is mostly intended as a one-way process, a transfer of information from a sender-teacher to a receiver-student. This thesis argues that this model should be questioned if we hold the view that the best learning opportunities are offered to students through dialogical interaction between teacher and students and among students themselves. But if we question whether education should do more than transmitting knowledge, we are also questioning what other functions language can take in the educational exchanges, the forms it can take. Knowledge transmission is essentially a one-way, monological activity rarely concerned with

how the knowledge will be received. In fact, transmission can happen independently from the receiver. Pre-prepared lectures, not based on students' needs, can be an example of transmission of knowledge independent from the receiver. In commenting on knowledge transmission through language, Bourdieu and Passeron (1996, p. 19) argue that "speech points to itself, rather than to what it signifies" and add, in rather sweeping terms, that in lectures

the professor, engaged in a monologue on a topic chosen by him, prepared and physically removed from his silent interlocutors, is sheltered from the hazards of improvisation, from surprise interruptions and from objections that might be fired at him (ibid., p.19).

Language, despite having been described as a means of communication and interaction, can, according to Bourdieu and Passeron, become a means for distancing. Lecturers may intentionally and metaphorically place themselves above students. The calculation of retrievability can then be used as a means to this end by pitching the language beyond student's current level of understanding of a particular topic. Language itself can be used for locking students out of the academic discourse. However Northedge (2003, p. 170) suggests that:

it is possible for teachers to pass on their knowledge of their subject without reverting to the tedium of didactic monologues

and this is possible through a student-centred approach that enables students to enter "an academic knowledge community (2003, p. 171).

5.1.2 Multiplicity of meanings and its implications for assessment practice

When choosing from a potential range of words that might express different meaning, speakers are faced with the challenge of identifying a meaning that is appropriate for the context. In the previous section the concept of calculation of retrievability as a means for activating shared understanding was introduced. Olson (1970, p. 266) adds that a "speaker must make an estimate of the contextual alternatives both in the light of the preceding utterances in the dialogue and on the basis of the experience [the speaker] has of the listener". This presents a difficulty due to the lack of univocal meaning attribution in most communicative transactions and contexts and, as Bakhtin (1981) suggests:

... no living word relates to its object in a *singular way*: between the world and its object, between the world and the speaking subject there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate (p.276)

There is an intrinsic contradictory multiplicity in the relationship between reference and referent and the difficulty is further exacerbated by the encounter of the different perspectives of those entering a communicative exchange. However, according to Rommetveit (1988), word meanings are open until they are used in communicative acts. Communicative acts necessitate some shared perspective to function and the achievement of shared perspective pushes participants to make an effort in order to take a reciprocal orientation.

In communicative exchanges a choice is made among all the meaning-mediating possibilities. If meaning attribution is considered in general terms, the ambiguity of meaning remains and it is both an obstacle and an opportunity for communication. The scientist Michael Polanyi speaks of meaning exceeding the possibility of being fully expressed and conveyed. Polanyi (1983, p. 4) refers to tacit knowledge and affirms that “we can know more than we can tell”, and that what we can tell is a portion of a more holistic comprehension of which what we can say is only a superficial semantic expression. In Polanyi’s conception there is an ontological element which is linked to the semantic component but that also exceeds it. We can try to reconstruct the ontological component from the semantic expression, but Polanyi (1983, p.19-20) warns that the reconstruction can “never bring back the original meaning” and even an explicit integration “cannot replace its tacit counterpart” (ibid.). Polanyi adds that “formalizing all knowledge to the exclusion of any tacit knowledge is self-defeating” (ibid.). It appears that tacit knowledge is inherent to any knowledge and, since in attributing meaning we refer to our own knowledge, there always remains a tacit element that exceeds our ability to express it. This has particular implications when attributing meaning to a shared understanding. If meaning attribution also arises from tacit knowledge we may not be entirely aware of the nuances of our own meaning attributions and for this reason we would not necessarily be aware of the difficulties encountered by others in sharing our perspective.

According to Hagtvet Eirksen & Heen Wold (2003, p.192) “in scientific disciplines, great efforts are typically directed toward the development of an exact and context-independent vocabulary”. This attempt to de-contextualise meaning arises from the conviction that the authority of objective scientific knowledge does not necessitate contextual framing for the recognition of its validity. The physicist David Bohm (1996) warns against a meaning fragmentation that arises from over-specialization, particularly in scientific thinking, and according to Rommetveit (1998, p. 229), this fragmentation leads to the fixation of small portions of social life into a closed language. This attempt to fixate fragments of life is also an attempt to remove the ambiguity that makes the context of interpretation necessary for understanding meaning. This, however, leads to the creation of an “expert and correct

terminology” and possession of such terminology may become a means to affirming undisputable authority. The substantiation of meaning through authority- understood as an expression of authoritarianism- is a monological process that does not allow negotiation. According to Bakhtin (1981, p. 343) such authority “demands our unconditional allegiance”. Bathkin refers to the calcification of meaning as the characteristic of any professional language that relies on its authority as a way to placing specific professional knowledge expressed through the “authoritative word” in a position hierarchically higher. But this hierarchical position demands acknowledgment rather than participation and creates a distance between those who possess such knowledge and those who do not. Bakhtin (1981) adds an insight- reminiscent of Paulo Freire’s “banking concept” - that is particularly interesting from an educational point of view. He affirms (1981, p. 344) that “authoritative discourse cannot be represented – it is only transmitted...it is by its very nature incapable of being double-voiced”. This has clear implications when the authoritative voice of educators and the type of relationship between educators and students is called into question.

Authoritarian discourses are antithetical to negotiation and therefore rely on transmission for communication of knowledge. In addition if we consider with Basil Bernstein (1971) some of the pedagogical implications of access to language for expressing meaning, it can be seen how educational failure may be related to lack of access to meaning potential. In Bernstein’s sociological perspective the lack of access to meaning potential is strictly linked to class origin. As the more prominent linguistic meanings validated through education are often removed from working class values, students from working class backgrounds have more limited exposure to those validated meanings in their home environment and this affects their ability to successfully enter the educational dialogue at an equal level with their wealthier peers. The validation of certain meanings among all possible meanings can then become, in educational terms, a means to reinforce social exclusion, as only those who have access to those meanings can fully participate in the educational transactions. Furthermore, if meaning is communicated through authoritative discourses that do not require participation, lack of access to meaning potential is also consolidated in a form of permanent exclusion from active participation in knowledge discovery and construction.

In assessment practices communication of validated meaning has important consequences in relation to the effective, transparent and fair application of assessment criteria and learning development. A certain “common” knowledge may easily be taken for granted. Sambell & McDowell (1998, p. 392) affirm that “conventional assessment has frequently been criticized for embodying a sub-text which communicates the ‘wrong’ message to students, thus, to some

perspectives, 'creating' the problem of hidden curriculum". It can be further argued that this hidden curriculum may to some extent be a by-product of tacit knowledge. Yet this can also be the product of an intentional activity aimed at safeguarding the educator's authority. There is often an implicit assumption that justifies teachers and lecturers in relying on their professionalism and experience in grading assessment activities on the ambiguous premises that through experience alone it is possible to know what a first, second or third class honours essay should be like, without the need for communicating and justifying the basis for such evaluation. The transparent application of assessment criteria requires a detailed justification of a particular evaluation against those criteria. It should be recognised that a lack of specification of criteria may be the fruit of authoritarian control over the assessment information conveyed to students. This aspect of assessment will be discussed in more detail in chapter eight.

5.1.3 Understanding and Misunderstanding

In the previous sections, it has been argued that shared –but not forcedly converging- understanding should be the goal of communicative action and that pedagogical dialogue as a form of communicative action should promote learning intended as the achievement of improved understanding. Trying to define what constitutes understanding is no easy task and goes beyond the scope of this section. For the purpose of this discussion it will suffice to say that "knowledge is the object of understanding" (Biggs, 1999, p.40) and the type of knowledge that is acquired and how it is acquired may influence the level and type of understanding achieved. Regardless of the type of knowledge sought, a shared understanding should be a starting point for any successful pedagogical interaction, and to quote Bohm (1996, p. 7) "shared meaning should lead to the emergence of new shared understanding". In order to ensure that the interaction between teachers and students is successful, there should be some consensus in relation to what constitutes understanding and what action needs to be taken in order to ensure that understanding is brought about among those engaging in dialogue.

How knowledge is translated into understanding is dependent on various factors, such as experience, prior knowledge and ability. The interaction of these factors is highly unpredictable. Polanyi and Prosch (1974) speak of a process of tacit integration that while highly effective escapes the awareness of those integrating knowledge. This tacit integration "cannot be replaced by any explicit mechanical procedure...it can only be lived, can only be

dwelt in" (1974, p.41). Understanding then is an "act of insight" and we focus of the physical aspect of words we "are losing sight of the meaning integrative element" (ibid., p.62).

If it is impossible for those performing an act of understanding to fully explain how they have come to that understanding, and if the ability to perform such act of understanding is concomitant with other variables such as previous knowledge and level of experience, the ability to share knowledge and understanding between individuals with different experiences and levels of knowledge is an even more challenging activity. Teachers and students clearly exemplify different levels of knowledge and in an ideal scenario such as that envisaged by Vygostky, this difference should be exploited as an opportunity for promoting shared understanding. Yet there are several examples – particularly in relation to understanding expressed in terms of assessment criteria - of mismatches of interpretations of what constitutes understanding between teachers and students and of how these mismatches remain unaddressed and impair learning. Harrington et al. (2005, p. 238) have highlighted that mismatches between students and teachers are often the result of students taking a surface approach to learning. However they have also argued that the knowledge gap between teachers and students needs to be given attention as this might be at the origin of such mismatch.

A series of studies conducted by Entwistle and Entwistle (1997) has highlighted that what students and teachers mean by understanding is often very different. The authors consider the difference worrying because from their analysis it emerged that students' interpretation of what constitutes understanding was not validated by teachers and, as a consequence, personal understanding of the course content was not rewarded in examinations. Harrington et al. (2005) point to the fact that the difference in levels of knowledge between teachers and students is rarely exploited in a vygotskian sense. Entwistle and Entwistle highlight that the difference in knowledge is not often regarded as an opportunity for teachers to allow students to find a place for their own voice to emerge.

The lack of clarity in relation to what constitutes understanding is then both a missed opportunity but also a way of reinforcing teachers' authority in virtue of their higher level of knowledge. These two scenarios exemplify two rather different problems which may lead to misunderstandings between teachers and students: on one hand the genuine lack of awareness of the differences in interpretation; on the other hand, an intentional effort by teachers to validate their own authority. Both scenarios stand in the way of successful negotiation of meaning and ultimately of the promotion of learning. A tacit element of

knowledge may remain unexpressed, and most likely this happens unintentionally and because of the inability of fully conveying one's own knowledge. This applies to teachers and students. For teachers it means that, despite their knowledge, they are not fully able to translate it into their teaching. For students it means that what they are able to show in terms of their learning may only represent the "tip of the iceberg" of what they actually know. In a scenario where potentially there is an underlying willingness to share knowledge in order to achieve better and shared understanding and minimizing misunderstandings through continuous negotiation of meaning and reciprocal validation of interpretations. Pedagogical dialogue can be this activity of negotiation, facilitating rising levels of reciprocal awareness.

As discussed in section 5.2.1, in a scenario where the lack of clarity is manipulated as a form of control, intentional and authoritarian distancing signals that learning is not the goal of relationship between teachers and students. Bourdieu & Passeron (1996) have written extensively on this issue. They argue – in rather conformist and questionable terms- that the effectiveness of teaching practice should be measured in terms of the amount of information that students receive and suggest that the loss of information in the teaching and learning interaction is a failure that arises from perpetuating a system of control and authority. Bourdieu & Passeron add that is not simply a matter of linguistic misunderstanding due to the use of technical jargon but that the dynamic itself is problematic. Students have come to "accept linguistic misunderstanding as a necessary evil which the skills of the teacher are not required to address" (1996, p. 5). There is a sense of powerlessness in the students' perception of their role in the teaching and learning relationships which almost legitimates misunderstanding. As a result of this students have settled for an "obligatory resignation in approximate understanding" (1996, p.17) that signifies the underlying perception that they do not have a right to understand. But students' tolerance of their own misunderstanding and the failure to share responsibility for such understanding with their teachers leads to a "complicity in misunderstanding", and to implicitly accepting that "misunderstanding and the fiction that there is no misunderstanding are inseparable phenomena" (1996, p.13). For lecturers, to engage in clearing up their students' misunderstanding, it would take renouncing "the professional monologue" and engaging in a genuine intellectual exchange reminiscent of Socratic dialogues. Such exchange according to the authors would allow a flow of information that can be monitored. The flow of information can be controlled because it

presupposes access to the techniques of verbal exchange - to methods of relating to the worlds of the speech partner as well as to one's own words – and these can be acquired only through partnership (1996, p.13).

In this scenario for a dialogical relationship to be established a change in attitude needs to take place first. Using, once again, the words of Bourdieu & Passeron, for teachers it would mean “abdicating a portion of security” (1996, p. 13) that comes from their authoritative position, by introducing greater accessibility in the meaning they communicate. For students it would mean taking a more active role by restoring their right to full understanding.

5.2 Beyond oral dialogues

Framing written assessment feedback comments as a form of dialogical interaction- in addition to paying special the attention to how meaning is created and shared- should also lead to expanding the conventional concept of dialogue to incorporate a broader range of educational practices.

The everyday use of dialogue assumes that dialogue happens through verbal/oral interaction. Pedagogical dialogue should encompass not only pedagogical activities mediated through oral interaction. It should also allow for interpretation of dialogical turn-taking in more unconventional forms, hence re-conceiving listening and responding as characteristic features of the assessment feedback.

A closer look reveals that dialogue in its etymological meaning as “reasoning through” interaction – as outlined in chapter three- does not necessarily require verbal interaction. Furthermore technological developments and online interactive environments have challenged and blurred the distinction between oral and written word. The term dialogue has expanded its definition and online message posting has come to be described as a “dialogic process” (Hamilton, 2002, p.5). Often online messages present a mix of colloquial verbal expressions alongside more formal expressions and for this reason they make the classification difficult. In particular, in asynchronous environments the written medium allows the writer to take time to reflect (Wertsch, 2002) and revise before committing to posting the message, yet the message retains an immediacy which makes it more akin to traditional face to face conversations. It is precisely the reflective engagement with the word written by others that enables the construction²⁵ of knowledge and “reasoning-through” to happen, regardless of the delayed and unconventional nature of the interaction. The asynchronicity of the process, whether in online environments or in written exchanges is often seen as connected to

²⁵ Lamy & Goodfellow (1999) & Wertsch (2002) have warned that a danger of parallel monologues and metacommenting exists also in online “interactive” environments thus also highlighting that online message posting is not *per se* dialogical.

monologism. Yet the interaction that arises from the written word can be a particularly advanced form of dialogue.

If we look at written feedback comments and we attempt to read them through dialogic lenses, one of the defining characteristics of dialogue, turn-taking, at first appears to be lost. Once the teacher has written and handed feedback comments to students there is a sense that those comments are the “final word” on the particular assessment activity completed by the learner. A closer look at written language is necessary to determine whether it may yield potential to accommodate and sustain dialogical relations in education.

5.2.1 The challenges to dialogue posed by the written word

Unlike meaning exchanges in face-to-face conversations, where the process is both fluid and supported by extra-verbal factors, in written exchanges the distance in space and time creates a gap between those sharing meaning. Not surprisingly Socrates, in dialogue with Phaedrus, expresses some concern over the potential of the written word to become dialogical.

You know Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offspring of painting stand there as they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately, those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.
(Phaedrus, 275e)

The father-writer of the text appears the only one who can answer questions and who can defend the text. The text itself is silent. The reader then is a questioner who asks questions simply to reconstruct the meaning intended by the writer. Socrates seems to indicate that marrying dialogue to the written word is an unproductive enterprise. But if the focus shifts from the inability of the written text to answer questions to the ability to generate new questions and knowledge then it is possible to rescue the dialogical essence. Yet the task is not without challenges.

Ricouer (1976) warns about the challenges posed by surplus of meaning in written language and affirms that within this medium “there is a detachment of meaning from an event” (p.25).

According to Halliday (1978, p. 150), in verbal interaction, “the interactants are continuously supplying the information that is ‘missing’ from the text”. Ricoeur, in agreement with Halliday, affirms that one of the characteristics of spoken discourse is

the possibility of showing the thing referred to as a member of the situation common to both speaker and hearer. The situation surrounds the dialogue, and its landmarks can be shown by a gesture or by pointing a finger” (ibid.)

But in the written text, as analysed by Ricoeur, this is no longer possible and the detachment of meaning from the event makes filling the gaps in the text impossible. The surplus of meaning of the written text is the unexpressed element behind and beyond the text. In the written text the situational references are missing and this means that the reconstruction of the possible meaning intended by the writer exceeds the possibility to be fully unpacked by the reader.

Ricoeur (1976) also speaks of “semantic autonomy”. The semantic autonomy of written texts is due to the separation in time, space and context between writer and reader. However it should be pointed out that Ricoeur refers to literary written texts where writers address a universal reader and for this reason, the text is freed from the need of calculating the extent to which the reader will be able to reconstruct his intentions.

Even if a dialogical interaction between writer and reader, mediated by a text, is possible, in literary texts the situational references of this possible dialogue are missing. Ricoeur affirms that “written discourse goes beyond the narrow boundaries of the dialogical situation” and frees its meaning from the tutelage of the mental intention and of the situational reference as the written text is not addressed to a specific reader. Eco (1990, p.2) –in accordance with Ricoeur- affirms that a text, once separated from its utterer (as well as from the utterer’s intention) and from the concrete circumstances of its utterance (and by consequence from its intended referent) floats (so to speak) in a vacuum of a potentially infinite range of possible interpretations”. Furthermore Derrida (1972, cited in Eco, 1994, p.33) argues that “once the text has been deprived of a subjective intention behind it, its readers no longer have the duty, or the possibility, to remain faithful to this intention”. The crucial element in the form of interpretation chosen by the reader is how he/she relates to the writer’s intention. The departure from the meaning that the writer had intended has its own validity, in terms of the active reader’s engagement with a particular text.

At a pragmatic level some relationship between reader and writer remains according to Eco (1994, p.44). There is a dialectic between author/message sender and reader/message receiver, which means that that “the functioning of a text can be explained by taking into account not only the generative process but also the role performed by the addressee and the way the addressee foresees and directs this kind of interpretative co-operation”. Furthermore Mercer (2000, p.5) affirms that “words carry meanings beyond those consciously intended by speakers or writers” and for this reason “listeners or readers bring their own perspective to the language they encounter”. If the scope of the reader’s interaction with the text is the achievement of some form of dialogical engagement with the writer, then a grasp of the writer’s intentions is even more a necessary starting point for the interaction.

In chapter six it will be shown that when- as in feedback- the reader is known dialogical, situational and ostensive elements of meaning attributions can be more easily preserved. An ostensive component conveys the meaning of a term by pointing out²⁶. In face to face dialogues pointing out can be a physical gesture whereas in other forms of exchanges, including written dialogues, pointing out can be done through referring to examples elucidating a particular point. Not all written texts lose their ostensive power, but the ostensive elements need to be emphasized more than in face to face communication in order for the written text to strengthen its communicative power.

It might be useful at this point to draw a parallel between speaking and listening and writing and reading to illustrate the similarities and differences of these two processes in facilitating exchange and appropriation of meaning. Voloshinov (1986) refers to speaking and listening as complementary processes as the word used for the exchange is a two-sided act requiring the appropriation of both speaker and listener. It can be argued that there is a similar complementarity between reading and writing. There is a mutual responsibility in ensuring that the exchange is successful and that both speaker and hearer are able to exchange roles and achieve some shared understanding. This reciprocal orientation is epitomized by responsive understanding. This type of understanding is what Bakhtin (1981, p. 282) defines as “engaged understanding”. According to Bakhtin, engaged understanding is active understanding: “one that assimilates the word under consideration into a new conceptual system, that of the one striving to understand”(ibid.)

²⁶ Wittgenstein (2001, p.,33) writes about ostensiveness: *So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear. Thus if I know that someone means to explain a colour-word to me the ostensive definition "That is called 'sepia' " will help me to understand the word....*

In written texts the exchange is mediated. Transactional theories of reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) suggest that texts do not contain definitive and univocal knowledge. The knowledge that is originated from a text depends on its interaction with individual readers, because different readers apply their own interpretation of the message conveyed. Wells (1990, quoted in Wells 1999, p. 73) argues that different readers or even the same reader on different occasions “will construct different interpretations of the text, depending on their current understanding and the purposes for which they are engaging with it”. A text is therefore a tool for mediating the mental activity of the reader. However, unlike face-to-face interactions, the reader does not interact with the writer, but with the artefact produced by the writer.

Bruner adds a new dimension to the analysis of dialogical interaction that helps to respond to the challenges posed by asynchronicity. He refers to a dialogic function in relation to our interaction with memory and the past which does not necessitate the presence of an interlocutor in the flesh (2003, p.59). Yet reconstructions in our memory entail remembering an interlocutor and the interlocutor, despite not being present in the flesh, “exerts a subtle but steady pressure” (ibid.). The writer-interlocutor remains a present stimulus even with physical absence.

Bakhtin (1991) also moves away from the conventional definitions of dialogue as identified exclusively by oral exchanges. The recurrent identification of dialogue with verbal exchanges has led, according to Bakhtin, to the study of dialogue “merely as a compositional form in the structuring of speech, but the dialogism of the word...the dialogism that penetrates its entire structure, all its semantic and expressive layers, is almost entirely ignored” (Bakhtin, 1981, p.279). He envisages the possibility of a dialogical interaction between a reader and writer. The written word speaks to the reader and enables him to enter in dialogue with the text. Bakhtin speaks of internal dialogism of the word. “The phenomenon of internal dialogization... is present to a greater or lesser extent in all realms of the word”. The word, regardless of whether it is written or spoken, is multilayered. What Bakhtin calls “heteroglossia” means that “no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other...” (1981, p.276). Acknowledging heteroglossia means adding an inter-subjective and an intra-subjective dimension to understanding and communication. From an inter-subjective perspective there is a necessary interaction between the otherness of the writer/speaker and that of the reader/listener, where the writer tries to get through to apperceptive horizon of the reader/listener. On the other hand the reader/listener in the dialogical encounter with the word confronts his own background of understanding with the linguistic stratification of the

word. The dialogic encounter allows the reader/hearer to engage in a process of appropriation of the word until he manages to make it his own (Bakhtin, 1981, p.293).

The appropriation of the word through a dialogical interaction with the written text is not a straightforward process. If for a moment we revert back to the original description of dialogue as dia-logos suggested by Hamilton, it is through reason (logos) that the appropriation of meaning takes place. Therefore, as suggested by Bakhtin, dialogue can be seen as rational activity leading to enhanced “appropriation” of meaning.

In considering the implications of the discussion of the written word as a dialogical means in contexts such as distance education context or in relation to face to face large classes a further problematic dimension is also added by the delayed nature of the interaction and by the physical and psychological distance imposed by the context itself. Furthermore the discussion of the written word in the context of assessment feedback brings other issues to the table. Assessment is fraught with power tensions between assessors and assessee and the potential for misunderstanding implicit in accessing the written word may have potentially damaging implications for those assessed. This dimension will be discussed more extensively in chapter eight.

5.2.2 The contribution of hermeneutics to the affirmation of the dialogical in written texts

A further contribution to the expansion of the concept of dialogue beyond oral exchanges comes from hermeneutics. According to Mueller-Vollmer (1985, p. ix) in the second half of the 20th century hermeneutics has become a general theory of the social and social sciences” (1985). Such wide appeal can be attributed to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) whose hermeneutics attempted to provide a sound methodological basis for the Humanities. Dilthey’s hermeneutics conceives the analyses of social sciences in interpretative terms and alerts against the risks of empiricist reductionist methodologies and dogmatic normative approaches. Hermeneutics is concerned with language-oriented notions of meaning, interpretation and intentionality and offers valuable perspectives for analysing dialogical interactions.

Ricoeur (1976) speaks of a dialectic and hermeneutical tension between writing and reading as the writer had distanced him/herself from the text; yet the reader aims to appropriate the meaning of the text through his/her own interpretation of it. If the reader aims to understand the text, he/she needs to apply an interpretative reading. As the writer is not present to

explain his/her text, interpretative reading has two functions: of explaining and facilitating understanding. The author's intentions are beyond reach (1976, p.29) and, according to Ricoeur, the reader needs to "guess" the meaning. Appropriation then corresponds to a process of validation by the reader of the meaning emerging from the text. The reader validates the meaning of a text by incorporating it in his own knowledge through an interpretative process that has allowed him/her to explain it first and then to slot it in his/her own existing knowledge. The text becomes meaningful to the reader through a hermeneutical cycle of explanation-validation-appropriation of meaning.

In order to achieve an understanding of the message communicated by the written text the reader needs to apply some form of interpretation to translate the message into comprehensible information. Whether interpretation can be considered an act of reconstruction/discovery or creation of meaning depends on the purpose for applying such interpretation to the text. It can also be argued that the form of interpretation that is applied will tend to reflect the goals of the reader in approaching the written text. Two main options are available to a reader. The first option is that of attempting to reconstruct/discover the intentions of the writer. The other option is for the reader to free himself/herself from any involvement with the writer's intentions and to create new knowledge arising from but also independent from the original text. In educational exchanges where reading is a goal-oriented activity aimed at achieving understanding as a way to enhancing learning and where the relationship between teachers and students necessitates mutual understanding, both creation and reconstruction of meaning are necessary purposes of the interaction with the written text. On one hand, the students' written text should allow them to create new knowledge. New knowledge should be generated by students by translating the information available to them into new understanding and by slotting it into existing knowledge through personal interpretation. On the other hand a written text can be a means of communication between students and teachers, and in this case the reconstruction/discovery of the teacher-writer's intention are essential for the establishment of a successful, albeit mediated, pedagogical dialogue. This separation is both a limitation for the reader as it limits his/her possibility to fully share the contextual elements and the writer's intentions that have given rise to the text. But it is also an opportunity as it allows the reader to appropriate the meaning of the text and to transform it into a new entity that relates better to the world of the reader him/herself.

Gadamer's (1975) hermeneutics offers the most useful insights in the establishment of strong link between less conventional forms of dialogue and understanding and ultimately between

dialogue and learning. In order to explore the contribution of Gadamer's hermeneutics to the exploration of pedagogical dialogue it is helpful to identify the main features of his conception.

Gadamer (1975) acknowledges that the written text presents a challenge. He asserts that "written texts present the real hermeneutical task" (1975, p. 390) as "the written word falls victim to misunderstanding, intentional or unintentional" (ibid. 393) and "meaning has undergone a kind of self-alienation through being written down" but also he adds that "no text and no book speaks if it does not speak a language that reaches the other person" (ibid. 397).

If the dialogical exchange is aimed at reaching a shared understanding, a reciprocal process should be activated and the intentions of the reader also become an essential ingredient of the interaction. As Gadamer (1975) suggests that

the text brings the subject matter into language, but that it does so is ultimately the achievement of the interpreter. Both have a share in it (p.390).

According to Gadamer the reader/interpreter is awakening the text's meaning. This does not mean that he is disconnecting completely from the original intended meaning, but rather that the meaning communicated through the text is newly brought to life through the interpretation of the reader. The reader adds his/her own intentionality in his interpretation, and in so doing he/she also adds something new while also potentially also losing some of the original meaning as intended by the writer.

Gadamer departs from Friedrich Schleiermacher's belief that misunderstanding was unavoidable and that interpretation was simply a means to overcome misunderstandings. For Schleiermacher (1768-1834) understanding the views of others consists in determining how those have arrived at their opinion by reconstructing the genesis of such opinion. Gadamer takes a different direction by affirming that any act of reading goes beyond the reconstruction of the intentions of the writer. He argues that even textual understanding is not about recovering the original meaning but is the discovery of common meaning in which the reader/interpreter takes an active role. In this he is close to Habermas's (1998) objections to "intentionalist" pragmatics²⁷ which aimed to reconstruct the speaker's intentions to derive meaning. The insights from Gadamer and Habermas offer a particularly significant starting point for the justification of a dialogically infused assessment practice which relies on written

²⁷ Habermas (1998, p.112) criticises Max Weber, as he sees his theory as implying that reaching understanding is "a derivative phenomenon that is to be construed with the help of a primitive concept of intention" This leads Habermas to label Weber's model of action as "monological" and affirms that he is "unable to introduce the concept of "social action" by way of an explication of the concept of meaning" (p. 113)

communication, because they highlight that, while the student may try to reconstruct the intentions of the assessor, concomitantly the student may also generate new meaning.

For Gadamer (1975) the reader is an interpreter who generates new understanding, because understanding is not mere passive and receptive process. The interaction with a text is a dialogical process. Gadamer offers a perspective of dialogue as the ground for the emergence of new understanding. Yet for achieving understanding it is essential that language reaches the other person. Gadamer's hermeneutics has focused on the modification of self-understanding that arises through the encounter with the other. The other is necessary for expanding understanding. "We begin with this proposition: understanding means, first of all, understanding one another" (1975, p. 168). *Com-munication* requires communality and for Gadamer the basis for such communality has an historical basis and also originates from a mutual orientation of participants in communication. Communication leads to understanding achieved *between* participants. According to Gadamer "this *between* is the true locus of hermeneutics" (1975, p. 264). The *betweenness* proposed by Gadamer resonates with Martin Buber (1929). Buber argues that "the relation in education is one of pure dialogue" (p.116) and in describing the relationship between teacher and student affirms that "...there is reality *between* them, there is mutuality". Buber adds that "experiencing the other side" (p.114) characterises dialogic relations and such inclusiveness also characterises the "fusion of horizons" presented by Gadamer.

All understanding arises from a particular historical horizon which determines how individuals' thinking is framed. Gadamer speaks of "horizons of understanding". "Horizon is another way of describing context. It includes everything of which one is not immediately aware..." (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 157). While partners in dialogue may present different perspectives, they need to be attentively disposed to each other's horizons of understanding in order to communicate with each other. "Fusion" of horizons" does not result in loss of individuality and does not entail necessary agreement. Gadamer (1985, p.389) argues that in true conversation "we are not necessarily seeking agreement concerning an object, but the specific contents of the conversation are only means to get to know the horizon of the other person...his ideas become intelligible".

The concept of "fusion of horizons" through dialogical interaction has been criticized by critical theorists as denoting a lack of sociological awareness but also by philosophers of education. This fusion of horizons, according to Gadamer's detractors is never neutral and does not entail an equal distribution of knowledge. Rather it entails a loss of individuality and a

disempowerment particularly affecting the weaker partner in dialogue (Kögler, 1996). Similarly Sidorkin (1999, p.25) argues that “the fusion of horizons” idea is reminiscent of the old dialectical concept of synthesis in one important regard: It reduces the difference”. Sidorkin suggests that Gadamer tends to gravitate towards unity and singularity of meaning, although he concedes that Gadamer does not believe in finalised truths. Yet in Gadamer’s conception agreement is not a necessary outcome of dialogue and this acts as a safeguard against loss of individuality. Furthermore as understanding is a productive activity the understanding that arises from the “fusion of horizons” is a process of enrichment that benefits both partners in dialogue. It pushes the participants in dialogue beyond the boundaries of their own immediate standpoint. For this reason the mutual attitude and openness to enter each other’s “horizon of understanding”, as defined in Gadamer’s terms, is the essential ingredient for enabling participation in dialogue. This shared meaning allows individuals to retain their individuality while at the same time enabling progress with reciprocal understanding and also with self-understanding.

Hermeneutics gives strength to the claim that the interaction with written texts can be dialogical as the meaning a reader extracts from a text is not simply the fruit of passive absorption of the meaning conveyed by the writer. Rather such meaning results also from the creative active act of interpreting that allows the reader to dialogue with the text. Through interpretation an in-between space is created where the writer and the reader meet and a fleeting but creatively achieved fusion of perspective arises. Such in-between space also characterizes dialogic relations in education.

In educational interactions with written texts there is a dual process of creation and reconstruction of meaning, which are both necessary to facilitate progression of learning. However, interpretation is a necessary means to allow appropriation of meaning. The orientation of those involved in the educational exchange is crucial. If, with Habermas (1998), we accept that the aim is to achieve an understanding that is not coordinated through egocentric calculations, we are also affirming that those who participate in the communicative interaction make their interpretations open and available as a way to harmonize them with those of others.

5.3 Meaning interpretation for shared understanding in dialogical feedback

The interaction between teacher and student in relation to assessed work is one of the few opportunities that are offered to both parties for one-to-one interaction and since much of the

communication revolves around assessment, feedback has an important role in the establishment of a successful dialogic relationship. The success of pedagogical interactions should be seen in the extent to which they promote and facilitate uncoerced learning and therefore it is important to first identify what might help in this direction. In customary educational practice there is a widespread lack of dialogical orientation in feedback. Feedback comments are characteristically framed as the authoritative voice of the teacher. This conception is the product of an established perspective on teachers' role as "gatekeepers of institutional discourses" (James & McInnes, 2004 cited in Hayatt, 2005 p. 341). Such a widespread perspective is an objective obstacle to the promotion of assessment feedback in more dialogical terms as it prevents a greater learner participation and inclusion in the academic discourse community (Hyatt, 2005).

Bakhtin (1981) has constructed much of his theory of dialogical imagination around the tension between monologism and dialogism and has inbuilt a sense of otherness in his concept of dialogue. He speaks of the "authoritative discourse" as antithetical to the dialogic interrelationship. "The authoritative ²⁸word is located in a distanced zone" (ibid.p.342) and does not allow for the connectedness that is necessary to engage in a dialogic relationship. If the teacher's word in assessment is final it can be equated to the authoritative word. As such it becomes intrinsically anti-dialogical as it does not demand engagement but simply compliance.

Thus how feedback comments are worded and the underlying orientation towards the student as expressed by the comments is extremely important. As in a Bakhtian sense "authoritatively" expressed feedback may preclude dialogue. Equally important is how the learner interacts with feedback comments as his/her response to advice received the difference between a dialogical approach to assessment feedback and a passive absorption of the word that comes from the authoritative voice of the teacher while also negatively impacting on learning. However, to place the responsibility for the dialogical engagement entirely on the teacher equates to assuming powerlessness and dependency on the learner's part. This is not always the case, particularly with adult learners who may hold strong views about themselves and their performance. As seen in chapter three, it is the mutual orientation that enables the dialogical interaction, even with the written word. As Sadler (1998, p.5) suggests "communication across the divide for formative purposes is an issue worthy of serious study".

²⁸ It should be noted that while that the term "authoritative" may not be the most appropriate to describe the undemocratic use of language that Bakhtin describes. Rather "authoritarian" might have been more suited term. However not having access to the original text which was written in Russian, nor being able to ascertain the accuracy of the translation it difficult to establish if in this case the disconnect between meaning and terminology is to be attributed to Bakhtin himself.

Learners and educators bring to the dialogue different levels of knowledge, different expectations, life experiences and skills which affect the interpretation of the shared information.

In chapter three it has been argued that pedagogical dialogue is one of the types of interaction that has great potential for promoting learning and it has been suggested that feedback may be seen as a form of pedagogical dialogue. Feedback, like any other form of dialogue, requires the establishment of a reciprocal process and a co-orientation of participants but, unlike other forms of communication, is a purpose-oriented action. Teacher and student have advancement of learning as a common goal, but for the achievement of this goal through feedback, it is suggested that two specific factors - among others - are particularly important. The first factor is how participants perceive their role in the interaction, the second factor is the extent to which they are able to share meaning in assessment through their interaction. These two factors are closely related as role perception has an impact on the process of sharing meaning in terms of how knowledge and ideas are communicated and who communicates such information. Assessment in general tends to allocate fairly set roles. The teacher evaluates and the student is the receiver of the evaluation. However if the relationship is envisaged in dialogical terms, greater flexibility can be introduced, which, in turn, can help in fostering a perception of assessment as a learning opportunity.

5.3.1 Roles and processes in dialogic feedback

Teachers have the opportunity to foster learning through feedback, but this is often a missed opportunity, as the intended meaning is not communicated in clear and approachable way and it is formulated in a manner that reinforces the teacher's authority. Furthermore students may not be receptive to meaning communicated through feedback, as this may be framed in a way that demands engagement and this is an alien for those students who have come to expect to be "spoon-fed" with prescriptive information rather than to be engaged with prompts for further reflection and action. Lipman (2003) affirms that the enabling factors for dialogue are: 1) learning to listen to others and 2) learning to respond effectively. If a reciprocal orientation is built into feedback exchanges, these two key elements should be present. It follows that if a dialogical approach to feedback is taken, teacher and student should be engaging in a "learning to listen – learning to respond cycle". But rather than attributing listening to one party and responding to the other – as in traditional teaching and learning scenarios -we should consider these two activities as prerogatives of both parties, in the same way as in a face-to-face dialogue, where the contribution to sharing of meaning comes from both

interlocutors and both parties exchange roles. Essentially, responsiveness should be a prerogative of both parties. But in order to be able to respond to each other they need to be able to find a common ground of shared meaning that enables such communication. Table 5.1 attempts to provide a possible framework for the interpretation of roles and their inter-changeability.

Table 5.1: A dialogical framework for assessment feedback

Activity	Teacher	Student
Listening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being receptive to work submitted by the student • reading submitted student work with the intention to understand where the student is in terms of understanding and development. • getting to know the student's strengths and needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading feedback comments in relation to their own work and with the view to making sense of what the teacher is telling in terms of his/her interpretation of the student's work • being receptive to advice on what needs to be done to progress and focusing on advice aimed at promoting improvement
Responding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focused teaching effort that is tailored to the specific needs of the individual student • selective teaching efforts rely on the idea of the enhancement of students' individual development trajectories • Give advice on what needs to be improved and how it can be improved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engaging with feedback advice • moving to and fro between past feedback and new learning activities and extracting information which considered relevant to the task in hand • Critical application of the advice received

Traditionally the teacher has the responsibility of clarifying the assessment activity by providing guidance and thus offering an interpretation of the meaning of the assessment activity requirements. As the teacher is in a power position, being the advisor but also the evaluator, the interpretation of meaning communicated in the form of assessment guidance tends to be interpreted by the student in prescriptive terms. In order to achieve good results

(albeit not necessarily to learn) it is necessary for the student to interpret the teacher's guidance as closely as possible to the intended meaning, as this would maximize the chances for success. Feedback provision can then become a process whereby the teacher evaluates the extent to which guidance has been closely matched by the effort produced by the student. This is often the end of the feedback cycle. As discussed in chapter four, the concept of "performance gap" (Sadler, 1987) - frequently quoted in the assessment literature - may be a strait-jacket when considered from the point of view of interpretation of assessment criteria. The gap between actual performance and desired performance is often not more than the extent to which the student has matched the teacher's expectations and interpretation of what constitutes good performance. Students' individual development trajectories and appraisal of divergent but productive improvement are often disregarded. While it is useful to have a desirable performance target students may or may not reach this target, yet some development may still occur which should be acknowledged, even if they do not fully match the teacher's expectations.

Unfortunately the roles tend to be rather rigid and this often stands in the way of the type of empathy that allows the teacher to acknowledge improvement. When the teacher is the information-provider and the student is the passive receptor, the student's main objective becomes exclusively that of reconstructing the teacher's intentions. Matching the teacher's expectations may result in skilled performance, "pleasing" the teacher, but not necessarily in fruitful learning. Achieving a set objective is purposeful activity insofar as achieving a good mark is a goal, but it can be argued that it is possible to achieve a good mark without fruitful learning, by simply fulfilling the requirements of a certain activity in a perfunctory fashion. If the goal of feedback is to fruitfully advance learning, each activity should be a starting point for further learning, rather than the closing of a cycle. For this reason an interaction pattern that starts and ends with the interpretation offered by the teacher is a closed cycle that does not allow for active participation from the student. If, as previously argued, learning requires some form of engagement, it is essential that the student's interpretation, as a way to gain ownership of learning, is also valued in the dialogical feedback process. This entails students and assessors sharing their interpretation of the meaning of the assessment criteria in order to achieve a shared understanding, but it also entails achieving an understanding of each other through the written word exchanged. The teacher should aim to understand his/her students through their work and by doing so become more attuned with the needs of the students. Ultimately teachers should aim to make themselves redundant. Students should become more receptive to teachers' comments, not exclusively with the purpose of producing a more skilled

performance but rather of extracting and generating new knowledge, so that they will be able to gather into their existing knowledge.

The written word – as suggested in the previous section - generates a distance between the writer and the reader as reader and writer are not interacting directly, but rather through the artefact produced by the writer; and in the feedback exchange both teachers and students are writers. This has important implications when examining the artefact-feedback. In reading a literary piece of work the reader has a certain degree of freedom in departing from the original and intended meaning. Feedback comments do not allow for the same degree of freedom as literary works and do not retain the immediacy of face-to-face dialogical exchanges. Yet, the reader's task is facilitated by some factors inherent in the teaching and learning relationship. Feedback, unlike other written texts, retains a close connection between writer and reader as both parties are known to each other and the relationship is sustained over a period of time. These ingredients are not comparable to the immediacy of the face-to-face interaction, which allows for a fluid movement between hearer and speaker that can – in its best expressions – encourage equal participation in the construction of knowledge. Some elements of this type of interaction, such as, for instance, the ostensive valence of some of the comments are still present in communication through written feedback. This advantage over other written texts should be exploited to enhance the understanding that arises from reading and writing feedback comments.

In the light of the above discussion, while for convenience sake it is easier to express a dialogical feedback framework in graphic form as a cycle, it should be stressed that an ascending spiral better represents the ideal process. Students should be gradually enabled to take greater control over their learning. This entails developing students' ability to self-assess their performance and evaluate whether it matches the advice received through feedback. For this reason it is important that feedback advice builds this capacity.

As the dialogue develops the student's response to the assessment task should show progression and accumulation of knowledge and experience. Teachers' comments should also move upwards by increasing in sophistication in order to meet students' improved capacity to deal with ideas of greater complexity. A movement upward also signals an increased facility for educators to provide for feedback comments more specifically tailored to meet the needs of individual students.

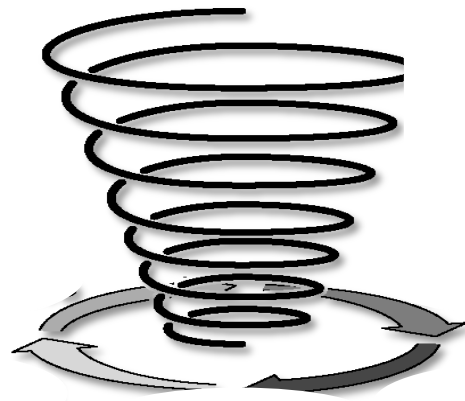


Figure 5.1 Growing student competence arising from dialogical engagement with feedback

Each step of the spiral is a cycle as shown by figure 5.2. However it is proposed that unlike a traditional feedback loops which close the performance gap. This process opens up new avenues of exploration and therefore pushes the students upward onto the next of open cycle of the spiral. Such opening epitomizes lifelong learning.

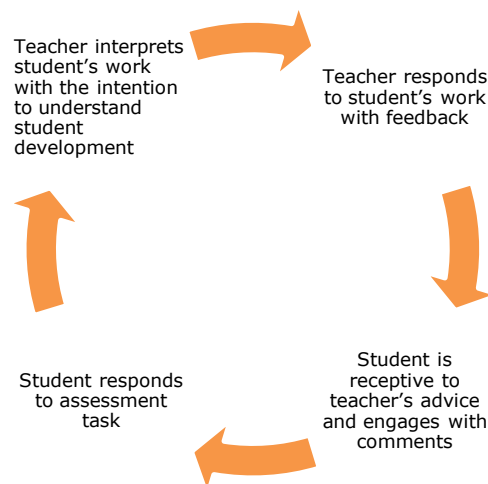


Figure 5.2: Dialogical feedback cycle

In reading feedback comments students need to interpret their meaning with a view to extract key points that will help them with their learning. It is important that the student reconstructs the intentions of the teacher with some degree of accuracy. However there should also be some room for the students' creativity and interpretation to emerge. Students' interpretation should not represent an alternative to the teacher's interpretation but rather a development on the teacher's interpretation; one which the teacher's interpretation has prompted.

Students should be encouraged to develop their own ideas and understanding and therefore evaluation should not be just a matter of rewarding convergent interpretations. Martin Buber (1937) affirms that in a dialogue both participants have in mind each other and the intention to establish a living mutual relationship. A community of enquiry is established on the basis that the exchange is not self-serving and this is particularly important if the dialogue is framed in an educational context.

Furthermore, as Eco points out (1990, p.48), how the code of a message is received by its addressees is equally important as the code of its senders. Therefore the teacher-sender needs to be aware of how the feedback message may be received by students. The value of feedback is determined by the student's understanding of the comments according to his interpretative choices and the interpretative choices are, in turn, the product of student's receptivity and ability to capture the intended meaning. It is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that feedback comments are pitched at a level matching the student's readiness and receptivity and by doing so, the teacher is effectively thinking about how his/her message will be received by his/her students/addressees.

While the interpretation of written feedback by the student often only equates primarily to a re-construction activity it should also become a creative activity. The evaluative component of feedback is a limiting factor as it sets rigid boundaries in terms of interpretation. Supposedly assessment criteria are meant to determine the exact objectives that students are required to meet. However assessment criteria are also open to interpretation and this offers teachers and students a certain degree of flexibility. When the emphasis is placed on the formative element of feedback the assessment element is shifted to the background. Even if the summative element is always present, if the emphasis on the joint meaning negotiation process, this ultimately contributes to addressing the issue of power imbalance in the teaching and learning relationship.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that education relies on language as its primary means of communication. How meaning is communicated through a pedagogical use of language has an impact on the establishment of the relationship between teachers and students and ultimately on learning. As the goal of education is the promotion of learning, language in education should promote learning. It is suggested, in educational exchanges, that language can promote

learning only when shared meaning between teachers and students is achieved. The road to shared meaning is however a difficult one as meaning is becoming fragmented into narrow and highly specialized subsets which are often only accessible by members of small communities. Also, the same meaning may be interpreted differently by different individuals, or even by the same individual on different occasions, and this makes exchanging meaning with others problematic. Finally there is an element in all knowledge that remains tacit as it goes beyond the human ability to be communicated. While univocal interpretation and complete explicitness of explanation may be unattainable objectives, it is possible to achieve a level of shared meaning that allows individuals to sustain the communication. Furthermore when the concept of pedagogical dialogue is expanded to encompass also written language further challenges emerge due to the asynchronicity introduced in the dialogical process.

Meaning is not exchanged simply in virtue of any type of social interaction, but rather is the product of a conscious effort aimed at ensuring that other members of the interaction are equally participating in the exchange. In many educational environments information is transmitted without communicating meaning or allowing students to make sense of the information they “receive”. Information transmitted rather than shared rarely results in meaning-making for students.

The intentionality of those exchanging meaning is essential as it is thanks to the will to be understood, and allowing others to understand, that some shared understanding is achieved. This is particularly relevant to education where a shared understanding of meaning is an essential element for teachers to ascertain where their students are in terms of learning progression; and for students, it is both the basis for further learning and the factor enabling them to participate in the educational exchange at a more equal level. Where such co-orientation of intentionality exists in the relationship between teachers and students, it is possible to establish dialogical processes that promote learning through interaction and allow greater participation and flexibility of roles.

CHAPTER SIX: *Research Phase 1 (Context 1).Analysing feedback to improve practice in a distance education context: a baseline study*

Introduction

As argued in chapter four feedback – and particularly formative feedback- remains a relatively under-explored dimension of assessment. In 2003 Ramsden (p.187), in referring to feedback, stated that “it is impossible to overstate the role of effective comments to students”. Ramsden was referring to effectiveness of feedback to help students to learn and progress and implicitly suggesting that when feedback is effective is also formative. However the effectiveness of feedback cannot be taken for granted.

In the light of the definition of pedagogical dialogue presented chapter three and of the dialogical principles that should inform dialogical assessment practice as presented in chapter two, this chapter investigates written feedback practice in the context of third level distance education.

This chapter serves a two-fold purpose. Firstly, it presents an overview of assessment feedback provision in the context of the BA in Humanities offered through distance education by Oscail – Dublin City University Distance Education Centre, through the classification of feedback comments in relation to their pedagogical and dialogical value. Secondly it seeks to identify examples from current feedback practice already denoting a dialogical orientation on which further developmental initiatives may be built.

The analysis presented in this chapter represents Phase one of a five-phase process. The overall research strategy is consistent with the principles of Design-Based Research. In line with DBR it serves the primary purpose of developing an initial and tentative suggestion to address deficiencies in feedback provision and to move feedback practice in a dialogical direction. This purpose is responded to through answering a specific research question:

- Can features of feedback that denote a dialogical orientation, be found in the current feedback practice?

The question has prompted an evaluation of current feedback practice through the lenses of dialogical principles. Such evaluation has led to highlighting specific features of feedback provision and to identify examples of good practice.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. In addition the concluding section sums up the outcomes of the analysis and outlines some brief suggestions for Phase 2 of the research. Section 6.1 offers some brief background information to Oscail assessment and feedback provision and describes the tutor group analysed. Section 6.2 illustrates the data collection process. Section 6.3 presents the outcomes of the categorization of feedback comments in terms of their functions and levels according to their dialogical and pedagogical strength. It also considers detail in feedback provision in numeric terms. It suggests that while quantity is not an indicator of feedback quality it provides information on the level of detail of feedback provided. Section 6.4 looks more in detail at differences in feedback styles and identifies examples that marry good practice to sustainability. Finally the concluding remarks consider the outcomes of this study with the aim of identifying specific areas in need of improvement and makes recommendations for change in the feedback provision strategy adopted by Oscail.

6.1 Background and context of the study

The investigation for this study constitutes Phase 1 of the overall research plan of this thesis and was carried in the first context (see Table 2.4 in chapter two for an overview of the research phases), namely the BA in Humanities offered by Oscail. Oscail is a faculty of Dublin City University which delivers distance education programmes throughout Ireland.

The Bachelor of Arts (BA) was introduced in 1993, and comprises five subject streams (History, Literature, Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology) with thirty modules in total. Each subject strand comprises six modules of which the first is classified as foundation module²⁹. Foundation modules are prerequisite for undertaking further modules in the same subject domain. All other modules within the same subject strand are classified as post-foundation.

Over 800 students were enrolled on the BA in 2005³⁰ when this study was undertaken. The majority of students enrolled on the BA programme are mature students (over 23 years of age) and their age ranges from 23 to 65+. Over 70% of students are female. In the same year a

²⁹ Due to the modular and flexible structure of the BA in Humanities, an hypothetical student could be enrol for a foundation module in Philosophy after having already studied Sociology at post-foundation level. Therefore the information about the level of modules taught by tutors was included simply to signal that tutors teaching foundation modules may need to invest time and effort in their feedback to raise students' awareness of the specific requirements of a subject, but not necessarily need to presume that students are at the beginning of their study career, hence needing more substantial levels of support.

³⁰ All feedback comments were collected during the academic year 2005-2006.

total of 76 tutors were responsible for teaching to 102 tutorial groups (with on average 15 students allocated to each group).

6.1.1 The tutor group studied

For the purpose of this study, feedback comments provided by 30 tutors -6 from each subject strand- have been selected. For History, Literature and Psychology an equal number of foundation modules and post-foundation modules were chosen, whereas for Philosophy two tutors were tutoring at foundation level and four at post-foundation level, and for Sociology five tutors were tutoring at foundation module level and one at post-foundation level (see Appendix A). The selection was motivated by the representativeness³¹ of the tutors for their subject group in terms of teaching experience both with Oscail and in other environments.

Every year Oscail experiences a teaching staff turnover of approximately 25%. A higher proportion of Sociology and Psychology tutors tend to be younger and in general less experienced than their colleagues (see Appendix A).

Over one academic year Oscail tutors meet students in person at eight two hour face-to-face tutorials held approximately once a month. Tutors are recruited locally, close to tutorial centres, and are therefore geographically dispersed.

Once a year, a tutor induction session is organised to discuss the course structure and pedagogical approaches for the academic year³². This session represents the only opportunity for tutors of different subject streams to meet and discuss pedagogical issues in person and is normally attended by not more than 60% of the tutor population. Relatively poor attendance is mainly due to geographical dispersion and the part-time nature of Oscail work, which means that annual meetings often clash with tutors' other commitments.

³¹ The chosen tutors represented various levels of experience working with Oscail and in various other institutions. Furthermore both foundation module and post-foundation module tutors were included.

³² Guidance given at tutor meetings is supplemented with written detailed information regarding Oscail feedback provision approach & policy.

Tutors mark ³³three essays per module and provide written feedback comments on each submitted essay. These are returned to Oscail and then to students approximately within a month from submission and prior to submission of subsequent essays. Hence students have the opportunity to reflect and productively engage with the feedback obtained on previous essays. Two types of feedback comments are provided: Summary comments - henceforth abbreviated as SM – and annotated feedback –abbreviated as AFS³⁴. SM are entered in a standardised feedback report form, termed TMA (tutor marked assignment) form whereas AFS are handwritten directly on the margins of assessed texts.

As part of the annual tutor meeting, subject specific marking sessions are organised. The purpose of these sessions is to achieve more consistent approach to marking and feedback within the same subject domain. For this purpose, prior to the meeting tutors are provided with a sample to mark and comment on. The marked sample is discussed in subject –specific groups chaired by subject leaders and monitored by academic co-coordinators. ³⁵ Academic co-coordinators are also available for pedagogical advice on assessment and feedback throughout the academic year and act as liaison with Subject leaders for subject-specific issues.

Further advice on marking and feedback is also provided to tutors through monitoring reports sent to tutors after the marking of each essay. An external subject-specific assessor (referred to as “the monitor”) double-marks a small selection of essays from each tutorial group to ensure consistency in marking and support through feedback.

Furthermore, unlike conventional third level education, Oscail students can appeal against the results of individual essays, prior to the final calculation of module marks. The monitor is charged with the responsibility to double-mark assignments for which an appeal has been lodged. Often assignment appeals are used by students as a means to signal their disagreement with the mark as- unlike in conventional third level education- this is considered

³³ It should be noted that the description in this section relates to practices in 2005, when the data for this chapter were collected. Current Oscail practices have changed considerably, thanks to greater use of technology for both administrative and pedagogical processes.

³⁴ Literally AFS stands for “annotated feedback system”. This term becomes used specifically from 2006 when as part of the new format a new system of annotated feedback comments provision is introduced. However to ensure that consistent terminology is used through the thesis the abbreviation AFS is also used for data in this chapter which refers to 2005 feedback provision.

³⁵ It should be noted that the researcher was an Oscail academic co-ordinator during the research process for this phase.

an acceptable ground for appeals in Oscail assessment system. This interestingly gives a voice to students during the assessment process which allows them to affirm their role in the educational relation in more active terms. In chapter seven it will be shown how statistics on appeals have been brought as an indicator of student satisfaction with the revised feedback format.

6.2 Data collection method

For the purpose of this study the feedback provided by 30 tutors to 3 of their students was analysed. Table 6.1 summarises the sets collected and for each tutor.

Table 6.1 collected feedback comments³⁶

	History						Literature						Philosophy						Psychology						Sociology					
Type	T 1	T 2	T 3	T 4	T 5	T 6	T 1	T 2	T 3	T 4	T 5	T 6	T 1	T 2	T 3	T 4	T 5	T 6	T 1	T 2	T 3	T 4	T 5	T 6	T 1	T 2	T 3	T 4	T 5	T 6
SM	9	8	8	8	9	9	6	7	8	8	6	9	8	8	4	9	9	7	5	7	7	9	9	7	8	9	7	7	7	8
Tot.	51						44						45						45						46					
AFS	9	4	5	4	6	7	5	6	8	8	7	8	5	6	4	9	8	7	3	7	6	9	9	7	7	7	2	2	5	1
Tot.	35						42						40						41						27					

The table differentiates between Summary Comments (SM) and annotated feedback (AFS) to account for incompleteness of some of the sets analysed. For instance it can be seen that while for History tutor 1 (T1) it was possible to collect a full set including 9 SM and 9 AFS, for Psychology tutor 1 (T1) 5 SM and only 3 AFS were collected.

The data collected represent “ordinary events in a natural setting” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.10) as the researcher made no intervention to modify or influence feedback provision. For some essays it was not possible to collect both SM and AFS. A full sample should have included 270 feedback reports including 3 feedback sheets for each of the three assignment submitted by individual students. However in total 231 summary and 185 annotated feedback commentaries were collected.

³⁶ It should be noted that 2 students in PHIL T3 and PSYT1 did not submit their second and third essay and this in part explain the reduced size of the set for these two tutors. Also SOC T6 did not provide annotated feedback for most of the essays and SOC T3 and T4 only provided AFS for some of the essays. Furthermore LIT T2 was unable to mark all of the first essays and some of the essays for this group were marked by another tutor. These were excluded from the analysis.

The shortfall was due mainly to three factors. Firstly the researcher was trying to limit her interference with the essay results processing procedure. As the timeframe available for collecting all the information was very short this affected the quantity of essays that could be photocopied prior to being sent back to the students. Marked essays are sent back by tutors to Oscail. The mark is recorded by Oscail administrative staff and the essay is then returned to student together with a feedback report sheet. Delays in receiving essays from some of the tutors analysed meant that in order to ensure that students would receive feedback before attempting subsequent ones they had to be sent back to students immediately. It was felt that delaying receipt of feedback would have defeated one of the main goals of the study, namely that of helping students with their learning through feedback. Therefore it was deemed to be preferable to limit the interference of this study with the essay processing procedure.

Secondly not all the students observed for this study submitted all assignments. 6 students did not submit all essays and 3 students deferred their studies. As Oscail students submit 3 assignments for each year long module, it was considered to be preferable to continue to collect feedback for the same students throughout the assessment. It was felt that maintaining the focus on the same students would provide a more consistent analytical environment. However, retaining the focus on the same students for all the essays also meant that when a student did not submit an essay or deferred his studies it was not possible to collect a full set of essays for the tutors to whom he was allocated.

Thirdly no annotated feedback was provided for 12 essays by 4 Sociology tutors, hence affecting the overall count of feedback AFS for this subject group.

6.3 Feedback functions, levels and detail

This section presents the outcomes of a coding process which identifies qualitative patterns of feedback provision. The codification of assessment feedback is not a new process. The pedagogical quality of written feedback has been a particularly significant concern for distance educators as studies carried out by Hyland (1998, 2001) Brown & Glover (2006) and Walker (2009) demonstrate. Brown & Glover in particular have presented one of the most extensive studies of feedback based on the classification of feedback comments through a coding process. Brown & Glover have devised a feedback classification system based on the conceptual framework of Gibbs et. al. (2003) and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004) and have generated five main categories (comments on content; on skills development; encouraging

further learning, motivational, demotivational) for analysing specifically science assignments. They have also identified within each of these categories what they describe as three levels of depth (acknowledge, correction, explain why). In similar fashion the research for this thesis has resulted in a feedback classification system as outlined in Coding manual included in Appendix B. Some differences between this system and the one devised by Brown & Glover are worth noting.

Firstly an entirely new theoretical framework based on dialogical principles has been devised specifically to inform the categorisation of feedback and development to a new assessment process. While dialogue appears in the list of codes presented by Brown and Glover (2006, p.84), their code “Fd” listed under the category “comments that encourage further learning” and explained as “dialogue with student encouraged”, simply suggests that dialogue is an additional and external process to feedback.³⁷

Secondly the categorisation proposed in this thesis modifies and extends the one proposed by Brown & Glover, by introducing a fourth level to the classification and by reconsidering the relationship between levels and function codes. The fourth level was devised to identify and categorise advice referring to past, current and future learning, and also providing explicitly advice for future learning. The addition of this additional level is consistent with the process orientation and the openness that are necessary conditions for the promotion of pedagogical dialogue as proposed by this thesis.

Furthermore Brown & Glover see levels as indicating depth of the advice given in relation to each of the categories they identify. However in the categorisation system devised for this thesis it was considered to be preferable to organize the categories according the potential level of contribution to learning and the establishment of dialogical relation. Levels include specific categories, hierarchically organized according to the potential to contribute to learning of the comments associated with each of the category.

As discussed in chapter two, the methodological model employed to analyse data was framework analysis. Framework Analysis presents a research process similar to grounded theory however unlike grounded theory it presents specific questions, a limited time frame and a priori issues to be addressed (Srivastava, & Thomson, 2009). Furthermore its prime

³⁷ Unfortunately Brown & Glover do not provide examples of coded feedback and it is therefore difficult to fully ascertain how the codes have been applied to specific text.

concern is to describe and interpret what is happening in a particular setting (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Therefore consistently with framework analysis an initial list of dialogical principles was specified prior to the data collection and analysis. The principles were considered as the starting point for the initial development of the coding matrix. Framework analysis is also compatible with the organic refinement of principles as a result of the data analysis. The process led to a further specification of such principles in more sophisticated listing, namely a coding matrix (Appendix D). The coding matrix itself is classificatory device for categorising feedback comments and identifying evidence of dialogical practice in written feedback. The analysis presented in the following sections presents the outcomes of the coding process (see Appendix D). One of the purposes of the research for this chapter is to generate a suggestion (as per Design-Based Research) for improving future practice.

It was considered important not only to capture the current quality of the feedback provision, but also identify the physical location of different types of comments (either in SM or in AFS). Such clarification was going to inform the restructuring of the new form to make sure that the physical structure of the form could enhance the opportunities to offer the best possible feedback.

The analysis also provides a breakdown according to subject groups, in order to identify whether certain issues relate only to certain subject domains or denote more generalized patterns. An analysis on subject domain basis has also been carried out with the purpose to select a specific group of tutors for analysis in the case study presented in chapter seven.

6.3.1 Feedback functions: overall patterns

As shown by figure 6.1 the most prominent function recorded in the analysis was that of “correction” (c) followed by feedback “justifying evaluation” (a-je), “identificating issues” (a-ii), “acknowledging merit of the quality of assessed work” (a-m) and comments with a motivational function (m). These functions represent between 12% and 16% of all coded feedback comments. Comments with an ostensive functions (o), comments indicating omissions (om), and encouraging students to further develop their discussion represent approximately (E-tac) 5% each.

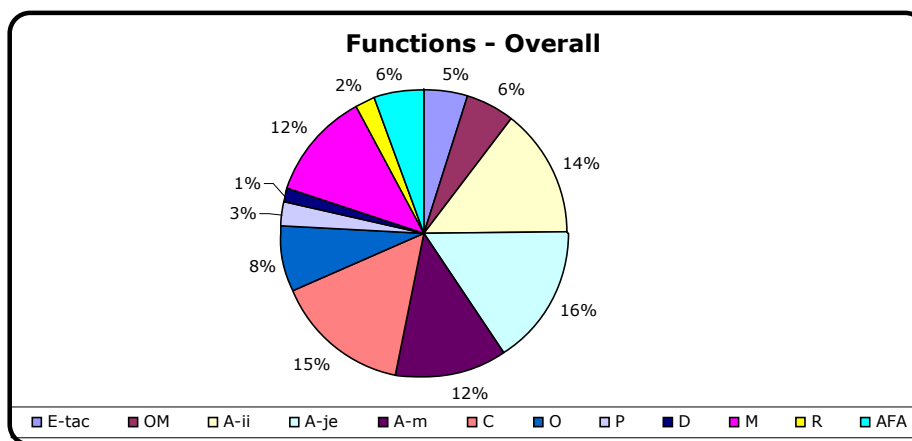


Figure 6.1: Overall feedback functions distribution

The above figure should not be read exclusively in negative terms. A large portion of comments are used to go beyond mere acknowledgement and offer corrections that are helpful to students in deepening and structuring their understanding of the specific essay topic and address specific instances of more technical issues (such as grammar, presentation and referencing). Considering that acknowledgment of issues and corrections can be found in almost equal proportions this appears to indicate that in general problematic issues are not left unexplained. However the percentage comments aimed at enhancing future learning is disproportionately low. Figure 6.1 shows that “Advice for future essays” (afa) comments accounts on average for 6% of the overall feedback provision, and not all tutors provide this type of feedback comments (25 out of 30). Comments linking past, current and future performance (r) are also rare (2%). Similar low percentages are also recorded for comments prompting further reflection beyond the specifics of the current essay (p) (3%) and comments framing the feedback exchange in more informal and conversational terms (d) (1%).

If we now consider the distribution of functions across the two types of comment, summative comments – entered in a box of standard size- and annotated feedback –handwritten comments on margin of the assignments, some observations can be made in relation to function and positioning of comments. Table 6.2 shows the distribution ³⁸of comments serving different functions across summary comments (SM) and annotated feedback comments (AFS). In general, not surprisingly, comments with a more specific focus tend to be found in annotated feedback whereas more general comments are more frequent found in summary comments. Motivational comments (M), comments justifying the grade given (A-je) and also

³⁸ One of the purposes of analysing the distribution of functions across different sections of the feedback report form was that of capturing current patterns of organisation of feedback and highlighting deficiencies that may be potentially addressed through restructuring of the actual feedback reporting form.

feedback providing advice for future assignments (AFA) tend to be framed in rather general terms and for this reason tend to be incorporated in summary comments.

Table 6.2: Overall functions and placing of comments

Function (%)	SM	AFS
AFA	6.06	1.60
A-ii	17	9.57
A-je	18.30	7.26
A-m	10.60	18.34
C	13.80	24.72
D	1.21	1.50
E-tac	3.30	12.57
M	13.10	0.29
O	7.47	15.10
OM	4.68	9.44
P	1.80	6.52
R	2.07	0.07

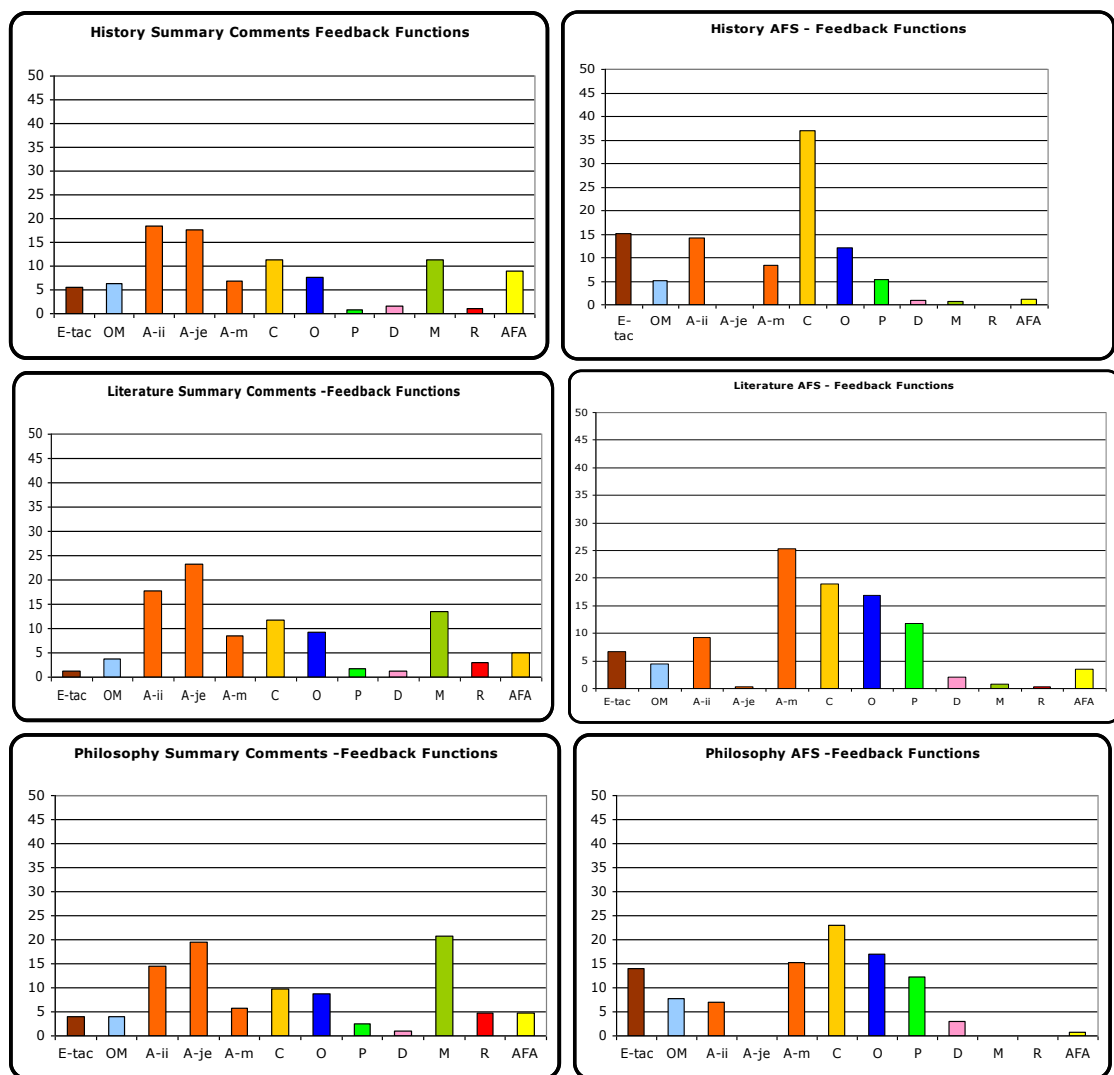
The most concerning element emerging from the analysis of this distribution is the tendency to incorporate advice for future assignments in summary comments. Table 6.2 shows that 6.06 % of advice for future assignment is entered in Summary comments whereas only 1.6% of feedback addressing the same function is included in annotated comments.–While justifiable- this also suggests that this type of advice may be very limited, considering that the physical space for entering summary comments is constrained by the size of the box allocated to summary comments in the actual feedback report form. This physical limitation may have implications for the level of detail that assessors are able to provide in their advice for future assignments, hence also potentially limiting pedagogical worth.

While on the whole, comments with a corrective function are the most prominent in the sample studied, a closer look also reveals that corrections in annotated feedback are more likely to be found in the annotated comments. This higher value can be attributed to the fact that many comments are very specific and relate to particular issues and their location in the annotated comments establishes a close link with particular sections of the essay. The analysis also reveals there is slight tendency- particularly in annotated comments- to correct analytical issues in generic terms and more surface issues, such as referencing or grammar, in more specific terms. This highlights a predominance of feedback on surface features of the assessed work.

6.3.2 Feedback Functions: subject specific differences

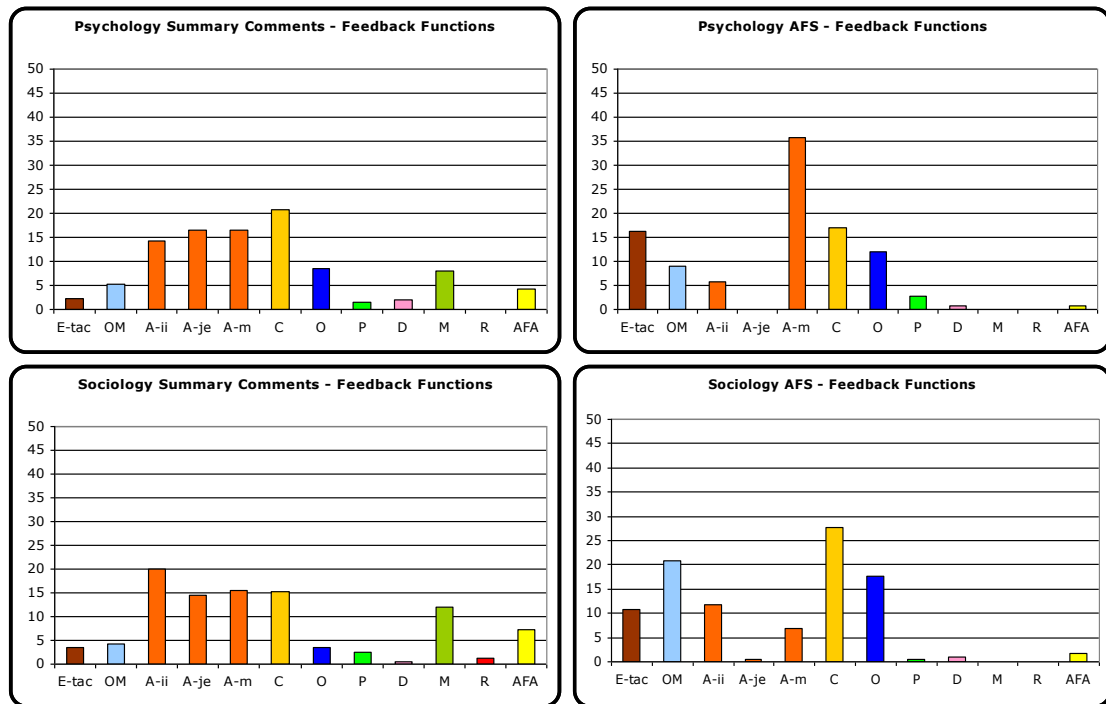
Variations in the use made of different functions by different subject groups³⁹ have emerged from the analysis. Figure 6.3 summarises the subject-specific differences in relation to functions. It should be noted that the figures are based on the percentage of average values for all the tutors in each subject group⁴⁰. In section 6.3.4 it will be shown that there are differences in feedback provision within the same subject group and therefore the subject average values provide only a generic means for comparison among subjects. Figure 6.2 shows a more consistent pattern across all subjects in terms of functions in summary comments.

Figure 6.2: Functions found in feedback provided within different subject groups (SM and AFS)



³⁹ It should be noted that given the small population for each subject no conclusive evidence of correlation between subject and style of feedback provision can be derived. A larger sample is necessary to establish such correlation.

⁴⁰ The quantity of feedback coded according to specific functions has been recorded. The an average value of the quantity of feedback coded according to a particular function for all the tutors within each subject strand has been calculated.



The bar charts above suggest that tutors across different subjects share similar views as to what type of information should be provided in summary comments. All subjects present A-ii (identification of issues) and A-je (justification of evaluation) in similar proportions. A distinction emerges in terms of corrections in summary comments. All subjects present a considerably higher proportion of motivational commentary in the summary comments rather than in the annotated feedback as many of these motivational comments are often praise of effort and achievement in holistic terms and refer to the overall performance. However the percentage of motivational comments given by Philosophy tutors is considerably higher than that of other subjects and this might be explained as an attempt to respond to the difficulties experienced by tutors for this subject in retaining students, particularly at foundation level. Advice for future essays is given by tutors in all subjects almost entirely in Summary Comments, with the exception of Literature where this function was found in similar quantities also in annotated feedback.

Literature and Philosophy show a more “distributed” pattern for annotated feedback, where several functions appear in similar proportions. Annotated feedback provided by Psychology and Sociology tutors avail only of a narrow range of functions, with most learning development functions almost absent.

Literature tutors tend to take a multilayered approach, whereby feedback does not only identify an issue, but also offers advice on how to correct it and expand on it in order to avoid

similar scenarios in future. The prevalence of multi-layered annotated comments, presenting a wide range of functions, may explain the relatively higher percentage recorded for “advice for future assessment” for this subject. While some philosophy tutors also present annotated comments with a wide range of functions this practice is not consistent among tutors for this subject. Furthermore, also among those philosophy tutors, providing multi-layered comments, only in few instances, the comments also present advice for future essays.

Comments linking past, current and future performance appear consistently in very small percentages across all the subject strands with none of the psychology tutors referring back to previous essays, either in summary comments or annotated feedback.

Prompting further reflection appears to be a prevalent function in annotated feedback only among Literature and Philosophy tutors. These subjects tend to attach great importance to interpretative analysis and it may be that the type of analysis associated with these two subjects also encourages this type of commentary. Conversely human sciences (psychology and sociology) tutors appear to attach less importance to this function and the type of analysis associated with these disciplines tends to require objective and evidence-based information and the correctness of the information presented appears to be particularly valued by Psychology tutors.

Finally, not surprisingly, ostensive comments appear in higher proportion in annotated feedback comments for all subjects due to the specificity of their reference. If we turn to the outcome of the classification of feedback according to function sub-codes (see Appendix B for full description of sub-codes) Table 6.3 offers further information on subject-specific similarities and differences.

The top five percentage values for each subject have been highlighted. Firstly it can be observed that tutors’ feedback comments in only two subjects –Literature and Philosophy– present the highest percentage values for the function coded as “prompts for further reflection” and more specifically also appear to have similar values for sub-code “prompt for further reflection on conceptual analysis” (p-prcp). Also the same two subjects present their highest percentage values for the ostensive sub-code “expanding on specific point” (o-exp). As noted in previous sections the majority of Philosophy and Literature tutors tend to provide richer annotated feedback, incorporating several functions within comments by moving from the specific to more general and transferable advice. The data emerging from the table appear to reconfirm the similarities between feedback provisions in these two subjects.

Psychology and History tutors appear to offer a relatively high volume of comments correcting referencing (c-g-ref). The correction is often offered in conjunction with advice pointing out the referencing regulations. This also explains the relatively high percentage of ostensive (o-pss) comments pointing at specific resources (o-pss), where the resources often referred to are the referencing guidelines. This is not surprising, as both, Psychology and History, use a different and more complex referencing system than the traditional Harvard System used for the other subject strands. Students generally struggle with mastering different referencing systems⁴¹, and tutors marking assignments within these subject domains clearly invest time and effort to help their students specifically in relation to requirements of their subject domain.

Further analysis of subject specific differences will be provided in section 6.3.4 where some of the patterns that have emerged in relation to functions will be also incorporated in the discussion of feedback levels.

⁴¹ It should be noted that Oscale BA students may be enrolled in modules for up to 5 subject domains and may need to master 3 referencing systems at once. The Harvard Referencing System is used for Philosophy, Literature and Sociology, the American Psychological Association system is used for Psychology; the Historical Society Referencing System is used for History.

Table 6.3 Function sub-codes Summary Tables

level	1														2										3						4							tot. coded segments										
funct code	e-tac		o-m			a-ii							a-je		a-m			c										o				p				d			m		R		AFA					R
funct sub-code	E-tac-m	E-tac-d	OM-cco	OM-m	OM-r	A-ii-ad	A-ii-rt	A-ii-es	A-ii-lu	A-ii-r	A-ii-wr	A-je-	A-m-b	A-m-d	C-co-in	C-co-c	C-co-r	C-p-s	C-p-l	C-p-st	C-g-sp	C-g-ref	O-trsp	O-eusp	O-exp	O-pps	P-prcp	P-awat	P-ed	P-ai	D-pe	D-c	D-o	D-ed	M-b	M-l	R-pca	R-hai	AFA-co	AFA-es	AFA-p-s	AFA-p-l	AFA-g-sp	AFA-g-ref	R-pcna	tot. coded segments		
N Tot.	58	175	91	21	68	99	67	29	51	25	30	135	144	150	100	24	189	34	37	64	25	76	33	62	133	89	118	31	11	18	10	17	2	10	85	18	4	7	44	18	4	5	6	3	1	2421		
% Tot.	2	7.2	4	1	3	4	3	1	2	1	1	5.6	5.95	6.2	4.13	1	7.8	1	2	3	1	3	1	3	5.5	4	4.9	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	4	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	100		
N SM	5	24	21	9	8	42	25	20	20	12	24	134	42	50	3	1	55	9	8	9	2	11	3	19	2	30	11	4	1	2	2	0	6	81	18	4	7	32	15	3	2	6	0	1	2421			
% SM	0	1	1	0	0	2	1	1	1	0	1	5.5	1.73	2.07	0.12	0	2.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.1	1	0.5	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	32.42			
N AFS	53	151	70	12	60	57	42	9	31	13	6	1	102	100	97	23	134	25	29	55	23	65	30	43	131	59	107	27	10	16	8	15	2	4	4	0	0	0	12	3	1	3	0	3	0	2421		
% AFS	2	6.2	3	0	2	2	2	0	1	1	0	0	4.21	4.13	4.01	1	5.5	1	1	2	1	3	1	2	5.4	2	4.4	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	67.58		
N HIS	19	81	15	7	21	40	27	15	16	9	14	47	26	35	33	8	60	17	23	20	13	43	11	16	18	36	27	4	2	4	2	3	0	4	28	6	0	2	14	11	1	0	2	2	0	782		
% HIS	2	10	2	1	3	5	3	2	2	1	2	6	3.32	4.48	4.22	1	7.7	2	3	3	2	5	1	2	2.3	5	3.5	1	0	1	0	0	1	4	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	100			
N LIT	10	13	21	4	0	16	6	1	12	5	0	9	30	24	11	9	35	0	0	1	0	0	1	24	41	6	29	15	7	5	5	4	1	1	5	5	0	0	4	0	1	1	0	0	0	362		
% LIT	3	3.6	6	1	0	4	2	0	3	1	0	2.5	8.29	6.63	3.04	2	9.7	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	11	2	8	4	2	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	100			
N PHIL	15	55	27	0	13	12	0	1	9	11	0	9	38	44	38	5	37	4	2	5	16	10	12	10	56	16	46	10	1	6	3	11	1	0	14	0	0	0	11	0	1	0	0	0	0	549		
% PHIL	3	10	5	0	2	2	0	0	2	2	0	1.6	6.92	8.01	6.92	1	6.7	1	0	1	3	2	2	2	10	3	8.4	2	0	1	1	2	0	0	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	100		
N PSY	2	4	8	0	4	9	9	3	1	4	7	35	32	14	0	0	20	5	7	7	1	14	1	3	0	17	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	3	12	5	0	0	4	2	2	1	1	1	0	242		
% PSY	1	1.7	3	0	2	4	4	1	0	2	3	14	13.2	5.79	0	0	8.3	2	3	3	0	6	0	1	0	7	0.4	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	2	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	0	100			
N SOC	12	21	20	8	30	22	14	9	13	7	9	35	18	34	18	2	37	7	5	32	6	9	8	9	18	14	5	1	0	2	0	1	0	2	26	2	0	3	11	5	0	2	3	0	0	480		
% SOC	3	4.4	4	2	6	5	3	2	3	1	2	7.3	3.75	7.08	3.75	0	7.7	1	1	7	1	2	2	2	3.8	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	100			

6.3.3 Feedback levels: overall patterns

After an initial categorisation that has led to classification of feedback summarised in table 6.3, the attention turned more specifically to the identification of the pedagogical and dialogical strength of the comments and to the hierarchical organization of the comments according to levels. Initial references to the categorisation and coding strategy have been made in the methodology chapter, section 2.5.5.1 (p.40). A more detailed explanation of the process leading to the identification of feedback levels is included in Appendix B.2 (p.16). The reader is reminded that 4 feedback levels were identified (for a detailed description of individual levels see Appendix B). Level 1 & 2 comments are retrospectively framed and focus on what the student *has done*, whereas level 3 & 4 are forward-looking comments which try to enhance what the student *can do*⁴². On the whole, the cumulative analysis of feedback comments for all tutors according to their functions has revealed a prevalence of comments with a retrospective focus (73%). This outcome –despite their different categorisation- is consistent with the findings presented by Brown & Glover (2006).

In considering feedback it can, in first place, be suggested that levels are not mutually exclusive. Feedback for one essay may present all four levels of feedback. Often the identification of a problematic issue is followed by a correction and from the correction is also extracted information that could also be relevant to future learning activities. This is often accompanied by motivating the student to do better next time and to an acknowledgement of the quality of what the student already does well. Generally tutors who provide feedback at level 3 and 4 also provide feedback at level 1 and 2 in proportionally lower quantity, hence distributing their time and effort in commenting across the 4 levels. Therefore the presence of feedback coded at level 3 and 4 tends to denote a more complex and multilayered approach to feedback provision.

It should also be noted that it is not always necessary to present all four levels for all issues. In some cases, for instance, corrections may be justifiable without a need for generalizing and extending it to future learning activities. In other instances the identification of particular issues may be self-explanatory, and might not necessitate further commenting to help the student to take action. The organization in levels does not imply that only levels 3 & 4 of feedback are worthwhile. Rather, it suggests that levels 1 & 2 are building blocks in promoting

⁴² *Can do* refers in pedagogical terms to the action that students can take to progress with their learning; in dialogical terms it also refers to opening up new possibilities for the students. Hence a forward-looking perspective places its emphasis on students' human potential.

learning that also necessitate further levels in order to exert a positive and long lasting influence on learning. Not surprisingly figure 6.3 shows a clear imbalance towards level 1 and 2 functions, which together account for 87% of all the feedback comments analysed for this study. The percentage proportions shown in the following figure should not lead one to assume that all levels should be represented in equal proportions. Yet the imbalance is too significant to conclude that current feedback provision is sufficiently effective in promoting learning.

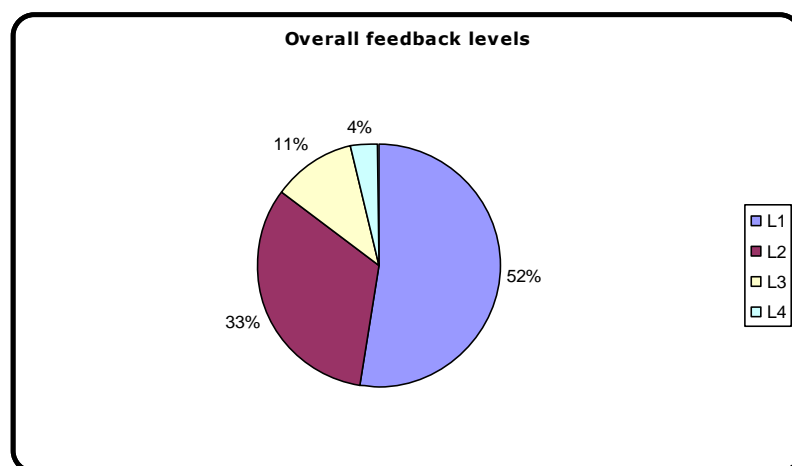
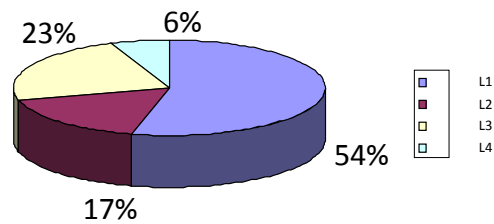


Figure 6.3: Overall feedback levels distribution

We now turn our attention to the relation between the positioning of comments- within either Summary or Annotated feedback -and to the levels. Figure 6.4 shows that despite the larger proportion of feedback at level 2 in annotated comments. Level 1 comments are prevalent in both SM and AFS. Level 3 comments, which tend to correspond primarily to feedback aimed at prompting further reflection, are more likely to be found in Summary comments. Level 3 in feedback presents a very mixed pattern according to different tutors' feedback styles, with some tutors preferring to give more generic prompts for reflection (normally entered in summary comments) and others offering ideas for further reflections that take up specific corrections made in annotated comments.

Level 4 comments, which emphasise the process orientation of assessment by linking past, current, and future learning and by providing advice on for future assessment represent an exceptionally small proportion of feedback in both SM and AFS. Level 4 feedback is almost entirely given in summary comments, with a small minority of tutors developing corrections in annotated comments into more transferable comments which yield information for subsequent learning activities.

Overall Summary Comments



Overall AFS

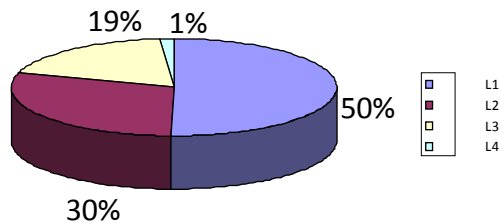


Figure 6.4: Feedback levels and positioning of comments

The prevalence of Level 2 comments in AFS is not surprising considering that corrections and ostensive comments make up level 2. Level 2 feedback in summary comments tends to condense specific annotated information in summarised form. This may explain the lower percentage for this level in summary comments. The following example, for instance, shows how Literature has condensed two annotated feedback comments in a more generic one in the summary comments section

At a couple of points I felt that you were re-telling the story when it would have been better to have reflected more on it in the context of exploring characterisation
(Level 2 comment in Summary comment)

I would deal with this scene at a greater length: try to bring out the importance of the style/language and the way this contributes to the play's thematic concerns (sexuality/death/betrayal/love/madness) and to the way in which it shows us a mode of expression completely at odds with that of the men in the play (in that it is fragmented, allusive: read over the comments made by Gertrude and the Gentleman at the opening of the scene for an intro
(Level 2 comment in AFS –reflected in above summary comment)

I would also draw attention to the way the characters are placed in similar predicaments and their ways of resolving them. In particular I would comment on the comparison between Linde/Krosgrad and Nora/Helmer: doesn't this offer us an interesting perspective on Nora's final decision?
(Level 2 comment in AFS –reflected in above summary comment)

Unlike level 2 comments, where the same function is reflected in annotated and summary comments in a slightly different form, at level 1 there appears to be a clearer distribution of various functions between the two types of feedback. Function A-je (justification of evaluation) is prevalent in summary comments and A-m (acknowledgment of merit) comments are mostly found in annotated feedback.

Table 6.4 summarises the feedback given by all tutors and shows the categorisation according to both functions and levels (see Appendix B.5 for a sample of coded feedback). As mentioned in section 6.2 it was not possible to collect a full set of essays (9 essays, 3 per each of the students examined for each tutor). Information relating to the feedback comments available is shown in the third and fourth column of the table. For each function both the frequencies and the percentage of feedback segment coded at that particular function are shown for each tutor. The last two columns for each level section show total frequencies and percentages recorded for individual tutors. Finally the last column on the right shows the total of coded segments identified by the researcher in all the feedback comments provided by the tutor appearing in that particular row.

Overall, comments coded at Level 1 and Level 2 represent the majority of feedback, with up to a maximum of 75.9% recorded for Level 1 (Soc T6) and a maximum of 60% recorded for Level 2 (Phil T3) for individual tutors. There tends to be a slightly higher percentage of comments coded at level 1 than coded at level 2, with only 4 tutors offering less feedback at level 1 than at level 2. 18 tutors offer 80% of their feedback comments at level 1 and 2. This is a considerably high proportion and confirms that the majority of the tutors examined present a rather narrow range of functions in their feedback provision and that such function tend to pertain primarily to retrospectively-framed feedback classification.

On average, similar percentages are recorded for functions “omission” (om), “tutor asking to clarify” (e-tac), and “justification of evaluation (a-je) (around 6 to 8 %) at level 1, whereas functions such as “acknowledgment of merit” (a-m) and identification of issues” (a-ii) account for approximately 30% of all the feedback comments.

Table 6.4 summary of levels and functions

Sub	T	Essays avail.		Level 1										Level 2				Level 3						Level 4				tot N									
				e-tac		om		A-ii		a-je		am		Level 1		C		O		Level 2		P		D		M			Level 3		R		AFA		Level 4		
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	tot N	tot%	N	%	N	%	tot N	tot%	N	%	N	%		N	%	tot N	tot%	N	%	N	%	tot N
HIS	1	9	9	8	6.2	5	3.8	28	22	8	6.2	8	6.2	52	40	49	38	8	6.2	57	44	2	1.5	5	3.8	6	4.6	13	10	1	0.8	2	1.5	3	2.3	130	
HIS	2	8	4	17	9.6	15	8.5	23	13	8	4.5	19	11	82	46	33	19	16	9	49	28	16	9	2	1.1	15	8.5	33	19	1	0.6	12	6.8	13	7.3	177	
HIS	3	8	5	1	1.6	6	9.5	8	13	6	9.5	6	9.5	27	43	16	25	6	9.5	22	35	4	6.3	1	1.6	1	1.6	9	14	0	0	5	7.9	5	7.9	63	
HIS	4	8	4	9	15	3	5	9	15	6	10	5	8.3	32	53	17	28	7	12	24	40	2	3.3	1	1.7	0	0	3	5	0	0	1	1.7	1	1.7	60	
HIS	5	9	6	0	0	3	3.5	16	19	10	12	25	29	54	63	18	21	2	2.3	20	23	1	1.2	0	0	5	5.8	6	7	1	1.2	5	5.8	6	7	86	
HIS	6	9	7	60	25	13	5.4	36	15	9	3.8	3	1.3	121	50	81	34	15	6.3	96	40	14	5.8	1	0.4	4	1.7	19	7.9	0	0	4	1.7	4	1.7	240	
LIT	1	6	5	0	0	4	2.5	36	23	6	3.8	14	8.9	60	38	43	27	17	11	60	38	29	18	2	1.3	3	1.9	34	22	1	0.6	3	1.9	4	2.5	158	
LIT	2	7	6	5	4	2	1.6	5	4	6	4.8	61	49	79	63	22	18	14	11	36	29	3	2.4	1	0.8	2	1.6	6	4.8	0	0	4	3.2	4	3.2	125	
LIT	3	8	8	24	6.7	30	8.3	38	11	6	1.7	51	14	149	41	57	16	77	21	124	34	51	14	10	2.8	1	0.3	82	23	0	0	8	2.2	8	2.2	360	
LIT	4	8	8	22	14	8	5.2	7	4.5	6	3.9	23	15	58	38	23	15	32	21	55	36	14	9.1	3	1.9	5	3.2	22	14	3	1.9	16	10	19	12	154	
LIT	5	6	7	4	3.5	0	0	13	11	6	5.3	21	18	44	39	39	34	17	15	56	49	8	7	1	0.9	5	4.4	14	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	114	
LIT	6	9	8	3	2	0	0	26	17	10	6.7	70	47	109	73	25	17	4	2.7	29	19	0	0	0	0	11	7.3	11	7.3	0	0	1	0.7	1	0.7	150	
PHIL	1	8	5	5	9.4	4	7.5	8	15	9	17	10	19	36	68	14	26	15	28	6	11	2	3.8	1	1.9	8	15	11	21	0	0	0	0	0	0	53	
PHIL	2	8	6	8	4.8	6	3.6	11	6.6	9	5.4	25	15	59	36	38	23	12	7.2	50	30	23	14	6	3.6	14	8.4	43	26	6	3.6	8	4.8	14	8.4	166	
PHIL	3	4	4	6	10	8	14	3	5.2	3	5.2	0	0	20	34	25	43	10	17	35	60	3	5.2	0	0	0	0	3	5.2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	58
PHIL	4	9	9	17	19	0	0	5	5.6	8	8.9	34	38	56	62	13	14	12	13	25	28	3	3.3	0	0	5	5.6	8	8.9	0	0	1	1.1	1	1.1	90	
PHIL	5	9	8	26	14	22	12	16	8.4	7	3.7	16	8.4	87	46	33	17	27	14	60	32	34	18	8	4.2	6	3.2	48	25	2	1.1	3	1.6	5	2.6	190	
PHIL	6	7	7	10	12	9	10	13	15	4	4.7	6	7	42	49	4	4.7	10	12	14	16	6	7	1	1.2	10	12	17	20	2	2.3	1	1.2	3	3.5	86	
PSY	1	5	3	0	0	2	5.1	7	18	5	13	7	18	21	54	6	15	2	5.1	8	21	1	2.6	3	7.7	5	13	9	23	0	0	1	2.6	1	2.6	39	
PSY	2	7	7	42	27	4	2.5	14	8.9	5	3.2	27	17	92	58	36	23	19	12	55	35	1	0.6	2	1.3	4	2.5	7	4.4	0	0	4	2.5	4	2.5	158	
PSY	3	7	6	7	3.3	7	3.3	6	2.9	3	1.4	124	59	147	70	22	11	27	13	49	23	9	4.3	0	0	2	1	11	5.3	0	0	2	1	2	1	209	
PSY	4	9	9	7	4.4	18	11	8	5.1	8	5.1	23	15	64	41	42	27	19	12	61	39	3	1.9	2	1.3	4	2.5	9	5.7	0	0	4	2.5	4	2.5	158	
PSY	5	9	9	25	18	19	13	15	11	8	5.7	12	8.5	79	56	48	34	7	5	55	39	0	0	0	0	4	2.8	4	2.8	0	0	3	2.1	3	2.1	141	
PSY	6	7	7	0	0	3	4.7	10	16	7	11	15	23	35	55	16	25	6	9.4	25	39	0	0	0	0	2	3.1	2	3.1	0	0	2	3.1	2	3.1	64	
SOC	1	8	7	8	9.3	22	26	8	9.3	7	8.1	16	19	61	71	18	21	3	3.5	21	24	2	2.3	0	0	0	0	2	2.3	0	0	2	2.3	2	2.3	86	
SOC	2	9	7	6	6.6	0	0	12	13	10	11	11	12	39	43	29	32	13	14	42	46	1	1.1	0	0	5	5.5	6	6.6	1	1.1	3	3.3	4	4.4	91	
SOC	3	7	2	5	12	4	9.5	7	17	7	17	2	4.8	25	60	14	33	2	4.8	16	38	1	2.4	0	0	0	0	1	2.4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	42
SOC	4	7	5	2	2.7	6	8.1	10	14	5	6.8	6	8.1	29	39	14	19	4	5.4	18	24	4	5.4	2	2.7	8	11	14	19	2	2.7	11	15	13	18	74	
SOC	5	7	5	12	10	16	14	15	13	3	2.6	5	4.3	51	44	32	28	23	20	55	47	1	0.9	1	0.9	2	1.7	4	3.4	0	0	6	5.2	6	5.2	116	
SOC	6	8	1	1	1.9	3	5.6	22	41	3	5.6	12	22	41	76	9	17	2	3.7	11	20	0	0	0	0	2	3.7	2	3.7	0	0	0	0	0	0	54	

As previously mentioned the function “correction” (c) is the most prominent and accounts alone, on average, for approximately 23% of all feedback provision, more than double the average percentage recorded for ostensive feedback (o). 9 of the tutors who have provided the lowest level of feedback at level 1 (with percentages under 50%) also record the highest level of feedback coded at levels 3 and 4 (HIS T2, HIS T3, LIT T1, LIT T3, LIT T4, PHIL T2, PHIL T5, PHIL T6, PSY T1, SOC T4) and this appears to indicate that these tutors have taken a more strategic approach to feedback by providing more performance-building feedback and have used a wider range of functions in their feedback provision.

With the exception of two tutors (Soc T4 and Lit T4), comments coded at level four represent less than 10% of the feedback provided by individual tutors. The majority of the comments coded at this level represent advice for future essays, with 20 out 30 tutors providing no feedback relating to the function R (comments linking previous, current and future performance) and consistently for all Psychology tutors, it represents less than 4%. The work of tutors in Literature, Philosophy and Sociology presents a similar pattern, with only one tutor in each of these subjects (Lit T4, PHIL T2, Soc T4) providing at least 6% of their feedback classified at level 4. History tutors offer a more mixed pattern with 3 tutors (T2,T3,T5) providing over 6% and the other 3 tutors showing a much lower percentage of feedback coded at this level.

Psychology tutors show consistently low values also for feedback classified at level 3. With the exception of one psychology tutor (T1), who presents 23.1% of commentary coded at this level - primarily thanks to a proportionally high quantity of level 3 motivational comments- for all the other Psychology tutors level 3 feedback represents less than 6% of their individual feedback provision. Among Sociology tutors the tutor (T4) who had recorded the highest value for level 4 also provides the highest volume (18.9%) of comments at level 3, and only one other tutor offers more than 6% of his feedback comments at level 3. Literature and Philosophy present a similar pattern, with 4 out 6 tutors offering between 10 and 25.9% of their feedback at level 3. Half of the History tutors provide over 10% of feedback at level 3. Philosophy tutor (T2) has devoted approximately 25% of his feedback to comments coded at level 3 and clearly stands out with a rather different feedback style. His feedback style and structure will be examined more in detail in section 6.4.

A closer look at subject-specific patterns and tutor groups will offer more detailed information. This aspect of the analysis will be illustrated in Section 6.3.4.

6.3.4 Feedback functions: analysis of subject-specific groups

This section aims to investigate more in detail subject specific groups of tutors. This analysis does not aim to verify whether the subject-based patterns can be specifically linked to the demands of the subject but rather to focus on the pedagogical effects of actions by individual tutors within particular subject groups. The subject specific analysis presented in this section suggests that on the whole tutors within a particular subject group tend to take similar approaches to feedback provision, hence implicitly indicating that tutors might tend to conform to a dominant feedback practice within their subject domain. Nevertheless all tutors across the various subject strands tend to provide a high percentage of level 1 and 2 feedback and what appears to differentiate individual tutors is the level of feedback at level 3 and to extent also at level 4 that they provide. Therefore the higher percentage of level 3 feedback provided by some tutors seems to be attributable more to the style of the individual tutor than to the common practice within the subject domain. History 2 T2, Literature T1 & 3, Philosophy tutors 2 & 5 and Psychology T1, Sociology T4 provide considerably more L3 feedback than other tutors within the same subject strand. This indicates that these tutors have invested considerably more time and effort than their subject counterparts in providing feedback also aimed at promoting future learning. A more detailed analysis of the outcomes subject specific groups is provided below.

History

History tutors represent a rather homogeneous group in terms of teaching experience and length of employment with Oscail, which means that tutors from this subject group are very familiar with Oscail procedures and approaches to feedback provision. The homogeneity of this group is also reflected in outcomes of the feedback analysis. With the exception of one tutor (HIS T5) all History tutors devote not more than 55% of feedback to Level 1 comments and three out of 6 tutors provide less than 50% feedback at this level.

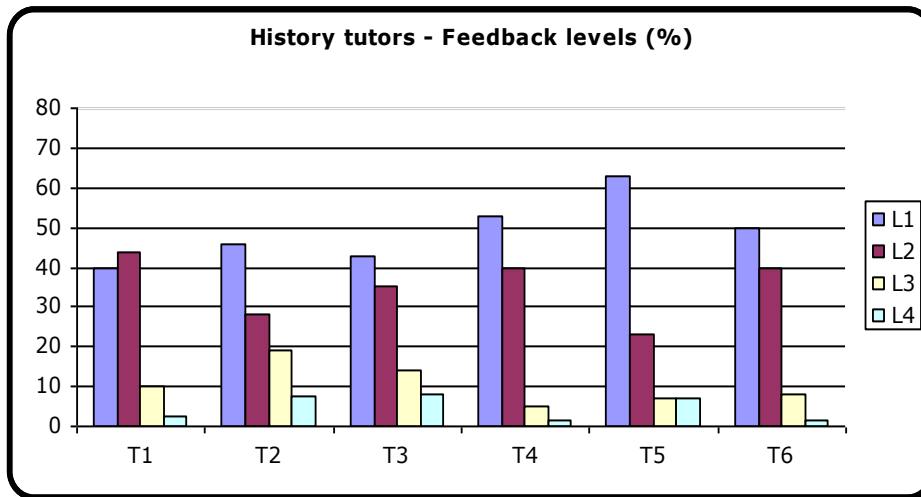


Figure 6.5: Levels in feedback comments provided by History tutors

In general, with the exception of His T4, who appears to concentrate his efforts on almost exclusively offering feedback at level 1 and 2 (93% of overall feedback provided by this tutor), all the other tutors present a wider range of functions and T2 and T3 present among the overall highest scores for feedback provision at level 2 and level 3.

Literature

Figure 6.6 shows that two tutors (T2 and T6) tend to give feedback mainly at level 1, three tutors (T1, T3 and T4) show a more distributed pattern and T5 providing no feedback at level 4.

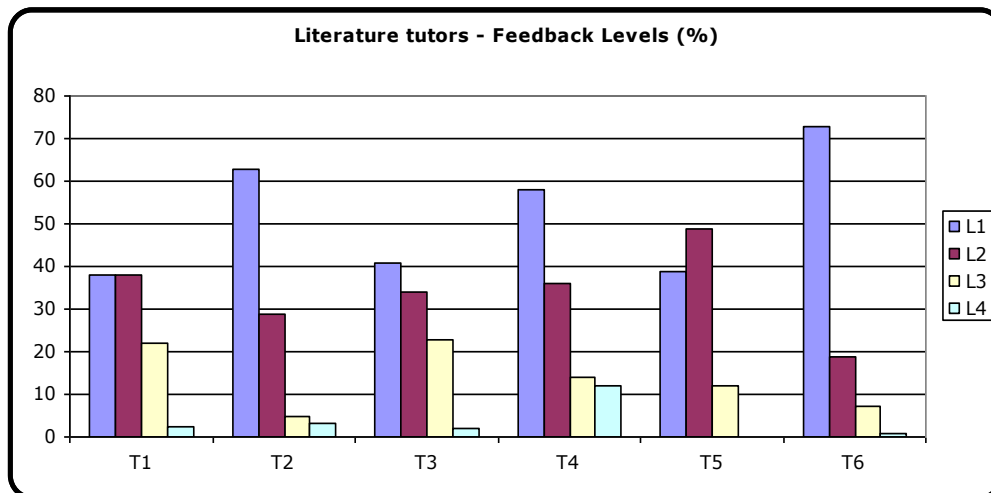


Figure 6.6: Levels in feedback comments provided by Literature tutors

There are strong similarities in the feedback provision style of tutors 1, 3 and 4 that may explain also the similarity in percentage values recorded for feedback levels. These 3 tutors

tend to provide lengthy summary comments which incorporate more than one function. Furthermore they tend to be very strategic in their approach to summary comments and instead of retelling all the issues identified in the annotated comments they tend to report in summarized form on the more critical issues. An exemplification of multilayered feedback style offered by these tutors will be offered in section 6.4.2.

Philosophy

Among Philosophy tutors, T2 and T5 present a more distributed pattern and a closer look at their feedback style reveals similarities also with Literature T1, T3 and T4. Philosophy T3 presents an unusual scenario as he is predominantly offering feedback a level 2. A more detailed analysis of the feedback provided by this tutor reveals he is clearly incorporating the identification of issues almost exclusively in the corrections; therefore level one feedback appears less predominantly.

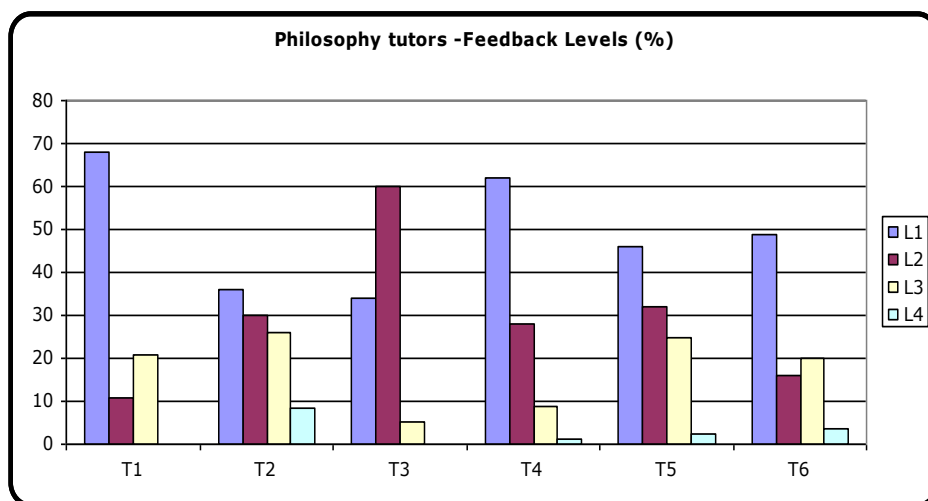


Figure 6.7: Levels in feedback comments provided by Philosophy tutors

T1 and T4 focus primarily on identification of problematic issues. Figure 6.7 shows that in terms of percentage of feedback provided by individual tutors, T4 proportionally offers similar levels of corrections to T2 and T5. However, the table showing quantity and length of comments provided highlights that this tutor is in fact providing very little feedback and presents a rather unusual scenario if compared to all the other Philosophy tutors.

Psychology

As noted in section 6.3.2 and also shown in Figure 6.8, all Psychology tutors offer little feedback at level 3 and 4. Conversely, Psychology tutors appear to offer a high volume of comments at level 2.

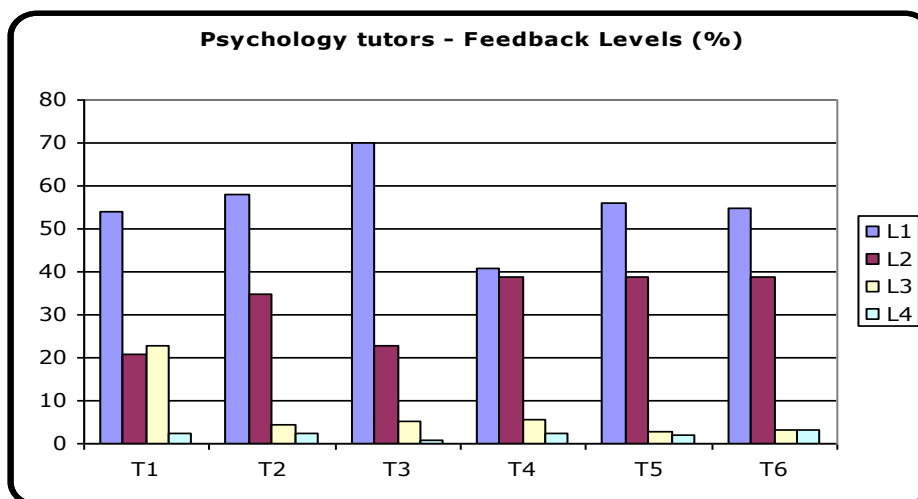


Figure 6.8: Levels in feedback comments provided by Psychology tutors

T1 stands out as the only one offering considerable feedback at level 3. If we refer back to table 6 it can be observed that this tutor offers a high proportion of motivational and conversational comments, which are classified at level 3. Therefore, while he offers a high level of support from an emotional perspective, in terms of prompts for further reflection and feedback fostering learning development from a cognitive perspective, he presents percentage values similar to those recorded for all other psychology tutors. Figure 6.8 also shows that T3 is offering the highest proportion of level 1 feedback. Table 6.4 reveals that this tutor is providing a high proportion of comments acknowledging merit, particularly in annotated feedback, where he has entered up to 50 brief comments per essay, acknowledging the quality of particular points made by students.

Sociology

Figure 6.9 shows that sociology tutors do not present a uniform scenario in terms of feedback provision. T4 is somehow different from other tutors and his pattern is more akin to LIT T1, T3, T4 and PHIL T2 and T5, with a more distributed classification of feedback across all the levels. T2 and T5 appear to offer a similar amount of level 1 feedback, and also of level 2, and show some evidence of feedback provision at level 3 and 4.

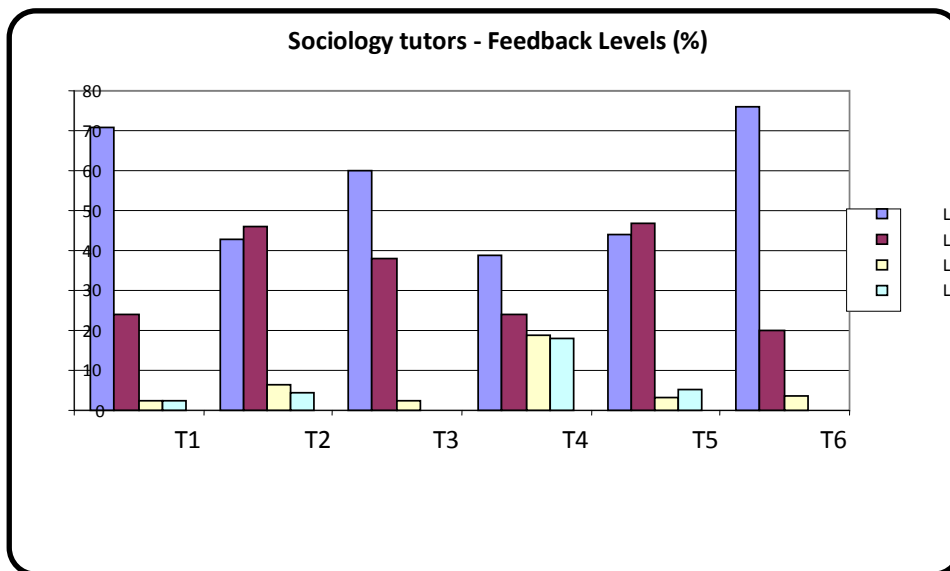


Figure 6.9: Levels in feedback comments provided by Sociology tutors

However, in general Sociology tutors offer a disappointingly low proportion of comments at level 3 and 4 and two tutors (T3 and T6) offer no feedback at level 4.

6.4 From current to future feedback practice

The outcomes of the coding process discussed in section 6.3 have highlighted that, on the whole, only a few tutors manage to achieve a good balance between retrospective and learning enhancement (feed-forward) feedback. In particular it has emerged that despite similarities in feedback provision by tutors within the same subject domain, some tutors appear to invest considerably more time and effort in learning enhancement feedback than others. This section will take a closer look at the feedback provision by some of the tutors who stood out in the analysis presented in section 6.3.5 and will compare different styles of feedback provision. The purpose of the analysis is to identify examples of good practice that show already evidence of infusion of dialogical principles in feedback provision. The analysis will discuss whether these examples will offer the basis for the development of a revised feedback strategy and format that can be adopted more extensively by Oscail tutors.

6.4.1 Evidence of infusion of dialogical principles in current feedback provision

From the analysis it has emerged that there are marked differences between feedback provisions in terms of the range of functions incorporated in feedback comments. While approximately half of the tutor population invest time in providing feedback

with a wide range of functions, only a minority of tutors take this approach consistently (Literature T1, T3, T4, T5, Philosophy T2, T5 and T6, Psychology T4, History T2, T3, T6 and Sociology T4 and T5).

The prevalence of feedback coded at level 1 and 2, while somewhat acceptable⁴³ in pedagogical terms, is deficient in dialogical terms. As we have seen, feedback coded at level 1 and 2 is primarily worded in retrospective terms and the finality of the comments resonates with what Batkhin (1983) describes as the authoritative word – a word demands unconditional allegiance. Recent studies (FAST, 2005; Weaver, 2006, 2009) have associated retrospective feedback with the predominance of content based-comments. They have identified this as a major obstacle to feedback helping students for future essays and have advocated a greater emphasis on skills based feedback. On the contrary it is argued that it is preferable to retain some content focus, but to build on content-based comments to extract information which can be used ostensibly⁴⁴ to inform future essays. Current studies (Wingate; 2006, MacKeogh & Lorenzi; 2007) are advocating the embedding of skills in subject domains, as it is through the application of skills to specific content that students learn to understand the subject and analyse and present information according to the conventions and the analytical approach of that specific subject. The subject-specific content contextualizes the skill and offers a means for exemplification of how a skill should be used within a particular subject domain.

This thesis suggests that the anti-dialogical orientation of retrospectively framed feedback is even more problematic. The retrospective focus of feedback refers to learning or lack of it as a *fait accompli* rather than as a process. There is a sense of finality in the comments which is also implicitly disempowering for students. What the student has done cannot be undone and unless draft submissions are incorporated in the assessment strategy, once an assessment task has been completed and submitted by the student it is out of his/her hand. Hence comments which do not encourage the student to look at an assessment activity as a step within a learning process, may be valuable in terms of providing information on the actual level of performance achieved by the student, but do not necessarily help the student to move

⁴³ The current practice is labelled as somewhat acceptable in pedagogical terms because it focuses primarily on student performance in retrospective terms, hence not necessarily helping the student to develop. The association of the term pedagogical to an activity would imply that learning is being promoted as part of the engagement in that activity. Therefore if learning generated from such feedback is minimal, this makes the only barely acceptable in pedagogical terms.

⁴⁴ Making an ostensive use of a particular content means, using the particular content as an example on which more generalised advice is provided. Reference to a specific content does not preclude achieving a broader and forward looking orientation in feedback. It is in fact suggested that extracting skills from content diminishes the formative power of the feedback comment as skills are addressed in a vacuum.

forward. The literature offers evidence that students do not necessarily know what to do with feedback. Feedback comments with a retrospective focus have their purpose as they provide the student with up to date information on where the student is at in terms of knowledge and development. However if such type of feedback is not coupled with feedback that helps students to move to the next level in the ascending spiral discussed in chapter five, then feedback may actually be a disempowering and anti-dialogical experience. Retrospectively worded feedback tends to elicit a passive response from the student.⁴⁵ This also results in the well documented lack of engagement or interest that students often show towards feedback.

If we return to Paulo Freire's (1981) "banking concept" of education discussed in chapter five and to one of the behaviours he associates to this model, namely "the teacher talks and the students listen –meekly" (p.54), it is not difficult to see how feedback that focuses exclusively retrospectively is form of one-directional communication. Dialogical education is at the other end of the spectrum for Freire, and at this end education becomes "problem-posing", hence prompting further reflection and emphasizing a continuous process of learning. Level 3 and 4 feedback aim precisely in this direction and for this reason should also be incorporated in dialogically infused approach to feedback.

However, it would be simplistic to associate level 1 and 2 feedback exclusively to the banking concept and to authoritarian approaches to education and to dismiss them on this basis. What the data analysed in this chapter suggest is that level 1 and 2 have a rightful place in feedback practice, provided that comments at this level are not provided in isolation.

Feedback that incorporates all 4 levels offers greater evidence of infusion of dialogical principles and – as advocated by this thesis- it is likely to be more beneficial to sustain learning beyond assessment. The impact of feedback on learning goes beyond the scope of the analysis of this chapter and at this point this argument can only be presented as a suggestion for further exploration.

It is necessary at this point to return to feedback principles outlined in chapter two. In chapter two, 7 principles will be presented, one of which (learning to listen and listen to teach and

⁴⁵ This point is particularly relevant to students to tend to perform poorly and who may find a negative appraisal of their work without information helping them to move forward particularly harsh and discouraging. Those students who generally tend to perform at higher levels tend to be better equipped and more likely to take more initiative to address deficiencies in their performance, hence needing less support. However educators should care for their students in a manner that is commensurate to the needs of the students. A generalised use of only retrospective comments is likely to disadvantage those who need to be helped the most.

learn) becomes part of the dialogical principles only in the research that will be discussed in chapter ten. If we consider the coding framework that has been utilised for the data discussed in this chapter, particular feedback functions have been associated with particular principles and the functions have been hierarchically organized.

Table 6.5 Functions and levels in relation to dialogical principles

Gibbs et. al (2003)	Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick (2006)	Dialogical principles	Feedback levels
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback is linked to the purpose of the assignment and to criteria 	Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)	Transparency and clarity	1 & 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback is understandable to students given their sophistication 	Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)	Sharing of meaning	1 & 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sufficient feedback is provided often enough and in enough detail 	Delivers high-quality information to students about their learning	Ostensiveness	2
	Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning	Responsive teaching	3
	Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem		
	Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning	Mutual student and teacher engagement	3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback focuses on learning rather than on marks or students. Feedback is provided quickly enough to be useful to students Feedback is acted upon by students to improve their work or learning 	Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance	Process orientation	4

The hierarchical organization of principles according to the levels used in the coding- as stated earlier- does not convey that preference to level 3 and 4 should be given over others, but rather that these levels are of higher significance in dialogical terms.

6.4.2 Multi-layered versus narrow range feedback

It is argued that pedagogically effective feedback – which is also dialogically infused- tends to be multilayered, with comments encompassing a wide range of functions and levels.

Mentkowski (2006) in presenting the model of assessment *as learning*, adopted by Alverno College proposes that “ if learning that lasts is developmental and individual, assessment must include multiplicity and be cumulative and expansive” (p.54) and while she does not refer specifically to feedback, she connects sustainability of learning beyond assessment activities to personalisation and expansiveness, attributes also associated to the multilayered approach advocated as a result of this analysis.

This section briefly illustrates some samples of multi-layered feedback compared to narrow range feedback to further explain the advantages of a multi-function and multi-level feedback. From the analysis of the samples some key action points can be derived that will inform the development of a revised approach to feedback for Oscail teaching staff.

Let’s first consider an example of multi-layered/wide range feedback provided in SM comments by LIT T1 and a similar example from AFS comments by LIT T3. The tables below shows layering in feedback provision where both tutors provide comments beyond level 1 and 2. Both tutors build on these comments to point, without being prescriptive, at new avenues of exploration. They incorporate some motivational comment (in the first example) also referring to future learning, hence also emphasizing the process orientation of the advice. The second example is particularly interesting because the annotated comment coded at level 3 is worded as a question rather than providing an answer hence prompting students to work out the answer for themselves. This is a process closely reminiscent of Socratic dialogues as discussed in chapter three.

Table 6.6: Example of wide range Summary Comment by LIT T1

Comment	Function	Level
<i>This essay does not adhere to the guidelines given for this essay</i>	Identify issue	1
<i>- see note 43 on attached sheet.</i>	Point at specific resources	2
<i>It also contains a number of faults - unnecessary repetition, generalisations, and excessive wordiness - that I highlighted in your first essay.</i>	Refers at a previous essay – repeated problem	4
<i>You obviously have a good sense of the difference in approach between Wordsworth and Coleridge, but need to discuss the implications in more depth.</i>	Identifies strengths + motivates + offers advice on how to improve	1 + 3 +4
<i>With careful planning, judicious selection of texts and attention to previous comments, I'm sure your next essay will be of a higher standard.</i>	Offers advice on how to improve analysis	4

Table 6.7: Example of wide range Annotated feedback comment by LIT T3⁴⁶

Comment	Function	Level
I think you should make reference to the variations in the rhyme scheme throughout the poem	Identifies omission	1
This would consolidate your commentary theme (since they are interdependent, the progress of the theme shadowed by slight variations in rhyme: look at those points where the rhyme is exact and those where it isn't)	Corrects by refining analysis	2
In this first verse one of the exact rhymes is 'prayed' and 'stayed': what does this tell us about the connection between prayer, poem and 'life'? Does it attest to Yeats' belief in the power of prayer/poetry (and to the close connection between them?)	Prompts further reflection	3

Psychology T5 offers the summary comments below. He offers only marginally useful advice on how to improve the analysis by suggesting that the student is over-relying on course notes and required readings. In this case there is a missed opportunity for prompting further reflection that would help the student to find alternative ways to enrich the discussion of the topic and to also point at additional resources that would have widened the bibliography. The use of underspecified feedback in written contexts may also affect the clarity and consequently the effectiveness of the advice given. In contrast with the above two examples, the example below does not go beyond level 1 and 2, and while it may be argued that Psychology as a subject may have very different requirements from Literature – a subject that tends to elicit personal and interpretative responses to texts- this does not seem a fully defensible argument in relation to this specific example.

Table 6.8: Example of narrow range Summary comments by PSY T5

Comment	Function	Level
Good essay, well written but over reliant on required reading and course notes.	Justifies overall evaluation	1
When you mention sources you must give the reader the chance to check the source.	Points at omission of reference	1
For example you mention (p.5) Walker. Where does one find this? In the Oscail notes or Santrock? It is not enough to assume the reader knows where to find the source, it must be written.	Points to a specific example	2
Otherwise a fine essay.	Acknowledges merit	1

⁴⁶ Further examples of sample comments are included in Appendix B.3.

It is granted that certain subject domains –such as Human sciences- place greater emphasis on factual accuracy not open to interpretation. However the process to arriving to acquisition of this information does not necessarily entail a narrow process and may be suited to accommodate prompting students to reflect on issues more autonomously. Hence the use of narrow-range feedback may be more readily attributed to established feedback practice than to limitation of particular subject domains to accommodate more openly and less retrospectively framed feedback.

On a different note a multilayered approach to feedback is also more likely to address one of problematic issues in distance education and, more generally, in the interpretation of written texts, namely the potential for misunderstanding. It has been suggested that such potential tends to be amplified when distance is introduced in the communication equation. While physical distance may remain relational, cognitive distance may be reduced by taking an approach to feedback that aims at the achievement of shared meaning as an enabling factor for productive learning. If we take the following as an example of not fully exploited feedback in terms of shared meaning this may help to further clarify the value of multi-layered feedback.

Psychology T1 offered the following summary comment without further explanation.

Your paragraphs are too dense

Since this statement is not further qualified by the tutor it would have been open to different interpretations by the student. For instance two alternative interpretations could have been associated to the above statement.

Interpretation 1

I need to restructure my paragraphs to distribute information in more paragraphs

Interpretation

The structure of my paragraphs is not sufficiently clear and I need to delete some information to achieve greater clarity

Both interpretations represent different ways to address the problem identified by the tutor. This has implications for further essays, where, as a result of incorrect interpretation, the same mistake may be repeated. This has implications at both pedagogical and personal level as the student is not offered a fair opportunity to address the issue and to improve as a result of it. This in turn may have a disempowering and demotivating impact on the student who may consequently disengage with other feedback.

If we then consider the difference between multi-layered comments and those with a narrow range of functions, the former tend to be more specific in the advice given. Therefore the potential for misunderstandings may be decreased by better communicating the pedagogical intentions of the tutor in a more transparent manner.

6.4.3 Considering viability and sustainability of multi-layered feedback

In annual meetings Oscail tutors have acknowledged the importance of feedback but have also raised concerns about the workload that good quality feedback requires⁴⁷, particularly in consideration of the part-time and temporary nature of their employment with Oscail. Advocating a multifunctional and multilevel approach to feedback provision seems to disregard the concerns expressed by the tutors because a multilayered approach requires detailed and extensive commentary on student assessed work. However as discussed in the previous chapters, one of the main aims of this thesis is to infuse dialogical principles in pedagogical practice in a way that is both viable and sustainable in the specific context. This does not mean taking an exclusively narrow instrumental approach to pedagogical dialogue, but rather finding an acceptable compromise in both pedagogical and philosophical terms. It is therefore necessary to identify a means to provide multi-layered feedback, preserving the integrity of the dialogical principles while at the same time infusing them in viable and sustainable practice. Philosophy T2's feedback offers an example of how viability and sustainability can be achieved without compromising principles. His approach presents a defensible combination of standardised and personalised elements. While standardisation, as it will be discussed in chapter eight, is seen as generally antithetical to dialogical principles, in the case of the feedback provided by this tutor it is defensible. The standardisation in this case is grounded in the students' response to the essay question and for this reason it does not lose attention to the individual student. Furthermore the cross-referencing for different essays for the same student adds a process-oriented dimension to feedback provision.

Let's now explore how the combination of personalisation and standardisation is achieved by this tutor. Philosophy T2, rather than handwriting the feedback comments in the Oscail Feedback report form, attaches a separate sheet including typewritten summary comments (a full sample of this tutor feedback provision can be found in Appendix B.6). The summary comments incorporate "Advice how to improve". The comments including in the latter are

⁴⁷ The importance of good feedback was emphasized at tutor meetings. However specific guidance on how to improve the quality of feedback was not provided at this point. When the feedback report form was modified –as a part of Phase 2 of the research – more specific advice was provided. The information included in Appendix C.1 was utilized to explain to tutors how to improve the structure and scope of their feedback.

particularly interesting because they are used by the tutor as a means for keeping track of students' improvement. A further sheet in which he enters also typewritten and numbered comments is also included. Rather than handwriting annotated comments directly on the margins of the essay, he enters a number corresponding to a relevant comment in the typewritten list. The following example shows the technique used by this tutor.

Comment offered for TMA1 to student 1

*Advice on to improve: 1) **When (re-)stating a view point, or belief, or argument of an author (or of yourself) follow this up by explaining that view point, belief or argument, ie. by arguing the points.** You do this very well most of the time, but you need to do this all the time in order to demonstrate your understanding of the issues and your application of them better. 2) **After supplying the reasons and arguments that support a particular view point or belief, then assess the merits and the de-merits of those reasons/ arguments.** In this way you will display better your critical understanding of the issue, and receive a higher grade. Again, you do this in your essay, but you need to do this throughout your essay, hence, you are well on your way to writing very good to excellent philosophy essays.*

In the following summary commentary offered for the second and third assignment the aspect of the assessment that continue to require attention are retained and emphasised with some minor additional advice reinforcing the point.

Comment offered for TMA2 to student 1

*Advice to improve (1) **As noted in my last comments and advice to you, 'When (re-)stating a view point, or belief, or argument of an author (or of yourself) follow this up by explaining that view point, belief or argument, ie. by arguing the points.** You do this very well most of the time, but you need to this, all the time in order to demonstrate your understanding of the issues. See comments nos. 2., 8., & 10. (2) **Also, as mentioned in my previous comments, 'After supplying the reasons and arguments that support a particular viewpoint or belief, then assess the merits and de-merits of those reasons/arguments.** In this way you will display better your critical understanding of the issues'. Again you do this in your essay, but you **just need to do this throughout your essay;***

Comment offered for TMA3 to student 1

*Advice how to improve: (1) Though you do present very good material, **not all of it is brought directly to bear on this essay topic** - but a lot is brought to bear - e.g. the 'tasks' of the artist is more implicitly argued than explicitly argued. (2) Though many of the points you make are very good, **there are still several points that are 'stated', but if argued, would have displayed your understanding better, in particular very critical points you make re both Plato's and Aristotle's positions** (see my comments above). (3) An evaluation of the merits and demerits of both Plato's and Aristotle's viewpoints in your conclusion would have displayed your critical understanding of this issues,*

It can be seen from the above examples that the tutor uses a comment template⁴⁸ that it is slightly modified to acknowledge improvements and highlight issues that still need to be addressed without needing to rewrite the entire comment. This template, in modified and adapted form, is also used to provide feedback to other students in the same group, when similar issues are relevant to the work produced by different students. The strategic use of the template allows a link between feedback previous, current performance and also allows the tutor to clearly highlight issues in need of improvement. It also retains an element of personalisation as the modifications to the template reflect the performance of the individual student. Furthermore it is also effective in reducing the tutor's workload as the template is used for several essays and several students.

Concluding remarks

The data presented in this chapter show that a dialogical features do not feature prominently in current Oscail feedback practice. However feedback provided by some tutors already provide a substantial basis upon which a dialogically infused feedback strategy can be developed.

Two major issues have been identified from the analysis. Firstly the level of inconsistency in quality of support to students provided through feedback between different subject groups and within the same subject group has been highlighted. Secondly it has emerged that approximately half of the tutors analysed use a limited range of feedback functions, hence also limiting the extent to which dialogical principles can be embedded in feedback.

It has been argued that in order to foster a dialogical orientation and promote fruitful learning, a wide range of functions should be present and the use of a multilayered approach to feedback has been advocated. Furthermore sustainable feedback with greater dialogical and pedagogical value is structured and presents a good balance among the different pedagogical functions identified in this study. Tutors should be encouraged to develop their personal approach to feedback provision. However they should also be encouraged to think about the above characteristics as essential in ensuring that their comments help their students' learning. It is also necessary to consider ways to make such feedback provision viable. The availability of effective models such that provided by Philosophy T2 also appears to indicate that it is possible to implement a format that achieves greater standardisation while retaining a personalised feel and presenting a wide range of functions. The feedback style of this tutor

⁴⁸ It should be noted that this is only the summary commentary and that detailed advice is provided in AFS.

also illustrates that a structured and well planned standardised format can help to reduce the tutor workload.

For feedback to bring about productive change in more than in an instrumental sense, the information communicated should promote sustained learning even beyond assessment. The communicative power, pedagogical value and the type of relations established through feedback exchanges are crucial elements in determining feedback effectiveness and their development should be considered to be at the basis of any educational policy aimed at enhancing learning through assessment.

While there is certainly an instrumental dimension to most pedagogical activities, on several occasions in this thesis it has been reiterated that education in its fullest sense requires the interplay of three dimensions, namely ontological, ethical and methodological/instrumental. In order to fully capture the effectiveness of a pedagogical activity is therefore necessary to move beyond the merely instrumental dimension.

The outcomes of this analysis highlight the need to achieve more consistency in the level and quality of support offered to students. The Oscail assessment monitoring process -while it is effective in addressing questionable grading- appears to be ineffective in addressing feedback quality. Also tutor induction sessions and Oscail documentation appear not to be sufficiently supporting tutors in developing an effective feedback strategy and modifying their approach to better suit distance education students.

At an instrumental level the analysis has highlighted the need to modify the format currently used for providing feedback by restructuring the report form to ensure that tutors have an opportunity to provide more extensive and structured feedback. In particular the limited availability of space for entering comments appears to be a factor limiting the detail of feedback that can be provided. Tutors who provide multilayered feedback also have redesigned the feedback form and have opted for comments typed in a separate sheet, hence further highlighting the need for more flexibility in the format of the report form.

However in order to obtain a more substantial shift in feedback practice tutors need also to be more clearly briefed and supported in adopting a feedback provision model . Subject-based patterns of feedback provision indicate that there are established and subject-specific practices. A shift towards a more dialogically infused feedback practice may require tutors to depart their current practice and the consequent demands for change may encounter some resistance. Therefore in some cases an ontological shift may also be necessary whereby tutors

need to consider their role, specifically in relation to how they can best support their students through feedback. Chapter seven will present the outcomes the piloting of a revised Feedback Report form and will focus specifically on one subject group to analyse in details the impact of the new feedback strategy.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Research Phase 2 (Context 1). Development & Evaluation of a dialogically infused Feedback Report Form

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the data collection and analysis for Phase two (context 1) of the research process and builds on the baseline study presented in chapter six. Chapter six provided an overview of feedback provision as part of the BA in Humanities offered by Oscail through a framework analysis coding process. It has also identified some shortcomings in relation to the proposed dialogical principles outlined in chapter two (see section 2.4.1). The following main issues have emerged from the analysis presented in chapter 6.

- 1) **A predominance of retrospective focus in feedback comments.** This has been considered problematic in both pedagogical (for the paucity of advice aimed at future learning) and in ethical (for the finality and disempowering tone of the comments) terms.
- 2) **A lack of explicitness in the advice provided,** making it difficult for students to understand and benefit from it;
- 3) **A relatively low presence of feedback comments linking past, current and future learning** and therefore contributing to the perception of assessment activities as isolated and disconnected assessment (rather than learning) episodes;
- 4) **A lack of consistency in the level of support offered** to students through feedback by different tutors.

If we consider the implications of the above issues in relation to the dialogical principles introduced in chapter two, it appears that feedback practice needs to be re-oriented in the direction of greater openness, transparency and responsiveness for the students' needs. Feedback comments framed in retrospective terms signal that the word of the assessor is final. The emphasis is placed on the performance end product. The comments focus on *what has been done* (and mostly *what has been done wrong*) rather than on what the student *can do to progress*. The reliance on judgements expressed in general rather than specific terms rarely offers sufficient information to enable students to progress with their learning.

The first issue – the predominance of retrospective comments- can be read as a symptom of limited mutual teacher-student engagement and only partially responsive teaching. Furthermore –as indicated by also by issue 4- the level of engagement and teacher responsiveness to the students' needs is highly dependent on individual tutors. A concern for

lack of consistency in terms of support provided by tutors through feedback raises the issue of equality and fairness of treatment across different tutorial groups.

The second issue – the lack of explicitness in the advice provided- denotes that meaning has only been partially shared between teachers and students and that greater clarity and transparency can be achieved also through improved ostensiveness. In assessment, like in dialogue, in order to actively participate in a process of sharing of meaning, all parties need to construct a common basis from which to build. Ultimately students need to develop a capacity for greater control over their learning to sustain improvement. On several occasions in this thesis it has been reiterated that dialogue requires openness which is more likely to be found in dynamic and democratic processes.

Finally the third issue -the relatively low presence of feedback comments linking past, current and future learning- suggests that feedback , through the predominant retrospective focus of the comments, has resulted in a lack of process orientation in the exchanges between students and tutors and, as such, it has served to reinforce the common view of assessment as separate from learning.

While the core research question for this thesis is *Can assessment be conceived as dialogue?*, this chapter builds on the outcomes of chapter six and continues to look at the relationship between assessment and dialogue in feedback practice. This chapter has a dual purpose. Firstly it outlines a pedagogical intervention designed to respond to the above mentioned issues, namely development and implementation of a new Feedback Report Form. Secondly it presents an evaluation of the use of this new Form.

Chapter six offered a broad overview of naturally occurring patterns in feedback provision by examining a large sample of feedback comments provided by Oscail tutors in five discipline domains, therefore it offered a macro-analysis. Chapter seven takes a case study approach and focuses specifically on feedback given by five of the original six History tutors who, whose feedback was also analysed in chapter six. The outcomes of case study evaluation of the use of the form by these five tutors are discussed. The development of the new feedback form and the evaluation of the use of the form represent two steps in the DBR process. The outcomes of this phase, together with the outcomes of the various phases relevant to context two (conventional third level education), will be discussed cumulatively as part of the concluding chapter of this thesis.

The analysis has been structured in response to the following specific research questions:

1. *Can a dialogically infused pedagogical intervention (the introduction of the new feedback report form) bring about change in tutors' feedback provision in the direction of more dialogical practice?*
2. *Can trends indicating learning development be found in students' performance (in response to feedback received using the new feedback report format)?*
3. *Can the new Feedback Report Form be considered an improvement on the previous one in terms of promotion of the infusion of dialogical principles in feedback practice?*

On the whole, the above questions aim to ascertain whether the infusion of dialogical principles in a specific assessment practice has been successful. The questions also prompt a comparison of feedback provision before and after the intervention, to evaluate whether the dialogical deficiencies that had been identified in chapter six have been addressed to some extent. Finally as throughout this thesis it has been contended that a dialogical orientation in assessment may also positively influence learning, question 2 has been designed to tentatively ascertain whether trends denoting⁴⁹ some impact of the feedback form on learning advancement can be identified.

After a brief description of the study process and context in section 7.1, Section 7.2 outlines the development of the new feedback report form. Section 7.3 responds to the first research question and outlines the impact of the new feedback form on tutor feedback provision styles and marking. Section 7.4, in response to the second research question, presents the outcomes of the analysis of impact of different feedback styles on student performance. The discussion attempts to determine whether styles that have been more closely shaped by the introduction of the new feedback format resulted in greater learning improvement. Section 7.5 answers the third research question and outlines the outcomes of the evaluation of the effectiveness of the new feedback format. Finally section 7.6 presents concluding remarks on whether the intervention discussed in the chapter and developed in response to the issues identified in chapter six signals a movement towards conceiving assessment as dialogue.

⁴⁹ It should be emphasised that, while some numeric data are presented the analysis for this study is primarily qualitative and focuses on a small group of students. In order to arrive at defensible conclusions on the impact of the use of the new feedback form on learning advancement a quantitative study should also be carried out. This could consider a large sample and a number of variables, such as for instance task difficulty comparison, student characteristics, external factors impacting on performance and so on. This type of analysis goes beyond the scope of this study and may be a worthwhile investigation route for future research. It is therefore clarified that this thesis, with the available data, can only highlight emerging trends that are worthy of quantitative investigation.

7.1 Context of the study

The research data for this phase (Phase2) were collected during the first year of introduction of a new Feedback Report Form (2006) designed by the researcher to address the issues emerged in Phase 1 of the research. Table 7.1 provides an overview of the context.

Table 7.1 Summary of context

Tutor	Tutor teaching experience	Module	Characteristics of the tutor's students	Group Size	Tot No. students analysed	Completion rates ⁵⁰	Feedback report forms analysed
1	Over 5 years	History 1 (Foundation Module)	All distance education adult students 17 first year students and 3 more experienced students	20 students	15	75% (N= 15)	45
2	2-5 years	History 1 (Foundation Module)	All distance education adult students All experienced students	10 students	9	90% (N= 9)	27
3	Over 5 years	History 2 (Post-Foundation Module)	All distance education adult students 6 first first year students and 4 more experienced students	19 students	15	79% (N = 15)	45
4	Over 5 years	History 2 (Post-Foundation Module)	All distance education adult students All experienced students	17 students	14	82% (N=14)	42
5	Over 5 years	History 1 (Post-Foundation Module)	All distance education adult students 5 first year students and 7 experienced students	12 students	9	83% (N=10)	27
				Tot 78	Tot. 62	Completion rate mean 81.8%	Tot. 186

This chapter takes a case study approach and focuses specifically on the categorisation and analysis of feedback provided by 5 of the original 6 History tutors examined in Chapter six. Tutor 6 was no longer working for Oscail when this study was undertaken and therefore the number of participant tutors had to be reduced to 5.

⁵⁰ It should also be noted that the retention rate (shown in the second last column of table 7.1), which may appear relatively low for some of the groups, is within the norm for distance education courses, which tend to be lower retention rates than for traditional face to face university courses. The higher dropout rate is mostly justifiable in terms of external factors affecting students' capacity to continue with their students, particularly in consideration of the fact that all Oscail students are adults with many calls on their lives. Tresman (2002) in referring to the UK based Open University affirms that dropout rates of approximately 25-30% are normally recorded and that OECD data from 1998 show that among the 29 OECD states investigated the lowest reported dropout rate was 19% and the highest was 37% for distance education programmes.

As shown by table 7.1 a total of 186 filled feedback report forms were analysed. It should be noted that T3 & 4 are allocated to post-foundation module History 2 and the other tutors to foundation modules. As the assessment tasks are centrally set by Oscail academic management team all students enrolled for a particular module undertake the same assessment task regardless of the tutor they are allocated to. With the exception of tutor two who had been working with Oscail for a shorter period of time –but had obtained previous experience with other distance education institutions- are a rather homogeneous group in terms of experience and familiarity with the distance education context.

Unlike for Phase 1, in this phase, thanks to the electronic format of the new feedback report form, it was possible to collect equivalent numbers of annotated comments and summary comments and for this reason a differentiation of SM and AFS is not presented in the above table. However it should be noted that only full sets, comprising three feedback report forms for each student- were collected.

As this Phase of the research also aims to ascertain whether some trends in student performance can be identified, it was deemed necessary to track performance by recording results of students who had submitted all three assignments for the modules examined. As shown by the above table on average approximately 81% of the students allocated to each student completed all required assessment and therefore the sample analysed refers to those students.

7.2 The development of the new feedback report form

In 2006 a new feedback report form was introduced (Appendix C). The development of the feedback form results from Phase 1 analysis which in turn has resulted in a more detailed specification of the initial dialogical principles in a charter as shown by figure 7.1.

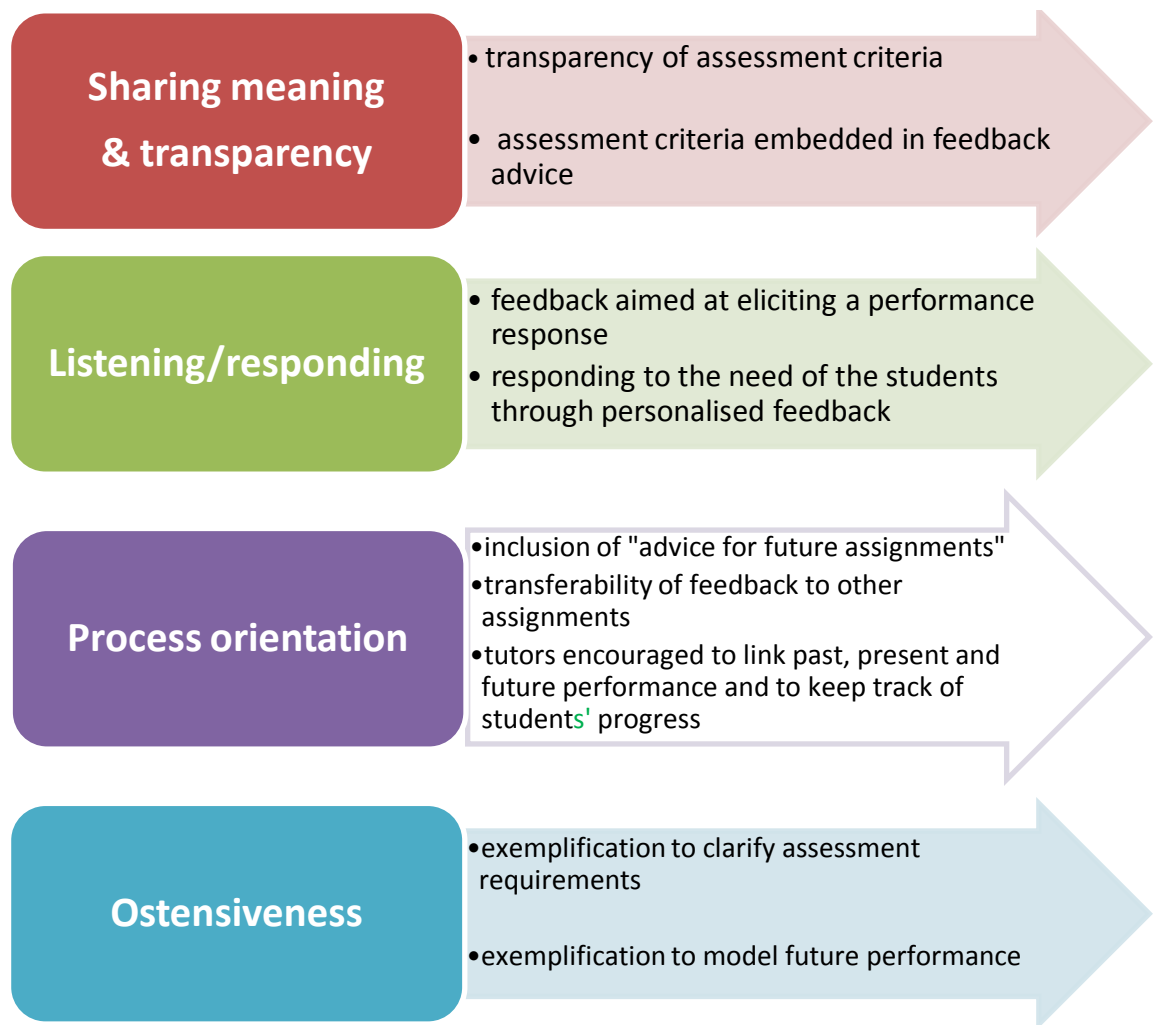


Figure 7.1 Dialogical principles charter for feedback practice (Phase2)

Dialogue - as a framework for pedagogical interaction - rests on the assumption that relationships built through it should be equitable and participatory.

Equity and participation are addressed by the new assessment feedback format through the achievement of the following objectives:

- **Improving sharing of meaning between student and tutor and promoting greater transparency in the formulation of assessment judgments.** The basis of tutors' interpretation of assessment criteria and their application to students' work should be more clearly communicated to students. Greater explicitness in the formulation of assessment judgments may have a rebalancing effect on the assessor-assessee's relationships. Greater transparency in assessment judgments should help students to become more aware of tutors' expectations, hence allowing them to perform to the best of their ability. This in turn may also result in students experiencing a greater sense of empowerment in the assessment process.

- **Promoting greater emphasis on learning process as distinct from assessment product.** As advocated in chapter six, if a multilayered approach to feedback is taken, feedback comments prompting further reflection and focusing on student progression should be included in the commentary provided to students. This should offer opportunities for the establishment of an ongoing dialogue between tutor and student, which is not simply centred on assessment requirements, techniques and skills, but also on learning beyond the assessment task.
- **Encouraging reciprocal responsiveness between assessors and assessees.** Tutors should respond to the students' needs by providing feedback that is personalised and helps them progressing along their own learning trajectories. Students should engage with feedback and respond through their improved performance to the advice received for previous assessment activities.

The new format takes a more structured approach and aims to enhance the quality of feedback provision, while also responding to the needs of the individual student effectively and efficiently. Efficiency here means the achievement of balance between feedback that meets students' needs, while also giving consideration to the workload generated by feedback for tutors. Workload may in the long run impinge on the viability of the format and tutor retention and therefore it is an issue that requires special attention. Effectiveness is understood as the extent to which the new form helps to foster advancement of learning and infuses the dialogical principles discussed in the previous chapters. If we compare the older and newer formats, two main differences have been introduced.

1. **Electronic format.** The electronic entry of feedback comments presents multiple benefits. Firstly the electronic format removes the rigid limitations to the length and detail of the feedback imposed in the past by the hard copy summary comments box of the old form and by the need to enter AFS comments manually on assignments' margin. Both SM and AFS are entered electronically. In building on the examples of good practice discussed in chapter six AFS comments are entered in a numbered listing in specific section of the Feedback Report Form. Only numbers relating to specific comments are entered on the margins of the assignment. This feature adds a considerable amount of flexibility to feedback provision and implicitly encourages tutors to provide more detailed feedback. Secondly, tutors can retain copies of the feedback they had given to students in previous assignments. This allows tutors to emphasise process orientation in assessment by interlinking comments on past, current and future assignments and also highlight student improvement. With the

previous form only a carbon copy of the summary comments (which often was of poor quality) was provided to students. As AFS were entered directly on the assignment, and the assignments were sent back to students, tutors had no longer access to this type of commentary. Thirdly – as shown by Philosophy T2 in chapter 6- the electronic format allows for pasting and copying, when applicable, of comments relevant to different students and also for the same student for different assignment tasks. This is considered a factor which may impact on the sustainability and viability of this new feedback format. Fourthly the electronic delivery of feedback allows for prompt online delivery of feedback. Prompt delivery of feedback has been regarded by many assessment theorists as a crucial feature of formative feedback (Race, 1995; Nicol, 2009) as early availability of advice on previous work is more likely to be responded to by students.

2. **More detailed structure.** Chapter 6 has highlighted the presence of a relatively small range of functions in feedback comments. It had been concluded that a multilayered approach was more likely to increase the formative and dialogical potential of feedback. The original format was very basic with only one box for the overall mark and a box to enter comments summing up the evaluation of the students' performance. The new form is subdivided in specific sections for different feedback functions and therefore it encourages providing of a broader range of feedback comments and at different levels (see Appendix C.1). The new form also introduces two additional sections: a) the performance table which enables the assessor to provide breakdown the performance evaluation according to specific assessment criteria with high visual impact; b) the "advice for future assessment" box (AFA) aimed at ensuring that ⁵¹tutors would include advice helping students to improve their future performance. Furthermore the Summary of performance table section allows for a visually immediate classification of student performance which lessens the need for descriptive comments identifying problematic issues, which –as showed in chapter six- constituted one of the largest components of the feedback given by Oscail tutors. The reduced need for descriptive feedback frees up time for investing in more learning enhancement advice hence balancing the addition of new requirements with a reduction of a potentially large part of feedback provided according to the old format.

⁵¹ During briefing sessions presenting the new feedback format tutors have been advised to fill all the sections. They also have been briefed about feedback functions and their potential distribution in different sections of the new form.

7.3 The impact of the new feedback form on feedback provision

This section attempts to establish the extent to which the new format improved the quality of feedback provision. The analysis has a longitudinal dimension. It compares feedback provision patterns identified in Phase one and two to determine whether the new feedback form has led tutors to improved feedback in both dialogical and pedagogical terms. It was suggested that it was necessary to discourage the exclusive use of purely retrospective comments (identified with level 1 and 2) and to move towards a more distributed pattern of feedback provision with greater balance among different feedback levels. Figure 7.2 compares the levels of feedback recorded in Phase 1 and 2 for the analysed tutors.

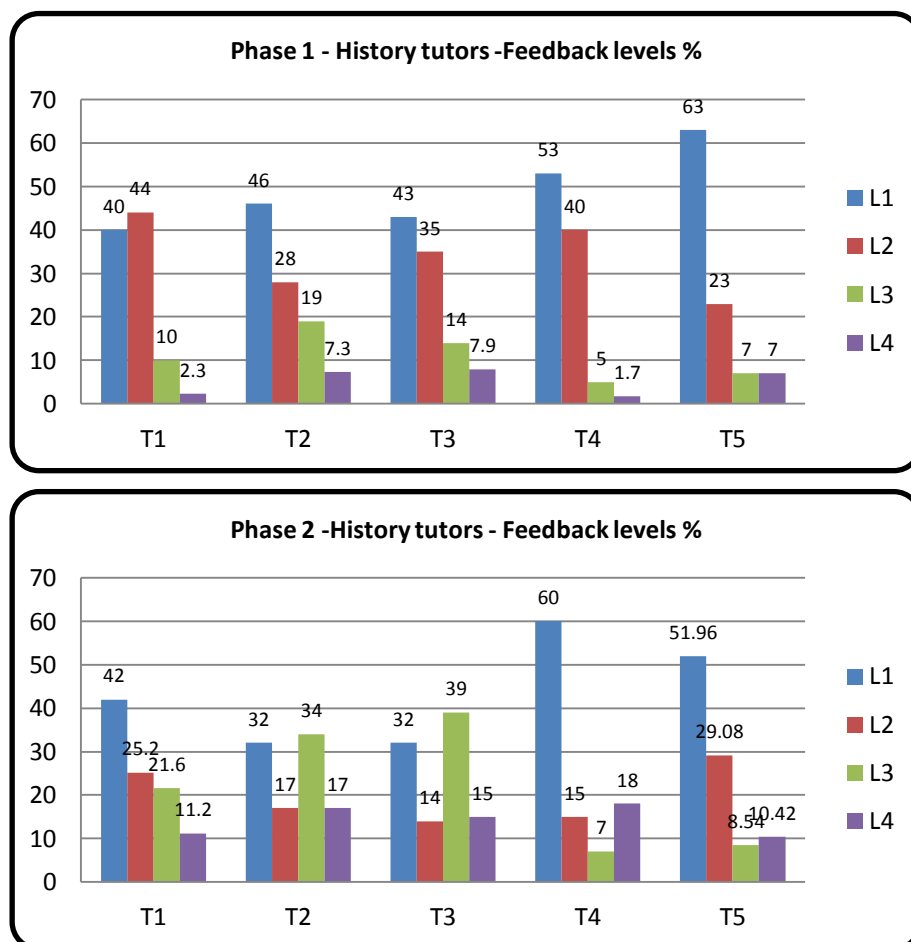


Figure 7.2 % Levels of feedback in Phase 1 and 2 (History tutors)

All 5 tutors show an increase for level 3 & 4 comments. The main purpose of level 4 comments is that of connecting past, present and future performance and placing emphasis on the learning process. In order to provide feedback of this type tutors need to consult previous feedback and construct their advice in a forward-looking manner. It is therefore encouraging

to see such a substantial increase in comments coded at this level. However it should be noted that not all the advice given at this level yields potential for deeper forms learning (for instance improving analytical ability). Tutor 4, on the whole, provides a proportionally higher percentage (18%) of comments at level 4 than other tutors, but a closer look reveals that these comments refer primarily to “surface” features of the assessed work, such as presentation and referencing issues. These features can be addressed through mastering of regulations and techniques and advice on these issues can be generic and standardised. For this reason it is easily transferable.

Tutors 1 and 2 give a considerably higher percentage of level 3 feedback than other tutors. Tutor 4 continues to provide a very high level of comments at level 1 and while he shows some change in pattern there seems to be a redistribution of percentage primarily between level 1 and level 2 comments, where a decrease in level 2 comments results in an increase in level 1 comments. Tutor 5 has not changed his feedback provision considerably and both tutors 4 and 5 continued to provide a high percentage of feedback at level 1. More interestingly tutors 2 and 3 stand out because they present the most distributed pattern across all 4 levels, hence indicating that they have strategically opted for a reduction of level 1 and 2 comments in favour of more level 3 and 4 comments.

From the analysis of coding patterns, it can be concluded that only an optimal use of the form –as recommended by the guidance offered to tutors (as shown in Appendix C.1) - resulted in an improvement of the feedback quality. However the data also signal that the new form alone was not sufficient to prompt a significant change. Two tutors (T4 & 5) managed to work around the new format and continued to provide feedback in their usual way and one tutor had even seen the new format as an opportunity to provide less detailed commentary (tutor 4). Despite the flexibility offered by the electronic format in terms of room for entering more detailed commentary, only tutors 2 and 3, and to some extent tutor 3, took advantage of this added feature. Even if the new form elicited greater transparency in terms of marking consistently across different tutorial groups, a similar level of consistency in terms of clarity of feedback comments did not result from it.

Tutors 2 and 3 show evidence of process-orientation, improved clarity and ostensiveness through detailed exemplification of the issues raised and therefore appear to have made effective use of feedback to share meaning and help students respond to it (Appendices F.2. and F.3).

In particular, tutor 3 in Phase 2 pays careful attention to referring back to previous assignments and this has resulted in fine-tuning of advice, particularly in cases when the student was unable to address the issue despite having already been given specific advice. Furthermore this tutor has also used annotated feedback to its fullest potential, particularly in relation to the development of analytical skills, by expanding on the topic but also by suggesting different analytical angles.

Tutor 2 makes minimal use of the summary comments box – where level one comments are more likely to be located. The judicious use of the summary comments by this tutor appears to have freed time to invest in more in-depth and higher level comments in other sections of the form. He appears to have invested time in “advice for future assignments” and in the annotated feedback comments. The comments in these boxes show a strong connection with the areas in need of attention identified in the performance table. The annotated feedback comments present a mixture of commentary on issues relating to specific passages of the essay, with question-type comments prompting further reflection on the topic. Furthermore the advice is specific, reinforced with examples and therefore has a high ostensive value. On the whole this tutor achieved a good compromise between effectiveness (intended as power to promote learning through feedback) and efficiency (less work-intensive use of the form).

The limited use of the “advice for future assignment” section of the new feedback form by tutors 1, 4, 5 meant that little process orientation can be found in the comments provided by these tutors. On several occasions tutor 5 fits comments, better suited to other feedback boxes, in incorrect ones, or simply ignores the subdivision in boxes and enters all advice in one single box. In so doing, he returns to the original feedback format. On some occasions this unfortunately results in little or no advice provided for future assignments. Nevertheless tutor 5 invests in a certain degree of effort in exemplification (as shown by comments coded at level 2 and 3 in Appendix F.5).

Feedback provided by tutor 1 is mostly vague. The explanations attached to the classification of performance according to specified criteria tended to be fuzzy and advice relating to different criteria was fused together, making it more difficult for students to understand how to act upon the advice given⁵². This resulted in a limited opportunity for the student to draw profitably on the feedback provided. In terms of functions of feedback (see Appendix F.1)

⁵² Tutor 1 in particular also had a propensity to use expressions such as ‘creating a discussion’ as a synonym of analysis. The explanation unpacking meaning appears in most cases in only comments for TMA3 when the tutor finally became more comfortable with the new format.

Tutor 1 shows only minor changes in the approach to overall feedback provision approach from Phase 1 to 2.

As suggested in chapter 6, the outcomes of the data analysis seem to indicate that the amount of detail in feedback is also an important factor. As shown by table 7.2 -despite the smaller group size (9 students allocated to tutor 5 and 15 allocated to tutor 4), tutor 5 provides much more feedback (585 feedback comments provided by tutor 5 versus 234 comments provided by tutor 4). Table 7.2 shows how the distribution of feedback comments in different sections of the feedback report form has been affected after the introduction of a new section titled “advice for future assessment” in Phase 2 of the research.

Table 7.2: distribution of types (SM, AFS &AFA) of feedback comments (Phase 1 & 2)

Tutor	Phase one			Phase two ⁵³			
	SM Summary comments %	AFS Annotated feedback %	tot N	SM Summary comments %	AFS Annotated feedback %	AFA Advice for future assessment %	tot N
1	27	73	142	29	57	14	579
2	39	61	173	14	56	30	451
3	48	52	65	27	57	16	584
4	51	49	57	33	44	24	234
5	32	68	76	19	65	16	585

In Phase two tutors 1, 2 and 5 provide comparable feedback detail. In Phase two, tutor 4 has taken an even more minimal approach to feedback provision and offers only few and brief comments on all three assignments and to all students. Despite the quantity of advice included in the “advice for future assessment” section of the new feedback report form, his advice for future assignments tends to merely state issues relating to presentation and referencing and sometimes this box is solely filled with information of a purely administrative nature.

With the exception of tutor 1 all other tutors appear to have reduced the amount of summary comments. Given that this section is normally used for acknowledging merit and simply identifying problematic issues (classified as Level 1 feedback), the reduction of summary comments appears as a positive development. However as shown in figure 7.2 tutors 4 and 5 still provide a high percentage of L1 feedback. Tutor 4 and 5 have included comments they had

⁵³ It should be noted that the size of sample in Phase one and in phase two differs due to logistic constraints in Phase one (Table 7.3 and 7.4 summarise the details of data collected). For this reason percentages for feedback commentaries listed in each section (SM= summary comments, AFS = annotated feedback system, AFA = advice for future assignments).

been advised to enter in “summary of performance section” in other sections of the form, hence deviating from the recommended practice. Tutors 1, 2, 4 and 5 have also reduced the percentage of annotated feedback, but tutors 2 and 4 appear to have allocated a more substantial proportion of their feedback to advice for future assignments (AFA) than tutors 1, 3 and 5. However, a closer look at the advice for future assignments (AFA) provided by tutor 2 and tutor 4, reveals considerable differences. Tutor 2 offers a broad-ranging feedback, encompassing all four feedback levels, with a predominance of level 3 feedback. In phase two comments tutor 2 appears to place greater emphasis on comments prompting further reflection, suggesting useful resources and helping students to improve essay structure with advice transferable to future activities. Nevertheless the reduction across the board of “summary comments” coupled with a substantial inclusion of “advice for future assessment” are significant developments as they signal a shift from the exclusively retrospective comments to capacity building feedback. In particular the reduction of summary comments suggests that tutors have realised that the summary of performance table was now absorbing classificatory/descriptive functions previously carried by summary comments. The structure of the new form seems to have been the primary cause of the pattern change in feedback provision. However, as shown by tutor 4 and 5 the form does not prevent incorrect use and the continuation of deficient feedback provision patterns. Tutors had been advised to fill each section of the form with comments at different levels (as shown by Appendix C.1) and with different functions. Those who have disregarded the suggested distribution of comments across the sections of the form have continued to offer the same type of commentary as before the introduction of the new Feedback Report Format. This issue does not highlight a deficiency in the conception of the new Feedback Report Form but rather a weakness in the promotion of optimal use of the new format. This issue will be discussed more in detail in section 7.5.

7.4 Overall performance trends

One of the purposes of this chapter is to determine the extent to which positive trends can be discerned in the use of the new format. As shown by figure 7.3, the mean mark for each of the three assignments completed by the students allocated to the 5 participating tutors has been plotted onto a graph to show performance trajectories for each of the groups. From the data collected contrasting trends emerge. To obtain a fuller picture of performance trajectories, recommendation made by monitors in monitoring reports⁵⁴ for the 5

⁵⁴ To ensure consistency in marking across different tutorial groups a selection (a high, middle and low marked) of assignments for each tutorial group is sent to an external assessment monitor, who is an independent subject

analysed tutors has also been consulted. Marking by all tutors -except tutor 1- has been considered accurate by the monitor. Therefore the performance recorded has been an accurate reflection of the level of performance displayed by students.

While two out of three groups have improved their average mark (T2 and T3 groups) T4 group shows no improvement and the other remaining groups (T1 and 5) show a slight disimprovement. Given that in section 7.3 it had been indicated that T2 and T3 displayed a more distributed feedback levels pattern this seems to indicate that the feedback provided by these tutors may have been a contributory factor to the improvement recorded for their groups. Marking by Tutor 1 was considered too lenient by the tutor monitor. This tutor was advised that he was marking high performing students too generously in the report for tma1 and was advised to mark less leniently for subsequent assignments. This may, to a certain extent, explain the apparent decline in performance shown by Figure 7.3 for this group.

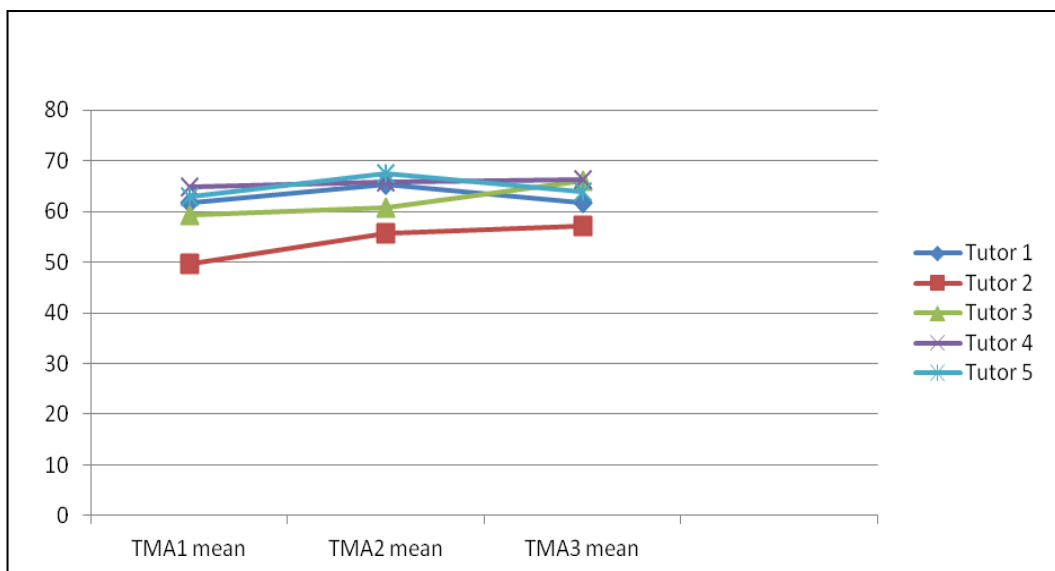


Figure 7.3 Phase two performance trajectories (based on group mean for each TMA)

To further unpack learning development patterns as demonstrated through assessment performance⁵⁵ more specific performance information has been derived from examining improvement in relation to specific criteria. The new Feedback Report Form presents a

specialist. The monitor evaluates the accuracy of marking and advises tutors on the quality of their feedback by means of a monitoring form which is sent to each individual tutor. The monitor may only alter tutor marking if an appeal has been lodged by a student. The monitoring reports are sent to tutors and provide them with feedback on their marking and feedback provision. In the case of T1 the monitor had indicated that TMA2 had been leniently marked and the tutor in response to the advice received applied less lenient marking for TMA3. This may explain the descending trajectory for this tutor. However T5 equally presents a descending trajectory despite no suggested change in marking from the monitor.

⁵⁵ It is acknowledged that assessment performance and learning are not equivalent. Learning may have occurred in excess of what is demonstrated by students in assessment activities. The interplay of student and assessment characteristics is fundamental and particular tasks may not allow all students to perform to the best of their ability. However for the purpose of this study, performance in response to the given assessment task, is the only indicator available of student learning, hence some degree of simplification is applied in the discussion of the data.

Summary of performance table which classifies performance in relation to individual criteria according to a grade band. Therefore it was possible to track improvement and disimprovement for individual students in relation to individual criteria. The percentage of sustained⁵⁶ improvement within each group in relation to each criterion has been plotted on a graph presented in figure 7.4. Figure 7.4 reveals that tutor 3 stands out as the only one who has managed to promote the greatest level of sustained development and in relation to all assessment criteria specified in the summary of performance table.

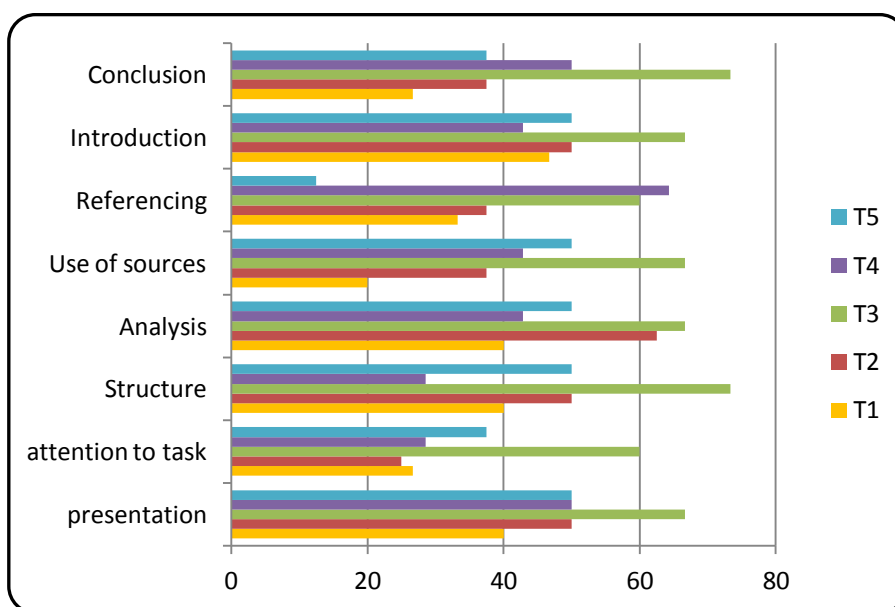


Figure 7.4: % of students allocated to individual tutors who have shown sustained grade improvement in relation to individual criteria over the three submitted assignments (i.e. over 70% of students allocated to T3 have achieved sustained improvement in relation to criterion “Conclusion”)

If we take a closer look at the improvement elicited by the feedback provided by tutor 3 we can see that the highest proportion of students allocated to his group improves on criteria such as analysis (66.7%), structure (73.3%) and attention to the assignment task (60%), whereas for instance a substantially lower percentage of students allocated to tutor 1 and tutor 4 show improvement in relation to the same criteria. The feedback provided by tutor 4 provides almost exclusively advice on how to improve use of referencing conventions and this appears to be reflected in the relatively higher percentage of improvement in relation to this

⁵⁶ In order to identify sustained improvement the classification of the performance of each student for each of the individual criteria listed in the “summary of performance table” section of the new Feedback report form for each of the 3 assignments was analysed. For instance if student 1 improved in relation to criterion “structure” from TMA 1 and TMA2 and continued to further improve in TMA3, this student was considered to have shown sustained improvement in relation to that specific criterion. The percentage shown in figure 7.4 is calculated on the basis of the number of students per group that have managed to improve on individual performance criteria. It should be noted that improvement has only been recorded when it has produced a shift in grade. Less substantial improvements might have taken place without having been accounted for in this figure.

criterion compared to the improvement that his feedback appears to elicit for other criteria. It is therefore not surprising to see some degree of connection between the focus of the feedback provided by tutors and students' improvement in those specific areas.

7.4.1 Group performance trajectories

Performance trajectories for each tutorial group have been charted (shown in Appendix I) and have been analysed in combination with data listed in table 7.3, which summarises marking patterns for individual tutors.

If we consider T1- as discussed in section 7.4- the monitor had highlighted a propensity to leniency in higher marked TMAs (with 4 students out of 9 with a mark between 70 and 90% in tma1 and 3 students with a mark over 80% in tma2) and this appears to be reconfirmed by the data presented in Table 7.3. It can be seen that top achieving students in this group have obtained considerably higher marks than students allocated to other groups. The performance trajectory for the students allocated to this tutor shows a very mixed picture. The mostly descending trajectories for high achieving students are likely to have been influenced by the monitor's advice to reduce marks on the third assignment. The majority of the other students allocated to this group show improvement. However, unlike tutor 2 and 3- whose students appear to move improve more substantially across higher grade bands, the progression to higher levels of performance appears to be more modest for this group.

Table 7.3: Statistical data on marking by individual tutors (Phase 2)

Tutor	TMA1 marks				TMA2 marks				TMA3 marks			
	STDV	Mean	Low	High ⁵⁷	STDV	MEAN	Low	High	STDV	Mean	Low	High
1	13.21	61.8	48	84	12.7	61	48	82	10.48	61.7	50	87
2	5.26	50	44	60	7.9	55.7	45	70	7.7	57	48	67
3	6.66	58.28	53	72	9.25	60.73	40	74	4.59	66	55	74
4	5.15	64.92	52	70	5.03	65.71	55	70	3.65	66.35	60	70
5	4.65	52.1	48	61	6.95	56.67	42	61	6.3	60.1	48	68

Tutor 2 appears to mark consistently lower than all the other tutors in all three assignments. Nevertheless- as shown in Appendix G- the graph for this group indicates that 6 out of 9 students present an ascending trajectory. It should be noted that, given that the overall average starting mark was lower, this gave more scope for improvement for students allocated to this tutor. The positive improvement pattern may have been influenced by this factor. Low marks are

⁵⁷ STDV = standard deviation; Mean= mean mark achieved in this particular group; low= lowest mark achieved in this group; High= highest mark achieved in this group.

often seen as de-motivating by students. However, as shown by table 7.1, student completion rates for this group are particularly high. The completion rate offers some implicit indication that the tutor supported the students and managed to maintain the students motivated through feedback and classroom interaction, hence helping them to stay on board.

Tutor 3 and 4, both teach post foundation module History 2, hence students for both groups have responded to the same assessment questions. Table 7.3 shows that similarities in marking between T3 and T4, but T4 constantly presents a lower standard deviation and consistently the highest mean for all 3 TMAs as he presents a very narrow and relative high range of marks. Given that the monitor's reports have not indicated a particular issue with marking by this tutor, this pattern may have be an indication of the ability of the particular group of students examined. If we consider the graphs charting the performance trajectories for T3 and T4 (see Appendix G) a rather different scenario emerges. The graph for T4 shows that in this group only 3 out of 14 students show improvement and 7 show some degree of disimprovement, while the remaining 4 appear to have stalled. On the whole T4's group shows very little improvement. Coincidentally it is the group that appears to have received the lowest level of feedback, both in terms of range and quantity of comments. Conversely, among the 15 students examined for T3, 9 students show improvement, 3 students show disimprovement only on the last TMA and the other 3 appear to perform consistently at the same level. Also it is worth noting that students already performing at 2:1 level (60-69%) show progression in T3's group, hence showing a generalised pattern of improvement.

Finally, marking patterns for tutor 5 are very similar to those recorded for tutor 2. On the whole this tutor marks lower than tutors 1, 3 and 4, particularly at the top end of the marking range for his group, and this pattern is maintained throughout the 3 tmas. The tutor monitor however indicated that this tutor marks accurately and does not recommend any substantial changes in either marking or feedback. The performance trajectory graph shows modest but generalised positive patterns for the whole group. The performance trajectories for T5 show good improvement for students already performing at a high level and a more mixed pattern for lower performing student who, with the exception of one student who increases his mark by two grades by the end of the module, tend to perform around the same level from first to last TMA. If the performance trajectory for this tutor is read in conjunction with figure 7.5 it can be seen that T2 and T4 groups show similar levels on improvement on most criteria. However a higher percentage of T2's students show more marked improvement in relation to analysis. It should be highlighted that improvement in performance cannot be traced back solely to the quality of the feedback received

Nevertheless the type of feedback offered by T2 appears to have had a greater impact on students' analytical ability given the substantially higher percentage of L3 comments in relation to this criterion provided by T2 compared to T5.

It can be seen that, with the exception of T4's group, all other groups show improvement. However T3's group stands out for higher and more generalised levels of improvement in the performance in relation to all assessment criteria. While the improvement cannot be attributed to the quality of feedback alone there appears to be an indication that the feedback provided by this tutor –which is both multilayered and detailed- has had a noticeable impact on students' learning.

7.5 Evaluation of the effectiveness of the new assessment feedback format

Both students and tutors were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the new assessment feedback form in helping learning and in improving performance. The views of all stakeholders were elicited through 4 distinct means:

- End of year (2006-2007) General Oscail student questionnaire.⁵⁸
- End of year (2006-2007) General Oscail tutor questionnaire
- Interviews⁵⁹ (recorded and transcribed) with the five History tutors analysed for this chapter
- Assessment appeals statistics

On the whole from the students' perspective a greater degree of satisfaction with the feedback provided using the new feedback report form emerges from the data collected. The lower number of appeals lodged- which traditionally signalled students' dissatisfaction with the basis on which assessment judgments had been made- and the positive comments expressed by students in the General Questionnaire suggest that the new format is seen in positive terms by the students. However some concerns have also been highlighted. Students indicate that while the new feedback format represents for most respondents an improvement

⁵⁸ End of year questionnaires are routine evaluation tools used by Oscail to gauge students' and tutors' level of satisfaction with the academic experience with Oscail. While these were tools not specifically designed for this research, a section was added to the questionnaires to investigate the level of satisfaction with the new assessment feedback form. It should be noted that the questionnaire was sent to all BA students, rather than only to the students examined as part of this case study. Similarly the tutor questionnaire was sent to all BA tutors. Given that it is Oscail standard practice that questionnaires are filled anonymously it was not possible to isolate responses from tutors and students examined for this study.

⁵⁹ Due to logistic constraints, individual interviews with History tutors were carried out over the phone. The interviews were recorded and transcribed (see Appendices L for full transcript). These interviews were important to obtain information specifically from the tutors involved in this case study and gave the opportunity to explore more specific details on marking and feedback provision.

on the previous format, the use made by tutors is not always satisfactory. This indicates that one of the issues highlighted in chapter six, namely the lack of consistency in the level of support offered by tutors through feedback, remains problematic.

While the general tutor questionnaire shows a positive response to the new feedback format, interviews with the five tutors examined in this chapter also raise some specific concerns with the format and the perceived workload, hence highlighting a tension between students need for support and tutors ability and willingness to provide it. A more detailed analysis of this tension is provided in section 7.5.1.

7.5.1 Stakeholder (students and tutors) evaluation of the new feedback report form

Data helping us to evaluate the level of satisfaction with the new feedback provision were elicited from all Oscail tutors through a section specifically on assessment that was included in the end of year general tutor questionnaire (Appendix H.2, questions 26-33). 41 out of 59 (70%) Oscail tutors responded to this questionnaire. To elicit more specifically the views of the 5 tutors participating in this study telephone interviews were carried out. The interviews were recorded and transcribed (Appendix L).

All Oscail students were also consulted and a section on assessment was also included in the general end of year questionnaire (Appendix H.1–questions 7 to 15). 287 out of 724 (39.6 %) students responded to the questionnaire. The student response rate is relatively low, but it is in line with rates obtained in previous years. Furthermore the relatively low response rate obtained for this questionnaire is not dissimilar to those recorded in other distance education studies (see for instance Nash, 2005; Shin & Chan, 2004). An additional questionnaire had also been circulated among the students specifically investigated in this chapter but unfortunately, despite 3 cycles of circulation of the questionnaire-both electronically and in hard copy sent to postal addresses- it produced a disappointingly low response rate (10%). The responses were discarded.

On the whole, students and tutors' responses show similarities in terms of what they saw as benefits of the new assessment feedback form, but they differ in terms of the concerns they express. The table presented in Appendices J & K include comments made by students and

tutors which present recurrent views expressed by respondents⁶⁰. The comments suggest that the new assessment format helped with structuring of feedback and consequently also brought more explicitness and clarity in assessment judgments. Transparency may lead to enhanced shared understanding and greater students' control over their learning. Several authors (Price, 2007; Higgins, 2002; Mclellan, 2001; Nicol, 2009) have argued that vagueness, ambiguity and jargon are among the most common shortcomings of written feedback comments which often prevent students from benefiting from feedback. The comments offered by students and tutors signal that in this study attention has been successfully paid to improving clarity. The picture emerging appears to be further reconfirmed in the discussion of appeals patterns which show a decrease in requests for clarification of assessment judgments through the appeal process. As shown by Appendix I and by table 7.4 both students and tutors appear to have welcomed particularly the introduction of the "advice for future assignments section" and the enhancement of the "annotated feedback"

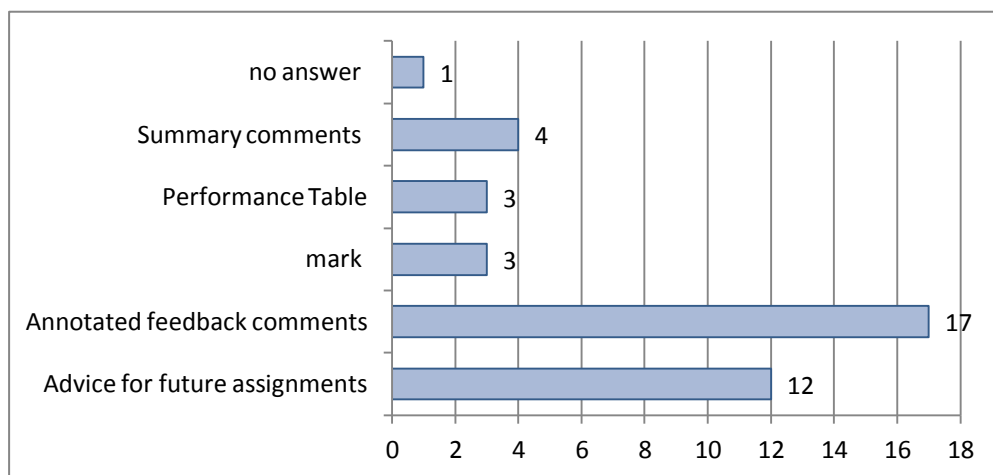


Figure 7.5: The most valuable element of the new feedback form (tutor responses from the General Questionnaire (N)). For instance 17 tutors considered the annotated feedback comments as the most valuable element of the new form.

Figure 7.5 shows that tutors rated these two elements of the new assessment feedback form as the most valuable and table 7.4 shows that the majority of students (77.8%) rated the same elements as either effective or very effective.

⁶⁰ It should be noted that in both the student and tutor questionnaires only a minority of tutors and students filled all the questions and in particular questions that required a discursive comment have more frequently been left blank. Therefore while the comments that have been collected have informed the analysis, they should be read in conjunction with the numeric data presented in table 7.4 and Figures 7.6 and 7.7 to gauge students' levels of satisfaction. Therefore while the representativeness of the comments may be questioned, in absence of specific views expressed by other students and tutors, they nevertheless provide more specific information that may further enrich the analysis. However the selected comments were included because similar views were expressed by several students and tutors and the specific quote encapsulated better than others specific concepts.

Table 7.4 Student evaluations of effectiveness of individual sections of the assignment feedback form

Rate the effectiveness of each item in helping you to learn	Overall assessment feedback form		Advice for future assignments section		Annotated comments section	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very effective	104	37.8	97	35.3	111	40.4
Effective	110	40	117	42.5	108	39.3
Neither effective nor ineffective	29	10.5	28	10.2	27	9.8
Ineffective	17	6.2	16	5.8	14	5.1
Very ineffective	6	2.2	5	1.8	7	2.5
I don't know	3	1.1	3	1.1	3	1.1
No answer	6	2.2	9	3.3	5	1.8
total	275	100	275	100	275	100

The assessment appeals statistics are also considered by Oscail management as a means to determine the level of student satisfaction with the level of support students have received in relation to assessment. Oscail students can appeal against overall module marks but also against marks for individual assignments⁶¹. Historically the majority of Oscail assessment appeals are lodged by students as a means for obtaining further clarification of the grounds for a particular mark and therefore signal dissatisfaction, particularly with the justificatory function of assessment.

As illustrated by Figure 7.6, a gradual decrease in the quantity of appeals lodged appears to coincide with the introduction of the new feedback form in 2006. In 2005 41 appeals were lodged, 27 of which resulted in the mark either being raised or lowered by the assessment monitor. In 2006 and 2007 a sharp decline in appeals was recorded and only 17 appeals were lodged in 2007. For most of these assignments the mark was not modified by the assessment monitor. The new appeal trend may indicate that the new Assignment Report Form made the basis for evaluation clearer by identifying strengths and weaknesses and that tutors have taken more care in clarifying their own marking criteria. On the whole, greater transparency in marking and feedback may have resulted in fewer changes in mark made by tutor monitors hence potentially explaining the change in pattern.

⁶¹ Unlike for other university degree programmes for which appeals can only be lodged at completion of a teaching period, Oscail students can submit appeals after receipt of marks for each assessed work. This means that appeals are lodged and responded to throughout the academic year and for this reason they have been often used by students as means to obtain additional feedback during the learning process. The reader is also reminded that unlike appeals for module marks, appeals for assignment marks allow "disagreement with mark obtained" as a ground for appeal.

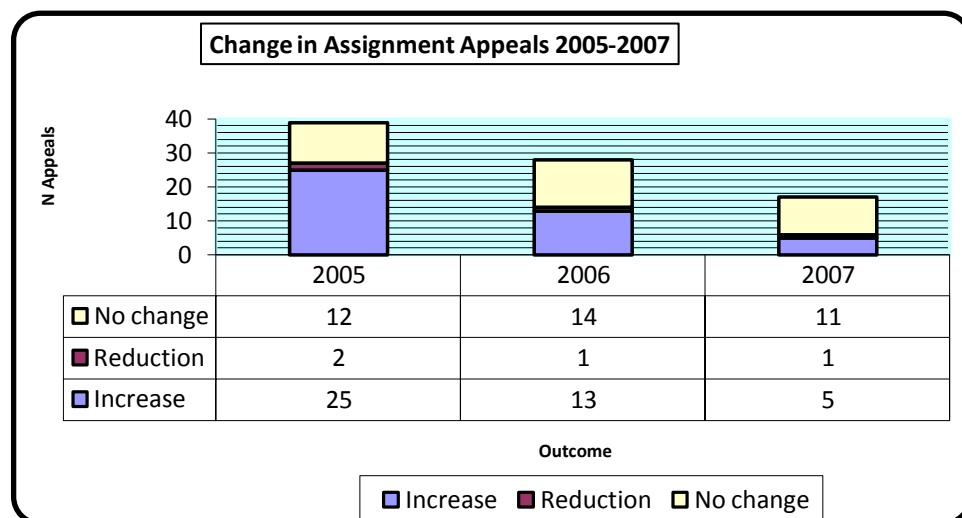


Figure 7.6: Number of appeals (2005-2007)⁶²

However, despite the positive overall rating of the new assessment feedback format and the positive trend appearing from appeals statistics format a less decisively positive picture emerges when students were asked to compare the new form to the previous one.

While the majority of respondents consider the new assessment feedback an improvement on the previous one, a proportionally large quantity of students either do not know or consider the two formats of equal value.

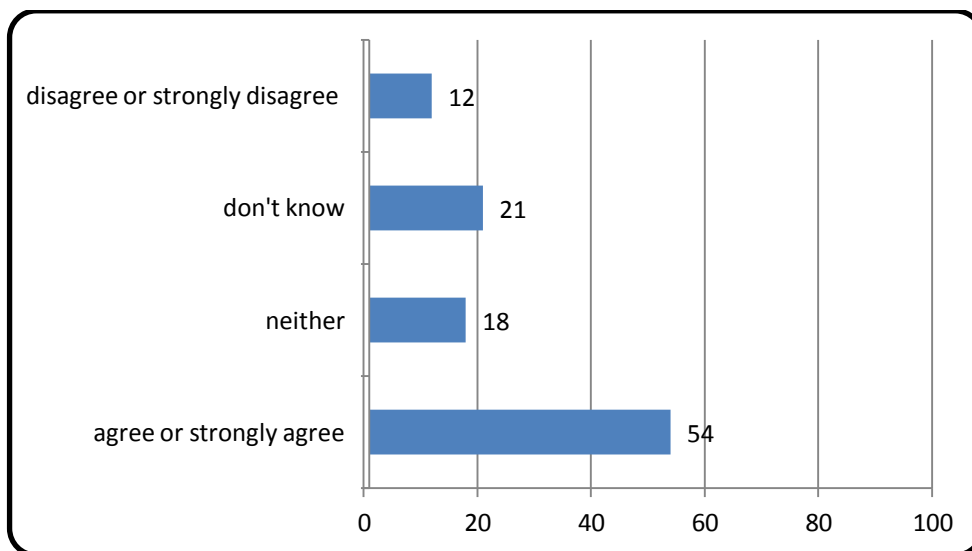


Figure 7.7: Students' reaction to the statement: *The new assessment feedback form is an improvement on the previous one* (N of responses to General End of year questionnaire)

While the percentage of respondents for this question is very low (14.5%) to draw conclusions, it prompts further investigation into the reasons that may have motivated such responses. It is

⁶² Increase, Decrease and no change refer to the outcome of the appeal and whether it has resulted in a change in the mark originally allocated by the tutor. For instance it can be seen that in 2005 25 appeals resulted in an increase in mark.

necessary to take a closer look at students' comments identifying problematic issues associated with the new assessment feedback form. The responses have been categorised in patterns and summarised in Appendix J. On the whole student comments indicate that the effectiveness of the assessment feedback form is dependent on the use that tutors make of it. The assignment feedback form does not offer sufficient guarantees to prevent perfunctory or minimal provision of feedback. As outlined in section 7.2 - even within the small sample of tutors examined for this chapter - a certain disparity in terms of detail and range of feedback functions and levels incorporated by the feedback provided by these tutors emerged. However it should be noted that students responding to the questionnaire comment on the whole Oscail tutor population⁶³ and the concerns they express do not relate exclusively to the 5 History tutors analysed for this chapter. This outcome is rather disappointing as one of the purposes for the introduction of the new assessment feedback form was that of ensuring greater consistency in the quality feedback provision and support across different tutorial groups.

The five History tutors during the interviews offered a rather mixed picture of the effectiveness of the new form in promoting learning. On the whole the interviews brought to surface the following issues:

- a degree of resistance among some of the five tutors who –as experienced practitioners- appear to be reluctant to modify well rehearsed practice, suggesting an implicit unwillingness to question one's own educational principles.
(Tutors 2 and 5)
- a perceived forced standardisation which stemmed from a lack of tutors' involvement in the design of the new format. This appears to signal a lack of ownership of the new format. (Tutors 2 and 5)
- an unclear understanding of the principles informing the new assessment feedback format, despite briefing information being circulated among tutors and given during face to face meetings(Tutors 1 , 2, 5)
- a concern with increased workload generated by the provision of more detailed feedback, requiring tutors also to keep track of students' past performance. (Tutor 1 and 3)

⁶³ It should be noted that only 5 History tutors out of an overall tutor population of 59 are analysed as part of this case study and that the responses to the student end of year questionnaire do not refer exclusively to the tutors analysed in this chapter.

While tutors 1 and 4 considered the detail that the form encourages tutors to provide as advantageous where the promotion of learning is concerned, tutor 1 also expressed annoyance in relation to the demands that this places on tutor time and workload. A similar sentiment is also echoed by tutor 3 but he also signalled a strong concern in relation to the excessive workload for tutors employed only on a part-time basis.

I used to write an awful lot in the comment box, but it is now more organised. The disadvantage is that is very time-consuming, it's like a one-to-one tutorial really; it's taking me an hour to mark the essays this way.

(Tutor 3)

In the one-to-one interviews (Appendix L), three out of five tutors express mixed feelings and state that they do not necessarily see the new format as an improvement (tutor 1, 5). While tutors 2 and 3 consider the new form an improvement (see appendices L.4 and L.5), only tutor 3 seemed to be satisfied with following the guidelines for optimal use, albeit also expressing concerns for the workload generated by the new feedback format. Tutors 1, 2 and 4 affirmed that the new form prompted them to take a more detailed and systematic approach to feedback provision, but tutor 3 suggested that not all the detail that the form appears to require may be necessary and that this may elicit a perfunctory approach in order to fill all the boxes in the form.

I think it is more systematic, I think it is set up more systematically, I would have done that, looking back at the form, I would have written up the page and round and round so this way is much more systematic, but it does, I didn't use to mark positively and this is very time consuming it a bit of window dressing⁶⁴

(Tutor3)

Some of the concerns expressed by tutor 3 are also shared by tutor 2, who felt that the structure of the form has led to repetitiveness and less clarity for tutors.

Maybe this is was that I was not clear about what was expected of me, but in my experience I found it a little repetitive. They have a summary table and then a summary box, then you have the advice and then you had the suggestions for future assignments I suppose in my... it's not necessarily better or worse

(Tutor2)

Tutor 5 concurred that the form did not necessarily represent an improvement, but also suggested that the form forced tutors to move away from a generic evaluation of student's work –which he considered to be more beneficial.

⁶⁴ It should be noted that in order to accurately transcribe the text of interviews grammatical inaccuracies have not been corrected.

you are really asked to reflect on different components whereas before you were given, you were asked just, you were given just an aggregated advice as to what comments you might make

(Tutor5)

From the student questionnaire and interviews with tutor 2 and tutor 5 another worrying pattern emerges, namely the perceived tendency to provide less personalised feedback as a product of the new feedback form. Appendix K shows that issue can be further specified in two subsets.

Firstly, both tutors and students appear to concur that even more detailed written information does not appear to be an effective means to replace face-to-face or telephone conversations⁶⁵ on assessment. Secondly, one student comments on the loss of spontaneity that appears to have resulted from the more structured approach to feedback provision promoted by the assessment feedback form. The loss of spontaneity may be a symptom of disaffection by tutors that may have resulted from a perceived loss of control on how feedback should be provided by individual tutors⁶⁶. Tutors 2 and 5 suggested that the form - through fragmentation and formalisation- has led to a depersonalisation of relationships established through assessment.

Tutor 5 comments as follows:

...from my point of view it hasn't got the same concept of conversation that the previous one had for me where, you know, where there was a more extended, in a sense the personal element of the comment almost it has been, you know, with the table and the annotated comments you don't get the same kind of push for what you are assessing now it is much more structured and rather than taking what might be, what you feel it might be the elements arising from the essay which are unique to the student (Tutor 5)⁶⁷

This tutor also equated a more structured approach with a loss of spontaneity on his part, which in his view also results in lower levels of engagement with individual students.

the previous one where you had a blank a kind of tabula rasa I suppose I felt, it has just occurred to me now really I probably felt I made a sense of engagement in a conversation with the students then through this particular one here.

(Tutor 5)

⁶⁵ Prior to the introduction of the new assessment feedback form students could contact their tutors either telephonically or by email to further clarify feedback. This measure was introduced in the past also to somewhat compensate for the tardiness of provision of feedback via surface mail. With the introduction of the new format and in consideration of the potential for increased workload that additional feedback may generate and of the online timely delivery of feedback, Oscail management decided to no longer offer additional face to face or telephone additional feedback.

⁶⁶ This point is further reinforced by some of the tutors in their individual interviews. Both tutor 2 and tutor refer to the loss of spontaneity resulting from a more structured approach to feedback which by is perceived by both tutors as a sort of standardisation of feedback.

⁶⁷ Bold type used to emphasise relevant sections of the quote.

Tutor 2 also felt that the new form introduced a level of formality in the interaction with students that was not associated with the old format. He also argued that the uniqueness of each student was less effectively captured by the new more formalised approach. He also felt that for the sake of transparency and clarity, the summary of performance table had introduced also a certain degree of harshness in how results are presented to students. According to Tutor2 the marks breakdown in the summary of performance table offers a harsh picture not sufficiently mitigated by comments.

from the point of view of the students, the different boxes which we has to be marked, I do think they are helpful, I think it may look a little harsh if it's an average mark or if he is struggling in the early forties, ... in the old format, I suppose, you had an opportunity to explain the same thing – maybe it wasn't that clear- but yeah you explained it in a more supportive way than just being there in Xs in the different boxes

(Tutor2)

Tutors 2 and 5 -while are both keen to establish an engaged and supportive relationship through feedback - highlighted a dichotomy between on one hand personalisation, on the other, the structuring of feedback. According to these two tutors increased clarity and formalisation comes with the drawback of depersonalisation and potential loss of engagement from tutors.

Nevertheless, with the exception of tutor 5, who affirms that he would rather return to the old system as he felt that by writing comments by hand and on the script margin he was able “to engage a little more”, the other tutors are willing to work with the new format. The impact of the new format on feedback style appears to be highly dependent on the extent to which tutors perceived it to be an improvement on the previous format. This in turn may have impacted on the extent to which tutors embraced the new format and appears to reinforce the outcome that emerged from the students’ questionnaires.

7.6 Summary of outcomes of phase two

In a recent article Nicol (2010, p.503) claims that “feedback can be interpreted as a symptom of impoverished dialogue”. While he considers feedback a form of communication, he sees it essentially as a monologue. Similarly Price (2007) suggests that written feedback fails to connect with learners as the messages conveyed by assessors tend to be poorly formulated,

unclear and often misunderstood. For this reason she comes to the conclusion that rather than investing time in perfecting written feedback we should move away from it and invest time in other feedback practices. Both Nicol and Price implicitly affirm the primacy of verbal dialogues and as a result consider other forms of two-way communication as deficient approximations.

In response to such criticism this study has attempted to show that investing time in improving written feedback is a worthwhile enterprise and that written feedback may be compatible with embracing dialogue as an educational principle. Firstly it should be noted that written feedback, *per se*, isn't dialogical or monological. Where its provision is deficient it impairs students' ability to respond and such deficiency turns a potentially dialogical means into a monological one. Therefore an important distinction between the usefulness of written feedback *per se* and the quality of its provision needs to be made. Good quality written feedback can be dialogical. Secondly the instrumental/methodological⁶⁸ dimension of dialogue is dependent on the other two dimensions outlined in earlier chapters, namely the ontological and ethical. The deficient use of written feedback as a dialogical means may depend on a two-fold lack of commitment from the assessors' part: an ontological commitment to the educational role, which should lead educators to maximise the learning opportunities for their students and an ethical commitment towards students and their personal and educational wellbeing.

Despite the earlier assertion, Nicol does not fully dissociate feedback from dialogue. But instead of seeing feedback itself as a dialogical means he suggests that for "written feedback to be effective it must be embedded in dialogical contexts" (2010, p.504). He goes on to suggest that such contexts present characteristics such as: active student engagement, process oriented, dynamic adjustment of the level of input by assessors, greater explicitness in sharing of meaning and responsiveness to students' needs. Similar principles have informed the analysis presented in this chapter as the primary intent was to determine whether the establishment of a dialogical framework for assessment feedback can have an impact on both learning and feedback provision approaches. However, unlike in Nicol's perspective, feedback is not simply seen as a tool within a dialogical context, rather it is viewed in itself as an unconventional form of dialogue.

⁶⁸ This is intended as the technical ability to provide feedback that has a dialogical orientation, hence using a process oriented approach to feedback provision.

This chapter shows that clarity can be improved, and that students value the advice. It also shows that to some extent feedback can be dialogical, in the sense that dialogical principles can be infused in feedback practice and that such infusion is beneficial. However dialogical engagement with feedback happens only in response to the type of feedback that enables such response from the students. Such response should be an improvement in performance which signals advancement of learning. Response-enabling feedback needs to be clearly formulated and detailed and should provide ostensive information exemplifying ways of addressing problematic issues. Furthermore, in order to promote sustainable learning, it should also prompt further reflection by offering alternative analytical angles; it should motivate students by acknowledging improvement on previous performance and it needs to be forward-looking, encouraging students to push themselves further.

The new feedback report form managed to bring about some changes in feedback provision as 4 out of 5 tutors show evidence of increased use of higher level (Level 3 and 4) feedback comments and tutor 3 appears to fully embrace the new format. These are significant changes on patterns recorded in chapter 6. Furthermore, while the performance trends outlined in this chapter cannot be explained exclusively in terms of the quality of support provided by tutors to student through feedback, the sustained and generalised improvement recorded for the students allocated to tutor 3 offers some indication that the feedback provided by this tutor may have had a strong impact on students learning.

While the majority of the students who have responded to the questionnaire have considered the new format either effective or very effective, mixed views have emerged when students were asked to compare the new format to the old one, thus indicating that some underlying concerns exist. Similarly while 4 out of 5 tutors expressed a willingness to continue to work with the new feedback format, offered only partially positive views on the new Feedback Report Form.

The following issues have been highlighted by the evaluation of the effectiveness of the new feedback format.

- As pointed out by the students' evaluation and by the outcomes of the coding and assessment performance tracking processes, the effectiveness of the new feedback report form is still –as for the previous format- dependent on the use of the form made by individual tutors. Tutors' commitment to fully embrace, not only the structure but also the principles that have informed the design of the new format appears to be a crucial contributing factor to the effectiveness of the use of the form.

Despite extensive briefing session addressing not only the use of the format, but also the principles that informed it and techniques for reducing workload (based on the examples of good practice outlined in chapter 6), the new format elicited a certain degree of resistance among tutors. Such resistance to the new approach prompted perfunctoriness and a disregard for the guidelines provided on the part of some tutors. The part-time nature of Oscail tutorial position to a certain extent explains the only partial endorsement shown by some tutors, particularly in consideration of the fact that form prompts tutors to provide more detailed feedback, hence generating greater workload.

- The formalisation of feedback provision in a more structured format has been perceived by two of the tutors participating in this case study as contributing to the erosion of academic autonomy and as restricting personal feedback provision style. The resistance to the new feedback report form may have been partially caused by the lack of tutors' involvement in the development of the new format and as a result it may have also resulted in a lack of ownership and endorsement. However perceived interference with academic freedom and autonomy are well documented objections. Attempts to encourage assessors to externalise the bases of their judgments appears to have been perceived by tutors as an attempt to interfere with their habitual feedback practice. Such perceptions are common and explain the persistent prevalence of a connoisseur model of assessment as discussed in chapter four and five. This points more in general at the fact that the effectiveness of a potentially valuable pedagogical intervention maybe highly undermined if the modification of practice associated with the pedagogical intervention does not also cause a shift in practitioners in ontological and ethical terms.
- The introduction of the new feedback format has been perceived by some tutors as an attempt to reduce spontaneity and depersonalise the interaction between tutors and students through feedback. This perception is a reason for concern for an initiative that aims to promote assessment and its associated practices as a form of dialogue. One of informing principles of the intervention is the enhancement reciprocity and mutuality between assessors and assessees and depersonalisation is an obstacle to such mutuality. However a core misunderstanding of the purposes of the new feedback report form may be at the root of this perception. On one hand informality and a certain degree of spontaneity contribute to the establishment of mutual relationships between students and tutors. On the other hand deficient sharing of meaning through poor clarity in the communication and application of assessment criteria distances assessors and assessees and places the authority and power for

assessment judgments firmly and exclusively in the hands of the assessors, thus disempowering students. There is often a tension between the educator and assessor roles and between having regard for the personal and academic wellbeing of the students. However the new feedback report form, despite its organisation in specific sections, does not prevent a more colloquial and personalised use of the format. It simply encourages the inclusion of a broader range of feedback functions to maximise the educational benefits of feedback. In addition to signalling a misunderstanding of the purposes of the new feedback format, the views expressed in tutors' comments may also indicate discomfort with having to reconsider one's own established practice, particularly considering that all the tutors in this study are highly experienced.

It can be concluded that on the whole, the validity of the principles that have informed the design of the new feedback format seem to have been reconfirmed by the benefits to the students, as seen in a trend indicating improved performance and their responses to the evaluation survey. However the concerns highlighted by tutors point at the fact that pedagogical interventions that intend to cause a substantial change in practices are more likely to succeed if the change is caused by practitioners themselves, or if practitioners have had an active role in the generation of new practices. Unfortunately the Oscail distance education system- which is centrally managed- tends to offer limited opportunities for direct consultation and participation of all teaching staff in the development of pedagogical activities. Furthermore the part-time nature of the work also tends to result in less involvement and engagement with activities beyond the contracted teaching hours -as low attendance to tutors meeting demonstrate. These factors may have impacted on the outcomes of the analysis for this chapter.

In chapter ten the researcher will take the role of assessment practitioner and will put to the test whether the endorsement of dialogical principles at ontological, instrumental and ethical level in relation to assessment can be further affirmed.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Formative assessment: beyond narrow accountability and depersonalisation

Introduction

Assessment can promote or hinder learning and it is therefore a powerful force to be reckoned in education. This far this thesis has argued that dialogue can be conceived as the basis for the development of a framework for assessment practice and that it may disclose new avenues for pedagogical interaction between students and teachers for enhancement of learning. It has been argued that a dialogical framework is particularly suited to re-conceive assessment feedback. Feedback – as a formative assessment practice- may offer opportunities to create an interactional space where reciprocated action may be possible and meaning can be negotiated rather than passively absorbed by students. If assessment is to be seen as an educationally worthwhile activity the dissociation of the formative aspect from assessment- too often witnessed in educational practice- should be opposed on both pedagogical and ethical grounds.

Assessment may serve multiple purposes. In its summative form it may act as a classificatory and qualifying device, and while these purposes may serve wider societal requirements, the predominance of this form of assessment may fall short of meeting more specifically educational aims. Summative assessment quantifies the worth of the work produced by students normally at the end of a teaching and learning cycle, and in doing so it also draws assumptions on the academic worth of the individual student. Furthermore summative assessment is increasingly being associated with anonymity as a means for safeguarding those being assessed against assessors' potential bias. Such anonymity necessarily results in a depersonalisation of the relationship established through assessment between assessors and assessees. While objectivity and rejection of bias should be upheld in all assessment relations, the affirmation of anonymity and resulting depersonalisation diminishes the educational potential of assessment. It seems to be rather uncontroversial to propose that teaching and learning activities should be student-centred, but to contend that assessment should also be student-centred is less so. But if we accept that assessors are in first place educators and if it is contended that educating should be an intrinsic aim of their activity, this aim is more likely to be satisfied by providing students with tailored assessment activities that allow them to learn. Therefore by engaging in assessment practices that do not offer students an opportunity to learn, educators fail to fulfil the more basic obligation arising from their professional role, namely educating. It is now perhaps more apparent why it is justifiable to propose that

summative assessment practices should become less prominent if our primary purposes are of an educational and ethical nature, as argued by this chapter.

The empirical analysis presented in chapter seven shows that the enhancement of dialogical interaction between assessors and assesseees through a well intentioned methodological intervention produced mixed results. The design of the intervention arose primarily from a practical concern for the improvement of feedback. While the infusion of dialogical principles in feedback had been identified as the core ingredient for such improvement, the intervention placed emphasis primarily on the instrumental dimension of the association assessment to dialogue. Nevertheless the analysis highlighted that, among other factors, the success of the intervention was severely impaired by the lack of commitment to their educational role displayed by some of the assessors. Dall’Alba (2009), in arguing for the necessity of an integration of the ontological, technical, and epistemic dimensions in the development of educational professionalism, suggests that “professional ways of being occur through integration of knowing, acting and being the professionals in question” (p.43). The lack of ontological assessors’ commitment to their role as educators had also ethical implications as it also lessened the potential to maximise development in the students allocated to them. However the dependency of the success of the intervention on the type of response given by the assessors also signals that the instrumental and methodological dimensions of pedagogical dialogue, as embodied by the new assessment feedback format, were not sufficient to promote the infusion of dialogical principles in assessment practice. An ontological commitment to the professional role of educator, together with an ethical concern for educational welfare of students, is also necessary for the establishment of dialogical relations that yield high educational value.

The research process has therefore highlighted the necessity to explore more in depth particularly the ethical challenges and possibilities offered by assessment and how these impinge on the establishment of dialogic relations through assessment.

This chapter, together with chapter nine, offers an important theoretical bridge between the empirical analyses presented in chapters six and seven and a new dialogical assessment model that will be presented in chapter ten. The integration of ethical and ontological concerns with instrumental ones offers grounds for a more wholesome framework for the infusion of dialogical principles in assessment practice. The challenges to the attainment of morally acceptable ways of relating to students through assessment are therefore explored. In first place the chapter attempts to determine how ethicality is expressed in summative and

formative assessment (Section 8.1). Furthermore it elucidates how the function (summative and formative) of assessment brings different concerns in relation to ethicality and requires specific means to promoting the ethically defensible relations. This section also shows how, paradoxically, the defence of ethicality in relation to one function may result in the lessening of ethicality in relation to the other function, resulting in often troubling dilemmas for assessment practitioners. Section 8.2 focuses on the threats to ethicality posed by restrictive forms of assessment that force students' perspectives to converge with those of assessors. It also warns against convergence that fosters conformity with the views of the assessor as a means to achieve higher grades. Section 8.3 focuses on the limitation of assessment and the intrinsic potential for exploitative and depersonalising practices that less ethically-oriented assessment relations tend to embody. Finally in section 8.4 it is proposed that a morally responsible assessor is willing to enter dialogical relationships with assessees to disclose the bases of assessment judgments more fully and, in so doing, allows more personalised exchanges with students.

8.1 Ethical challenges for summative and formative assessment

It has been argued in the foregoing chapters that if dialogue becomes a framework for feedback, learning should be promoted in ways that allow assessors to negotiate meaning and establish a democratic relationship. Chapter four has traced a crucial distinction between summative and formative assessment and positioned feedback within the domain of formative assessment practices. It has been suggested that one of the main sources of differentiation between summative and formative is the primary function attributed to particular assessment practices. In summative forms of assessment the predominant function is that of assigning value to assessment performance mostly in numeric form and normally at the end of a learning cycle. The primary function of formative assessment practices is that of helping the student to learn and develop through the assessment experience. Summative practices have minimal formative value *per se* and sometimes they may even prompt un-educational behaviours such as cramming and regurgitation of information. Nevertheless both summative and formative assessments raise ethical concerns, albeit of a different nature. These are further compounded when the purpose of assessment intersects with such different subject domains as those of exact sciences and humanities.

Figure 8.1 attempts to capture the conditions that enable ethicality in summative and formative assessment. It is proposed that objectivity, accuracy and accountability achieved

through anonymity offer sufficient guarantees of the level of ethicality in summative assessment.

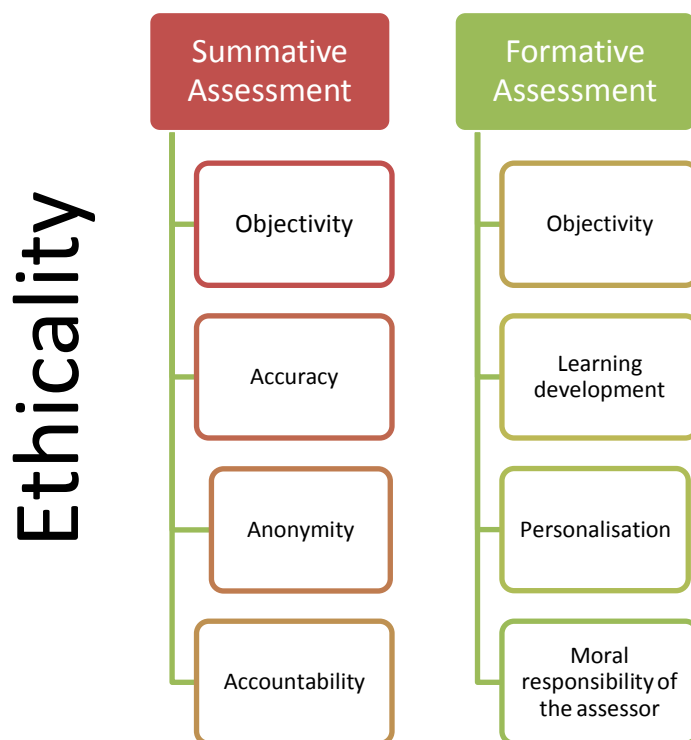


Figure 8.1: Ethicality in Summative and Formative Assessment

It seems reasonable to suggest that a rather simple approach to ethicality is necessary in relation to summative practices. Anonymity forecloses any opportunity for biases based on personal acquaintance and it is frequently taken to assure greater objectivity. Transparency, objectivity and accuracy allow assessors also to give guarantees of accountability. Through performing their duty in a transparent, objective and accurate way, assessors can demonstrate to have fulfilled their professional duties in ‘traceable manner’. If assessment criteria are clearly specified, disclosed and applied this should offer guarantees of transparency, objectivity and accuracy. Therefore assessment designed to fulfil the summative function seems to present a certain ease in achieving acceptable ethical standards in the relationships between students and teachers. This is achieved primarily by minimising the interaction between assessors and assesses and by specifying assessment criteria. However it should be noted that a flaw remains is this apparently straightforward practice, which may undermine the overall ethicality of such enterprise. Even in the presence of clearly specified assessment criteria, the translation of the student performance in a numeric classification is not always straightforward. In exact sciences or in assessment forms⁶⁹ where recall of specific information

⁶⁹ In education practices there is a growing tendency to standardise procedures and practices according to examples that primarily are borrowed from scientific domains, which while fit to capture the state of affairs in those domains,

is expected, the correctness of the response to an assessment task can easily be established. Moreover assessment in the humanities often requires an interpretative activity. The translation from performance to grade is much less straightforward and therefore both objectivity and accuracy of judgment can be negatively affected, even if the assessment product has been anonymised and criteria clearly specified.

Formative assessment practices have as their main purpose the development of learning and it is therefore necessary to ensure that this function is in first place safeguarded. By promoting learning students not only gain from an educational point of view, but also in terms of their personal well-being. Such promotion is accordingly both an educational and ethical parameter. However, the development of learning rests on the satisfaction of three other conditions: objectivity, personalisation and moral responsibility of the assessor.

At this point some clarification of the concept of personalisation – which is seen as a core factor in the establishment of dialogical assessment relations advocated by this thesis – is necessary. Without entering the current political UK debate on personalisation (Milliband, 2004; Leadbeater, 2004a; Hartley, 2007) the terminological confusion that surrounds the concept needs to be briefly addressed. Personalisation is commonly and improperly used as synonymous for individualisation and customisation. Individualisation refers to the set of didactic strategies aimed at guaranteeing that all students achieve the same learning objectives, by different rhythms, times, ways according to their learning styles. Customisation is derived from Neo-liberal ideals that associate personhood with choice and see choice as derived from consumption of goods. Hartley (2007) laments that in its association with customisation and individualisation, ‘personalisation’ is an emerging code of education which draws not on humanism and romanticism, but on consumerism and especially upon marketing theory. Personalisation, as used in this thesis, reconnects with the student-centred tradition. Personalisation then focuses on the human and cognitive potential of the learner and aims to develop his/her capabilities⁷⁰ even beyond narrowly conceived learning outcomes.

generate more questions than answers in other domains. With Smith (2010, p.144), who affirms that we tend “with science to offer knowledge as a unified and coherent method (no doubt characterised by a single ‘method’) we voice a concern over an unreflective and modernist mind-set which in relation to assessment practices leads to generalise, in a non-sufficiently problematised fashion, from scientific subject domains to others.

⁷⁰ This latter concept is not without critics. Bird (2007, <http://www.teachingexpertise.com/articles/personalisation-what-does-it-really-mean-1442> accessed on 1/07/2012) sees personalisation more as an aspirational concept and specifically with reference to assessment warns that: “... in the end, it is worth remembering that the path of personalised learning ends in standardised tests; and however differently students may get there, they must all end up the same.”

In light of the above the definition of personalisation- intended as a condition for ethicality in formative assessment- it is proposed that the assessor needs to tailor advice to the needs of the individual student in order help him/her to progress beyond simply closing performance gaps. The advice provided, while positively framed, needs to offer an objective picture of the state of affairs and the assessor needs to be vigilant against his/her bias and ensure that the advice he/she provides is actually providing information that helps the learner to progress.

While anonymity does not seem to offer a sufficiently satisfactory response to bias, personalisation is not without challenges. Despite being seen as a condition for ethicality in formative assessment- personalisation may raise ethical concerns. Firstly, while dialogical engagement requires at least some degree of personalisation in the interaction between assessors and assesses, Foster (2007, p.22) aptly points out that teachers need to be self-aware and find a line of demarcation between respect and their role as evaluators. Secondly there is also a danger that motivational comments- often present in personalised feedback- may depict an unrealistic picture of the student's performance, transforming advice more into therapeutic than educational terms. Thirdly, in the context of feedback as a formative practice, the provision of advice in the form of comments (mostly in written form) generates high workloads. There is a danger that student-specific feedback comments may be formulated in a summary and perfunctory manner that does not fulfil the formative function (examples of the potential for perfunctory feedback practices can be found in the feedback analysed for chapter seven).

While it can be argued that assessors should strive for objectivity and moral responsibility towards those they are assessing in the context of both summative and formative assessment, a crucial distinction needs to be drawn. Formative assessment practices are rarely subjected to the scrutiny of external stakeholders –such as external examiners, professional bodies and inspectors. Assessors are more likely to be held accountable for grades and marks than for feedback comments. Hence some form of external obligation in relation to summative assessment to perform practices in an objective and accurate fashion is imposed on assessors. In terms of formative assessment the extent to which such practice positively impacts on the development of individuals is left almost entirely to the initiative and commitment of the individual assessor.

The quality of formative practices arises chiefly from the formative choices made by the assessor and from their suitability to the context of practice and to the students at whom they are aimed. There is a striking contrast here with practices that arise mainly as a response to external obligations. For this reason moral responsibility of the assessor is even more important in formative practices, as assessors need to find in themselves the source of the obligation to act ethically towards those they are assessing. This is the greatest challenge to ethicality in formative practices. Therefore formative practices –particularly in the domain of the Humanities- are the primary focus of the reflections presented in this chapter in relation to moral responsibility of assessors.

8.2 Imperfect humans, imperfect assessment

Even if the focus of assessment is the evaluation of the final *learning product* the consequences of assessment have repercussions on the individual student as a person and the agent behind the product. If we assume that assessment should maximise the opportunities for those assessed to learn and develop, the tendency to reduce assessment purely to a classification device should be counteracted. Granted that attainment in assessment activities constitutes the basis for awarding qualifications and that qualifications are crucial in determining the place that individuals occupy in society, assumptions derived from assessment outcomes should be weighed carefully.

There is a tendency to pigeonhole those assessed into classifications and to read such classifications as indications of personal worth more than of academic attainment. Academic attainment is only one indicator of human potential and certainly not sufficient to ascertain the level of professional competence or suitability for a particular occupation.

Kevin Williams (1998) in his essay *Assessment and the challenge of skepticism* may be justified in pointing out that the essential connection between assessment and learning becomes diluted by the tendency to reduce assessment purely to a classification device. Such tendency may lead to perfunctoriness⁷¹ and surface learning. Williams concludes that

⁷¹ Perfunctoriness can be seen to be connected to Lyotard's (1984) concept of performativity. Performativity is the optimization of the relationship between input and output, where the emphasis is placed on the achievement of maximum output with minimal input. However what constitutes 'maximum' output is not necessarily evaluated in terms of the quality of the output and output measures -fitting to account for the specific factors that may account for variations such output. Similarly perfunctoriness may maximise the output without concerning itself with quality. Educational performance targets, such as Leaving Certificate results, may be met without sufficient regard for how they have been achieved and legacy they leave behind in terms of what students may come to regard to be associated with assessment.

... there will always remain some element of chance in assessment. This is simply because it is an activity conducted by imperfect humans on other imperfect human beings in an imperfect universe (p.18)

While, with Williams, it is important to highlight the imperfection of human judgments, it is even more important to emphasise that assessment judgments are expressed on the work completed *by others* rather than *on others* themselves. This is a crucial distinction that is often ignored in day-to-day practices where assessors generalise and extract judgments on individual students from their performance. Agent and product should be seen as separate. The product (the student response to the assessment task) may not be fully representative of the agent (the assessee) in terms of his knowledge, skills and ability and assessors are called to express their judgment on the product rather than on the agent, even if knowledge of the agent may offer a greater understanding of the act itself. The assessment of the product should not lead one to draw conclusions about the agent which may pigeonhole him/her into categories derived from the performance achieved. If our scope is to identify ethically defensible ways of appraising the work of others, one of the important points to be raised is that agent-student and the product being assessed should not be confused as such confusion denotes *per se* an unethical way of relating to students through assessment. The conclusions that may be derived from knowledge of the agent-student in relation to the product are at the root of the movement towards anonymisation of assessment in summative assessment.

A commonly held view of assessment is that those who possess superior knowledge set tasks for others who are developing their knowledge in order to verify their level of attainment. Those being assessed may have no choice but to subject themselves to the judgment of assessors and in so doing place themselves in a vulnerable position. The specification of assessment and marking criteria may represent an attempt to empower learners by sharing the basis on which assessment judgments will be expressed. However assessment judgments rest on the interpretation of those criteria and the process that leads from interpretation to application by assessors may not always be a fully conscious one.

Few opportunities for reversibility of such judgment are granted. The judgment expressed through assessment is controlled by the assessor whose expertise and judgment is rarely questioned. Questioning assessment judgments is often perceived by those assessing as an intrusion into the safely guarded territory of academic freedom and as a criticism of the ability to express competent judgments. Even if we accept that assessors may possess superior knowledge and that their judgment is to be trusted on this basis, there is, nevertheless, an

undeniable element of arbitrariness in marking which makes the basis of relationship between assessors and those been assessed questionable on knowledge grounds.

Articulation of assessment criteria may increase transparency, but the extent to which such articulation leads to objectivity may need to be raised. While the transparency afforded by the articulation of assessment criteria is to be valued, such transparency may not extend to the application of the assessment criteria, and an 'unavoidable subjectivity' may be still injected in the act of evaluating assessed work against transparent criteria.

Absolute objectivity is certainly more an aspirational than an actual goal in assessment of humanities. On one hand, the assessor needs to have internalised the significance of marks and criteria; on the other hand, he/she needs to relate this symbolic system to the text produced by the assessee. This process of matching can be less than transparent even if the assessment criteria themselves are transparent and even if the student whose work is being assessed is not known. The issue is further complicated by the translation of evaluative judgments into quantitative terms of assessment. A numeric translation of an assessment judgment adds a further degree of opaqueness. It classifies performance, but does not tell any more about that performance than the level at which it has been classified. Yet numeric translation allows for comparability of performances and quantification also gives the illusion of greater objectivity.

In setting the discussion within the boundaries of the domain of humanities, we can suggest that imperfection can be considered both a limit and a possibility. It is a limit in terms of our ability as human beings to express "infallible"⁷² judgment and specifically, in the case of assessment, of expressing entirely accurate judgment on others' attainment. However, when assessment in the humanities intersects with formation and formation through feedback, assessment also represents a possibility, as it may open up a fluid interactional space between assessors and assessee where understanding can be enhanced and meaning negotiated and shared⁷³. It is put forward that assessors have a moral duty to create favourable conditions to allow students to express their knowledge to the best of their ability and to facilitate the

⁷² "Infallible" here refers to the ability of the assessor to express judgments which are fully objective, transparent.

⁷³ The greater is the emphasis on the formative aspect of the assessment the greater is fluidity of the interactional space that assessment may create in the humanities. Where assessment fulfils at once summative and formative function, the assessor needs to balance the need to classify the student performance with the intention to preserve the student's individuality and possibilities to perform new and creative interpretations. This on one hand limits the fluidity of negotiation of meaning created through assessment but does not completely remove the possibility for creativity. If assessment criteria have been formulated in a non- constraining way and to allow the individual to retain room for personal appropriation, the application of such criteria will still allow space for negotiation and interpretation of meaning.

development of learning. A conscious effort needs to be put in place to rebalance the relationship and establish some degree of mutuality and reciprocity between assessor and assessee and indeed between teaching and learning. This does not mean denying the existence of an imbalance in knowledge between assessors and assessee. Rather, it suggests that the possession of superior knowledge should not be used as a means to establish a power relation between assessors and assessee and put assessors beyond accountability and moral responsibility. This in turn also means emphasising the opportunity for assessors to put their superior knowledge to the service of the learners, by using it to promote interest in the specific subject and the development of a gradually increased ability to engage with it. In emphasising the importance of shared commitment for dialogical relations, Foster (2007, p.29) suggests that asymmetry can be productive and act as a means for ethical growth. Hence asymmetries, such as those described also by Vygotsky, not only foster cognitive development, but also can be ethically defensible.

The acknowledgement of the imperfection of human knowledge and of the inability to express entirely accurate judgments should not have a paralyzing effect. Teaching does have an impact on learning and arguably learning and/or lack of it should have an impact on teaching. If we maintain that assessment can - to some degree and among other functions⁷⁴ - ascertain the ability of individuals, it should be designed to allow individuals to display the best of their ability. But if in addition to this purpose -and more fundamentally so - assessment is to be intended as a form of learning, then measuring of ability becomes only one secondary aspect of assessment. Attainment is still important and measurement of attainment may even be a motivating factor for some. But the emphasis more often placed on attainment and its measurement has been shown to detract from the formative element of assessment (Torrance & Prior, 1998) and to encourage learners to concentrate more readily on obtaining good grades without necessarily learning.

⁷⁴ This point does not imply that in general assessment of ability is not the core function of assessment. Indeed assessment should verify that there has been some educational gain for the assessee from a particular course of study. However, in some professional qualifications, assessment performance on specific course component is crucial in determining the suitability and ability of the assessee to fulfill the professional role.

While we live in a society obsessed with quantification and measurement, it should be maintained that attempts to capture human knowledge are approximate⁷⁵. There is a generalised perception that the benefits of quantification extend beyond counteracting bias and serve the purpose of providing objective proof that accountability demands have been satisfied. The relation between assessors and assesseees is constrained by demands imposed by accountability as the necessity of providing objective proof of quality, primarily in quantitative terms, limits the breadth of practices in which assessors can invest time and effort.

Recent movements towards the specification of learning objectives and constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) between teaching and learning objectives and assessment criteria are an attempt to attenuate arbitrariness. Yet it needs to be acknowledged that there is a 'tension between scientific aspirations of assessment technologies to represent objective reality and the unavoidable subjectivities injected by the human focus of these technologies' (Broadfoot, 2002 p.288). While objectivity is to be valued what leads to objectivity needs to be questioned. Biesta (2009) warns against the uncritical association of quantification with objectivity. He argues that there is, in first place, a problem with *normative validity* of measurement and points at the danger of just measuring what we can easily measure. As a result we might end up valuing what we can measure instead of measuring what we value. Biesta concludes that normative validity is being replaced by technical validity, which emphasise instrumental effectiveness. Portelli & Vibert (2003) also alert us about the distinction to be made between *standards as measurement* and *standards as a value*, and suggest that there a tendency to confuse the two terms. Such confusion may have led to an over-simplification of the works of standards which, in their view, is what has given rise to movements such as "outcome based education" (ibid, p.7). Such oversimplification has also led, through quantification and measurability, to homogeneity and disregarding differences in terms outcomes. All students are expected to achieve the same standardized and measurable outcomes; hence personalisation as individualization has been promoted.

Furthermore implicit in learning outcomes is a behaviouristic illusion that a cause and effect model can be simplistically applied to educational environments. The language itself (outcome rather than objective or aim) presupposes that from teaching-stimulus X will result learning-

⁷⁵ There is a tendency even in educational research -also signaled by Richard Smith- (2010, p.142) - to associate measurement with certainty. Such tendency, according to Smith, has been challenged by Post-modernism - among them by Lyotard, -who question the transferability and generalisability of conclusions derived from measurements and comparison of social realities.

response Y. If we apply the principle of constructive alignment, learning objectives in their purist form should serve as the basis for determining assessment criteria, but additional, uncommunicated and unspecified criteria often crop up when marking is carried out.

Despite the rather narrow and mechanistic approach often taken to the development of learning objectives, these somehow encourage –if not force - assessors to externalise the basis for their judgments. However Curren (1999) highlights that outcome measures are imperfect means of measurement as they indicate little about the process that yields them and focus on a pre-defined product. The desirability of learning outcomes beyond their instrumental value can only be partially supported. Learning outcomes *per se* are not an insurance policy against ambiguity, as the expression of learning outcomes does not provide a guarantee in terms of ethicality. They tell us about transparency of criteria but not about transparency in the application of criteria. They tell us about compliance with procedures and to a certain extent can give the illusion that satisfying accountability measures implies ethicality in virtue of enhanced transparency. Yet assessment judgments shaped onto learning outcomes may be nothing more than a perfunctory response to external accountability demands, to the point of being self-serving, and quickly discharging the assessor of his/her responsibility towards the assessee.

If only certain measurable indicators of quality of assessment performance are considered in accountability terms, time-poor assessors are pushed into concentrating on perfecting their practice primarily in relation to those indicators. Practices such as those of formative feedback are clearly richer in formative value than is the capturing of assessment performance through grades and marks. But since such practices require engagement with the individual student they are less suited to satisfy a narrow concept of accountability that links objectivity to quantification. This unfortunately leads to relegating such practices to the domain of the desirable but not required.

While accountability demands may be informed by the willingness to improve the quality of education, holding individuals to account does not only mean that they are *able* to deliver an *account*. It also suggests that they are *obliged* to do so. Sockett (1980) offers the following definition of accountability:

The purpose of an accountability system is in part contained in the meaning of the word, which at a simple level, is to hold someone to account. Yet the main point on which all its advocates would agree is that it is an attempt to *improve* the quality of education, and it is sometimes added, to *prove* that this is being done (p.10)

Accountability may be an appropriate concept to define the relationship between teachers and external authorities, but moral responsibility seems the more apt concept to define the relationship between teachers and learners. Moral responsibility arises from choice rather than obligation. Those teachers who see themselves responsible to their students do not behave in response to an externally imposed obligation, but rather in response to an internal moral imperative to act in order to promote the welfare of students. The response to the obligation imposed by accountability may ultimately divorce practice from core educational aims. Sockett (1980) clearly illustrates the potential effects of such separation.

...Schools and their teachers would not be applauded if they strove for such results, *whatever the consequences*. Thus a school which got good eleven plus results by feeding the pupils a diet of tests for two years before the examination would get the results, but not in an appropriate way....Educational purposes may well conflict with the demands of a competitive examination system. It is this factor that must encourage us to view teachers as accountable not only for the *outcomes* of learning, but also for the principles embedded in the procedures they use (p.12).

Potentially and paradoxically the satisfaction of accountability demands may lead us to perform morally questionable actions. Even if we regard accountability not in terms of results, but as the expression of the adherence to principles of practice, it still remains that principles of practice impose an obligation and action may arise from an uncomfortable choice. Uncomfortable choices may still lead to the fulfilment of obligations but rarely to the endorsement of the principles informing such obligations. It follows that the obligation may be perceived as an imposition and, as such, it may elicit a perfunctory response from the agent. Furthermore agents who reluctantly comply are more likely to meet the requirements at the lowest acceptable level of practice.

Assessors have the difficult task of balancing accountability and moral responsibility when these sources of obligation point in different directions. The demands imposed by accountability may still need to be fulfilled in assessment practice, but moral responsibility of assessors and assesses should be highlighted and quality of the relations established through assessment should be enhanced if the educational purposes of assessment are to be properly served. The dominant message in current assessment practices seems to imply that the less we engage with the other and the more we encourage the fulfilment of standardised outcomes the better in terms of objectivity, and in doing so it discourages dialogic practice.

8.3.1 The demand for convergence and intellectual conformity

As we have seen in the previous section, high aspirations towards promoting human flourishing may be dwarfed by the constraints imposed on educational practice by external accountability demands. Such demands may lead practitioners to underplay some of their moral and educational values but also to overplay the importance of summative assessment practices.

All teaching entails some degree of influencing⁷⁶, and while indoctrination demands allegiance, only forms of influencing that may lead to the development of autonomous individuals can be considered to be compatible with the concept of education as flourishing. In order for teachers to retain some control over the values they are able to express through their educational practice, they need to be conscious of what those are and of the impact their actions have on their students. This is important, as the assessment activities of teachers may expose students to a range of risks that are anti-educational. Such risks include those of a long-term lowering of self belief among students and a loss of motivation to study.

Assessment judgments may therefore expose students' vulnerability. The dependency on teacher's judgment may well be exploited in a coercive manner to foster convergence with the teacher's perspective. For subject domains which may allow for interpretative judgments (such as most Humanities), a demand for forced convergence is both a means to control and convenience. From the student's point of view responding to an assessment task in a convergent manner may be an act of recognition of the authority of the assessor on the subject⁷⁷ matter. The assessor's position as the individual who has the last word on what is considered to be acceptable is legitimised. From the point of view of the assessor, convergence means comparability and greater ease in marking. Creative and divergent responses may force the assessor to broaden his/her interpretative horizons and may ultimately be perceived as challenging the assessor's authority over the subject matter and his/her ability to objectively capture the value of the assessed work. It is therefore not surprising that convergence is more often encouraged than creativity.

⁷⁶ Barrow & Woods (2006, p.80) point out that to "influence is not in itself to indoctrinate" and suggest that "provided that children are ultimately brought to examine for themselves the various moral values that are adhered to within a society and which they have been initially brought to conform to, they are not indoctrinated". The distinction highlights that while some element of convergence in the teaching and learning relationship is beneficial, such convergence should arise from the promotion of rationality and choice rather from imposition and coercion. A non-coercive convergence is the product of a shared understanding that has been negotiated through dialogue and mutual engagement.

⁷⁷ This is not to say that there are no inherent demands of the subject of study which results in some acceptable degree of convergence in relation to criteria such as for instance fluency and lucidity in expressing one's thought.

Curren (1999, pp. 199-200) suggests that a 'coercion argument' has been put forward by some libertarian educational theories in relation to assessment. According to this perspective, coercion is intrinsic in assessment, to the point – in stronger forms of coercion- of violating the rights of those being assessed. Curren (1999, p.201) also attributes to libertarian views the concern with pressure put on students to conform with their teachers' views and states that according to this perspective good grades are seen as rewards for intellectual conformity. On one hand good grades, on this account, represent the acknowledgement that the performance of the student has matched the expectations of the assessor and therefore signals a convergence of the meaning expressed by the student with that of the assessor. On the other hand, lack of convergence attracts penalties. Curren (1999) distances himself from this perspective and differentiates between strong and weak coercion. The weaker coercion argument supported by Curren simply suggests that grading negatively affects students' self-determination.

Weiss (1991) concurs with Curren in stating that teachers have an expectation that students' views would converge with theirs and states rather uncritically that 'in being educated, students are internalizing the judgment of the teacher' (1991, p. 233). There are at least two implications in this aspect of assessment. Firstly, it suggests that teachers who connect being educated with internalization of the judgment of the teacher may also see those 'divergent' students, who perhaps develop in different direction, as not sufficiently educated or even uneducated. This has implications for the identification of what constitutes success in assessment activities. This ability to correctly interpret the teacher's views may be little more than a perfunctory activity aimed at achieving high grades rather than a demonstration of learning. Secondly, convergence of interpretation may be based on a validation of meaning. What meanings are validated may be intrinsically linked to the beliefs and experiences of the teacher. In exact sciences, where right or wrong answers are more easily defined, it is possible to argue that what constitutes a 'right' answer is not a matter of validation of meaning, but rather of scientific proof. For those subjects where such exactness cannot be claimed, efforts should be directed towards negotiating what meaning should be validated on the basis of the argument which is best supported by evidence and sound reasoning. In this domain then dialogue has an important role to play as it facilitates the process of sharing of meaning. Todd (2003), affirms that

Teachers, as vehicles through which the pedagogical demand for learning to become is made real for students, cannot escape their role – they require students to make

symbolic attachments and meaning out the curriculum they present, and in doing so they cannot escape a certain degree of coercion. (p. 31)

The inherent violence arising from coercion towards absorption of pre-established meanings is not seen by Todd as an insurmountable obstacle, but it certainly highlights that educators constantly face a moral dilemma and can frequently involve a balancing act between more defensible and less defensible forms of influencing. It should also be noted that convergence is problematic only insofar as the meaning expressed, rather than signifying understanding, signals a regurgitation of undigested information. We once again remind ourselves of Gadamer's concept of "fusions of horizons of understanding" as an eminent example of non-forced convergence. Convergence coupled with understanding, and dissociated from coercion, should not be uncritically condemned.

Weiss (1991), in contrast to Curren, argues that a grade reflects both actions by the student and actions by the assessor. The argument is based on the notion that those allocating grades are not exclusively responsible for the consequences of such action and that the student must have had some responsibility for receiving a particular grade. Marking is seen by Weiss as a reciprocal action. Judgment is not the sole and exclusive prerogative of the assessor and a mark is an amalgam of judgments and choices made by both assessors and assessees. Students too are asked to express their judgment in terms of what they consider to be an appropriate response to an assessment task.⁷⁸ Their response requires them to interpret the requirements of the task and rests on the assumption that theirs and the assessor's interpretation of the assessment requirements converge. While at first this seems to indicate that students participate in the decision process that leads to the allocation of a grade, the interpretation of the response given by the student to an assessment activity remains nevertheless the sole responsibility of the assessor. Students' involvement is limited to the initial interpretative activity that addressing an assessment task requires. To consider a mark as an amalgam of students' and teachers' interpretations may give the illusory impression of some kind of negotiation in the interpretative activity that leads to the allocation of a mark. This may also lead one to conclude that students may have brought a poor mark on themselves, when a poor mark may also be the outcome of poor teaching, or marking ability and experience, on the assessor's part.

⁷⁸ Clearly these considerations go beyond factual accuracy. It is granted that the assessee should provide factually accurate answers to assessment activities, but many assessment activities in the Humanities are set to encourage students to provide answers that elicit more than accurate recall of information. In Humanities interpretation is a form of both of analysis and synthesis (see Bloom's Taxonomy, 1956) and therefore such forms of cognitive processing are more highly regarded in such subject domains.

However, if productive learning should emerge from assessment, a reciprocal engagement of assessor and assessee is necessary. The questions posited by assessment to a certain extent already encapsulate the type of answer that is expected. If the questions are not carefully formulated, meeting expectations may simply elicit narrowly compliant answers. In taking a dialogic approach to assessment, assessors should also show that divergent, but well argued and factually accurate responses may be positively regarded.

As discussed in chapter three, the early Socratic dialogical model of pedagogical interaction offers a fertile ground in relation to creating opportunities for the development of understanding in a non-convergent manner. Assessment does not feature in the Socratic dialogical exchanges. However an element of formative assessment can be identified in the probing questions put by Socrates to his interlocutors with the purpose of clarifying their understanding of their own thinking (rather than of Socrates' thinking alone). The educational richness of the Socratic contribution is to be seen precisely in the truthfulness and purposefulness of his action but also in the chosen inconclusiveness of the outcomes of the dialogues. The inconclusiveness, or *aporia*, represents a chosen renunciation of any forced convergence.

Assessment often presents us with a diametrically opposed scenario to the Socratic approach. Assessment too often leads to the convergence towards pre-specified learning objectives and if those objectives are not broadly specified, they channel student thinking in narrowly convergent manner. Within this perspective validation of meaning of the assessed text rests on the recognition by the assessor of criteria familiar to the assessor –but which mightn't be explicit to students. Students may be disempowered on two grounds. Firstly, not fully knowing what criteria are attached to good performance, students are effectively prevented from performing to the best of their ability. Secondly, conformity does not allow students to express themselves in creative ways which may be better suited to their form of intelligence and which may be more likely to foster autonomy.

[8.3.2 Against depersonalising tendencies](#)

Whether anonymity and depersonalisation guarantee greater ethicality in assessment relations than personalisation should be further questioned. While anonymity may be a safeguard against assessors' bias in summative assessment, its educational value can be questioned. On this basis the need for anonymity and depersonalisation could also come under scrutiny.

Depersonalisation imposed by anonymisation may simply and implicitly be motivated by the mistrust in the ability of the individual assessors to be vigilant against his/her own bias and the potential that such bias could call into question accountability and legally expose educational institutions. Depersonalisation offers the illusion of greater objectivity, as not knowing the author of the assessed work reduces the potential for bias. Depersonalising tendencies present in current marking policies are considered to increase fairness. Supporters of narrowly conceived learning objectives tend to consider the evaluation of performance to be connected with stripping judgments from any 'spurious' factor such as effort, or relationship with the assessor, which, according to Weiss (1991), make marking 'personal'. Learning objectives explicitly demand objectivity but covertly also imply anonymity. Not knowing who the student is frees the assessor from the interference of spurious personalizing factors. Personalisation is often equated to subjectivity and subjectivity with unfairness. Yet the facelessness of the anonymous process increasingly associated with summative assessment protects the assessor from emotional investment and effectively prevents any form of dialogical engagement. Ultimately anonymous summative assessments precisely for the absence of personalisation are unsuited to accommodate the infusion of dialogical principles.

Let's now weigh whether personalisation may be profitably associated with formative practices on both educational and ethical grounds. Weiss (1991) suggests that marking can be both personal and impersonal: personal when specific circumstances are taken into consideration and marking is concerned with the formation of the student; impersonal when marking is purely concerned with measurement of performance without accounting for other factors. Unlike Weiss who offers that depersonalisation is not strictly necessary in marking, Winch and Gingell (2000, p. 693) argue that we should not trust "those who have the most personal knowledge of pupils in assessing their educational progress". While knowing more about students can be certainly exploited as a means for discrimination,⁷⁹ it does not automatically follow that personalisation should be equated with subjectivity and subjectivity with unfairness. Bias and lack of objectivity are not equivalent concepts and this is why depersonalisation, which offers some guarantees against bias, is not a sufficient safeguard against lack of objectivity and transparency in the application of assessment criteria. The concerns expressed in relation to personalisation dissolve when the discussion moves from marking to feedback and other formative practices. While objectivity and transparency are

⁷⁹ I am thankful to Professor Morweena Griffiths who at a recent Conference titled 'Women in Philosophy of Education held in Edinburgh' (September 2010) has pointed out that several studies have highlighted that knowledge of students in the UK school system has led to social discrimination on class, race and gender basis and the potential for misuse of such information should not be underestimated.

also necessary parameters for good practice in formative assessment, the pressure generated by the finality and irrevocability of a summative grade is absent. In formative assessment practices the assessor may open up new avenues of exploration that are suited to the sensibility of the individual being assessed. In such form of assessment knowing who the student is both necessary and beneficial to the student's development.

Certainly if we consider feedback, while increasing the potential for bias, personalisation increases the potential for enhancing the formation of the individual. Feedback, as an element of assessment for learning, requires the assessor to know more about the assessee in order to identify and address the needs of the individual. Knowing the other may enable the assessor to set assessment activities that will help the assessee to perform to the best of his/her ability. When the assessee is known it is possible to shift the focus from the assessment product to the assessment process, and such shift may allow the assessor to teach through assessing. Todd (2003, p.37) affirms that 'the delicacy of teaching, then, with its emphasis on responding to the unique *other*, is at once a curricular and ethical manner'. Personalising assessment means knowing about the *other*, not through a de-othering interpretation of the *other* that makes the unfamiliar familiar, but rather through allowing the other to disclose him/herself through entering a pedagogical dialogue with the assessor. The notion of personalisation as enabled self-disclosure is not in contradiction with learning from the *other* as proposed by Todd (2003). On the surface personalisation appears to equate to learning about the *other* and ultimately reducing the other to an entity that can be objectively captured and understood in all his/her complexity. However in the context of formative assessment, learning about the *other* seems also an appropriate aim, as it entails knowing about the needs of the other and responding in specific and individualised manner. Moreover Curren(1999) advocates the use of process standards as a means for evaluating the development of the ability to express accurate judgments.⁸⁰ As it has been argued in chapter four, the emphasis in assessment should be placed more on the learning development trajectories of individuals than on attainment. This shift is strictly linked to knowing more about the individuals. There is therefore richness in a participatory personalisation process. The assessee, through dialogue with the assessor, can learn more about the self and his/her own needs. A process initiated with the aim to help the assessor to know more about the assessee may be also a process of enhanced self-knowledge for both assessor and assessee.

⁸⁰ It can be argued that process-based standards are not only doing justice to competence development, but also prevent the widespread recourse to plagiarism. If the process that has led to the formulation of certain judgment needs to be accounted for in assessment activities, only those who have lived through this process are able to reconstruct it with a good degree of fidelity.

On the whole, there seems to be some inherent contradiction on one hand devising teaching activities to suit the needs of learners and yet trying to ignore who those learners are when it comes to assessing them. Knowledge of the other and ethics therefore may not necessarily be in contradiction. Dialogue requires difference and polarity. Polarity – the originality and uniqueness of both parties – needs to be preserved to sustain dialogue. Advocating personalisation- at least in formative practices- means allowing the emergence of the originality and uniqueness of both parties. Knowing who the other is should be coupled with respecting the other in his/her uniqueness. In the absence of respect for the uniqueness of the other, the other may fall victim to manipulations and discrimination. This is a particularly strong danger in assessment, where the power imbalance between assessor and assessee is a constitutive element of the assessment relation.

The potential for misuse is present in most human practices and the issue of whether this should be conceived as a sufficient reason for not endorsing a particular practice should be questioned. The benefits arising from personalisation may outweigh the potential dangers for misuse. Striving for objectivity and transparency still hold value as a professional goal, but the quest for objectivity should be an aid to, rather than be to the detriment of, learning. Learning objectives are an attempt to encourage objectivity and transparency, but their interpretation should allow for enough latitude to preserve some element of contextualization and personalisation. Ethical considerations for the wellbeing of the students should prevail and while there is an undeniable –though not necessarily justifiable - demand for a classificatory function in assessment, the formative function should be one of the primary concerns for assessors.

To conclude, personalisation is necessary for assessment to be experienced as learning by assessee and does not necessarily result in bias, lack of transparency and loss of objectivity. Conversely, while depersonalisation may counteract the potential for bias it does not fully protect against a lack of transparency and objectivity. Finally, and most importantly, since assessment for learning can at once fulfil a formative and summative function, but requires knowledge of the assessee in order to serve its formative function it seems appropriate to support such a form of assessment.

On the whole there is abundant evidence from the literature to support the case that teaching has a strong moral significance (Campbell, 2007; Carr, 2000; Dunne & Hogan, 2004; Haynes, 1998; Haydon, 2006; Noddings, 1984; Strike and Soltis, 2004). Integrity –as a commitment to truthfulness- and care in the teaching profession emerge as its defining characteristics. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, assessment should be conceived as a teaching and learning opportunity. Therefore considerations relating to integrity in teaching should be considered to be pertinent to the assessor’s role.

Campbell (2007, p.23) argues that moral agency on the grounds of a non-consequential imperative is a defining characteristic of the teacher. Teachers have a moral duty to treat their students fairly, kindly, honestly and with competence and commitment. She adds (p.37) that ‘teachers need to be aware of the moral nature of what they do’. The evaluative activity of teachers as assessors is therefore also morally charged and the responsibility of those assessing towards those assessed needs to be highlighted.

The success of teaching should be seen in the extent to which it fosters learning. As argued by Hogan (2004) the occupational commitment that teaching demands is in fact

a double commitment: to teaching *and* learning as a human practice, not just as a repertoire of competencies to be mastered, transmitted or shared (p.20).

Other occupations may not require a sincere commitment to the other parties in the occupational enterprise and success may not require truthfulness for its achievement. The commitment is an expression of the moral responsibility of the teacher. Carr (2007) adds that:

teaching seems to be the sort of occupation in which professional effectiveness is greatly enhanced by the possession and exercise of personal qualities and practical dispositions that are not entirely (if at all) reducible to academic knowledge or technical skill (p.369).

Carr goes on to argue that the cultivation of morally good character is an essential ingredient of teacher professionalism. In his treatment of morally good character –and in accordance with Aristotle- he differentiates between those teachers who conform to morally good principles but do not endorse them and those whose motives and feelings are in complete accord with the right judgment.

Endorsement of ethical principles that should inform teaching practice is not a necessary condition for teaching. Carr (2007, p.372) points out that ‘a teacher who conforms to principles of fairness and care may not need to be a fair and caring teacher’. But if it is possible to be fair and express care without being caring and fair is it necessary to become fair and caring in order to teach? Could a teacher remain uncaring and teach? Some movement towards embracing care seems necessary.

If one is naturally inclined to be fair, caring and responsive to others he/she may need to put less effort in his/her professional practice in order to act morally. Yet according to Aristotle (1925, p.28) ‘virtues do not arise in us by nature though we are fitted by nature to receive them’. A naturally good disposition is not sufficient. Cultivation of good character is necessary to ensure that moral judgment is enhanced with contextual sensitivity. Such contextual sensitivity is achieved through the development of what Aristotle calls *Phronesis*, which translates as practical wisdom. *Phronesis*, unlike *Techne*, is a non-instrumental form of productive reasoning that is activated through moral practice. In affirming that it is a form of reasoning we are also affirming that moral action has a cognitive foundation. In emphasising contextual sensitivity emphasis is also placed on an attentiveness to the needs of others that complements but also exceeds the cognitive component of human action. Teaching then is more than *Techne*, skills and techniques for effectively managing educational interactions with pupils. In terms of assessment this means not only mastery of assessment techniques, but also the development of sensitivity to the type of relations that can be established through assessment with assessees in order to facilitate learning.

8.4.1 Assessors as moral agents

Our concern for the ethical dimension of assessment leads us also to concentrate more closely on the intentions of educators as assessors. In this chapter it has been suggested that an exclusive reliance on accountability as a means to establishing ethical relations through assessment is unsatisfactory.

It is helpful at this point to elucidate the difference between truth and truthfulness as a means to resolve the issue of moral acceptability of assessment judgments. This is particularly important in the context of the Humanities, where –as discussed in chapter five and in this chapter – assessment judgments are of an interpretative nature.

Cooper (2008, p. 82) helpfully points out that truthfulness is a virtue of people whereas truth is a property of statements or beliefs. Interpretation – which serves as the basis for assessment judgments- may be influenced by the framework of reference of the assessor. The application of the assessment criteria by the assessor may not be fully understood by the assessor him/herself. The elusiveness of truth and the resulting difficulty with expressing “true judgments” may explain the imperfect understanding that assessors often appear to have of their own assessment judgments. Cooper (2008) suggests that truth is not a necessary condition for truthfulness. One acting in a truthful manner believes that truth is the basis for his/her action, even if he/she is mistaken. Cooper (2008, p. 81) expands on an earlier definition presented by Bernard Williams (2002), who linked truthfulness to the intention to make statements which are accurate and sincere. He adds that truthfulness is expressed through communication which is ‘transparent’ and that has ‘no agenda hidden from its audience’. The assessee will need to presume that the assessor is truthful in his intentions to accurately capture the meaning intended by the assessee in virtue of his/her knowledge and of his occupational commitment. The assessee places his trust in the assessor’s competence. The assessor has then the responsibility to be truthful towards the assessee, to communicate what he/she believes to be true about the assessed text and to strive to capture the truth of the intended meaning. However, with Cooper, it is accepted that trust is not exclusively built on the recognition of the truthfulness of the intention of the other party. Assesseees also need to trust the assessor’s ability to express authoritative assessment judgments.

Tacit knowledge challenges transparency in self knowledge and limits the ability to fully express what we intuitively know. On one hand, this inability to fully express one’s own knowledge may also partially explain –albeit not justify - the resistance to explicate the bases for one’s own judgment. On the other hand the lack of self-awareness may rest on the over-reliance on professional experience in marking and under this respect it is less justifiable in ethical terms. Furthermore the resistance may also signal the assessor’s inability as much as unease with the erosion of the control over assessment criteria. Weis (1991) may therefore be justified in asserting that grading is a private matter *insofar* as the bases for expressing judgment are rarely fully disclosed.

It is argued that assessment as a form of judgment is an expression of human agency. As outlined in chapter five, assessment in the context of the humanities – and considered as a form of judgment- is also an interpretative activity and as such it poses a hermeneutic challenge. In assessment the interpreter expresses a judgment in relation to the validity of

meaning expressed by others -in addition to judgments on fluency, accuracy and thoughtfulness- and ultimately validates a particular meaning. In the case of assessment the intention of the assessor is to interpret the assessed text against set criteria.

In order to arrive to a judgment one needs to interpret an event and choose to attribute value to salient features of such event in a manner which is meaningful to the interpreter and that – in the case of constructively aligned curricula- is consistent with specified criteria. According to Wolf (1993):

any assessment... is a head-on encounter with a culture's models of prowess. It is an encounter with a deep-running kind of 'ought'. Assessments publish what we regard as a skill and what we accept or reject as a demonstration of accomplishment (p.213).

What constitutes prowess, and what is chosen to be of value, needs to be shared with students before the assessment event takes place through clearly communicated criteria. After the assessment event has taken place feedback which makes explicit how the assessed text has been evaluated against such criteria should be provided. The unpredictability of assessment judgments could be minimised during a student's course of studies through engaging the student in the hermeneutic task of defining and interpreting what is of value, so to foster shared ownership and control over the assessment criteria. Furthermore students should also be helped to come to appreciate some standards of excellence for the particular discipline domain in which assessment is being carried out.

According to Blake et al. (2000, cited in Cooper 2007, p. 85) education can be seen as a personal fulfilling relationship which has the energy to flourish if there is trust among the parties to it. Trust develops from the recognition of the sincerity and goodness of the intentions of both parties. While the truth of the assessment judgments cannot be fully defended, the moral responsibility of the assessor towards the assessee should be assumed. Moral responsibility is represented by the truthfulness of the intentions of the assessors to pursue the truth and foster the development of assessee. The choices made by those setting assessment in terms of assessed knowledge and means used to this end have an impact on the ability of those assessed to respond and demonstrate their knowledge. The demonstration of knowledge should reflect deeper forms of learning rather than regurgitation and parroting of undigested information. Hence assessors and assessees need to share an understanding of what knowing means and how best to express it. If some shared understanding of criteria is not achieved between assessors and assessees the potential for unfairness is not addressed. Furthermore if those assessing are not willing explain and justify their evaluation, unfairness is further compounded.

If we refer to assessment judgments in the domains of exact sciences decisive judgments on the accuracy of the student's response to assessment tasks can be made and objectivity of assessment can be defended. In relation to humanities, assessment requires both the assessor and the assessee to perform an interpretative task. The assessee interprets the requirements of the assessment activity and attempts to organise knowledge acquired from readings and teaching events in such a way that according to the student's level of understanding responds to the assessment task. The assessor interprets how the assessee has responded to the assessment task according to criteria that are in principle demonstrable. The more removed from source of the interpretation the interpreter becomes the more difficult it become to achieve objectivity.

Harlen (1994, p. 12 quoted in Williams 1998 p.11) points out that assessment in education is inherently inexact and should be treated as such. In speaking of the problem of interpretation in assessment judgments, John Halliday (2010) asserts that all the various levels of interpretation⁸¹ do not mean that:

the results of the assessment or the process itself are entirely subjective, invalid and unreliable and of little use to those with an interest in how good a student is at something. What it means is that there are good reasons to try to ensure that students, assessors, interpreters and others with an interest have an opportunity to test their prejudices through continuing dialogue with others and that there is an acceptance that some others do have superior insight knowledge and judgment in particular areas of learning...Taken together both requirements indicate the importance of shared understanding of the way areas of learning are distinguished and of systems of assessment that enable authoritative mastery of each area to be recognized (p.375).

In chapter three it was argued that the intentionality of those exchanging meaning is essential to ensuring that all parties share an understanding of what is being communicated. The contextual parameters may constrain the opportunities for expressing moral agency through assessment judgments⁸², yet an element of choice remains. The intention to communicate to

⁸¹ Halliday (2010, p.374) speaks of 3 levels of interpretation in assessment judgment: "The first level concerns the way the student interprets the assessment task. The second level concerns the way the student's answer is interpreted by the assessor. The third level concerns the way the results of the student's assessment are interpreted by those who use the results of assessment".

⁸² Cooper (2008, p. 80) sees three challenges to truthfulness. Performativity, as an emphasis on success on the basis of achievement of measurable aims and objectives, sidelines truthfulness as the achievement of objectives does not necessarily require a truthful orientation by agents. The 'service industry' orientation of education – term borrowed from Oakeshott- forms the new generations to specifically to serve the needs of society, but this orientation favours efficiency over truthfulness. Finally political correctness may at times demand an uncritical

be understood and help understanding should be a core feature of any form of educational communication. Hence avoidance of ambiguity in sharing meaning and advice given by teaching, with a special attention paid to the calculations of retrievability of meaning discussed in chapter five, should inform the provision of feedback, understood as a core formative assessment activity.

The assessor as an interpreter is concerned with gaining a correct understanding of the meaning expressed by the assessee. If the interpreter wants to preserve the intended meaning he/she needs to enter what may be an alien way of expressing meaning from his/her own. This acceptance of meaning expressed by others entails recognition of the alterity of others but, in assessment, making sense of the text also entails decoding and classifying the text according to assessment criteria. How this message sits with pre-existing knowledge of the assessor is highly unpredictable (Williams, 1998). The point here is not that the assessed text does not make sense but rather that the sense expressed⁸³ by the author may be misunderstood. The assessor should also be concerned with gaining a correct understanding of the meaning expressed by the assessee. An incorrect reading of an assessed text does not capture the truth of the text and misunderstands the meaning intended by the author- assessee. While in an ordinary reading of a text the misunderstanding of the text is likely to impact on the reader alone, a misunderstanding by the assessor as a reader has an impact on the student as author of the text.

As discussed in chapter five a tacit element is present in any knowledge and since we know more than we can tell, we might be unable to fully express what we know. The allocation of a mark does not always tap into a fully conscious dimension of the assessors' judgment. A generic reference to professionalism and experience are often brought as a justification for the holistic ability to express the value of student performance in grade terms. As Webster et al (2000, p.73 cited in O'Donovan et al. 2000, p.81) aptly point out, the 'connoisseur model of assessment is 'pretty much impenetrable to the non-cognoscenti'. By highlighting the moral responsibility of assessors we also highlight the unacceptability of assessor's poor self-awareness. In addition to questioning assessors' self-awareness – as pointed out at the

defence of diversity and celebration of difference to the expenses of truthfulness, which –for instance- may require to reveal unpleasant truths about intercultural matters or social issues.

⁸³ This is not to imply that in all cases the meaning expressed by the student is actually suited to meet the assessment criteria and that is problem lies exclusively with the inability of the assessor to capture the meaning expressed by the student. The issue, from an ethical point of view, arises primarily with the assessor's erroneous interpretation of the student's work as this may have a negative impact on the student both personally and pedagogically. Of course even in the case of the student wandering off the point and not meeting the assessment criteria there may be underlying ethical issues in terms of poor teaching which may have led the student astray, but the interconnection between teaching and performance in assessment goes beyond the scope of this research.

beginning of this section- assessment is not necessary for learning. If the only function of education were learning, the role of assessors can also be questioned, particularly in the light of the ethical concerns that have been raised thus far. Professional experience does not guarantee that a sort of automatism in the ability to express consistent evaluative judgments has been achieved. Whether judgments that have the merit of being consistent are also fair may also be questioned.

Let's for instance consider the case of an assessor who discovers -through the process of marking- that the assessment criteria that have been disclosed to the students prior to submission of an assessment task do not fully capture the quality and problematic issues of the texts being assessed. The assessor is faced with a dilemma. If she/he applies the criteria as they have been disclosed, he/she may disadvantage some students, who – had more appropriate criteria been specified- would have fared better in terms of grading. If he/she chooses to modify the criteria to better capture the reality of the assessed texts, he/she is faced with the issue of transparency (and potentially accountability). He/she can choose to apply these 'new' but not disclosed criteria consistently to all assessed texts. However, if such criteria have not been made known to the students prior to submitting their assessment, this makes the grading process consistently unfair. Hence, consistency is not necessarily equivalent to fairness. It could be argued that a judgment based on generic holistic sense derived from purely from professional experience may be also consistently unfair. On the other hand it also follows that the weather-like unpredictability of judgments is often the result of such unexpressed and mostly holistic basis for evaluative judgments. By highlighting the moral responsibility of assessors we are once again stressing the unacceptability of assessors' poor self-awareness.

While it is acknowledged that assessment may have a formative function, this is too often not the primary motivation for assessing, particularly when high stake summative assessment is considered. In the context of those forms the role of assessors is validated by accountability demands. However it is even more fundamental to determine whether the role of assessors can also be morally legitimised in some form.

Conclusion

Accountability demands only offer an external source of obligation to procedural transparency, often discharged through quantification of performance. As affirmed in section 8.2 quantification and objectivity are not equivalent. Transparency is not achieved exclusively

through quantification. Furthermore, accountability demands seem to apply exclusively to summative practices and the quality of formative practices is left to the initiative and good will of individual assessors. Preoccupation with accountability through summative assessment distracts attention from one of the most important responsibilities of educators: enhancing the experience of learning through feedback that is discerning and constructive.

This chapter has highlighted the limits of accountability as source of obligation in formative assessment. Accountability should be coupled with an emphasis placed on the moral responsibility of the assessor. This is particularly important if assessment is framed in dialogical terms and becomes a means for negotiation of meaning and democracy. A commitment to trust, respect, openness, objectivity, fairness and transparency should inform all assessment practices. Moral responsibility of the assessor towards the assessee – represented by the truthfulness⁸⁴ of the intentions of the assessors to pursue the truth and foster the development of assessee – should clearly emerge from formative assessment relations. Truthfulness is not something like a mere antidote against a human inability to fully capture truth. It signals a commitment to the search for truth and also our moral commitment to others.

⁸⁴ Cooper (2008, p. 80) sees three challenges to truthfulness. Performativity, as an emphasis on success on the basis of achievement of measurable aims and objectives, sidelines truthfulness, as the achievement of objectives does not necessarily require a truthful orientation by agents. The 'service industry' orientation of education – term borrowed from Oakeshott- forms the new generations specifically to serve the needs of society, but this orientation favours efficiency over truthfulness. Finally political correctness may at times demand an uncritical defence of diversity and celebration of difference at the expense of truthfulness, which –for instance- may require revealing unpleasant truths about intercultural matters or social issues.

CHAPTER NINE: The ethical possibilities afforded by Assessment Feedback

Introduction

While it may sound trivial to suggest that educational activities should promote learning, learning is too often dissociated from pedagogical practice. It is therefore not trivial to suggest that educators should commit to both teaching and learning and that their efforts should be directed to ensure that learning happens.

As discussed in chapter eight, assessment practice is marred with contradictions, particularly because commonly used forms of assessment tend to overplay the importance of the summative function of assessment to the detriment of the formative one. Furthermore assessment tends more commonly to be conceived as a stand-alone practice, which, rather than being integrated comes at the end of a teaching and learning period, hence losing most of its pedagogical value.

In chapter eight the anonymisation of assessment processes imposed by external accountability demands and intended as a means of greater fairness and objectivity has been found particularly problematic. Thus it seems contradictory on one hand to encourage educators to tailor their educational activities to the needs of their students while at the same to ask of them to ignore who these students are when it comes to assessing them.

This chapter proposes that assessment feedback may be an educational practice that allows enhancing ethicality of assessment. Feedback, as the aftermath of assessment, may have a rebalancing power and shift the emphasis from measurement of attainment to development of learning. Marking may be intrinsically inequitable due to its generic nature (one measure fits all). However feedback that allows assessor and assessee to engage with each other in a mutually responsive manner does more than rebalancing asymmetries; it is an expression of care. The value of care and its expression in professional terms in educational practice is particularly significant. The reflections resulting from the data analysis presented in chapter seven highlighted deficiencies in the assessors' commitment to their role and to students. This, together with chapter eight, offers a theoretical bridge between the outcomes of the empirical analysis presented in chapters six and seven and builds on the findings from these two chapters. As discussed in chapter eight a need for further clarifying the concept of dialogue had emerged as part of the research process.

As suggested in chapter three the association of dialogue and assessment is three-fold (assessment *as* pedagogical dialogue, *through* pedagogical dialogue, *for* pedagogical dialogue) and all three dimensions need to be developed harmoniously for assessment to be conceived as an educational practice. The interplay of the ontological and of the ethical is discussed in this chapter by focusing on the ethical obligations of assessors and on the implications for their professional role. The chapter also focuses on care as an emerging value that underpins ethicality in educational relations. It is suggested that an aspiration to care needs to be translated into viable and sustainable practices. Care -as altruistic love and responsiveness to the needs of students- needs to be tempered with *Phronesis*, understood as the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom.

Section 9.1 critically discusses the concept of care and the extent to which it affords opportunities for assessors to express their values and ethicality in relation to their students. The disclosure of such vulnerability becomes acceptable only in a caring environment which guarantees that vulnerability will not be exploited for individual gain, but will lead instead to development and learning by both parties.

Section 9.2 derives conclusions about the moral duties of assessors from established views of morality in teaching. If accountability -particularly in the Humanities⁸⁵- is not sufficient to ensure objective, and transparent application of assessment criteria, then an alternative source of obligation for assessors must be found. This section is crucial in attempting to fill a void left by the concept of narrow accountability explored in chapter eight. With this purpose in mind, this section explores the concept of call of duty.

Section 9.3 focuses on the concept of *Agape*. It is argued that *Agape*-in its original pre-Christian meaning as love and care that does not require reciprocation- is a value which pushes educators to go beyond narrowly conceived professional obligations. *Agape* is a non-perfunctory and non-coercive action which enables teachers in their professional capacity to express their care towards their students with the selfless aim of promoting their students' development. For such pedagogical agents feedback, and even dialogical feedback, becomes

⁸⁵ The reader is reminded that two issues were identified in relation to the deficiency of the concept of accountability to guarantee ethicality of assessment relations. The first issue is the necessity for interpretative judgments in the assessment of humanities, which gives a certain degree of freedom in the interpretation of both assessment criteria and text to be assessed. The second issue is a response to an obligation, where the source of such obligation is external to the agent, may be responded in a perfunctory manner. Such response may fulfil accountability criteria while at the same time ignoring the ethical demands that may be inherent in such obligation.

part of their day to day pedagogical practices and a means to expressing their responsibility towards their students.

9. 1 Can care offer a core ethical basis for dialogical engagement through feedback?

There has been much debate in recent times on feedback and on whether it can be considered a formative activity. If learning from assessment is more than regurgitating meaning validated by the assessor some of form of dialogue that allows negotiation of meaning rather than consolidation of power needs to happen. Feedback that moves beyond the justificatory function is freed from the external pressure to generate convergence and seek anonymity. Feedback should become a dialogical activity that engages assessor and assessee in a process that requires mutuality, openness, commitment and ultimately care.

Yet MacDonald (1991) highlights that there is a gap between best and actual feedback practice and argues that actual practices –such as retrospective feedback-⁸⁶show more readily a tendency to offer feedback ranging from mere ‘rubberstamping’ to well-intentioned but paternalistically worded comments’(p. 4). In his psychological analysis he concludes that:

the connection between response and learning is a richly complex array of processes which can function to promote nearly ideal instruction and learning or deteriorate to a dysfunctional morass’ (ibid.)

MacDonald captures the essential interconnection between learning and assessment, but fails to question why such common but misguided practices are in existence. There is a tendency to find a scapegoat primarily in educational policies and in the marketisation of education driving down educational standards. To a certain extent the influence of external factors cannot be denied⁸⁷. However these factors alone do not explain why teachers may choose to provide only perfunctory responses to pedagogical deficiencies. As presented in chapter four,

⁸⁶ Summative and retrospective feedback do not provide information aimed at improving future performance, but focus on, and summarise the outcomes of past performance.

⁸⁷ In a key note talk given in 2009 at the Voyagers’ Conference Nel Noddings tells the story of a teacher who had exploited ‘snowing’ event as a teachable moment, rich in learning value (as the snow in her example is used by the teacher as a springboard for creative pedagogical activities) and which potentially could have disrupted teaching activities. The very same teacher was reprimanded by the teaching inspector for going off the curriculum by using the ‘snow-event’ as part of the teaching learning activities. The teacher in question had as his/her goal fostering learning and more or less consciously had adopted progressive practices of experiential learning. The goodness arising from her action was questioned not on moral grounds but rather on the basis of accountability. Hence in this case, this teacher, despite fulfilling her moral responsibility towards the students she did not meet accountability standards. More can be said about the dissociation of ethics and accountability, but for the purpose of this discussion it will suffice to argue that the fulfilment of moral obligations requires the possibility to express free choice and that extrinsic constraints may limit choice.

recent literature on assessment feedback focuses on providing toolkits and methodologies⁸⁸ for providing formative feedback. While these certainly help to raise awareness of the need to provide assessment advice that helps learners to improve, they do not address the issue of what might encourage educators to endorse and replicate such exemplary practices. In fact, exemplary practices are often perceived as placing unrealistic demands on already time-poor educators.

Todd (2003,) acknowledges that “teachers are already stretched to capacity in the hectic day-to-dayness of what it means to teach and to learn” (p.41) and adds that they need to be “able to live both within and beyond their means, both within and beyond their capacities, simultaneously (ibid.)”. Circumstantial factors such as large class sizes and short deadlines undeniably have an impact on the choices made by assessors, but given that some do ‘go the extra mile’ for their students despite such factors, this may indicate they may not be insurmountable obstacles.

In chapter eight it was suggested that when the sources of obligation are external to the agent, perfunctoriness in educational practice is more likely to result from them. It is suggested that perfunctoriness should be interpreted as a lack of care.

Therefore care- as a moral facet of assessment- also needs to be explored in order to ascertain whether greater emphasis is placed on the integration of this value in assessment practice, offers greater guarantees of sustainability of the learning promoted through dialogical feedback.

The analysis of care should start by questioning in first place whether care and assessment are compatible. It should then critically discuss elements of the ethics of care relevant to educational practice with the view to determine which characteristics may be compatible with assessment. This should enable us to theorise feedback as an act of care that offers grounds for dialogical engagement between assessor and assessee.

It is proposed that a viable route to care in assessment feedback can be developed by building on the ethics of care as proposed to by Mayeroff (1971), Noddings (1984; 2010a) and Katz (1999; 2007). The objective is to develop a concept of *professional care* that allows assessors to care for their assesseees not only personally but also pedagogically in a viable and

⁸⁸ Such methodologies are effective in developing *Techne* -technical knowledgeof assessment - , but *Techne* dissociated from *Phronesis* may lead to efficient (as time-saving) but not necessarily effective (as learning promoting) assessment feedback choices. *Techne* should be combined with *Phronesis* to ensure that both efficiency and effectiveness are addressed.

sustainable manner. A discussion of the core features of the ethics of care is at this point necessary.

Katz et. al., in discussing assessment grading, (1999,) affirm that teachers experience a tension between being fair and being caring and state that

to be a fair judge as a teacher involves making judgments of students' conduct and academic performances without prejudice or partiality; most of the time, it involves the impartial application of appropriate standards to this conduct. In contrast, to be a caring person, one must accept the unique "otherness" of a student in a receptive, supportive, open, and essentially *nonjudgmental* way. Judging students fairly is bound up with the unequal power relationships existing between teachers and students and with one facet of this power relationship –teachers distributing one of education's most precious commodities, grades (p.61).

In their view grading offers an apparent foreclosure to the caring relationship. The power inequality inherent to the judgmental activity that assessment entails seems to preclude accepting the unique otherness of the student. However Katz et. al focus on grading rather than on feedback.

In chapter eight it was argued that grading and feedback raise different concerns and concern with objectivity is central to ensuring that grading is performed accurately and fairly. The judgmental act that is expressed in the allocation of a grade certainly can be conceptualised as expressing power. But teachers do not necessarily choose to be in a power position in relation to their students. They may have chosen to gain expertise in a particular subject domain that has allowed them to enter the teaching profession, and in virtue of such expertise they may have been placed in a position of power in relation to their students. However possessing power does not *per se* imply that it will necessarily result in a non-acceptance of the otherness of the student. A grade on its own does not provide formative information to the student and therefore the power that the teacher possesses in virtue of his/her knowledge is not shared. A grade without further information therefore may further reinforce power and distance of the assessor from the student. However if the grade is associated with formative information in the form of feedback, power, through sharing of knowledge, may be distributed. In choosing to share knowledge through formative feedback the assessor gives up part of his/her power and at the same time displays care.

Fairness and care need not to be separated or juxtaposed. A grade may represent a fair evaluation of a student's performance. In ensuring that the grade allocated accurately reflects

the quality of the assessed work and that assessment criteria have been transparently applied, the assessor expresses his care towards the assessee. However feedback and its formative power allows assessors to also express care in fuller sense by counterbalancing what may be the harshness and opacity of a numeric symbol with information that helps learning. Feedback can justify the reasons for the allocation of a grade but should also look at the future and help the student to develop. For this reason it can be also a motivational tool. Therefore assessors, in having learning as the focus of feedback, express at once care for the wellbeing of their students both at a personal and pedagogical level.

Katz does not offer more insights specifically on assessment but in a later article (2009) emphasises that professional care – opposed to personal care- rests on the balance between care and fairness. However, if we return to Katz el. earlier concern (1999) for the tension between fairness and care it arises primarily from one of the fundamental characteristics of the concept of care, that of partiality. Prominent proponents of the ethics of care such as Noddings, Mayeroff and also Slote (2010b) argue that care entails a specific movement to a specific *other*, and entails being partial to *this* other. If being partial to another is such a core characteristic of being caring then this may then be justifiably problematic if objectivity is also to be upheld in assessment. One can reasonably question whether assessors can be both caring and objective at once. Perhaps objectivity necessitates impartiality and therefore a non- caring attitude? This seems to lead to the unlikely conclusion that assessors should not care for assessees. But given that assessors are mostly also teachers, assessment should not be conceived as an activity external to teaching and learning. Care for students' achievement is certainly compatible with objectivity and this highlights that care within an educational setting needs to be qualified in terms of educational purposes. Assessors then should care for their assessees' learning and some specific form of care that allows resolving the contrast between fairness and care needs to be associated to assessment. This form of care shall be labelled as 'professional care' later in this section. However, before attempting a definition of 'professional care' it is beneficial to the discussion to consider how care and its ethical implications have been addressed by care theorists.

Nel Noddings' *Caring. A feminine approach to Ethics & Moral Education (1984)* is without a doubt one of the most influential books on care. Central to her concept of care are the concepts of motivational displacement and reciprocity. Noddings suggests that care is a 'move away from the self' (1984, p. 16) and it is the foundation of moral action.

We ask something of the sort: Why must I (or should I) do what suggests itself to reason as “right” or as needing to be done for the sake of some other? We might prefer to supplement “reason” with “and/or feeling”. This question is, of course, not the only thorny question in moral theory, but it is one that has plagued theorists who see clearly that there is no way to derive an “I ought” statement from a chain of facts. I may agree readily “that things would be better” – that is, that a certain state of affairs commonly agreed to be desirable might be attained – if a certain chain of events were to take place. But there is nothing in this intellectual chain that can produce the “I ought”. I may chose to remain an observer on the scene’ (ibid, p.82)

In Noddings’ ethical perspective the moral sentiment towards others precedes rational justification and is alone sufficient to generate moral action. In discussing the basis of moral obligation, she argues that reason alone does not explain the acceptable of the moral obligation. While Noddings differentiates between natural inclination and moral imperative, she suggests that ‘the impulse to act in behalf of the present other is itself innate’ (1984, p. 83). In affirming that the basis for moral action is not necessarily reason, Noddings places her moral theory in sharp contrast with Kohlberg’s moral stages theory (1963) and with the Kantian tradition. Yet in affirming that the impulse to act in behalf of the present other is innate she also affirms the primacy and universality of care that appears to align her to Levinas (1982) in his discussion of the responsibility towards the *other*. Levinas in dialogue with Philippe Nemo affirms:

The tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility, this moreover, whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete for the Other. To say: here I am. To do something for the Other. To give. To be human spirit, that’s it. The incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality (p.97).

The primacy of the responsibility towards the *other* in Levinas and the innateness of action on behalf of the *other* in Noddings seem to bring them close. Yet Noddings specifies ‘present’ *other* and this is a crucial distinction which sets her apart from any form of universalism. Care calls for variation rather than the embracing of a universal concept of care or a generic caring attitude. Noddings sees such universal love as unrealistic and in contradiction with the possibility of actualising care (although it may be argue it does not appear to be in contradiction with “caring about”).

Noddings argues that we should limit our obligation to care by examining the possibility of its completion (1984, p. 86). Famously (1984, p. 86) she controversially affirmed that we are not obliged to care for starving children of Africa. The “children of Africa” represent a distant and faceless *other* with whom there is no direct relation. They are a sort of universal entity. What is

called into question by Noddings, is not that “children of Africa” may not be deserving of care, but that there might be no possibility for care towards them to be completed. This disproportionate task would affect the care to which one is already obligated. According to Noddings the unavoidable partiality of care forces us to be selective in our approach to care and she confines care to chains of relationships in which we are already enmeshed. Care is reserved to those with whom we have personal professional relationships (such as that of a teacher with students). We can “care for” the present *other* but at most we can “care about” starving children of Africa. To “care about” to others is a sort of diluted form of care which does not entail any type of action according to Noddings. It is akin to a bland sense of concern. Noddings is equally and on similar grounds critical of the Christian concept of Universal love (1984) and affirms:

Under the illusion, some young people retreat to the church to worship that which they cannot actualize; some write lovely poetry extolling universal love; and some, in terrible disillusion, kill to establish the very principles which should have entreated them not to kill. Thus are lost principles and persons (p.90)

Noddings adds that ‘to act as one caring then is to act with special regard for the particular person in a concrete situation⁸⁹’ (1986, p.24).

Choosing to care ethically is not purely the actualisation of a naturally caring disposition. All caring involves *engrossment* (1984) or – as termed in later writings (2010a)- *receptive attention* and is a form of displacement of interest “from my own reality to the reality of the other’ (Noddings, 1984, p.14). Noddings (1984, p.19) adds that the one-caring, in caring, is present to the *other* – the cared-for- in his/her acts of caring. Even in physical absence, acts at a distance bear signs of presence: *engrossment in the other, regard, desire for the other’s well-being’* and feedback represents a form of care through distant presence.

Furthermore Noddings affirms that care is as an attribute of relationships rather than as a virtue, therefore her concern is not for the natural or moral dispositions of individuals, but for the conditions that enable entering and sustaining caring relationships. Such relationships are however precarious. The conditions that have initially facilitated the establishment of a caring relationship may change thus preventing the response for either of the two parties- the one-caring and the cared-for. Care is actualised through the possibility of receiving a response. This sets boundaries that – if chosen as a background to dialogical relations through feedback-

⁸⁹ The reader may notice that choosing action appropriate to the specific circumstances resonates very closely the concept of *Phronesis*.

could justify assessors in the strategic choice of providing feedback only to those students who are likely to respond to it.⁹⁰

Noddings sets two fundamental criteria for the ethical obligation to care: 1) the existence or potential for the present relation and 2) the dynamic potential for growth and mutuality. Ethical Care as conceived by Noddings relies on reciprocation and circularity of the process where the cared-for responds to the caring-one and this is what sustains care. Yet the assessor has no guarantee that the student will respond to feedback and that improved understanding would result from it and the circularity of the caring relationship may then be compromised. According to Noddings if care is not reciprocated then the caring relationship falls apart and this may allow us to advance that the one-caring may stop caring if he/she realises that his/her care is not responded to. But for educational practitioners to act guided by this concept of care is to walk on thin ice. The possibility of non-reciprocated care is a real one and if they were to stop caring because of non-reciprocated care their role would be narrowed to care only for those students who show interest and engagement. If this were the case those who do not respond are doomed to remain afflicted by their ignorance.

If the possibility of completion of care is such a necessary feature for the establishment of caring relationships one can legitimately wonder whether this would lead not to care for those who do not care or who stop to care. This has substantial implications for education in general but also specifically for assessment. Can teachers afford not to care for those students who seem not to be responsive to their teaching efforts? Should assessors who invest time and effort in detailed feedback comments eventually give up on students whose performances does not seem to improve despite their efforts? If Noddings' principle were to be applied teachers would seem to be justified in giving up. Undeniably there is a human dimension to this, whereby a lack of response may be demoralising for those who put time and effort in helping others. Noddings acknowledges the possibility of failure to care, particularly in relation to those with whom we are not in a relationship of any sort. She writes (1984, p. 47)

⁹⁰ This is a rather controversial issue. In Dublin City University lecturers are not obliged to give feedback (although they are encouraged to do so). A large part of feedback is given to students verbally after semester results are published. However students are asked to make appointments with lecturers to obtain verbal feedback and only those who make an appointment receive feedback. Too often those who would need feedback the most do not arrange feedback appointments. If one was to read this practice in Noddings' terms, those who make appointments have responded to care, expressed in the willingness (or perhaps obligation) by lecturers to provide feedback. It is therefore possible to complete a cycle of care with those students. The others who do not come forward do not respond to care and therefore are left behind. Realistically the fact that not all students look for feedback is somewhat a relief for time-poor lecturers. Yet there is a sense that the educational duties have not been completely fulfilled if those who need it the most are not helped to progressed.

But what of a stranger, one who comes to me without the bonds established in my chains of caring? Is there any sense in which I can be prepared to care for him? I can remain receptive. As in the beginning, I may recognise the internal “I must”, that natural imperative that arises as I receive the other, but this becomes more and more difficult as my world grows more complex...I may come to rely almost completely on external rules and, if I do, I become detached from the very heart of morality: the sensibility that calls forth caring (p.47).

The obedience to rules referred to by Noddings recalls closely the perfunctory response to accountability demands discussed in chapter eight. However what is most surprising is that, despite having affirmed that care is to be considered as a characteristic of relationships, she seems to return to a more primary “sensibility that calls forth caring” (ibid.). This seems at odds with the necessity for reciprocation of care, frequently referred by Noddings as a core factor in sustaining caring relationships. The “sensibility that calls forth caring” resonates with the fundamental obligation towards others, as expressed by Levinas. This leads to the question whether Noddings is fully justified in seeing a presumed impossibility of completion as a foreclosure of care.

Milton Mayeroff’s concept of care (1971) shares many common features with core ideas presented by Noddings. Both refer to the availability of the carer to the cared-for. Noddings refers to Gabriel Marcel’s *disponibilite’*, which she translates in a rather approximate way as ‘disposability’ (1984, p. 19) as the ‘readiness to spend oneself and to be present for the *other* even without physical presence. Mayeroff (1971) speaks of ‘being on call’ for the *other* as being there for the *other* regardless to whether the *other* wants to be cared-for and affirms that being there for the *other* requires continuity and devotion.

But crucially, and in opposition to Noddings, Mayeroff (1971) acknowledges that care may not be reciprocated and that this should not signal the end of the caring efforts of the one-caring.

In a meaningful friendship, caring is mutual, each cares for the other: caring becomes contagious. My caring for the other helps activating his caring for me; and similarly his caring for me helps activate my caring for him; it “strengthens” me to care for him. But to say that caring in this case is reciprocated does not imply that it is a trade – I care for you if you care for me. And this is true even if I cease to care for another simply because my caring is not reciprocated (p.47)

To paraphrase Mayeroff’s words (1971, p. 11) care is shown by consistency and persistence under unfavourable conditions and it is characterised by the willingness to overcome difficulties. The one-caring remains one caring despite difficulties and care “is not an isolated feeling or a momentary relationship” (1971, p.1). Katz (2007) captures an important distinction between Mayeroff’s and Noddings’ concept of care and suggests that while in Noddings’ writings care is an attribute of the relationship that is established between the one-caring and

the cared-for, for Mayeroff it is an attribute of the agent as one-caring. Noddings' relationships require reciprocation in order to actualise care. Mayeroff's caring agent can remain caring despite of non reciprocation as the caring disposition of the agent remain constant and consistent.

Noddings and Mayeroff agree that caring acts presuppose that such acts are performed not purely to satisfy professional duty parameters and therefore care is never instrumental. But they differ in how they conceive the engagement with the *other* in order to apprehend the reality of the *other*. Noddings labels the sentiment behind the displacement of interest as *sympathy*, or "feeling with" the *other*, which she juxtaposes to "empathy" as feeling what the *other* feels. Noddings explains (2010a):

As we listen to the other, we identify her feelings; we begin to understand what she is going through. As a result, we feel something... We put aside our own goals and purposes temporarily in order to assist in satisfying the expressed needs of the other; our motive energy flows toward the purposes or needs of the other. This is the basic chain of events in caring (p. 9).

Mayeroff on the other hand suggests that in order to care I must understand the *other's* needs and I therefore need empathetically rather than sympathetically to try to understand what the *other* feel. Mayeroff is careful in qualifying knowledge of the *other* and clarifies that care for the *other* excludes dominating, possessing or using the *other* to meet one's own needs. The one-caring is therefore not going to use knowledge of the *other* as a means to exert power, but rather as an opportunity to enhance the quality of his caring efforts. The caring efforts should be directed to ensure that dependency of the cared-for does not occur and that the relationship does not become parasitic. In helping one to grow through care the one-caring allows for autonomy to develop.

In helping the other grow, I do not impose my own direction; rather, I allow the direction of the other's growth to guide what I do, to help determine how I am to respond and what is relevant to such response" (1971, p.9)

Katz (2007) however suggests that neither Noddings nor Mayeroff focus in their concept of care on what he calls 'professional caring'.

Despite some interesting differences, both Noddings and Mayeroff offer accounts of caring that focus on the relationship between teachers and students as persons caring for each other as persons. Neither views caring for the other person as being conditional upon, subordinate to, or instrumental for promoting student learning. However, many of my prospective secondary teachers do not see personal

caring as being more important than what I am calling “professional caring,” that is, caring for the student as a learner (p. 132).

He goes on to argue that ‘Many view their primary role as initiating students into a mastery of their subject’ (ibid.) and in so doing he highlights a deficiency in a professional attitude rather than in the concept of care, hence also suggesting that care should be inherent to a professional attitude. Personal care is not in contradiction to professional care, as Katz seems to suggest. Rather it can be argued that the initiation into the mastery of a particular subject is more likely to succeed if a climate of care and trust has already been established by teachers. Mayeroff (1971) affirms that caring is helping another to actualize himself, but also speaks of writers caring for the subject and adds that:

To help another person grow is at least to help him to care for something or someone apart from himself (p.13).

Katz’s criticism seems to be more readily directed at Noddings who affirms (p.20):

It is no use saying that the teacher who “really cares” wants the students to learn the basic skills which are necessary to a comfortable life; I am not denying that, but the notion is impoverished at both ends. On one extreme, it is not enough to want one’s students to master basic skills. I would not want to choose, but if I had to choose whether my child would be a reader or a loving human being, I would choose the latter with alacrity. On the other extreme, it is by itself too much, for it suggests that as a caring teacher should be willing to do almost anything to bring my students to mastery of basic skills. And I am not...The student is infinitely more important than the subject (p.20).

Noddings acknowledges the duality of the role of the teacher, namely fostering at once personal and pedagogical development. Yet she signals a tension between personal and pedagogical. In neither Katz nor Noddings there is sufficient justification to support this tension between personal and pedagogical development. The pedagogical role may, at times, force on teachers’ uncomfortable decisions, such as those flagged by Katz in relation to the tension between fairness and care. But a teacher by being fair instils a sense of fairness in students and upholds the value of good pedagogical practice. In doing so the teacher actualises his/her professional care towards the student. To think in terms of professional care means for the teacher to promote students’ development, both personally and pedagogically, even through an experience -such as a ⁹¹fail mark-which, on surface, may be regarded as

⁹¹ Being fair and caring should not be mistaken with being lenient. An accurate fail mark can represent a harsh reality for a student. Care and fairness are better expressed in conjunction with accuracy and support for learning through feedback. Feedback which constructively on mistakes makes “swallowing the bitter pill” of a fail mark more palatable because it frames a fail mark as a temporary lapse in a learning process which can be remedied. It is therefore fairer to an assessee to tell him/her the truth about the quality of his/her performance while caring for his/her development through formative feedback.

unfair. A fail mark is more likely to be regarded as fair or expressing care by a student if it is coupled with feedback which would enable him/her to learn from the experience of failing through engaging with formative information included in feedback comments.

Katz (2007) further discusses the concept of professional care and suggests that it is necessarily conditional and in this he aligns himself to Noddings. To reinforce that to care professionally means “caring for the student as a learner”(p.5) he refers to Jamie Escalante’s film *Stand and Deliver* and he traces a distinction between Escalante and the concept of care proposed by Noddings and Mayeroff

But the difference with Mayeroff and Noddings is critical: his caring, unlike that of Noddings and Mayeroff , is not unconditional; rather it depends on his students showing him that they will commit to being serious about math(ibid.).

Such commitment does not seem to add much new to the concept of reciprocation of care except that the response expected by the teacher in this case is not care for him/herself as a person and as an educator, but for the subject taught. This may indeed warrant the label of ‘professional’ in relation to this concept of care. But as aptly acknowledged by Katz, Jamie Escalante’s students did not initially care about maths and he seems to be able turn his students around through building a relationship of personal care with the students. What seems questionable in Katz’s discussion is that personal caring is secondary to caring for the subject and that is merely a tool for activating care for the subject.

9.2 Assessment feedback as an act of care: the call of duty and beyond?

There seems to be an avoidable sacrifice to be made: either sacrificing the personal time of the assessor or the quality of assessment. In order to see what sacrifice may be more justifiable from a moral and professional point of view it is helpful to follow the line of thought proposed by Suttle (1992) on the morality of niceness and supererogation. After arguing in favour of a concept of professional care, let’s consider if care and its demands can actually be seen as an essential ingredient of the professional role of educators, and consequently of assessors.

Teacher burnout may explain why those involved in the teaching profession may wish to limit their occupational duties to a list of specific and limited obligations. Whether such a list is sufficiently exhaustive to ensure that learning emerges from educational practice needs to be examined. Suttle (1992) argues that teachers’ obligations should not be limited to the

achievement of academic objectives, but the manner in which such achievement is accomplished is also important. He argues that being sensitive, caring and empathetic should also be included in the list of obligations. He cumulatively refers to sensitivity, care and empathy as “niceness” and argues that niceness is not included within the current requirements of the teaching profession and –as a result- that there is therefore a ‘need to rethink the limits of an educator’s obligations’. Furthermore he incorporates moral behaviour into teachers’ competence and suggests that professional obligations have moral undertones.⁹²

Futernick (1992, p.3), in response to Suttle, affirms that ‘nobody would want to stay or enter a profession in which boundless sacrifice was just part of the job and worthy of no special recognition’, and that what can be reasonably asked of teachers should be clarified. Implicitly he argues that whether being caring and empathetic should be considered supererogatory. The debate between Suttle and Furternick highlights that the position of care among professional obligations cannot be straightforwardly affirmed.

In order to engage in a particular profession one is required respond to the obligations set out -normally by professional bodies- as the parameters for the profession. We may consider duty as a moral obligation or as a professional obligation. The unifying elements of these two types of obligations is that those responding to the obligations are responsible for their action and that such obligations can be reasonably satisfied, in virtue of the principle ‘ought-implies-can’. Suttle, despite having affirmed the importance of “niceness”, he is in agreement with Futernick in affirming that it is supererogatory hence exceeding moral obligation. He proposes that teachers should not be obliged to be caring and empathetic⁹³.

It remains to be probed whether responding to professional obligations is necessarily a moral activity and if so whether care can also be excluded from moral obligations. Not all professional obligations have a moral value, although the increasing currency gained by codes

⁹² Suttle does not explicitly equates professional duties to moral duties, but the reference to supererogation as a way to describe exceeding the professional call of duty seems to indicate that this connection has been implicitly made.

⁹³ Whether care is covered by the professional obligations for teachers is debatable. The Irish Teaching Council in its ‘Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers’ makes a clear reference to respect for students and to the legal duty of care which teachers exercise, their role as carer is central to their professional value system. Their practice is motivated by the best interests of the students entrusted to their care’. Care therefore features among the professional obligations of Irish Teachers, yet as pointed out by Carr (2007) to care does not require being caring’. The argument put forward by Suttle seems to indicate that in order to refer to supererogation it is necessary to consider care as a virtue. The cultivation of the virtue of care then may have moral implications and going beyond the call of duty may then equate to supererogation. Although some ambiguity in the presentation of care remain which makes it difficult to clearly distinguish between care as a value and care intended as the legal of obligation imposed by the “duty of care”.

of ethics seems to indicate that in many professions some overlap between moral and professional duties is being specified. If professional educators choose to be caring and empathetic they exceed their call of duty. Exceeding a professional duty is not necessarily the equivalent of exceeding a moral obligation and therefore going beyond the call of professional duty is not necessarily a supererogatory act.

It is suggested that while engaging in demanding formative practices may be conceived as exceeding the call of duty as specified by professional codes of conduct, it may not exceed the moral obligation to students.

However with Noddings (1999) we maintain that:

...the test of legitimacy for a given practice would always reside in the adequacy of conditions to respond to the needs of those for whom the practice exists (p.17).

This may generate legitimate expectations that empathy and care would be also included among teachers' professional obligations. Interestingly the revised code of conduct of Irish teachers (2011) compared to its first draft of 2007 includes a more explicit reference to care⁹⁴ as a core value that should inform teaching practice. Hence an overlap between professional and ethical obligations to students is now clearly enshrined in the regulations governing practices of teaching in Ireland.

Students may have a legal right to be treated with care and respect in compliance to teachers' duty of care but teachers cannot be forced to 'be caring'. Obedience and obligation to care can be stipulated in codes of professional conduct but a virtuous disposition to 'being caring' can only be considered as desirable. Rules and regulations appear to be inadequate when it is a matter of moving individuals 'from the inside' and, as Noddings argues, "care picks up where justice leaves off" (1999, p.16) .

Nevertheless, as previously suggested, the core purpose of education is to promote human flourishing through learning and learning is not intended exclusively as development of cognitive faculties. Pring warns against learning *per se* without consideration for the use to which learning will be put and argues that 'efforts must never produce learned monsters,

⁹⁴ The second edition of the Teaching Council of Ireland Draft of Professional Conduct for Teachers (2011) states: "A teacher's practice is motivated by the best interests of the pupils/students entrusted in his /her care. Teachers show this through positive influence, professional judgment and empathy in practice." The specification of care among the four core values (respect, integrity, trust are the other three core values) is a significant change compared to the first edition, where care appeared as a dimension of the relations in educational practice , but had been given such prominence.

skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmans'(2001 , p.212). He argues that teaching is a moral practice which should also promote moral practices by example. Assessment activities should represent morally acceptable practices and should enable educational practitioners to relate to students in such a way that allows them to set a moral example.

9.3 Agape as a visionary aspiration to ethical assessment practice

So far it has been suggested that care and empathy might have a rightful place among teaching professional obligations and consequently among assessors' obligations, even if their inclusion does not protect against perfunctoriness. This section argues that the relationship that binds students and teachers should also be conceived in terms of *Agape*, love that gives regardless of being returned (Wivestad, 2008). Care and *Agape* represent forms of love that may be suited to frame educational relationships as they require commitment to the wellbeing of the *other*. It is contended that while a reciprocation of care is desirable teachers should commit to help all of their students to grow and progress and their care should be dispensed in greater amount to those who are less likely to reciprocate,

The implication of framing the educational relationship between teachers and students as *Agape* is three-fold. Firstly *Agape* is not compatible with perfunctoriness. One cannot be obliged to love and therefore the loving *elan* towards the *other* is a form of action chosen by the agent. Perfunctoriness in response to externally imposed obligation without endorsing its aims results in an inability to sustain the agent's original motivation to act in a particular way towards the *other*⁹⁵. Secondly *Agape* is other-oriented action. By framing the educational relationship as *Agape* it is proposed that teachers, in their professional capacity, engage with students with the selfless aim of promoting their students' development; thirdly *Agape* is non-coercive action. Teachers hope their selfless engagement will elicit –albeit not force- a response to their efforts and that the response given by students represents a development both in academic and personal terms.

Wivestad (2008) offers an insightful analysis of the complementarity of the Aristotelian concept of *Phronesis*, introduced in section 9.1, and of the concept of *Agape*, which he ascribes primarily to the Christian tradition. He sums up the complementary interaction

⁹⁵ Both Hogan (2010) and Williams (2009) refer to the young teacher Ursula Brangwen in D.H. Lawrence "The Rainbow" and her failure to sustain her initial aspiration to care for her students when she is confronted with the day to dayness of teaching and the unresponsiveness of her students. Her anger turns into disillusionment and finally into perfunctoriness.

between *Phronesis* (practical wisdom or prudence) and *Agape* by affirming that “*Agape* can help a *phronimos* (the practically wise person) to be altruistic and *Phronesis* can help those doing works of *Agape* to be realistic” (2008, p.309). Wivestad goes on to suggest that the interaction of *Phronesis* and *Agape* ‘can disclose visionary aspirations worthy of practical efforts of all educators.’ (ibid.).

Wivestad’s analysis *Agape* is presented primarily through Aquinas’ interpretation as a *caritas* or universal love directed to God or friendship with God. His exploration of earlier appearance of the concept of *Agape* may yield more fruitful insights for arriving at a more humanly oriented concept of *Agape* and therefore more suited to frame pedagogical practice. Wivestad affirms that the verb *agapan* makes its first appearance with Homer but the noun *Agape* appears later. *Agapan* is used by Aristotle as a synonym of *philein*, verb derived from the noun *Philia*, which in relation to Aristotle has been translated as non-exploitative and reciprocated friendship, the friendship of those who are guided by good will (*Eunoia*) and love the other person for the sake of the other person’s good and who have no hidden agendas. Both noun and verb are derived from the Hebrew ‘ahab’⁹⁶, which implies the establishment of strong ties with someone or something (Hach and Redpath, 1998, p. 5-7, cited in Wivestad, 2008).

Moving beyond the theological interpretation of *Agape* proposed by Wivestad, it is possible to suggest that *Agape* may signify a disinterested *elan* towards others with the view to establishing a close link with individual others. While the Aristotelian concept of *Philia* requires that friendship is reciprocated, *Agape* hopes for, but does not expect, that love will be reciprocated with responsive action of equal strength. While Mayeroff does not relate his concept of care to *Agape* the un-phased caring attitude of the agent resonates with the unconditional and disinterested movement towards the *other* that characterises *Agape*. In the concept of care as *Agape* proposed by this thesis, *Agape* is dissociated from the Christian universal love as *Caritas*, and reconnected to *the* Aristotelic *Philia* which entails a regard for a specific *other also* presents similarities with Noddings ethics of care. However the focus of care – the specific *other*- rather than the form in which it is expressed is a point of convergence. Noddings sets other two parameters for the ethics of care which drive the two concepts apart. Firstly, through *Agape* one loves and cares for the *other* unconditionally. Noddings speaks of motivational displacement and engrossment, but these are only reserved

⁹⁶ The reader may notice that Jewish philosophers such as Buber and Levinas translate the concept of *Agape* or *ahab* in their ethical thought.

for those who reciprocate care. Secondly *Agape* entails a virtuous disposition to care whereas Noddings sees care as a characteristic of a particular type of relationships.

But, can educators express *Agape* as unconditional and universal love that does not require reciprocation in their educational practice? Can they also find a justification for *Agape* without seeking beyond the boundaries of the educational relationship? More importantly can educators find a justification in themselves for loving those in their care regardless of whether they will respond?

As suggested in section 9.1, such justification may come from the occupational commitment advanced by Hogan (2004, p.19). If we accept Hogan's stand that the *ought* as already contained within the *is* then the occupational commitment that accompanies this form of life is two-fold, as commitment to both teaching and learning, *Agape* may then be conceived as intrinsic to pedagogical relationships. The attempt to theoretically and practically frame feedback dialogically put forward by this thesis may be a visionary aspiration which attempts to marry *Agape* and *Phronesis*. This can only be achieved if the aspiration to think of this form of educational practice as something that can enable educators to express love for those being educated is tempered by necessity to ensure that demands placed on assessors allow for their completion.⁹⁷

In discussing the relationship as *Agape* the focus necessarily is placed on the type of relational activity that can embody *Agape* and it is proposed that dialogue is such activity. If dialogue then is embedded in the teaching and learning activity that is assessment, this enable us to affirm that assessors, in responding in a personalised manner to the needs of their students through feedback, express their care for the students in such a way that hopes to elicit a response. This is not to say that the response should be directed to the teacher as a person. From a pedagogical point of view, engagement with a subject is an acceptable form of response within an educational relation. Hence an increased interest and commitment to higher standard of work in a particular subject in response to feedback comments is already evidence of dialogical engagement.

However to place unrealistic demands on assessors in terms of the type and format of feedback they can be expected to provide may foreclose the possibility for teachers to ever want to engage in such formative practices. *Phronesis* ensures that aspirations are carefully

⁹⁷ It is once again reiteration that completion is not dependent on reciprocation but rather on the intentionality and resources available to the assessor.

evaluated and that the ensuing action and judgment of the occasion and circumstances are apt. It is of utmost importance that formative practices are realistically conceived to enable their adoption.

It should, nevertheless, be emphasised (Comte-Sponville , 2003, p.36 cited in Wivestad, 2008, p317) that *Phronesis* has a secondary position and that *Agape* should guide *Phronesis*. The wise course of action taken in response to the specific circumstances does not exclusively originate from the careful and rational examination of the circumstances. Moral action is not simply a rationally driven movement and the needs of the learners may sometime push assessors to go well beyond the call of duty and of what they can be reasonably expected to perform. This however cannot be forced upon assessors and should arise from choice and willingness of assessors to respond to the specific needs of their assessees.

Chapter seven has offered evidence that the infusion of dialogical principles in assessment feedback has not been sufficient to encourage all the examined assessors to take a dialogical approach to feedback. Ultimately the endorsement of such principles is essential to the translation into good educational practice.

[9.3.1 Professional care and Agape as conditions and expressions of dialogical feedback](#)

Caring for the students personally should include considerations about their wellbeing and their wellbeing may be dependent on their educational development. Personal and pedagogical development are closely interwoven and to care for students means to care for their development on both fronts at once. For this reason it seems odd to think in terms of what comes first, care for the subject or care for the student. Only those involved purely in research can afford to think in terms of care for the subject alone. Those who are involved in teaching a subject should be concerned with how to bring students to care for a subject and in order to this they necessarily need to care for those students and their development through learning of the subject. This can only be done more effectively if teachers know their students, their needs their interests and what may “switch them on”. Therefore a concept of professional care cannot be built on a sequence of caring elements. It should rather focus on the interaction of the various elements of care that are beneficial to learning. Indeed, Katz is justified in his concern for the time and effort that such a rich concept of professional care may require. Some conditions need to be introduced and these should be dictated by the specific context. Their specification should be left to the teacher who should have developed a

heightened ability to weigh constraints and opportunities through what has been labelled as *Phronesis*.

Feedback is one of the few opportunities that educators have to communicate to and with individual students on a one-to-one basis and to express their care for such students in a personalised manner. If the features of dialogue, such as openness, responsiveness and receptiveness are more consciously brought to the fore and emphasised in feedback, they necessitate the establishment of a climate of care and trust between assessors and assessees.

Professional care and dialogue in education share common grounds. Firstly and most importantly they have a common goal, which is learning. In educational contexts dialogue is not simply conversation and care is not simply aimed at a generic personal development. While those elements are certainly part of the interactions between educators and students they do not define the purpose of the interaction. Secondly one cannot be forced to care, or to enter a dialogue. Both dialogue and care require a reciprocal orientation, but a response cannot be forced. Dialogue allows divergence to emerge because it entails a process where validated meaning is not imposed but is negotiated. Dialogue necessitates duality and such duality can preserve the alterity of those engaging in dialogue. It is through openness to the self-disclosing *other* and responsiveness that learning emerges in a way that does not compromise alterity. Thirdly, in both dialogue and care is the responsiveness, as openness to receive the *other*, which enables and sustains the interaction.

To consider dialogical feedback as an expression of care means to emphasise the need for personalisation. Relatedness cannot be established without knowing the *other*, but knowledge of the *other* is not a sufficient condition. The alterity of the *other* needs to be preserved. The *other* should not be reduced to sameness. If we lose polarity through sameness monologue replaces *dia-logue*⁹⁸.

Displacement of interests –as derived from Noddings’ concept of ethical caring- is also necessary. Such displacement, which is at the heart of the concept of *Agape* is also openness to receiving the *other*. The motivational displacement that according to Noddings (1986) is the most fundamental expression of care is actualised through the attempt of the assessor to think

⁹⁸ Bakhtin (1981.p.342) speaks of the “authoritative discourse” as antithetical to the dialogic interrelationship. “The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone” and does not allow for the connectedness that is necessary to engage in a dialogic relationship. If the teacher’s word is equated to the authoritative word it becomes intrinsically anti-dialogical as it does not demand engagement but simply compliance.

in terms of the receiver of his/her feedback comments. This means that feedback is framed in such a way that in the intention of the assessor, it will benefit the assessee-cared-for and is tailored to the needs of the assessee. The assessee-cared-for is more likely to respond to the care expressed through feedback if it conveys meaning in a way that he/she can understand, because it is written to be understood by the specific assessee. While generic advice may be ignored by the recipient -as he/she may feel that the message is not designed for him/her specifically- feedback that expresses care speaks to the assessee directly and personally. Motivational displacement leads the assessor to think beyond his needs. The assessor cares about the learning development of the assessee.

As suggested in section 8.3.1 early Socratic dialogues⁹⁹ offer an attractive model for a dialogically framed feedback. Through dialogical feedback the assessor cares about the development of the assessee. Dialogical feedback does not demand forced convergence. Knowing about the *other* allows those engaging in dialogue to build on an initial basis for tentative mutual understanding. The divergence that may arise from such interaction may signal the emergence of student autonomy. Socratic dialogues offer an example how partnership can be established and roles can become more fluid in a pedagogical interaction. The Socratic example also illustrates that mutuality can advance the development of understanding, but mutuality cannot be established without reciprocated openness to the *other* and to 'the risk'¹⁰⁰ of enhanced self-understanding.

Such openness may make both parties more vulnerable. How assessment judgments have been arrived at is disclosed through feedback. Such disclosure may lead to questionability and negotiability of meaning expressed through feedback and this may place the assessor in less powerful and more vulnerable position. But the assessor chooses to disclose the bases for his/her judgment. This chosen vulnerability can only be justifiable in terms of willingness to displace one's own interests and opening up to the student as the *other* of the assessment relation. Such vulnerability can only be tolerable if a climate of love and care has been established. Such love, as *Agape*, while it makes assessors vulnerable, may yield a very high

⁹⁹ Todd (2003, p.30) affirms that the Socratic *Maieutics* erases the significance of the Other as it reduces the Other as an incidental disruption of the I. The I is capable to derive learning from within himself rather than in the dialogue with the Other. Socrates, as the midwife of Truth, is only drawing out what is already within the I and therefore cannot bring more than the I can contain. But dialogue nevertheless entails a polarity. Socrates is not simply an *Alter Ego* in dialogues is a co-traveller to an unknown destination. Hogan (1995, p. 24) remind us that the essence of the Socratic is found in early Platonic dialogues (*Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito* and book one of *the Republic*) and that 'while conversation remains living it also remains unfinished'.

¹⁰⁰ Enhanced self-understanding may lead the agent to question deeply held beliefs and destabilize self-perception. By fluidifying ones' beliefs greater openness results and the 'fusion of horizon' of understanding between teacher and student becomes possible. This type of convergence is not forced by either parties, but arises from coming towards the other with openness. Like the point where the sea meets the sky, the boundary become imperceptible.

reward: an engaged response from the assessee. Care does not necessarily elicit care in response but it certainly aims to do so.

Feedback that aims at fostering this type of response is necessarily framed in dialogical terms. Student progression necessitates the development of critical and autonomous thinking. Feedback framed as dialogue allows the student to uphold his/her individuality as pedagogical dialogue is kept alive by the polarity of two different yet complementary interlocutors. Through maintaining such dialogical orientation it is possible to promote the development of the student as -guided, yet autonomous- thinking. Dialogical feedback follows a similar path. The assessors need to know the assessee to offer advice that helps him/her to develop, but the direction that development will take is determined the individual student who follows along his/her own development trajectory. Furthermore dialogical feedback allows the assessor to fulfil his/her educational role to its fullest.

Dialogical feedback has the potential to rescue and reinforce elements of ethicality already implicit in educational assessment practices by embracing the openness and regard for the *other* that dialogicality presupposes. A dialogic approach to feedback entails having regard for the other party's views and taking responsibility for oneself towards the other party. This type of feedback is one of the highest expressions of assessment for learning and for this reason it recaptures the true meaning of education.

Conclusion

It has been argued that feedback as a dialogical action – and particularly in comparison to grading- is an ethical activity that maximises the learning opportunities arising from assessment. This is achieved by focusing on communicating to the student and entering in a caring relationship, not because of external forces demanding accuracy and measurement according to outcome based standards, but for benefit of the student alone. Care expressed through feedback has the potential to rebalance the inequitable relationship that is intrinsically inherent in assessment.

The reciprocity expressed through assessment feedback is essentially of an ethical nature. It has been argued that any teaching and learning activity are potentially dialogical as the to-and-fro of teaching and learning are necessary conditions for advancement of knowledge and ultimately human flourishing. Nucci (2001) argues that treating others fairly may mean treating

people unequally in the sense that equity requires adjustments that bring more people into more comparable statuses. Equality can therefore be reinstated as an end point, thanks to feedback tailored to the specific needs of individual students, which allows them to achieve a more equitable end point¹⁰¹.

Feedback may then amplify the ethical potential of assessment when it is driven by forces such as care, empathy and ultimately *Agape*. It may encourage assessors to reject perfunctoriness and push them to go beyond mere accountability demands. Feedback may become a dialogical form which allows the teacher/lecturer to fully express his/her responsibility towards the student and the student alone.

¹⁰¹ In this case a more equitable end point does not mean that all students achieve the same level of attainment but rather that they all have been given the opportunity to perform to the best of their ability. The metaphor of the learning development trajectory illustrates that if an educational activity has resulted in learning, regardless to the starting point and the end point, the trajectory will be represented by ascending line.

CHAPTER TEN: Research Phases 3 to 5 (Context 2).Development & Evaluation of a dialogically infused assessment portfolio

Introduction

This chapter draws particularly on the literature discussed in chapter eight and nine and on the outcomes of Phases 1 (2005-2006) and 2 (2006-2007) presented in chapters six and seven. In chapter six and seven the focus of the analysis was the development of a feedback report form designed to infuse assessment practices with the dialogical principles outlined in chapter two and discussed throughout this thesis. The outcomes of chapter seven had raised concerns over the level of commitment to the pedagogical role of assessors required by the infusion of dialogical principles in educational practice. These concerns prompted a reflection on the ethical dimension of assessment, which is still under-represented in assessment literature. In chapter seven it was concluded that the high dependency of the effectiveness of the new feedback report form on the commitment of assessor to their educational role was not a weakness in the design of the tool. Rather it was the result of an unavoidable tension between on one hand the willingness to help students to progress and the resources available to assessors to support the students to the best one's ability. This was particularly true in a context such as distance education where the part-time and temporary nature of the tutors employment was a factor impinging upon –albeit not justifying- the different levels of commitment shown by the tutors examined.

In chapter eight the need for personalisation and commitment to the individual student was investigated and it was advanced that assessors in their educational role have a dual commitment to respect for the student. In ethical terms this means respecting the student as a person. In pedagogical terms it means respecting him/her in their learning, hence not forcing the student merely develop in a convergent manner, as too often implied by the rhetoric of learning outcomes. In chapter nine it was argued that care is an essential ingredient of dialogic educational relations and that assessment as an educational practice should be an expression of care. It has been argued that compromise must be achieved between the desire to care professionally (*Agape*) for students unconditionally through the provision of feedback that enhances their opportunities to progress and the necessity to apply one's practical judgment (*Phronesis*) to ensure that the educational practice is contextually appropriate, viable and sustainable. A thoughtful yet practical approach to assessment is therefore necessary.

This chapter puts once again to the test whether the infusion of dialogical principles into assessment practice is viable and sustainable, but this time the analysis moves to the second

context of practice, namely face-to-face conventional third level education. It outlines the development of a dialogical assessment portfolio and it documents re- iterations of the model during three academic years (2008-2011), each corresponding to research Phases 3 (2008-2009), 4 (2009-2010) and 5 (2010-2011). The aim of this chapter is to ascertain the extent to which dialogically oriented assessment portfolio can enhance the opportunities for learning while at the same time promoting student autonomy. Together with such primary aims, the portfolio also was designed to promote ownership of learning, reflection, sharing of meaning and the establishment of a more equalitarian relationship between assessors and assessees.

The data collection and analysis for this chapter coincided with an important transition in the professional role of the researcher. The move from academic co-ordinator in a distance education university department -primarily with administrative and managerial functions- to permanent lecturer in a conventional university department -with research and teaching functions generated opportunities, not only in professional terms, but also in research terms. The change in professional role meant that I was no longer exclusively an enforcer of policies and a third party assessment accountability agent in relation to practices. I had made the transition to first person assessor and enactor of the new approach to practice that is elucidated in this chapter. In research terms it meant that I was able to make a transition from researcher/external observer to action/practitioner researcher. This shift in professional role, while not planned as part of the overall research framework for this thesis, offered the opportunity to test the viability of the dialogical principles in first person. It allowed me to verify whether I could sustainably commit to the dialogical principles I had identified and whether this would help me to establish the dialogical and pedagogical relationship with my students I had envisaged.

This chapter responds to questions similar to those answered in chapter seven, but also brings to the fore a concern with the viability and sustainability of the newly designed pedagogical intervention, to ensure that time and effort is invested in a worthwhile enterprise.

1. Can a dialogical assessment model incorporating the new feedback format be a viable pedagogical practice?
2. Can trends indicating learning development in response to the dialogic assessment model be found in students' performance?
3. Can a dialogical assessment model incorporating the new feedback format be a pedagogical practice transferable to other subject domains?

The first and the second question mirror similar questions asked in chapter seven. The third question specifically asks whether the adaptation of the dialogically-oriented assessment portfolio can be achieved to suit the specific requirements of different subjects, hence showing the possibility of the diffusion of dialogical principles even beyond the context of practice investigated in this study.

This chapter is subdivided in five sections. Section 10.1 offers some background information to the Context 2 of analysis (face-to-face third level education). Section 10.2 outlines a further specification of the dialogical principles charter to suit more closely the analysis presented in this chapter. Section 10.3 details the development of the dialogically-oriented assessment portfolio in Phases 3 and 4 of the research and illustrates its format and dynamics. In Phase 5 the original model has been deconstructed and reconstructed into a new model based on the same principles to show that despite the apparent differences in the actual assessment format, dialogical principles can be upheld. The adapted model is described in section 10.4. In section 10.5 the evaluations of the Phases 3-5 are presented through an analysis of reflection diaries, assessment performance trends and student responses to questionnaires. Finally Section 10.6 sums up cumulatively the outcomes of the three year process and offers final reflections on the how a balance between theoretical integrity and viable practice can be achieved.

10.1 Context of the study

The research data for this chapter are derived from a three year process (from 2009-2011) directly linked to the professional practice of the researcher as a lecturer in the School of Education Studies in Dublin City University. The data refer to the design of the assessment format for the module “Curriculum Assessment” (ES204/ES222) in Phases 3 and 4 . It also presents how the format has been adapted and transferred to modules “Philosophy of Education” (ES556) and “Philosophical Perspectives on Education”(ES402) in Phase 5. The modules “Curriculum Assessment” and “Philosophical perspectives on Education are offered as part of of the BSc. In Education and Training (part-time and full-time). Module “Philosophy of Education” is part of the compulsory modules for the Graduate Diploma in Education (part-time equivalent of the Higher Diploma in Education for trainee secondary school teachers).The table 10.1 summarises the student population characteristics for the modules under investigation.

Table 10.1 Summary of contextual elements

YEAR	Taught by	Module	Group	Characteristics	Size	Completion rates
1	Researcher	Curriculum assessment (ES204) ¹⁰²	Bsc Ed. & Training (full-time) (ET3)	Large group Mixed groups of students (<i>mature and traditional undergraduate</i>) NQT staus little experience	77 students	96% (N =73)
1	Researcher	Curriculum assessment (ES222)	Bsc Ed. & Training (part-time) (BET3)	Small group Mature students Part-time Professional experience (training)	27 students	93% (N=26)
2	Other lecturer	Curriculum assessment (ES204)	Bsc Ed. & Training (full-time) (ET3)	Large group Mixed groups of students (<i>mature and traditional undergraduate</i>) NQT staus little experience	71 students	96% (N= 68)
2	Other lecturer	Curriculum assessment (ES222)	Bsc Ed. & Training (part-time) (BET3)	Small group Mature students Part-time Professional experience (training)	28 students	90% (N=25)
3	Researcher	Philosophical perspectives... (ES402)	Bsc Ed. & Training (part-time) (BET3)	Small group Mature students Part-time Professional experience (training)	26 students	Draft/formative submission 77% (N=20) Completion 96.2% (N=25)
3	Researcher	Philosophy of Education (ES556)	Graduate Dip. Ed. (part-time) (GDED2)	Large group HDip Post-Primary Teachers Mature students Part-time All second level teachers	63 students	Formative submission 98.4% (N=62) Completion 98.4% (N=62)

The student profiles differ quite considerably. However the characteristics of students enrolled for each programme present little variations across different cohorts. Students studying the full-time programme follow the module ES204. This programme is a teacher training programme for those who are interested in working in the further and vocational education sector. They are a large group of full time students, mostly school leavers, with

¹⁰² It should be noted that despite the different code, modules ES222 and ES204 present an identical syllabus and assessment format.

approximately 10% mature students. They have little or no experience of teaching or training or assessment design experience.

Conversely students studying the part time programme follow module ES222 & ES402 and are a small group (ranging between 25 to 30 students). They are mainly already working as NQTs (Non-Qualified Teachers) in adult and continuing education, as trainers in community settings, youth workers or working with people who have disabilities. These students join the course to support their continuing professional development with knowledge and skills to enhance their professionalism and help them gain a recognised qualification. They are a group of mature students, all studying *part-time* (evenings and weekends).

Finally GDED (Graduate Diploma in Education) students are trainee secondary school teachers¹⁰³ who hope through studying for the GDED programme to qualify and secure permanent full-time employment. These are mature students, many with several years experience in the secondary school sector. Students of all groups are in the final year of their course.

It should be noted that in Phase 4 of the study module ES204/ES222 Curriculum Assessment and Evaluation was taught by another lecturer who chose to continue to use the dialogically-oriented assessment portfolio and has since been involved in research on the topic. The module delivery by another lecturer afforded the opportunity to verify whether the positive outcomes recorded in the first year of presentation could be sustained regardless of the involvement of the researcher in the teaching of the module. The comparison of the two years of presentation (Phase 3 and Phase 4) and cohorts of students allows one to ascertain whether the initial success of the model was primarily determined by circumstantial factors (such as students' personal preferences in terms of assessment and teaching style) or by the soundness of the model itself, hence making its success less susceptible to those factors.

Another important point to be made is in relation to the content of the modules. While Module "Curriculum assessment" (ES204/ES222) combines theory of assessment and practice, modules "Philosophical Perspectives on Education" and "Philosophy of Education" (ES402/ES556) are theoretical modules. Modules ES402/ES556 are inquiry-based modules,

¹⁰³ As this is an evening programme it attracts a mix of students who have just completed their undergraduate qualifications but have acquired some teaching experience and other students who despite being unqualified have been working in a teaching capacity –some on an almost full-time basis– for a number of years.

which focus on reflection on core educational themes and encourage students to develop self-awareness in terms of their professional role as educators.

10.2 Revision of the dialogical principles for assessment

Throughout this thesis it has been argued that conceiving assessment as dialogue, through dialogue and for dialogue requires principled educational practice. Paraphrasing Kant (1781), practice without theory is blind and theory without practice is empty. While there is no denying that the translating dialogic assessment theory into practice is an arduous task, a theoretically infused practice presents the benefit of being principles-led and for this reason maintains a sense of purpose. It is through retaining this sense of purpose that educational practice can advance. Furthermore if the principles underpinning dialogic assessment theory can also be upheld in ethical terms, such theory can offer the basis for preserving integrity in educational practice. In chapter two a listing of dialogical principles had been identified from the literature. In chapter seven a dialogical principles charter for assessment practice was specified to frame the analysis presented in that chapter. As the focus of the analysis broadens beyond feedback in this chapter, the charter has been further revised. Furthermore the analysis of the literature in chapter eight and nine has highlighted that the ethical dimension of assessment needs to be also be reflected in the principles charter. In order to ensure that it is regarded as a reference point to inform assessment practice not only in instrumental terms. Figure 10.1 presents the redrafted charter.



Figure 10.1 Charter of dialogical principles for viable assessment practice

It should be noted that this is a revised version of the draft charter which places greater emphasis on principles of an ethical nature such as care and respect for the other. It emphasises the need to sensitively responding to the needs of students by displaying care for students' learning , through personalisation and regard for the learning trajectory of the individual (rather than embracing the prevalent "one measure fits all" assessment approach).

10.3 The development of a new dialogically oriented assessment portfolio. Phase 3 – (2008-2009) & Phase 4 (2009-2010)

This section focuses on the development of the initial dialogical feedback model (Phase 3) and of its restructured format in the second year (Phase 4). A dialogical feedback framework places its emphasis on the process of learning and on the relationship-building capacity of the

dialogical exchange through feedback practice (as indicated by figure 5.1 presented in Chapter five (see section 5.3.1).

In addition to the dialogical principles the development of the model described in this chapter paid particular attention to the specific context and purpose of the module for which it had been developed. Module ES204/ES222 “Curriculum assessment” is particularly important for the purposes of this research because it presents a meta-dimension on two grounds:

- It is a module on assessment . It encourages students to reflect on assessment through engaging in different aspects of assessment.
- The lecturer, through the assessment designed for this module, has an opportunity to offer an example of good practice to future educators, hence also enhancing the promotion of dialogical assessment practice beyond the specific context of research.

As the module is offered as part of a teaching training programme specifically with the intention of helping teachers to be effective assessors, the portfolio had a dual purpose. Firstly the translation of dialogical principles in a model for dialogic assessment practice; secondly the enhancement of future teachers’ ability to effectively assess not simply by developing their technical expertise in assessment but also by eliciting reflection about the role of the assessors in the educational relation as established through assessment.

Nel Noddings (2004, p. 161) argues that ‘it is not the job of teachers simply to secure demonstrable learning on a pre-specified set of objectives’ and that the teacher role cannot be reduced merely to a set of skills. Hogan (2004, p. 20) adds that teaching is to be understood as a ‘human practice, not just as a repertoire of competencies to be mastered, transmitted and shared’. If, with Schelter (1968) we espouse the view that teaching does require training in the “*manner*” in which to teach, but also “*intention*” and with David Carr (1993, p.254) we encourage intelligent application of knowledge, which encapsulates skills, reflection and commitment to the teaching role. For Dewey (1916, 1963) knowledge emerges only from situations in which learners have to draw it out of meaningful experiences. Skills and competencies should be an essential component of teacher education but a more holistic approach should be taken to ensure that attitudes and personal values are also cultivated.

Pre-service teachers should be offered the opportunity to experience professional scenarios that in addition to the development of specific skills helping them to function effectively in the

day-to-day teaching activities also challenge their perceptions, foster awareness of their own values and cause attitudinal shifts. It is therefore important that pre-service teachers are introduced to scenarios that reproduce real life contexts that allow them to reduce the 'practice shock' (Van Huizen et al., 2005) and reproduce professional real life contexts (Janssen-Noordman et. al., 2006) which enable them to reflect on their role as educators. Such learning scenarios should require them not only to perform skilfully, but can also encourage students to express their creativity, individuality, and most importantly their principled judgment. Taking into consideration these theoretical foundations, the dialogic portfolio model for module ES204/ES222 attempts to address at once the ontological, instrumental and ethical dimensions of assessment while also being structured as a dialogical process.

An assessment format resting on these principles necessarily needs to be organised as a structured sequence of activities that encourage a progressive, reflection-led process that helps students to attach meaning and derive sustainable learning from the educational activity. Such activities should allow the student to progress and engage with the course content in a supportive and as much as possible personalised manner.

Oscail assessment –as described in chapters six and seven- presented already an inherently dialogical structure as students were required to complete three assignments per module and were provided with feedback on each assignment prior to addressing the next one. The new dialogical model replicates the multi-assessment format of the Oscail format but translates it into a portfolio. Portfolios are process-oriented forms of assessment and also present a multi-activity format which allows incorporating feedback cycles within the process. However unlike the Oscail format, in portfolios the various assessment tasks tend to be directly connected and scaffolded. Such an assessment format enables structured progression and generally allows greater transferability of feedback advice from one task to the next, hence yielding greater potential for dialogic engagement with such advice.

The original portfolio format presented in 2008-2009 consisted of four tasks as shown by Figure 1 (for a sample of the Portfolio assessment brief, please see Appendix M).

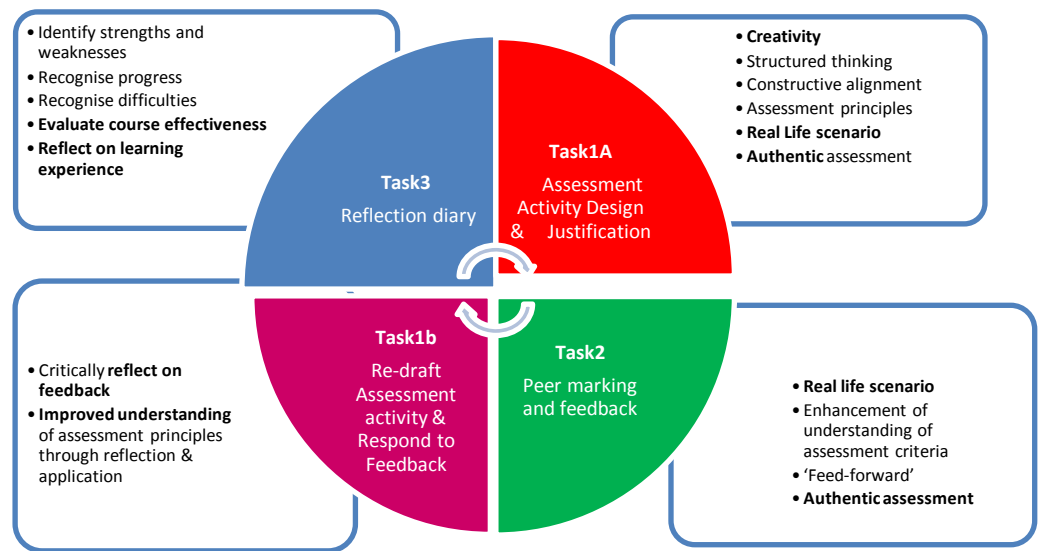


Figure 10.2: Phase 3: 2008-2009 Portfolio format

The model was designed to experience different elements of assessment from the perspective of the teacher as well as that of the student. It is designed as a dialogical cycle comprising four tasks. The response to feedback is a reflective exercise that encourages students to critically consider their strengths and weaknesses in order to identify how to improve. The ES204/ES222 portfolio aims to foster a dialogical relationship between teaching and learning and progressive transfer of responsibility for learning from lecturers to students.

Task 1 is subdivided into two tasks, Task1a and Task1b. Task1a consists of the design of an assessment activity for a syllabus and a potential group of learners identified by the students themselves. This task requires students to match the learning objectives for the chosen syllabus with an assessment activity that it is suited for the specific group of learners. Students are asked to prepare guidelines, design the assessment activity and specify marking criteria. The task simulates a real life scenario and allows students to express their creativity. It also raises students' awareness of key assessment concepts such as transparency, clarity and fairness and also constructive alignment and validity. By designing an assessment activity these concepts are embedded in practice and the experience gained enables students to transfer the knowledge acquired to current and future professional contexts.

Task1B is a re-drafting activity in response to the feedback received from peers as part of Task 2. The redrafting of the assessment activity requires students to react constructively to the feedback received and to reflect of the advice in order to decide what changes should be made to improve the quality of the design. For Task 2 students mark and provide feedback to peers on their Task1a. They bear the responsibility for giving useful advice and ensuring that their

evaluation is fair and transparent. Task 2 enables students to assume a dual role at once: that of teacher and of student. This task in particular appears to cause attitudinal shift. Students need to be mindful of the wellbeing of their peers while at the same time ensuring that reliability of marking¹⁰⁴. Nevertheless marking is a daunting task for many students since their skills and knowledge are still developing and the quality of feedback they are able to provide is still relatively limited and directly linked to their level of understanding of assessment theory and practice. For this reason Task1b is not a straightforward task. Students receiving feedback from their peers advising them on how to redraft their assessment activity are not simply asked to implement the recommendations received¹⁰⁵. They first need to make a decision on the pedagogical soundness of the advice received from peers and then to implement what, on reflection, they consider appropriate. The structure is intrinsically dialogical as it requires active engagement and a critical response to feedback.

Finally Task 3 is a reflection diary in which students are asked to record after the completion of each task their thoughts on what they have learnt from the specific task, what difficulties they have encountered and what aspects of the tasks they felt should be improved for further presentations¹⁰⁶.

In 2009-2010, due to restrictions imposed by the reduced duration of the module, the assessment portfolio had to be modified. In the second year (Phase 4) the format had to be amended. The modules “Curriculum assessment” and “Curriculum Evaluation” were merged and this resulted in a halved number of hours allocated to teaching of “Curriculum Assessment” course content. Unfortunately one of the tasks – task 3 -the reflection diary- had to be removed to ensure that the assessment workload was proportional to the reduced number of teaching hours associated with this assessment. Nevertheless it was considered important to maintain the three-step format (design-feedback-revised design). To make up for the absence of task 3 further reflection was elicited within the classroom interaction during the lectures and the opportunity for students to contribute to the evaluation was maintained through responses to the end of module questionnaire.

¹⁰⁴ In order to ensure marking inter-reliability and fairness lecturers moderate marking and only in cases where the mark is deemed to be inappropriate, it is replaced by a mark given by the lecturer and lecturer given feedback is also added.

¹⁰⁵ Feedback provided by lecturers is more likely to result in compliance than feedback provided by peers, because the lecturer is seen as the expert on the topic. In responding to feedback by peers expertise of peers cannot be assumed and therefore students are forced to take a more critical stance on the advice received.

¹⁰⁶ It is important to stress that the students are involved in the evaluation of the module and that they are encouraged to contribute to the development of the model. Listening to the students’ voice is also one of crucial elements of a dialogical educational model as it fosters a two-way communication between teachers and students.

10.4 Adaptation of the dialogically-oriented assessment portfolio model to modules ES402 and ES556-Phase 5 (2010-2011)

As it will be discussed in section 10.5, the implementation of the original portfolio model in Phase 3 produced encouraging results also reconfirmed in Phase 4. The dialogically-oriented portfolio model for module ES204/ES222 was closely interconnected with the content and purpose of the module for which it was designed. Therefore in order to determine the viability of dialogical principles for assessment practice in a more general sense it was necessary to decouple the model from the specific domain in which it had been embedded. “Curriculum Assessment” is a module aimed at educating pre-service teachers on assessment and as such the assessment for this module presented a meta-dimension: teaching about assessment through assessment. This may have led students to see more direct relevance of the module to their professional development and prompted them to maximise the benefits arising from it. This therefore may have provided evidence of the impact of perceived relevance of the assessment activities to the development of professional practice on the motivation to perform well in assessment rather than supporting the validity of the dialogical feedback model per se. It was therefore necessary to demonstrate whether the dialogical framework, even when dissociated from such meta-dimensions, could lead to learning progression and deeper engagement with course content. This reflection led to redrafting the assessment format to suit different modules. The new format aimed to serve two purposes at once. Firstly, it aimed to demonstrate the pedagogical value of the model regardless of the module content. Secondly, it initiated a process of transfer of the model to other modules in order to show the sustainability and the practical viability of the principles that inform it.

A new dialogically-oriented assessment portfolio was designed for modules ES402 “Philosophical Perspectives on Education”, ES556 “Philosophy of Education” and was introduced in Phase 5 of the research for this thesis. The first module was offered as part of the final year of the BSc in Education and Training. The same students who had taken part in the second year in Module ES204 were now taking part in ES402 in the final year of their studies. Module ES556 is offered as part of the final year of the Graduate Diploma in Education, a programme qualifying secondary school teachers.

The new format of the portfolio retains some of the core characteristics of the original while at the same time presenting modifications to suit different subject content. Both portfolios hinge on the core concept of dialogical feedback and as a result of it they also

- focus on the process of learning (rather than exclusively on the end product),
- foster engagement with the course content,
- make assessment criteria more transparent, thus empowering students,
- increase the opportunities for establish a mutual relationship between teachers, and students and between teaching and learning.

The new portfolio comprises 3 tasks. Task1 and Task2 are short essays that require students to answer two separate questions of their choice from among those addressed during the lectures for this module. The third task is a Teaching Philosophy Statement.¹⁰⁷ This is a brief reflective piece in which students link the course content to their professional experience and aspirations. (For a detailed sample of the Portfolio assessment brief, please see Appendix P).

Within the same Phase 5 cohort, the format was further modified to take into account the different size of the two groups: a large GDED2 group (over 60 students) and a small BET3 group (27 students). As illustrated by Figure 10.4 the GDED2 students were asked to submit the first Task/Essay on a group basis, with groups with 5 to 7 students. Figure 10.3 shows that thanks to the small group size it was possible to allow BET3 students to submit all tasks on an individual basis.

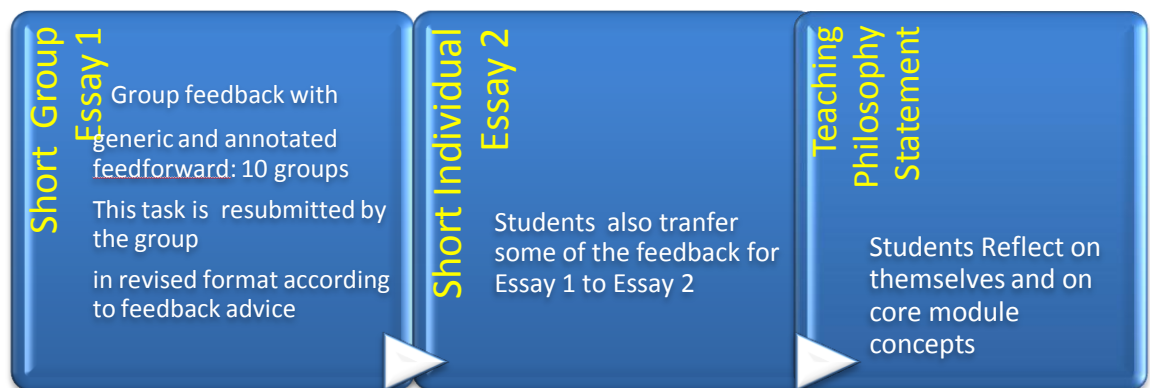


Figure 10.3 GDED2 Portfolio assessment for module ES556: Philosophy of Education

¹⁰⁷ A teaching philosophy statement is a reflective task by which trainee teachers are asked to reflect on the module content and declare their values and aspirations for their future teaching practice.

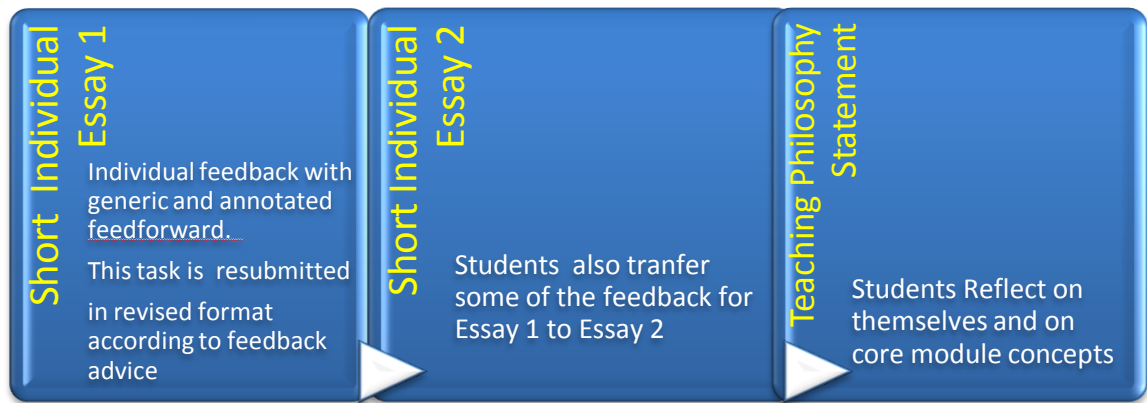


Figure 10.4 BET3 Portfolio assessment for module ES402: Philosophical Perspectives on Education

Students were encouraged, on a voluntary basis, to submit a complete draft of Essay 1 for formative purposes. GDED2 received group feedback on their formative draft whereas BET3 students received individual feedback.

The purpose of this format was that of providing students with guidance for redrafting essay 1 but also to obtain feedback advice transferable to essay 2.

All students were new to Philosophy of Education and unfamiliar with structuring of argumentation in philosophical terms. The introduction of a draft submission for both BET3 and GDED2 students was intended as a means to establish a climate of reciprocal co-operation between lecturer and students and among students themselves, while also easing anxiety associated with a new subject domain and its requirements. The feedback on the formative draft enables students to try out the new unfamiliar format with lessened fear of failure, it exemplifies how assessment criteria are applied in practice and most importantly it allows students to respond to feedback through their redrafted essay. As suggested by McGarrell and Verbeem (2007, p. 228) “the importance of engaging developing writers in draft revision is almost unquestioned” and they add that the inclusion of feedback on drafts in the assessment process “helps teachers to reconcile their conflicting roles as collaborators and evaluators” (p.236) as feedback on draft allows teachers to enact their advisory role as part of an assessment process.

One important difference between the original dialogic portfolio model and this revised version is that for the latter the lecturer provides the feedback. The original model was educating pre-service teachers about assessment and therefore it was important for them to actively experience as many aspects of assessment as possible. This meant also giving control of feedback over to students in task 2. As modules in Phase 5 do not present this meta-

dimension (learning about assessment through assessment), lecturer-given feedback was considered more appropriate, particularly in recognition of the unfamiliarity of the subject domain.

10.5 Evaluation of the effectiveness of the new dialogically oriented portfolio (Phases 3 &4) and of its adapted version (Phase 5)

Table 10.2 summarises the research methodology employed to evaluate the effectiveness of the dialogically-oriented portfolio and of its adapted version presented in Phase 5.

Table 10.2 Summary of research phases, and data collection methods

Phase	Module	Research Questions	Data collection methods
Phase 3 2008-2009	ES204 & ES222 Curriculum Assessment	<i>Can a dialogical assessment model incorporating the new feedback format be a viable pedagogical practice?</i>	Textual analysis of learning diaries extracted from completed ES204/ES222 portfolios Comparative analysis of Performance trends of ET and BET students End of module student questionnaire
Phase 4 2009-2010	ES204 & ES222 Curriculum Assessment	<i>Can trends indicating learning development in response to the dialogic assessment model be found in students' performance?</i>	Comparative and longitudinal analysis of Performance trends of ET and BET students End of module student questionnaire
Phase 5 2010-2011	ES402 Philosophical Perspectives on Education ES556 Philosophy of Education	<i>Can a dialogical assessment model incorporating the new feedback format be a pedagogical practice transferable to other subject domains?</i> <i>Can trends indicating learning development in response to the dialogic assessment model be found in students' performance?</i>	Comparative and longitudinal analysis of Performance trends of ET and BET students End of module student questionnaire

The same research questions were asked in Phase 3 and 4 as Phase 4 was a reiteration of the model used in Phase 3 in almost identical format. While in Phase 3 it was also possible to analyse reflection diaries to obtain rich information on student learning and satisfaction with the assessment format, in Phase 4 this task was removed. However it was possible to carry out a longitudinal analysis comparing performance trends in Phase 3 and Phase 4. Such longitudinal analysis is consistent with Design-based Research which relies on reiteration of design implementations as a means to ensuring reliability of the research process. Furthermore the analysis of the outcomes of Phase 3 and Phase 4 attempts to determine whether common patterns had emerged in the responses from both student cohorts to the

end of module questionnaires. This longitudinal comparison was particularly important given that in Phase 4 the module was delivered by another lecturer.

In 2010-2011 a further data collection took place (Phase5). In this phase the analysis focuses on the transferability of the model to a different subject domain such as Philosophy of Education. Therefore in addition to considering performance trends in response to the feedback incorporated in the assessment cycle the analysis considers the effectiveness of the adapted model and whether the positive evaluation offered by students in relation to the original model are also obtained for this new adapted version.

10.5.1 Analysis of reflection diaries - Phase 3 only (2008-2009)

In Phase 3 it was possible to collect rich information as commentaries on the learning experience were also derived from the reflections students had included in their learning diaries. As we shall see below some of the observations made by students were unexpected.

As part of the assessment portfolio for module ES204 (full-time)/ES222 (part-time) students were required to complete a reflection diary (Task 3). After each task students were asked to reflect on the difficulties they had encountered, on their strengths and on what they had learnt from preparing the specific task. At the end of the module they were also asked to reflect on the module as a whole and to offer advice on improving its structure and design (see Appendix M).

Considering that the reflections were contributing to the overall module mark, the reliability of the information collected from this source can be questioned. Reflection diaries are too often filled in an either perfunctory or compliant fashion when their scope and value is not fully appreciated by students. Yet, the overall picture that emerges from diaries from both groups is that of an honest – albeit mostly emotional – response to a challenging learning process. On the whole the data collected from reflection diaries - which represents the opinions of the full cohort of students - reconfirmed the positive view expressed in relation to the learning experience in the online questionnaire.

Table 10.3 presents some of the comments made by students in their learning diaries which

have been organised according to 6 core themes which have emerged from¹⁰⁸ such comments.

Table 10.3: Learning diaries summary: recurring positive comments (Phase3)

Core Themes	Full- time students	Part-time students
Relevance to Professional practice		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I have found this module very relevant to my work</i> <i>I am going to change my work practice/</i> <i>It reinforced my professional practice</i> <i>I am going to use my assessment activity in my work context</i> <i>I could apply what I had learnt at lectures</i>
Linking theory and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I have learned to link theory to practice.</i> <i>I learned how to create an assessment</i> <i>I learned to apply other elements of my learning from other modules into this assignment</i> <i>I learned how to give clearer instructions in assessment design</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I had the opportunity to apply what I had learnt from lectures</i> <i>I have experienced Kolb's cycle</i> <i>With this module I have experienced Bloom's higher levels</i> <i>This module was a case of experiential learning</i> <i>I have gained practical experience in designing assessment</i> <i>I am in a better position to design assessment</i>
Reflection on learning objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Even though the language of SLOs is simplistic, the work behind devising these objectives is very complex.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>The learning outcomes for this module were fully met</i> <i>I have learnt the value of learning objectives</i>
Reflection on feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>My understanding of assessment and feedback are greatly improved.</i> <i>It is hard to give relevant and helpful feedback</i> <i>I have learnt how important it is to give/receive feedback</i> <i>Taking feedback (even if constructive) is difficult</i> <i>It is time consuming to give feedback</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I have learnt that feedback is great tool to progress</i> <i>I have learnt that feedback can be positive</i> <i>I have learnt that it is important to reflect on feedback received</i> <i>I have learnt to accept constructive criticism</i>
Personal development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I have learnt to critically evaluate</i> <i>I found peer and self assessment difficult but for what I gained I would not change it</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I gained confidence in myself</i> <i>This module was an empowering experience</i> <i>This module has provided me with deep personal learning</i>
Reflection on roles & attitudinal changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I have learned about how much time goes into designing assessment</i> <i>I have learned how to take feedback (good or bad). It gives an insight into how others see your work</i> <i>I found it difficult to be both a teacher and a student</i> <i>The assignment pushed me out of my comfort zone</i> <i>By seeing other people's mistakes I have learned to improve my own work</i> <i>The portfolio made me more aware of the need to plan</i> <i>I feel that even with the same assessment criteria everyone grades differently</i> <i>I focus more on learning criteria now</i> <i>Learning how to be an accurate marker is key to being a good teacher</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I have realised that my perception of assessment was narrow and traditional</i> <i>It made me realise how important assessment is for our students</i> <i>It made me think about how other people may interpret the feedback I give them</i> <i>I have learnt the importance of writing instructions for students' benefit</i>

¹⁰⁸ The comments included in this table represent recurrent themes. Their inclusion was based on three core principles: a) the evaluative information on the effectiveness of the assessment model b) the significance of the comments in terms of ascertaining whether the assessment model has influenced learning and b) the information they provide to improve future modifications of the model.

Not surprisingly part-time students have made most of the comments linking their professional practice with¹⁰⁹ the outcomes of the module. The comments on this theme emphasise the transferability and applicability of the knowledge they have acquired to their professional contexts. In relation to comments linking assessment theory and practice full-time students focus on the cross-curricular relevance of this module but their comments are very generic in terms of explaining how the establishment of a link between theory and practice has been achieved. Part-time students use the assessment theories they have been presented with at lectures to explain how they have experienced the link between theory and practice and emphasise their improved ability to design assessment activities. Feedback seems to elicit very similar reflections from both groups. Comments highlight an enhanced understanding of the value of feedback but also an appreciation of the difficulty in giving and receiving criticism. Personal development appears to be a stronger feature of comments by part-time students. All students in this group were adults returning to education, in some cases, after a long absence from formal learning environments. The confidence-building and empowering dimensions of the learning experience appear to be valuable aspects of the assessment for these students.

The most significant outcome that emerged from the reflection diaries was the attitudinal change in both groups. The portfolio tasks required students to embrace the teacher and student roles and this appears to have caused an attitudinal change. Being required to embrace both roles provided a more and a more capacity-enhancing experience than it could be achieved in a course *about* assessment approaches and strategies. The comments by full-time students denote an enhanced awareness of the complexity of the teacher's role as planner, assessor and mentor providing constructive criticism and support. Part-time students question their beliefs in relation to the role of assessment and how it impacts on students. The need for becoming an empathetic teacher who designs instructions for the benefit of students and is careful about how feedback comments are received and interpreted is expressed in the comments by this group of students. On the whole the assessment experience appears to have had a deep effect on student learning and development.

However the model was not without faults. Table 10.4 summarises some of the shared concerns expressed by the students.

¹⁰⁹ Comments made in other sections of the table by ET3 students also refer to professional practice but their predominant relevance to another theme led to listing under a different heading than "Relevance to Professional Practice".

Table 10.4: Learning diaries: recurring negative comments (Phase 3)

Core Themes	Full- time students Selected quotes	Part-time students Selected quotes
Reflection on module structure and delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I found it hard to keep track of the amount of work involved • I found the word count difficult • I was unsure as to whether to explain the activity design in an essay style or not • I found it difficult to write a non-essay¹¹⁰ • I felt overloaded • I found it hard to choose a topic for my assessment activity • As a student I need more clarification on this form of assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The instructions we received were too wordy • The instructions in workbook were not always clear • The language used should be more first-timer friendly • Task1 scheduled too early • Not enough guidance in relation to marking • I would have liked more guidance on how to structure reflections • There was a lot to be taken in
Reflections on marking and feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think the level of feedback we had to provide was too in-depth for our inexperience • I would not allow people who are unqualified to mark someone else's work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The feedback I received from peers was too vague • I received contrasting feedback/marks • I would have liked to have the assignment marked by the lecturer • I found it difficult to word feedback accurately • Marking guidance was too rushed
Embracing the teacher's role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I found it hard to mark something I didn't have enough understanding of • I felt I was not qualified to mark fellow classmates work¹¹¹ • I found it difficult to make sure that the student followed the guidelines when I was marking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I felt uneasy with marking fellow students • I found the portfolio daunting at the beginning • I did not have a knowledge of the topics I was marking • I only administered assessment and never designed before

In relation to the course delivery and structure both groups felt overwhelmed by the quantity of work involved and the complexity of the structure. The lecturer invested time and energy in providing guidance and this -while well-intentioned -resulted in an information overload, expressed particularly by part-time students. The difficulties encountered however seem to indicate that students have engaged with the tasks and experienced a “practice shock” normally witnessed in authentic work environments. The anxiety caused by being asked to let go of the student role is expressed in comments emphasising the lack of experience or being “unqualified” for taking on a professional role.

¹¹⁰ The term “non-essay” was used by one of the students in his comments. As essays constitute the most common form of assessment used in the BSc in Education and Training, this student signals that he found it difficult to depart from a familiar assessment format.

¹¹¹ It should be noted that this sentence signals a criticism of the assessment format as the student in the reminder of the text of the diary speaks of the unfairness of the assessment task, which in his opinion, was asking students to perform a task beyond their current ability.

The part-time students are practitioners and appear to be less concerned about their lack of experience, but are equally concerned about the interpersonal dimension and the unease with being assessors of equals. In both cases however the difficulty seems to arise with being asked to take a dual role as teacher and student and being faced with a considerably new learning experience and assessment format (Tisani, 2008). Ball (1993) argues that teaching is made up of many paradoxes with which the teacher must grapple. The format of this portfolio appears to have given a head start to the students in terms of beginning to experience educational decision-making and application of their professional judgment. This was a challenge for most students. Nevertheless the majority of students in the overall evaluation of the module, commented positively on the assessment format adopted for this module and acknowledged the learning value of the overall experience. On a whole the reflection diaries offer some evidence of substantial learning beyond simply the technical dimension of assessment.

10.5.2 Trends in performance and learning Phase 3 (2008-2009) & 4 (2009-2010)

The portfolio assessment for module (ES204/ES222 Curriculum Assessment and Evaluation) represented a challenge for both the students and the lecturer. Portfolio assessment is work-intensive for both parties, but it also represents a departure from more traditional forms of assessment such as essays and exams¹¹². This departure requires the lecturer not only to support students about how to approach and complete the portfolio activities but also to develop an appreciation of the learning value of this form of assessment. One of the crucial issues of the specific portfolio assessment for module ES204/ES222, was the room that the format left to students to be creative and design an assessment for a module of their choice (Task1 A & 1B). Students reacted with unease to the relative freedom that this task afforded and asked for more directive guidance, signalling unfamiliarity with a non-convergent form of assessment (see discussion on non-convergent assessment in Chapter eight, section 8.3.1).

The unfamiliarity of the assessment format, however, elicited different responses from the two groups in relation to how they tackled the tasks. Full-time students responded by making the unfamiliar familiar, by trying to transform the task-based portfolio activities into essays. A number of students misinterpreted the first task, which required them to design an assessment activity for a group of their choice. Despite detailed written instructions and repeated briefing sessions, instead of designing an assessment activity approximately 30% of the full-time students from both cohorts wrote an essay on how they would go about

¹¹² It should be noted that module ES204/ES222 prior to the introduction of the dialogically oriented portfolio, was assessed by end of module written exam.

designing an assessment activity. They overcame their difficulty in applying theory to practice by resorting to a theoretical discussion of assessment. The part-time students are practitioners and while most of them had never experienced setting an assessment task¹¹³, they felt much more at ease with a task that required them to apply theoretical knowledge. Nevertheless both groups experienced a sort of “creativity block”. The parameters for setting an assessment activity were intentionally left very open. Students could choose the syllabus of the module for which they wished to set an assessment activity and the context for which it was designed and decide the assessment method. Furthermore they were required to apply their professional judgment to ensure that the assessment activity they designed was appropriate for the syllabus they had chosen, in terms of scope, method, fairness, transparency, reliability and validity.

In relation to group performance, while there are no significant differences in terms of completion rates, the analysis of some core performance indicators reveals different patterns, as shown in Tables 10.5 and 10.6.

¹¹³ It should be noted that the part-time students are mostly practitioners in training environments. In some training environments assessment is not used and in others assessment is set centrally by the body or organisation for which the trainer works. Hence while as practitioners are familiar with assessment they are not necessarily familiar with designing assessment.

Table 10.5 Comparative summary of performance (Phase 3)¹¹⁴

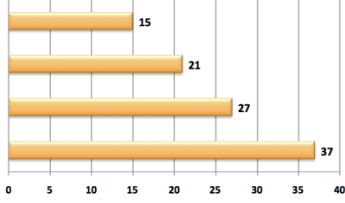
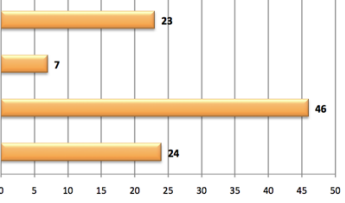
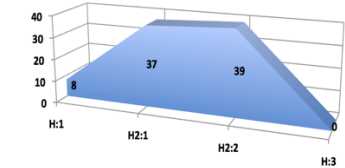
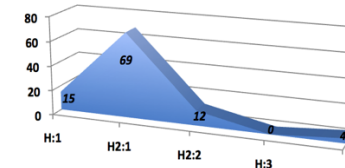
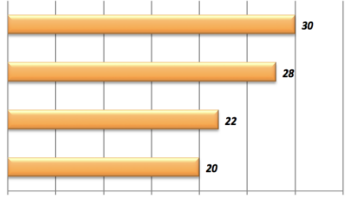
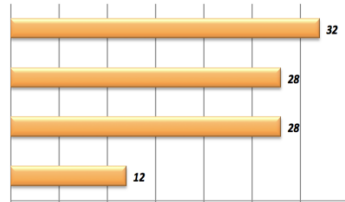
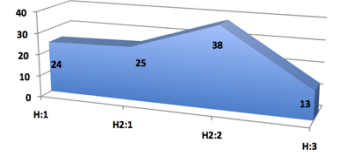
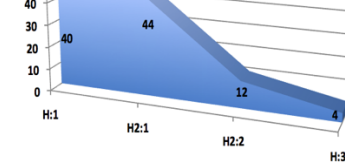
Indicator	ET2 Full-time Students ES204 Curriculum Assessment	DET Part-time Students ES222 Curriculum Assessment
Completion / Submission rate	73 out of 76 students 96%	26 out of 28 students 93%
% of Student Improvement from Task 1a to Task 1b		
Grade distribution		

Table 10.6 Comparative summary of performance (Phase 4)

Indicator	ET2 Full-time Students ES204 Curriculum Assessment	DET Part-time Students ES222 Curriculum Assessment
Completion / Submission rate	68 out of 71 students 96 %	25 out of 28 students 90%
% of Student Improvement from Task 1a to Task 1b		
Grade distribution		

¹¹⁴ Please note that the code DET is being used in tables 10.5 and 10.6. In years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 the code DET was used, whereas in year 2010-2011 the code was changed to BET. The tables use the correct code at the time when the research was carried out. However,, for clarity sake only the code BET is used in the discussion as the same group of students labelled as DET2 in 2009-2010 becomes BET3 in 2010-2011.

Phase 3 shows less satisfactory results than Phase 4 in terms of performance improvement. While for both cohorts the majority of students appear to have improved, in phase 4 the degree of improvement appears to be greater. The grade distribution also shows a considerably higher percentage of students performing at first class level in both full-time and part-time groups. This is a reassuring outcome as it suggests that from Phase 3 to Phase 4 the model had been perfected.¹¹⁵

10.5.3 Students evaluation of the dialogically-oriented assessment portfolio (Phases 3 & 4 Questionnaires)

Phases 3 and 4 students completed an online questionnaire to evaluate the learning experience for module ES204/ES222. The questionnaire included a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions in order to ensure both breadth and depth of information collected. In 2008-2009 (Phase 3) a total of 48 out of 104 (BET & ET combined) students responded (46%) and in 2009-2010 (Phase 4) 51 responses out of 106 were received (48%). While in 2008-2009 ET (53.2%) and BET(48.8%) responded almost in equal proportion, in 2009-2010 the majority of responses were received from ET students (70.6%). The analysis of the information from Phase 3 and Phase 4 questionnaires is presented comparatively in this section, to give a longitudinal dimension to the analysis of the effectiveness of the portfolio. The reader is reminded that in Phase 3 the researcher was also the lecturer for the module whereas in Phase 4 the module was delivered by another lecturer. This is particularly interesting because while the analysis denotes some differences in terms of the emphasis placed on certain aspects of assessment theory and practice by different lecturers, the overall evaluation of the effectiveness of the assessment model produces similar patterns in both Phase 3 and 4.

On the whole the questionnaire shows comparable levels of satisfaction with the module and a positive reaction to the assessment structure and delivery of the content. As shown by Figures 10.5 and 10.6, the students' responses at the end of both years of presentation indicate that the module format has succeeded - in comparable terms- in changing students' perception of assessment.

¹¹⁵ As signaled in some of the comments included in table 10.4 the workload for the module and the quality of the instructions provided needed careful attention. The instructions included in the assessment booklet were simplified and as part of the lecturing activities workshops helping students to devise assessment and providing feedback were incorporated.

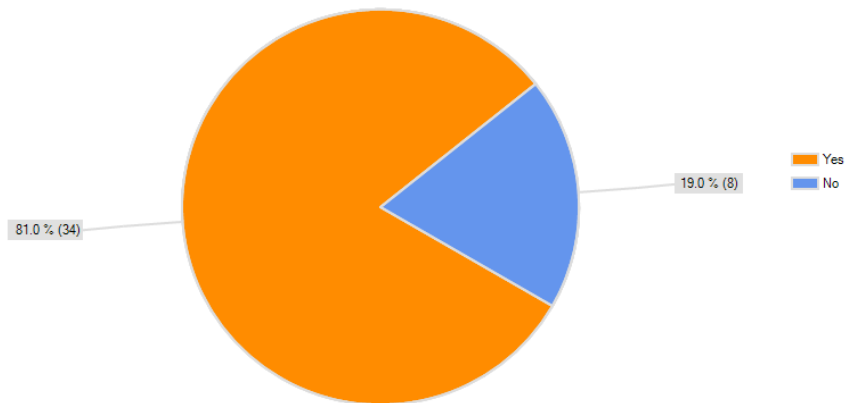


Figure 10.5 : 2008-2009 Cohort- Perception of the role of the student in assessment

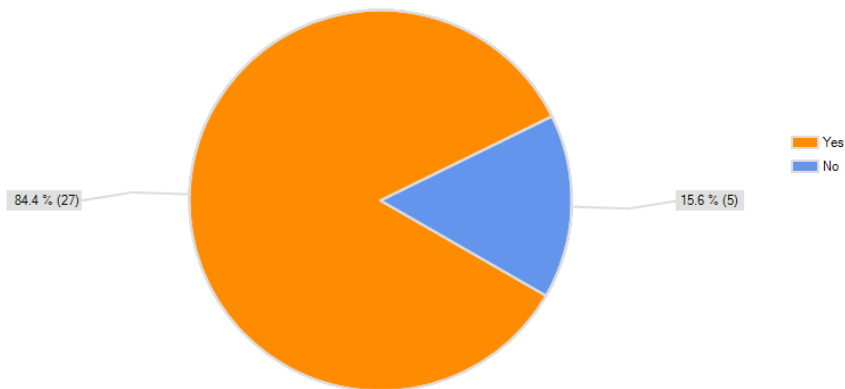


Figure 10.6: 2009-2010 Cohort- Perception of the role of the student assessment

The change in perception of assessment is one of the key objectives of the module and it supports the idea of sustainability of learning beyond assessment through empowering students. This change in perception is also important because it signals that students are not simply looking at assessment from the standpoint of their current role as either a student or a teacher, but have started to transition between roles, hence also enabling to experience themselves in a new light (transitioning ontologically). The importance of the role of the learner in the assessment process appears to have been understood and captured by students as it emerges from the answers summarised in table 10.7. The table shows a consistent pattern

in terms of values expressed by the students who rate the focus on diverse needs and empowerment and motivation through feedback among the most important aspects of assessment for learners.

Table 10.7 : Perspectives on the role of the learner in assessment (ranking in order of perceived importance)

Have your views on the role of the learner in the assessment process changed as a result of undertaking this module? ¹¹⁶	(Phase 4) 2009-2010 %	(Phase 4) 2009-2010 N	(Phase 3) 2008-2009 %	(Phase 3) 2008-2009 N
through feedback learners have more control and motivation	29.17	7	11.77	2
more focus on diverse learners' needs & views	29.17	7	41.18	7
clearer assessment criteria empower learners	8.33	2	5.88	1
greater communication and empathy between assessor and learner	4.17	1	11.76	2
learners should be enabled to showcase their learning	8.33	2	17.65	3
no answer	20.83	5	11.76	2
Total answers	100	24	100	17

Once again the selected quotes listed in table 10.8 reconfirm the overall consistency of the trend.

Table 10.8: selected students' quotes on the value of the learning experience (Phase 3 & 4)

	Phase 3	Phase 4
BET students	<p><i>'I have far greater understanding of feedback and how it can be used positively and/or negatively. Also a better understanding of the difficulties in developing assessments'</i></p> <p><i>'I can understand the importance of feedback especially as I was personally exposed to it during this module and it is something that I will cultivate going forward'</i></p>	<p><i>'I feel I now look at assessment in more creative ways and would be more likely to use practical demonstration or presentation as forms of assessment'</i></p>
ET students	<p><i>'I now realise how much work is involved in forming an assessment. Also the feedback is quite difficult'</i></p>	<p><i>'My attitude changed because now I see assessment as a integral step that should be undertaken throughout the learning cycle, and not just a summative action at the end of period of learning'</i></p> <p><i>'I realised the responsibility involved in marking someone else's work and I gained a new appreciation for teachers'</i></p>

¹¹⁶ The two lecturers who delivered the content placed emphasis of different aspects of assessment, as these reflect the influence of their specific research interests on their teaching. The answers provided by students seem to indicate that the different emphasis of the lecturers has had a noticeable impact on their responses.

In 2008-2009 great emphasis was placed by the lecturer on the value of formative feedback and fair and transparent communication on assessment matters with the students. In 2009-2010, greater emphasis was placed on the theory and practice of learning outcomes and assessment design. Table 10.9 also shows evidence of the influence of the teaching approach on students' perceptions and contribution to the learning experience. Notably once again greater emphasis on feedback theory and practice is acknowledged by students in 2008-2009 and the importance of design and marking guidelines emerges from the answers of students from the 2009-2010 cohorts.

Table 10.9: contribution of the assessment portfolio to the learning experience (ranking in order of perceived importance)

How Has your perception and attitude towards assessment changed as a result of undertaking this module?	(Phase 4) 2009-2010 %	(Phase 4) 2009-2010 N	(Phase 3) 2008-2009 %	(Phase 3) 2008-2009 N
1. I have a better understanding of the importance of formative assessment	3.45	1	0	0
2. I understand the importance of clear guidelines and marking criteria	13.79	4	5	1
3. I appreciate and understand more the importance of assessment	41.38	12	10	2
4. I can be more creative in designing assessment	3.45	1	5	1
5. I understand the effect that assessment has on learning	10.34	3	20	4
6. I have learnt about constructive feedback	0	0	20	4
7. I have realised the amount of work and responsibility that teachers have to put in assessment	10.34	3	15	3
8. I am no longer scared of assessment	0	0	5	1
9. I understand the importance of constructive alignment	0	0	20	4
10. I understand the terminology better	3.45	1	0	0
11. It has given me practical experience to design assessment	6.9	2	0	0
12. It has had an impact on my practice	3.45	1	0	0
13. no answer	3.45	1	0	0

Students were also asked how their experience of being assessed within this module would help them with their professional development. The following comments give a cross section

of opinion in regard to this question. Responses from Phase 3 and 4 are collated in Table 10.10 as no differentiating pattern emerged from the analysis of the responses from the two cohorts.

Table 10.10: impact on professional development (sustainable learning)

BET students	ET students
<i>'I think I will consider other factors and try to help my students in a manner more conducive to their learning'</i>	<i>"Deeper understanding of theory to practice'</i>
<i>'I will never test just for the sake of testing again'</i>	<i>'It will give me more confidence to give and receive constructive feedback'</i>
<i>'I now know how to give constructive feedback to students even if the work is not to the best of their abilities'</i>	<i>'It has added to my learning experience as a whole'</i>
<i>'It helped me appreciate how the learners feel being assessed'</i>	

Finally students were asked to identify aspects of the assessment format in need of improvement. Table 10.11 shows that similar concerns are expressed by students of the two cohorts.

Table 10.11: Comparative table – Students' suggestions for improvement

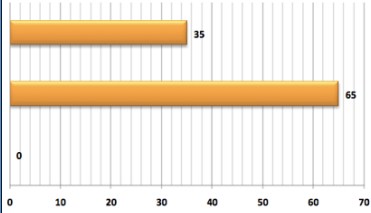
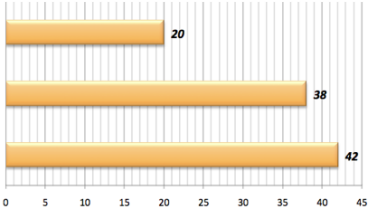
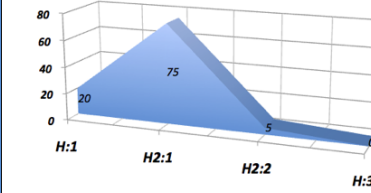
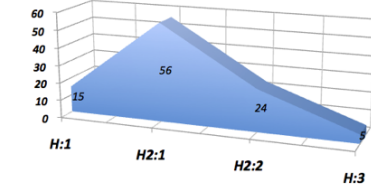
Suggestions for improving the module assessment	(Phase 4) 2009-2010 %	(Phase 4) 2009-2010 N	(Phase 3) 2008-2009 %	(Phase 3) 2008-2009 N
Would have liked to practice various aspects of assessment more	8.33	2	4.55	1
Would have like more clarity in the instructions provided	29.17	7	22.73	5
Would have liked more time to complete the tasks	16.67	4	27.28	6
happy with it - no change needed	25	6	18.18	4
Would have preferred feedback from lecturer rather than from peers	12.5	3	13.63	3
no answers	8.33	2	13.63	3
total answers	100	24	100	22

On the whole the questionnaire shows consistent patterns of satisfaction and advancement of knowledge across different years of presentation, in response to different teaching approaches and despite modifications dictated by external constraints. The outcomes emerging from the questionnaires appear to offer evidence of the sustainability and soundness of the assessment model devised for this module, albeit with some clearly identified areas in need of improvement. These have been highlighted by students as the need for clearer and more concise guidance and a better proportion between time available and assessment workload.

10.5.4 Trends in student performance and learning (Phase 5)

As described in section 10.4 in Phase 5 an adapted version of the dialogically-oriented portfolio module was designed and implemented. Assessment for both GDED2 and BET3 groups incorporated a formative/draft submission of task1. Out of 27 BET students one deferred the module and 6 others chose not to submit a task1 draft, citing lack of time and pressure from other engagements as the reason for non submission. With the exception of one student who had deferred the module all other GDED2 students submitted a draft Task1. As shown by table 10.12, on the whole, both GDED2 and BET3 students improved on their first task in response to the feedback received from the lecturer on the draft submission. However BET 3 students show a more marked improvement.

Table 10.12: Comparative summary of performance (Phase 5 -2010-2012)

<i>Indicator</i>	BET3 ES402 Philosophical Perspectives in Education & Training	GDED ES556 Philosophy of Education
Completion / Submission rate	20 out 26 students 77%	62 out of 63 99%
% of Student Improvement from Task 1a to Task 1b		
Grade distribution		

It should be noted that BET3 students submitted task1 as an individual activity and therefore received individual feedback, whereas for GDED2 students Task1 was a group activity and therefore feedback was given on a group basis. Performance in response to feedback may have been affected by group dynamics. This may partially explain the lower level of improvement recorded for GDED2 students in comparison with the BET3 class. While there are no specific data to support this claim, some anecdotal information is available as a minority of students expressed their dissatisfaction during the lectures with the requirement to partake in

group assessment. This was also reconfirmed by a small percentage of the responses to the online questionnaires, which will be discussed in more detail in section 10.5.5.

If we consider the difference in mark obtained in the draft submission for task1 compared to the mark obtained for the same task by BET3 students, all students improved as shown by figure 10.7.

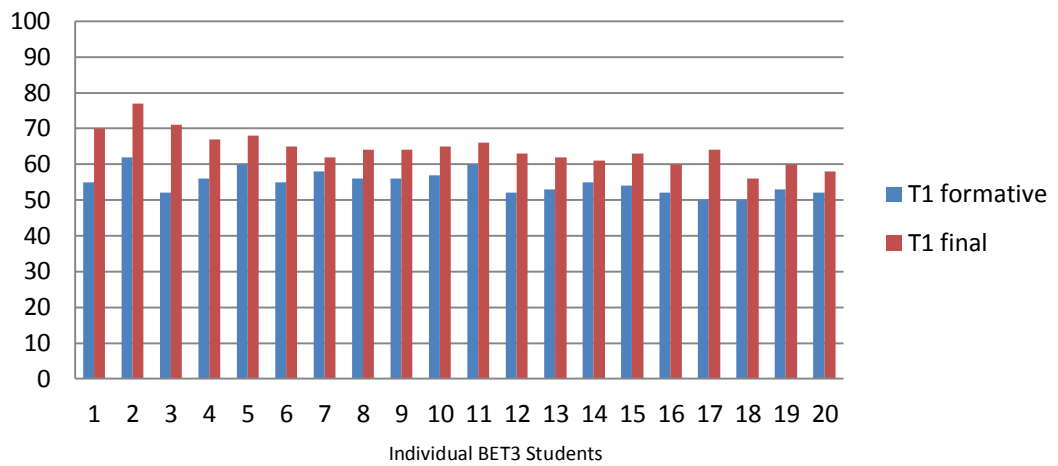


Figure 10.7: Comparison between formative and final Task1 submission mark (BET3 – individual task)

If we look at the difference in mark obtained by BET students between for the redrafted Task1 and task2 – as shown by figure 10.8- that 12 out of 20 students manage to either perform at the same level for tasks 1 and 2 or further improve in task 2. This result indicates that for the majority of students in this group learning was sustained throughout the module and that students were able to transfer some of the advice received for the first task also for completion of the second task.

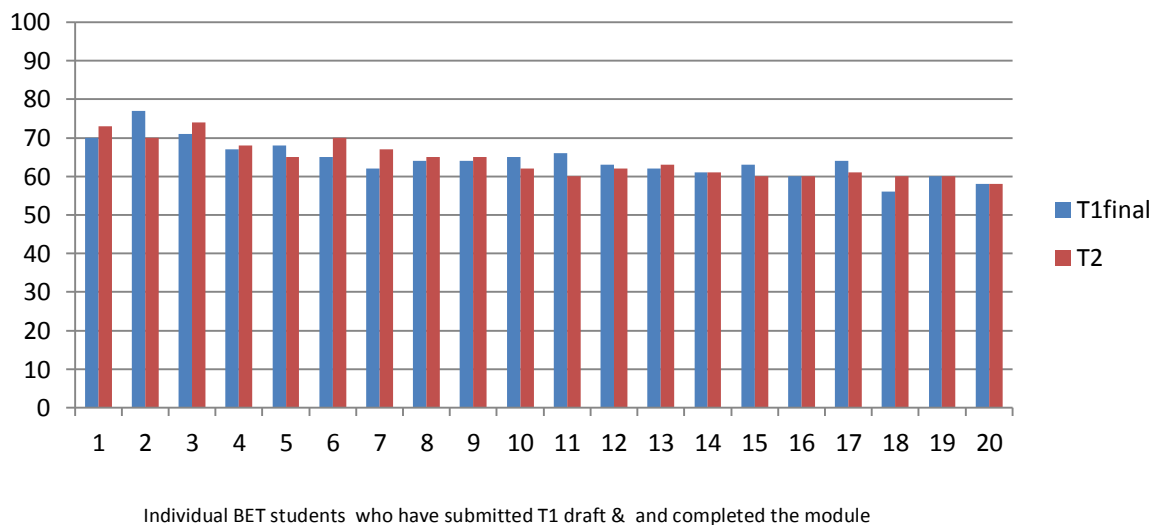


Figure 10.8: GDED2 performance relation between T1 final and Task2 ability to transfer advice and sustain improvement

The GDED2 group presents a rather different scenario. While on the whole the majority of students appear to have sustained the same level of improvement a less picture emerges.

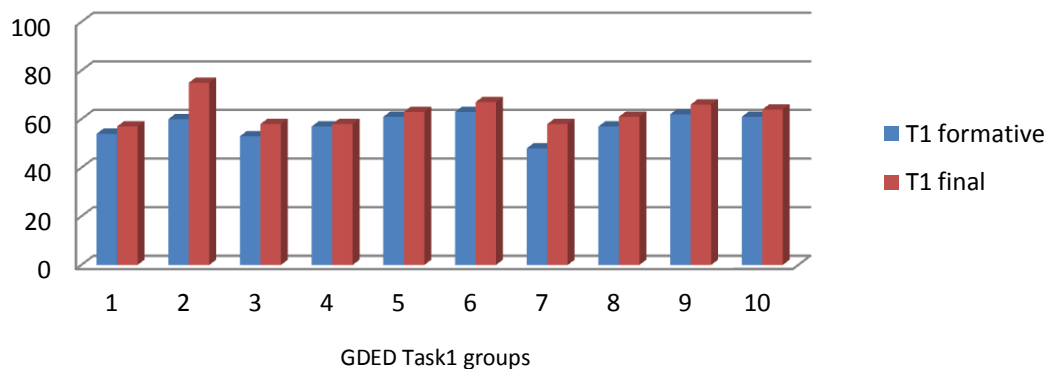


Figure 10.9: Comparison between formative and final Task1 submission mark (GDED2- group task)¹¹⁷

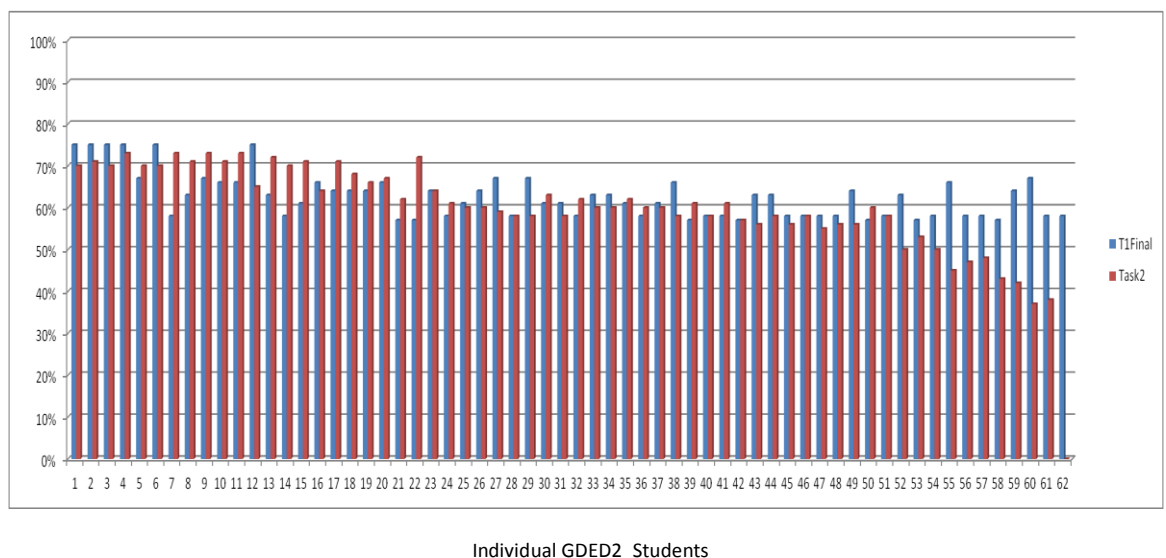


Figure 10.10: BET3 performance relation between T1 final and Task2 ability to transfer advice and sustain improvement

14 students achieve a lower grade in Task2 than in the final draft of Task1. This indicates that these students were unable to transfer the feedback for Task1 also to the preparation of task 2. This also may suggest that these students have benefited from working with a group as when they worked on their own for task 2 have produced among the weakest GDED2 performances.

Since a similar pattern as not been recorded for the BET3 group this may suggest that the group feedback¹¹⁸ provision may be a contributing factor to the inability to productively

¹¹⁷ It should also be noted that in all graphs presented in this section students and groups have been sorted according to their level of performance, student /group 1 being the highest performing.

transfer feedback advice and that greater personalisation is necessary to maximise the benefits that students can derive from this assessment model. However, in the immediate, it signals the need to incorporate in the teaching activities some training aimed at helping students to transfer feedback to similar activities and to derive the maximum benefits from it. As noted in Chapter seven, conclusions on the extent to which feedback has contributed to learning cannot be straightforwardly derived from an analysis of performance alone. Also since task1 was a group activity and task2 an individual activity the level of performance achieved by the group may have been higher than that achievable by some group members in first instance.

10.5.5 Student evaluation of the effectiveness of the adapted portfolio assessment (Phase 5)

In 2010-2011 (Phase 5) 24 out of 27 BET3 students (85%) responded to the questionnaire compared to only 19 out of 63 GDED2 students (30%)¹¹⁹. Unfortunately the low response from GDED2 students limits the possibility to draw reliable conclusions on this particular group. However together with the analysis of the performance patterns for all the students from this group it was possible to identify important trends informing the evaluation of the assessment format and influencing future presentations of the module.

As shown by figures 10.11 and 10.12 most both BET3 and GDED2 respondents found the assessment clearly presented and structured and a mostly good degree of satisfaction with the level of support received from the lecturer also emerges from respondents from both classes. As discussed in section 10.4 both GDED and BET students were asked to submit a draft version of Task1¹²⁰, they received feedback from the lecturer and were able to resubmit the task in response to the feedback.

Students were asked to express their level of agreement on aspects of the assessment design and principles for ES402 and ES556 modules. The responses given in relation to group activities signal that four GDED2 respondents felt that interacting with the group negatively impacted on their assessment performance and three respondents from the same class also felt that the

¹¹⁸ The large size (6 or in two instances 7 students per group) of groups may also have had an impact of the ability of students to actively contribute to the group activity leading to drafting the first task, hence negatively impacting on learning.

¹¹⁹ In 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 ET3 and BET3 students responded to the same questionnaire and for this reason the responses are presented in cumulative fashion. In 2010-2011 two slightly different questionnaires were circulated to the two groups. This measure was necessary to better capture the responses to the differences in the assessment format for the two groups within the same year of presentation.

¹²⁰ The reader is reminded that task2 was submitted individually by both BET and GDED students.

group interaction also negatively affected their understanding of the course content. While these students represent a minority of respondents their responses signal a un-ease with group-based assessment.

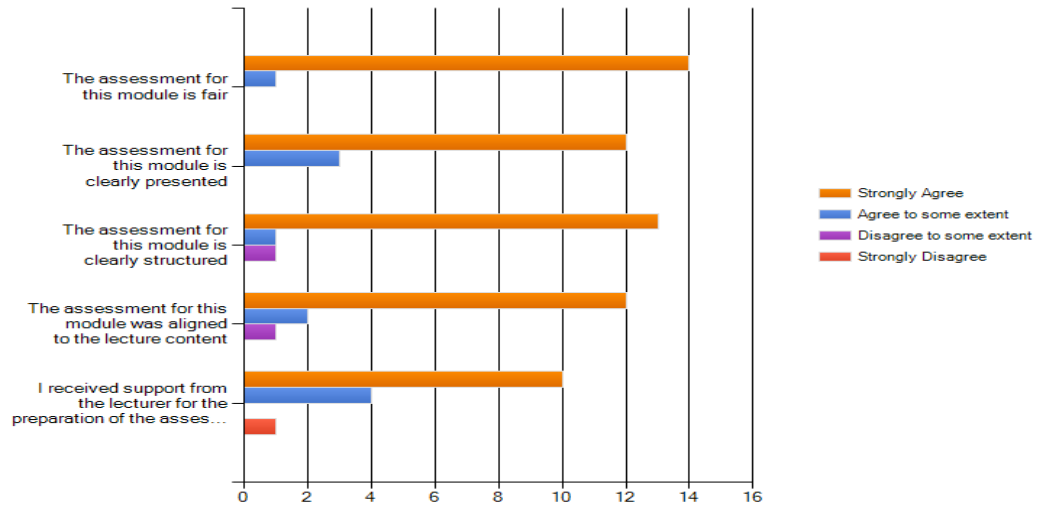


Figure 10.11:¹²¹ BET3 evaluation of the assessment format (N of answers- level of agreement with statements)

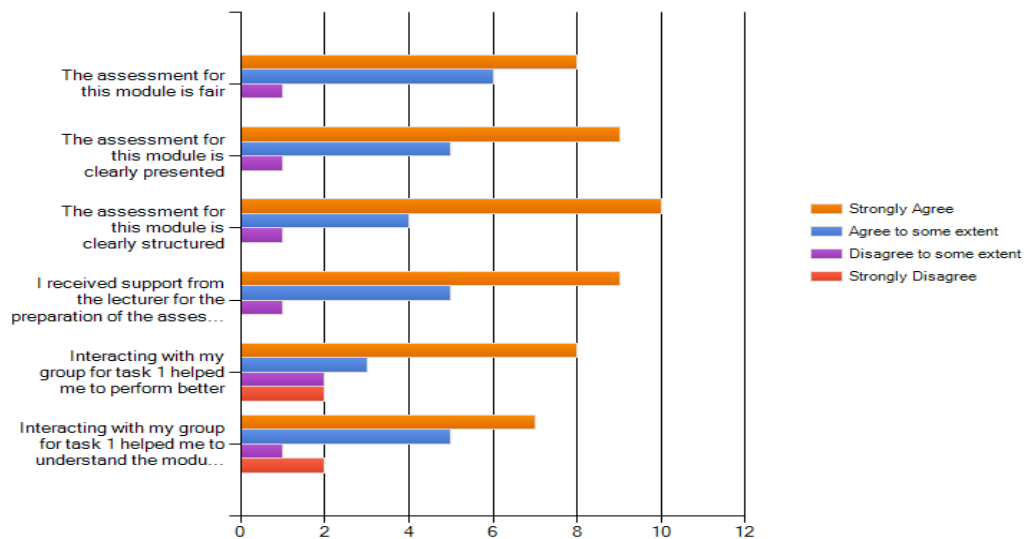


Figure 10.12: GDED2 evaluation of the assessment format (N- level of agreement with statements)

During the two part-time years of the GDED2 course, students had never experienced group based assessment, and initially responded with some resistance to this format. Also the selection of groups and management of group activities were left to the students as it was considered an important element of fostering student autonomy and self-management. This

¹²¹ BET3 and GDED2 students were asked to react to two similar but not exactly identical sets of statements, hence comparison is only possible on some of the statements. The differentiation was deemed necessary to capture more specifically the characteristics of each class. For instance, it was particularly important to determine whether- even with a group based assessment element- GDED2 student were able to progress with their thinking on an individual basis.

level of autonomy in some groups resulted in poorly managed workload distribution among group members and this may well have negatively impacted on assessment performance. This in turn may have led some students to feel that the group activity did not allow them to perform to the best of their ability. The issue of the group work is interesting in dialogical terms as in chapter nine it was argued that personalisation is an important feature of the establishment of dialogical relations. Group-based Task1 submission was a necessity in this case due to need to care for the students through provision of feedback for draft submissions while at the same time making this task viable with a large class. However some students felt that they were not given an opportunity to benefit from feedback because it was not provided on an individual basis. As noted in chapter seven, this once again highlights a tension between maximising benefits to students while at the same time achieving viability and sustainability of the educational practice. Nevertheless Figures 10.13 & 10.14 show that on the whole, there is an agreement that the assessment facilitated engagement with the course content – albeit with stronger levels of agreement with the BET3 respondents-. It is particularly significant in dialogical terms that 50% of the GDED2 students and the majority of BET3 students agree that the assessment format was also helping to build a teaching and learning relationship with the lecturer.

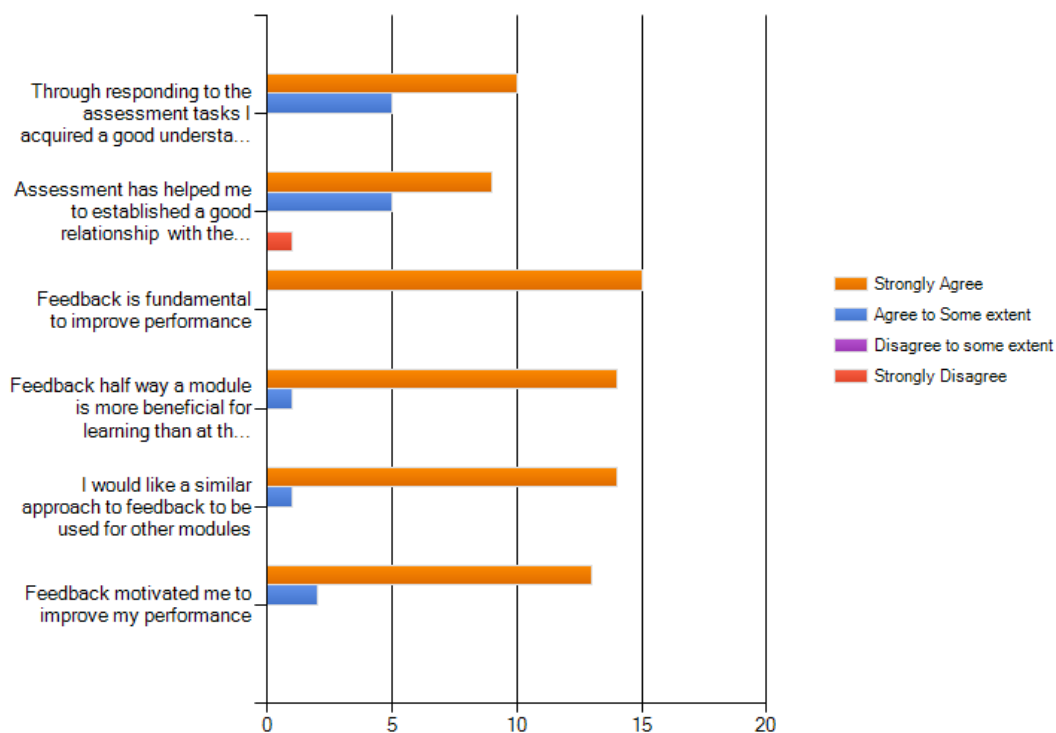


Figure 10.13 BET3 evaluation of assessment format & feedback

However it should also be noted that one student in each class strongly disagreed on this statement. It emerges that this student chose not submit the formative draft and therefore had limited opportunity for one-to-one interaction with the lecturer and to receive support through feedback. It appears from the additional comments that the GDED2 student who expresses similar views found the feedback comments too prescriptive and this may have led him/her less and eases interacting with the lecturer.

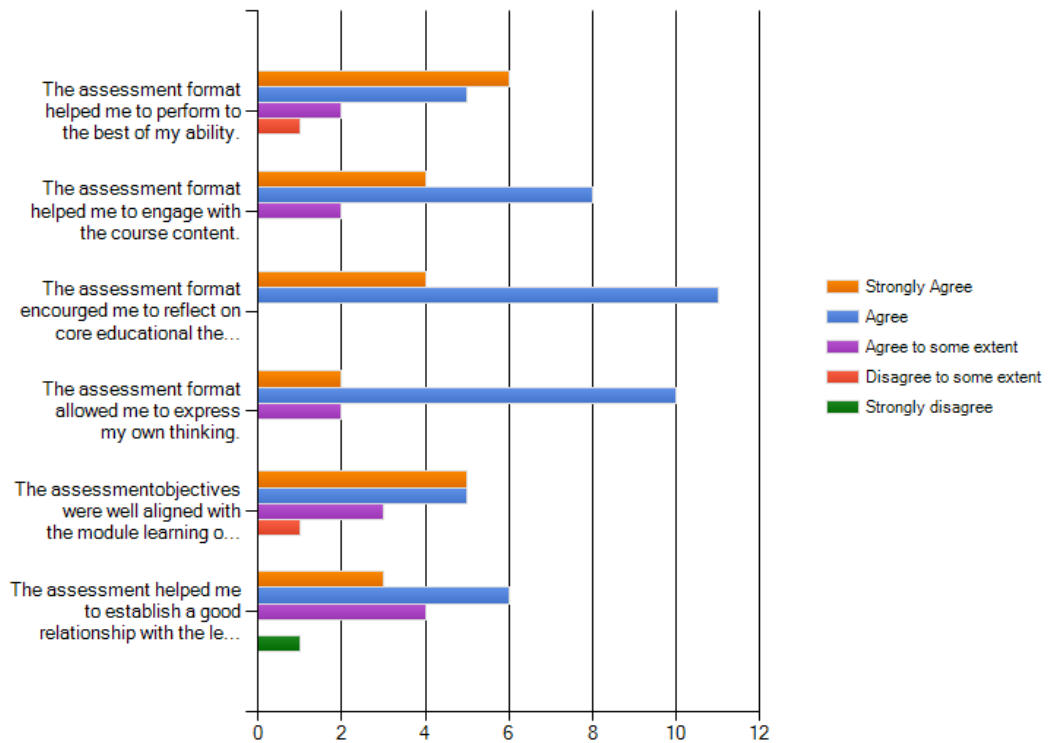


Figure 10.14 GDED2 evaluation of assessment format and feedback

In relation to the evaluation of the feedback received the responses from both BET3 and GDED2 are remarkably similar as evidenced by Figures 10.15 and 10.16. Students from both classes express satisfaction with the level of detail and usefulness of the feedback received with only one BET3 student claiming to have felt “put off” by the level of detail of the feedback.

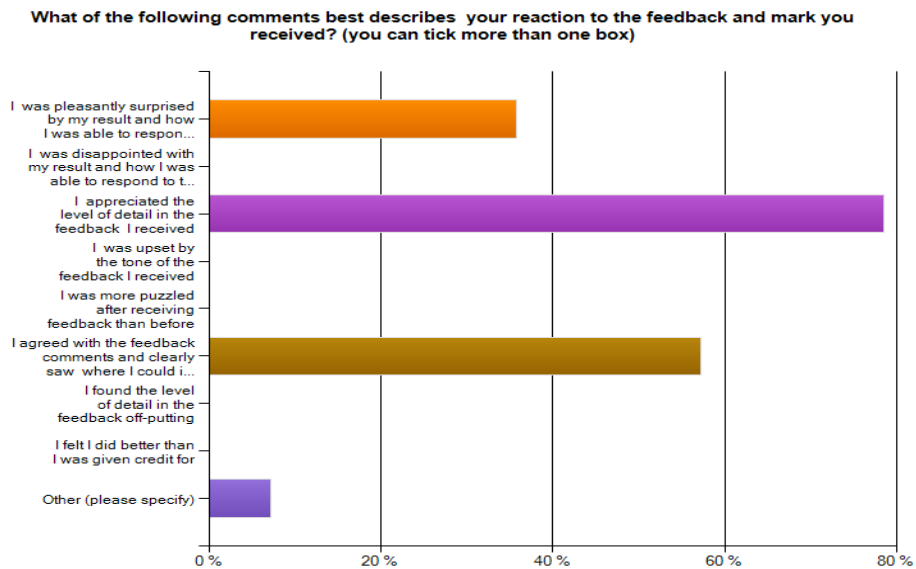


Figure 10.15 GDED2 reaction to the feedback received (%)

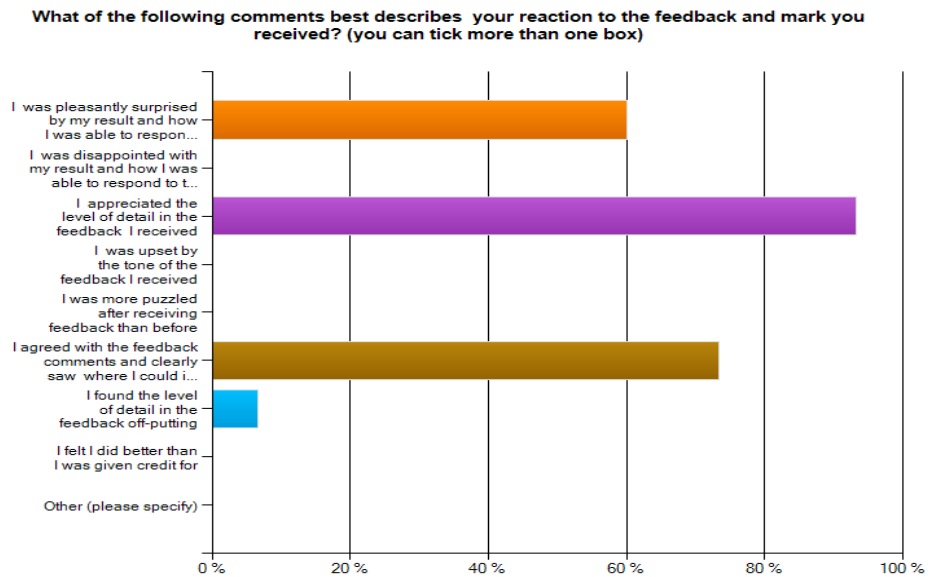


Figure 10.16: BET3 reaction to the feedback received (%)

This emerging scenario is further reinforced by comments made by students in response to the open-ended questions in the online questionnaire. The comments have been organised according to recurrent themes in table 10.13. The table shows that while feedback helped in a general sense with redrafting of the essay it also had a motivational impact for some students and one BET3 student mention that it helped to clarify for the very first time the correct use of referencing conventions. The feedback also appears to have helped with clarifying the specifics of philosophical argumentation. Interestingly one GDED2 student also comments on how the group had used the questions raised in the feedback comments as the basis for group

discussion, hence helping the group to progress with their understanding of the course content¹²², hence somehow contradicting the outcomes emerging from figure 10.10.

Table 10.13 BET3 & GDED2 students' evaluation of usefulness of feedback¹²³

Emerging Themes	BET3	GDED2
Detail & Helpful for redrafting	<p><i>The clear detailed approach applied to the feedback highlighted the areas needed to be addressed.</i></p> <p><i>The level of detail and particularly the annotated feedback.</i></p> <p><i>The detailed annotated comments were very explicit and helpful in re-drafting the assignment.</i></p> <p><i>feedback was paragraph by paragraph so very easy to follow and understand</i></p>	<p><i>It was very thorough and gave very valuable pointers as to how to improve the second draft (group essay)</i></p> <p><i>that the feedback involved questions that I felt we could then address as a group</i></p> <p><i>I found the feedback to be very welcome, it meant that as a group we could see the areas that needed improving and the areas which were on point.</i></p>
Facilitating understanding of the subject-specific requirements	<p><i>It clearly showed where I could improve and certain actions I could make which would benefit the task of writing philosophy in general.</i></p> <p><i>The difference in the format between writing an academic assignment and a philosophical assignment and also the annotated feedback</i></p> <p><i>Helpful for finding the right voice for the piece</i></p>	<p><i>It was great guidance on what was expected in writing a philosophy lecture as quite honestly I had never written one before and wasn't sure what the correct format was. It helped me to overcome the pitfalls which I was falling into.</i></p> <p><i>Tips on how to structure argument throughout the essay</i></p>
understanding assessment criteria	<p><i>The feedback was really detailed and gave me huge support. I realised and understood referencing for the first time and my marks will improve all round.</i></p>	
Motivational/ confirming understanding	<p><i>All of it. It provided a direction and indicated what points I needed to improve and elaborate on. It also confirmed that I had engaged with the module and needed to tweak some points to improve my grade</i></p> <p><i>I appreciated the personal tone of the feedback and the sensitively phrased suggestions for improving my work</i></p>	<p><i>The detail of the feedback helped focus my study</i></p> <p><i>The feedback was amazing and helped me to understand where at times I have lost track of the question and answer it to the best of my ability. I felt this feedback was the best support I received during my whole time in D,C,U.</i></p> <p><i>...it [feedback]was very detailed and helpful. It gave me and others in the group confidence in what they were doing and direction for future work.</i></p>

¹²² It should be noted that feedback was given in the context of two Philosophy of Education modules. One of the aims of the module was to promote independent thinking. For this reason in many instances feedback comments relating to conceptual and analytical issues were formulated as questions prompting students to 'dig deeper' in their understanding.

¹²³ In order to obtain a broad perspective on benefits derived from the assessment portfolio by students, comments representing all the different aspects of the evaluation have been included and grouped according to the themes presented in the table.

Students were also asked to comment on the least useful aspects of the feedback they received and only a few students responded to this question. 11 GDED students responded to this question and 10 recommended no change. However the GDED2 who had signalled dissatisfaction with feedback in the closed-ended questions also offered the following comment:

Comments on the theme of the piece - it seemed to imply the requirement to change our opinion.

Surprisingly the student also added that he/she did not find *the prescriptive nature of the comments* useful. The same student had also indicated in previous comments that he/she was off-put by the detail in the commentary and found the feedback too prescriptive.

14 BET students also answered the same question and while 14 recommended no change one student suggested that he/she did not feel it was necessary to provide advice on sentence structuring. Furthermore a BET3 student felt that the feedback advice was pitched too high and he/she felt that the advice was pushing him/her beyond her level of expertise. This seems to indicate that the student was not able to fully benefit from the advice received.

All of the feedback was useful so it is hard to pick the least useful element but I did find it a little bit tricky in understanding fully some points made by the lecturer as I felt I did not reach that level of expertise with the module.

In terms of transferability of the advice received, the vast majority of respondents indicate that they were able to use at least 50% of the advice received also for drafting of the second essay (as shown in table 10.14), which was an individual essay for both GDED2 and BET3 students.

Table 10.14: Transfer of feedback advice from Task1 to Task2

	BET3		GDED2	
	Total respondents: 15 out of 26 (58%)		Total respondents: 15 out of 63 (24%)	
	%	N	%	N
All of it	46.7	7	24	6
50% or more	53.3	8	53.3	8
Less than 50%	0	0	6.7	1
None	0	0	0	0

This outcome appears to be at odds with the analysis of performance summarised in figure 10.10 (GDED2 class) where a sizeable proportion of students do not show sustained improvement in Task2. However the data summarised in the chart refer to the classes in their entirety whereas table 10.14 refers to respondents for the online questionnaire who account for only 15 students for each group responded to the questionnaire, hence offering a particularly low response rate for the GDED group.

Finally students were asked to make suggestions on the assessment format. On the whole a good level of satisfaction emerges from respondents and some of the students have offered the following comments.

I found the feedback EXCELLENT [capital letters in the original comment]. This was the most enjoyable module I have studied in DCU to date, largely because I felt like I knew exactly what was expected of me in the essay. (BET3 student)

I thought the feedback was excellent and very detailed which was appreciated. The lecturer understood the students had never written a philosophy essay before and is very different to other modules. I cannot suggest any improvements, It was the best feedback I ever received and reflected the lecturer's passion for teaching and caring for students.

(BET3 student)

This type of feedback was excellent and I really wish it was available in all my modules. I did find however it took a lot of my time in preparing the draft and then working on the feedback, which left not as much time to focus on the other 2 parts of the assignment. But overall I was extremely happy with how this module was organised and with the motivation and encouragement I received from the lecturer who I felt truly "Cared" about my learning as I felt this subject is a bit tricky to get to grips with then others but I am glad I took part in it. Thank you

(GDED2 student)

If participants received feedback in all modules this way they would benefit much more and feel much more included in the whole experience. (GDED2 student)

I found it one of the better modules

(GDED2 Student)

The comments suggest that the students felt that the format supported their learning and that a similar format would be welcomed in other modules in their courses. Interestingly one GDED2 and one BET3 student explicitly associated the type of feedback to care and saw in such care a stimulus to engage with the module content.

Finally in relation to suggestions for improvement, one GDED2 student offered the following comment which appears to reconfirm the concerns relating to group work emerged in earlier discussion of data. This highlights the necessity for a more structured approach to group work.

Possibly some direction on which readings would improve the assignment, advice on how to divide the work - writing a group essay is difficult and this is the only module

which required us to do so.
(GDED2 student)

With the exception of one BET3 student who expressed his preference for face to face verbal feedback no other student from this group expressed a need for modifications to the assessment format.

Whilst written feedback is valuable a meeting in person whilst time consuming would enhance the feedback where further points could be clarified if required
(BET3 student)

On the whole it can be concluded that the assessment format worked well for both BET3 and GDED2 students, but that the BET3 students derived greater benefit due to the personalised and individual format of the feedback they received. GDED2 assessment format raised some concern in relation the group task. The data highlight a need for a more structured approach to the group task and for the formation of smaller groups, giving all group members more opportunities for active engagement. However the feedback received appears to have helped in terms of clarification of expectations and assessment requirements, relationship-building with the lecturer, engagement with the course content and sustainability of learning within and beyond the module.

10.6 Summary of outcomes (Phases 3-5): aiming for sustainability while preserving the integrity of theory

In recent years there has been a change in educational practice in terms of the concept of student learning promoted by policy makers. Increasingly the focus has moved from teaching to learning, yet the emphasis has shifted not only from what is taught, to *what* has been *learned* but also more and more frequently on *how it is learned*. This has led to a tendency to regard learning and teaching skills a primary focus, sometimes the sole focus, of education. This has also had a particular strong influence on teacher training as it has resulted in an increasing emphasis being placed on the acquisition of teaching skills in order to professionally function in educational environments. However *being* a teacher, in contrast to *simply functioning* as a teacher -goes beyond being the efficient enactor of teaching techniques. The cultivation of principled judgment needs to be incorporated in training of teachers and such cultivation is more likely to be successful if principled judgment is exemplified through the practice of those training future teachers. Laurillard & Elton (1979, p.100) argue that "...the

quickest way to change student learning is to change the assessment system". Assessment then may well be a good starting point to counteract prevalent instrumental tendencies. A transformation needs to happen among assessment stakeholders. It is not sufficient to modify assessment formats. Attitudes need to be shifted and assessment roles need to be reconceived. It is therefore essential that in forming beginning educators, theory and practice to which student teachers experience fosters sustainable learning and models future practice in a wider educational context.

Student feedback should be seen as part of the learning process and helps students move from surface to deep learning (Marton and Säljö, 1984; Ramsden, 2003; Biggs, 1987 and Entwistle, 1981). This chapter shows that when feedback is integrated in the learning process the end result is a dialogical assessment model and feedback itself becomes dialogical. As Uhlman (1995) points out, students as 'stakeholders' need to be also participating in and transformed by the contextual dialogue of teaching & learning initiated and developed around the teacher's reflective practice and research. Dialogue is not just a teaching method. Central to the dialogical model is the transformation of teacher-student relationship and the way we think about knowledge.

On the whole the data that emerged from three research phases presented in this chapter suggest that the implementation of a philosophically informed dialogical model for assessment and feedback is possible and beneficial. The following are among the benefits that have been identified:

- The data highlight sustainability at two different levels: 1) sustainability of the dialogical model through translation in different learning contexts; 2) sustainability of learning gain as a result of engaging with the assessment process and responding to feedback with enhanced understanding and control of assessment criteria.
- The outcomes of the three phases also indicated that the students' focus remained firmly on learning progression, in some cases also resulting in an overall change of perception in relation to how assessment can be conceived.
- Feedback, rather than simply marks and grades, emerges as a key driver of learning and improvement. This supports the view that when feedback is incorporated in the learning process rather than given at the end, students are more likely to be responsive to it and as a result to gain from it.
- The assessment format in all 3 phases presented in context 2 was not only a learning evaluation tool but also constituted a relationship-building environment. Feedback

provided half-way through the modules also allowed the lecturers to engage more directly with students during the process and was seen by a sizeable proportion of students as a means also to interact with lecturers.

However the implementation of the dialogically infused assessment model different degrees of success can be observed in the three different phases and in relation to different student groups. The following difficulties have been identified:

- Assessment for all three phases required careful planning and was work-intensive in terms of support for students and time spent providing detailed written feedback. Written feedback was also coupled with further verbal feedback when students required it. Its success is highly reliant on the commitment to the principles that have led to the development of the dialogical framework. The three phases highlight that a high level of commitment to student learning is necessary on the teacher's part as the more personalised the more effective it appears to be crucial to foster improvement.
- The teacher needs to pay attention not only to the detail of the advice provided but also the wording of comments to ensure that it is positively framed, yet accurate, in the detection of areas in need of improvement. This needs to be coupled with the sensitivity towards the students as recipients of the feedback, as feedback should motivate and enable a response. Ontological and ethical commitment is necessary on the assessor's part. This raises concerns in relation to the transferability of the model to modules assessed by other lecturers who may be less interested and committed to dialogical principles. This to a certain extent may lead to replicating a scenario similar to that discussed in chapter seven, where the impact of feedback on student learning appears to be directly proportional to the assessor's commitment to provide highly formative feedback.
- In phase 3 and 4 peer-feedback was given in place of lecturer-given feedback and for GDED2 group-based feedback replaced individual feedback. These strategies were an attempt to manage feedback with large class sizes. Large class sizes led to led to efforts to think creatively about solutions, including compromises that would still involve a commitment to dialogical principles, particularly through providing feedback. Group and peer feedback to a certain extent led to a diminished impact on learning if compared to individual and personalised feedback given to BET3 students in Phase 3.

While this issue highlights a limitation of the model it also reconfirms, as stated in chapter eight, that personalisation and attention to the individual student offers the best opportunities for learning development.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter concentrates on the insights gained during the research process and discusses these in the context of the research questions. Conclusions and insights from the study are presented in a systematic sequence, reflecting the tri-dimensional nature of the association of dialogue with assessment argued for in the thesis as a whole. A key purpose in reviewing the outcomes of the research in this format is that of opening up productive avenues for further exploration of the place of dialogue in assessment practice. Accordingly the chapter has the following structure.

Section 11.1 considers the findings on the three main research questions posed and relates these according to the three philosophical dimensions discussed in Chapter three (ontological/assessment *as* dialogue, ethical/assessment *for* dialogue and methodological/assessment *through* dialogue).

Section 11.2 identifies some important recommendations for further research and for the development of dialogically infused assessment practice.

Section 11.3 outlines some limitations of the study.

Finally, the concluding remarks briefly summarises what this thesis has attempted to do and what has been learned from the process.

11.1 The infusion of dialogical principles in assessment practice: outcomes of the research

In order to explain how the initial idea for this research came about it is necessary to take a step back. A practical syllogism may help to illustrate the initial conceptualization of the problem.

Education has as one of its core purposes promoting learning

Assessment is an educational activity

Assessment *should* promote learning

The verification of the contention that dialogue can be associated with assessment and that this association may strengthen the educational function of assessment requires careful consideration of the multiple dimensions of dialogue in its association with assessment.

The outcomes of the research indicate that it is indeed possible to associate assessment with dialogue and the positive performance trends presented in chapters seven and ten suggest that such association may be beneficial to students' learning. However the analysis of outcomes also shows that the association of dialogue with assessment is not straightforward. Unless attention is paid to the various dimensions of such association, the association itself may be destined to fail in meeting its most essential goal, namely promoting learning.

As the research unfolded three dimensions of dialogical practice emerged which are encapsulated in the core question that this thesis set out to answer:

Can assessment

- be conceived *as* dialogue,
- act as a catalyst *for* dialogue and
- lead to transformation in educational practice *through* the implementation of dialogically infused models of assessment?

As we have seen throughout this thesis, in addressing whether assessment can be seen as dialogue the roles of those engaging in assessment relations need to be questioned. In order to assume a dialogic orientation in educational practice one necessarily needs to endorse democratic and equalitarian values that allow him/her to commit to reciprocal relationship with students with the aim of advancing learning. For assessment to become a catalyst for dialogue, openness and less convergent forms of assessment (and of assessment advice provided through feedback) need to be promoted. Finally the association of dialogue and assessment needs to be reflected in methodologies that allow for openness, divergence, mutuality, engagement. Emphasis needs to be placed on the process rather than on the product of learning, not merely on the product, through the embodiment in the process of the principles just mentioned. Such methodologies can contribute also to expanding conventional concepts of dialogue commonly associated with verbal and face-to-face interaction.

In phases 1 and 2 of the research presented in this thesis, it has been argued that it is necessary to increase the transactional presence in distance education contexts to enhance the educational experience of students. In order to minimise the potential for misunderstanding generated by physical distance, it was proposed that educational relations needed to be reconsidered. In particular it was suggested that a more explicitly acknowledged two-way form of exchange was necessary so that misunderstandings could be clarified and a degree of mutuality could be established between distance education tutors and students.

Dialogue emerged as a productive concept to reframe the educational relation precisely because dialogue is reasoning with others and as such it requires two-way exchanges. The limitations imposed by the physical distance between students and educators made it necessary to think creatively about dialogue beyond its common understanding as verbal, face to face one to one exchanges. Given the dual focus of the analysis in the thesis on the students' experiences and on assessment as an educational activity, the issue of ethically defensible assessment relations became a central concern. Such relations - it has been argued - should be characterised by two way exchanges enhancing transparency and student active participation in the assessment process. This helps significantly in overcoming the gap of physical distance between assessors and assesses in distance education settings.

These purposes were advanced through the design, implementation and evaluation of a feedback report form infused with dialogical principles. The form was designed as a tool to enhance mutuality between assessors and assesses by increasing accessibility, clarity and transparency of assessment judgments, thus helping students and assessors to rethink assessment as a process leading to continuous advancement of learning. However it emerged that the merits of the form, as with most tools, cannot be evaluated without considering how it has been used. In designing the form attention had being paid primarily to the methodological dimension of the association of dialogue with assessment (*assessment through dialogue*). The students' evaluation of the effectiveness of this intervention in helping them to progress with their learning highlighted that despite their satisfaction with the form itself the use of it made by different tutors/assessors was at times rather deficient. A commitment of assessors to their *educational* role (*assessment as dialogue*) and to the educational welfare of their students (*assessment for dialogue*) is necessary in first place. Commitment to principles of mutuality, respect and responsiveness to educational needs of the other should be regarded as key factors to the success of any assessment intervention.

Phases 3-5 of the research benefited from the insights that had emerged from the first two phases. The design of a new intervention – an assessment portfolio aimed at developing trainee teachers' competence in assessment – was informed by the multidimensionality of the association of dialogue with assessment that emerged from the first two phases of the research. The portfolio had retained the process orientation and the transparency that had characterised the first intervention. In addition it also aimed to address the ontological and ethical dimension of the association of dialogue with assessment. Through specific tasks included in the portfolio, trainee teachers were asked to embrace the role of assessors. They

designed an assessment activity conceived for a specific group of students identified by them. They also selected learning outcomes for a programme of study they had chosen and matched learning outcomes to assessment outcomes. They peer-marked each others' assessment activities and provided feedback. Finally they reflected on the experience of becoming assessors and on the impact that assessment has on students. The analysis of the reflection diaries and the responses to questionnaires in these three phases indicate that through completion of these tasks students reflected on need to commit the welfare and educational development of students through assessment. They recognised the importance of paying close attention to the needs of the students and the potentially damaging effect that harshly and poorly formulated feedback may have on students (assessment for dialogue). This prompted also a reconsideration of the role of the assessor (assessment as dialogue). For part-time students (BET3) who were already practitioners this meant rethinking their current practices. For full-time students (ET3) this meant considering the future direction of their role and practices as assessors.

It is important to emphasise that, while specific observations can be derived from the analysis of the outcomes of the research in relation to each of these three dimensions (*as/for/through*), the presentation of the outcomes under headings relating to each dimensions is somewhat artificial. Ultimately the interplay of the three dimensions is necessary in order for assessment to be associated with dialogue so that it will promote fruitful learning in a progressive and sustainable way. However the organisation under headings helps us to clarify the specific contribution of each individual dimension to assessment practice. In section 11.2 a framework for the infusion of dialogue in assessment practice resulting from the research will now be considered.

11.1.1 Assessment as dialogue

As discussed in chapter three, Kezepides (2011) - in arguing for education *as* dialogue - affirms that 'all learning is not learning *that* something is the case, or learning *how* to do something, but learning *to be* a certain kind of person'(p.5). It was suggested that in focusing on assessment as dialogue we need to focus on the ontological dimension. At an **ontological** level dialogue has two implications: firstly it is *a way of being* and secondly, in terms of the learning it fosters, it contributes to *learning to be*. With regard to the first implication, how those involved in dialogical forms of assessment see their role is a crucial factor. With regard to the second implication, engaging in dialogic assessment relations should in itself promote a shift in the assessor's attitudes, practices and way of being as a teacher. The research carried out for

this thesis offers some insights on both implications of the ontological dimension of the association of dialogue with assessment.

Dialogue as a way of being

- In investigating the reason for the only partially positive outcomes obtained in chapter seven with the introduction of a new feedback report format, it emerged that the form had been used differently by the tutors investigated. The use of the form was connected to how tutors saw their role and responsibilities in relation to their students. The new feedback format required tutors to depart from their habitual way of providing feedback and to make the basis of their judgment more explicit through the provision of more detailed and multilayered feedback. Such challenge was met with disinterest by some and by resistance by others. Feedback, particularly in its association with dialogue, is demanding. Beside the need to invest time in the provision of effective feedback advice that helps assessees to become both more knowledgeable and autonomous, such feedback is demanding at an ethical level. It requires assessors to be explicitly aware of their own personal and professional values. It also requires them to reframe their professional role to strike a balance between, on one hand, being knowledgeable and caring advisors and on the other, preserving authority during the assessment process. Increased transparency of assessment criteria, not only through their explanation in assessment briefs, but also and more poignantly through their application and further elucidation through feedback comments, may result in a certain degree of vulnerability for assessors. By disclosing the basis of their assessment judgments they open themselves to being questioned. Ironically such questionability may be seen as an expression of the mutuality necessitated by pedagogical dialogue.
- The outcomes emerging from chapter seven highlight the point that dialogue necessitates perceptive choice and agency on the part of the assessor. There is often a tension between the educator and assessor roles and between having regard for the personal and academic wellbeing of the students. The concerns highlighted by tutors point at the fact that pedagogical interventions that intend to cause a substantial change in practices are more likely to succeed if the change is brought about by practitioners themselves, or if practitioners have had an active role in the generation of new practices. In order for dialogical principles to be endorsed by teachers and students, ownership and freedom to choose such principles is necessary. Dialogue is a lived experience and as such needs to stem from those directly involved in educational

practice. Imposition of dialogical principles is a contradiction in terms and it is likely to result in a perfunctory response from practitioners. The formalisation of feedback provision in a more structured format – as outlined in chapter seven - was perceived by two of the tutors participating in this case study as contributing to the erosion of academic autonomy and as restricting their personal feedback style. The resistance to the new feedback report form may have been partially caused by the lack of tutors' involvement in the development of the new format and as a result it may have also occasioned a lack of ownership and endorsement. Attempts to encourage assessors to externalise the basis of their judgments appear to have been perceived by tutors as an attempt to interfere with their habitual feedback practice. Furthermore the introduction of the new feedback format was perceived in general by tutors an attempt to reduce spontaneity and depersonalise the interaction between tutors and students through feedback. As argued in chapter seven a core misunderstanding of the purposes of the new feedback report form may be at the root of this perception. Such perception however may have arisen precisely because of their lack of involvement in the restructuring of the feedback process. This may have led tutors to underestimate the extent of the change they were asked to embrace.

- It makes little sense to speak of feedback as dialogue if the whole pedagogical relation between students and teachers is not also recast as dialogue. This is perhaps one of the biggest difficulties in the proposition advanced by this thesis. Assessment, in its association with dialogue, may well be a drop in a rarely dialogical or even anti-dialogical educational ocean. Students and teachers are likely to find it difficult to see themselves as partners in the educational relation in the context of a particular subject or module if this type of relation is not more generalized. Roles are more likely to be transformed if the transformation is also part of a more systemic change.

Dialogue as learning to be

- Ontological transitioning has been discussed as one of the outcomes of phases 3 and 4 of the research (context 2) as outlined in chapter ten. Final year BSc in Education and Training students (ET3) who are pre-service teachers and trainers were required by the assessment tasks included in the assessment portfolio to mark and provide feedback on the work completed by their peers (Task2). In doing so they experienced the responsibilities and challenges that completing such task involves in actual practice. While completing that particular task they had to see themselves as teachers and experienced “being on the other side of the fence”. While the task made them

develop a technical ability in marking and feedback provision, it also made them reflect on values such as fairness and respect and on the responsibilities of assessors towards students. Final year students in the part-time version of the BSc in Education and training programme (BET3) are training or teaching practitioners and for most of them marking and providing feedback was already part of their professional practice. In their case the assessment task however helped in deconstructing some of their pre-conceptions about the role of assessors and students. In particular some of the BET3 students commented that they had never provided formative feedback and had not taken a sufficiently transparent approach to marking by making the marking criteria known to students before the assessment. As a result of this task some of the BET3 students commented that they wished to change their assessment practice with their own students. In both cases (in relation to both BET3 and ET3 students) a reconsideration of the role of assessors and assesses occurred.

11.1.2 Assessment for dialogue

This thesis has argued that dialogical being is a form of being with others. However being with others does not really describe how we should act in relation to others. If we consider being with others in the context of education and we regard teaching as a moral occupation (Pring, 2000; Fullan, 1993; Campbell, 2007; Carr, 2007), then our being with others in educational contexts necessarily has moral connotations.

In proposing that assessment could become a catalyst for dialogue it is also implied that the relation between student and teacher through assessment should be informed by values such as respect and trust that enable them to relate to each other across the power divide in a more equitable manner. If we return to the example offered by early Socratic dialogues as discussed in chapter three, it was suggested that the probing questions asked by Socrates were not a means for demonstrating cognitive superiority. Such questions opened up new avenues of exploration rather than forcing convergence of views. It has therefore been proposed that if dialogue is considered as a core dimension also of assessment practice, a mutual relationship based on responsibility, trust, care and respect across the differences is more likely to be promoted between teachers and students. However, too often in assessment practice roles tend to be set, outcomes tend to be pre-determined and convergence of students' views with those of assessors tends to be elicited. If ontological shifts occur and roles are reframed then greater fluidity can be injected in assessment relations. Assessment for dialogue can then

become an *equalising means*, and a *means for caring and respectful mutual engagement* between student and assessor.

Dialogue as an equalising means

While it is argued that inequality in terms of knowledge is inherent in the teacher-student relationship, it has also been shown that such inequality can be minimized and turned to advantage. Furthermore inequality in terms of knowledge should not result in other forms of inequality based on power and role stagnation. In chapter five it was argued that if dialogue informs assessment the assessors and assessees are seen as speakers and listeners in a shared pursuit. Hence dialogue intrinsically demands some degree of equality in terms of roles. Inequality in terms of knowledge can be productively exploited if assessors consider themselves also as ethical agents, who are responsible to themselves and to those they assess in addition to external bodies demanding accountability. Such productive exploitation should ultimately result in the reduction of inequality even in terms of knowledge.

- A productive exploitation of knowledge inequality can be achieved through the provision of carefully crafted feedback that pushes students beyond their current understanding without forcing them in a narrowly pre-established direction. This is illustrated by the analysis in Chapter six. For instance, Literature tutor 3 – whose work has been referred to as an example of good practice - not only provides corrections but also raises answers for further exploration. His feedback opens up new avenues of exploration for the student without forcing the student to answer in a narrowly pre-determined direction. Such openness denotes an ethical orientation towards the student and respect for the potentially unexpected and divergent answer that the student can bring in answering the question. The embodiment of dialogical principles in assessment practice entails the fostering of responsiveness. Response-enabling feedback needs to be clearly formulated and detailed and should provide ostensive information exemplifying ways of addressing problematic issues.
- The outcomes of chapter seven suggest that tutor 3 had invested time and effort in making the basis of his judgment known. In providing students with detailed advice also on how to tackle future assessment tasks, he appears to have produced a trend of continuous improvement among the students allocated to this tutor, denoting responsiveness to the advice provided by this tutor. This tutor stood out for the level of commitment and care taken to ensure that his students would benefit and develop in response to the advice given. Furthermore what is particularly remarkable about

this tutor is that, despite raising the issue of the increased workload generated by the new feedback report format in the interview, he acknowledges its value and as a result commits to the principles that had informed its design. His recognition of the value of the format also led him to disregard the part-time and temporary nature of his employment as a factor determining the level of commitment to his role as an educator. The assessment practice of this tutor illustrates a fruitful intersection the ontological and the ethical dimensions.

- In chapter seven, tutor 4, unlike tutor 3, took a minimal approach to feedback provision and in the interview tends to attribute students' lack of improvement to their unresponsiveness to the advice received or to poor attendance at tutorials. His feedback advice tended to be mostly retrospective and rarely offered students opportunities to progress in their understanding. The rather different level of commitment displayed by this tutor, if compared to tutor 3, suggests that assessors need to find in themselves the source of obligation that allows them to relate to their students through their professional practice in a fair, caring and respectful manner.
- It should be noted that assessors, in making the basis for the judgments known, effectively give up exclusive control over the criteria for assessment. This makes assessors more open to criticism, which may undermine their authority. However if a relationship of mutual trust has been established, the vulnerability that sharing assessment criteria generate does not result in a loss of authority. In chapter 7 tutor 5 stated that the new feedback format had forced him to move away from his habitual more generic feedback provision style and he perceived this as an intrusion in his academic freedom. This potentially signals a discomfort with greater disclosure of the basis upon which assessment judgments had been made and suggests that this may be seen to undermine the authority of the assessor.

Dialogue as a means for mutual engagement

In chapter nine it was argued contra Noddings (1984) that care in teaching should not be dependent on receiving a response from students, but that it should nevertheless hope to elicit one. Certainly in assessment the provision of feedback - if formatively and dialogically framed - is aimed at eliciting a response in the form of improved performance.

- The analysis of performance in phases 2-5 suggests that when feedback has been dialogically and formatively framed it has had some productive impact on student performance, even if those trends of improvement cannot be straightforwardly attributed to feedback alone. It can nevertheless be tentatively proposed that, when care has been taken by assessors to provide feedback that is tailored to the needs of the individual student, this has acted as motivator for engagement with the advice provided through feedback.
- In phase 5 of the research, as outlined in chapter ten, the majority of the respondents to the evaluation regarded the assessment format as conducive to establishing a relationship with the lecturer/assessor. Anecdotal evidence of a more relaxed and co-operative atmosphere in the classroom was observed particularly after receiving feedback on the draft submission for task 1 of the dialogically-infused assessment portfolio designed for modules ES402 and ES556. The establishment of such an atmosphere also resulted in a more active participation in classroom discussion by a greater number of students in both GDED and BET groups. The responses from the questionnaire and the anecdotal evidence from classroom interaction suggest that the efforts that I made as a lecturer and assessor elicited some degree of reciprocation that allowed me and student to sustain dialogical interaction during the module and not only in the form of improved performance.

11.1.3 Assessment through dialogue

In chapter 3 unsophisticated criticism of the methodological and instrumental dimension of dialogue has been criticised. If dialogue is instrumental to promoting learning and development then it fulfils its educational function and as such the instrumental dimension can be positively regarded. The embodiment of dialogue in assessment practice, as proposed by this thesis, is aimed at promoting fruitful learning and specific interventions were devised with this particular aim in mind. The infusion of dialogical principles in assessment practice has been promoted through designing and implementing a new feedback report form (in research phase 2) and an assessment portfolio (phases 3-5). The implementation of these dialogical interventions highlighted three specific issues: firstly that the association of dialogue with

assessment is not necessarily bound to dialogue being expressed through verbal interaction; secondly that dialogic interaction in assessment should primarily be characterised by processes that enable students' progression, and thirdly that a trade-off between preserving the integrity of dialogical principles and their translation into sustainable assessment practice needs to be achieved to ensure the long term sustainability of the practice. Furthermore sustainability is primarily influenced by the workload that the intervention generates. Creative and judicious use of one's own professional judgment needs to be applied to maximise benefits to students while reducing the workload. The use of feedback templates adapted to meet the specific needs of students – as shown by the feedback provided by Philosophy tutor 5 in chapter six -is an example of this phronetic trade-off. Similarly the provision of feedback on a group basis on draft submissions in phase 5 of the research and the inclusion of monitored peer-marking and feedback are also measures that reduce the workload for the assessor. Such measures also manage to preserve the integrity of the principles included in the charter, while moderating the potential increase in workload.

Dialogue as a process

Dialogue and learning are both processes. Therefore the association of dialogue with assessment should lead to reframing assessment as a process. The outcomes of the research – particularly in phases 3-5 -suggest that greater emphasis on the assessment process rather than on the assessment product may result in greater engagement with course content and with deeper learning.

- The feedback report form discussed in phase one of the research was restructured in phase two (presented in chapter seven). Such intervention was aimed at increasing the process orientation in feedback provision as a means also to maximise the overall dialogic orientation of feedback. The analysis of the coding patterns presented in chapter seven reveals that the new format had produced a generalised change for all tutors, but to different degrees. More marked improvement trends were recorded for those tutors who presented more multi-layered feedback provision, also placing greater emphasis on capacity building for future assessment activities. Hence placement of emphasis on the process of learning in the revised feedback report form, through the introduction of sections specifically providing advice for future assessment activities, appears to have been beneficial to and positively evaluated by students.
- In research phases 3-5 greater engagement with the course content has been observed throughout the semester and has also been highlighted by students

themselves through their end-of-module evaluation questionnaire. Such engagement with the course content signals that the assessment format had fostered a shift from a narrow focus on assessment results to learning as part of the assessment process. Feedback and the format of the assessment emerged as a key driver of learning and improvement. This supports the view that when feedback is incorporated in the learning process rather than given at the end, students are more likely to be responsive to it and, as a result, to gain from it.

Sustainable and viable dialogue

Considerations regarding viability and sustainability of practice are important, however they should not be the only considerations and certainly not the primary causes of interventions aimed at optimising educational practice. If sustainability and viability alone drive educational intervention there is a serious risk that the instrumental dimension of practice becomes the primary focus of education. Values and principles should be the primary springs of pedagogical action.

- The data presented in chapter 10 (Phases 3-5) highlight sustainability at two different levels: 1) sustainability of the dialogical model through translation in different learning contexts; 2) sustainability of learning gains as a result of engaging with the assessment process and responding to feedback with enhanced understanding and control of assessment criteria.

11.2 Recommendations

This section presents a number of recommendations derived from the analysis presented in the thesis. After some general recommendations, more specific recommendations are provided to address issues relating to the role of assessment practitioners, to guide the design of dialogically-infused assessment and finally to highlight possible areas for further research.

General recommendations

- 1) **Moving away from a narrowly instrumental view of education.** Optimal dialogical practice is personalised, fosters engagement and autonomy and is transformative. However, lack of resources frequently seems to constrain the possibilities of achieving optimal practice. In taking a dialogic approach to assessment practice a move from a technicist view of education is implied. This should also be coupled with greater emphasis placed on the relational dimension. The construction of ethically defensible

relations should be primary; techniques, tools and methods should be secondary and dependent on the type of relationships sought. A multi-dimensional approach – taking into consideration the inter-play of the ontological, the ethical and the methodological – should underpin not only the embedment of dialogue in assessment practice but also educational practice in general. Such a manifold shift from a narrowly technicist view of education may then also offer a more fertile ground for more widespread infusion of dialogue in educational practice.

- 2) **Taking a systemic approach in changing assessment practice.** In proposing that current assessment practices in third level education and beyond need to be restructured in order to accommodate a dialogical orientation it is also suggested that such change is more likely to be productive and sustainable if a more systemic approach is taken. At the level of the individual practitioner this means modifying teaching and learning activities in a broader sense to integrate assessment more fully among those activities. At the level of organisations it means taking a multidimensional activity¹²⁴(Fullan, 2007) and orchestrated approach, whereby those engaging in innovative assessment practices are supported and encouraged to share and promote their initiatives among colleagues.

- 3) **Translation of principles in other educational contexts.** The infusion of dialogical principles in assessment practice does not need to be restricted to third level education. The changing landscape of secondary school assessment in Ireland¹²⁵ offers opportunities to try new assessment formats that are rich in formative value and in relationship-building potential. This may also entail devising specific training for assessors and sharing an understanding of dialogical principles with a broader

¹²⁴ Fullan (2007, p.28) argues that the essence of change” revolves around three concepts: beliefs and values; knowledge and skills; and outcomes” and suggests that unless the interplay of these three factors is taken into consideration, meaningful change cannot be introduced and sustained.

¹²⁵ The newly published (October 2012) Junior Framework

http://www.juniorcycle.ie/NCCA_JuniorCycle/media/NCCA/Documents/JC-Framework_FINAL_02oct12.pdf

emphasises the flexibility that has been introduced in the assessment practices that gives more scope for teachers to manage directly assessment and to introduce change in their own practices. Minister of Education Ruairi Quinn in his foreword to the report states:” I want the junior cycle to place the needs of our students at the core of what we do and to improve the quality of their learning experiences and outcomes. Such an approach should enable all students to achieve their full potential and be properly challenged in their learning, thereby raising educational standards. To achieve this, we must ensure that assessment becomes a key part of teaching and learning across the three years of junior cycle and provides high quality feedback to students and parents. The opportunities for such approaches to assessment are even greater in situations where assessment is no longer high-stakes.”(p. V). The report also acknowledges that This new focus on assessment, particularly on ‘assessment for learning’ as well as on ‘assessment of learning’ will be a challenge for schools and will require significant Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for principals and teachers”(p.3). A renewed interest in assessment may offer opportunities to stir educators in the direction of dialogical assessment practice.

practitioners' community and researching the adaptation of the principles and of the model for different communities of practice.

Specific Recommendations for assessment practitioners

- 1) Reflection on one's own personal and professional values** The success and impact of assessment interventions, even if informed by the dialogical principles specified in the charter presented in chapters seven and ten, may be short-lived. The charter should elicit in the assessor a reflection on the level of commitment he/she is willing and able to offer to ensure that the intervention helps students to learn. This may entail a continuous process of re-examination of the practice as various phases in the implementation of the dialogically-infused portfolio model show. It also entails considering ways to achieve defensible compromises between committing to students' learning and to the integrity of dialogical principles, while at the same time generating a manageable workload for the assessor. The development of the assessor's professional care as an element of professional judgment should therefore be cultivated as a prerequisite to the engagement in dialogically-infused assessment practices.

- 2) Reflection on one's own role and authority in the assessment relation.** As emphasised throughout this thesis, the fostering of mutual and democratic relations between assessors and assesses, aimed at promoting learning, is necessary. In embarking on dialogical assessment assessors need to self-monitor and reflect on how they relate to their students to ensure that they develop autonomously and are able to express their creativity within the parameters of the subject. The authority of the assessors should therefore be expressed not through exclusive control over assessment criteria but through authoritativeness in the guidance provided through a type of feedback which is stimulating in both motivational and analytical terms.

Recommendations for assessment design

- **Refocus assessment on sustainable learning.** In a recent article (2007) Harry Torrance speaks of the necessity of conceiving assessment as an educational activity that builds students' capacity for autonomy and development. Not surprisingly he questions the educational value of formative feedback that is prescriptively formulated and as such fosters convergence with narrowly conceived learning outcomes. Similarly, arising from the findings presented in this thesis it is recommended that assessment and feedback should continuously focus on fostering long-term learning rather than simply

on the fulfilment of tasks criteria. Such purpose is best achieved if assessment is structured in such a way that allows students to share meaning with assessors and to develop their critical understanding of the subject. Therefore assessment should allow – when appropriate and within the limits of the specific subject domains – students not to be penalised for expressing divergent views from those of the assessors, and ensure that convergence is not forced upon assessees.

- **Construct assessment as a process.** The shift of emphasis from assessment product at the end of a teaching and learning cycle to assessment process where learning is part of the assessment is also more likely to result in active engagement with the course/subject content. It is recommended that assessment is structured as a cyclical process during which feedback that provides advice, building the capacity to tackle future assessment more confidently and effectively, is provided. Such feedback can also have a motivational function if it also refers to previous performance to highlight how current performance shows progression. Furthermore in structuring assessment as a process, cramming is more likely to be prevented and deeper and more reflective forms of learning to be encouraged.
- **Adopt a broad concept of dialogue not limited to specific forms or modes.** No specific prescription of what shape dialogic assessment should take is offered because dialogic assessment is not characterised by specific formats, techniques or modalities. However the figure below attempts to sum up some of the defining characteristics that are recommended in the design of an assessment that is dialogically oriented. Figure 11.1 presents a framework that may guide assessment design choices. It shows how the three dimensions of the association of dialogue with assessment relate also to parameters (Purpose, Mode, Orientation and Content) that need to be considered when designing assessment. It also exemplifies how those elements should be translated into practice if a dialogic approach to assessment is taken. For instance the figure suggests that no specific mode is associated with dialogically infused assessment as the mode itself is not a defining characteristic of dialogical interactions. As shown by this thesis, with a broadened concept of dialogue, written dialogues are possible even if they do not sit happily with conventional canons for dialogic interaction.

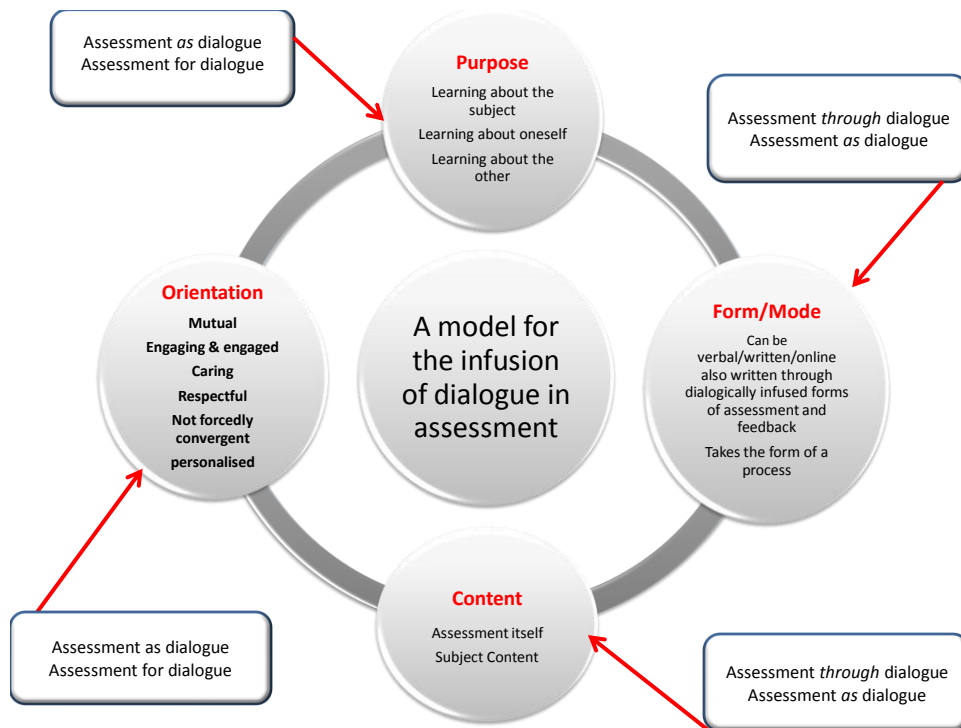


Figure 11.1 A model for the design of dialogically infused assessment

Also dialogue in assessment could help to elucidate subject content more in-depth and it may help students to understand more clearly the assessment criteria. In the latter case dialogue may focus on assessment itself. Furthermore a dialogical orientation in assessment may be expressed through personalised feedback which provides clear and transparent information for students to improve and develop in an autonomous way. Finally, dialogical assessment is inherently formative, hence its core purpose is the advancement of learning. But learning in a dialogical sense is represented by the development of the student's capability for autonomous and creative thinking that allows him/her to interact with the subject content in an open and enquiring manner.

Recommendations for further research

- 1) Application of dialogical principles in various subject domains.** Given the benefits but also the limitations that have emerged from this study, future research on the topic might profitably focus on the effective ways of contextualising the dialogical framework and increasing its ability to maximise learning gain from feedback. In particular it would be important to demonstrate that dialogic approaches are also suited to frame formative practices not only in the domain of the humanities but also in the domain of the sciences. It would be particularly interesting to research whether less convergent forms of

dialogically-infused assessment portfolios, allowing students to respond in varied and creative ways, can also be designed for science-based subjects.

- 2) **Investigation into long-term impact of dialogical assessment approaches on professional practice of trainee teachers.** In chapter ten it has been suggested that a dialogical assessment format may lead to greater sustainability of learning well beyond meeting the requirements of the assessment task. Therefore it would be important to verify if such sustainability can be rightfully claimed by researching whether learning that has been initiated through the assessment task has been sustained and transferred to professional practice of trainee teachers. Some of the BET and ET students investigated by this thesis claimed that as a result of undertaking study and assessment for module ES204/ES222 Curriculum Assessment and Evaluation their own views on assessment changed. Some declared that they intended to change their future practice. It would be important to follow up on those students and verify to what extent the dialogical model has actually brought about change in their professional practice.

- 3) **Investigation into combined forms of dialogue in assessment.** A comparison of various forms of dialogue may be a further avenue for research. Such analysis may disclose ways of combining various dialogue modes in order to maximised the opportunities for learning. Further exploration of creative and effective ways of achieving a defensible balance between preserving the integrity of dialogical principles and maximising benefits to students (particularly with large groups and with students in distance education contexts) should also be undertaken. The research for this thesis has provided examples of dialogic assessment practice with different groups of students and in different educational contexts. More research is required to achieve a balance between viability and pedagogical benefit to students. In particular, the development of good dialogical practice with large groups of students and in distance education is necessary. Such examples may ultimately offer further evidence that the distance between assessor and students created either by large group sizes and by geographical separation can be overcome by creating relational processes through assessment that promotes sustained learning.

11.3 Limitations of the study

The research undertaken for this thesis utilised a multifaceted design-based approach.

As discussed in chapter two the interventions designed within DBR research framework are contextualised and developmental activities are closely grounded in the specific opportunities and limitations imposed by the chosen context. This study is no exception in this regard. The conclusions that have been derived from the evaluation of the interventions have been discussed in chapter six, seven and ten in terms of the specific needs of and benefits for the educational stakeholders the research was meant to serve.

The grounding of the research in the context of practice was at once a strength and a limitation. By paying close attention to the needs of the stakeholders within each context it was possible to devise interventions that offered a swift response to those specific needs in a practical and manageable way; chiefly through redesigning elements of the assessment that had been found to be deficient. However, precisely because of the specific nature of the intervention to suit the characteristics of the context, claims of generalisability of the outcomes of the specific phases of the research under identical conditions cannot be advanced.

Furthermore the research for this thesis has demonstrated that principles for dialogical assessment practice included in the charter discussed in chapters seven and ten can be embodied in different assessment interventions and in different contexts of practice. This outcome allows one to suggest that such principles are transferable and adaptable to meet varying contextual constraints and needs while not compromising their integrity. The charter is essentially an “orienting framework” (Di Sessa & Cobb, 2004, p.81) which does not provide prescription, but rather offers a general perspective “for conceptualizing issues of learning, teaching and instructional design”. Such lack of prescriptiveness in the formulation of the framework -while it may be perceived as a limitation of the outcomes of the research- is intentional. Firstly it is ultimately the result of reflection on the meaning of dialogue, especially its inherent openness towards new avenues of exploration. Secondly the non-prescriptive nature of the frameworks offers greater flexibility that may allow practitioners to make contextually appropriate choices in the design of their own interventions. Accordingly the framework does not propose a causal model of professional action (Biesta, 2007a) as implied by models of evidence-based educational research. Rather it invites practitioners, who might wish to refer to it to inform their practice, to explore, review and discuss the appropriateness of the model to their own contexts of practice.

Concluding remarks

The research presented in this thesis refers to specific contexts of educational practice and to specific groups of students; as such it does not make claims of generalisability of its conclusions. While it offers some evidence that dialogical practice is both desirable and viable in the contexts analysed, it can only suggest that the infusion of dialogue in assessment practice may also benefit students in other contexts.

Too often we –as human beings with other human beings- engage in *monological dialogues*. *Monological dialogues* are communicative exchanges which, on surface, present the characteristics of dialogues. An external observer could witness in such rituals evidence of turn-taking, some degree of shared meaning and even some evidence of ostensiveness, whereby interlocutors exemplify and demonstrate a point. Such exchange may even be described as a process denoted by apparent clarity and transparency. Yet those involved in this exchange could skilfully play their part without ever fully engaging in a dialogue. Hidden agendas and power roles may mar the exchange so that meaning is shared only to the extent to which it does not rock implicitly accepted hierarchies.

Too often I have taken part in such dialogues where sharing meaning never meant negotiating meaning. Transparency and clarity were simply features of the communication of a fixed and pre-established meaning rather than uncovering necessary ingredients for making a new and emerging meaning understood by both parties. What strikes me about such apparent dialogues is that fundamentally what is missing is the willingness to be equal partners in the exchange. Equal here does not mean at the same level in terms of knowledge and power, but rather in terms of how one relates to the other, regardless of hierarchies. If such equality in the orientation towards the other in the exchange is taken seriously, sharing of meaning, transparency and clarity and even ostensiveness acquire greater significance as they become equalising means. If there is a genuine intention to engage in dialogue clarity and transparency do not make explicit a pre-established point but rather are means by which shared understanding emerges as part of a collaborative process. Clarity, transparency and ostensiveness are no longer features of the elucidation of unilaterally transmitted information, but characterise the contribution to emerging and shared meaning of both interlocutors.

This thesis has attempted to raise awareness of the potential benefits of infusion of dialogue in assessment practice. However such infusion requires substantial changes in current assessment practice and in more general in educational practice. “Pockets of dialogue” may

show an alternative way of constructing educational relations but they are unlikely to substantially change how the educational system works as a whole. Unless practitioners come to appreciate the pedagogical benefits of assessment *as, for* and *through* dialogue, interventions such as those described in this thesis only illustrate benefits within specific contextual boundaries, rather than in more generalised terms. While contextualised examples from practice are *per se* valuable, more efforts should be put into the formation of educational practitioners to allow them to consider their own values and how such values influence their educational practice. Furthermore, practitioners should be supported in reviewing their values and in opening up to alternative ways of seeing educational relations from what they have experienced themselves. Only if this process is productively initiated can vicious circles of anti-dialogical practice be broken.

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