



Negotiated assessment and teacher learning: An in-depth exploration



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Opportunities for negotiation in formative assessment may benefit teacher learning.
- More information about the negotiation process is needed.
- We developed a formative assessment procedure with opportunities for negotiation.
- Both teachers and their peer assessors neglected many opportunities for negotiation.
- Participants found it difficult to confront a colleague while negotiating.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 March 2014

Received in revised form

3 March 2015

Accepted 17 March 2015

Available online 14 April 2015

Keywords:

Teacher professional development

Formative assessment

Negotiated assessment

Negotiation

Reflectivity

ABSTRACT

Opportunities for negotiation in formative assessment may benefit teachers' professional development. Detailed analysis of nine assessment dialogues involving pairs of nursing teachers in secondary vocational education showed that the *amount* of negotiation was *limited*. Assessment dialogues provided ample opportunities for negotiation (based on expressed disagreement), but more than half of these opportunities were neglected and hence not used to negotiate learning implications. Participants found it difficult to confront a colleague. Possible reasons for this, also methodological, are discussed with a view to future training, formative assessment and research.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, in the USA, Australia and Europe much emphasis has been placed on teachers' professional development (Desimone, 2009). Conceptual models of possible approaches to teacher professional development contain several aspects that seem promising, such as content focus, active learning, coherence between different elements in the professional development programme, duration of the professional development programmes, and collective participation (Desimone, 2009; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007).

According to Borko, Jacobs, and Koellner (2010), high quality teacher professional development programmes should consist of

several characteristics, such as 1) the content should be situated in daily practice and should be focused on students' learning; 2) the programme engages teachers in an inquiry into the concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection; and 3) the programme consists of ongoing activities, which enable teachers to engage in cycles of experimentation and reflection over time.

The notion of critical reflectivity is vital in the study of teacher learning and teacher professional development. According to the international literature critically reflective teachers continuously examine their assumptions by viewing practices from various viewpoints, such as their learners' eyes, the perceptions of colleague teachers, and perspectives derived from theory (Cunliffe, 2004; D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2007; Mehrotra, Chee, & Ong, 2014). Activities that can stimulate teachers to engage in critical reflection are analysing and reflecting on classroom work, exchanging ideas with colleagues, and critiquing each other's work on the basis of classroom observations. Such activities are especially typical within professional development programmes situated in the context of teacher assessment (Sato, Chung Wei, & Darling-Hammond, 2008). The literature indicates that feedback

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provided within the context of the *formative* assessment of teachers may be beneficial mainly for teacher learning, in particular if it helps them recognise their strengths and weaknesses, targets areas for remedial action, identifies new skills to acquire and develop, challenges their assumptions, enriches their understanding of their own teaching practices and allows them to plan their future learning (Porter, Youngs, & Odden, 2001; Topping, 2009). Formative assessment differs from summative assessment of teachers: in the latter, the focus is on judging the teachers' performances, for example as input for a job evaluation or in order to achieve a teaching certificate or a permanent appointment; formative assessment, on the other hand, focuses on supporting teachers in their learning and development, and enriching their understanding.

For fostering teacher learning through critical reflective thinking, formative assessment which includes opportunities for negotiation is particularly interesting. 'Negotiated assessment' is a specific instance of formative assessment in which the assessor and the individual being assessed are expected to interact by exchanging views. Because of the participatory and interactive elements of negotiated assessment, it has been described in the literature as a useful form of formative assessment (Boud, 1992; Day, 1999; Verberg, Tigelaar, & Verloop, 2013).

Negotiated assessment can take a variety of forms, which have some key elements in common (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999; Verberg et al., 2013). The initial meeting is usually devoted to some discussion of the relevant tasks, responsibilities and expectations (Anderson, Boud, & Sampson, 1996), possibly accompanied by the formulation of a formal learning contract or learning agreement (Gosling, 2000). The learning contract/agreement may then provide a guideline for the learning trajectory of the individual being assessed; it may at times be renegotiated and hence discussed during subsequent meetings (Gosling, 2000). A negotiated assessment meeting is typically also a reflective *dialogue* in which 1) the assessor provides feedback on the progress of the individual being assessed and 2) the individual in turn responds to this feedback. In truly negotiated assessment, the implications and conclusions to be drawn from the feedback provided are also explicitly discussed. This negotiation requires the active involvement of *all* participants, and thus is considered essential for formative learning to take place (Day, 1999). The characteristics of negotiated assessment have much in common with key notions in open-to-learning conversations, in which participants are stimulated to be 'open to learning' about the quality of thinking and information used in judgements about what is happening, why, and what to do about it (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009).

Despite the perceived importance of reflection and the availability of several helpful and concrete models to support reflection, there is little to guide teachers in understanding and developing reflective skills among their own students. Teachers need a richer understanding of the ways in which they may deal with the available models for reflection, in order to support their students in engaging in reflection in various contexts and to further their knowledge of pedagogical approaches that could be valuable when they want to stimulate their students to learn from reflection (Asselin, 2011; Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009). In an earlier study, we used a formative assessment procedure which included opportunities for negotiation as a part of a professional development project whose purpose was to assist teachers in gaining a better understanding of their own practice with regard to promoting reflection skills among nursing students at secondary vocational education schools. The results of this small-scale empirical study indicated that — in the opinion of the participants themselves — negotiated assessment contributed to their learning and development (Verberg et al.,

2013). The participating teachers in that study were able to discuss and negotiate professional development (i.e., assessment) goals for topics in several domains. These included a teacher competence framework with associated criteria and standards for behaviour; a learning contract; specific learning goals; and the evidence needed to demonstrate progress with regard to the learning goals (Verberg et al., 2013). However, upon completion of that study we concluded that more information about the negotiation process or, in other words, the exact nature of the *assessment interactions*, was needed. Knowing more about the negotiation process within the context of formative assessment for teachers can also further our understanding of formative assessment in general, and negotiated formative assessment in particular. The results of our study may also have implications for professionals seeking to establish and develop an agenda of critical reflectivity and openness to learning.

1.1. Further background information and definition of negotiation

Both reflection and critical reflectivity are considered necessary elements of an assessment process which includes opportunities for negotiation. In the international literature, the concept of reflectivity is used interchangeably with other concepts such as reflection and critical reflection, and reflexivity (see D'Cruz et al. (2007) for a literature review). Mezirow (1990) states that reflection is concerned with the how or how-to of actions, whereas critical reflection is concerned with the reasons for and consequences of what people do. Mehrotra et al. (2014) refer to Bourdieu's (1985) notion of reflexivity when they state that reflexivity refers to reflecting on one's practices in a social context, and being sensitive to the culture in that context by reflecting on practice from various viewpoints. The latter definition is about becoming aware of and challenging the validity of one's own positions or presuppositions.

As outlined in the introduction, we will here use the concept 'negotiated assessment' while studying teacher learning through critical reflective thinking. In essence this study is about a formative assessment procedure which includes opportunities for negotiation and the way in which such a procedure can promote teachers' learning. In a *negotiated* assessment procedure, the assessor and the individual being assessed are generally on more equal footing than in other forms of assessment (Gosling, 2000): the significance of the feedback provided during a negotiated assessment procedure is discussed (i.e., negotiated) by both parties (Anderson et al., 1996). In a *formative* negotiated teacher assessment the focus is on *learning*, for instance by negotiation, rather than on crucial job evaluation.

In the general literature, negotiation is defined as an interpersonal communication process in which two or more people engage in discussion in order to reach an agreement with a positive outcome for both parties (Thompson, 2006). The characteristics of negotiation have much in common with key notions regarding open-to-learning conversations, as described in the educational leadership literature by Robinson et al. (2009). Both are focused on the progress of the task as well as on maintaining the relationship. This means that providing information to support one's point of view, and not taking anything for granted and examining all underlying assumptions, are considered essential in both the literature on negotiation and open-to-learning conversations.

In the literature the importance of opportunities for negotiation in assessment processes to stimulate learning is emphasised, but apart from this not much else is known about the nature of assessment interactions during negotiation processes in formative assessment, and how such dialogues may benefit teachers' learning.

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