Investigating Dialogue: how effective is it for assessing and exploring learning from practice?

The poster presents the outcomes of a UK Project funded by the Education Subject Centre Project (ESCalate) in the UK. This project investigated how selected UK universities are making use of dialogue as an assessment tool for assessing professional practice. In the context of the UK Professional Standards Framework and a need for flexible means of assessing practitioner learning, the research outcomes present valuable insight into the application of dialogic assessment for discussion.

This submission proposal takes the form of a poster. It addresses 4 themes within the iSSOTL Conference: Faculty development methods or strategies; assessing students; skills development and lifelong learning; supporting learners.

Whilst it is widely acknowledged that learning is socially constructed and that meaning making is an important part of the learning process, which is strongly supportive of both a reflective and a discursive model of learning, there has been little specific research focusing on the use of dialogue as an assessment tool. Brown et al discuss oral assessments, and others promote the value of discussion around assessment processes to help students gain both from feedback and from making the task and criteria clear (Odonovan, Rust et al, 2000, 2004). The contribution made by peers, the ‘critical friend’, and social interrogation of practice within reflective processes is also widely supported (Boud, 1998; Brockbank & McGill 2007). Reflection itself presents an essential mechanism within experiential and work-based learning processes (Boud, 1996). Transferring this into wider contexts, community, culture and the collaborative formation of knowledge within organisational contexts also contribute through models of organisational learning and change processes (Wenger, 1998; Pedlar 1996).

Hence when introducing dialogic processes as a mechanism for assessing practice and supportive the reflective exploration of values and practice within the context of the new UK Professional Standards Framework (HEFCE, UUK 2006), we were aware that we were taking a creative and innovative approach to assessing performance and reflection for academic staff. The logical step was to research the implications and using funding from the Education Subject Centre our research into dialogue has revealed considerable potential for it as a flexible, challenging and rigorous assessment tool and a valuable one for generating appreciative, supportive environments for exploration and culture change.

Dialogue allows critical interrogation of practice and deep investigation around meaning, commitment and the assumptions associated with professional practice and development (Powell 2004, Bell 2001, Kreber 2004, Brookfield 1996). It has value as a facilitator of reflective space and as an appreciative framework to encourage academic staff to unpick their practice and underlying values in a way that written text-based mechanisms do not (Fish 1997, Brockbank & McGill 2007). The project has identified a range of models to inform the use of dialogue in this way, and also used research into a series of UK HE institutional case studies to investigate the breadth and scope of application of this tool. Findings suggest particular requirements for the training of assessors and around process; early indicators suggest that the benefits and positive outcomes of using this tool outweigh the challenges; suggestions are that the dialogic process supports faculty development and change at a significant level.
The project team wishes to use the poster process to engage colleagues in debate and wider discussion of the value of dialogue within the assessment of experiential and practice based learning contexts, and to prompt wider dissemination of the outcomes of this research.

**Research Process:**
ESCalate funded Project, £15k, 18mths from Sept 2009- December 2010
Institutions involved:  UCLan (Dialogue use with postgraduate students and for professional accreditation); Chester (Dialogue use with managers for SD3 leadership and mentoring accreditation; dialogue for assessing work-based learning); Worcester (Dialogue for APL purposes at SD1 within a formal PG Certificate course), Liverpool (reflection on professional development).

**Data:**
3 dialogues per institution transcribed; 1 interview of a participants and assessor on process – transcribed; reflection and discussion on process by project team; Ethical clearance through UClan and Chester, permission and information documentation and consent slips obtained from participants.

**Analysis:**
Initial pilot for the project bid included analysis of transcribed dialogue and interviews with assessors/participants had identified a series of themes. These have directed initial thematic readings of documents. Discussion and more detailed reflection on transcripts have raised further areas for exploration:
- Management of dialogue; nature of dialogue; language used by assessor/participants
- Power issues
- Evidence to support assessment and judgment – within dialogue and using interviews; nature of evidence; link to assessment criteria; rigour of process
- Further exploration will expose issues of identity, relationship and stance to T&L
Thus far TAGCloud and NVivo thematic dissection of dialogues underway

**Outcomes:**
1. Sharing of research into dialogue as an assessment tool; conclusions about assessment of values, behaviour, competence using dialogue
2. Guidance to others in sector on training for assessors and use of dialogue
3. Research based evidence for HE Sector, professional standards recognition
4. Book, papers, evidence base

Reflection and discussion on process to date suggest the process has validity, reliability and rigour, but there are significant challenges involved in the training of assessors.

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