Compliance, commitment and comfort zones
the effects of post-16 assessment systems on students’ identities and learning careers
Dr Kathryn Ecclestone, University of Nottingham

The presentation
• defining ‘assessment for learning’
• institutionalising the principles and practices of formative assessment
• the ‘spirit’ and the ‘letter’ – different forms of motivation and autonomy
• a socio-political, cultural analysis of the effects of assessment cultures in English vocational education
• implications for young people’s learning careers

The rise of ‘assessment for learning’
• “any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students’ learning...an assessment activity [is formative] if it provides information to be used as feedback, by teachers and by their students, in assessing themselves and each other to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes formative when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet the learning needs” (Black et al, 2005)
  - not the method, or the timing but the purpose
  - confusion about meaning and practices

The institutionalisation of ‘assessment for learning’
• political goals of achievement, participation and ‘engagement’
  - outcome-based and competence-based education and the ‘learning outcomes’ movement
• requirements for diagnostic assessment, review, target-setting, feedback, classroom questioning, self-assessment, ‘internalising the criteria’, grade descriptors and ‘transparency’
• democratic, empowering and inclusive
  - demystifies a community of practice
  - promotes learning autonomy
  - raises achievement
The ‘spirit’ and the ‘letter’

- the same ‘formative’ techniques can promote learning as transmission, transaction or transformation
- monitoring progress, setting targets, giving feedback, reviewing progress
- learning about students’ progress, engaging them with learning, constructing knowledge and reflecting on these

The mantras of autonomy and motivation

- procedural, personal and critical autonomy
- amotivated, external, introjected, identified, intrinsic and interested motivation
- shifting, fluctuating, idiosyncratic
- AfL can promote these implicitly or explicitly

A socio-political, cultural understanding (1)

- practices constituted by the actions, dispositions and interpretations of participants
  - designers of assessment systems and other stakeholders
  - teachers, students, parents, others
- a learning culture is both structured and structuring, bounded by norms etc, but also shaped by participants (and external constituencies)

A socio-political and cultural understanding (2)

- social and political expectations that assessment must raise achievement and encourage engagement
- texts, specifications and QA procedures, accountability
- resources, environment, organisational ethos, subject discipline, professional rules
- goals and expectations
- peers, norms and relationships
- teachers’ and students’ values and beliefs about assessment and learning
### Learning and assessment careers

- the field of the assessment regime and its translation into an assessment culture
- students' and teachers' *habitus*
  - socialisation through school, further and higher education
  - dispositions, responses and actions in a particular field
- interaction and reproduction to create new identities and reinforce old ones

### Assessment cultures in Level 3 vocational and general education

- **choice and progression**
  - tracks and stereotypes: 'people like me'
  - uncertain aspirations in uncertain contexts
  - certainty and continuity
- **goals and priorities**
  - official targets for achievement
  - personal development and self-esteem vs subject knowledge
- **assessment identities**
  - stereotypes of 'second chance' or 'successful'
  - low risk assessment, no surprises
  - practical, relevant, no writing

### Assessment activities: vocational education

- grade descriptors
  - detailed interpretation and a bottomless pit of 'transparency'
- tasks broken down, homogenised and standardised ('moderatable evidence')
- lesson time dominated by assessment
- drafts and feedback: plugging the gaps
- self-assessment: tracking and checking
- helping each other

### Assessment activities: general education

- grade descriptors
  - less detail, less use of them
- holistic and general marking on the text
- lesson time dominated by revision and subject teaching
- little opportunity to draft and offer feedback
- haphazard self-assessment
- little evidence of peer support
Assessment activities

• I talk through the assessment criteria grid with them and the assignment brief, pinpointing the relationships between pass, merit and distinction... then I see a draft work, read through it, make notes, talk to each one, show the good areas in relation to the criteria and explain why and how if they've met them, saying things like 'you missed out M2....

• You do a draft, you get it back and you have a week to change things and hand it back again... if you are lucky and you have just missed a bit, you can improve it. That's good when you don't know what you are doing!

Outcomes of outcome-based assessment

• procedural autonomy
  – checking, tracking, ‘evidencing’
  – escaping from ‘boring’ classrooms: hunting and gathering information

• introjected, identified motivation

• confidence and basis for dialogue

• springboard for a minority to achieve beyond expectations

• compliance, commitment and comfort zones

• ‘moderatable evidence’ when inspectors and awarding bodies come to call....

Implications for identities and learning careers

• technical emphasis on FA/AfL
  – haphazard effects on identity, practice and learning careers
  – socio-political expectations translated into local assessment cultures

• particular images of learning, achievement, motivation and autonomy

• FA for motivation reinforces tracks and ‘types’
  – no coherent curriculum or subject development

• assessment culture raises achievement
  – what is the acceptable trade-off between instrumentalism and higher levels of participation and achievement?

Instrumentalism

• The clearer the task of how to achieve a grade or award becomes, and the more detailed the assistance given by tutors, supervisors and assessors, the more likely the candidates are to succeed; but succeed at what? Transparency of objectives, coupled with extensive use of coaching and practice to help learners met them, is in danger of removing the challenge of learning and reducing the quality and validity of outcomes achieved.... assessment procedures and practices come completely to dominate the learning experience, and ‘criteria compliance’ comes to replace ‘learning’ (Torrance et al, 2005, p46).
Without challenge….

• "I get an A4 piece of paper for each of 5 assessment criteria… examine the texts and lift out from the texts and put it in whichever section I feel relevant, that’s how I do it… you’re getting your five pieces of work, separate pieces of the question, and you just string them all together and structure it…"

• disadvantaged students ‘achieve’
  - but what do they ‘learn’?

• ‘advantaged’ students achieve and learn

• pressures for feedback, explanation, breaking down the criteria to get a good grade, not doing anything ‘irrelevant’

• demoralisation about education and deep learning

Challenging instrumentalism

• identifying why and how some assessment cultures create deep engagement with learning

• publicising the effects of instrumentalism

• talking to students about the tensions and dilemmas

• setting boundaries around help, support and ‘transparency’

• devising progression in autonomy and considering types of motivation