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Editorial for Special Issue on:

Signature Assessment and Feedback Practices in the Disciplines

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Introduction

In the main attention to disciplinary practices has been largely neglected in assessment and feedback research (Coffey, et al., 2011; Cowie & Moreland, 2015). More recently, the longstanding interest in authentic assessment (e.g., Wiggins, 1989) has re-surfaced in higher education literature on authentic assessment design (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; Villarroel, et al., 2018) and authentic feedback (Dawson, et al., 2020).

To address this gap, in our 2019 call for papers for this special issue, we sought articles that would explore the potential of what we called ‘signature’ assessment and feedback practices. Just as signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) have directed attention to discipline- and profession-specific teaching practices in higher education, we used the term ‘signature’ to invite researchers and educators to consider discipline-specific assessment and feedback practices. While these signatures will be authentic to a discipline, the term implies that they will be uniquely characteristic of a particular discipline. Thus, we invited researchers and educators to dig deeply into what makes a discipline or profession special and distinct from other fields. Because attention to disciplines has the potential to connect primary and secondary with tertiary education, which is often siloed in its own journals, the call for papers also explicitly sought examples from different levels of education.

Two years later, this special issue contains five theoretically framed and grounded empirical papers that: a) situate particular assessment and feedback practices within a discipline; b) analyse how engagement with those assessment and feedback activities allows students to participate more fully or effectively within the disciplinary or professional community, and c) illuminate new aspects of assessment and feedback. We (Quinlan and Pitt, this issue) conclude this special issue with an article that draws on the five empirical papers to construct a taxonomy for advancing research on signature assessment and feedback practices.

Introducing the Articles in this Special Issue

Consistent with the emphasis on classroom assessment practices and assessment for learning, all five empirical articles use qualitative data drawn from practice in particular classes, courses or programmes. The studies draw on combinations of observations, teacher interviews and reflections, student interviews and written reflections. Of particular interest in this special issue are researchers’ attention to disciplinary artefacts and how they are used in classroom assessment. The first two articles focus on discipline-specific (english and science)

assessment and feedback practices in school settings. The next three articles focus on further or higher education. Following Shulman's emphasis on professional education, all three of these further/higher education papers focus on vocationally oriented programmes: dental hygiene, allied health, and business.

In the first article, Finch and Willis (this issue) address the lack of empirical research relating to teachers' feedback design in high school English teaching. They use Allal's (2016) theory of co-regulation of classroom learning to analyse observations, artefacts, and interview data across two qualitative studies. They interrogate teacher feedback practices that can support students' acquisition of evaluative expertise in writing and how these interactions are shaped by disciplinary and schooling contexts. Finch and Willis's contribution to this special issue lies particularly in their demonstration of how signature practices within English are translated into broad school syllabi and criteria. They highlight how teachers convert these into specific assessment and feedback-related tools and how students' make sense of them. This tracing of the roots of assessment and feedback practices from the discipline through a series of other socio-cultural contexts emphasises that discipline-specific practices undergo a series of translations that shape their role in assessment and feedback practices. Thus, signature feedback and assessment practices need to be understood as both historically and culturally situated.

In the second article, Swanson and Midra (this issue) explore an elective scientific theory-building course at a US middle school. Authenticity within scientific learning environments lies at the heart of new science education standards in the US. This has generated research on teaching to these standards and on the design of summative assessments. However, they assert, more work is needed to understand how to formatively assess children's development of these scientific skills. They explore the integration of formative assessment and feedback practices into classroom instruction in ways that are authentic to science. Their article provides a narrative account that integrates rich classroom data drawn from videos of classroom interactions across a whole unit and analysis of students' work against standards-based rubrics. Their account documents how discipline-specific scientific practices and feedback can move student learning forward. The cyclical nature of the formative feedback opportunities, such as evaluation of ideas against experimental evidence, peer-review, and sense-making classroom discussion and debate helped students iteratively develop, test, and refine their own theories.

The next three papers investigate vocationally-oriented further or higher education. Esterhazy, de Lange, and Møystad (this issue) focus on dental hygiene to explore how teachers used ‘assessment moments’ to prepare students for the often complex and unpredictable nature of professional work. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with students and teachers, they report on research about three different assessment moments across a dental hygiene programme: seminars, written exams and clinical training. They specifically interrogate how professional knowledge, skills and attitudes are achieved through assessment moments in which students need to generate, interpret or discuss dental radiographs and either receive formative feedback or are assessed with a grade. Thus they show how students are introduced to the professional nature of the discipline by engaging with authentic professional artefacts. These signature assessments use practical tasks related to radiographs that challenge students to identify and discriminate knowledge-aspects and ethical issues during practical decision-making.

Penman, Tai, Thomson, and Thompson (this issue) also situate their study in health education, using the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al, 2017) to explore the role of feedback in clinical placements. This theory supports their focus on disciplinary and professional practices that are embedded in workplaces as learning environments. Their research centres on the execution of a signature pedagogy within clinical settings, a near-peer mentoring (Olaussen et al., 2016) initiative across physiotherapy and occupational therapy placements. The student near-peer mentors in both of these clinical disciplines appeared to be able to freely engage in generating and enacting peer feedback. This supports Penman’s assertion that such near-peer mentoring is a common signature pedagogy for clinical placements. The authors explore implications of this signature approach for educator development and the types of roles students take on in workplace feedback situations. Creating a comfortable learning environment and promoting feedback for learning were two influential feedback practices within this setting. They also identify the importance of explicit articulation of feedback expectations for students transitioning from the classroom to clinical contexts.

In business-oriented disciplines, Zhao, Zhou, and Dawson (this issue) posit that there is a disconnection between what employers expect graduates to do and what graduates are able to do. To address this gap, they interviewed recruiters from industry settings in China and used the findings to design an innovative assessment process for students in a Chinese university. They designed a peer-assessment loop for higher education international business

students focused on helping students learn how to work together in groups to analyse business case studies and present their analyses. They explored the effects of rubric co-construction, rubric-guided learning and performance, rubric-referenced peer review, and rubric-referenced reflection on students' perceptions of their assessment experiences. Both the team work on the case analyses and the processes of co-construction of rubrics and use of those rubrics in subsequent peer assessment enabled the instructors to recreate a 'real world' setting of teamwork interactions in business. The design of case-based peer assessment loops with co-constructed rubrics mirrored the operational genres, cognitive challenges, and emotional dynamics of business professional practices. The authors analysed students' reflections related to the entire assessment loop. The majority of students saw the co-construction of rubrics from samples as yielding a 'compass' that guided them toward particular professional competencies and values in preparing their own cases and assessing their peers' case presentations.

To our knowledge, this is the first special issue focused on discipline-specific assessment and feedback practices. To describe these practices, we have proposed the concepts of signature assessment and signature feedback, but this requires further development. Therefore, we (Quinlan and Pitt, this issue) have also written a substantial concluding article which draws upon lessons from each of the studies and advances a framework for subsequent research. In this final article, we theorise a taxonomy of elements of signature assessment and signature feedback practices. Specifically, we propose elements of discipline-specific assessments and categories of discipline-specific sources of feedback and feedback timings. We illustrate throughout the taxonomy with examples from the special issue papers. We conclude by identifying gaps and suggesting priorities for future research.

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