ESCalate Research Grant Project Final Report

Date submitted 21 September 2011
Project Title Using reflective dialogue to assess professional learning
Project Leader Ruth Pilkington
Institution University of Central Lancashire
Project Start date 1 September 2009
Project End date 2 September 2011
Summary

The use of dialogue to support professional and experiential learning is well established in the literature, however its use as a tool for assessment is little researched despite being widespread within specific subject areas and contexts. Increased interest in assessment for learning, and a need for an assessment tool for professional accreditation of HE academics, has prompted this study. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative analysis of twelve assessed dialogues, this project has explored issues of power, judgment, structure and definition which can arise for those wishing to develop dialogue as a tool for assessing reflective learning. The conclusion from the research and experience of participants is that dialogue offers significant advantages when assessing reflective and professional learning. It is reliable and rigorous in exposing values and attitudes typical of this form of learning and in exposing and exploring practice through use of examples, narrative and the dynamic structure of dialogue. Added benefits as part of informal organisational structures involve sharing and peer learning. The project identified the particular value of a mentored dialogue model by Brockbank and McGill (2007) in effectively supporting and assessing professional and reflective learning. Finally, the project has produced resources and data which can inform the training and development of those involved in implementing this tool in a variety of contexts within HE, FE, vocational and professional education. Resources can be found by accessing the project website on http://escalate.ac.uk/6333. Resistance to use of dialogue for assessment purposes often relates to time, second marking, moderation, quality assurance and the reliability of evidence in written format. The project has found that slight adaptations to normal quality assurance processes can accommodate the differences associated with this form of assessment, whereas the dynamic and flexible nature of dialogue allows probing, and detailed examination appropriate to expose reflection on practice and professional learning. Training of assessors should focus upon detailed engagement with criteria and skills in facilitation of dialogue.

1. **Project Overview**

   a) **Aims and Research Questions:**

   The project aimed to research the value of professional dialogue as a tool for assessing and structuring informal professional learning. In addressing this aim, the focus of the research was to explore the following:

   1. What skills and training are required for assessors?
   2. How valuable is dialogue when engaging staff with reflection and learning for the purpose of accreditation?
   3. What impact does use of dialogue for assessing professional standing have on management of the assessment process, the participant’s learning and perception of the process, and the development of the practitioner?
   4. How is it being applied across the sector?
The project is situated primarily within a HE context where the assessment of professional learning as part of an accreditation process linked to the UK Professional Standards Framework for HE (UK PSF) has become a significant concern for universities. The project lead has extensive experience within the field of professional development and its assessment (Pilkington 2007). Dialogue forms an important component of successful learning and assessment within work based contexts and when assessing reflection by professionals (see project bibliography http://escalate.ac.uk/6333). Having developed dialogue as a form of assessment within the lead university (UCLan), it had been adopted for formal assessment of experienced HE academics within a CPD framework, but early investigations indicated a lack of research into how effectively dialogue worked as a tool for assessment. An inquiry across the HE sector showed interest in the potential for development of dialogue, and therefore the project established a small group of universities where dialogue had been employed in order to facilitate the research.

As the project progressed, the focus of analysis centred on the dialogue and how effectively it worked as a means of assessment. This was regarded as appropriate because it would allow lessons to be drawn to inform the training and work of future assessors and others interested in this form of assessment. The data analysis primarily focused on questions 2 and 3 of the aims (above) therefore with conclusions and findings and output meeting question 1. Workshops at the start and end of the project, alongside consultation with national networks (SEDA, HEA, HE PG Certificate Course Leaders) informed question 4 complemented by a literature review which revealed limited research into use of dialogue for assessment purposes across sectors. This also highlighted the intense interest in dialogue as part of learning and assessment support processes. This suggested that the current research was timely and necessary.

Initially four institutions were involved. This included Glyndwr, UCLan, Chester and Worcester. Glyndwr withdrew early because of changes to personnel and was replaced by Liverpool. This meant a profile of one pre-1992 universities and three post-1992 universities. Whilst further universities were invited to participate in order to broaden the data base, many of those interested were at too early a stage of dialogue use as a specific tool for assessment. Appendix 1 shows institutions which have consulted with the research project during its lifetime. All the final project participants were actively involved in use of dialogue for assessment of professional learning for HE practitioners.

b) Methodology

Data collected: 11 transcriptions of professional dialogue, plus a pilot transcript; 4 core institutions; pilot interviews with assessors and candidate; interviews with assessors from institutions A and D, participant from institution B.

Participants on the project - apart from the Research Assistant (RA) - were all involved in the dialogue assessment process; in addition the project drew on input from a ‘Critical Friend’ from the HEA project ‘Practitioner Review of Literature on …’, 2006, Dr. Peter Kahn. Following the model adopted by the earlier HEA Practitioner Review Project reported in Kahn et al, 2006, several meetings were held with project representatives reflecting and engaging in a collaborative process of analysis and consideration of data, and dialogue use. This informed the identification of themes, and focus for analysis in an iterative developmental cycle.

Early activity included a pilot of the data collection process, and a broad practitioner-led literature review which focused on the nature and process of professional learning and its assessment, and the use of dialogue for assessment, as well as exploring judgment of professional learning. This informed the development of themes which were subjectively identified from content, process elements and issues emerging within transcriptions. Coding
reflected these components and themes were adjusted and amended in an iterative process of review and attention informed by the literature and specifically by the discussions and reflections of participants.

Data was primarily analysed qualitatively although there was some quantitative examination of data. This reflected a desire to identify patterns as well as to explore individual processes of dialogue and how professional dialogues might be structured, supported and used as part of a reflective and experientially relevant process of assessment. It also helped inform participants in developing management systems and processes for training assessors, and assuring quality.

A range of basic statistical data was generated through the mapping and recording of themes, use of Tag Clouds to illustrate word frequency, and basic recording of word counts. In addition, examples of particular interventions including interruptions, phatics, open/closed/directive questions were recorded and examined, as well as examples of use of power and sharing. The result is a multi-level picture of different layers of analysis and interpretation, which have been used to inform findings and conclusions informed in turn by the experience and perspectives of the professional educational developers working on the project.

c) Sampling and ethical clearance

Dialogues used for the research were based on convenience sampling using and agreeing use of assessed dialogues as they arose over the year. Ethical procedures were completed through institutional processes at two of the institutions involved, and other institutions provided letters confirming acceptance of this process and commitment to participate. Anonymity and confidentiality was assured for those participating in the dialogue process. Informed consent and agreement was obtained from participants before the dialogues were recorded, and reaffirmed afterwards; transcriptions being made available to owning institutions for clearance and sharing with participants; withdrawal of permissions to use the transcribed data did not arise.

Recording of dialogues is accepted practice for assessment situations requiring moderation and for quality assurance. All recordings were anonymised through the host institution project lead and transcription process. Whilst data on background and educational history was evident from transcriptions, it has only served as a source of contextualisation and generic summary (see below). Within the report and in any subsequent publications, samples from transcriptions will be carefully chosen and used to avoid identification of individuals and preserve anonymity.

Changes to the project have largely revolved around being able to complete data analysis which has taken a lot longer than anticipated and is still yielding results and being interpreted; furthermore local institutional priorities and the basis for funding which did not allow funding for time from project members meant that activity and research analysis was being undertaken in addition to normal role demands. This meant that progress was probably less sustained over the period of the project and this has impacted on the projected timeline and efficiency with respect to dealing with data and establishing and reporting findings.

d) Range of data:

12 transcripts were obtained and transcribed, with preliminary coding identifying themes, process. A wide range of use of dialogue for assessment of reflection for professional purposes was identified. The range embraces:

- APL (accreditation of prior learning) dialogues as part of formal interview process supported by portfolio, upon completion of which participants can enter and complete a PG Cert award;
• Assessed dialogues as part of formal modules in which the assessed dialogue involves reflection back onto assignments and reading completed, and forward to action plan for own CPD;
• Dialogue for completion of assessment against UK PSF (UK Professional Standards Framework for HE) Standard Descriptor (SD) 3 using a short reflective statement submitted as evidence; and
• Professional dialogues completed as a final stage in a mentored reflective process applying a specific model for assessing professional learning for UK PSF SD2 status.

Summary of subjects shows candidates in professional dialogues came from a range of backgrounds:
  2 show history of entry into academe from previous work in industry or other sectors, relatively new to HE but experienced in education and training;
  2 show experience at high level of leadership within organisation in management/change roles;
  5 have strong research background, PhDs and entry to UK HE teaching within last 5 years;
  4 candidates also had extensive teaching experience abroad;
  2 appeared to be non-UK nationals.

Overall reflecting the context of dialogues, there was a range of experienced and novice HE lecturers across the sample. Teaching fields included business, medicine, sports and science, arts, humanities, social sciences and education.

Themes identified in dialogues reflect the contexts of the sample and specific assessment applications of each dialogue in assessing professional learning and reflection for accreditation purposes. Backgrounds of those having substantial teaching experience abroad reflect on differences and challenges in transferring to UK HE environment, for example; those within taught PG Certificate programmes emphasise teaching beliefs, deep consideration of teaching and their responsibility to students; others focus on their perspective and relationship to the learning and assessment activities, to the institution and to their role and colleagues; those having entered from alternative careers emphasise pragmatic concerns in relation to students’ needs, diversity and pedagogy; those operating at SD3 show evidence of themes associated with organisations, leadership and mentoring as well as pedagogic concerns.

e) Results
Dialogue is an effective and appropriate tool for assessing reflective and professional learning. It provides a dynamic and flexible tool that can efficiently and effectively expose values. The project provided an opportunity to explore literature and processes around what is a little researched tool and to draw conclusions on the basis of modelling and theorising from data obtained enhanced by the reflection and explorations of the use of dialogue by project participants and using two key events and workshops, as well as in exploration with communities of peers. Papers and publications are currently being drafted using the qualitative data analysis.

Those actively working on the project have been able to develop their own institutional approaches on the basis of the project. The project has yielded training videos for use when training staff at one institution, for example, workshop materials and resources to support those implementing this tool, and training tools for those acting as mentors and assessors when using dialogue for UK PSF.

Below I list briefly findings against original aims:
  1. What skills and training are required for assessors?
It is clear from the research that considerable training is required for assessors. The research exposed several models for the dialogue and the fact that inequality caused by the assessor-assessee relationship can limit opportunities for genuine exchange and sharing which is the hallmark of dialogue. This was largely addressed where the model of a mentoring dialogue was subsumed within the preparation and assessment process, and also where dialogue was between peers. Training in mentoring, facilitation of the dialogic process and engagement with the criteria (professional standards) are essential elements of support required. Examples of exchanges and video were used to support this process, alongside workshops which unpack the process and criteria.

2. How valuable is dialogue when engaging staff with reflection and learning for the purpose of accreditation?

Dialogue emerged as a convincing tool for assessment of learning of a reflective and experiential nature. The role played by examples, narrative and story-telling in particular strengthened the reliability and rigour and provided opportunities for exploration of beliefs, values and praxis. The live nature of dialogue generates a dynamic situation in which probing, exploration and reflection are crucial components.

3. What impact does use of dialogue for assessing professional standing have on management of the assessment process, the participant’s learning and perception of the process, and the development of the practitioner?

Universally across the project, both participants and assessors stressed the value and positive nature of the experience. In particular the opportunity to explore and reflect on one’s own teaching and learning practice was regarded as invaluable and energising. The conclusion suggested is that the process has a valuable contribution to make to how professionals can articulate and conceptualise what is often tacitly known and experienced. The range of dialogues used showed that depending upon context and purpose additional resources may be drawn in to support an assessed dialogue, but are not necessary. The model of a mentored dialogue which incorporates a staggered process in which the assessee is supported by a mentor to explore their practice prior to engaging in an assessed dialogue appeared to be particularly valuable. (See the adapted model based on Brockbank and McGill, 2007 in Appendix 2; report by Critical Friend Appendix 3). In general management of the process was showed to fit well within usual QA processes of marking and moderation on the basis of the recordings. Time was in many respects regarded as equivalent to that required of portfolio use, but it was felt by both parties to be far more positive and developmental: less formal. This was regarded as a significant benefit.

4. How is it being applied across the sector?

Interest in the workshops and from communities of peers indicated that dialogue is generating interest as an assessment tool. It is being applied across primary, secondary and tertiary sectors reflecting the growing attention to ‘assessment for learning’. It is still regarded with some concern as a sole tool for assessment, reflecting the dependence and reliance on written forms of assessment for evidence. However the project found that processes of quality assurance, moderation and monitoring were equivalent if different. It also found that a shift to dialogic forms of assessment opened up opportunities for creative approaches involving narrative, multi media and organisationally-relevant spaces in which practice could be reflected on, shared and explored.

f) Project Impact

An early activity was to analyse the differing forms of dialogue. This showed a wide variety of usage across all sectors and across the institutions involved. This conclusion was reinforced at the early workshop (June 2010) which revealed a wide and diverse use of
dialogue across all sectors and a growing interest in its use when assessing experiential learning or reflection and process. This is discussed in the literature review on dialogue which is currently being submitted for publication. This appears to complement the widespread emphasis of its value as a support tool within assessment and learning. Review of the dialogue process evident within transcripts led to modelling of possible dialogue processes. More detailed analysis of transcripts raised questions about whether dialogue as defined by the project could actually occur within unequal assessment situations as a result of power and management. Dialogue was defined by the project as ‘Talk between 2 or more people in which thoughts feelings and ideas are expressed, questions are asked and answered, or information exchanged’. Where dialogue was applied between peers however this exchange was far more likely.

Elements of dialogue that were identified as of particular importance when assessing it for professional purposes included that it ‘should be multidimensional, dynamic; interaction should create new understanding in participation through insightful questioning and articulation of metacognition.’ Modelling of dialogues reinforced that this was able to take place but required care and structure to ensure the developmental learning aspects were supported.

It appeared that dialogue within the assessment context was often affected by issues of power, control and judgment. This is exposed through modelling the dialogue processes across transcripts and exploring the way that power and input from participants varied. This is an important outcome and reinforced the value of the Brockbank and McGill (2007) model as a means of ensuring this sharing and learning could occur. It also reinforced the value of completing a peer-led dialogue where rather than the participants being assessor and assesse, the dialogue was held and managed by two ‘participant-assesseees’ with an observer-assessor. This allowed a more equal and open dialogic process to develop which more closely matches the definitions above. The process within the Brockbank and McGill (2007) mentoring dialogue as adapted by one of the institutions enabled the dynamic, exploratory, sharing process to be incorporated in a structured way as part of the preparation stage for the final assessed dialogue.

Impact is currently still being mapped by the project as an extension has been requested to allow the project leader to disseminate and publish after completing the data analysis. On the basis of activity to date however impact can be seen to have been achieved at a number of levels:

- In depth and significantly in terms of informing the work and understanding of those institutions who participated actively on the project;
- Stimulating interest and sharing information through workshops, early articles and website;
- At an intermediary level through inquiries and consultancy across a smaller group of institutions who have actively inquired into resources and information from the project.
The use of dialogue will have deeper impact within the institutions involved which will extend to students because where staff have used dialogue they will be more likely to explore and develop approaches adapting this form of assessment. Additionally, because of influence through PG Certificate programmes (most of those involved in the project have included initial teacher training programme leaders), further embedding of dialogue as a potential and viable form of assessment will take place.

The intention for Chester and UCLan as the most active and advanced users of dialogue as a form of assessment will be to use outcomes for training for assessors across each institution, and to disseminate outcomes through workshops.

The project has provided significant benefit to me as project leader through its inclusion within my own doctoral research.

See also Critical Friend Report Appendix 3

2. Outputs

Outputs include:
- Web resources and reports
- Bibliography
- Literature Review (currently being submitted for publication)
- Conference Papers – planned for HEA, SEDA, etc
- Discussion Papers reporting on research, methodology and findings
- Article in ESCalate
• Paper ESCalate on Professional Standards, 2011
• Paper TBC – Pilkington R, being submitted to IJAD ‘Professional Dialogues – exploring an alternative means of assessing the professional learning of experienced HE academics’
• Possible Book, draft proposal currently being drafted
• Training Resources: overheads, models of dialogue, key readings

4. Project Activity to date and Future Events
• Conference Paper at Assessment: Research and Innovation for Inclusive Practice Conference Programme, 8th July 2010
• Poster Presentation given at ISSOTL 19th-21st Oct 2010
• Application made to HEA to fund Assessment Seminar on Dialogue in assessment (unsuccessful)
• Paper Proposal to SRHE, Canada 2011 – not accepted
• Paper proposal to Canada June 2011 – accepted but withdrew
In addition to early contacts with colleagues at Hull (dialogue to support peer review reflection), Portsmouth (Narrative dialogue), Leeds (Formal scholar dialogue), and Middlesex (reflective dialogue for WBL) about dialogue and its value to reflection and work-based learning, further contacts have been established with colleagues at Liverpool (professional dialogue), BCU (professional modules assessed dialogue adopted following project model); inquiries and conversations with colleagues from Newcastle, Essex, Queens Belfast, Liverpool Hope; consultancy on dialogue with York St John and BCU; presentations on the project to colleagues from SEDA and the HE PG Certificate Course Leader Network, and through the workshops in June 2010 and July 2011. The June workshop (2010) in particular was open to all sectors and drew interest and attendees from primary, secondary and further education sectors as well as HE. As a result of the fact that analysis of data is only now being completed, papers and articles will form a focus for forthcoming events in 2011-12 necessitating a request to extend final deadlines to allow this to take place. Future planned events include possible papers at conferences for the HE Academy, ISSOTL, ISL, EARLI depending upon opportunity and focus. In addition papers are in draft for IJAD, and papers are planned for the Journal of FHE and Assessment and Evaluation. Hence the project is seeking to use the final tranche of funds for this purpose and also to support the postponed writing event.

5. Expenditure Profile
Submitted to ESCalate

References
Brockbank A & McGill I 2007 Facilitating Reflective Learning in HE SRHE/OUP 2nd Ed
Pilkington R 2007 SEDA PDF – A Tool for Supporting and Structuring CPD Frameworks SEDA Special 21, SEDA, London
**Appendix 1**

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**Inquiries, consultancy and contacts**
York St John, Birmingham City University, Essex, Newcastle

**Professional Groups**
SEDA Professional Development Framework Committee, SEDA Executive, PG Certificate Course Leader Network
Appendix 2

Adapted as a ‘Professional Dialogue’

- Normally takes place between an experienced ‘other’ and the ‘student’.
- It involves a 3-stage process:
  - an initial set-up dialogue,
  - an exploratory dialogic process, and
  - the assessed dialogue.
- Stage 3 is recorded and involves a second assessor to act as moderator or second marker.
- In Stage 3, one assessor comes from the subject or ‘field’ and acts as mentor through the preparation phase of dialogue, the other may have a broader, objective, generic teaching and learning perspective

The mentee acquires ownership of the focus and direction of the dialogue as the process develops assuming a more equal role in preparation for the final assessed dialogue.
Appendix 3 –
ESCALATE project – Using reflective dialogue to assess professional learning

Report from the project’s critical friend, Dr Peter Kahn, University of Liverpool.

5th September 2011

Context
I was invited to participate as an external critical friend to the project through attending meetings and workshops, and commenting as relevant on project outputs. I attended the initial workshop on the 4th June 2010 and two meetings of the project team. I further commented on proposals for the July 2011 workshop. I am Director of Studies for the Doctor of Education (EdD) programme in Higher Education at the University of Liverpool. I offer here a range of thoughts on the project, rather than a single crafted argument.

Comments on the final report

Importance and take-up of the project
Dialogue itself represents a fundamental form of human interaction, as indicated through the central place that dialogue is accorded within such areas of thought as critical theory (Habermas), hermeneutics (Gadamer) others. It is interesting that dialogue is used more extensively in other national educational settings at various levels of education (e.g. continental Europe), suggesting that scope is present for a much wider usage in the UK.

The Higher Education sector is facing particular challenges at the present time in the UK, with a need to demonstrate high quality provision to students and to other stakeholders. It will thus be important to find robust routes to effect such a demonstration, but without adding significant new burdens that cannot effectively be delivered. In such a professional context, there are attractions to using dialogue to demonstrate professionalism.

It is thus not surprising that there has been good engagement with this project from across the sector. The initial workshop attracted good attendance, and evidence of uses of dialogue across a wide variety of settings. There is evidently scope for further dissemination of the project in terms of scholarly outputs, with an audience already in place given the take-up of existing outputs from the project.

Further dissemination
The project report outlines a clear indication of the project’s main findings, although practical outputs emerging from the project are also likely to be important in its wider dissemination. Beyond this, the project undertook a large volume of data analysis, with findings still emerging more recently. Dialogue, clearly, has the potential to generate an extensive amount of evidence within a relatively short period of time; and this effect was clearly at work in the transcriptions that resulted from the examples of dialogues that were included within the project. There is thus good scope for further dissemination work, including scholarly publications, to ensure tease out more fully the insights emerging from the project, and to ensure that these reach the widest possible audience.
Comments on project findings
Dialogue offers good possibilities for authentic assessment, particularly in relation to reflective learning and to articulating professional expertise and experience. There are clear links, for instance, between reflection and dialogue, as with the dialogic nature of reflection (Hatton and Smith 1995). The validity of assessment in relation to the professional context is thus less likely to be an issue than those that pertain to the reliability of assessment, although there may be some issues in relation to the assessment of outcomes that pertain to the scholarly literature. Or, at least, further outputs from the project should take note that concerns around reliability are likely to be present within the academic community in judging the success of this project.

Further perspectives
I conclude by offering some further perspectives on the final report. There are particular resonances between the findings that emerge from the project and the work of David Bohm (e.g. Bohm et al, 1991), although his vision of dialogue is set within the setting of somewhat larger groups. He emphasises how dialogue involves a search for insights, whereby participants suspend their pre-judgments and engage alongside each other as peers. It is clearly challenging to link assessment to a process that is predicated on dialogue as a path to insight and understanding. Assessment which involves a testing of knowledge that has already been attained clearly represents a different model to assessment via a dialogue, which connects more directly to assessment for learning.

There are thus advantages in adding earlier phases of dialogue which are not directly assessed in order to maintain parity between those involved in the process, as the final report proposes drawing also on work by Brockbank and McGill. This helps to address inequalities otherwise might arise in relation to an assessor and assessee which clearly has the potential to limit the usefulness of dialogue as a means of assessment. But it would be worth exploring alternative means to address such inequalities, beyond introducing earlier stages to the dialogue: in principle there is scope for protocols to ensure parity between the dialogue partners, or to require certain forms of preparation.

Recent scholarship on collaborative working that I have conducted (Walsh and Kahn, 2009) highlights also some of the other vehicles that can be harnessed to support dialogue, whether shared practice, technology, physical estate or co-location, and social capital (e.g. organisations, personal networks, teams, etc, as well as the importance of engaging the individuals concerned (e.g. through taking on a designated role). It could be worth also exploring this wider context within which dialogue occurs, given that the focus on transcripts has ensured a most direct concern with the content of the dialogue itself.

References