Does continuous assessment in higher education support student learning?

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Abstract   A distinction is often made in the literature about "assessment of learning" and "assessment for learning" attributing a formative function to the latter while the former takes a summative function. While there may be disagreements among researchers and educators about such categorical distinctions there is consensus that both types of assessment are often used concurrently in higher education institutions. A question that often arises when formative and summative assessment practices are used in continuous assessment is the extent to which student learning can be facilitated through feedback. The views and perceptions of students and academics from a discipline in the Humanities across seven higher education institutions were sought to examine the above question. A postal survey was completed by academics, along with a survey administered to a sample of undergraduate students and a semi-structured interview was conducted with key academics in each of the seven institutions. This comparative study highlights issues that concern both groups about the extent to which continuous assessment practices facilitate student learning and the challenges faced. The findings illustrate the need to consider more effective and efficient ways in which feedback can be better used to facilitate student learning.

Keywords   Continuous assessment · Student learning · Feedback · Higher education

Introduction

Educationalists and lay people alike would agree with Brown and Knight (1994) when they affirm that assessment is central to the student experience. Likewise, Gibbs (2006a) states that assessment frames learning. These assertions are well supported in the literature (Biggs 2003; Bryan and Clegg 2006; Heywood 2000; Ramsden 2003; Rowntree 1987), although Joughin (2009, p. 24) argues that they "must be treated cautiously in light of the

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nuanced research which is often associated with these claims". Regardless of the assertions and their interpretation, assessment cannot be understood in isolation from learning. However, the relationship between assessment and learning is often problematic, given that "assessment is about several things at once" (Ramsden 2003, p. 177). Among other things, assessment is about grading and reporting student achievements and about supporting students in their learning; and continuous assessment often does both of those things. Therefore, continuous assessment practices generally have a formative function for learning and a summative function for certification.

A large number of publications have arisen from research on the impact of assessment on students' learning (see, for example, Biggs 2003; Black and Wiliam 1998; Gibbs 1999; Gibbs 2006a; Gibbs et al. 2003; McDowell and Sambell 1999; Ramsden 2003; Rust 2002; Scouller 1996, 1998). In contrast, the issue of the attitudes to and experiences of academics and students on how the coexistence of different types of assessment contributes to the enhancement of student learning has received less attention, in particular research that focuses on several institutions. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature in relation to studies that compare the perceptions of academics and students from a discipline in the Humanities across several higher education institutions on the relationship between assessment and student learning. This paper aims to address this gap by examining the views of academics and students on how assessment practices support student learning. This comparative study highlights issues that concern both groups about the extent to which continuous assessment practices facilitate student learning through feedback and the challenges facing them.

Learning-oriented assessment

The distinction between formative and summative assessment is not easy to make (Brown et al. 1997; Knight and Yorke 2003). The key difference between these two types of assessment is not when they are used but their purpose and the effect that these practices have on students' learning. Some assessments in higher education are designed to be both formative and summative (Knight and Yorke 2003; Taras 2005; Yorke 2007). Such assessment tasks are considered formative because they provide feedback so that the students learn from it. Furthermore, the same assessment task fulfils a summative function because a grade is awarded and it contributes to the overall results of the course (Heywood 2000; Knight and Yorke 2003). The different purposes of assessment overlap or, at times, are in conflict with each other (Bloxham and Boyd 2007; Brown et al. 1997).

According to Heywood (2000), the concept of coursework (continuous assessment) was used in the United Kingdom and Ireland before the terms formative and summative were part of the vocabulary of assessment. Trotter (2006) claims that continuous assessment practices encourage students to learn on an on-going basis. Similarly, Isaksson (2007) argues that continuous assessment enables the provision of feedback to students on their learning. However, McDowell et al. (2005) express a note of caution about the extensive use of continuous assessment with a summative function because it can diminish the provision of effective feedback. Yorke (2003) claims that the move towards modularisation and unitisation of curricula in higher education has also been a factor contributing to an increase in the use of summative assessment and a reduction in formative assessment. Other reasons identified as contributors to the imbalance between formative and summative assessment include limited availability of staff, growing student diversity and plagiarism [Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) 2007]. Thus, continuous assessment can create

an additional burden for academics who find the provision of effective feedback to students on continuous assessment demanding (Trotter 2006) and recognize that the feedback frequently makes little impact on learning (Crisp 2007).

Sadler (1989) questions the practice of giving an assessment task both a formative and a summative function, as he believes that grades tend to shift attention away from what the students need to improve. Providing both grades and feedback comments may be counter-productive for formative purposes as students may simply note the grade and ignore the formative feedback (Yorke 2007). Thus, the feedback serves mainly to justify the students' marks (Brown and Glover 2006). In contrast, Taras (2005) argues that formative assessment is nothing more than summative assessment plus feedback, which is given to the students to improve their learning. She concludes, therefore, that all assessment is summative first and if the assessment also provides feedback then it can be regarded as formative.

Striking a balance between formative and summative assessment can be problematic, because excessive focus on one may have negative consequences for the other (QAA 2007). For example, when the focus is mainly on summative assessment for grading and certifying students' performances, the benefits of the feedback provided to students may diminish or have a limited effect on their learning (Gibbs 2006b). In that case the connections between formative and summative assessment are too weak. Another problematic situation may arise when formative and summative assessments are too tightly linked and marks get attached to an increasing number of activities arising from a conviction that students will not pay attention to work unless it carries some marks (QAA 2007). This is highlighted in Maclellan's study (2001) from one higher education institution in Britain where the grading/ranking of student achievement emerged as the most frequently supported purpose of assessment for both staff and students. A quarter of the students in that study also revealed that assessment never motivates them to learn. Taras (2008) argues that the dominant focus given by the literature on assessment to the functions of formative and summative assessment has led to some of the misunderstandings about the relationship between formative and summative assessment processes.

Instead of focusing on the distinction between formative and summative assessment, the concept of learning-oriented assessment provides a more satisfactory perspective when considering the links between assessment and learning. Learning-oriented assessment has been described as an approach to assessment that seeks to encourage and support students' learning (Carless 2007; Joughin 2004). Carless (2007) argues that students' learning is supported by setting appropriate tasks to assess students' learning, by focusing on the process of learning and on providing feedback that is effective, and by developing students' autonomy and responsibility for monitoring and managing their own learning. Feedback is arguably the most critical element in facilitating students' learning (Black and Wiliam 1998; Gibbs and Simpson 2004).

The provision of effective feedback has been highlighted as one of the main features of a learning-focused approach to assessment (Carless 2007; Joughin 2004). Schmidt and Ó Dochartaigh (2001) note that most academics take feedback seriously delivering it to students in different forms ranging from comments on the assignment to e-mail messages, as well as in oral form either in class or individually. However, they also found poor practices of feedback consisting of a grade and a few comments. Bishop (2004) argues that the use of electronic feedback solves the problem of providing feedback to a large number of students in higher education.

Feedback, as described by Brown (1999), should have three components. Firstly, it is essential to state what is going to be assessed and the standard required in a transparent

way for students and teachers. Secondly, a judgement of the students' work needs to be
provided. Thirdly, the feedback given to students should help them to address the gap
between what they know and what is expected of them. Traditional assessment practices
are usually good at evaluation but they are often lacking in description and fail to provide
students with advice and support to improve their own learning (Brown 1999).

Some of the limitations of a traditional approach to assessment may be overcome when
students become actively engaged with the feedback and have to act upon it to improve
their work or their learning (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Hernández 2008). This has been
described as 'feed-forward', a concept that focuses on the responses of learners to feed-
back. Furthermore, feedback needs to be understood as a process of communication
between teachers and students (Higgins et al. 2001) and should take the form of assessment
dialogues in an attempt to clarify the assessment process (Carless 2006).

Method

The participants of the study (see Table 1) were undergraduate students of Hispanic
Studies and the teaching staff from the departments/sections of Hispanic Studies in the
seven universities in the Republic of Ireland. To maintain the anonymity of the institutions,
each university has been identified by a letter, e.g. A, B, C, etc.

The academics came from two groups. The larger group comprised of all academic staff
of the seven departments/sections of Hispanic Studies in the universities who completed a
postal questionnaire in 2006. The second group was a sub set of the participants in the
questionnaire, either in their capacity as heads of department/section, or as a member of the
staff nominated by the head of the department/section. Seven academics representing each
of the seven universities accepted to participate in a semi-structured interview conducted
by the researcher during 2007 in order to investigate practices of student assessment. The
student sample was drawn from those individuals who were available and/or willing to
participate in the completion of the questionnaire on the day that the researcher visited
their university. A significant limitation in using a convenience sampling method is that the
findings cannot be considered representative of the whole population (Robson 2002).
However, the data obtained are rich and allow certain comparisons to be made between the
views of academic staff and students.

The study is based on quantitative and qualitative data from the two surveys and on
qualitative data from the interviews. For the purpose of analysis, 41 completed academic
surveys were classified with an ID number (S1, S2, … S41) as they were received.
Similarly, each student questionnaire was coded according to the university from which it
originated (e.g. A, B, C, etc.) and was given an ID number ranging from 1 to 138. For
example (D.84) refers to a reply given by a student from university D, who has been given
the ID code 84. Interviews were fully transcribed and pseudonyms were devised to pre-
serve the anonymity of the participants and their institutions. Data were coded into cate-
gories using content analysis. Documentary material (e.g. students' handbooks, course

Table 1 Number of participants in target sample and the final sample

Group	Target	Final
Students	138	138
Academics	70 (68)	41
Heads of subject or nominee	7	7

descriptions, assignment requirements, past papers and departmental/section websites) was also used. Table 2 illustrates the total number of undergraduate modules offered in each university.

Results

Use of continuous assessment

An analysis of programme documentation related to all the undergraduate modules/courses offered by the seven departments/sections reveals the extent to which continuous assessment is used and how much assessment practices vary from one university to another (see Table 3).

Few departments/sections appear to be assessing modules/courses by using a formal end of semester/year examination as the only format of assessment. An exception can be seen in University A where it appears that one in five modules is assessed exclusively by examination (21.1%). Similarly, in University D all language modules/courses are assessed by formal examinations. A large percentage of assessment at Universities B, E, F and G entails a combination of continuous assessment and examinations, with a small number of

Table 2 Total number of undergraduate modules/courses offered in each university

Department/section	Number of modules/courses on offer
University A	19
University B	34
University C	44
University D	24
University E	40
University F	36
University G	27

Table 3 Percentage of undergraduate modules being assessed by continuous assessment (CA) and/or examination in different departments/sections

[a] The assessment practices at this particular university are significantly different to those of the other universities in that some examinations cover more than one course/module. Thus, the weightings of coursework and examinations are only approximate values

Department/section	Combination of examination and CA	Examination only	CA only
University A (N = 19)	42.1	21.1	36.8
University B (N = 34)	94.2	0	5.8
University C (N = 44)	23.0	0	77.0
University D[a] (N = 24)	∼41.8	∼46.2	∼12.0
University E (N = 40)	82.5	2.5	15.0
University F (N = 36)	77.8	0	22.2
University G (N = 27)	92.6	0	7.4

modules/courses being assessed entirely by continuous assessment. In University E, despite the high percentage of modules being assessed by a combination of continuous assessment and examination (82.5%), approximately one in five of those modules (18.2%) includes a formal written examination, while for the rest of the modules/courses the formal written examination has been replaced by formal 'in-class' tests. University C is unique in relation to the high percentage of modules/courses (77%) that are being assessed entirely by continuous assessment; however, assessment that combines continuous assessment and formal examinations has been retained for the majority of the modules/courses focusing on language/linguistics.

Provision of feedback comments and/or grades

Almost nine in ten academics (87.8%) who responded to the questionnaire stated that they 'always' or 'often' provide students with comments on assessed work. However, they also reported that most methods of assessment are used simultaneously to grade students' learning and to provide feedback on their work (see Table 4).

Similarly, almost nine in ten students (87.7%) indicated that they "always" or "often" receive a grade for their assessed work. Students also reported that six of the most frequent

Table 4 Modes of Assessment used concurrently to grade and provide feedback	Modes of Assessment most used (N = 41)	Used by	Concurrently used to grade and feedback (%)
	Language essays	(n = 23)	82.6
	Written individual assignment	(n = 40)	77.5
	Literature essays	(n = 17)	76.4
	Oral individual presentations	(n = 29)	75.8
	Language individual written exercises	(n = 35)	71.4
	Class written tests	(n = 35)	71.4
	Translation exercises	(n = 31)	70.9
	Aural/listening tests	(n = 20)	65.0

Table 5 Modes of assessment used concurrently to grade and provide feedback	Modes of Assessment most used (N = 138)	Used by	Concurrently used to grade and feedback (%)
	Language essays	(n = 109)	66.1
	Written individual assignments	(n = 133)	64.6
	Translation exercises	(n = 132)	61.3
	Literature essays	(n = 112)	58.9
	Class written tests	(n = 129)	58.1
	Language individual written exercises	(n = 133)	55.6
	Oral individual presentations	(n = 105)	40.9

methods of continuous assessment are used simultaneously to provide grades and feedback (see Table 5).

Over three quarters of students (78.3%) confirmed that they receive oral or written comments on coursework, and when they were asked to indicate if they believed that all their learning should be reported by the use of a grade/mark 71% gave a positive reply. Comments made by 74.8% of the students in favour of being provided with a grade for their work justified their answer arguing that the grade/mark acted as a motivator to learn, that a grade encourages them, or that grades give them an idea about their standard. However, the students that were not in favour of receiving grades for all the work submitted (25.2%) expressed it in strong terms. One student stated that:

> Too much emphasis is placed on continuous assessment. Every single little home-work assignment is counted towards our final grade so even if you miss one [assignment] you get a zero, which drags down your whole average overall for the year. I think it is not fair (F.106).

Both positive and negative effects on students' learning were reported by all intervie-wees regarding the use of continuous assessment to grade students work. Feargal elabo-rated on that issue:

> Continuous assessment is very good because it takes into account student progression and work throughout the year… However, a lot of pressure is put on academics to give marks for continuous assessment and that also contributes to putting more pressure on students.

An additional difficulty emerging in relation to the provision of feedback to students was that continuous assessment means that the provision of feedback is regarded by many academics as a labour-intensive activity. A comment made by Dermot illustrates the difficulties faced by academics regarding the provision of feedback to a large number of students on an on-going basis:

> Now, I'm afraid that because of the number of students taking certain modules … the feedback that I would give for a piece of non-language work might be a crisp two or three lines and that's the truth - plus a grade.

Supporting student learning with feedback

Figure 1 highlights that academics and students from this study hold similar opinions regarding the importance of the pedagogic functions of assessment, i.e. 'to provide students with feedback', 'to meet the learning outcomes' and 'to motivate students to study'. Differences begin to emerge in relation to their opinions about the importance of grading, which is given a slightly higher priority by students (16.8%) than by teachers (11.1%).

It is in the ranking attributed to the most frequently employed purposes of assessment used in Hispanic Studies where more divergent views between academics and students begin to emerge (see Fig. 2). The graph illustrates that the option of 'grading students' was ranked the most frequent purpose of assessment by students (24.1%) while the percentage of academics that considered 'grading students' as a frequent purpose of assessment was much lower (13.1%).

Practices of feedback that include a grade were regarded as having less impact on student learning. For example, Dermot noted that students do not seem to make the most of feedback when it comes together with a grade:
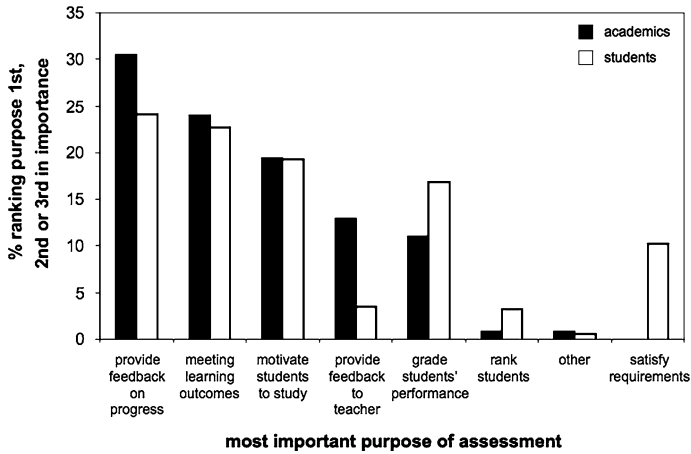
Fig. 1 The most important purposes of assessment, as identified by academics and students
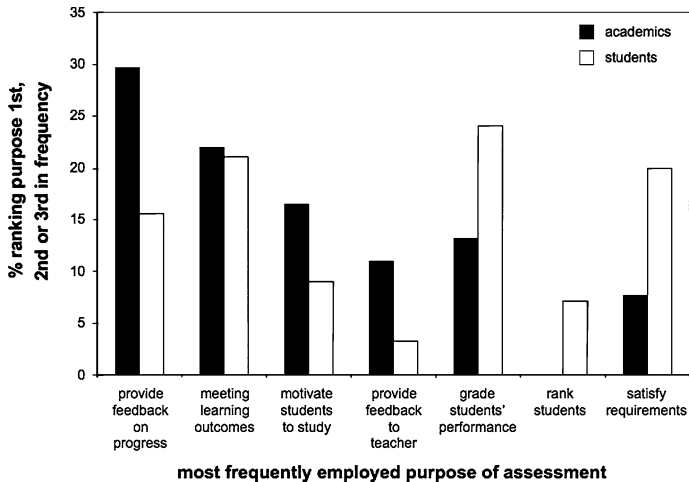

Fig. 2 The most frequently employed purposes of assessment

I tell the students that they must bear in mind the comments that I made and that they must also keep on file the translations that we use in class; they sort of look at me and think "well, it's done, it's over, I've got a mark – why should I bother?"

Geraldine added that in her experience the provision of feedback does not always lead to helping students to improve their work:

I suspect that they [students] don't always look as closely as they should at the corrections and they register the grade in a very clear way but they may not register their errors and the corrections that have been offered as clearly as they should, so often they will make the same mistake twice and repeat it.

Feargal also expressed similar sentiments about the limited effect of feedback on students' learning when he said that "[feedback] is kind of wasted… I even ask them 'do you

look at it?'…They don't do it until you say OK, if you do it [re-submit] I'll give you another mark".

However, some interviewees commented on other ways (no grades were provided) in which formative assessment seems to have a positive effect on students' learning. For example, Tom indicated that:

> [about] the literary presentations… They [students] are more interested in getting feedback than a grade; they do like getting that feedback. I actually would not like to grade those because I feel they are there to motivate, and to help, and to give you feedback as well about what you are doing and … I do like the literature presentations very much as a teaching method.

In one institution it is compulsory for students to personally meet the academics to talk about their work and to get feedback on their essays. Other institutions have a more flexible system and some members of the staff organise a meeting with the students while others leave it up to the students. A number of interviewees expressed hesitation about how successfully they felt that assessment was at supporting students' learning. For example, Kate stated that "ideally" assessment should encourage students' progression. Similarly, Chris seemed hesitant about whether feedback supports students in their learning by using the word "perhaps" when commenting on his department's mode of grading the work of their students.

Student satisfaction with the feedback received was measured by using a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = very satisfied, 5 = very dissatisfied). Overall, the average rating was 3.24. Reasons given for satisfaction with feedback include: "extensive comments pointing exactly where revision is needed" (A.6), "mistakes are highlighted" (F.109) or "comments are made and corrections suggested so you know what you are doing wrong" (A.14). Students' dissatisfaction with the feedback received was related to three main factors. These are listed below along with examples of comments made:

(a) Not enough feedback (quantity):
"Sometimes feedback is not always given and when it is, it's only one or two brief points" (B.17)
"It is only a sentence at the end, not very helpful" (C.28)
(b) Feedback does not provide advice on how to improve (quality):
"Vague criticism, no indication on what/how to improve" (D.77)
"They normally tell you it's either good or bad with no elaborate or helpful comments" (F.89)
(c) Feedback comes too late (timing):
"Advice is given too late" (F.92)
"Sometimes it is quite detached [in time] from the exercise given" (B.25)

Students acting on the feedback received: 'feed-forward'

Academics were asked to provide information on what they expect students to do with the feedback received. Almost all (94.6%) of the respondents replied to this item. The answers were classified into two categories: those specifically saying that academics expected students to do something with the feedback received (54.3%), and those answers in which academics hoped that students would learn something from it without focusing on any specific action (45.7%). A sample quotation from the first group was "I expect them to

work on their weak points" (S4), and from the second group "to get a better understanding of the discipline" (S16).

When the respondents were asked about how they ensured that students acted on the feedback, 91.9% replied to that open-ended question. The replies were grouped into three categories, (i) those academics that place the responsibility on the students (26.4%), (ii) those that would check improvement in the future (41.2%) and (iii) those that require students to take some action in relation to the feedback received (31.4%). Examples of comments made under each category are presented in Table 6.

Fifty percent of the students in this sample stated that they are provided with suggestions 'always' or 'often' on how to improve the work that has been assessed. When breaking down by year of study (see Table 7), there are a relatively high percentage of first-year students (20.8%) indicating that they 'never' get suggestions to improve their work, and also 20% of second-year students indicating that they 'rarely' get suggestions on how to improve their work.

Students were asked what they do with the feedback received to ascertain the extent to which feedback becomes 'feed-forward'. This means that the feedback provided is intended to be used by the students as an aid to facilitate the improvement of their work. A total of 70.3% of the students answered the question. The answers from the students were classified into three categories according to what they did with the feedback received: (i) no specific action beyond reading it (20.6%), (ii) intending to act on the suggestions provided by applying the suggestions in future assignments (62.9%), and (iii) evidence that they acted on the recommendations to improve their work (16.5%).

Table 6 Ways of ensuring that feedback is acted upon

Category	Sample views of the respondents
i) Place responsibility on students	"I can only trust that they do" (S1)
	"I consider it their responsibility" (S23)
	"I cannot ensure that students do anything" (S16)
ii) Monitor progress in the future	"To see that they use it in future assignments" (S17)
	"I try to follow their progress" (S35)
iii) Require specific action from the students	"They have to return a corrected version" (S22)
	"I just mark the mistakes and they have to revise and correct them" (S30)
	"I discuss it in class and build the next activity on it" (S18)

Table 7 Feedback on how to improve work by year of study

Students by year of study	N = 138	Suggestions to improve work by teacher given				
		Always %	Often %	Sometimes %	Rarely %	Never %
First year	24	12.5	29.2	29.2	8.3	20.8
Second year	20	10.0	45.0	25.0	20.0	0
Other year	19	15.8	52.6	31.6	0	0
Final year	75	16.0	30.7	33.3	17.3	1.3

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that continuous assessment is extensively used in the seven departments/sections, either as the only method of assessing undergraduate modules/courses in Hispanic Studies or, more broadly, combined with examinations. It was not within the scope of this article to look at the factors that have contributed to a shift towards continuous assessment but it can be argued that the greater use of continuous assessment has provided academics with more control over the assessment within the classroom rather than leaving it in the hands of the central system of the university. Nevertheless, the fact that many modules/courses are assessed under typical examination conditions "in-class" suggests that academics value assessment that entails performing under supervision. Assessment practices at University C suggest that students are trusted by the academics, as a large proportion of their assessment does not take place under supervision.

The positive results found in relation to the importance given by both groups to the provision of feedback indicates that "assessment for learning", in principle, is given a high priority by academics and students. These findings support the learning-oriented approach to assessment advocated by Carless (2007). Students, in particular, associate continuous assessment with motivation to learn on an on-going basis and believe it provides opportunities to get feedback on their learning. It was also found that many practices of continuous assessment reported in this study appear to have both a formative and a summative function as the provision of feedback comes together with a grade that counts towards the degree certification. This double function given to continuous assessment appears to be a significant factor towards inhibiting feedback from having a greater effect in supporting student learning, as suggested by the literature (Sadler 1989). Furthermore, many students appear to be quite demanding about getting grades on all their work while some academics seem to believe that grading is not always necessary. These differences may be explained by the previous experiences of students in relation to the value of grading, particularly in second-level education. Further research is needed to ascertain if the differences of opinion between academics and students in relation to the frequency with which grades are used to assess students' work may be the result of the student sample used or if the findings can be generalised.

This study shows that a great effort is placed by academics into giving feedback to students. However, some respondents expressed concerns about providing students with effective feedback in a timely manner due to an increase in the use of continuous assessment and to the large number of students involved when compared with such practices 10 or 15 years ago. A small number of students were also conscious that too much continuous assessment, when used for summative purposes, could result in an assessment overload and student anxiety about the grades achieved. The opinions of academics and students suggest that feedback in the support of student learning is no longer effective in addressing the assessment needs of the undergraduate students of Hispanic Studies. This finding is consistent with that of Schmidt and Ó Dochartaigh (2001, p. 83) and concurs with the study by Brown and Glover (2006) suggesting that students may perceive the comments as a justification of the grade. A significant number of students reported that the comments received are limited and do not suggest how to improve their learning. The high percentages of first-year students reporting dissatisfaction with the feedback received is higher than might be expected, as one would think that the need to help students in their learning should be greater in the first-year of their study. Either this is not the case (a more representative sample may have provided different results) or it may be a true reflection that a significant proportion of the students in the initial years of their

studies are not getting enough support through feedback. A factor contributing to first year students getting less feedback than students in later years could be that larger teaching groups in first year add pressure to academics to provide the kind of feedback expected by the students. Academics reported that large class sizes and the implementation of modularisation are barriers to effective feedback. This study shows that, in general, feedback is given directly by the teacher to the students with very little involvement of students in self and peer assessment (Hernández 2008). Neither was much evidence found in this study for the provision of electronic feedback (Bishop 2004), although such rapid feedback might encourage students to pay more attention to the comments received. The use of technology in the provision of feedback may offer a means of communicating with large numbers of students in a timely manner. Online management systems, such as Blackboard or Moodle, could provide the platform through which prompt feedback to students can lead to 'feedforward', the practice whereby students act on their feedback to improve their work.

The limited action taken by the students on the feedback received may be due to the timing of the feedback (e.g. too late in the term) or to the suggestions not being sufficiently motivational to prompt action. Even when the academics said that they expected some action from the students on the feedback, or that they will check progress in the future, students may not act on the feedback received as the dialogue required between students and academics on how to act may be missing. The lack of dialogue may be perceived by the students as not being provided with enough help, which was one of the most common expressions of dissatisfaction reported by the student respondents. Thus, the feedback given appears to be lacking the third component described by Brown (1999).

Conclusions

This study has shown that continuous assessment has the potential to support student learning through feedback and to increase students' motivation for learning. Despite some apparent differences, which relate to tradition and student numbers, in the provision of feedback from academics in the different institutions, the results of this study indicate that this practice of assessment often seems to fail in supporting "assessment for learning", irrespective of the great effort that academics put into it. The shortcomings of continuous assessment appear to be linked to the double function (formative and summative) attributed to this practice of assessment. An understanding of formative assessment as summative assessment plus feedback, as advocated by Taras (2005), does not adequately address the shortcomings of current feedback practices in supporting student learning as discussed above. For feedback to support students' learning a move towards a learning-oriented approach to assessment, as argued by Carless (2007), is suggested. This approach advocates a) the design of assessment tasks as learning tasks, b) the provision of feedback that aims at supporting students throughout the process of learning, instead of focusing on offering feedback on the completed task (i.e. when they receive the grade) and c) the engagement of students in managing and monitoring their learning. A learning-oriented approach to assessment requires a radical change in the way feedback is perceived with greater emphasis given to the role of the students in the feedback process rather than to the quantity and quality of feedback, as has traditionally been the case. This approach would require that a "feed-forward" component is included, making it clear to students what they have to do with the feedback received. Students should also be trained on how to develop skills to peer review their own work. The involvement of students in self and peer assessment practices could also have a positive effect by encouraging students to reflect

about their learning and take greater responsibility for it, thus making the feedback process more effective. More feedback dialogue between academics and students is necessary so that students become aware of how the feedback can influence positively on their learning.

It is important to recognise the value of grades as part of the assessment of student learning but student perceptions need to be changed. Reflecting about learning through activities that do not carry grades may encourage students to change their previous perceptions about the value of grades. Future research is needed to ascertain the extent to which learning-oriented assessment facilitates students' learning by moving to a more student-centred approach to working with feedback and, thus, contributes to overcome some of the difficulties about student feedback emerging from this research.

While the context of this study is very specific, it is believed that its findings are relevant to other contexts in higher education. In this day and age, when resources for institutions to support student learning are scarce, any proposal in favour of enhancing student teaching and learning should include the provision of a learning-oriented approach to assessment as an essential component of any university programme.

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