Using dialogue as a tool for assessing learning

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Abstract

Within social constructivist paradigms, dialogue is seen as critical to the process of learning and meaning making. Communities of learners (Wenger 1998) engage in discourse to share understanding and construct a culturally situated ‘knowledge base’ involving either the deconstruction and reconstruction of abstract knowledge making it relevant and meaningful to the learners’ context (Odonovan et al 2004; Goodfellow & Lea 2007), or, conversely, it involves the exploration of practice and theorising around practical knowledge generating new, shared or professional knowledge (Ponte 2010).

We find that dialogue as an assessment tool has been little researched (Cosh in Wisker, 2005), but is widely and effectively used to support critical reflection on practice (Brookfield, 1995; Kahn et al, 2006; Brockbank & McGill 2006; Laurillard 1999). Using empirical inquiry into the use of dialogue for reflecting on and assessing learning, preliminary findings suggest that dialogue provides a flexible, rigorous and effective assessment tool at a number of levels. The research raises questions about the training and expertise, as well as status, of assessors (Knight, 2004) and the assessment and judgement of reflection.

Using a qualitative process involving participant interview and analysis of dialogues being used for assessment across several HEIs, the project aims to establish answers to these issues by exploring evidence of reflection, the effectiveness and reliability of the dialogic process, and the contributions made by the protagonists within the assessment experience. The paper invites participants to discuss preliminary findings and the questions raised by this research and to consider its value for their own assessment practice.

Keywords: assessment, dialogue, professional learning, learning