6-5 Assessment: "Here's your degree, darling, go"

Introduction

> But it's a terrible thing to say, actually. [Laughs]. Work in a university and say "I don't believe in assessment". [Laughs]… …I mean, I almost feel that what we should do is forget exams altogether just give every student who comes in a bloody degree at the end. "Here's your degree, darling, go". (Participant 19)

Whilst there is substantial debate and discussion around the nature of media studies, its purpose and characteristics, both publically and within the academy, attitudes crystallise, starkly in the case of this participant, when reduced to a discussion of assessment— a dialogue where a sophisticated dialectic of learning outcomes and assessment criteria is distilled down to 'just tell me what I have to do to pass' (Biggs, 1999; Prosser and Trigwell, 2001). This analysis draws on responses from three participants.

For Richard Wakeford, the importance of assessment is summarised (in Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 2001, p.58) as:

"…assessment is an integral component of the teaching and learning system… …student perceptions of what is rewarded and what is ignored by more formal examination procedures will have a substantial impact upon their learning behaviour and thus upon the outcomes of a course… …we need assessment to be accurate because it is pointless and unfair to students if it is otherwise."

An analysis of the participant responses together with a critique from the literature suggests that as one of the social practices that defines media studies, the assessment of student-produced media artefacts cannot be reconciled with a discourse that conceives assessment as potentially '*accurate*', leading to the response of Participant 19 (above) that suggests assessment may indeed be '*pointless*'.

Analysis

Within media studies particularly, assessment is inextricably linked to the themes of this study and so, although participants were not asked directly about their perceptions of assessment, some of them choose to frame their responses to other prompts with reference to assessment practices.

Participant 09 points to the relationship between assessment and other themes of the study by describing various assessment formats and distinguishing between them:

> So most of the units have a presentation, have a written piece, an essay if you like, or sometimes a report, depending on if it's vocation … more vocational and a practical piece. (Participant 09)

This taxonomy of assessment is based on whether he sees the unit as "*more vocational*", associating *reports* with the more vocational units and *essays,* by inference, with less vocational units. However, he only makes this distinction in relation to written work as he concludes by indicating that all units have a "*practical piece*" too. This relates to the rationale for foundation degrees considered in Chapter Six, Section 6-4. The significance of this short response is that it shows a link between the discourses around a rationale for media studies (Chapter Five, Section 5-3) and the assessment practices within a course; the participant characterises some assessment methods as '*vocational*' and others as not and so assessment practices can be seen as perpetuating and reinforcing a discourse of '*vocational*'/'*academic*' dichotomy.

> I insisted to myself that there should be (…) a theoretical essay in this module, as apart from anything else (…) and not just a diary so I mean (…) I just thought there ought to be some writing. (Participant 17)

In some contrast, Participant 17 frames the relationship between assessment design and a vocational rationale rather differently. This participant moved into higher education teaching following a long career in journalism as a reporter and sub-editor, including working for national tabloid newspapers (*Appendix 1*), giving him a distinctive perspective on writing processes and written work. He associates the essay assessment type with the '*theoretical*' aspects of media studies, a view that appears to be congruent with Participant 09's view of '*reports*' as '*vocational*'. But this participant is, consistent with his background, primarily concerned with the quality and depth of writing, distinguishing essays from assessment artefacts that are "*just a diary*". So, with a background as a professional writer, this participant appears to see less of a distinction between the '*vocational*' and the '*academic*', at least in regard to assessment practices.

The responses of these two participants serve to problematise the relationship between a rationale for media studies and corresponding assessment practices. Rather than categorise assessment types according to how they might reinforce particular views of the rationale for media studies, there is value in considering the relationship between the subject and modes of assessment more holistically. Bragg's (2000) critique of '*critical*' media studies and the teaching, learning and assessment associated with that approach leads to deeper consideration of the role of assessment in learning and it's effectiveness in evidencing that learning either tangibly or more implicitly. Her view is that practical work, whilst not unproblematic, is generally underestimated both as a learning activity and learning opportunity and as a tool for assessing students' understanding of critical concepts and their applicability:

"…current epistemological models of media education overestimate the contribution of theory and explicit knowledge to learning and that practical as a strategy in media literacy teaching is both richer and more problematic than ideological critique… …Intelligible and appropriate work in this mode can provide evidence of the creativity of implicit understanding derived from experience." (Bragg, 2000, pp.49-50)

Participant 19, whilst quite dismissive of the formalities of assessment, is quite clear about what she considers to be the over-riding qualities that she looks for when assessing students:

> Again, I don't care about grades, so long as people can show a...a visual imagination, and an ability to write, because there is no way you can work in the media [laughs] world without being able to write. So I just want to see two things: a visual imagination, an ability to write, and then you learn. (Participant 19)

Once again, the emphasis is on the quality of writing but this participant is also concerned with what she terms '*visual imagination*'. This phrase brings in a consideration of the visual aspects of the media and couples it with the idea of '*imagination'*— a term that appears to go beyond an assessment of the ability to understand and critically evaluate existing media artefacts to an assessment of a student's ability to apply those abilities constructively, creatively and innovatively.

Whilst setting out a framework for what should be assessed, the phrase "*I don't care about grades*" points to perceived difficulties in making that assessment in a way that would satisfy Wakeford's requirement that "*we need assessment to be accurate because it is pointless and unfair to students if it is otherwise*" (ibid.). This concern is echoed by other participants:

> How do you judge this stuff, you know, what, what constitutes an A, a B, a C, a D? So the learning outcomes were very important to kind of make it very clear for both students and staff. (Participant 09)

Participant 09 speaks of the grading process in a way that conveys concerns, posed as a rhetorical question. His response then points to a need for a shared understanding of assessment between academic staff and students and suggests '*learning outcomes'* as a vehicle for that. This is a conventional answer given the predominance of 'learning outcomes' or sometimes the more qualified 'intended learning outcomes' as part of a framework for documenting and prescribing learning within a modular or unitised approach to curriculum and course definition (Bell and Wade, 1993). The use of learning outcomes is prescribed through the *Quality Assurance Agency Quality Cod*e as an expectation of all applicable courses as part of a required programme specification:

"A programme specification is a concise description of the intended learning outcomes of a Higher Education (HE) programme, and the means by which the outcomes are achieved and demonstrated… …These intended learning outcomes relate directly to the curriculum, study and assessment methods and criteria used to assess performance." (Quality Assurance Agency, 2011, p.3)

Although mandatory across England through formal frameworks, the use of learning outcomes to define learning is not uncontested. Hussey and Smith provide a critique of learning outcomes grounded in a '*new managerialism*' discourse (See Chapter Six, Section 6-3)

"…universities and colleges must not only be made to adopt modern management techniques to ensure efficiency, they must also be exposed to the latter-day elixir for all economic ills – the rigours of the market place. Educational institutions need a bureaucracy capable of managing themselves and able to respond to the external pressures for accountability… …The new managerialism has created a situation in which the economic tail is vigorously wagging the educational dog." (Hussey and Smith, 2002, p.221)

Hussey and Smith see learning outcomes as a tool for artificially partitioning and commodifying learning and as a means of ensuring accountability, quoting Marilyn Strathern:

"The language of indicators takes over the language of service. Or, to return to the audit process, the language of accountability takes over the language of trust." (Strathern, 2000, p.314)

Their principal objections to learning outcomes are two-fold, their use as a means of managerially constraining and limiting learning and teaching, which they see as inherently wrong, but also that learning outcomes are ineffective in delivering this control and accountability as they:

"give the impression of precision only because we unconsciously interpret them against a prior understanding of what is required. In brief, they are parasitic upon the very knowledge and understanding that they are supposed to be explicating." (Hussey and Smith, 2002, p.225)

These concerns are shared by others, particularly in relation to the assessment of creative practice (Orr, 2007; Orr and Bloxham 2012; Kleiman, 2005). Orr argues that learning outcomes are part of a positivist discourse of assessment that spuriously implies the existence and value of objectivity in assessment with terms such as '*standards*', '*bias*' and the '*correct mark*'. This contrasts with Wakeford's assertion (see above) that "*we need assessment to be accurate*" as that implies that this positivist outcome is both achievable and desirable.

So whilst Participant 09 refers to learning outcomes as a starting point for assessment criteria that will lead to a classification of assessment artefacts according to a prescribed grading system there is some doubt that thinking and talking about assessment within a positivist discourse that includes '*learning outcomes*' can effectively evidence and quantify the results of learning that

Participant 19 describes as '*visual imagination*'. Speaking of the assessment of creative practice in the context of art and design courses, Orr (2007, p.648) argues that "*assessment is a socially situated practice that is informed by, and mediated through, the sociopolitical context within which it occurs".* This view can be equally applied to the assessment of media artefacts and doing so provides an insight into the participant responses that sees assessment practices as a significant contributor to, and indicative of, the wider social practices that constitute media studies.

Summary and Conclusions

The analysis of participants' responses concerning assessment shows how media academic staff must continually negotiate the discourses of positivist assessment, creative practice and employability. As a significant activity for both academic staff and students it is notable that assessment was seen as a much greater issue by academic staff participants than it was by the graduate participants. Where graduates did mention assessment it was cursory and unproblematic and largely expressed in the terms of a positivist discourse. Students were more concerned with the value of practical media production work as a learning opportunity rather than its use as an assessment tool.

These conclusions can be used to revisit the assertion of Participant 19 that "*I don't care about grades*". The completion of formative tasks is valued by the participants as a pedagogic tool in media studies but they are uncomfortable with the discourses of summative assessment that are ultimately used as a means of labeling students as '*graduates*', or not.