Implementing Change in Assessment Practice through Participatory Action Research: Trial through Distributive Leadership Model

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Abstract: Assessment practice at tertiary education has become a topic of intensive review and discussion internationally. It is widely acknowledged that assessment is crucial for learning and is a main source for directing students’ learning practices. With increasing demand to nurture graduate capabilities and generic skills alongside students’ major studies, there is a call for improvement in assessment practice to align with these new demands. This paper reports on a trial project conducted at a tertiary institution language department, which was designed to improve assessment practice. The trial took a participatory action research approach with a distributive leadership model. Through a series of analyses, presentations, workshops and round table discussions the whole of the teaching staff was engaged in a process of renewal of assessment practice for the department. The creation of a Statement of Assessment Principles emerged from this process. Based on these principles the staff took on the challenge of reworking assessment tasks for all units to be offered in the coming semester to ensure they aligned with this newly developed statement of principles. Data was collected from the participating staff members through individual and group interviews. This paper discusses the transition experienced of teaching staff members. It examines changes that took place in beliefs and understandings about assessment, their expectations and concerns about the implementation stage and their responses to the concentrated nature of the renewal process that was used in this trial. A future project will follow the implementation and will utilize the experience of the participants to develop a set of guidelines, in an endeavour to ensure this renewed approach to assessment can be sustained through staff and syllabus changes. Future papers may emerge from this stage.

Keywords: Assessment Practice, Language Education, Tertiary Education, Participatory Action Research, Distributive Leadership, Leadership Development

Introduction

This paper outlines a project for the implementation of a change in assessment practice using the distributive leadership model in a discipline at a tertiary institution. The project was conducted between October 2007 and July 2008 using participatory action research as the methodology. Educational institutions worldwide now face a critical time with the increasing demand to meet the needs of stakeholders to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Increasingly, literature about teaching and learning issues in higher education shows evidence that there is greater attention being paid to and awareness of the transitional role of higher education. To improve the quality of teaching and learning, it is essential to develop the quality of reflective skills of individual teaching staff members as well as leadership skills. To implement change, it is often desirable, and preferred by professionals, to do so through distributive leadership rather than the traditional type of leadership (Bryman 2007). This project aims to provide project leaders with opportunities to apply distributive leadership to implement change. In this case project participants reflect on their own assessment practices and lead their colleagues through a process of change. In this paper, the project is analysed and the outcomes show how a distributive leadership model worked in implementing changes in assessment practices.

Background

In recent years, the issue of teaching and learning has increasingly become a topic of discussion for tertiary institutions nationally and internationally. At many tertiary institutions, specific centres have been established to focus the enhancement of quality teaching and learning.

At the institution discussed in this study, the state of institutional management has been in a state of flux due to a prolonged restructure of the organization including significant changes in staff at every level. As a result of the restructure, various policies have been in a process renewal. The institution’s assessment policy which aims to enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

This paper outlines a project for the implementation of a change in assessment practice using the distributive leadership model in a discipline at a tertiary institution.
its own practices and implement changes in line with the new guidelines. These changes also provide an opportunity for staff members to develop leadership skills. Several disciplines were offered the opportunity to participate in a project involving a model of distributive leadership using a participatory action research approach. Project leaders for each discipline were assigned to act as facilitators for enhancing assessment practices in their own discipline. In line with what Bryman (2007) pointed out, applying a distributive leadership model was considered as the preferred model for developing leadership skills among the project leaders in this project. In his study, it is pointed out that professionals need a different or more subtle form of leadership than the traditional form of close supervision of tasks. This approach is regarded as suitable for the discipline in this study, because as a result of institutional restructuring, a significant turnover in staff members for the discipline was anticipated. The distributive leadership model was expected to contribute in orientating new staff members and building coherent disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning.

Formative Assessment for Self-regulated Learners

Assessment practice is an important part of learning and teaching in formal education. It plays a role for teachers in getting to know their students and the quality of the students’ learning (Rowntree 1977). At the same time, assessment practice also provides a good source of information for students to understand their own learning. There are two broadly classified types of assessments. The first is “assessment of learning” or “summative assessment” which is to be used as a source of information to decide the student’s grade. These guide credit for the subject based on students’ performance or achievements. The second is “assessment for learning” or “formative assessment” which is used for providing feedback to students for further learning and improvement purposes. Sadler (1998) states that formative assessment is specifically intended to generate feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning. As these two types of assessments have different purposes as described above, they should be used appropriately in a balanced teaching approach to promote students’ learning. Because of students’ ability levels in tertiary education “assessment for learning” is encouraged Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that in higher education there is the necessity to build on the ability that students already have for self-assessment of their work and for generating their own feedback. It is also argued that formative assessment and feedback should be used to empower students as self-regulated learners. Self-regulated learners are students who can regulate aspects of their thinking, motivation and behaviour during learning (Pintrich and Zusho 2002). Special issues of the journal Language Testing (2001) and Language Assessment Quarterly (2007) show the increasing discussion about alternative assessments in language teaching and the role of assessment for promoting learning of foreign languages. Ross (2005) suggests that the impact of formative assessment practices yields substantive skill-specific effects on foreign language proficiency growth.

Assessment Practices and Graduate Capabilities

Assessment practices, such as the implementation of formative assessment and encouragement of self-regulated learning, offer another element, that of graduate capabilities. Tertiary education is now expected to produce graduates with the ability to continue to develop their knowledge and skills in varied and changing situations even after they have left formal education. A capable graduate is seen as one who can take effective action in a changing situation with ethics, judgement and the self-confidence to take risks and a commitment to learn from the experience (Stephenson 1998). Therefore, it is necessary to reflect the importance of graduate capability in assessment practices. For this purpose, the use of student-centred assessment is useful. (Yanowitz and Hahs-Vaughn 2007) In Yanowitz and Hahs-Vaughn’s study, it was found that non-science disciplines used student-centred assessment significantly more often. They argue that student-centred assessment, such as cooperative group work, problem-based or authentic learning and competency based assessments, create an active environment for learning. Since it is non-competitive, the sense of community and cooperative learning is promoted, which resulted in a better retention of students. (Davis and Rosser 1996)

Formative Assessment for Curriculum Development

The alignment of teaching objectives/learning outcomes to assessment practices will influence the study behaviour of students. It is often said that decisions by teaching staff regarding assessment tasks for the curriculum are made as a final step, while it is the assessment tasks that students will refer to when making decision about whether to take the unit or when making a study strategy for the unit. If there is no alignment between teaching objectives/learning outcomes and assessment practices, these teaching objectives/learning outcomes are unlikely to be achieved, since students’ main focus will be on how to succeed in the assessment tasks. This highlights
the importance of focusing on this alignment when implementing change in assessment practices.

The Quality of Reflective Teacher and the Quality of Leadership

The quality of leadership has significant co-relation with the quality of reflective teacher as shown in the study by Warwick and Swaffield (2006). It is suggested that there are many commonalities in these two roles and it is important to develop reflective skills for professional development in teaching. Therefore, nurturing leadership among staff members is likely to improve the quality of reflection of teachers.

Participatory Action Research for Leadership Development

Participatory action research is often used in educational contexts and for leadership development. It is not commonly used for tertiary education research except in this context of the development of teaching and learning practices. (Zubert-Skerritt 1992) However, with the recent change of context for tertiary education and the increasing focus on the need to improve the quality of teaching and learning, the value of this methodology of participatory action research, has been acknowledged.

Participatory action research was recently derived from action research. Action research is used in an attempt to transcend the distinction between research theory and actual practice in order to benefit researchers in their practice. It involves a four part process: a plan; an action; an observation; and a reflection. It has different research paradigms including the positivist, the interpretivist and critical and poststructuralist paradigms (Fien & Hillcoat, 1996). Carr and Kemmis (1986: 162) describe action research as a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out. Participatory action research emphasizes empowerment and active and democratic participation by people, such as the staff of the organization to be developed (Kekälä and Pirtilä 2006: 253). Participatory action research also enables a researcher to be a participant of the research. In the study by Ilana (2007), participatory action research was conducted at a teacher educational college and the details of her internal transitional process, both in her conception of her role and her behaviour was recorded.

Kekälä and Pirtilä (2006) support the potential of participatory action research as the methodological framework for developing quality leadership, and state, “Participatory action research has a double objective: it seeks to both produce academic knowledge and action directly useful to people and organizations” (p.252).

The condition for successful participatory action research is commensurate with the degree of democracy in a dialogue used in a participatory action research. Gustavsen (1985: 474-475 cited in Kekälä and Pirtilä 2006) presented the following nine criteria:

- The dialogue is a process of exchange between participants;
- All concerned must have the possibility to participate;
- Everyone should also be active in the discourse;
- All participants are equal;
- Work experience is the foundation for participation;
- The dialogue must be considered legitimate;
- It must be possible for everybody to develop an understanding of the issue;
- All arguments which pertain to issues under discussion are legitimate; and
- The dialogue must continuously produce agreements which can provide a platform for investigation and practical action.

As a method for a participatory action research, Stringer (1999) explains the following steps; 1. Look (gather, define and describe data) 2. Think (explore and analyse, understand what is happening, and interpret and explain why things are what they are.) 3. Act (report, implement, and evaluate). These steps were used to facilitate implementation of change in assessment practices in the discipline referred to in this study.

The Study

The project was conducted in a university that was in the process of structural change. The project was conducted at two levels. The universities Learning and Teaching Centre conducted the overarching leadership and assessment project. Within this project smaller discipline based projects were carried out. The discipline discussed in this paper is in the field of language and culture studies. It has a staff of around 10 fulltime and part-time staff members and a number of additional casual teaching staff. In the 12 months prior to the commencement of the project there had been a large turnover in staff. All but three of the staff members were new to the department within this 12 months period. Even prior to this, approaches to assessment from one unit to the next were reasonably diverse and there was no common understanding between lecturers of what was considered good assessment practice.
Gathering, Defining and Describing Data from the Current Assessment Practices

The involvement of the discipline in the institutional project was initiated by a centre at the institution in October 2007. Two staff members, the researchers of this study, participated in this project as project leaders for the discipline. At discipline level the goal was to facilitate implementing of assessment practices. A second goal of participation was that project leaders would develop leadership skills to further contribute to the discipline. At the institution level of the project, the project leaders, along with project leaders from two other disciplines, attended monthly meetings. These included two workshops organized to improve understanding of the concept of participatory action research and how to apply a distributive leadership model to improve assessment practice. At other meetings project leaders from the three different disciplines together with participants from an earlier stage of the project were given opportunities to discuss leadership and assessment practices in their disciplines. Literature on leadership development through participatory action research was also provided to assist further understanding and reflection on the project.

The first step was for project leaders to collect details about the summative assessment practices for as many units from their discipline as possible. Some of this information was available through unit guides. However across the institution and even within disciplines there had been a large amount of autonomy in the format of unit guidelines, with lecturers being relatively free to follow their particular teaching beliefs. Overall a variety of approaches were used to gather this information including one on one interviews between the project leaders and their colleagues.

Once collected, the assessment tasks across the given disciplines were mapped according to assessment type and weighting of final mark.

Exploration and Analysis

In the main project sessions the contexts within the different participating departments were discussed and different strategies suggest for the unique situations that each of the participants encountered. At the same time common understandings about appropriate assessment practices were established. While recognizing the diverse needs of different disciplines, it was accepted that some common principles were true for good assessment practice, regardless of the discipline. These included items such as alignment between stated learning outcomes and assessment tasks, reasonable marks weighting for any one task, appropriate balance of different types of tasks, and so on.

Report and Implementation

At the main project level the experiences of individual participants were pooled to develop a set of guidelines for using this approach to implementing curriculum change for the broader academic community within the institution.

Discipline Project

Based on the initial project workshops the smaller discipline-based project was designed. The goal was to improve assessment practices within the discipline through both raising awareness of the importance of assessment and by building a culture of open exchange of ideas between staff members. It was determined that within this discipline as well, there would be a participatory action research approach.

Gathering, Defining and Describing Data from the Current Assessment Practices

The first step was to collect unit guide for all the units taught in one semester. The faculty to which this discipline belongs, as part of its own learning and teaching initiatives had already been trialing a standardised unit guide template. Since one of the goals of this initiative was to improve the alignment of teaching objectives/learning outcomes and assessment practices the unit guide template included details of all summative assessment.

As a result the mapping of summative assessment tasks within this discipline could be based on the unit guidelines.

Exploration and Analysis

The results of the assessment mapping within the discipline revealed a significant reliance on quizzes, tests and exam that largely tested for accuracy in language components such as grammar, vocabulary and writing. While teachers recognized their intent to teach a much larger range of understandings and knowledge they predominantly saw their task as teaching fundamental language skills and tended to believe that what was appropriate for assessment was testing of accuracy.

Some units included assessment tasks that also contained significant formative assessment components but for the large part these were limited to specific culture units.

All units in the discipline already recognized the principle of providing a number of tasks so that no single task was unreasonably weighted for grading. There was also some degree of variety such as online discussions, presentations or essays but only to a limited degree.

It was recognized that these patterns of assessment were not providing students with the opportunity for
deeper understanding of language and culture. Nor was it providing an environment that would help nurture targeted graduate capabilities in students.

Staff expressed the need for more information on alternative assessment tasks such as group work and tasks to develop self-regulated learning so as to better meet these student needs.

It was determined that workshops would be held for staff to both allow them to share concerns and experiences with new assessment and to expose them to new ideas.

With particular attention to the fact that this was a staff predominantly made up of brand new staff members, it was felt that this project provided an opportunity to begin developing a discipline based culture of teaching and learning. The first step would be a jointly developed statement of principles of assessment for the discipline. This statement would guide all staff members in the development of their unit assessment design.

**Report and Implementation**

A series of workshops were planned with for the discipline staff. The workshops were jointly facilitated by the projects leaders and an expert from the learning and teaching centre. This was the same expert who had lead the development of the institution’s new assessment policy and so it was assured that the directions taken within the discipline would not contradict principles that would soon be enforced across the institution.

The workshops were designed to build on existing and shared understandings of the staff so that for the most part staff felt included in the process of change. New approaches to assessment that were introduced were selected to meet specific assessment needs identified by the staff themselves. The philosophy underpinning the new institutional assessment policy was woven into the workshops with relevant and concrete examples, making it seem a less daunting document than it would otherwise have been. One of the most significant of these philosophical underpinnings was the importance of formative assessment.

While these actions were being undertaken for the discipline, during the semester project leaders were invited to observe the monthly institutional learning and teaching committee working party meetings. These had been working to creatie the institutional assessment policy. This helped to familiarize project leaders with the institutional process.

Two workshops were held during the first semester. In the workshops, the aim and methodology chosen for this project was explained to all the staff members to enable them to understand the objectives of this project. This workshop was facilitated by the institutional education advisor and included the philosophy underpinning the institutional assessment policy. The workshops included examples of recent research findings about assessment issues. Opinions and questions relating to application to their own teaching units were exchanged and discussed among participants.

After this series of workshops, the statement of assessment principles was drafted through ongoing staff discussions and exchange of opinions. Some key elements that were outlined in this new document were the alignment betweenthe new institutional assessment policy and disciplinary assessment practices; the clear articulation of the assessment tasks in all unit guides; the use of a variety of assessment tasks; the importance of assessment for learning; and grading according to a profile of standards. A recommendation was made for staff members to refer to this newly developed statement of principles when creating the second semester units.

Following the second semester, observations and findings by each staff member of the application of this new document will be discussed as part of the on-going curriculum renewal process. While it was initially planned to create the detailed guidelines for assessment at the same time as developing the statement of assessment principles, during the workshops and discussions it was agreed that it was necessary to work on the assessment guidelines after staff had had the opportunity to work with the broader statement of assessment principles document.

New unit guides were created based on this statement of assessment principles and presented in the template being trialled by the faculty. This template also accommodated the new institutional assessment policy. It is designed to encourage unit coordinators to more clearly articulate the learning outcomes, teaching plans, and assessment requirements. The template is also designed to allow them to reflect on their teaching and assessment practices.

Within the discipline, casual discussions between staff members and project leaders also often took place. Through the discussion with staff members about assessment issues, the necessity to review the whole curriculum of the discipline and along with the establishment of a set of assessment statements and guidelines was identified as a shared view. As a result, the initiative was put forward by the staff members to develop a project for improving whole curriculum in the discipline. Therefore, a team was created to plan the project, with ideas and opinions exchanged among staff members using an online discussion board. The project was supported by a further university grant.
Evaluation

Implementation of Change of Assessment Practices

Evaluation of this project was conducted through two mechanisms. The first was through feedback from the staff members themselves gathered through either a questionnaire or an interview with one of the project leaders. The second mechanism was an analysis of details of assessment as indicated in unit guidelines from a subsequent semester.

Feedback questionnaires and staff interviews addressed four questions. These related to:

- Staff member’s perceptions of their own contributions to the process of change in assessment;
- The effectiveness of how the project was conducted;
- Changes in their own understandings and beliefs about assessment practice; and
- Potential problems encountered in their own assessment practices.

Feedback from staff members by questionnaires and interviews indicated that their initial ideas of assessment practices had changed over the period of the study project. It seems that the workshops organized through this project were informative and stimulating for most staff members in the discipline. Some of the feedback emphasised the usefulness of the workshops facilitated by the institutional education advisor for reflecting on their assessment practices. Especially among new staff members, comments were made about how the project gave them opportunities to learn and develop their assessment tasks for “assessment for learning”. The comments show that assessment practices have come to be perceived by the staff members as an important part of learning for students not just a summative tool for assigning grades.

Colby-Kelly and Turner (2007) found that many language teachers show hesitancy regarding formative assessment in spite of the significant recommendations for formative assessment in the language teaching. Before the commencement of this project this would also appear to have been the case for staff members within the discipline. Comments from some staff indicate that the project raised their awareness of assessment practice, particularly formative assessment, as an integrated part of the teaching/learning process.

Examples of the types of change in assessment practice that took place include one new staff member who after participating in one of the workshops, trialled the introduction of a group work task in one of their units. Another staff member changed the format of their regular weekly assessment task, so that it now operates as a formative assessment task. The new style of task is also designed to support students in becoming more self-regulated learners.

The main concerns expressed by staff relate to the issue of bridging formative and summative assessment, when there is still the imperative to provide final grades. This is also addressed by Colby-Kelly and Turner’s study.

Feedback from unit guides for the second semester units shows noticeable improvement compared to the earlier semester in regards to the clarity of information relating to assessment task. There was also evidence of different degrees of change in the assignment tasks for many units. These changes appear to move toward greater alignment between stated outcomes and assessment tasks. This indicates that each staff member took the time to reflect on the alignment issue consciously when planning their own teaching.

Leadership Development

The project has been a good opportunity for project leaders and to reflect on leadership through the distributed leadership model in a participatory action research framework.

For the successful outcome from participatory action research in developing leadership, a degree of democracy in dialogue is indispensable as shown in Gustavsen (1985: 474-475 cited in Kekäle and Pirttila 2006). In the project discussed here, the aim was also to maintain democracy in a dialogue among staff members and encourage them to develop their own ideas. This is especially true in the case of this particular study, where more than half of the staff members are new to the institution. It has been essential for continuing staff members to ensure the new staff members of the democratic culture of the discipline and that it is an open and supportive environment. This study found that it is particularly important to maintain this democratic and supportive culture if the leadership role is being enacted by those without formal leadership status, as was the case in with this distributed leadership based project.

Staff feedback indicated that some staff felt that the project direction was not clear. Since project leaders had endeavoured to clarify the project directions, this may be an indication that the methodological framework was not suitable for some staff members. Where participants are unfamiliar with this research methodology or are uncomfortable with it, this democratic atmosphere cannot be fully achieved. Workshops on the participatory action research methodology at a discipline level may have improved the outcomes. To produce a fruitful result in leadership, the culture of the discipline needs to be dynamic and development-oriented. If the culture
of the discipline is not open-minded, it could end up with meaningless or defensive speculation in the discipline, as Kekäle and Pirttilä (2006) have pointed out.

Concluding Remarks

This paper reported on a project at a tertiary institution that was undergoing restructuring and widespread curriculum renewal. Targeting the area of change in assessment practice, the project was conducted using a participatory action research model to trial a distributive leadership approach to implementing the pending broadsweeping curriculum changes. This paper particularly focused on one of the language and culture studies disciplines within the institution and the project leaders from that discipline who participated in the project. The outcomes of the participatory action research project were to determine how the distributive leadership approach could facilitate the rollout of new curriculum initiatives, for this study, specifically new assessment practice. This paper discussed findings both from the perspective of staff responses to the distributive leadership approach and from their perspective of discernable changes in actual assessment practice within this particular discipline.

Whole staff engagement with the assessment project, as evidenced by their enthusiasm in workshops, input into the statement of principles document and in incidental discussions with project leaders in addition to the formal feedback received from them, indicated that the distributive leadership approach was well received by the staff. The project leaders on reflecting on their role in this distributive leadership model believed that they had been able to make a significant contribution to the discipline both because of this receptiveness from the staff and because of the concrete changes that took place in assessment practice and staff attitudes. They attribute this success at least partly to the democratic and open-minded culture that was encouraged in this project, factors that are indispensable in a distributive leadership model.

Changes in the patterns of assessment within many of the units within the discipline indicate that staff is implementing new approaches to assessment practice. More importantly the changes incorporate a broader variety of assessment tasks that target a broader range of learning outcomes. This degree of changes is in the limited time allocated for this study strongly supports a distributive leadership approach to implementing curriculum change. Particularly if this change challenges the existing understandings of teaching within the group as this implementation did.

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References


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