

# **Assessment *as* learning? How the use of explicit learning objectives, assessment criteria and feedback in post-secondary education and training can come to dominate learning.<sup>1</sup>**

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The paper reports on the findings of a Learning and Skills Research Centre (LSRC) funded study investigating the impact of different modes and methods of assessment on achievement and progress in post-secondary education and training. Data were collected across Advanced-level academic and vocational preparation programmes in schools and colleges, work-based training, and adult education settings. The paper reports that clarity in assessment procedures, processes and criteria has underpinned widespread use of coaching, practice and provision of formative feedback to boost achievement, but that such transparency encourages instrumentalism. It concludes that the practice of assessment has moved from assessment *of* learning, through assessment *for* learning, to assessment *as* learning, with assessment procedures and practices coming completely to dominate the learning experience and ‘criteria compliance’ replacing ‘learning’.

## **Introduction**

Claims for the educational value and effectiveness of formative assessment in the mainstream compulsory school system have been made for a number of years, in the UK and elsewhere. It is argued that assessment has to move from ‘assessment of learning’ to ‘assessment for learning’, whereby assessment procedures and practices are developed to support learning and underpin rather than undermine student confidence, achievement and progress (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Torrance & Pryor, 1998; Gipps, 1999; Shepard, 2000). Indeed, so commonplace have these claims become that research and development attention has shifted to the dissemination and

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implementation of formative approaches to assessment on a wide scale, integrating work on formative assessment with that deriving from the school improvement movement and addressing the problem of 'scaling up' across the maintained school system. In England a Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for just this purpose (James *et al.*, 2006). Key elements of formative assessment practice, which it is claimed implementation should involve, include 'feedback focused on helping students to improve [and] sharing criteria of quality' (James & Pedder, 2006, p. 110; see also Marshall & Drummond, 2006, p. 134). However, the research project on which this paper reports, which investigated assessment in post-secondary education and training in England,<sup>2</sup> has discovered that these key elements of formative assessment are already widespread in the post-secondary sector, but are interpreted very narrowly, with an overwhelming focus on criteria compliance and award achievement. Far from promoting an orientation towards student autonomy and 'Learning How To Learn' (James *et al.*, 2006; Black *et al.*, 2006), such practices are interpreted as techniques to assure award achievement and probably help to produce students who are *more* dependent on their tutors and assessors rather than less dependent.

There has been a significant move over the last 20 years towards criterion-referenced assessment and competence-based assessment in post-compulsory education and training, including in the UK modularization of the Advanced Level General Certificate of Education (A-level) and the Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education (AVCE) in the context of 'Curriculum 2000' (Burke, 1989; Jessup, 1991; Wolf, 1995; Hodgson & Spours, 2003; see also Hayward & McNicholl, this issue). This has involved greater transparency of intended learning outcomes and the criteria by which they are judged, and has benefited learners in terms of the increasing numbers of learners retained in formal education and training and the range and numbers of awards which they achieve (for discussion of recent figures see Raffe *et al.*, 2001; Savory *et al.*, 2003). Clarity in assessment procedures, processes and criteria has underpinned the widespread use of coaching, practice and provision of formative feedback to boost individual and institutional achievement. Detailed tutor and assessor support, in the form of exam coaching and practice, drafting and redrafting of assignments, asking 'leading questions' during workplace observations, and identifying appropriate evidence to record in portfolios, is widespread throughout the sector and is effective in facilitating learner achievement and progression.

However, research evidence reported below suggests that such transparency encourages instrumentalism. The clearer the task of how to achieve a grade or award becomes, and the more detailed the assistance given by tutors, supervisors and assessors, the more likely candidates are to succeed. But transparency of objectives coupled with extensive use of coaching and practice to help learners meet them is in danger of removing the challenge of learning and reducing the quality and validity of outcomes achieved. This might be characterized as a move from assessment *of* learning, through the currently popular idea of assessment *for* learning, to *assessment as learning*, where assessment procedures and practices come completely to dominate the learning experience, and 'criteria compliance' comes to replace 'learning'.<sup>3</sup>

## The research

The findings on which this paper is based derive from a Learning and Skills Research Centre (LSRC) funded research project, ‘The impact of different modes and methods of assessment on achievement and progress in the learning and skills sector’ (additional support was provided by City & Guilds and the ‘University for Industry’, Ufi). The project was commissioned to investigate whether or not, and if so, how, use of different assessment methods makes a difference to learner achievement and progress in post-compulsory education and training. A review of the literature on assessment in post-compulsory education noted the scarcity of studies in the sector (Torrance & Coultas, 2004) while other recent research reviews such as Stasz *et al.* (2004) note a similar paucity of evidence with respect to what teaching and learning approaches might actually make a difference to achievement and outcomes in the sector. Thus the project was commissioned to address the need for a comprehensive overview of assessment procedures and practices in the post-compulsory Learning and Skills Sector (LSS) in England, especially at the level of impact on the learner. It sought to compare and contrast the assessment experiences of learners in different settings and is the first comprehensive study of assessment procedures and practices employed across the full range of LSS contexts—school sixth-forms, further education colleges, workplaces and adult learning environments.

Data have been gathered by conducting a series of parallel case studies of assessment ‘in action’ across a wide variety of LSS settings and by a questionnaire distributed to a larger sample of learners derived from the case study settings. Case studies were conducted of assessment across of the post-compulsory Learning and Skills Sector:

- School sixth-form and college-based A-levels and AVCEs in physical education, sport & leisure and business studies;
- Work-based National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in social care, motor vehicle engineering (MVE) and sport & recreation;
- College-based Access to Higher Education (HE) courses;
- College-based Adult Basic Skills testing;
- and an informal Community Education and Accreditation programme conducted under the auspices of a government-funded community ‘SureStart’ project.<sup>4</sup>

The boundaries of each case were established with respect to particular qualifications and/or awards and the contextual and regional factors which influence the assessment of awards in practice, including awarding body procedures and processes. Thus the case studies were designed as ‘vertical’ investigations, exploring a particular qualification such as AVCE or NVQ from awarding body through to learner, though with the emphasis on learner experience. In total 237 learners/candidates were interviewed, along with 95 ‘assessors’ (i.e. all those involved in operating and conducting assessment within the case studies including the full range of senior awarding body staff, chief and lead verifiers, internal assessors and external

verifiers, employers, supervisors, college and school heads of department, tutors, etc.) Completed questionnaire returns were also received from 260 respondents out of 890 distributed (34% return).

### Findings: supporting candidates to achieve awards

The full findings of the research are reported in Torrance *et al.* (2005).<sup>5</sup> This paper focuses on the key issues of how achievement is defined and how formative feedback is used to support achievement.

Achievement is routinely defined in fairly narrow and instrumental terms. It is interpreted as securing the evidence to complete a portfolio and/or the ‘necessary’ or ‘expected’ grades to accomplish an award; these are not necessarily the highest grades available or even directly related to competent practice:

Achievement would mean getting a C or above; I’d be happy to get a C but I know I could do better. (AVCE student)

I’ve got quite a lot of experience as a mechanic because I’ve worked in a garage for a while but I’ve just got no papers so ... if anything goes wrong if I’ve got qualifications I can say well I’ve been in college and I’ve done that. (MVE trainee)

I’ve had four years’ experience now since being with SureStart. I can do it—I know what I’m doing ... but ... I just want all of that on paper... you know I want me bit of paper now to prove that I can do it ... . (Adult learner involved in SureStart programme accredited by the Open College Network, OCN)

Failure is defined as *non-completion* (of a portfolio, or of sufficient credits in a course of study) or not securing *expected and necessary* grades (e.g. for progression to a particular HE course). Provided the work is (eventually) completed, the award will be achieved:

You can fail if you just don’t do the work on time, or you don’t take any notice of the teachers’ advice ... [but] you can drop a couple of the option units if your marks aren’t any good and you can still pass the course. (AVCE student)

They don’t fail, they can be withdrawn. For example, if an assessor observes bad practice or if somebody doesn’t seem competent in their work, then ... they are mentored within the workplace until such time their manager feels that they are ready to continue. (Lead verifier, social care NVQ)

Essentially there’s no fail as such at NVQ—they’re referred. Obviously if they’re referred they get another opportunity to update their portfolio to get it to a pass standard or to demonstrate that they’ve met the units of competence. (External assessor, sport & recreation NVQ)

Even at A-level (i.e. an academic programme preparatory to university entrance), students can re sit modular tests to improve grades or retrieve fails (see Hayward & McNicholl, this issue). Students take tests and exam papers in the first year (‘AS’ qualification) but can retake poorly graded papers or simply not progress to the second year (A2) if grades are too poor, focusing instead on those subjects in which they think they will do best. Thus, for example, in one of the case study colleges

students could opt to do one unit of a business studies course as either a coursework project or a modular test and one student chose both options so that she could pick her higher mark to go forward for final grading.

### The process in action

In addition to this overall orientation towards the pursuit of achievement, and the structural properties of awards such as modularization which can facilitate this, there is a significant, even overwhelming, culture of support for learners/candidates at every level and across every sub-sector of the LSS. Even in A-level teaching, beyond modularization, support is provided by tutors through the breaking down and interpreting of assessment criteria and the involvement of tutors in formal examining and moderating roles for awarding bodies (ABs, i.e. what were previously known as examination boards). Such involvement helps to develop teachers' understanding of the assessment process and criteria which, in turn, they pass on to students through exam coaching.

#### *AVCE and A-level*

This culture of support is apparent in choices of awards and awarding bodies even before tutors begin to provide detailed guidance on assessment tasks and criteria.

We have changed exam board—from [AB1 to AB2]. The practical with the former was too long-winded and complicated, and the moderation system was complicated ... [the AB2 syllabus] is also a little bit more compartmentalized ... which seems to suit our pupils. With [AB1] the questions went down the synoptic line, which our kids found confusing ...  
 . (AVCE Sp&L tutor)

ABs also came in for considerable criticism about lack of responsiveness to queries and clearly this will influence choice of AB. In some colleges in the study, curriculum managers have been returning to BTEC programmes (that is, older vocational preparation programmes), which they feel are more genuinely vocationally oriented, rather than AVCEs. Additionally BTEC students are not counted in national achievement data for 'Level 3' (i.e. A-level equivalent for government statistics), so moving to BTEC and taking vocational students out of college level data could obscure a college's attainment of fewer higher grades in AVCE compared to general A-level. Savory *et al.* (2003) similarly report a move away from AVCE towards offering BTEC Nationals, and note widespread dissatisfaction with ABs' responses to queries. They quote one respondent complaining that:

The exam boards have become so big that they are drowning and we find it almost impossible to find a real person to talk to about new specification problems. (Savory *et al.*, 2003, p. 16)

Once ABs and syllabuses are selected, detailed grade criteria are articulated for learners at A-level and AVCE—the breaking down of awarding body guidelines and instructions into detailed mark schemes, assignment plans, etc., for students to follow.

At A-level [the examining boards] want to hear technical terms and expanded vocabulary ... [students] need to be a little more analytical at A-level ... So we have drafted a crib sheet with words, explanations. (A-level PE tutor)

We have spent a lot of time ... coming up with a sort of a template to issue to our students as a starting point to give them something to work on ... writing frames, templates to fill in, bullet points to follow ... . (AVCE Sp&L tutor)

In turn students can draft and re draft assignments, receiving feedback on strengths and weaknesses and what needs to be done to improve the grade. They can also re-take unit and modular tests as necessary to improve grades. Sometimes tutors operate with the 'straight' AVCE/BTEC nomenclature of Pass, Merit and Distinction; sometimes they operate with a range of grades which parallel AS and A2 (grades E–A) and which in turn 'map onto' AVCE, thus 'D/E' refer to 'describing and identifying' and would correspond with a Pass; 'B/C' involve 'understanding' and 'bringing together' and correspond with a Merit; 'A' must include 'critical evaluation and analysis' and corresponds with a Distinction. When asked what an A grade meant in AVCE Business Studies, one student responded:

It's analyse, evaluate, and stuff like that. You have to explain things but more in-depth. Instead of just summarizing, you have to extend it and make it relevant and link it to what you've already put, it's clear and it flows and it's fully described.

Other students were equally well tuned to the criteria and drafting process:

At the start of each module we get like a sheet of paper, it's got 'for an E you have to do this, for a D you have to do that' ... they tell you what you have to do to get a good mark. (AVCE student)

Tutors worked very hard to make their feedback as detailed as possible:

I see a draft, read through it, make notes, talk to each one, show the good areas in relation to the criteria and explain why and how if they have met them, saying things like 'you've missed out M2' .... . (AVCE BS tutor)

I assess continuously ... Also there are summative assessments [written tasks that respond to a specific question and a set of criteria]. These are always worked on in a way where they can improve their grades, and they get a lot more than one chance ... you can see a piece of work three times. If there is a large group this gets out of hand. But I want to get the best I can for my students. (AVCE Sp&L tutor)

Thus 'good teachers' are those who can handle this workload and schedule this formative feedback within realistic time-scales, offering clear guidance that students feel they can follow. A-level and AVCE alike involve a great deal of criteria-focused 'coaching' of students. The potential downside of such activity is that achievement can come to be seen as little more than criteria compliance in pursuit of grades. Moreover, while the pressure of coursework assignments can become intense, the responsibility for putting in the 'hard work' of assessment in pursuit of achievement might now be said to fall as much on the shoulders of tutors as on the learners, and a great deal of 'hidden work' is undertaken according to tutor disposition (cf. also James & Diment, 2003).

*Support in the workplace*

Just as ACVE and A-level students get support from their tutors, so, it transpires, do learners in the workplace. NVQ assessment is intended to be largely based on observation of competence in action, *in situ*. It is designed to be conducted when candidates are ready to demonstrate competence, by assessors who either have an interest in ensuring that learners are indeed competent (e.g. supervisors and line managers) and so are unlikely to pass poor candidates, or assessors who are external to the workplace and therefore intended to be completely disinterested (external verifiers). In practice however, assessors get drawn into a much more pedagogical relationship with candidates:

Our primary form of assessment is through observation and questioning, if ... I'm not satisfied that the learner has met the standards, I will make reference to it in the feedback that I give to the learner, obviously I'll try to be as positive and encouraging as I can; I'll say that there's been missed opportunities here, therefore I can not use this piece of evidence ... If they need additional support I will make every effort to make a weekly visit as opposed to a fortnightly visit for that learner, to give them the encouragement, to give them whatever training needs are necessary, and to encourage them to get through, and obviously I'll liaise with their managers ... . (External assessor, Sp&Rec NVQ)

In other workplace settings support can be observed in the way 'leading questions' are asked of candidates to help them through observations of workshop practice and in compiling portfolio evidence. In the example below, where an MVE apprentice is cleaning and adjusting brake drums and shoes, the interaction is more like a traditional 'teacher-pupil' pedagogic encounter than a workplace assessment.

[Fieldwork observation:]

- Assessor: What were the drums like?  
 MVE trainee: They had a bit of rust on them so we cleaned the drums out and cleaned the shoes out ... [ ] ...  
 A: I'm trying to think of something I haven't asked you before. Yes, what causes the rust on a brake pipe?  
 MVE tr: Corrosion.  
 A: So you get outside corrosion, yes, from the weather and then what about the inside corrosion? How does a brake pipe get rusted on the inside which you can't see?  
 MVE tr: The brake fluid gets warm.  
 A: No.  
 MVE tr: It's something in the brake fluid isn't it?  
 A: Yes, what causes rust?  
 MVE tr: Water.  
 A: So if it's rusty on the inside, what do we say the brake fluid does? Why do we have to change the brake fluid? If I say hygroscopic to you, I'm not swearing. Have you heard of it?  
 MVE tr: I've heard it now.  
 A: Do you know what it means? Can you remember what it means? It absorbs moisture. So that's why you have to change the fluid so that the brake pipes don't become rusty on the inside.  
 MVE tr: I knew it was something in the fluid.  
 A: Well now you know don't you. Don't forget next time will you?

Similarly in social care we observed assessors asking leading questions to help candidates articulate what they (supposedly) already know and can do, as in this assessment of a foster parent:

[Fieldwork observation:]

- Assessor: Why is it important to explain these limits to clients [i.e. foster children]?
- Learner: I don't know. My mind's gone blank.
- A: So what if a child came home from school and they're going on a trip in two days time and they want you to sign the form?
- L: I'd say to him because I'm not your legal guardian, I'm not allowed to sign so we'd have to try and get in touch with the parent or social worker for them to sign. I wouldn't be stopping them from going on the trip. It's not me that's stopping them; it's that I'm not allowed to sign.
- A: So right, they know what their expectations are then. When you've got older children Julie, it's always important to explain everything to them ... [ ] ... So let's think, say for instance you get a child who's not going to school at all ... but you managed to work with them and they start going to school and start going regular, why is it important that you sit down and talk to that child about what they've achieved by going?
- L: Well it's to help them further their education; get a better start in life.
- A: How do you think that would make them feel about themselves?
- L: I think they'd feel more secure and confident about themselves.
- A: That's what I'm looking for.
- L: I finally got there!

### *Adult learning*

In Access courses and adult basic education settings, similar levels of support, coaching and practice were observed. Exercises and assignments were drafted, read, commented upon and then re submitted:

I tend to layout fairly clearly what I want ... I've broken it down into four discrete sections and lay out exactly what they have to do for each and then they get handouts which will support them. (Access tutor)

They do give you a lot of feedback on your assignments ... The first assignment in Psychology I got a [level] 2 and she went through it and she said if you define that a bit better than that and she gave me another week and I did it all and she gave me a [level] 3. (Access student)

In Basic Skills programmes there are continual efforts made to relate literacy and numeracy tasks to relevant social and vocational activities, and render the Adult Basic Skills Unit (ABSU) national curriculum into 'small chunks', but with the addition that in college-based settings as much testing as possible was embedded in ordinary classroom activities.

We all have small chunks for the students to cover and so they are doing activities in the classroom and they can self-assess. They can peer-assess as well. They are doing group work and they are doing listening as well, so they are assessing all these skills as we go along. (Adult Basic Skills tutor)

Right now I have been working through units, I am just working through the units each time ... I tend to do them one by one, make sure they are OK, and get them out of the way

... you do one paper, and if you get it all right, then you can move on to the next one ... It is the set-up to work through each unit and you take your time going through it, make sure it is correct, and you get to the end and do the final test. (Basic Skills learner)

In this respect it is a moot point if some candidates even realized they were taking a test. A number of learners had progressed from one level to another without being able to remember that they had taken tests:

... the English teacher is quite clever, she's given me a few tests without me [realizing]. When I go on the computer she says 'well that's level 1 or level 2', so she says 'you passed that'. I don't know ... which is kind of good because of the psychology of it ... (Basic Skills learner)

Significant levels of tutor 'hidden work' were also observed in this sub-sector as in others:

If you've got problems you know who to talk to. You haven't got to go hunting for somebody ... I think [tutor] R feels like the mother of the group. She's the mother hen that goes round and worries about everybody ... If you need help or you need extra time, you go and talk to R and it's sorted. (Access student)

Last year [named tutor] had them from [village] and it's quite a way out, I mean it's right up in the hills really. And they don't have cars because it's a poorer area ... And she brought them down in her car. She went up, collected them all, brought them all back. They did their exams and she took them back again. Because you do worry about them. Well, I worry about them. I know it's stupid. (Basic Skills tutor)

### Equity and quality in learner support

It can be argued that none of this support, even exam coaching, is necessarily inappropriate or unfair in and of itself. Such practices are at the heart of professional judgments about the performance/competence interface which tutors and assessors must make. They are also very understandable in the current context of results-driven accountability and the financial viability of programmes and institutions. But the provision of such detailed support raises issues of equity if it is not pursued uniformly. College level provision of support varies with local policies and level of tutor knowledge of the system (e.g. as noted above, through individual tutors becoming examiners in order to understand better the procedures and assessment criteria of their course).

More broadly, the questionnaire data suggest that there can be wide variations in the frequency and length of assessor visits to workplaces. Thus, for example, while the most frequently reported timing of assessor visits amongst the NVQ-takers was 1–2 hours every 4–6 weeks, one reported that they saw their assessor once a week for 2–3 hours, while four reported that they saw their assessors only every three months or less *and* for one hour or less. There is also evidence that discrepancies may derive from the different cultures that develop in colleges and private training agencies, with college tutors not only seeing apprentices in college (for day-release classes) but also often visiting them in their workplaces to conduct assessments, and thus developing a much closer pedagogical relationship than that of training agency staff who simply travel round workplaces assessing full time.

Helping candidates 'complete the paperwork' is also an important element of the assessor's role in workplace assessment interactions. For example, in garages it

appeared to be a very common practice for MVE apprentices simply to keep their garage ‘job-sheets’ up to date and filled in with brief descriptions of the jobs undertaken and completed. The assessor then ‘deconstructs’ this basic information into the relevant ‘competences’ and maps and transfers the detail into the apprentice’s evidence portfolio. Such practices also accord with the findings of other recent studies of portfolio completion in the workplace which indicate that younger workers do not usually take responsibility for portfolio completion (Kodz *et al.*, 1998; Tolley *et al.*, 2003). Indeed, Fuller and Unwin (2003) in their study of apprenticeship in various sectors of the steel industry, note, almost in passing, that:

Responsibility for recording the apprentices’ progress towards the achievements of the qualifications was taken by the external training provider at the regular review sessions. An important part of his job was to help apprentices identify how the day-to-day task in which they were engaged could be used to generate evidence that they were meeting the competence standards codified in the NVQ... . (Fuller & Unwin, 2003, p. 422)

Policy-makers may be tempted to try to re assert the disinterested observational nature of NVQ assessment by defining working practices, including the number and length of assessment occasions, in ever more detail. But even if this is effective (which, given the evidence reported above, is unlikely) it will simply disadvantage work-based NVQ takers against college-based A-level and AVCE takers. Giving clear instructions to assessors that the *quality of the assessment interaction* is likely to be as important to ‘fair’ and motivating workplace assessment as the accuracy of the observational record may be more helpful. Stasz *et al.* (2004) and Fuller and Unwin (2003) similarly note the importance of the vitality and range of workplace relationships for the quality of trainee learning.

### **Transparency promotes instrumentalism**

A corollary of the level of support provided is that not only is it both demanded and expected by learners, it is also expected to be very specifically focused on achieving the qualification:

Sometimes we have to do other tasks but the bottom line is ‘is it relevant’ ... [there’s] no time to do irrelevant stuff. (AVCE student)

We’re all there for one reason. We’re all there at the end of the day to pass it ... I just want to get it over and done with. Get it passed and carry on. (Access student)

I’ve got to get my papers ... so I can walk into any job in the future. (MVE trainee)

In turn, the instrumentalism of learners both drives and validates the level of tutor support. Similarly institutions themselves are target-oriented and instrumentally driven. Thus learners seek and expect details of assessment specifications, evidence requirements and so forth. They want support and appreciate it when they get it; but their instrumentalism reinforces tutor moves to focus on grade criteria, the elucidation of evidence, etc. As a consequence assignments and portfolios from some institutions can often look very similar—in structure, format, types of evidence included, etc.—so it seems that some institutions are becoming very adept at ‘coaching’ cohorts

through assignment completion; exam cramming by another means. In a very real sense we seem to have moved from ‘assessment of learning’ through ‘assessment for learning’ to ‘*assessment as learning*’, for both learners and tutors alike, with assessment procedures and processes completely dominating the teaching and learning experience. In saying this I am not necessarily suggesting that each and every tutor or supervisor has made this transition empirically, but rather that the field of practice as a whole seems to have made the transition conceptually. Indeed, empirically, it might be argued that in post-compulsory education and training, practice has moved directly from assessment *of* learning to assessment *as* learning, but this is justified and explained in the language of assessment for learning: providing feedback, communicating criteria to the learner, and so forth.<sup>6</sup> Thus the supposedly educative formative process of identifying and sharing assessment criteria, and providing feedback on strengths and weaknesses to learners, is ensconced at the heart of the learning experience in the post-secondary sector, infusing every aspect of the learner experience. But it is a process which appears to weaken rather than strengthen the development of learner autonomy.

This finding of extensive support, manifest across all sub-sectors of the LSS through coaching, practice, drafting and the elicitation of evidence, coupled with an associated learner instrumentalism, seems to derive in large part from the move towards transparency in assessment processes and criteria. The more clearly requirements are stated, the easier it would appear for them to be pursued and accomplished. Equally, however, the imperative to compliance and the ‘expulsion of failure’ from the post-secondary sector (except with respect to non-completion) begs questions about what should now constitute a legitimate learning *challenge* in the context of post-secondary education and training. The danger is that as the number of enrolments and awards achieved increase, the underlying purpose of such expansion—increasing the numbers in *and* improving the standards achieved in further education and training—is compromised. Making learning objectives and instructional processes more explicit calls into question the validity and worthwhileness of the outcomes achieved.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

Previous studies of formative assessment in the compulsory school sector have noted that broad recommendations to ‘share criteria’ and ‘provide criteria-focused feedback’ can be interpreted in different ways. Torrance and Pryor (1998) report that formative assessment can be ‘convergent’, with teachers focusing on identifying and reporting whether or not students achieve extant curriculum-derived objectives, or ‘divergent’ which is much more oriented towards identifying what students can do in an open-ended and exploratory fashion. Similarly Marshall and Drummond (2006) note that while some teachers in the ‘Learning How to Learn’ study attempted to implement the ‘spirit’ of formative assessment with respect to developing student autonomy, most simply followed the ‘letter’ and used formative assessment techniques to facilitate short-term lesson planning and teaching, and promote short-term grade accomplishment. It would appear that not much has changed in the compulsory sector in the eight years between the two studies. Certainly it would seem that

formative assessment is not necessarily or inevitably a benign or expansive process, or one that will always promote 'learning autonomy' (Black *et al.*, 2006).

Perhaps the more interesting point to note in the context of post-compulsory education and training, however, is the widespread use of convergent formative assessment in the sector, without the aid of a 'rolling out' programme (James *et al.*, 2006). Why is it so widespread and why is practice so convergent? The answer would appear to lie partly in the long-term advocacy and development of criterion referencing and competence-based assessment in the post-compulsory sector, and partly in the attainment-oriented culture of the sector.

Criterion referencing involves establishing aims and objectives for a course, along with clear criteria for deciding whether or not the aims and objectives have been achieved, and then identifying what candidates know and can do in relation to those criteria. Competence-based assessment is a particularly strong form of criterion referencing practised in vocational and especially work-based learning environments. What the learner can do, and can be seen to do, in relation to the tasks required of them for competent practice, are paramount. It is of little interest to the learner or assessor to identify what *else* the learner can do (i.e. engage in divergent assessment) although this may be of considerable importance to their longer-term development. Clearly this overall orientation of the post-compulsory system has an enormously powerful convergent impact. Moreover, the majority of the sector is operating within a strong 'second best but second chance' culture. Vocational routes are still perceived as second best to academic achievement and progression, and tutors are often dealing with learners who have experienced previous school failure. They are determined to maximize the possibilities of success for this 'second chance' client group. In addition the more general policy trend towards widening participation and improving achievement levels at 19 ('level 3') and in higher education, means related practices are also influencing A-levels. This, together with the high stakes accountability and financial insecurity of the sector, will also inevitably drive a convergent focus on criterion attainment and award accrual.

Does it matter? More learners are staying on in post-compulsory education and training, or returning to it in later life, and are achieving more awards than ever before. But the trade-off, which would now appear to be a major issue for policy, is that the content of the awards and of learners' overall learning experience may be overly narrowed. To reiterate, we seem to have moved from 'assessment of learning' through 'assessment for learning' to '*assessment as learning*'. If formative assessment is to develop more positively in post-compulsory education and training, attention must be paid to the development of tutors' and assessors' judgement at local level, and the nature of their relationships with learners, so that learners are inducted into 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) which explore and interrogate criteria, rather than accept them as given. The provision of clear national programmes of study and the criteria by which success can be judged, have certainly led to increasing numbers of learners achieving awards; but this very process has led to too narrow a reliance on accumulating marks, or elements of competence, and a narrowing of the quality of the learning experience. What is required now is an acknowledgement that local communities of practice are the context in which all meaningful

judgements are made and thus should be the level of the system at which most efforts at capacity building are directed. This may start to reinstate the challenge of learning in the post-compulsory sector and attend to it as an act of social and intellectual development rather than one of acquisition and accumulation.

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### Notes

1. Paper originally presented to BERA symposium, 'Assessment in Post-compulsory Education and Training', University of Warwick, September 2006.
2. Also known in the UK as post-compulsory education and training, since some elements of provision remain located in secondary school 'sixth forms', which students attend after passing the formal minimum school leaving age of 16 years.
3. Lorna Earl also uses the phrase 'Assessment as Learning' (Earl, 2003). However, she argues for a congruence between learning and assessment which is concerned with student self-assessment and is very much in the assessment *for* learning tradition. My use of the term is much more concerned with the *displacement* of learning (i.e. understanding) by procedural compliance: i.e. achievement without understanding.
4. 'SureStart' focuses on early learning among pre-school children and community-based support for new parents.
5. Research project funded 2003–2005 by LSRC and City & Guilds, with support from Ufi. The full report including a full description of the methodology, sample, etc. is available at: <http://www.lsda.org.uk/cims/order.aspx?code=052284&src=XOWEB>.
6. I am grateful to Mary James for raising this query when she read an earlier version of this paper.
7. Two cautionary riders may be added at this point, however. First, the research engaged with learners who are in the system, rather than outside it, and hence are likely to have a propensity to continue to comply and achieve, albeit while perhaps avoiding tasks or activities which are perceived as too difficult. Second, we have encountered evidence of more intrinsic orientations and rewards, particularly in the adult education sector, with respect to the development of self-confidence. In training contexts the development of practical competence following school-based academic failure and/or disinterest has also brought a sense of achievement. By their very nature, however, such achievements are difficult for learners to identify and articulate in more than a cursory manner. When asked in the questionnaire to state how they knew they were making progress, learners' answers varied from 'because I'm passing the tests' and 'because I'm getting more knowledge' through 'holding my job down at work' to 'because I just re fitted the brakes on my car'. Clearly there is a sense of personal achievement linked to developing competence in these latter responses, but such responses are unusual and hard to 'call forth' in the context of assessment tasks and events where achievement and progress are normally interpreted much more narrowly.

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