‘Using dialogue as an assessment tool’ – Workshop Report

Introduction:

The ESCalate-funded Research Project ‘Using reflective dialogue to assess professional learning’ [http://escalate.ac.uk/6333](http://escalate.ac.uk/6333) is undertaking comparative research into dialogic practice in HE. The project focus is on the use of dialogue for assessing Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in the context of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF) which was introduced in 2006 to raise the status of Teaching and Supporting Learning in HE, but we feel our work is also more widely applicable.

Focus of Workshop in June 2010:

At this early point in our research we wanted to raise some interesting and emerging issues about dialogue as an assessment tool.

The project team invited participants to attend a workshop on 4th June 2010 to explore how dialogue can be used:

- To assess knowledge
- To assess practice
- To evidence reflection on practice

In the context of a growing need for tools that can flexibly and appropriately support and assess experience, practice, performance and motivation, this workshop anticipated a rich discussion around this little researched tool and to share ideas and issues around its application and development.

Outcomes

Colleagues were invited to bring along models and materials, posters and fliers of their current practice in using of dialogue. Interesting resources and information was provided.

- UCln as host shared the work of the ESCalate team, and started off the discussions about dialogue, inviting sharing from colleagues about their own dialogue practice.

Particular contributions also came from:

- Chester colleagues are working on assessing SD3 within UK PSF for the project. Chester colleagues showed a video of a training dialogue;

- Colleagues from Portsmouth shared their extremely interesting work on ‘nested dialogues’ which had been developed and used with students and took a learning dialogue into a much richer multi-media environment in which individual learning was unpacked and enhanced using multiple and creative media;
• Colleagues in UEL reflecting on their experience of being assessed for UK PSF using the dialogue/presentation approach;

• A Bishop Grosseteste colleague shared her research into assessment as part of three projects and work undertaken for her doctoral thesis
  o a) English Subject Centre funded project focusing mostly on the development of criteria and procedures for assessing discussion
  o b) TDA funded project on the impact of teaching and assessing discussion skills on the professional skills of education students
  o c) PhD on the influence of dialogue, assessment and peer-leadership on student learning in history seminars.

• A Bolton colleague contributed with a widely welcomed definition of dialogue which emerged from the group activity on the day;
  o ‘Dialogue should be multidimensional, dynamic; interaction creates new understanding in participation through insightful questioning and articulation of metacognition’

Finally, the event brought together colleagues from a variety of sectors including primary and there was some fascinating documents shared on dialogue and oral assessment in primary contexts by a colleague from Kingston.

In the second half of the day, colleagues worked in groups to define dialogue as well as to discuss issues around its assessment. Groups came up with common themes about dialogue:

**Group One**
Important to clarify the philosophy underpinning dialogic assessment. Members suggest it could be seen as:
- Conversation with a purpose
- It has to involve moving forward
- Learning should emerge for all

Care should be given to the different purposes of dialogue as there is an inherent power differential in assessment due to the differing roles

Dialogue should be multidimensional, dynamic; interaction creates new understanding in participation through inciteful questioning and articulation of metacognition

Assessment involves: quality of dialogue, evidence of understanding

Suggestion that the key to defining assessment is about looking at what dialogic assessment is not.

**Group Two**
Ideas involved in dialogic assessment include:
- Process versus product,
- Assessment for learning
- To expose the process
- A shared purpose
- Genuine questions to seek unknown answers
- Formative for the participant (backwards and forwards)
- Power relationship is two-way

**Group Three**
Dialogue as assessment involves
- Consideration of influence of assessment criteria / Learning outcomes
- Appreciative Inquiry versus negative marking
- Dialogue is about learning evolving
• Assessment is about summative element
• Dialogue involves complex interaction; compare with monologue
• Mutuality, turn-taking
• Different expectations can be an issue
• Would students know when dialogue is in process?
• Notion of process is critical
• Emphasis is on growth

Noted the benefit of online dialogue: online revisiting of threads of conversation is possible on-line but not in conversation

Other points raised included:

• A definition of dialogue needs to be made by the institution
• Comparison of dialogue to interview: dialogue is not interview
• There is a considerable issue around training and generic skills in dialogue, e.g. is it coaching of mentoring; the generation of questions that open up dialogue
• But dialogue is easier to assess because the face-to-face experience exposes truth, validity, integrity
• From an educational perspective dialogue may have an emancipator purpose; is it judged holistically?
• We need to beware of one-sided agenda setting in dialogue and the open endedness of it; also power issues

The participants gave extremely positive feedback on the day. The conviction was strong among participants that dialogue was an underused form of assessment that could potentially lead to deeper, richer more meaningful evaluation of student learning. Participants asked for further workshops to share findings as the project progressed. Participants were also asked to submit outline case studies of work on dialogue in their respective institutions as part of a possible publication.

A second workshop will be held in 2011.

Participant List:

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