

138 Are we answering the question that has been set? Exploring the gap between examinations research and practice in higher education

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Despite a large amount of critical research literature, traditional examinations continue to be widely used in higher education. In this talk I will explore the role that methodology plays in the gap between research on exams and the way that exams are used. Drawing on Viviane Robinson's 'problem-based methodology' – which focuses on the need for researchers to engage with the priorities of practitioners – I will discuss the extent to which literature on exams published between 2016 and 2021 focuses on real-world assessment challenges. I will conclude that there is an absence of evidence about how practitioners make their decisions about assessments, which hinders the ability of assessment researchers to appropriately connect their work with practical assessment challenges. To make a difference, assessment research needs to live in the real world; a world which, at least as far as practitioners' assessment decisions are concerned, we do not yet sufficiently understand.

Full paper

Introduction

Assessment is an aspect of higher education where the gap between research and practice is often believed to be particularly wide. There is a sense that while the historical shift in focus from what teachers do to what students do (Barr & Tagg, 1995) has had considerable impact on pedagogy, the hold of traditional transmission-focused approaches has lingered longer when it comes to assessment and feedback (Winstone and Carless, 2020). Formal examinations probably represent the apotheosis of this reported disconnect between assessment research and the assessment methods that are actually used within universities (Chong and McArthur 2021). The issue discussed in this article is whether this gap between research and practice is partly due to the methodologies employed by researchers.

In order to evaluate methodology as a factor, I explore the application to recent research on exams of Viviane Robinson's 'problem-based methodology', which views insufficient engagement by researchers with practitioners' challenges as a key factor in the lack of uptake of educational research (Robinson 1998). It starts from the idea that the educational practices that researchers may wish to challenge and change should not be seen as irrational spasms or unthinking traditions, but as rational attempts to solve particular problems. As a consequence, researchers need to offer superior solutions to those very same problems if they want to contribute to the improvement of those practices. Just as students can perform poorly in exams because they answer the question they wish they'd been asked rather than the one they are set on the paper, the work of researchers can lack impact because they offer solutions to the problems they see, rather than the problems practitioners take themselves to face (Robinson 1993).

In Robinson's model, research that aims at improving practice should address either a) the accuracy of practitioners' beliefs, b) the extent to which an assessment practice satisfies practitioners' existing constraints, or c) the extent to which an assessment practice makes it easier to solve other problems that practitioners are concerned with.

Method

Literature on examinations in higher education published in the five-year period between 2016 and 2021 was reviewed to explore the extent of its alignment with Robinson's problem-based methodology. An initial simple search was undertaken using Google Scholar, followed by a systematic search within 28 'key journals' highlighted by Tight (2018). In total 43 relevant papers were found. The papers were reviewed to determine i) the constraint/s focused on,

and ii) how they framed those constraints with regard to practitioners' concerns: whether they addressed the accuracy of practitioners' beliefs, how effectively practitioners' existing constraints are satisfied, or the relevance of additional considerations to practitioners' existing constraints.

Findings

The review found research that matches all three elements of Robinson's model, though the dominant strategy (in 17 of the 43 papers reviewed) is to address the effectiveness of assessment solutions. However, an equal number of papers (17), featured no explicit discussion at all of how the research relates to practitioners' assessment decisions. In addition, even where researchers do explicitly discuss the relationship between their work and practitioners' concerns, it is rare for relevant evidence about practitioners' concerns to then be cited; only nine of the 43 papers reviewed do so. Researchers almost always provide evidence that the issue they discuss is of importance to other researchers, but rarely do the same for practitioners.

It is widely recognised that there is a scarcity of research on how assessment decisions are made (e.g. Bearman et al. 2017), and apparently none on the decision-making processes that lead to the use of exams. If we don't know why practitioners choose to use exams in particular situations, it is hard for those conducting research on exams to provide evidence about how their research engages with those choices. Robinson herself is clear that the kind of practice-focused model she advocates depends on robust information about how practitioners frame their problems and make their choices (Robinson & Lai 1999).

If we want research to influence the rational decision-making processes of practitioners, lamenting the lack of innovation and improvement in assessment while failing to engage with the thought-processes that lead to decisions about assessment is unlikely to succeed. Offering better solutions to the problems that practitioners face is a more promising path to the change we would all like to see.

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