
Variation in academics' conceptions of e-assessment

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Earlier research in academic development proposed that enhancing teaching often derives from changes in how teachers think about their own teaching (Dall'Alba, 1991). Accordingly, the current study postulates that academic teachers conceptualise e-assessment in a number of qualitatively different ways; some of them may replicate traditional pedagogical approaches and merely transfer them to blended or online assessment settings while others may endorse transformational notions of assessment, underpinning knowledge construction and student agency. The study aims to synthesize and extend the findings from two existing clusters of studies. The first cluster derives from qualitative, non-phenomenographic research exploring conceptions held by academics about assessment without taking into account the layer of complexity brought about by technological tools. Influential studies in teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning identified a continuum of conceptions ranging from teacher-focused and content-oriented conceptions on the one end to student-focused and learning-oriented on the other end (for a review see Kember, 1997). Entwistle (2000) noted that *limited* evidence suggested that contrasting conceptions of teaching tend to hold corresponding views on assessment. Several studies also contended that teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching affect their approaches to teaching (e.g. Kember & Kwan, 2000). However, there have been no extensive, follow-up studies aimed at ascertaining whether contrasting conceptions of teaching are aligned to corresponding views on assessment or what the exact nature of such an alignment may be. Samuelowicz and Bain (2002) identified a continuum ranging from an emphasis on knowledge reproduction to an emphasis on knowledge construction and transformation and Postareff et al. (2012) described categories of concep-

tions, from reproductive conceptions to more transformational conceptions of assessment. The second cluster consists of phenomenographic studies in the area of conceptions of teaching and learning through technologies. These studies investigated university teachers' conceptions of, and approaches to e-learning (e.g. Ellis et al., 2009; González, 2010) and blended learning (Ellis et al., 2006). They did not, however, take into account assessment as a distinct element of the process of university teaching.

The adopted phenomenographic approach aimed to describe the phenomenon from the perspective of people involved with the phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997) i.e. teachers e-assessing within blended and online environments. Twenty participants have been invited to attend semi-structured interviews - preceded by two pilot interviews. The sample was drawn from teachers of a modern British university; a wide number of disciplinary backgrounds and academics with differing levels of experience was sought. The interviewers prompted academics to describe *possible* ways of utilizing e-assessment tools, their experiences of practicing e-assessment in general and details about a particular e-assessment practice they are engaged in. Participants were invited to explain what the purpose of the e-assessment was, how they understood their role in e-assessment and what they believed the role of the student was. Rounds of iterative analysis produced four qualitatively different, hierarchically-inclusive and logically-related categories of how academics conceive of e-assessment. E-assessment has been seen as a means: (i) managing and streamlining the assessment process (ii) communicating and engaging with students (iii) enhancing student learning and the quality of teaching (iv) community and (digital) identity building. The paper also reports on dimensions of variation, most importantly the role of the teacher/assessor, the role of the student, the level and quality of collaboration, the role of the technological medium and, finally, who benefits from the e-assessment processes. Conclusively, variation in the way academics conceive of e-assessment is discussed in light of previous studies in this area; implications for faculty development are approached under the lens of expanding awareness i.e. how can faculty development promote qualitatively more advanced conceptions of e-assessment and how can such interventions can improve student learning.

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