



Assessment, Learning and Employability

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As a distinguished contributor noted at a recent conference on e-learning, 'in addressing the challenges of learning and teaching, academics have become too preoccupied with the *how*, to the neglect of the *why*'. It is therefore particularly refreshing to review a book that addresses both, and does it well.

There is no doubt that 'employability' is the critical pedagogic leitmotif and there is no shortage of copy addressing this agenda. However, as far as I'm aware, this is the first book to undertake a concerted exploration of the policy and practical implications of addressing the employability agenda for the curriculum and, in particular, for assessment. The determination of the appropriateness of assessment practices is placed firmly in the context of a consideration of assessment purposes and assessment theory.

The authors set their exploration in the context of what some might regard as the antipathetic relationship between employability and traditional academic values. They argue strongly and convincingly, in my view, that there is no necessary opposition between these two goals. They exemplify this in the text itself with a rigorous, scholarly exploration of the policy and intellectual issues, applied in a professional way to a thorough consideration of the implications of employability for the instruments of practice.

The preface and introductory chapter provide a succinct and informative (yet familiar) overview of the increased demands faced by higher education, the role of higher education in the economy and a rationale for the focus on skills and employability. Models for an 'employability-aware curriculum' are reviewed and the challenges that enhancing employability places, particularly on modular schemes, are considered. The implications for summative assessment are identified and it is suggested that the concept of employability focuses the spotlight on the inherent problems of assessment. If higher education is expected to deliver a wider range of achievements, then how can we ensure that assessment meets this greater challenge and supports learning?

A review demonstrates clearly the fragility and limitations of current higher education assessment practices, highlighting the unreliability of assessment as grading, and raising serious questions about our over-reliance on summative assessment. It seems unsurprising, on the basis of the evidence presented, that teaching, learning and assessment gives the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) some cause for concern! Add to this the increased complexity that developing employability necessitates, and we place further pressure on what might already be deemed a process at risk. This is not wholly a counsel of despair, however; the authors identify a critically-informed but nonetheless sensible and practical way in which programme teams can help to ensure a more intelligent application of assessment. Indeed, one of the merits of this text is its abiding concern for the practical payoffs of its theorizing.

The authors cogently argue that the potential of formative assessment, in promoting the kinds of complex learning and development associated with employability, is often unrealized. They suggest that 'structural threats' and resource constraints mean that formative assessment is often (and has been) a casualty of the changes placed on the sector. The clear message of the book is that if we take seriously the implications of employability, and indeed traditional academic values, we need to realize the potential of formative assessment. We also need to undertake a more thorough review of our assessment practices at programme and institutional level, in terms of their purpose and their research base. In this respect the book is both a call for action and a prompt as to how one might set about tackling this critical agenda.

In repositioning and opening up the problematic topic of assessment in the context of the employability agenda, the authors deploy three organising principles:

1. assessment must be recognized as involving judgement rather than measurement
2. the tension between formative and summative assessment must be reduced
3. a systemic approach to assessment at the programme-level, with an emphasis on agreeing goals and helping others to achieve them, is needed to increase reliability.

The authors draw on an impressive range of research to facilitate and enrich the application of these principles, in order to consider which methods should be used. They provide a helpful summary of a diverse range of methods and suggest how one might assess the complex achievements associated with employability. They also

explore the implications of the concept of authenticity, identify ways in which reliability might be improved and examine how formative assessment might be more effectively used. In addition, they address the implications of progression in terms of 'slow learning', introduce the concept of assessment as 'claims making' and the more radical notion of students making their own claims. Finally, they explore the implications for assessment systems at academic department and institutional level.

Key themes emerge across these chapters, illustrating how assessment can corrode complex learning and highlighting the difficulties of assessing 'fuzzy' contexts. It is repeatedly emphasized that 'low stakes' assessment (formative) would be more effective for learner development than the 'high stakes' summative assessment, as the former lowers the risk for the learner and enhances the opportunity for learning and development.

The chapters provide a stimulating, professional and engaging resource for the practitioner and policy maker alike. The educational issues are coherently teased out and the authors provide us with an accessible means of working through, in a more rigorous, self-conscious and sustainable way, the implications of the choices we make in deploying our assessment methods.

A fascinating, but in my view under-developed, section in chapter three explores the role of higher education in developing 'moral action'. The authors acknowledge that this is 'contentious territory', but I was disappointed that they didn't explore this aspect more fully. The spate of recent corporate scandals, e.g. Parmalat, and growing unease about Third World Debt and environmental issues, underline the importance of values in vocational education and business. A consideration of moral action could also open up the prospect of developing a curriculum and assessment that would challenge received notions of employability and could promote a more critical alignment between academic values and employability. Barnett's concept of 'critical being' is, I feel, particularly relevant here, as is his recent work on 'pernicious ideologies' (Barnett, 1997; 2002). This comment is not meant to detract from the overall merit of the authors' thesis, as taking 'moral action' seriously would, I'm convinced, underline even more strongly the importance of 'low stakes' formative assessment.

In drawing the book to a close, the authors summarize their main arguments. Higher education might be more complex but assessment problems are not new and we need to focus on them in a more scholarly way in order to develop theory. We also need to understand more about the relationship between assessment and learning. Linked to this, we need to review how we measure employability and seek to develop curricula that maximize opportunities for students to develop. It will

be important to understand how students develop self-efficacy and meta-cognition, as well as knowledge and skills. If learning is complex, then assessment systems need to be equally complex and capable of addressing 'fuzzy' learning, remembering that assessment is not an exact science but a process that inevitably involves judgment.

The tension between formative and summative assessment makes the teacher's role difficult; the former requires facilitative engagement with the learner that is in conflict with the distance and detachment required by the latter. The authors suggest that this tension might be reduced if we abandoned our commitment to determining overall grades and reduced our concern with the exactness of grading. The learning process would need to include approaches to help the students make 'claim achievements', supported by evidence as well as certification. Implied in this approach would be a stronger emphasis on the facilitation of learning, greater value placed on 'soft' achievements and a curriculum that acknowledges the different starting points of the learner. There would be less concern with summative grades and broad acceptance of ungraded awards. In principle, the argument is logical and powerfully presented. However, getting employers and academics to 'buy in' to this radically different approach will present a challenge!

The book finishes by re-emphasizing the importance of a 'systemic' approach to assessment at the programme level, the implications for developing the curriculum and the importance of leadership in facilitating change.

I particularly enjoyed this book. There is no doubt that it will give the reader plenty to think about — whether individual lecturer, curriculum designer, programme leader, or senior academic. As I read, I found myself questioning my own personal and institutional practice, coming up with ideas for change and identifying others who should read this book. Some of us might be further down the road than others in developing assessment techniques to address employability, but there is much for all to learn. Knight & Yorke provide a well-argued position that will serve to raise questions, inspire research and bring about change.

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References

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