Professional Development in Higher Education

Imre FENYŐ

fenyoimre@gmail.com
**(University of Debrecen Institute of Educational Studies and Cultural Management, Debrecen, Hungary)**

Abstract: The University of Debrecen is a participant of the PETRA project (Promoting Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Azerbaijani Universities) with the University of Jyvaskyla, Finland, University of Applied Sciences Vienna, Austria, Polytechnic University of Valencia, Spain. The aim of the project is promoting of teaching and learning excellence in Azerbaijan Universities, by supporting the professional development in higher education and, in the academic community. For this reason, the program wants to enhance the usage of technology and innovative forms of teaching, to provide support for designing courses and for choosing and using diverse approaches in assessment. The purpose of this study is to identify the possibilities of promoting the professional development in higher education and to explore the theoretical landscape: the roles and implications of the professional development. This paper explores the connections between the reflective behaviour of the teachers and their assessment methods and wants to provide new approaches to assessment in the context of the institutional strategies of the higher education. This paper argues for innovative forms of assessment such as the portfolios in teacher preparation or the group-based assessment forms - as methods of promoting higher quality learning. The study investigates the ways towards the autonomous assessment in the higher education, using self-assessment and peer assessment.

Keywords: higher education, professional development, certification, assessment

About the changing landscape of the higher education

Assessment is a substantive part of learning. Moreover, we might say that this is one of the most important or essential element in the process of learning and not some extra add-on at the end of the teaching and learning process. On the schematic diagram (see Figure 1) we can see the structure of the teaching and learning process, which starts with the element of action planning and goes through the elements of learning or development and closes with the element of the formative assessment. The formative assessment provides information to the re-planning or re-designing of the process which can starts again. Eventually the process leads to the element of summative assessment and provides qualifications for students' further life and career.

Figure 1. The cycle of teaching and learning process
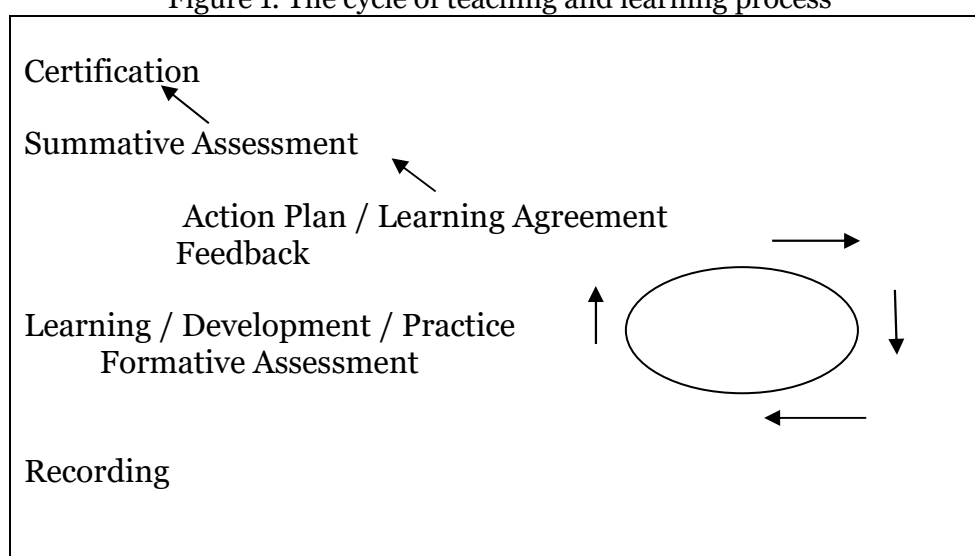
(Source: Rhodes & Tallantyre, 2003)

Why do we need to find a way to change this process and which is the element with the determinative impact on the process?

The reason why the recent interest is shown in this issue is the change of the sphere of higher education. We are witnesses of the change of modes of delivery, with increasing popularity of distance delivery methods, fragmentation of course programs and modularization of curriculums. Thus, in the context of the changing higher education we need to renew our expectations and requirements. First of all, it must be admitted that the traditional forms of assessment (such as the written test or the unseen written exam) are not effective instruments for creating feedback and controlling the teaching and learning process. Moreover, the traditional forms of assessment are no longer sufficient to satisfy the needs of the students (not either the needs of their future employers).

Therefore, we have to find ways to improve the quality of educational processes with a new emphasis on learning outcomes rather than on other element of the process. So, we must say that the problem of assessment became substantive to the whole process of higher education.

If the assessment is so crucial element of the teaching and learning process, and the improvement of the teaching and learning process is not

possible without the improvement of the assessment methods and strategies, we have to take a closer look at the field of assessment methods and strategies. First of all, we must admit that the assessment itself is a very complex phenomenon, with a number of elemental functions. According to the study of *Graham Gibbs*, the functions of assessment are the following (Gibbs, 2003):

1. Capturing students time and attention
2. Generating appropriate student learning activity
3. Providing timely feedback which students pay attention to
4. Helping students to internalize the discipline's standards and notions of quality
5. Marking: generating marks or grades which distinguish between students or which enable pass/fail decisions to be made

Fortunately, the teaching staff are in a unique position to affect the elements of the process of higher education by altering and improving assessment strategies to make them able to fulfill all these functions (or at least most of them).

It must be admitted, that the transition is not a simple problem. There are long and hard traditions of assessment, particularly in the traditional universities and in the conventional disciplines. Traditions are often preserved by the strict assessment regulations and the external examiner systems of the country. But today we might say that the assessment becomes the most powerful instrument which teachers have to effect, the way students behave as learners and participate in courses. So, we cannot afford to leave out of consideration the development of the methods in this field.

The role of assessment and the new ways of assessment in the higher education

If we need to know how effective the teaching and learning process has been and what students have learned, the evidence we must turn to is students' achievement which is accessible through their practice. So in the changing context of today's higher education we need to seek to find some innovative forms of assessment in order to register and evaluate the evidences of students practice. It cannot be denied that this is a hard issue, but we can find some useful guidelines for the renovation of higher educational assessment practice in the literature of higher educational didactics.

For example, *McDowell and Sambell* (2003) recommended the following principles to reform the methods of assessment in higher education:

➢ *Consider students workload carefully*: the innovative forms of assessment make students work hard - they may spend more time on learning than we usually think.

➢ *Take steps to maintain motivation*: it is not a hard issue to add motivating elements in the innovative forms of assessment -

constant feedback, interim deadlines, and continuous guidance could be important elements of assessment tasks.

➢ *Introduce a new form of assessment carefully*: the initial experiences often are ambiguous - the students' initial reflections may be negative, even hostile.

➢ *Establish a clear framework and guidelines*: to avoid the doubts the students need clear guidance - when they are working on non-conventional tasks, definite guidelines are needed.

➢ *Help students to understand assessment criteria*: the innovative assessment forms often involve students in the process of assessment using the instruments of self-assessment or peer-assessment. It could be the best way of forming the students understanding of how evaluations are made in the subject they are currently studying and also improving the assessment capabilities which they may need as professionals, for example as teachers.

➢ *Pay careful attention to organizational details and procedures*: because the organizational procedures of the higher education are disposed to be very well fit to traditional assessment and seem to be able to discourage the implementation of new forms or methods of assessment.

➢ *Pay particular attention to, how your awards marks and for what*: marking new forms of assessment products (such as portfolio or micro-teaching in the process of teacher training courses) can be problematic.

➢ In the next section of our study we will enumerate what kinds of assessment methods or what kinds of assessment strategies are able to fulfil these requirements.

The pragmatics of assessing practice.

To assess practice, we need to broaden the range of assessment methods we used. In the literature of higher educational didactics, we can find useful recommendations on the topics of innovative assessment. In the study of *Sally Brown* (2003) we can find a list of the most often used innovative assessment methods. Brown's list provides an overview of the ways of modern assessment in the various subject areas of the higher education.

Competence checklist

According to Sally Brown's study the competence checklists are used in a number of subject areas to assure that a list of activities has been undertaken and evaluated, often not just once. Such a checklist would be completed by the student and tutor or supervisor together and would provide a written record of discussions concerning practical activities beyond the range of the checklist. The structure of a competence checklist:

List of competences to be achieved	Date ready to be assessed	Date of assessment	Further comments / tutor recommendations
- - -			

Projects

Projects are often used as instruments for students to report on learning undertaken away from or independently within institutions. It is more substantial when students have the opportunity to adopt a critical or analytical attitude to their experience of learning.

Logs, diaries, reflective journals

Logs can be like a simple checklist which records prescribed activities, sometimes with the reflective commentary of the student. A diary tends to be a personal narrative summary of students' activities. The reflective journal extracts from the material of a diary 2 or 3 particularly interesting incidents on which it is worth focusing and presents them circumstantially.

Case studies

Case studies are often used in order to the students can apply the learned material in professional contexts. The examples are usually provided in documentary form and the students are required to demonstrate their deep understanding of the case (or their ability of analysing data in realistic scenarios) and to provide recommendations or solutions regarding the sample case. This form of assessment encourages application of knowledge and problem-solving abilities.

Observation of the demonstration of skills in practice

During a demonstration usually, a tutor or supervisor is watching how professional issues are solved by the student. After the demonstration the tutor or supervisor provides feedback and evaluation on student's performance. The validity of this form of assessment relies on clear and available criteria against which the student is to be evaluated. This method can be problematic when evaluators have little experience of assessment.

Artefacts

Artefacts are the outcomes of students' professional practice, such as computer programs, sculptures etc.

OSCEs (Objective Structural Clinical Examinations)

OSCEs contains a set of prescribed tasks, at a series of assessment stations, like circuit training exercise in the gym. This assessment method enables assessors to judge students' competence at a wide range of practical skills.

Posters and presentations

Posters and presentations can be used by groups of students or by individuals to demonstrate the outcomes of the work undertaken independently, often away from the institution. Thus, this form of assessment provides insights to students' skills and attitudes and allowing them to interpret their experiences of professional work.

Portfolios

The portfolio as assessment method has been used in the teacher training program of the University of Debrecen since 2006. Therefore, the last section of our study deals with this form of innovative assessment.

Portfolios (for teacher preparation)

Portfolio seems to be the most appropriate instrument of assessment which meets the requirement of the teacher preparation programme. According to the study of *John Biggs*, portfolios are very appropriate for complex assessment situations, which assess programme goals, not individual courses, but the elements could come from the key courses of the programme (Biggs & Thang, 2011). So, a portfolio can provide access to information about a participant's abilities across a range of qualities: attitudes or skills. It also provides the participants with a learning resource for their future professional career. According to Jessup's definition:

> *"A person who is described as competent in an occupation or profession is considered to have a repertoire of skills, knowledge, and understanding which he or she can apply in a range of contexts and organisations."* (Jessup 1991:26)

Gill Young in a study (Young, 2003) shows an example of the structure of a portfolio (Table 1). We can see that the portfolio has three modules and uses three forms of evidence for each three modules: 1. written projects, reports or files, 2. teaching practice assessments, 3. example lessons plans. All the section contains a variety of assessment strategies

and almost all achievements are evaluated by participants. Nearly all the forms are used at the teacher training program of the University of Debrecen.

Table 1. Example of portfolio evidence of achievement (UD: used form at the University of Debrecen)

Section	Self-assessed	Peer-assessed	Tutor-assessed
1.	Students own personal learning agreement for the programme. *UD: not used / motivation letter*	(A) Student profile document (Formative) *UD: entrance exam / motivation letter*	(B) Lesson (or other learning event) plan and evaluation of the lesson. *UD: part of the routine*
2. Planning		(C) Critical analysis of an existing programme or module (Summative) *UD: seminar*	(D) An outline programme for a series of future lessons (Formative) *UD: part of the routine*
3. Assessment	(E) Evidence of having assessed / marked either exam, coursework practical or work experience for a small group of students. (summative) *UD: regular part of training program*		(F) An assessment plan, a variety of assessment tools / sources of evidence designed by the participant including a rationale for the methods chosen. (Summative) *UD: part of practice*
4. Evaluation	(G) Evaluation of own student profile document as used so far (Formative) *UD: Summative assessment*		(H) Evaluation of a self-selected learning event. (Summative) (I) An evaluation strategy for one of the participant's own future learning events. (Formative) *UD: Summative assessment*

Some examples from our routine at the teacher training program of the University of Debrecen. The element (A) plays an important role in the teacher training process. At the start of the training process the students have to write personal motivation letter which works as a learning agreement during the teaching and learning process. Nevertheless, this is not compulsory element of the portfolio, but the students have the opportunity to attach this document to the portfolio as an evidence of their professional commitment. The element (B) and (D) are usual elements of

the teacher training program. The teacher trainees have to create lesson plans regularly during their practice, under the supervision of their tutor. The element (C) is part of the theoretical preparation, a complete course deals with the problem of the program- or module-design and with the problems of the curriculums. The element (E) is a regular part of our teacher training. The students experience a variety of assessment methods, from the traditional forms of assessment (such as the oral exams or the written tests) to the innovative forms (such as the projects or presentations). The element (F) is integral part of the teacher training practice. The students have to create assessment tools, such as questionnaires or tests. And the students have to evaluate and mark the achievement of the high school students during their practice. The element (G), (H) and (I) are summative elements of our assessment process. At the closing exam the students must evaluate their professional progress and plan their future career.

Advantages and disadvantages of portfolios

Measured against the ten-point manifesto for assessment, designed by Brown, Race and Smith portfolio as an assessment form (as it is used at the University of Debrecen in the teacher training process) is highly rated (Brown, Race & Smith, 1996). First of all, it is based on a fair understanding of how students learn. In the background of this assessment strategy there is a complex theory of learning which determines not only the assessment methods but the curse structure of the training process as well. In addition (2) the portfolio-style assessment accommodates individual differences in students. It offers possibilities of decision making: students are able to choose evidences which they are going to use in their portfolio. Moreover (3) the purpose of assessment is clearly explained. This form of assessments can be considered valid (4). Validity is secured by the variety of evidences which plays crucial role in the creation of a portfolio. (5) Thanks to the careful and deliberate planning and to the variety of assessment forms (such as peer-assessment and self-assessment) during the creation of a portfolio, the assessment instruments and processes are reliable and consistent. (6) The portfolio-style assessment forms allow students to receive feedback on their learning and their performance, even during the process of the making of portfolio. (7) The portfolio as innovative assessment form provides opportunities to reflect on the practice of teachers and learning of students. The comments provide participants with information on how well or badly they performed. (8) Portfolio is an integral component of curse design: the outcomes of the courses considered to be possible elements of the portfolio. (9) The assessment criteria, used in the teacher training are explicit, clearly understandable, and public: available via the homepage of the Teacher Training Centre of the University of Debrecen.[1] The portfolios in the teacher training are criterion referenced with clear marking criteria for each assignment. (10) The amount of assessment should be appropriate.

---

[1] http://tanarkepzes.unideb.hu/dokumentumtar_portfolio.php

The last point is the only problematic element: nearly all participants of the teacher training courses reported finding the portfolio format difficult initially, with not reasonable amount of issues. But eventually all the teacher trainee students were able to create a successful portfolio, so according to our experience, portfolio seems to be a very effective innovative form of assessment which really fits to the complex world of the teacher training process.

References

Biggs, J., & Thang, C. (2011). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*. [4th Edition]. Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education; Open University Press.

Brown, S., Race, P., & Smith, B. (1996). *500 Tips on Assessment*. London: Kogan Page.

Brown, S. (2003). Assessing Practice. In Brown, S., & Glasner, A. (Eds.), *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches* (pp. 95-105). Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education; Open University Press.

Gibbs, G. (2003). Using Assessment Strategically to Change the Way Students Learn. In Brown, S., & Glasner, A. (Eds.), *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches* (pp. 41-54). Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education; Open University Press.

Jessup, G. (1991). *Outcomes: NVQs and the Emerging Model of Education and Training*. London: Falmer Press.

McDowell, L., & Sambell, K. (2003). The Experience of Innovative Assessment: Student Perspectives. In Brown, S., & Glasner, A. (Eds.), *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches* (pp. 71-82). Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education; Open University Press.

Rhodes, G., & Tallantyre, F. (2003). Assessment of Key Skills. In Brown, S., & Glasner, A. (Eds.), *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches* (pp. 106-121). Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education; Open University Press.

Young, Gill (2003). Using Portfolios for Assessment in Teacher Preparation and Health Sciences. In Brown, S., & Glasner, A. (Eds.), *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches* (pp. 122-131). Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education; Open University Press.