Trust, distrust and their impact on assessment reform

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This paper puts forward the case that one of the factors constraining principled learning-oriented assessment practices is lack of trust. It examines a number of assessment dimensions in which trust or distrust plays a role. These issues are illustrated via a discussion of two different iterations of the same module taught in a teacher education institution. Through this example, the author analyses how accountability forces and distrust created an atmosphere which constrained the use of innovative assessment methods. The paper discusses how trust might be developed, some of the barriers arising, and the relationship between trust and good assessment practices. It concludes by sketching some possible avenues for further research into stakeholders' perceptions of the interplay between trust and assessment.

Keywords: trust; distrust; assessment reform; accountability; learning-oriented assessment

Introduction

The Master said, 'Give them enough food, give them enough arms, and the common people will have trust in you.'

Tzu-kung said, 'If one had to give up one of these three, which should one give up first?' 'Give up arms'.

Tzu-kung said, 'If one had to give up one of the remaining two, which should one give up first?'

'Give up food. Death has always been with us since the beginning of time, but when there is no trust, the common people will have nothing to stand on.' (Confucius, Analects, Book XII: Lau 1979, 113)

Fukuyama (1996) defines trust as 'the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and co-operative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms' (26). He argues that we live in an era of increasing distrust and that high levels of trust create more efficient economic production because resources are saved from monitoring and legal mechanisms. This point strikes a chord with the contemporary world of higher education in which cultures of surveillance and accountability sometimes distract staff from their core roles as teachers and researchers. In low-trust environments, staff are reluctant to take risks (Giddens 1990) or admit mistakes for fear of appearing incompetent, competence trust or 'trust of capability' being an important dimension of trust (Reina and Reina 2006).

During the last 25 years or so managerialism has become a substitute for trust (Trow 1994). An associated risk is that accountability can be a source rather than a remedy for distrust (O'Neill 2005). Distrust has fuelled the audit explosion (Power 1994) with assumptions of distrust sustaining audit processes and becoming self-fulfilling as auditees adapt

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their behaviour strategically in response to the audit process, thereby becoming less trustworthy (Power 1997). O'Neill (2002) puts it as follows: 'the new culture of accountability provides incentives for arbitrary and unprofessional choices' (56) or what she terms 'defensive teaching' (50).

Accountability, of course, also has positive elements: it guards against irresponsibility and provides checks or controls which can enhance the quality of procedures (Sztompka 1999). Some form of accountability may have potential for contributing to organisational trust. Organisational trust is defined as positive expectations individuals have about the intents and behaviours of organisational members based on roles, relationships and interdependencies (Shockley-Zalabak et al. 2000). What factors seem to support organisational trust? Collaborative cultures have potential for increasing trust in view of the reciprocal nature of collaboration and trust (Tschannen-Moran 2001). Gimbel (2003) sees good communication, defined as frequent and accurate, as being a factor in generating trust. Job stability also correlates with trust in that a stable and reliable position increases feelings of security, whilst rapid organisational change risks undermining trust (Sztompka 1999). Change itself is a further relevant dimension as reform is easier to achieve in high-trust collaborative institutions (Louis 2007).

This paper seeks to highlight trust or distrust as an important issue in assessment, chart some of its key dimensions and argue how lack of trust can constrain assessment reform. In the next two sections, a framework for good assessment practices is synthesised from relevant literature and related to the notion of trust. I then illustrate the impact of trust on assessment design in a particular teaching context, through the discussion of two iterations of the same module. Finally, some strategies for increasing trust are outlined and some avenues for further research are sketched.

Learning-oriented assessment practices

In this section, I draw on the notion of learning-oriented assessment (Carless 2007) to emphasise that maximising the learning potential of assessment is a crucial component of attempts to renew assessment practices. Whilst acknowledging that a challenge for assessment is that it has to fulfil several purposes simultaneously (Ramsden 2003), learning-oriented assessment holds that for all assessments – whether predominantly summative or formative in function – a key aim is for them to promote productive student learning. Grading and certifying are important parallel functions of assessment, in tune with the accountability agendas outlined above, yet they should not outweigh the core learning purpose.

Assessment task design is a fundamental component of learning-oriented assessment, or what Carless et al. (2006) call 'assessment tasks as learning tasks' (9). In this conception, assignments would generally be preferred to examinations on the grounds that the latter tend to be over-reliant on factual recall and the reproduction of information. Related to this, assessment should engage students with work over time rather than being episodic or one-shot (Gibbs 2006). Other relevant features of task design include: a relationship between assessment tasks and real-world tasks; and cooperative rather than competitive tasks, for example, through group work or project-based learning (Keppell and Carless 2006). Assessment task design seeks to stimulate deep learning and complex achievements (Knight 2006), fulfilling the demands required in the contemporary workplace.

Learning-oriented assessment also predisposes that student involvement in assessment (Falchikov 2005) through peer and self-assessment is crucial. Rather than peer assessment involving student grading, I view *peer feedback* as being a particularly valuable process by which students learn from each other, reflect on standards achieved and

begin to self-regulate their own learning (Liu and Carless 2006). Peer feedback can be allied with self-assessment (e.g. Boud 1995) to support students in drafting or decoding assessment criteria and applying them to exemplars, their own work and that of their peers. Self-assessment within the context of participation in practice is a key element of sustainable assessment (Boud 2000) which holds that assessment needs to be tenable for current purposes, whilst also equipping students through their active involvement in the assessment process with the necessary dispositions for lifelong learning.

Self-assessment facilitates understandings of feedback, a further strand of learning-oriented assessment, in that for feedback to be effective students need to be developing an awareness of required standards and how they can 'close the gap' between current and desired levels of performance (Sadler 1989). Gibbs (2006) outlines a number of features of good feedback processes, including: feedback focuses on learning rather than on marks or on students themselves; and feedback is acted upon by students to improve their work or their learning. Key issues include the comprehensibility and timeliness of feedback (e.g. Carless 2006) so that students can make sense of feedback and have prompt opportunities to use it.

Learning-oriented assessment positions itself within an outcomes-based approach to higher education. When learning outcomes are worthwhile and clearly stated, and assessment tasks require students to work productively towards these outcomes, then students are being primed for deep learning experiences. Of relevance here is the notion of constructive alignment (Biggs 1999), involving coherence between learning objectives, constructivist teaching strategies, course content and assessment methods.

In sum, learning-oriented assessment seeks to contribute to the reconciliation of formative and summative assessment tensions by focusing on good assessment principles potentially applicable to both. It is predicated on an integration of appropriate task design; the involvement of students in the assessment process; feedback that can be acted upon to improve student learning in current and/or future assignments; and student progress towards worthwhile learning outcomes.

Trust and assessment

My analysis of trust and assessment is not focused on trustworthiness in terms of reliability of judgements, in other words whether grades can be trusted (see Knight 2002, for an authoritative discussion). Instead, I refer to trust with regard to assessment as denoting the confidence one has in the likelihood of others (management, administration, colleagues, students) acting responsibly in respect of sound principles, practices or behaviours in assessment. In other words, there are confidence, integrity and competence issues. Relevant to the discussion are various interpersonal dimensions to trust or distrust: to what extent is trust exhibited between lecturers and students; lecturers and their colleagues; students and their classmates; or management and teaching staff?

Within a consideration of trust and assessment, it has to be acknowledged that assessment demands a number of functions which involve compromises or trade-offs, what Boud (2000) calls 'double duty' (159). Assessment is about learning and about grading; it is both a technical matter and one that impacts on students' emotional lives. Assessment must be justifiable to lecturers themselves, students and management. Assessment needs to be principled, yet also practical. Negotiating such dilemmas is often a tall order.

How might trust impact on the learning-oriented assessment principles discussed in the previous section? In terms of assessment design, Tate (2005) suggests that it may be easier to maintain trust in an assessment system that has less validity but more perceived reliability.

A consequence of this may be a preference for more objective but less complex assignments. Curzon-Hobson (2002) voices a concern that if assessment is only conceived narrowly in terms of fairness and accuracy then there is likely to be minimal encouragement and reward for participation in flexible or innovative approaches to assessment.

Assessment design sometimes fails to look much further than examinations which are trusted partly because of their long tradition. They represent continuity and stability, whilst other more innovative forms of assessment may be seen as risk-taking. The limitations of examinations have long been acknowledged: the restricted writing time and need to cram information into short-term memory seem to favour certain students (Knight and Yorke 2003); and examination success is often not congruent with deep conceptual understanding (Entwistle and Entwistle 1992). Despite such critiques, examinations maintain their position as a major form of assessment in higher education. Elements of distrust may manifest themselves in the preference for examinations. A contemporary rationale for examinations is that plagiarism is thereby easier to avoid than in other forms of assessment. Plagiarism is a reality, yet also a potential source of over-generalisation to 'honest' students and so a source of distrust (Carroll 2002). Plagiarism thrives in large anonymous classes so the closer and more trusting relationships are between staff and students, the less likely plagiarism is to occur.

In the discussion of learning-oriented assessment, I referred to the importance of student involvement in assessment; how is this dimension affected by trust? Two common strategies for promoting student involvement in assessment are group assignments and peer assessment. Discussion of group assessments often prompts concerns that 'free riders' may be rewarded for work they have not done (Heathfield 1999). The peer assessment literature is dominated by studies of correlations between tutor and student grades because of the perceived need to justify the trustworthiness of student marking (Liu and Carless 2006). These dimensions of trust may distract us from the equally important issue of the extent to which group assignments and peer assessment lead to productive student learning.

Turning now to formative feedback, trust is also salient. Feedback requires lecturers and students to enter into a relationship of trust in which the former try to provide helpful comments that the latter attempt to use. For formative feedback to flourish it is necessary for students to be willing to reveal their own partial conceptions: in other words to invest trust in the teacher. Conversely, 'faking good' (Gibbs 2006, 26) occurs when students present themselves as knowing more than they actually do, for fear that revealing their weaknesses may be used against them.

Earlier in the paper, I noted that accountability may represent a threat to trust and it may lead to defensive assessment practices. Ecclestone and Swann (1999), for example, discuss tensions between desires to improve assessment practices and the need to defend oneself against challenges from students, colleagues or external bodies. Grade inflation may also be related to accountability. A possible repercussion of the ubiquity of student evaluations of teaching is that staff may be tempted to award higher student grades as a means to obtain favourable evaluations (Millea and Grimes 2003). Accountability also risks distorting outcomes-based approaches in that a bureaucratic quest to demonstrate achieved outcomes risks drowning a focus on what really matters: student learning (Hussey and Smith 2003).

This section has explored, in broad terms, the relationship between trust and aspects of a learning-oriented approach to assessment. It has focused on assessment design, particularly with regard to examinations; constraints to the active involvement of students in assessment processes; some of the challenges to feedback processes; and some of the threats of accountability forces.

The role of trust in a specific context

This part of the paper exemplifies, as far as space permits, some of the issues raised above via the discussion of the assessment components of a specific module taught in the tertiary sector in Hong Kong.

Background

The institution to which I then belonged comprised an amalgamation of previously separate colleges of education, was changing at a fast pace and progressing towards university status (Hayhoe 2001). As such, it was emerging from a relatively low status and was subject to both critical scrutiny and sometimes unjust criticism (Glenwright 2005). Staff were required to upgrade their academic qualifications and reform some well-established practices. As noted earlier, rapid change and potential instability can prove a threat to trusting relationships.

There were particular contextual challenges for the department of English (as a second language) to which I belonged. The department was identified by administration as being over-staffed and threats of redundancy were rife. A further negative dimension came from external accountability sources. In view of longstanding concerns about alleged declining English-language standards in Hong Kong (Evans 2000) and that the low standard of teachers' English was one of the main culprits (Glenwright 2002), the Government introduced a benchmark language proficiency assessment for teachers (LPAT). The pre-service and in-service teachers taught by the department were required to achieve this benchmark – not straightforward in a test that was considered to be challenging and controversial (Glenwright 2005). The LPAT exacerbated pressures on the English department, there was a renewed emphasis on the achievement of high standards and associated expectations that failure rates would be expected to increase in an institution which had traditionally held a supportive stance towards 'marginal' students.

Within this general context, the specific module to be discussed was itself on the topic of 'Assessment for Learning' and its objectives were for students to demonstrate their understanding of formative and summative approaches to assessment and construct appropriate assessment tools. Participants were Cantonese pre-service students in their final year of study before becoming primary school teachers of English as a second language. Here I discuss two iterations of the module, referred to as module cases A and B respectively.

Module case A

In module case A, the main aims of the assignment were twofold: to integrate formative processes within a summative assignment; and to facilitate collaboration and peer learning through a group assignment (three members per group). The single assignment for the module was the development of a portfolio of assessment tools for the ESL classroom. The processes supporting the preparation of the assignment included email feedback on a draft outline of the portfolio; a subsequent group tutorial for further verbal interaction; and a mini-viva (Carless 2002) after submission to facilitate discussion, reflection and prompt feedback on the assignment. These processes were evaluated successfully by students (see Carless 2002). In terms of assignment performance, most students gained grades of 'good' or 'satisfactory' and there were no failures. For this particular cohort, within the accountability context outlined above, these were regarded as relatively high grades.

In the interim period between module cases A and B, a number of events intensified pressure on the department. In particular, public scrutiny was exacerbated by generally poor

teacher performance in the LPAT (Glenwright 2005), some of which could be traced to recently graduated students from the institution. In this intensified climate of accountability and distrust, various measures were adopted at the departmental level to try to ensure that students' written English was able to meet LPAT standards. These included: a particular emphasis on grammatical accuracy as an assessment criterion; an increase in examinations rather than assignments as a mode of assessment; and a reduction in group assignments, and only permitting them if they represented less than 50% of the assessment weighting for a module. Departmental management also voiced concerns about the role of feedback on drafts and there were some criticisms of formative feedback providing too much support for students. A stance of encouraging staff to be rigorous and/or to fail students was also reiterated.

Module case B

In this climate the assignment for module case B, two years later, was similar in content to module case A but the format was changed. I resisted the pressure for an examination in the belief that it did not suit a module that aimed to broaden notions of assessment and promote assessment for learning. I did, however, abandon the group assignment that had worked well in module case A. The revised assignment for module case B was an individual assignment handed in at the end of the module with no feedback on outlines or drafts during its process. The grades on this assignment were markedly lower than in case A with six students failing, mainly on the grounds of weak English. From the point of view of the accountability pressures on the department, this failure rate was perceived by department leadership relatively positively, as an indication of rigour. In terms of student response, the module was evaluated less positively than module case A. With regard to workload, module case B represented a lighter workload for both students and staff. If a one-off end of module assignment provides convenience and simplicity for students and lecturers, what motivation is there for assessment reform?

Issues arising

This brief discussion of a module in a particular context exemplifies how assessment design is affected by a number of factors, including trust, accountability, external influences and an individual lecturer's perceptions of these. The department in which I was working suffered from a lack of confidence, limited public trust and the external accountability dimension of the LPAT benchmarking its graduates. These pressures were also exacerbated by the low status of teacher education and the specific institution.

Organisational distrust was also paramount, in particular the contagious nature of distrust. The public lacked confidence in the institution; senior management appeared to distrust the department; departmental leadership felt under pressure and passed distrust to staff. Once distrust becomes established, it tends to be self-perpetuating and difficult to overcome (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2000).

In relation to assessment practices, communication from senior or departmental management conveys explicit or implicit messages which may undermine trust and discourage experimentation. Educational change is difficult to carry out in low-trust settings (Louis 2007), probably even more so in respect of assessment change. Lecturer perceptions are also prominent and sometimes we may feel pressured to carry out a course of action due to miscommunication, misinterpretation or anxiety. Perceptions are a key aspect of trust and what is compelling to one lecturer may not be so to another. The kind of pressures outlined in the case can be and were resisted by some staff (but not by others).

Within such accountability situations, assessment is a prime focal point of scrutiny in view of its gate-keeping function. This reinforces the dilemmas salient in assessment processes. Strategies in module case A which might be considered to be good practice as outlined in the section on learning-oriented assessment practices seemed to become subordinated in case B to what accountability and defence from criticism would permit. Cooperative group and peer processes from case A gave way to a more technical, or even competitive, evaluation of writing ability in case B. This may have facilitated a reliable assessment of individual student writing abilities, but did not seem to encourage a particularly productive learning experience. Rather than a criticism of a department operating under difficult circumstances, this is an acknowledgement of the complexities and multiple demands of assessment.

Elements of the assessment dilemmas from the case are worth elaborating. The maintenance of standards is a key role of assessment and is particularly relevant as a counterpoint to grade inflation. There is a tension between the traditional supportiveness of teacher education institutions manifested by an unwillingness to fail students (e.g. Hawe 2003), and a desire in the case under discussion to raise externally mandated standards. Standards-referenced assessments often imply some open or covert elements of norm-referencing (Sadler 2005). At the time of module case B, there was pressure for the least successful students to be awarded failure grades, based partly on the required standards and partly on the basis of their comparative weakness vis-à-vis other students.

Assessment design and implementation are also beset with dilemmas. The tensions between grading and productive student learning referred to earlier are again salient. Cooperative group assessments involve the development of collaborative skills highly valued in the workplace, whilst traditional assessments often place students in competition, at least in part. Feedback on work in progress is timely and supports student engagement, but may create student dependency or favour students who request more assistance. Some alternative assessments may appear risky and so only be feasible or desirable when trust is high. The rewards for risk-taking in assessment are relatively low, and the challenges relatively high, contributing to conservatism in the technology of assessment.

Towards enhancing trust

This paper has argued that trust plays a significant role in assessment processes and the case discussed has illustrated how distrust impacted negatively on the design of a module assessment. Is there anything that can be done to minimise the negative impact of distrust on assessment practices or is lack of trust sometimes too pervasive to be tackled adequately? Most fundamentally desirable would be a holistic and coherent approach to the problem whereby trust is developed throughout all levels and structures of an institution. This may, however, be unrealistic within the constraints of time, resources and willpower. Either within such a holistic approach or as more modest discrete initiatives, I now suggest two main strategies which may contribute to the increase of trust in assessment processes.

First, for competence trust to be more robust there is a need for higher levels of assessment literacy at all levels of an institution from senior management to frontline teaching staff. We require systems that can be justified theoretically and practically, and the confidence to defend our practices against internal or external scrutiny. James (2003), based on a study in Australia, suggests that the quality assurance of assessment lags behind other aspects of teaching; that assessment is probably one of the least sophisticated aspects of university teaching; and that there is an overemphasis on the sorting and certification role of assessment in higher education. If this can be generalised, there may be valid reasons for

us not to trust our colleagues' assessment practices. Assessment leadership is required and, because of their influence, middle or senior management may be in most need of assessment-related professional development. Distributed leadership may be a way forward: first with regard to its implication of a more open and trusting way of working together; second, shared decision-making is indicative of trusting relationships; and third the expertise of the 'assessment leader' may carry more relevance than the hierarchical status of the manager. Yet within the constraints of intensification of workloads and multiple demands, finding time for assessment-driven professional development and the right kind of professional development may, perhaps ironically, only be stimulated by an accountability event, such as an external audit.

Second, and following from the above, there should also be greater transparency about assessment processes. Trust could be enhanced by greater communication and transparency between different stakeholders. With regard to staff and students, clear and shared expectations support the development of trust. Hopefully, the more students know about the assessment process, the more likely they are to have confidence in it. There may be aspects of assessment that we would prefer students not to know about: the processes of 'bargaining' in moderation processes; compromises between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced grading; and the 'defensiveness' of not returning examination scripts. Although such pragmatic compromises may not bear detailed scrutiny, in general, transparency breeds trust. Students need to be shown and helped to understand some of the tacit assumptions of the assessment process, for example, how to interpret assessment criteria and how they are used. They may need input on the different types and purposes of feedback, and how they can best make use of lecturer comments (Price and O'Donovan 2006). Staff also need to do more to understand and address students' positions or concerns about assessment (Costa and Kallick 1995).

In terms of developing trust between university staff members, a suggested means to promote transparency is through increased collaboration. Collaboration may be particularly useful in relation to assessment, which is sometimes secretive and is often conservative in nature. For example, Johnson (2003) recommends more openness in disclosing assessment grades across faculties. Might it be the case that we sometimes distrust colleagues' grading practices on the basis of anecdote or conjecture rather than hard evidence? More sharing between staff of issues and practices in relation to assessment might contribute to reducing distrust and also carry potential for the kind of professional development referred to above.

Conclusion

Contemporary university life is deeply affected by accountability, quality audits and associated distrust. This paper has related the notion of trust to one particular aspect, that of assessment, and opened up an important dimension of assessment which has not been analysed in detail in the existing literature. Distrust risks undermining the integrity of assessment practices, and may be a particular impediment to current emphases on the need for assessment to stimulate a productive student learning experience. We need to work towards building trust in various ways so as to develop assessment systems that contribute effectively to student learning.

I have suggested that trust and distrust impact significantly on the implementation of learning-oriented assessment practices. This has been illustrated through the discussion of a specific case in which accountability forces impacted negatively on the design of assessment tasks. When distrust is powerful and pervasive, all strategies to enhance it may be swamped. Despite this threat, the development of wider assessment literacy, transparency

and collaboration have been suggested as strategies to increase trust. Perhaps lecturers also need to resist external pressures and shy away from defensive assessment. This is not easy when contract renewals, tenure, promotions or other carrots and sticks may be at stake. It is, however, the hallmark of a professional that he/she is able to make his/her own informed and evidence-based judgements on the desirability of professional actions.

This paper has suggested that trust should be given more consideration in relation to assessment reform, yet has probably raised more issues than it is able to answer. Future research might include empirical studies related to stakeholders' perceptions of trust. For example, questionnaire surveys or in-depth interview studies could investigate dimensions of trust in assessment as perceived by senior management, departmental management, teaching staff and students. As communication is a key basis of trust, a better understanding, appreciation and reconciliation of different perceptions of the assessment process would be particularly valuable. From the perspective of the student experience, the extent to which students understand and trust various facets of the assessment process is also worthy of further exploration. Another dimension worth examining relates to the granting of trust: if we invest greater trust in students, they may respond positively, although a minority might abuse it. Finally, the paper will have succeeded in its purpose if it contributes to an increased investigation of the role of trust or distrust in assessment reform.

Notes on contributor

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