

The Role of Assessment in Developing Potentials for
Student Learning: Multiple Perspectives on
Undergraduate Distance and Online Course
Assessment Practices at an Australian University

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Three aims

- ☉ † To map current assessment practices and tasks in the university's undergraduate distance and online courses
- ☉ † To conduct a theoretically informed analysis of those practices and tasks
- ☉ † To generate a set of evidence-based recommendations for the refinement of those practices and tasks and the dissemination of the findings of that analysis.



Research questions

- ☉ † What was the range of assumptions and attitudes underpinning the academics' assessment practices and tasks in the selected undergraduate distance and online courses at Central Queensland University?
- ☉ † How did those assumptions and attitudes create and constrain assessment as a crucial element of student learning?



Methodology

- The study's methodology was centred on the planning and enactment of a single, exploratory case study (Yin, 2002, 2003), guided by appropriate ethical procedures.



Analysis

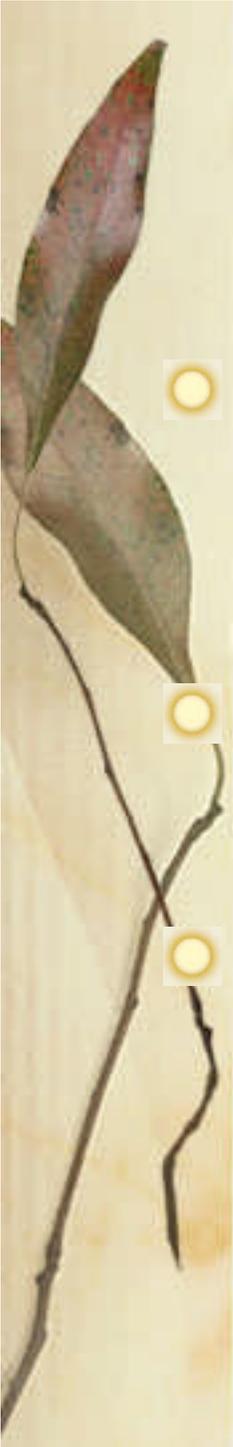
- Gee's (1996a, 1996b) 'Big D/little d' D/discourse theory was the method used to analyse the results of the review of the course profiles and the interview transcripts. This method is attentive to the underpinning organising structures as well as the 'language bits' that reflect individuals' and groups' worldviews.



Significance

- Findings were clustered around three discursive tensions and two major findings arising from the study.

- The discursive tensions related to:
 - †Content- and discipline-specific assessment *vis-à-vis* the evaluation of generic skills and graduate attributes
 - †Online content and course management systems as facilitators of and/or obstacles to assessing diverse forms of knowledge
 - †Assessment in relation to learner-centred education versus a 'user pays good'.



Threediscursive tensions

- ☉ † The confirmation of the direct conceptual links between assessment and learning posited by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (2001), Harris and James (2006) and James, McInnis and Devlin (2002)
- ☉ † The mediation of those conceptual links through the D/discourses of academics (as well as other stakeholders, particularly students)
- ☉ † The proposition of 'the potentials for student learning' as a constructed, contextualised and heterogeneous phenomenon.



Two major findings

- ❑ † The importance of developing the potentials for student learning in a variety of contexts and from multiple perspectives (as demonstrated in the study's focus on 20 academics' assessment practices and tasks)
- ❑ † The range of opportunities within, and pressures on, higher education as a particular set of sites and types of student learning that frame and underpin the effectiveness or otherwise of that learning.



Conclusion(1)

- Highlighted the need for academics to negotiate a complex array of factors and forces (including students' needs and demands, institutional requirements and their own professional and personal views of learning and assessment) in designing, implementing and evaluating assessment tasks.



Conclusion(2)

- Has also identified some prospects for quality assessment practices that are equitable and potentially empowering and transformative: these were most strongly evident in some interviewees' references to specific assessment tasks and/or associated strategies.



Finally conclusion (3)

- Therefore the study's value consists of linking the mapping of the assessment tasks with the perceptions of assessment by the participating academics. This link has significant implications for two crucial and interdependent goals:
- (i) improving students' learning outcomes;
- (ii) understanding and valuing the work and lives of academics.