

TUNING IN ZONING OUT: STUDENT ASSESSMENT IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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Assessment in higher education and teacher education in particular continues to be a prominent feature of the student experience. For teacher education students there is an immediate and future concern as they both experience assessment and go on to become assessors of learning within their profession. In the state of Queensland, Australia, assessment in teacher education has taken on renewed importance with pre-registration testing of new graduates. Assessment is a phenomenon that influences nearly all aspects of students' experience of university – their learning, relationships with staff and peers, and their emotions. This paper reports on data from the author's reflective journal where insights were derived from conversations about assessment during student interactions. Extracts from this reflective writing enabled extrapolation of key issues of student perceptions, learning, relationships and emotions. What students say and do in relation to assessment offers lecturers powerful insights into the central role it plays in their experience of university. Students are active in shaping their assessment experience but are clearly also shaped by it. Lecturers play important roles in sustaining and challenging assessment practices that influence students in complex ways.

Introduction

Research into assessment practices in universities and within teacher education degrees in particular, spans a broad field. Recent investigations have considered the effectiveness and place of authentic assessment, group tasks, peer and self-assessment (Chung, 2008; Okhremtchouk et. al, 2009; Shepherd & Hannafin, 2008). Longstanding literature indicates that assessment in schools at least, is not a neutral practice and its effects are enduring (Connell, 1993; Furlong, 1991). The same might be said for assessment in teacher education programs at university level where grades determine progression, and grade point averages (GPAs) go on to inform ranking for employment. In the case of CQUniversity's teacher education programs, grades also determine acceptance and progression into the 'fast-track' program where students can complete their studies in three rather than the designated four years. For this reason alone, assessment is worthy of close consideration. To contextualise further, there have been recent developments in teacher education in Australia that point to renewed accountability, adoption of national teacher education standards, compliance with nationally driven school curriculum and whole cohort testing. This has particular implications for pre-service teachers as they prepare to teach in a standards based and assessment-driven environment with tightly defined curriculum content.

In the state of Queensland, part of the Government response to the Masters' Report (2009), which reviewed primary and secondary school students' performance on national tests, was to adopt the recommendation to test graduate teachers in Early Childhood and Primary education before they can become registered teachers. University assessment alone is seen to have a significant impact on students' careers and sense of worth (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000) and when viewed in conjunction with testing of teacher education graduates prior to registration and eligibility to teach, assessment assumes an even greater role in determining career trajectories. This highlights that at least for teacher education students in Queensland, there are multiple junctures at which assessment is high stakes.

This paper presents the findings of an initial review of the literature and uses a preliminary analysis of researcher reflections to interrogate further the themes emerging from this review. It presents first the background to the study and some details of methodology before moving onto sections on the

literature themes and researcher reflections.

Background to the study

This literature review is designed as part of a larger ethnographic study exploring the pedagogical relationships linked to the student experience of assessment. It seeks to explore questions of what assessment does to students and lecturers and how that relationship is worked out. How do students position themselves in relation to assessment? How do lecturers? How do they position each other? How are these relationships developed, sustained or challenged?

The author teaches in CQUniversity's teacher education program at one of six regional campuses. Having observed what seemed to be an emphasis on student conversation about assessment (in class and online), the author started to keep a reflective journal in order to document what appeared to be the experiences and perspectives of students, to listen to and reflect on their lived experiences of assessment and to try to make sense of the part assessment plays in the pedagogical relationships developed between students and lecturers and between students themselves. The reflective journal represents a constructivist interpretive document (Guba & Lincoln, 1991). The author recalls events and conversations as soon as possible after they have occurred. The choice of what to record is determined by the author's perceptions of what is pertinent to how students understand assessment. Although this does not capture student voice as such, it is hoped that in the wider ethnographic study, student voice will be represented in interview data. As the journal was being kept at the time of literature search for the wider study, there was then an opportunity to begin to map some of this preliminary data against key findings in the literature.

Reviewing the literature

Acknowledging the small scale of this study and author perspectives and history, the literature reviewed was selected according to three contextualising criteria. Firstly, literature located and reviewed was post 2009 unless seminal. This criterion accepts that recent literature is cognisant of what has been done before. It also allows for the inclusion of standout literature that is older. A second criterion is that the literature should relate to assessment in teacher education programs specifically, ideally within an Australian context. This accepts that while the field is indeed assessment in teacher education, other literature about assessment in higher education more generally could be included as could literature from overseas. The final conceptual criterion is that the literature should focus on student perceptions, experiences and conceptualisations of assessment. It is anticipated that there will be a dearth of literature on assessment practices, assessment types and so on. This criterion keeps the focus firmly on students.

The initial review suggests key themes that can be broadly clustered into assessment and lecturer and student perceptions, assessment and learning, assessment and relationships and assessment and emotion, though these are interrelated.

Differing perceptions: students and lecturers

The different ways students and lecturers perceive assessment has been the focus of a number of studies. Biggs (2006, p. 141) for example, contends that students think about assessment first: "to the teacher, assessment is at the end of the teaching-learning sequence of events, but to the students it is at the beginning." Anecdotally, this resonates as first tutorials of a term are often characterised by questioning of the lecturer about what is required in assessment. Despite what might be seen as learning benefits of some forms of assessment such as peer and self-assessment (Brew, Riley & Walta, 2009), there is still a sense that staff and students perceive the roles and outcomes of assessment differently.

It is important to note that staff perceptions (and, by extrapolation, student perceptions) are not

homogenous. McClam and Sevier (2010) were clear supporters of alternative and participative assessment as teacher educators, and sought to have their assessment practices align with their democratic pedagogical principles – that is participatory student roles in teaching, learning and assessing. However, they found considerable resistance from both the student body and the wider faculty once responsibility for grades was shifted to students. Brew, Riley and Walta (2009) conversely, found greater staff support than student support for peer and self-assessment and found, perhaps not surprisingly, that “students are more likely to be anxious about the validity issues while staff focus on the educational benefits for students.” Each of these studies illustrates the differing ways students and lecturers perceive participatory assessment.

Differing perceptions can also centre on feedback. Carless (2006) established that student perceptions of feedback contrasted markedly with the feedback intentions of lecturers. He argued that this occurs in part because of the differential power relations as encoded in academic discourse together with the fact that assessment is an emotional process. Carless found that lecturers thought that their feedback was more detailed and useful than did students (2006, p. 225). Interestingly, this seemed to stem from the fact that lecturers provided feedback specific to the particular assignment rather than general feedback that might assist students with subsequent assignments. Carless (2006, p. 225) argues, “(general) feedback has the potential to ‘feedforward’, into future tasks rather than back to completed tasks.” This study also highlighted differences in perceptions of fairness and comprehensibility of feedback.

Assessment and learning

A desirable outcome of assessment is learning and indeed in constructively aligned courses – where course outcomes are tightly linked to content and assessment - this is possible because what students are purported to be learning is directly linked to assessment (Biggs, 2006). Recent studies in teacher education have found links between assessment and improved learning outcomes (Okremtchouk, et. al, 2009; Chung, 2008) and other studies in higher education establish patterns of learning behaviour as related to perceived assessment requirements. Ramsden (2003) for example, argues that students will adopt surface or deep approaches to learning based on their perceptions of learning tasks and assessment, and suggests that these approaches will shape learning outcomes. This is also researched by Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2005, p. 327), who argue that when focussed on assessment, some students appear to adopt a more strategic or ‘achieving’ approach to learning. This means that students make judgements about how to best spend their time so as to achieve high grades.

The positive relationship between particular assessment practices and learning outcomes might be related to the authenticity of the assessment. Okremtchouk, et. al. (2009) and Chung (2008) for example, found that the Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT) had positive effects on student learning outcomes. The PACT involves what might be seen as authentic assessment, with the assessment of an integrated teaching event that is based on “a *planning, instruction, assessment and reflection* (PIAR) model in which teacher education candidates use knowledge of students’ skills and abilities, as well as knowledge of content and how best to teach it, to plan, implement and assess instruction” (Pecheone, et. al., 2005, p. 165, emphasis in original). Such an assessment has been seen to have multiple positive effects on learning generally, learning about how to assess children’s learning and on pre-service teachers’ capacity to reflect (Okremtchouk, et. al. 2009). Similarly, in the Brew, Riley and Walta study (2009, p. 642), peer and self-assessment were attributed to deep student learning, improved confidence, independence and reflection, and these would seem to be transferrable and enduring learning outcomes.

That assessment should impact positively on learning beyond a particular course, is an idea developed more fully by Boud and Falchikov (2006, p. 400) who consider the case for “sustainable assessment...assessment to foster learning throughout life.” This means that learning and assessment ought not be limited to self-contained subjects at university, but rather serve students in life outside and beyond formal learning. The authors point to the hegemonic practices in assessment in higher

education that constrain students' learning behaviours arguing that "the most pervasive of all (is) the treatment of assessment as grading lead(ing) students to focus on marks rather than the learning they purport to represent" (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 403). They argue that the over-specification that some students seek will fail to serve them well once outside university where "there is a need for learners to identify for themselves what they need to learn, taking into account a range of contextual factors and what counts as good work" (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 404). So there is an immediate and future tension around assessment and learning and how students are positioned and position themselves to do well.

Assessment and relationships

Assessment is a social and emotional process so it concomitantly affects relationships – between students and their lecturers and likely between students themselves (Connell, 1993; Furlong, 1991; Johnston, 1998). The common themes of fairness, bias and equity in a number of studies (McCann & Sevier, 2009, Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2005) demonstrate the degree to which assessment affects how students feel about assessment, their lecturers and their peers.

The longstanding work of Johnston (1998) identifies two key dimensions along which classroom teachers assess or rank their students. These are what he calls moral and cognitive scales. He suggests that assessment, not a neutral process, is shaped by the ways in which teachers perceive both academic ability and behaviour – both social constructions. He goes on to explain that "(w)hen we habitually draw upon our particular mix of moral and cognitive categories to rank students and their behaviour we are also marking out social distinctions between individuals and groups" (Johnston, 1998, p. 64). He argues that these are far from objective means of understanding students and underpin cultural bias implicit in assessment. This is a useful way to consider students in tertiary environments because whether or not academics acknowledge that these factors are in play, Johnston's work suggests that marking assignments and other forms of assessment are likely to be far from objective. Furthermore, it is possible that at least some students are acutely aware that something other than assessment is at play in the assessment and marking game.

So at one level, we have assessment and pedagogical relationships between students and lecturers shaped by a complexity of social and cultural factors, as argued by Johnston (1998) and institutional factors such as power and discourse suggested by Carless(2006) and Boud and Falchikov (2006). These relations are also forged and tested between students themselves, particularly in participative practices such as peer assessment (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000). Even when the motivation to involve students in the assessment process is to reduce the power lecturers have in the assessment relationship, participative practices such as peer and self-assessment might simply lead to new power relations amongst students and the attendant emotional impacts (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000).

Assessment and emotion

That students are affected emotionally by assessment was highlighted by Okremtchouk et. al (2009) and these emotional impacts ranged from submitting other coursework late and to a standard students were unhappy about, to more serious emotional impacts. Indeed, "a few mentioned becoming physically ill from the stress of the process and from a lack of time for exercise and healthy eating, and others indicated that their personal relationships had suffered." (Okremtchouk, 2009, p.56). As indicated above participative assessment can heighten this stress. Indeed, Reynolds and Trehan (2000, p. 273) see such forms of assessment as "an emotional and anxiety provoking procedure."

There is an interrelationship between how students perceive assessment, how they position their learning in relation to assessment, and how assessment shapes peer and teaching relationships. How students feel about assessment is the point at which each of these areas intersects. How students feel about assessment is mutually influenced in terms of how they think about assessment, how they approach it, and their relationships with peers and staff. Drawing on the work of others, Ramsden

(2003, p. 58), contends that there is a correlative relationship between adopted learning approaches and feelings of satisfaction, where deep approaches to learning correlate with feelings of “enjoyment and commitment” and surface learning with high degrees of dissatisfaction. Despite what he calls the “robust” relationship, he qualifies:

Surface approaches are usually more strongly linked to poor learning than deep ones are to effective learning; and the connections between grades and approaches are less marked than those between measures of learning quality and approaches. The reasons for both qualifications are plain. In the first place, although using a surface approach logically prevents a student from achieving understanding, using a deep approach does not guarantee it...(and secondly) grades or degree results are much less reliable and valid measure of outcome than a test of understanding based on the same study material that was used to classify the students' approaches (Ramsden, 2003, pp. 58-59).

Such qualification is seen in the Okremtchouk et al. (2009) study that found that students, even when stressed, found benefit in the assessment task being explored. Thus the relationship between assessment and student emotion is not straightforward. The literature identifies a relationship between assessment and emotion, and this is an area of continuing interest.

Analysing reflections

Analysis of the researcher journal reflections goes some way to affirm these literature review findings. They also problematise them. There is always a danger that when researchers use journal entries as data they make assertions or generalisations in the early stages of a study that are not justified. This danger accompanies the problem of using notes as data for analysis. This is acknowledged. However, the use of reflective writing is also acknowledged as both legitimate ethnographic data and as the depiction of social experience (Mykhalovskiy, 1996). Reflections also offer powerful narrative frames where “stories not only express meaning given to the experience but also determine which aspects of the experience are selected for expression. In this sense narrative or story provides the primary frame for interpretation of experience” (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 1999, p. 8). Nine stories from the reflective journal are presented to highlight the interrelationship between the concepts of assessment learning, perceptions, relationships and emotions. One story might simultaneously reveal something about each of these.

Differing perceptions & learning

Story 1.1 depicts the comments made by a final year student in the teacher education program.

Story 1.1

In the midst of a tutorial where students were asked to discuss an idea in pairs, I noticed one student withdrawn and quiet. Only minutes before, she had been lively and engaging, taking notes, posing questions. I walked up to her and asked if everything was OK. She replied “Oh, no offence Justine, but I filter everything you say and everything you ask us to do in terms of whether I need it for the assessment. If I do, I tune in. If I don't, I zone out.”

This got me thinking. How much of my teaching is simply filtered out by students as unimportant or unnecessary? How do students like this work out what to filter to keep and what to discard? I think my whole subject is important! (Reflective journal, May, 2011)

This student has explicitly flagged her learning orientation. Stuyven, Dochy and Janssens, (2005) might describe it as an ‘achieving’ orientation to learning. Ramsden (2003) might argue it is a surface approach. Either way, it highlights the potential and reality for students to intentionally shape their university learning experiences according to their perception of the assessment requirements. This tuning in and zoning out according to student perception of assessment tasks has potentially quite profound implications for student learning and achievement of curriculum goals. For students like this, there is an obvious need for subjects to be designed with tight alignment between content and assessment. Failure to do so means students will opt to ‘tune in and zone out’ according to their

perceptions of what is required. In the case above it seems that at least for this student, not all of that which is taught is likely to be assessed. This idea is also illustrated in Story 1.2.

Story 1.2

A student came to see me today. She reported being angry with a lecturer because she only addressed the requirements of the second assessment task the week before it was due. Class time, she recalled, in the weeks before had been taken up with ‘other things’ and the lecturer did not talk about the assessment. I wonder if, unlike the student who could tune in and zone out according to assessment requirements, this one could not filter what was going on in tutorials without explicit reference to assessment or the flagging of it via lecturer statements like “this is important for your assessment.” I think that in all likelihood the content of the tutorials would have informed the assessment, but wasn’t explicitly flagged as such. If all content informs assessment, then is any explicit labelling “this is for your assessment” needed? (Reflective journal, May 2011)

Learning & emotion

The contrasting ways in which lecturers and students perceive assessment have been identified in the literature (Brew, Riley & Walta, 2009; Carless, 2006; McClam & Seiver, 2010). Story 1.3 illustrates the contrast between a lecturer’s perception of an assessment piece as a product of learning and the student’s perception of it as a process, where effort should be acknowledged in the overall grade.

Story 1.3

Students’ final grades were released today and a number of students have been in touch with lecturers querying the ‘calculations’ for their overall grades. Lecturers know one particular student as a high achiever; conscientious and driven. She queried her overall grade in science. When it was explained to her how the final grade was determined, she was told that she received a low credit for one piece of assessed work. She replied to her lecturer that she felt extremely disappointed. She felt a higher mark was deserved given the **effort** she put in. (Reflective journal, September, 2011)

This story also demonstrates the interrelationship with student emotion: the disappointment articulated illustrates the emotional investment this student has made in her assessment and the expectation that such an investment should be rewarded in the form of high grades. It is also clear that whilst the emotional investment has impacted on the student, there is a different, hidden discourse at play: The lecturer has implicitly marked the product, but the student sees her effort as worthy of assessment. There is not, it seems, a shared understanding of what comprises ‘the’ assessment. Whilst Carless’s work (2006) goes some way to show how students’ thinking, behaviour and feelings are impacted by feedback, his ideas of discourse, emotion and power could apply to assessment more generally. The story above suggests there are differing perceptions of what is worthy. So these framings of discourse, emotion and power are useful ways for determining how it is that students and lecturers come to have very different ideas about different aspects of assessment.

Assessment & relationships

It is possible that students know that they hold different ideas about assessment to those held by their lecturers. Indeed the following reflective journal entry recounts deliberate attempts by students to align these perceptions.

Story 1.4

Assessment task 2 for my subject is to be completed individually. I have made online forum postings in response to student questions on assessment that indicate “there are many right ways to approach this assignment” and this idea has been reiterated in class tutorials. I

explained that the assessment was designed to be enjoyable and was open (it involves reading children's books). Students bemoaned however and rejected the idea that the task was open: "but we want to know what is in your head so we can design the assessment that way." Students went on to question me to determine the precise elements, the detail; the minutiae of the assessment. A most frustrating tutorial! I found myself being cajoled into telling students what the assessment might look like. I understand that we have come a long way since 'Black Box' assessment where students didn't have elaborate assessment descriptions or marking rubrics, but have we gone too far? I feel that with assessment forums and class discussions like this we have reached an absurd situation where the more detail students have, the more they want and they will clamber into our heads to get it! (Reflective journal, May, 2011)

This story indicates a deliberate positioning in the student-lecturer relationship. Students are positioning the lecturer as the more powerful designer and marker of assessment, and themselves as the ones who need to get an assessment right – and right in particular ways. Ways that resonate with the lecturer. The lecturer is trying to demonstrate the valuing of multiple ways in which students might tackle an assessment task, and in doing so initially positions students as capable and autonomous. By the end of the tutorial however, there is a sense that, giving into the insistent questioning, students are successful in having themselves restored as dependent and in need of help. This positioning is also seen in story 1.5 where a student articulates the importance of relationships.

Story 1.5

In class today there was a brief discussion of the assessment task. Again I was trying to instil a sense of 'lots of right ways.' One student commented: "We like to do assessment to please you. The whole time I was doing my assignment, I was thinking 'Justine will like this' or 'Justine won't like that.'" (Reflective journal, May, 2011)

This story reveals a number of things. Firstly it indicates the way in which this student is acutely aware of the lecturer as determiner of grades, and therefore reinforces Carless's (2006) dimension of power in assessment. It also reveals the student perception of the need to maintain a positive relationship between her and the lecturer. This understanding of the perceived importance of a positive personal relationship between lecturers and its relationship to student success is also demonstrated in story 1.6.

Story 1.6

After a class today three first year students came to see me about how they were feeling about a particular lecturer. They commented that they liked her, but couldn't relate to her style of teaching. We talked about how they might address this, including an open conversation with the lecturer about what they might like more of in classes. One student commented: "I don't want it to affect my assessment." (Reflective journal, July, 2011)

Although lecturers might think they are marking only the product in the form of assignments, Johnston's (1998) research together with these stories illustrate that it is likely not the case or at the very least students do not perceive it so. Keeping lecturers happy generally as implied here, can be coupled with students working hard to get to the heart of what they think a lecturer wants from an assessment (rather than what they might learn). In doing so, they are setting up deliberate relationships and positionings within these relationships. The outcome of story 1.4 where the lecturer was cajoled into answering questions, suggests keeping students happy is also a feature of these relationships. Such relationships are not all constructed in the same way nor can we generalise from these few stories. Indeed, there are those students who resist the specificity insisted on by other students in class:

Story 1.7

A student came to see me today. She was very pleased –and surprised – at her marks for maths. "I wasn't sure what the lecturer thought of me. I was really unsure about her, but I

got a D and HD! (Laughing) Yeah, I like her now.” The student went on to articulate some of the uncertainty she experiences when doing assessment. She commented that she seems to think differently about assessments to her peers – especially in the maths course she had just completed. She said she often gets a different perspective on something and then worries that it isn’t right or she won’t do well, but that she often does. I spoke to her about my interest in assessment and how, when I make more details about assessment available, students ask more and more questions in a quest to ‘get the assessment right.’ The student responded: “Perhaps you shouldn’t be so kind. Don’t support us so much. Fewer guidelines would really get us thinking outside the box.” I think she is right: the more explicit I am about assessment tasks, the more I narrow what is possible. Another dimension here is that this student is a Torres Strait Islander. My understanding of Aboriginal children at least is that they are typically brought up with high degrees of autonomy. Is this what this student is seeking? (Reflective journal, January, 2012)

There is an intriguing insight in this student’s thoughts about assessment. Although she doubts herself when it comes to interpreting assessment tasks, she persists with her way of thinking and has been rewarded for it (at least in one subject). Her reluctance to seek the specificity seen by other students might be a cultural response, in which case lecturers and universities are wise to be alert to the ways in which both personal pedagogical and institutional assessment practices serve or fail to serve all students well.

Once again we see the relationship between lecturer and student as being impacted by assessment. In this case, the student indicates explicitly that she liked the lecturer because of the high grades she awarded. Other studies suggest that getting high grades is not always predictive of a positive student-lecturer relationship or vice versa (Carless, 2006). Assessment too, impacts on peer relationships. Story 1.8 reinforces the findings of Reynolds and Trehan (2000):

Story 1.8

This term I have organised peer assessment for paired presentations. Peers wholly assess these presentations with grades and comments not amended or supplemented by me as the lecturer in any way. At the conclusion of the final presentation, I asked how the students had found the process of peer assessment. A couple of comments included: “Really hard. It is difficult to remember to not to assess by comparison but in relation to the criteria.” And: “Hard. You have to write your name on it and you have to hope they don’t take it personally.” (Reflective journal, April, 2011)

These student comments show dual concern both in their capacity to assess – mirroring the validity issues raised by Brew, Riley and Walta (2009) – and in their concern for positive peer relationships. They demonstrate that they know how assessment impacts students’ feelings and worry that they will be responsible for any negative impacts.

In addition to how students feel about lecturers and their peers as a result of assessment, how they feel about a whole subject might be related to their perceptions and experiences of the assessment within that subject. In some instances this is fostered by institutional factors such as having assessment questions weighted in student evaluations.

Story 1.9

A student in my term 3 course posted to the forum questions about assessment task 2. She complained that there wasn’t enough guidance or detail with regard to the task. I answered her questions but indicated to her that the quality and thoughtfulness with which she posed questions indicated that she probably had a firm grasp of what was required of the assignment. I felt very frustrated. Here was a high achieving, articulate student complaining that she didn’t understand the assignment. I felt that on the one hand I wanted to foster independent and creative thought “do you what you think. I’m open,” but worry, as I know other colleagues have, that this will result in students evaluating my course and teaching poorly. In fact, if I look at the pattern of students responding to evaluation requests, I see

that only 3 of 44 students have so far evaluated the subject, even though we are in the final week. (Reflective journal, January, 2012)

Post-script: After task 2 was submitted, a further 16 students evaluated the subject with many comments pertaining to assessment.

Here the intersection of the personal and the institutional can be seen. Assessment is both high stakes for the lecturer – needing to receive positive feedback on the subject in order to meet university benchmarks– and the student. The insistence on having specific questions answered might indicate student stress with the subject. Price, Carroll, O’Donovan & Rust (2011) suggest that it is not just individual subjects that might account for student negativity. Students experience many different assessment tasks across many different subjects. Price et al. (2011, p. 490) argue that when such practices are viewed across the institution, “serious inconsistencies” are revealed and subjects and their assessments can appear “very disaggregated to students.” Thus, when attempts are made to improve assessment at a course level, the broader assessment environment is also impacted. For students it can mean “that the subject...studied (is) less important than the particular regime of the university where they studied” (Price, et al., 2011, p. 488). So assessment is both a personal and institutional affair.

Concluding thoughts

This paper has analysed both longstanding and recent literature on assessment and has presented some findings from preliminary data from a researcher journal. It has elucidated emergent themes of assessment and perception, assessment and learning, assessment and relationships and assessment and emotion. That assessment is seen to impact on so many aspects of university life – learning, relationships and feelings – suggests that assessment really is at the core of the student (and perhaps lecturer) experience. The reflections from the journal emphasise the dimension of assessment and relationships and emotion for lecturers and students alike. There are three key ideas to be gleaned here. Firstly, attention is drawn to the methodological value of the reflective journal. The record of pertinent stories and events shapes and filters the literature search. So in addition to capturing data, it functions as a methodological tool. Secondly, assessment might sometimes be a case of not seeing the wood for the trees. In focusing on tasks, criteria sheets, evaluations, or whole of university practices, we neglect to see the construction of relationships between students and their peers and students and their lecturers. It is these relationships that demonstrate how assessment is instrumental in the careful positionings students and lecturers actively engage in. Finally, once we see the wood, we can see the multiple ways assessment manifests itself as a dynamic interplay between perceptions, relationships, learning and emotion. It is these things that this research seeks to further explore. Assessment appears to play a central role in teaching and learning relationships and the ideas here challenge lecturers to think beyond the assignments they set and mark as part of their assessment regimes and towards the relationships forged by them.

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