

# ***SEDA Research and Evaluation Small Grants: Final Report***

## **Project title**

EDPAL2016: Investigating Educational Developers' Perceptions of Assessment Literacy

## **Institution and project team**

Centre for Educational Development, University of Bradford.

John Dermo (Project Leader and Principal Investigator),

Ruth Whitfield and Dr Sean Walton.

## **Reasons for choosing the project**

“Higher education is, in general, thinly populated with academics who are experts in assessment (there are probably rather more who consider themselves experts)” (Yorke, 2011, p. 267).

Assessment Literacy has been a significant topic of discussion in educational development in recent years, largely as a result of the work carried out by the Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning, focusing primarily on developing student assessment literacy (Price et al, 2012; Sambell et al, 2013). Prior to that, work on assessment literacy (mainly in the USA) had concentrated on staff assessment literacy in the school sector (Stiggins, 1995).

This project sought to explore the concept of assessment literacy from the perspective of the educational developer, who has been largely overlooked in the literature to date. We set out to answer the following questions:

- What does assessment literacy mean to educational developers in higher education?
- How do educational developers engage with the concept in theory and in practice?
- What are the implications for provision of initial and continuing professional development in higher education?

## What we did and how it was carried out

This study consisted of three stages which provided different perspectives on our research questions, starting with an online questionnaire to educational developers, followed up by more detailed discussion in a workshop discussion session with SEDA conference delegates, and finally by a longer in-depth discussion with an expert focus group. All three data collection activities were structured around the research questions above, and analysed by thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

This process is now described, along with a brief summary of the key themes constructed by the researchers at each stage. A more detailed discussion of these findings follows in the next section of the report “What we have learned”.

### 1. Ethical Approval

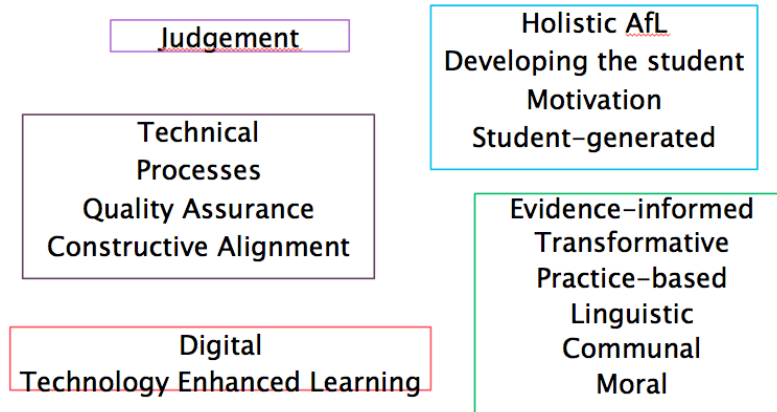
Ethical approval for this project was granted by the Humanities, Social and Health Sciences Research Ethics Panel at the University of Bradford on 2nd October 2015.

### 2. Online Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was published in autumn 2015 via the SEDA mailing list ([seda@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:seda@jiscmail.ac.uk)) and further publicised at the SEDA 2015 annual conference. Data were collected from November 2015 to February 2016 and thematic analysis was carried out in March and April 2016.

There were 30 respondents from 23 universities, covering a range of types of institution (e.g. Russell Group, post-1992), with most participants based in central educational development units, and representing a range of roles and experience in the field of educational development. The findings from the questionnaire can be summarised as follows.





**Figure 2: key themes in defining assessment literacy from the educational developer's perspective**

### 2.3 The main challenges and barriers to developing assessment literacy.

When asked to identify barriers and challenges in assessment literacy from the educational developer's perspective, respondents identified these six areas:

1. Engaging in dialogue around assessment themes
2. Resource issues (e.g. time, workload, cohort size)
3. Departmental and institutional culture
4. Systems and processes
5. Issues around marking criteria and judgement
6. Embedding constructive alignment

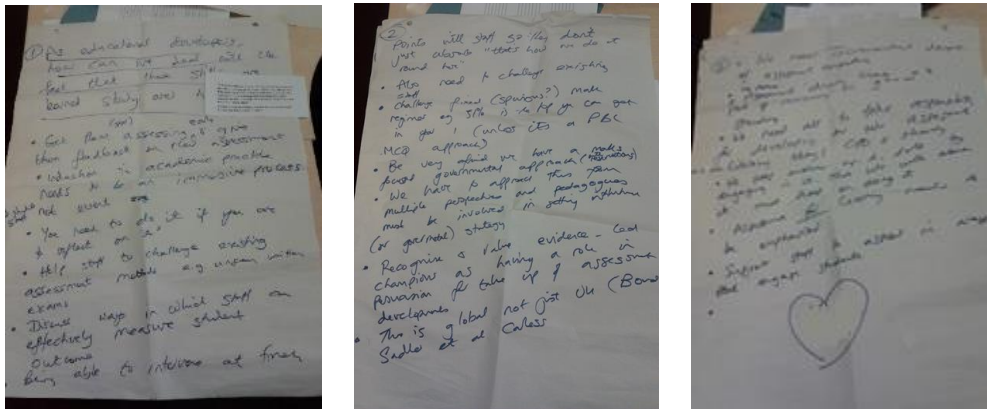
### 3. Workshop Activity

As a follow up to the online questionnaire, a data collection workshop was held on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2015 with delegates at the 20<sup>th</sup> SEDA Annual conference at St David's Hotel and Spa, Cardiff. [http://www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/30\\_Dermo.pdf](http://www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/30_Dermo.pdf)

After a brief summary of interim findings, a facilitated group data collection activity took place: eleven participants (working in educational development, learning and teaching and/or quality assurance) were divided into two groups to discuss an assessment

literacy-related prompt question, and to capture their group thoughts on a flip-chart poster.

Group one was posed this question: *“Assessment literacy is a slowly learned gateway or threshold skill which, once mastered, allows access, not only to further learning and knowledge, but also to academic communities, their practice and standards” (Price 2015). As Educational Developers, how can we deal with the fact that these skills are developed slowly over time?*



**Figure 3: Group 1 flipchart notes.**

This group’s responses focused on the following themes:

- involve staff in assessment and give them feedback on their assessment
- Induction needs to be an immersive process of CPD and sharing – not a one-off event
- Incremental development of assessment competence
- do it, reflect on it and discuss it – don’t just talk and write about it, do it
- Challenge existing assessment methods and a culture of “that’s how we do it round here”
- Challenge spurious marking regimes and a marks-focused approach
- Involve pedagogues in development of strategy
- Recognise and value the role of evidence-led champions in take-up of assessment developments
- This is global not just UK

- Propose an “Assessment driving license” as evidence of good standing
- Assessment for learning needs to be emphasised and assessment to engage students.

Group 2 was given the prompt question: “Assessment literate teachers would be sufficiently experienced, alert to the vagaries of professional judgement and conscious of developments in good assessment practice” (Bloxham and Boyd 2012). As educational developers, how can we develop this judgement and good practice in teaching staff?

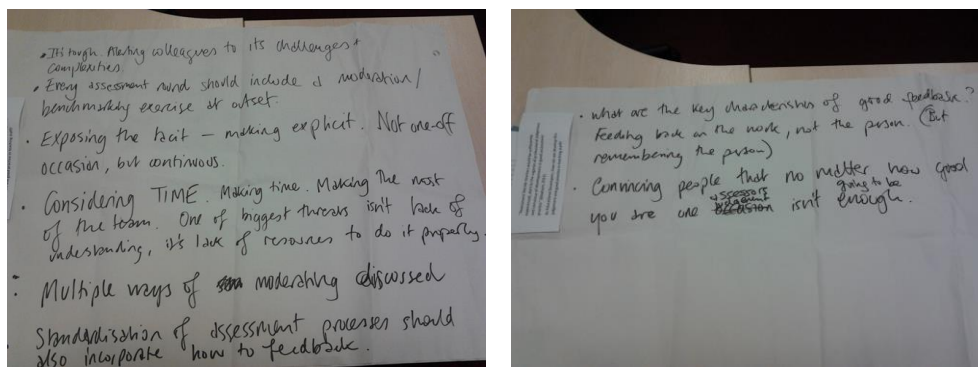


Figure 4: Group two flipchart notes.

Group 2 raised these themes:

- Alerting colleagues to the challenges and complexities of assessment.
- Every assessment round should include a moderation/benchmarking exercise at the outset.
- Exposing the tacit – making explicit.
- Development is continuous, not a one-off occasion
- Time and resources: making the most of teams; it isn't lack of understanding, it's lack of resources to do it properly.
- Standardisation of assessment processes should also incorporate how to feedback.
- Judgement: no matter how good you are, one assessor's judgement isn't going to be enough.

## 4. Expert focus group

As a result of discussions and networking at the SEDA annual conference in November 2015, a special focus group was arranged with the kind support of Professor Sally Brown. This took place in April 2016, with participation from a panel of four experts from the field of educational development and assessment in higher education, with a wealth of experience and publications in the field. There was a wide-ranging 90 minute semi-structured group discussion of the project research questions, which was recorded and analysed for key themes. The data are summarised in brief as follows:

### 4.1 Assessment literacy is:

- Thinking deeply about assessment
- A rich and varied territory from the micro to the macro level
- Built on dialogue within communities
- Having a shared philosophy of assessment
- Working out how assessment works by doing it
- Not a patronising term
- Analogous to learning to drive (complex, tacit knowledge acquired over time and through experience)
- Building confidence, and self-efficacy
- An attitude with an underpinning disposition (open minded, reflective, with humility)
- Closely related to judgement alone and with others

### 4.2 Staff assessment literacy can be developed:

- By engaging in dialogue
- Through an academic articulating what is happening in their assessment practice, and reflecting on this
- By staff and students sharing and understanding each others' perspectives
- Partly through 'training' but mainly by learning through experience, reflection and critical feedback, learning from mistakes
- Involving practical workshops, experiencing it, not just talking about it
- By opening up repertoires to new possibilities
- Through de-mystifying the language of assessment

- Through authentic assessment dilemmas, allowing participants to own the solutions, finding answers, not being told how to do it
- With an awareness of the heterogeneity of the staff (and student) bodies
- Aligning principles and practice based on the multiple purposes of assessment and how these compete
- Moving beyond the rhetorical statements of assessment to operationalize them in real-life scenarios
- Recognising that AL is an on-going process and cannot be imparted via a single workshop: even a PgCert can only hope to start the process
- Might need to take the place of a helpful experienced mentor who used to guide new academics through early teaching, but these are now rare

#### 4.3 Assessment Literacy for whom?

There are overarching basic principles of assessment, but how these are interpreted in different contexts vary hugely between stakeholder groups. There is little disagreement about the central principles but there is a lot of disagreement about how this is interpreted by, for example:

- students
- practitioners
- educational developers
- senior managers in universities
- QA staff and registry
- employers
- professional bodies
- educational researchers
- and the list goes on (delegates at the SEDA conference also added “exams office”, “disability unit”, “learner support team”)



## What we have learned

This study set out to answer these three research questions:

- What does assessment literacy mean to educational developers?
- How do educational developers engage with the concept in theory and in practice?
- What are the implications for provision of initial and continuing professional development in higher education?

What we have learned about each of these three questions (based on an analysis of data from the questionnaire, the workshop discussions and the expert focus group) will now be discussed in turn.

### 1. The meaning of Assessment Literacy.

Educational Developers have a quite wide range of perspectives on the theme of assessment literacy. These are not at all contradictory positions, but rather reflect the different functions and roles which educational developers play, usually within central educational development units, or occasionally as faculty-based educational developers.

For some educational developers, it is all about the student, about promoting Assessment for Learning (or Assessment as Learning), about using assessment to engage learners and developing lifelong learning skills and involving students as partners in assessment: this tallies very much with the position as found in the literature, for example in Price et al (2012). Other educational developers focus more on a technical-rational position: assessment literacy is perceived as understanding institutional processes, about complying with quality assurance requirements, as well as grasping the technical aspects of aligning assessment with learning activities and outcomes. Alternatively, some focus primarily on digital literacy and technology enhanced assessment, seeing assessment literacy as a search for technical solutions. Another group of educational developers takes a more pedagogic view, focusing on educational issues around evidence-informed practice, reflection, transformation, experiential and community-based learning, as well as linguistic and discourse-based issues, and even moral imperatives. Along with all these groups, another thread running through all of this is the importance of judgement in assessment, reflecting the

importance of reliability in high-stakes assessment and the challenges faced in trying to achieve this.

What is clear is that assessment literacy is very difficult to define: “it is like trying to nail jelly to a wall” (expert focus group participant). This is partly because it exists on several levels, ranging from the micro level (learning specific tips, or examples of good practice which might be addressed via training sessions) to a highly complex macro level of cognitively demanding challenges (e.g. trying to design an authentic programme assessment strategy, which requires deeper transformation and a longer-term reflective, community based and dialogic approach). It is also partly because assessment literacy is impossible to measure, “you know when you have it” (expert focus group participant), and is tacit, and ever-developing. There is also a fundamental philosophical element to assessment literacy: your view of assessment will depend on your view of the world, and these epistemological differences are situated in academic disciplines. Consequently, interdisciplinary discussion about assessment can be immensely fruitful and challenging. As well the cognitive aspects of assessment literacy, there is also an affective domain within it: it is related to building confidence as well as competence, and there is a suggestion that it is accompanied by an underpinning disposition of open-mindedness, reflexivity and even humility. There is also a linguistic turn to assessment literacy: it is about being able to de-code the terminology of assessment, but the very term “literacy” also carries connotations. Assessment literacy should not be based on a deficit model: it is not a patronising term, but is rather “a baseline foundation on which to build ... moving from a combination of basic skills into an expert domain” (expert focus group participant).

## 2. Developing staff Assessment Literacy in theory and in practice

In terms of how to develop AL among staff, several clear themes can be identified. The findings from this study indicate that dialogue is at the heart of developing assessment literacy, along with the need for constant reflective practice among university teachers. Because assessment practice is situated within the context of academics’ teaching situation and its challenges, this necessitates sharing within a community of practice and learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991): communication and collaboration within the programme team, as well as module teams, are crucial to this.

A key part of developing assessment literacy is providing opportunities for universities to “articulate the tacit”, to be able to talk about their assessment practice. This enables them to reflect on practice and self-evaluate. By doing this within teams and groups (both within their discipline and across disciplines) peer feedback, discussion and evaluation also becomes possible. In this way, individuals and teams are given a chance to question their existing assessment practice and challenge the existing assessment culture of “that’s how we do it round here” (workshop group comment).

Developing assessment literacy through experience is also key. A common theme was that little is to be gained from merely talking about how complex assessment is, or from discussing the theory in abstract terms. University teachers must be able to see the real-life benefits of a variety of assessment practices, and be able to apply the theory in their own situation, combining theoretical principles and practice in a meaningful authentic way.

In addition, it is important that the role of the educational developer is not to tell the academics “how to do it”. Assessment literacy cannot be imparted, it must be developed within individuals and teams. This is not a matter of “knowledge transfer”, but rather of “conceptual change” (Trigwell & Prosser, 2004). This is only possible if the academics take ownership of the application of the concepts. As such the role of the educational developer needs to be largely facilitative.

Moreover, assessment literacy is developed incrementally and is continuous: it cannot be imparted in a one-off session: “induction in academic practice needs to be an immersive process for students and staff - not [an] event” (workshop group comment) and “we shouldn't expect to impart this on a PgCert, that would be impossible - you can start it” (focus group comment).

It is recognised that traditionally much of this development used to be led by a department mentor, who would guide, advise and support new academics through assessment practice over a number of years. However, with new pressures on teaching academics to “hit the ground running”, and at the same time with limited resources within

the department to provide this crucial support, some of this responsibility now falls to central educational development teams to fill the gap.

### 3. Implications for initial and continuing professional development in assessment literacy.

There are several lessons to be learned from this study in terms of how we can design development opportunities on the theme of assessment literacy.

It is acknowledged that there are certain practical guidelines which can be shared via one-off induction sessions: for example, awareness raising of institutional processes and regulations (e.g. around quality assurance), and established evidence-based good practice (such as group moderation sessions, sharing marking criteria with students and principles for effective feedback). This should certainly be built into academic induction sessions for all staff engaged in the assessment process. However, this is only the start and needs to be integrated with an ongoing programme of assessment literacy development.

Subsequent development should consist of practical workshops which go hand in hand with the academics' involvement in assessment in practice. These sessions should go beyond discussing the theory of assessment at an abstract level and involve participants in authentic tasks, where experiential learning can take place. Because reflection, dialogue and self- and peer assessment play an important role in this process, these activities should contain a group discussion element where participants are able to share their experiences and reflections, and provide feedback to peers. Such workshops can take place within programme teams to help build assessment literacy across the taught programme, but also in cross-disciplinary sessions where practice can be shared and new possibilities may be explored.

For example, activities should be developed around authentic assessment dilemmas, constructed to address real assessment challenges faced by academics in their day-to-day practice. The sessions are facilitated so that participants can apply the theory to find evidence-based solutions to their own issues. In this way, the academics will own the solutions, and are far more likely to develop literacy than if they are told what to do.

The role of the educational developer is therefore about making the theory of assessment accessible to academics, avoiding rhetorical “educational development speak”, instead providing relevant examples and facilitating the sharing of further examples between participants. This would be helped by the inclusion of digestible evidence-based resources, such the [Higher Education Academy toolkits](#), or online institutional resources, for example the [ASKe 123 leaflets](#).

Educational Developers should avoid one-size-fits-all solutions, but rather encourage participants to apply the theory to develop specific solutions to their own real life situated assessment challenges. Throughout these activities, educational developers should seek to de-mystify the language of assessment, and “bust the myths” of assessment.

It is also important to consider different stakeholder groups: whilst the fundamental principles apply, the different perspectives on key issues will vary. Assessment literacy extends to all the involved parties, including managers, quality assurance staff, administrators, graduate teaching assistants, support staff (and many others), and needs to be addressed via targeted and tailored development opportunities. There are also groups external to the institution, such as professional accrediting bodies and employers, who may be more difficult to reach, but whose perspectives are also important to consider.

The role of the programme leader and the programme team is central to developing assessment literacy. It is understood that collaboration and communication is crucial, but it is also recognised that departmental culture and tradition can be a barrier here. Educational developers can play a key role in facilitating this communication, where possible using department-based champions to encourage the sharing and moving towards a situated community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Finally, findings from the conference workshop and the expert focus group both compared the development of assessment literacy to learning to drive. Both are about developing confidence and competence, gradually moving from a set of basic skills to a level of advanced mastery which remains largely tacit. One suggestion is to develop an

“assessment driving licence”, by which staff can demonstrate their good standing. This is certainly an interesting idea which can be taken forward in future work.

## **How have you told others about your work?**

At the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual SEDA conference in Cardiff in 2015, there was an interim progress report on the project, preceding a data collection workshop activity, facilitated by the Principal Investigator John Dermo.

[http://www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/30\\_Dermo.pdf](http://www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/30_Dermo.pdf)

The findings of the report were shared at a presentation by John Dermo at the SEDA spring conference 13<sup>th</sup> May at the Carlton Hotel, Edinburgh

[http://www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/29b\\_Dermo.pdf](http://www.seda.ac.uk/resources/files/29b_Dermo.pdf)

Ruth Whitfield from the project team also presented on the related theme of programme-based assessment strategies at the 2016 SEDA Spring conference and at the 2016 CLT conference, Edge Hill University.

As a result of the network of connections gained through the project, Principal investigator John Dermo was invited to attend the Higher Education Academy “Assessment and Feedback Summit” in York in May 2016, where he was able to input into discussions on assessment literacy with assessment experts from the sector. He was also able to attend the “Assessment in Higher Education” (AHE) seminar in Manchester June 2016, where assessment literacy was a core theme for the day-long seminar.

## **What effect has it had and where is this activity now heading?**

1. The project has provided insights into perspectives among educational developers and has enabled the start of discussion of the theme of assessment literacy within our Centre for Educational Development. Follow up interviews with educational developers are now being carried out within the team, which will widen out moving forward, informing practical decisions around development sessions and wider issues of educational development and academic identity.

2. Analysis of the emerging themes and what we have learned from this project are also informing a new approach to developing staff assessment literacy at the university with regard to the organisation, planning and design of development activities around staff assessment literacy, building in the suggestions discussed above into our programme of CPD and IPD activities for 2016-7 and beyond.
3. This project led directly to an invitation to join the HEA Assessment and Feedback summit in May 2016, where staff assessment literacy was one of the key themes of enquiry and discussion. Participation at the summit enabled the educational developer's voice to be heard, informed by findings from this study. Moving forward, it should help the promotion of staff assessment literacy as a priority for the HEA in future discussion and action planning.

## What outputs have resulted from this activity?

The team are planning to develop our conference presentations, along with themes and ideas discussed in this report into a series of articles for peer reviewed journals, specifically "Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education", as well as "International Journal for Academic Development". It is also hoped that this work might contribute to future issues of the SEDA publications "Educational Developments" and "Innovations in Education and Teaching International".

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