

Stručni članak  
UDK 378.147:371.279.7:821.112.2:378.4(410)

Primljen 15. 6. 2009.  
Prihvaćen 1. 7. 2009.

## INVOLVING STUDENTS IN UNDERSTANDING ASSESSMENT CRITERIA



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**This article deals with the problem of understanding academic criteria for essays and oral presentations. The module Reading Modern Germany at London Metropolitan University serves as an example. An evaluation of an informal survey showed that students often don't understand the assessment criteria for a successful essay or a presentation and that the tutor's feedback often doesn't achieve better future performances.**

**The author of this article suggests that students be involved in creating assessment criteria and in continuous reflection on their learning thus aligning the assessment criteria and the learning outcomes of the module.**

**In the example the module a method is presented which motivates students to reflect on their thinking and on that of their peers. This method aims at enabling students to actively participate rather than concentrate on exams and thereby gain the transferable skill to understand academic methods.**

*Key words: assessment criteria, reflecting, transferable skills*

In the course of teaching German language and literature at the London Metropolitan University it soon became clear to the author that students' understanding – or lack of understanding - of assessment criteria and their involvement in that process have a big influence on their performance and success.

The author emailed a questionnaire to the students; it revealed that most students were familiar with the assessment criteria but nevertheless encountered problems in understanding them or couldn't connect the assessment criteria with the feedback they were given. According to the results of the questionnaire the most common difficulties derived from the complex language of the criteria. Furthermore, terms like "satisfactory", "good" or "very good" were criticised as too vague and not helpful as formative feedback.

Research literature shows that transparent criteria are necessary for many reasons: Students and tutors don't usually have the same understanding, it enables meaningful feedback, and meets the principles of equity, fairness and accountability. More transparent

criteria have disadvantages too: In some cases or subjects, they may encourage a strategic marks-orientated approach rather than meaningful engagement with the subject matter (Norton, 2004). Tutors often cannot agree on the values or meanings attached to the criteria or they have mental models of marking which are resistant to new guidelines in applying assessment criteria (Woolf, 2004).

Beneficial as transparent assessment criteria are and much as students demand them, the danger of strategic, formulaic, surface learning has to be taken into account. Another danger lies in the over-dependence on tutor-guidance and a concentration on the mechanics of the task (Norton, 2004). Research shows that students resist critical thinking (Orsmond et al, 2002) and decision making is difficult for students. They sometimes try to renegotiate the demands of the work, because they are used to passive learning.

Boud (1995) suggests constructive alignment: Developing a curriculum where the aims match the learning outcomes and the assessment tasks and assessment criteria match the learning outcomes.

Other suggestions for the improved use of assessment criteria include: better definitions of requirements, exemplar assignments, class discussion, peer assessment, collaboration of students with tutors to devise criteria, combinations of any of the above

(Rust, 2003). It has been suggested that students should engage in creating assessment criteria and that the joint development of criteria should be seen as part of not only the assessment process but of the learning process as well. Involvement in creating assessment criteria enhances students' learning and enables them to perform better and with more confidence in peer and self assessment.

Ideally, the assessment criteria are transparent, understandable and are referred to in the feedback. At the same time they enable students to engage critically with the subject matter and enhance deep learning. Involving students in the process of creating assessment criteria can be seen as part of the learning process and enable students to engage in peer and self assessment with more confidence.

The key issues shall be discussed on the basis of the module "Reading Modern Germany", a module for final year students. The aims are to provide a critical understanding of a number of key texts, to trace recent history and to contextualise the works of literature within it, to extend students' ability to research and present material in a variety of ways using different media support. The learning outcomes are defined as follows: understand and appreciate poems, plays and short stories as expressions of a variety of cultural traditions, demonstrate a thorough understanding and appreciation of individual poems, plays and short stories in the German language, and present and discuss orally and in writing original material in either German or English.

The continuous assessment is based on one seminar presentation given in class and one written assignment on an unrelated topic.

The chosen methods of assessment for this module are an essay and a presentation. The students receive summative feedback for both assessments as they are both marked. There is no coursework and no examination.

While the methods for this module seem appropriate the involvement of students and

their understanding isn't. Essays are the most common form of assessment in the arts and social sciences (Brown, 1997) as they present a useful way of assessing deep learning. Essays require students to integrate knowledge, skills and understanding.

In the case of the German literature module, the essay requires students to understand the methods and means to analyse and discuss literature in its social and political context and, most importantly, to transfer methods of analysis.

These two different methods provide the necessary variety in assessment which are, in the writer's opinion, suitable for the module.

The problem is twofold. Firstly, there is the timing. The students do not receive the feedback on the presentation and the final essay early enough to benefit from it. In most cases, they have to wait until the end of the term. Secondly, there is the instrument of assessment, in this case, the marking scheme. As students stated in the survey, the language used in the criteria is vague. The marking scheme for the essay is divided into a) understanding of task, b) formulation, c) content and d) written presentation. For the distinction level the criteria are read as follows: a) Very well focused with full understanding, b) fully and clearly set out, few if any errors, very well structured, c) full coverage of issues raised and in-depth approach to topic, d) perfect spelling and punctuation. Whereas probably d) is obvious as it is measurable, students struggle to grasp the meaning of 'very well focused', 'full understanding', 'full coverage of issues raised'.

As a consequence, the students feel they have no guidelines for good performance and, given the fact that there is only a presentation and an essay, they don't benefit from formative feedback in other previous assessments.

The author therefore suggests that the emphasis has to be put on informal formative feedback on the students' oral performance in class. Adopting aspects of a constructivist theory of learning, it is seen that formative assessment feedback is essential to encourage the kind of deep learning desired by tutors (Higgins et al, 2002). Arguing with Rust (2002, 2003), assessment criteria should be reconceptualised as learning criteria. For the module in question, it means that students are actively involved in the process of creating assessment criteria and of developing strategies and methods to analyse texts. It is argued that both activities are closely connected and incorporating them into the learning process can be beneficial for the students. The students not understanding how they are assessed reflects not only vague assessment criteria but also an inability to find suitable strategies for text analysis and understanding of context. The varying texts used in this module required different approaches and strategies and that proved to be the biggest challenge for the students as they were not able to adopt one method of analysis to all texts and authors. One important learning outcome could be therefore defined as the ability to understand and appreciate that different texts and different authors require different suitable but not arbitrary approaches. For example, the analysis of Wolfgang Borchert's short stories needs to be related to the context of post-war Germany and the specific role of the genre short story at that time. Kafka's parables on the other hand don't necessarily reflect the social or political context but could benefit from a psychoanalytical and biographical approach, Ingeborg Bachmann's hermetic poems require knowledge of tendencies and development of the German literature



in the seventies.

An example of how students are tempted to use a strategic formulaic way to meet the assessment criteria is the transfer of analysis methods from one author to another. Adapting analysis methods that are suitable to the post-war short stories writers Borchert and Kafka lead to major misunderstandings as these parables reflect psychological dilemmata rather than social problems as they don't present realistic descriptions but are allegoric.

Overcoming the students' resistance to think critically and make decisions (Heywood, 1988) has to be one of the priorities of the module.

In order to develop critical thinking and thus enhance deep learning and ultimate understanding of assessment criteria, this paper proposes a three stage strategy.

In the first stage, a text is discussed and analysed in class with the tutor providing helpful questions and hints, eliciting pre-knowledge and encouraging students to develop their own ideas and thoughts and peers to reflect on them. At the end of the discussion, tutor and students summarise their outcomes.

In the second stage, students are asked to work in groups and to reflect on the process of the analysis. Helpful questions might be: What did we analyse in this text? The style/language? What did we find out about the use of metaphors etc.? The social/political context? The atmosphere? How does the author convey atmosphere? Did we discuss the author's biography and if so, is it relevant for the understanding of the text or not? The groups then present and compare their results. This way, students are encouraged to use a meta-language for text analysis. One of the most common misunderstandings in feedback – the distinction between descriptive and analytical – could be avoided this way as students are trained to analyse and reflect on texts and the process very early. (Chanock, 2000)

Before stage three, students are asked to prepare a text from a different author. At this stage, they are required to look at the questions and reflection on the first text. The students are then asked to discuss in small groups whether the questions used in stage two apply to the new text and whether they can think of other, more suitable questions: Does this text reflect the social and political context of Germany? If not, what else does it reflect? Could this text be written in another time? Why? Do we need to know about the author's life in order to understand the text or is it unimportant? Is there something striking about the style, use of words? Does the author convey a specific atmosphere or emotions? How does he/she achieve it? Etc. The groups then present, compare and discuss their results.

This process can be used as a pattern for future text analysis; the more texts students analyse in this way, the more aware they become of the importance of different approaches and the more confident they become in peer and self-assessment.

A continuous oral, informal formative feedback should be provided by the tutor in the course of the module, referring back to the established suitable approach/questions.

Involving students in understanding assessment criteria, it appears, means integrating criteria in the learning process and redefining assessment criteria as learning criteria.

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## UKLJUČIVANJE STUDENATA U RAZUMIJEVANJE KRITERIJA ZA ISPITIVANJE



### Sažetak

Rad se bavi problemom shvaćanja akademskih kriterija za ocjenjivanje sastava i prezentacija na primjeru seminara *Njemačka poslijeratna književnost* na sveučilištu London Metropolitan University. Evaluacija ankete među studentima pokazala je da studenti često ne shvaćaju kriterije za uspješan sastav ili prezentaciju te da komentari profesora i konačne ocjene često ne potiču poboljšane radove u budućnosti.

Autorica ovog rada predlaže da se studenti uključe u proces formuliranja kriterija za ocjenjivanje i konstantnog reflektiranja metoda, te da se na taj način usklade kriterije za ocjenjivanje i očekivani ishodi seminara.

U prikazanom primjeru predlaže se metoda kojom studenti reflektiraju svoja razmišljanja i razmišljanja kolega. Cilj te metode je osposobiti studente da aktivno sudjeluju umjesto da se koncentriraju na ispite i time steknu sposobnost i prenosivu kompetentnost za savladanje znanstvenih metoda.

*Ključne riječi: kriterije za ocjenjivanje, reflektiranje, prenosiva kompetentnost*