Staff student partnership in assessment: enhancing assessment literacy through democratic practices

Susan J. Deeley & Catherine Bovill

Published online: 29 Dec 2015.

Submit your article to this journal

View Crossmark data

Staff student partnership in assessment: enhancing assessment literacy through democratic practices

Susan J. Deeley* and Catherine Bovill

School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

In recent years, research and practice focused on staff and students working in partnership to co-design learning and teaching in higher education has increased. However, within staff–student partnerships a focus on assessment is relatively uncommon, with fewer examples evident in the literature. In this paper, we take the stance that all assessment can be oriented *for* learning, and that students' learning is enhanced by improving their level of assessment literacy. A small study in a Scottish university was undertaken that involved a range of different adaptations to assessment and feedback, in which students were invited to become partners in assessment. We argue that a partnership approach, designed to democratise the assessment process, not only offered students greater agency in their own and their peers' learning, but also helped students to enhance their assessment literacy. Although staff and students reported experiencing a sense of risk, there was immense compensation through increased motivation, and a sense of being part of an engaged learning community. Implications for partnership in assessment are discussed and explored further. We assert that adopting staff–student partnership in assessment and more democratic classroom practices can have a wide range of positive benefits.

Keywords: staff–student partnership; assessment literacy; democratic practices; learning community; assessment and feedback

Introduction

It has been asserted that assessment and feedback are the weakest links in learning and teaching and remain a major source of student dissatisfaction (Rust, O'Donovan, and Price 2005). This dissatisfaction may centre on lack of clarity about assessment requirements and understanding marking criteria (Bloxham and West 2004); opacity of feedback, which may lead to students 'misinterpreting academic discourse' (Weaver 2006, 392); difficulty in understanding how feedback can be used to improve skills or be applied to future assignments (Blair and McGinty 2013; Sadler 2010); and tardiness of feedback and its relevance (Jonsson 2012). Sadler (1989) asserts that three key pieces of information must be communicated effectively in feedback to students: (a) what constitutes a good performance in a particular assessment, (b) how the student has performed in a particular assessment and (c) what a student needs to do to bridge the gap between (a) and (b). For students to be able to respond effectively to feedback, it is imperative that they understand its meaning. This requires them to become conversant with not only academic language in the subject discipline (Lea and Street 1998), but also the language of assessment (Stefani 1998),

*Corresponding author. Email: susan.deeley@glasgow.ac.uk

otherwise referred to as 'assessment literacy' (Smith et al. 2013, 44; Higher Education Academy (HEA) 2012; Price et al. 2012).

Alongside the prioritisation of assessment and feedback, the UK higher education sector is witnessing an increased interest in staff and students working as partners in learning and teaching (Bovill 2013a, 2013b; Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011; Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014; Higher Education Academy 2014). Indeed, Ryan and Tilbury (2013, 5) claim that 'learner empowerment – actively involving students in learning development and processes of "co-creation" that challenge learning relationships and the power frames that underpin them' is one of six new pedagogical ideas in higher education. Within the discourse of staff–student partnership, some concerns have been raised about whether students ought to, or indeed can, meaningfully act as partners in assessment (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014). This is due in part to its validatory nature, with assessment typically regarded as belonging within the domain of the teacher. However, alongside the importance of assessing what students have learned (which often serves a quality assurance role that is of particular importance to subjects governed by professional bodies), is the opportunity to design assessment *for* learning. Here, assessment is viewed not only as a way of measuring learning that has taken place, but also as an opportunity to engage students in further learning (Carless 2015; Sainsbury and Walker 2008; Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2012; Taras 2002).

Stefani (1998) argues that students should be part of the assessment process, and yet the majority of students continue to have few opportunities to participate in decisions about assessment. Although there are circumstances in which student involvement in the assessment process might be deemed inappropriate, there is growing evidence of beneficial outcomes for students from co-created assessment initiatives, such as deeper learning and enhanced skills development (Deeley 2014); enhanced examination performance and student learning (Hardy et al. 2014); and deeper understanding of assessment processes (Sambell and Graham 2011).

In this paper, we present findings from a small research study in a Scottish university, where students were invited to work in partnership with the teacher of two final-year undergraduate courses to co-create a range of different assessment and feedback elements. We argue that a staff–student partnership approach to assessment: is consistent with an assessment *for* learning approach, encourages more active engagement in assessment and learning, and provides opportunities to enhance 'students' capacity to judge their own work' (Boud and Falchikov 2006, 403), as well as developing their assessment literacy (HEA 2012).

Staff–student partnership in assessment and feedback

Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014, 6–7) define staff–student partnership as 'a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways'. It is a dialogic relationship which is sustained by mutual trust and respect. Stefani (1998, 348) refers to 'academic staff … sharing expertise', and Rust, Price, and O'Donovan (2003) affirm that students must be active participants in their own learning. We use the term 'partnership' deliberately, recognising that collaborations between staff and students do not always achieve the equality of opportunity and decision-making implied by the term. Aspirationally, we advocate a shift towards democratic practices through the principles of partnership in assessment, even within the constraints

of existing assessment systems. Additionally, we acknowledge that there may be different levels of collaboration possible in different contexts (Bovill and Bulley 2011). We place staff first in the terminology 'staff–student partnership' purposely to reflect the reality that staff usually exercise decision-making power in relation to assessment.

Being involved in a partnership relationship with students requires the teacher to relinquish some inherent power and, similarly, requires students to take responsibility in their empowered status as partners in the classroom. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that power relations continue to exist between student and teacher, even when assessment and feedback is 'mutually constructed and co-dependent' (Boud and Molloy 2013, 711); or, in co-assessment (Deeley 2014), where students and staff agree appropriate grades following critical appraisal and discussion. The transition to a more democratic classroom that partnership engenders can lead to the emergence of a range of challenges and risks (Bovill 2014). These include, for example, resistance to partnership working from students and staff; a sense of vulnerability that arises from changing the learned habits and norms of learning and teaching; and ensuring partnership is not tokenistic (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014). However Bovill et al. (2015) argue that many of these challenges can be overcome and can be re-envisaged as pedagogical opportunities leading to rewarding outcomes from partnership work.

The conventional division between teachers and students can be understood as a social construction, reinforced by role expectations and assumptions. Challenging this reveals a threshold to an exciting foreign landscape where the map of assessment can be redrawn. Indeed, Cook-Sather (2014) argues that staff–student partnership is a threshold concept for many academic staff, recognising its troublesome, but potentially transformatory, nature. Through crossing this threshold by adopting a partnership approach, students can be empowered, becoming active self-directed learners by taking more responsibility for their learning. There is ample evidence to suggest that the collaborative nature of this more democratic approach is beneficial to students' learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014; Deeley 2014; Deeley and Brown 2015; Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014; Higher Education Academy 2014; Rust, Price, and O'Donovan 2003; Sambell and Graham 2011; Stefani 1998). Proposing an extension of staff–student partnership to encompass assessment may unearth hidden risks and anxieties for both teachers and students. Indeed, some staff and students may not share the vision of an exciting new foreign landscape of assessment. Those whose disciplines are regulated by external professional bodies may also feel more constrained by what is possible in any re-envisaged assessment processes – although there is often flexibility in the pedagogic processes leading to professional competencies (Bovill et al. 2015; Hutchings, Huber, and Ciccone 2011).

One of the reasons that a partnership approach to assessment may be beneficial to staff, students and higher education institutions is through its potential to enhance students' assessment literacy. Students can increase their understanding of the language of assessment through their active engagement in: 'observation, imitation, dialogue and practice' (Rust, Price, and O'Donovan 2003, 152), investigating marking criteria (Handley and Williams 2011), and in assessment design (Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling 2002). Developing a 'capability in making complex judgements' (Sadler 2010, 546), self-monitoring (Boud and Molloy 2013) and 'giving and receiving criticism' (Mulder, Pearce, and Baik 2014, 158) are valuable attributes that can be

enhanced through a partnership approach. Boud and Falchikov (2006, 400) also argue that partnership in assessment can 'effectively equip [students] for a lifetime of assessing their own learning'.

Inspired and informed by the potential benefits to students of a staff–student partnership approach to assessment in developing assessment literacy, we present a small research study that investigated a staff–student partnership approach to a variety of assessment and feedback elements.

Staff–student partnership case study

The overarching aim of this small-scale research study was to investigate student perspectives on their learning during a staff–student partnership that engaged students as co-designers within assessment and feedback processes. The study was undertaken at a Scottish university with students in a four-year undergraduate MA Social Sciences degree. It involved all the students who were studying two optional Public Policy honours courses, which were taught by the first author in the first and second semesters of 2013–2014. It was a mixed classroom of third- and fourth-year students, and international students who were visiting for one semester. Twenty students took the first semester course and 13 students the second. Each course was assessed by a 3000-word essay, weighted at 40% of the overall course grade and a two hour examination, weighted at 60%.

Areas of assessment and feedback where a partnership approach was adopted

In the first semester course, the aim was to build staff–student partnership in areas of assessment and feedback with a view to learning from and refining the approach taken for the second semester course. In the first semester course, the following activities were undertaken:

- staff–student co-creation of students' essay titles;
- staff–student co-creation of essay marking criteria;
- students' formative self-assessment of their essays, using the co-designed marking criteria that they could later compare with the teacher's feedback on their essays;
- staff–student co-creation of formative and summative examination marking criteria;
- a typed formative examination (in which students answered the examination questions by typing their essays on individual computers in a computer laboratory at the university under examination conditions), where student answers were uploaded to Aropä (a web-based system which supports a range of peer review activities first developed by John Hamer at the University of Auckland in 1999);
- student peer review of their formative examination answers using Aropä and the agreed co-designed marking criteria.

In addition to the above, the second semester course also included:

- a typed summative examination, after which students' answers were uploaded to Aropä so that students could be given online feedback on their final exami-

nation using the agreed marking criteria, consistent with the format in which the students had received their formative examination feedback.

It should be noted at this point that giving feedback on summative examinations was not the usual practice at the university at this time, and marked examination papers were not normally returned to students.

Methods of data collection

This study involved gathering data during the time that the two courses were being taught, through a variety of methods:

- an examination practice questionnaire;
- three stages of students' anonymous critical incident questionnaires, which students were asked to complete regularly throughout the course: these were adopted from Brookfield (2012) and were designed to encourage students' reflections on their learning;
- a questionnaire at the end of each course, asking students for their views about their participation in the co-design of marking criteria and for their qualitative comments on their learning experience during the course: all the questionnaires were completed anonymously;
- students' self-assessment of their essays.

The data were collated and scrutinised several times by both authors to identify prevalent themes, and analysed in conjunction with the extant literature in this field.

Participants

All 33 of the students in both of the courses participated in the study but this included six students who took both courses, so a total of 27 students participated in the study, seven of whom were visiting international students.

Ethics

As this research project involved students on two courses taught by one of the researchers, it involved an element of ethical risk in that the participants were in a dependent relationship. To overcome this risk, the project was clearly explained verbally and in writing with assurances to the students that, even though the nature of partnership working on assessment would be likely to alter the power relations between staff and students and offer students more of a voice in the assessment process, their participation or non-participation would have no adverse or favourable effects on the outcomes of their studies, assessment or degree. All the summative assessment was marked and second marked anonymously. An external examiner verified the marks, which were ultimately ratified at an examination board meeting. All the students gave their written consent to participate in the study. The study was approved by the University's College of Social Science Ethics Committee.

Potential limitations

Despite assurances that the research would not affect the teacher–student relationship, there remains a possibility that the students were perhaps more willing to engage in this partnership because it was part of a research study, or through a motivation to support the teacher in her aims. However, the rigour of the study design and analysis was strengthened by involvement of the second author, who was external to the staff–student partnership and was not teaching either course.

This was a small-scale project, and although its findings may not represent staff–student partnership in assessment across the higher education sector, they may inform or encourage the adoption of similar pedagogical approaches in other contexts.

Findings

At the beginning of both courses, the nature of the staff–student partnership was outlined and explained in terms of the course assessment structure. Some of the fourth-year students had previous experience of staff–student co-assessment in a different course taught by the first author in the preceding year. In this case, the idea of partnership was not surprising, however, for other students in the class, it was an unfamiliar approach which seemed to take them by surprise and was perhaps perceived as being a rather 'curious arrangement' (Deeley and Brown 2014, 3). As the course was optional, it was made clear to the students that, if they did not feel comfortable with the assessment methods, they could choose to study a different course. All of the students decided to stay on the first semester course, as one student explained, 'the approach to teaching/assessing was different which I found very appealing'. For reasons discussed later, two students subsequently changed their minds about continuing with the second semester course. The research study was also explicitly explained and openly discussed with the students.

We explore the findings related to each assessment and feedback approach and then follow this in the discussion by exploring key themes arising from the findings.

Co-created essay titles

Learning how to structure essay questions is beneficial and useful to students, but it may also prove to be challenging. In the study, students were required to co-design their own essay titles, but they were given parameters within which they could focus on what was of most interest to them. Choices of command words, topic areas and essay foci were given for guidance, as set out below.

(1) Choose a command word prefixed by the word 'critically':
    analyse/assess/discuss/evaluate/examine
(2) Choose a topic area:
    secularism/domestic violence/learning disability and sexuality/the 'underclass'/lone parenthood
(3) Choose a focus for your essay related to:
    freedom/equality

Typically, students wrote a draft of an essay title and emailed it to the teacher for approval. In most cases, the teacher suggested some changes in order to make the essay titles more succinct. Students were mostly positive in their responses to this exercise; for example, one said, 'for me it means I'll write a better paper ... I would like to design my own question again'. Another student stated that she enjoyed 'the opportunity to write about what I felt most passionately'. However, one student commented that it meant 'added extra pressure' in terms of work and time. Some of the students found the exercise quite difficult or saw the risks in writing a difficult essay title, finding it 'more complex than (I thought it would be)' and realising that 'it can make a rod for your own back in terms of difficulty'. This highlights the importance of the teacher's role in offering guidance on the scope of students' proposed work, as well as in ratifying the essay titles.

Essay and examination marking criteria

Students were invited to co-create the marking criteria for their summatively assessed essay, as well as for use in the formative and summative examinations. Stefani (1998, 346) argues that '[a] shared understanding of the learning task and the assessment criteria are keys to this ideal [of partnership]', but co-creating marking criteria for their essays and the examination posed a challenge to some students. Only a few students admitted to considering closely the various criteria that had been used to judge their work in the past: 'for the first time, I properly paid attention to the marking criteria'. Comments from many students suggested that this had been a useful exercise, with one student saying that she 'very much enjoyed this', while another student wished 'this had been done from first year'.

A few students were less sure of the value of co-creating marking criteria with comments suggesting it is 'common sense to know what makes a good essay' and 'an academic essay will always be about the same things and nothing ground breaking could be added/deleted from the standard criteria'.

Formative self assessment of essays using co-created criteria and comparison with the teacher's grade

The self assessment exercise was intended to encourage students to develop their skills and understanding in judging their own performance against criteria. Many students found the experience constructive, with comments such as: 'it made me think harder about the quality of the work I was about to submit'; 'I was able to take a step back and really look at my essay from a different perspective'; and 'I really valued this because in other courses this reflection has helped improve my grades and learning motivation'.

Levels of student engagement in partnership varied, and this challenged the teacher's expectations and assumptions. For example, five students did not complete a formative self–assessment form when they submitted their essay. Although for some this may have been due to forgetfulness, one student admitted, 'I don't ever enjoy self-assessment because I am a harsh critic of my own work'. By contrast, another student believed that having set the criteria, students would always assess themselves positively. Interestingly, in another response, one of the students said 'I just don't see the point … it doesn't matter what I think'. To this student, her self-assessment was irrelevant because she believed that it was the teacher's judgement that

mattered most. It is possible that some students may be so imbued with the conventional view of their passive role, in the light of the teacher's authority, that the idea of partnership is met with disbelief and cynicism. There is also a possibility that self-assessment, coupled with low confidence, brings a degree of discomfort to students.

Formative typed examination in Aropä and peer review of examinations using co-created criteria

Most students found the peer review exercise to be useful as it offered them the chance 'to see other people's writing styles' and 'how others interpret the same criteria'. Students learned from each other, as one student asserted, she had 'taken on board the comments I received'. This signified a type of partnership between students that contributed to the emerging learning community within the class.

   Following the peer review of students' formative examination in semester one, students remarked in class that it would be very helpful to them if they could receive the teacher's feedback on their summative examination. Thus, the teacher suggested repeating the use of Aropä in the summative examination, but, instead of peer review, the teacher would mark the examination answers. This meant that feedback could be returned online to students, along with their marked examination answers, in the same format as the formative examination.

   Contrary to the teacher's expectations, her suggestion of a typed summative examination was met with some resistance. The atmosphere in the class was palpable and it quickly became apparent that some of the students felt very uncomfortable. One student, fuelled by fear and anxiety, spoke out angrily in the class, claiming that if she had known that the examination was to be typed she would not have chosen the course. This was a critical point for the teacher and it threatened to be a major challenge to the trust within the staff–student partnership. Consequently, all the students were asked for their views on this issue, and slightly more than half the class said that they would prefer to type their examination answers. However, as this examination format had not been considered at the beginning of the course, the teacher deemed it unfair to introduce it mid-way through the semester and decided that the hand written examination would remain in place. Instead, a typed examination would be introduced in the semester two course, so that students could opt out of the course in advance if they were uncomfortable with this arrangement. Two students subsequently opted out of the semester two course.

Semester two typed summative examination with answers uploaded into Aropä and teacher using Aropä to give online feedback against co-created criteria

Students were generally very positive about receiving feedback on their summative examinations, as one student exclaimed, 'it was 'brilliant to learn how to improve in future exams'. Another student commented that feedback was helpful 'in order to know why I'm not always getting As'. Feedback was seen as particularly helpful when it 'suggested ways to improve'. Feedback on summative examinations seemingly nudges the paradigm of assessment *of* learning into that of assessment *for* learning, as well as being conducive to enhancing students' assessment literacy.

Discussion

Reflecting on the experiences of a partnership approach to a range of assessment and feedback processes, some key themes arose: risk; enhanced motivation and engagement; and developing a learning community. These are consistent with outcomes and themes within existing literature (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014). We draw upon these themes to explore the specific role of partnership in assessment and initiate some areas of discussion that we consider to be currently under-scrutinised in partnership and assessment discourse.

Risk

In a learning and teaching partnership, there are inherent, but different, risks that may exist for teachers and students. In this study, students' anxiety regarding typing rather than writing the examination was a risk in two ways: firstly, it threatened to break the trust between students and teacher, and, secondly, students felt it might jeopardise their good grades. One student echoed the feelings of several students, claiming that 'this is a big risk … particularly as I can't type very quickly. Additionally, I feel like the hammering of keys will be a distraction from being able to focus my thoughts in answering the question'. Such passionate pleas challenge assumptions that young people are unanimously confident and expert in using technology, and contradict the assertion that 'typing speed can surely be disregarded as a major concern when considering whether to allow use of word processors in essay-type examinations' (Mogey et al. 2012, 124).

This example of risk demonstrates the outer edges of students' comfort zones and the power differentials within the staff–student partnership. Staff and students often find unfamiliar learning experiences more risky (Bovill 2014). Secure in an autonomous position, teachers may plot their limits of comfort in advance, whereas students, in their less powerful position, must draw their boundaries by altering their journey en route. This was evident where two students reconsidered their course plans and decided to opt out of the semester two course. In the class, we modelled assessment *for* learning by including some formative opportunities to make mistakes and discuss uncertainty, as well as opportunities for collaboration in defining and understanding assessment processes. All of this helped to reduce the perceived risks of the student–staff partnership in assessment, yet students still described some discomfort or uncertainty associated with their new roles in co-designing elements of assessment.

Enhanced motivation and engagement

Despite the intrinsic risks that may exist in partnership, there are also huge rewards to be gained. Students valued the partnership because of the opportunities for their active involvement. Indeed, one student reported that she 'was engaged for the entirety'. Students felt supported, valued and included in decision-making. They had a level of autonomy and, with it, responsibility. These factors led to their intrinsic motivation and a desire to perform well (Deeley 2014). One student commented on the empowerment that partnership engendered, admitting that she 'liked having a say in how my work would be graded', echoed by another student who stated that it 'felt nice to have a say'. These positive responses to involvement in assessment

support those arguing for student involvement in assessment (Rust, Price, and O'Donovan 2003; Stefani 1998). This enhanced engagement was clearly evident in the co-design of essay titles, where most students were keenly enthused. They felt more engaged, motivated and confident because they were able to focus their essay on more personal interests. This greater engagement leads students to report adopting a deeper approach to their learning, consistent with the aims of assessment *for* learning. As a consequence, the teacher experienced the rewards of this approach when marking the students' essays, which were of very high quality and innovative.

Developing a learning community

The discussions in class about assessment, feedback and peer review contributed to a strong sense of a learning community, with students and staff working together as a group to co-create criteria and discuss alternatives and possibilities. This experience was considered to be rewarding by the majority of students. For a staff–student partnership to develop, it is vital for trust to grow between the teacher and students (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014, 6). Indeed, Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) consider learning communities to be a key way in which staff–student partnerships in learning and teaching can be enacted and supported. During the two courses, students were consulted on their views and asked to reflect on the progress of their learning, using anonymous critical incident questionnaires (Brookfield 2012). A summary of their responses with feedback comments from the teacher were given verbally at the following weeks' classes. This exercise demonstrated the teacher's responsiveness to students and the genuine shared interest in shaping the course and its assessment. Another example of teacher responsiveness was the first-semester 'crisis' of the typed examination. The collaborative discussions and increased responsibility for designing of elements of assessment led to the language of assessment, which is normally the domain of the teacher, being opened up to all students, enabling them to enhance their assessment literacy. These factors helped to nurture trust and a feeling of community within the classroom.

One student described how the 'willingness of the teacher to listen/accept/change the ways exams/essays can be marked (was) very refreshing'. This helped to create an inclusive classroom. Consequently, this democratic practice brought other rewards as a student explained that it 'made me feel more valued and involved with the course in general'.

Implications for the role of partnership in assessment

Although staff and students may be keen to enact staff–student partnership in practice, many remain wary of partnership in assessment and feedback, particularly in examinations. In higher education, assessment is perhaps a more difficult area in which to achieve the genuine equality implied by partnership, where staff still hold final decision-making power over grades contributing to degree outcomes. Nevertheless, we should not be discouraged from moving towards more democratic practices in assessment and feedback, and Bovill et al. (2015) argue that there are ways of re-envisaging challenges to offer potential solutions and further learning. For example, if students are resistant to becoming involved in assessment or respond in surprising ways, having an open discussion about concerns is often helpful. In order to manage the risks experienced by both teacher and students, it is crucial that the teacher

clearly articulates the intentions of partnership in assessment – in this case, to enhance student assessment literacy and to change assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning. In our experience, honesty and openness frequently reduces many of the concerns students have.

There are risks for staff where they propose sharing power in assessment processes. For example, trusting students to arrive at a set of acceptable marking criteria may be a source of anxiety for the teacher. Within any assessment partnership, it is important for the teacher to maintain professional integrity and accountability. Clearly, staff–student partnership does not entail uninformed decision-making or following students' wishes in an unquestioning manner. Instead, it infers that teachers 'engage in a more complex set of relationships involving genuine dialogue with students' (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014, 8).

Poignantly, the experience of opening up the assessment and feedback processes to students has actually revealed our preconceived ideas of what is considered acceptable assessment and feedback practice. When co-creating marking criteria for the essays and examinations, the students did not deviate much from the type of criteria that staff would have designed. One student very astutely pointed out that possibly these norms had been internalised by students, so when they had the opportunity to co-create criteria in this study, it was challenging for them to think outside these norms. She added, 'it just shows how academia is a very normative system consisting of its own strict rules'. Interestingly, this resonates with other work undertaken by Bovill et al. (2015) and begs the question as to how staff respond to students' suggestions that extend beyond normative expectations, particularly in outcome-focused higher education, which may constrain transformative learning (Furedi 2012).

Many current practices in higher education pose barriers to enhancing assessment literacy, such as the delays in returning feedback to students on their assessed work (Jonsson 2012), where often a student has written their second assignment before receiving feedback on their first assignment. Yet, even where there are existing assessment practices that may act as barriers to assessment *for* learning, and there may be limitations to the extent of co-creation that is possible in some contexts, there are still significant benefits to be gained by exploring further possibilities within the assessment and feedback process. One of the outcomes that we should not ignore is the substantially enhanced assessment literacy reported and demonstrated by students. This is embodied in a comment from a student about how feedback 'helped me understand how well I am doing and how I could do better'. Students were invited into an arena conventionally considered to be staff territory, and, whilst staff maintain some expert and adjudicator roles, the emphasis shifts towards staff offering mentorship and guidance on co-designed assessment and feedback where the rules of assessment are exposed.

In this study, we included examinations as part of our democratic discussions. Mogey et al. (2012, 125) argue that, 'examinations leave a great deal to chance, their criteria are often far from transparent, and arguably we often fail to prepare our students adequately for this special experience'. The students were keen to perform well in the examination and when this view was reinforced by the teacher openly expressing her wish that they perform well, a seedbed of trust was sown for the teacher–student partnership. It is clear that students appreciated collaborative discussions about the examinations as well as feedback on their examinations, as it helped them to gain insight and understanding of how to write high-quality answers that

demonstrated their learning. Given that degree examinations are weighted heavily (Blair and McGinty 2013), it is not surprising to hear that students claimed that they 'should be given all possible ways to help achieve the best result'.

Conclusion

The Higher Education Academy (2012, 21) argues that '[a]ssessment literacy is essential to everyone involved in assessment practice. It takes time to develop understanding and skills in assessment. These can be gained by active involvement in an educational community in which students are contributing partners'. There is no doubt that a variety of student responses is generated by a staff–student partnership approach, which becomes more complex and controversial when the issue of assessment is raised. Staff–student partnerships challenge conventional pedagogy and assumptions of how learning ought to be assessed, and build on the body of work that has argued that assessment is a powerful process *for* learning, not just testing accumulated knowledge. This research project concerned a specific and small case study of an authentic attempt to engage students actively and meaningfully with their own learning through assessment. By doing so, it adopted a partnership approach founded on democratic classroom practice. Co-creating marking criteria and then asking students to formatively self-assess their essays using these criteria enabled students to compare their own assessment with the teacher's assessment, and to understand the assessment requirements more fully. This was more effective than merely asking students to self-assess their work, because it gave them the opportunity to gauge their ability against criteria they were familiar with, and to calibrate their self-assessment with their peers and with the teacher's expert assessment. Not only does this practice help students to gauge the quality of their work, but, importantly, it allows them to learn effectively how to use the tools by which a judgement is made.

We argue that assessment *for* learning can be enhanced by staff–student partnership in learning. Admittedly, staff–student partnership may not be appropriate in all learning situations or assessment. Some may still question whether complete partnership can be achieved in assessment, and it might also be a step outside the comfort zone for some students or teachers. For those new to partnership working, Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) present a range of practical recommendations that include: starting small, perhaps designing partnership in one assessment or one element of assessment; ensuring partnership is voluntary and that alternatives are available for students who do not wish to take part; and thinking carefully about how to ensure an approach that is inclusive of all students who wish to participate.

Although we acknowledge that partnership presents challenges and poses risks, it is undoubtedly an innovative pathway to enhancing students' assessment literacy through democratic practices that can facilitate intrinsic motivation, active engagement and deeper approaches to learning.

Notes on contributors

Susan J. Deeley is Senior University Teacher and Convenor of Undergraduate Studies in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow, UK. She is a senior fellow of the Higher Education Academy and holds a University of Glasgow Teaching Excellence

Award. Her research and publications focus on service-learning in higher education; staff-student co-assessment; and the use of technology to enhance assessment and feedback.

Catherine Bovill is a senior lecturer in the Academic Development Unit at the University of Glasgow, UK. She has co-ordinated and continues to contribute to the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice and the MEd in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. She leads the support for pedagogic research and scholarship at the University. Her research and publications focus on students and staff co-creating curricula; peer observation of teaching; and the internationalisation of higher education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Blair, A., and S. McGinty. 2013. "Feedback-Dialogues: Exploring the Student Perspective." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 38 (4): 466–476.

Bloxham, S., and A. West. 2004. "Understanding the Rules of the Game: Peer Assessment as a Medium for Developing Students' Conceptions of Assessment." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 29 (6): 721–733.

Boud, D., and N. Falchikov. 2006. "Aligning Assessment with Long-term Learning." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 31 (4): 399–413.

Boud, D., and E. Molloy. 2013. "Rethinking Models of Feedback for Learning: The Challenge of Design." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 38 (6): 698–712.

Bovill, C. 2013a. "Students and Staff Co-Creating Curricula – A New Trend or an Old Idea We Never Got around to Implementing?" In *Improving Student Learning through Research and Scholarship: 20 Years of ISL*, edited by C. Rust, 96–108. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Educational Development.

Bovill, C. 2013b. "Powerful Partnerships ." Invited think piece. Higher Education Academy Annual Conference, University of Warwick, July 3–4.

Bovill, C. 2014. "An Investigation of Co-Created Curricula within Higher Education in the UK, Ireland and the USA." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 51 (1): 15–25.

Bovill, C., and C. J. Bulley. 2011. "A Model of Active Student Participation in Curriculum Design: Exploring Desirability and Possibility." In *Improving Student Learning (18) Global Theories and Local Practices: Institutional, Disciplinary and Cultural Variations*, edited by C. Rust, 176–188. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Educational Development.

Bovill, C., A. Cook-Sather, and P. Felten. 2011. "Students as Co-Creators of Teaching Approaches, Course Design, and Curricula: Implications for Academic Developers." *International Journal for Academic Development* 16 (2): 133–145.

Bovill, C., A. Cook-Sather, P. Felten, L. Millard, and N. Moore-Cherry. 2015. "Addressing Potential Challenges in Co-Creating Learning and Teaching: Overcoming Resistance, Navigating Institutional Norms and Ensuring Inclusivity in Student–Staff Partnerships." *Higher Education*. http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-015-9896-4

Brookfield, S. 2012. *Teaching for Critical Thinking*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Carless, D. 2015. *Excellence in University Assessment*. London: Routledge.

Cook-Sather, A. 2014. "Student–Faculty Partnership in Explorations of Pedagogical Practice: A Threshold Concept in Academic Development." *International Journal for Academic Development* 19 (3): 186–198.

Cook-Sather, A., C. Bovill, and P. Felten. 2014. *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Deeley, S. J. 2014. "Summative Co-Assessment: A Deep Learning Approach to Enhancing Employability Skills and Attributes." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 15 (1): 39–51. http://alh.sagepub.com/content/15/1/39

Deeley, S. J., and R. A. Brown. 2014. "Learning through Partnership in Assessment." *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*. Thirteenth Issue: Fall. http://teachingandlearningtogether.blogs.brynmawr.edu/thirteenth-issue-fall-2014/learning-through-partnership-in-assessment

Deeley, S. J., and R. A. Brown. 2015. "Staff–Student Partnership in Assessment." Unpublished paper presented at the University of Glasgow 8th Annual Learning and Teaching Conference, Glasgow, April 14.

Furedi, F. 2012. *The Unhappiness Principle*. Times Higher Education. November 29. https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/the-unhappiness-principle/421958.article

Handley, K., and L. Williams. 2011. "From Copying to Learning: Using Exemplars to Engage with Assessment Criteria and Feedback." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 36 (1): 95–108.

Hardy, J. S. P., M. M. Bates, K. W. Casey, A. E. Galloway, P. Kirsop Kay, and H. McQueen. 2014. "Student-Generated Content: Enhancing Learning through Sharing Multiple Choice Questions." *International Journal of Science Education* 36 (13): 2180–2194.

Healey, M., A. Flint, and K. Harrington. 2014. *Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Higher Education Academy. 2012. *A Marked Improvement: Transforming Assessment in Higher Education*. York: Higher Education Academy. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/A_Marked_Improvement.pdf

Higher Education Academy. 2014. *Framework for Partnership in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. York: The Higher Education Academy.

Hutchings, P., M. T. Huber, and A. Ciccone. 2011. *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Reconsidered: Institutional Integration and Impact (Jossey-Bass/Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching)*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Jonsson, A. 2012. "Facilitating Productive Use of Feedback in Higher Education." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 14 (1): 63–76.

Lea, M. R., and B. V. Street. 1998. "Student Writing in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach." *Studies in Higher Education* 23 (2): 157–172.

Mogey, N., J. Cowan, J. Paterson, and M. Purcell. 2012. "Students' Choices between Typing and Handwriting in Examinations." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 13 (2): 117–128.

Mulder, R. A., J. M. Pearce, and C. Baik. 2014. "Peer Review in Higher Education: Student Perceptions before and after Participation." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 15 (2): 157–171.

Orsmond, P., S. Merry, and K. Reiling. 2002. "The Use of Exemplars and Formative Feedback when using Student Derived Marking Criteria in Peer and Self-assessment." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 27 (4): 309–323.

Price, M., C. Rust, B. O'Donovan, K. Handley, and R. Bryant. 2012. *Assessment Literacy*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

Rust, C., B. O'Donovan, and M. Price. 2005. "A Social Constructivist Assessment Process Model: How the Research Literature Shows us This Could be Best Practice." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 30 (3): 231–240.

Rust, C., M. Price, and B. O'Donovan. 2003. "Improving Students' Learning by Developing Their Understanding of Assessment Criteria and Processes." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 28 (2): 147–164.

Ryan, A., and D. Tilbury. 2013. *Flexible Pedagogies: New Pedagogical Ideas*. York: Higher Education Academy. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/npi_report.pdf

Sadler, D. R. 1989. "Formative Assessment and the Design of Instructional Systems." *Instructional Science* 18: 119–144.

Sadler, D. R. 2010. "Beyond Feedback: Developing Student Capability in Complex Appraisal." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35 (5): 535–550.

Sainsbury, E. J., and R. A. Walker. 2008. "Assessment as a Vehicle for Learning: Extending Collaboration into Testing." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 33 (2): 103–117.

Sambell, K., and L. Graham. 2011. "Towards an Assessment Partnership Model? Students' Experiences of being Engaged as Partners in Assessment for Learning (AfL) Enhance-

ment Activity." In *Staff–Student Partnerships in Higher Education*, edited by S. Little, 31–47. London: Continuum.

Sambell, K., L. McDowell, and C. Montgomery. 2012. *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Smith, C. D., K. Worsfold, L. Davies, R. Fisher, and R. McPhail. 2013. "Assessment Literacy and Student Learning: The Case for Explicitly Developing Students' 'Assessment Literacy'." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 38 (1): 44–60.

Stefani, L. A. J. 1998. "Assessment in Partnership with Learners." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 23 (4): 339–350.

Taras, M. 2002. "Using Assessment for Learning and Learning from Assessment." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 27 (6): 501–510.

Weaver, M. R. 2006. "Do Students Value Feedback? Student Perceptions of Tutors' Written Responses." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 31 (3): 379–394.