Towards a Personal Best: a Case for Introducing Ipsative Assessment in Higher Education

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Introduction

The central role that assessment plays in learning and teaching is increasingly being recognised in higher education. The practice of giving formative feedback is a key aspect to assessment *for* learning rather than assessment as solely a measurement *of* learning (Ramsden, 2003; Stobart, 2008). However, in systems under pressure from expansion and dwindling resources with pressure to 'maintain standards', formative feedback is often minimal and overshadowed by summative criteria-referenced grades (Gibbs, 2006). The dominant role of criteria-referenced assessment continues to be one of competition and control rather than of motivation and enabling learning to take place (Broadfoot, 1996). But, there is another form of assessment which has received little attention: that of ipsative assessment.

Ipsative assessment compares existing performance with previous performance. Many informal and practical learning experiences are assessed in this way such as sports coaching, music teaching and in computer games. A personal best in athletics is an ipsative

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assessment. By contrast, in much academic learning, where assessment is made in relation to external attainment criteria or rubrics, credit is rarely given for how far the learner has advanced since the previous piece of work.

Learner motivation and persistence in mass higher education have become issues of widespread concern (Tinto, 1994; Yorke, 1999). Learners are motivated both by external rewards such as grades – extrinsic motivation - and by personal development in the subject or discipline - intrinsic motivation- although the extent of intrinsic motivation varies widely (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002). Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) explored how good formative assessment has the potential to shift learners away from the extrinsic motivation associated with summative grades towards intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning. However, commentary by students and assessment experts alike suggests that there is little evidence of a widespread provision of effective feedback (Rust & O'Donovan, 2007). The article begins with a review of some problems with assessment in today's higher education.

The main section of this article will use a model of feedback provided by Hattie & Timperley (2007) to examine how existing criteria-referenced regimes limit the best intentions of those who aim to provide effective formative feedback because formative assessment is always in the shadow of criteria-referenced summative grading. By contrast, ipsative feedback focuses on learner progress rather than a 'performance gap' and I next apply the model to argue that replacing criteria-driven feedback with ipsative feedback might provide a new driver towards encouraging assessment *for* learning.

An ipsative approach could underpin either formative assessment or summative assessment or both. Ipsative feedback informs the learner how s/he has progressed since the previous assessment and how effective response to developmental feedback has been. Likewise an ipsative summative assessment grade would be based on progress towards criteria rather than how far criteria have been met. A fully ipsative regime of assessment would include

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both ipsative feedback and grades, but this might be a radical and currently unrealistic proposal in educational cultures driven by standards and awards. However, including ipsative feedback within an existing criteria-referenced regime might be achievable in the short term, although potentially less effective for lower achievers.

A second possibility is mixing ipsative and criteria-referenced summative assessment in a dual regime. Reducing the amount of externally referenced assessment through combining ipsative and criteria-referenced assessment may motivate lower achievers and offer a partial answer to the problems with reliability and standards in assessment regimes which are under pressures from resource allocation. In a final note of caution, I will acknowledge that for both proposals there are obstacles to be overcome before ipsative assessment can gain widespread acceptance.

Some limitations of criteria-referenced assessment

Criteria-referenced assessment is widely used in higher education but problems in its implementation are well recognised. These include confusion over criteria and standards and disagreement over the purposes of assessment and providing feedback.

Confusion between criteria and standards

Assessment is dominated by criteria and standards and yet and for most forms of assessment it is agreed that criteria and standards are never going to be completely objective (Biggs, 2003). Sadler (2005) argued that there are two reasons for this.

Firstly, terms criteria and standards are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same. Criteria are descriptive whereas standards are judgmental - a high criterion does not make the same sense as a high standard does. This inevitably leads to confusion and inconsistency. Criteria can also be specific to an assessment, either implicitly such as

answering an assignment brief, or explicitly in published criteria, or be generic for a discipline or level of study such as Masters level criteria. Criteria may or may not contain explicit links to standards such as grading levels or marks.

Secondly, and more importantly, marking and grading in most disciplines is inevitably subjective. Even when criteria are explicitly stated, these will always be open to interpretation. In a study where markers were asked to think aloud during the marking process, they did not refer to published criteria except to rationalise decisions (Bloxham, Boyd & Orr, 2009). Standards are also based on the marker's personal expectations and are very subjective: 'excellent' for one marker might be very different for another. In spite of tacit knowledge of standards that markers agree through moderating processes such as double marking, there will inevitably be disagreements over what is a top grade or mark and norm referencing can creep in when a marker reviews the whole set of student work to get a 'feel' for the standard. Moreover, although moderation processes allow tacit knowledge about standards to be shared, learners are not usually a part of this so moderation is not helpful to them.

Confusion over the purposes of feedback

The feedback process is equally problematic. Although there is evidence that students value feedback, feel that they deserve it and sometimes claim to pay it close attention (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002), there is little evidence that feedback is used effectively. Studies from both the UK and Hong Kong suggest that that students and staff are confused about the purpose of feedback often linking it strongly to justification of a grade (Carless 2006; Handley, Price & Millar 2008). Staff claim to write good quality feedback but students disagree. To compound this, many students do not feel that they can approach their teachers to ask for clarification and advice, although this depends on their relationships with their teachers, teacher credibility and their own confidence (Poulos & Mahony, 2008).

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A view of learning as being either passive or actively constructed influences both teachers' and learners' views on feedback. Askew & Lodge (2000) for example, distinguish between viewing feedback as a 'gift' (maybe unwanted) to a passive recipient and a constructivist model which assumes that the learner needs 'drawing out' through a 'ping-pong' of questioning and discussion. Given the range of views on learning from different disciplinary practices, it is not surprising that there is widespread contention and dissatisfaction over the role of feedback.

There has been much literature on how to improve the quality of feedback to learners and thus improve their learning. Sadler (1989) argued that good quality feedback enables learners to understand that there is a performance gap between current performance and the required performance. Several models of good practice in giving feedback which build on both the idea of a performance gap and a constructivist view of feedback as a dialogue between learner and teacher have been proposed with the aim of addressing some of the confusion.

Models of good feedback practice and their application to assessment reform

One well-established model of good feedback practice is from Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) who reviewed literature on feedback which encourages learners to become active self-regulators in an assessment process. They proposed seven principles for effective feedback:

1. Good feedback helps clarify what good performance is
2. Good feedback facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning.
3. Good feedback delivers high quality information to students about their learning.

4. Good feedback encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning

5. Good feedback encourages positive motivational beliefs and self- esteem

6. Good feedback provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance

7. Good feedback provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape teaching.

Underlying these principles is an aim to empower the learners to close the performance gap. However, although such principles are useful for guiding practice, they do not give a detailed breakdown of the different questions feedback seeks to address and nor do they fully distinguish between generic feedback and task specific feedback.

Another useful model for use of feedback to enhance learning is that of Hattie & Timperley (2007). The model is again based on the premise that feedback aims to reduce the discrepancy between performance and a desired goal, but it does provide a stronger analytical tool than a list of principles. They propose that effective feedback answers three questions:

- Feed Up which enables learners to answer questions about goals;
- Feed Back which enables learners to answer questions about where they are now;
- Feed Forward which enables learners to answer questions about where they need to go next.

Each of these types of feedback operates at four levels: the task, the performance processes, self-regulation or self-assessment by the learner and the personal level. Hattie and Timperley provide evidence that while some feedback at the task level is necessary, it is

feedback about learning processes and self-assessment which are most likely to elicit change. Personal feedback, which is usually in the form of praise, has little impact. Their work provides a useful basis for exploring the negative impacts that an obsession with task related criteria and standards has for both the givers and the receivers of feedback and the potential of ipsative feedback to overcome this. I will use the three types of feedback above as a framework for this critique supplemented by some of the ideas which underpin Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick's principles.

Feed Up: students understanding of goals

In a criteria-referenced regime, goals depend on interpretations of criteria and standards. However, there is considerable evidence that there is a mismatch between learners' and teachers' learning goals and Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick argue that learners need help in understanding what the teachers' goals are, in other words transparency about what the standards are, and what criteria are used to judge performance. Good practice in criteria-referenced assessment means having clear assessment criteria and ensuring that students have access to these and understand them. In addition, Sadler (2005) argues that fixed, clear standards should be negotiated and learners need to understand these tacitly agreed standards.

While concurring that learners can benefit from a deeper understanding of both standards and criteria at the self-assessment level, the framing of learning goals in this way is not always helpful for three reasons.

Firstly, for high stakes summative assessment where every grade or mark 'counts', the concern for reliability and consistency is time-consuming for markers and means there is less time for formative feedback. Criteria and standards are written, agreed and made public, internal double or sample marking is used to moderate marking and external examiners

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monitor equivalence across programmes. Yet, effort put into feed up though clarifying standards is at the expense of feedforward. Surveys from the UK, for example, indicate that learners are not wholly satisfied with the usefulness and timeliness of the feedback they receive (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008; Williams & Kane, 2008).This supports Hattie and Timperley's assertion that feed up at the task level – through giving and justifying a grade - is not enough.

Secondly, while providing clarity over learning goals is undeniably helpful, there is an underlying assumption that these learning goals must be external to the learner and this might not always be advantageous. The problem here is that a good performance described by external criteria might be beyond the learner's immediate reach, and simply being clearer about criteria and standards will not necessarily help the learner attain them. Overloading weaker learners with developmental feedback on how to reach distant goals is likely to be de-motivating. In addition, there may be a mismatch between a learner's self-assessment and assessment against external standards. A learner who feels that s/he has progressed, but does not fare well against external criteria and standards might easily become frustrated and de-motivated.

Thirdly, seeking a foolproof and fair system of criteria and standards based assessment takes the focus away from the important question: is the learner making progress against learning goals? Significant ipsative progress may well be obvious through improved grades or through turning failures into passes, but incremental progress is unlikely to show up in a criteria-referenced assessment regime and so goals are largely left to learners to establish for themselves with little or no explicit guidance.

Feed Back: Student understanding of current performance

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A very serious problem with most current assessment regimes is the de-motivating effect they have on many learners who do not perform well. Learners are sometimes categorized as extrinsic or intrinsically motivated but distinguishing the two may not be most helpful. Higgins, Hartley & Skelton (2002) point out that many learners are motivated both extrinsically by grades and intrinsically by a desire to engage with their subject in a deep way. Extrinsically motivated learners inevitably link feedback with getting better grades and thus are motivated by both a grade and developmental feedback. But, I propose that criteria-referenced assessment promotes extrinsic motivation at the expense of deeper learning and can damage self-esteem for the most fragile.

Feedback and de-motivation

The impact of assessment on a learner's sense of self-worth has a significant and often under-recognised influence on motivation. Comments and grades give individuals powerful messages about themselves as learners (Ivanic, Clark & Rimmeshaw 2000; Stobart, 2008), and for many learners assessment produces negative emotions (Falchikov & Boud, 2007). Even when there are attempts to 'sweeten' negative or challenging feedback and results with positive comments, there are indications from some Australian studies that many learners do not act on critical feedback (Crisp, 2007), either because they have focused only on the praise at a personal level, or because they have been overwhelmed by excessive critique (Lizzio & Wilson 2008). Thus, most feedback in relation to fixed criteria and standards - however well intended- does not begin to tackle the damaging effects that occur when learners interpret feedback at a personal level.

However, not all learners are de-motivated by negative feedback nor do they all interpret lack of success at a personal level. Dweck (1999) has undertaken extensive studies on self-theories of intelligence which give insight into learner motivation. She proposes that there are two contrasting theories that individuals can hold and act upon. The first is the entity

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theory in which intelligence is perceived as fixed and the second is the incremental theory where intelligence is viewed as developmental. Entity theorists are goal orientated and tend to act in ways which will make them look good. They see a single failure as evidence of their lack of intelligence and easily give up if faced with difficulty even if they have previously been successful. They become helpless when challenged and tend to avoid 'difficult' subjects like mathematics and science and may shy away from remedial support. By contrast, incremental theorists see learning as more importance than performance goals. They view failure as part of the learning experience and not as evidence of low intelligence. They are mastery-orientated rather than helpless when faced with a challenge, and tend to see failure as an opportunity to learn. For example, Dweck suggests that self-theories of intelligence are gendered in that girls tend to view intelligence as fixed while boys view it as developmental and this might explain why girls aim for high performance at primary school but drop off when faced with more difficulty in secondary school while boys are less interested in performance outcomes, but many will persevere with the tougher subjects at secondary school.

Dweck gives evidence that students can be helped to change their theory through demonstration that entity theories are misguided but this seems unlikely to occur where high stakes summative assessment predominates. Assessment readily perpetuates a myth that ability is innate for entity theorists if feedback is strongly task-outcome orientated and these outcomes are grades in comparison with others. It is easy to interpret critical feedback as evidence for an inability to meet the goals when performance on task is relatively low and the process of learning is under-valued. Nicol & Macfarlane- Dick (2006) also suggest that that low stakes assessment tasks that are formatively assessed and emphasise process are more likely to build self- esteem than high stakes summatively assessed task. But, such a shift from a task outcome onto learning process is inconsistent with a strongly criteria-referenced regime.

Failure and re-submission

I have discussed above how for some learners the gap between performance and expected standards seems unbridgeable. Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that examination regimes often only allow one or limited resubmission so that learners who might benefit from more iterations of learning will hit a wall of failure before reaching the standard required. The transition from school or college to the first year undergraduate level is one that in the UK and Australia can present learners with particular difficulty (Yorke & Longden, 2007). One solution is to provide opportunities for re-submission to allow learners to improve in stages to close performance gaps. Assuming that learners are recruited onto programmes only where they have the potential to reach the standard, and given enough opportunities to resubmit improved work, all learners would be expected to succeed unless there is good reason. The problems on many programmes are firstly, that progress is rarely monitored across the programme as a whole so that resubmission consumes resources but may not improve learning; and secondly, a requirement to meet rather than progress towards assessment criteria means that there will inevitably be some who are de-motivated if they do not immediately succeed as discussed above.

Feed Forward: student understanding of where to go next

The idea that feedback should be developmental –sometimes referred to as feed forward- is not a new. Most learners recognize this. But there are also some problems with providing adequate feedforward in many higher education assessment regimes; when feed forward is task orientated rather than generic, there is little opportunity for dialogue and students do not know whether or not they have used feedforward effectively.

Task orientated feed forward compared to generic feed forward

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Although students are usually interested in marks or grades, they might not be willing to engage with, or act upon, feed forward. This may be because they have been de-motivated by feedback or because developmental feed forward is not useable or it is unclear (Walker, 2009). Disengagement with feedback is compounded by institutional practices such as anonymous marking which prevents learners from building developmental relationships with tutors and modular schemes which mean there is little continuity over feed forward practices.

Significantly, Handley, Price & Millar (2008) reported that students were more likely to act upon feedback if they could see the immediate utility of it, for example, in helping with the next piece of work. But task specific feed forward is only useful if the task is to be repeated in the short term and comments at the task level criteria are not easy to apply to a new piece of work. Walker's (2009) study from the Open University, UK further supports a claim that developmental comments are more useful if they do not solely perform a short-term corrective function. Generic skills development comments at the process level, for example about thinking or writing skills, are more useable: these can be used for other assignments as well as improving on draft work and can always be illustrated by the assignment content. Higgins, Hartley & Skelton (2002) also agree that feedback needs to foster generic critical skills which have long term value.

Opportunity for dialogue

One explanation for students' lack of understanding of feed forward is that most assessment regimes provide little opportunity for dialogue and discussion. One proposed solution is use of more self-assessment and peer assessment. Dialogue is the basis of constructivist learning and Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) suggest that discussion between teacher and learners or between peers about the criteria and standards can be very helpful in enabling learners to become self-regulating and this is one of their key principles.

In a criteria- based assessment regime dialogue about single pieces of work is valuable, but the benefits might be lessened if there is little opportunity for dialogue to continue over a period of time. Dialogue concerning single pieces of work considered in isolation from others is likely to amount to a series of short conversations which do not necessarily link up. In other words the feedback loop does not get closed.

Feedback loops: students do not know if they have acted on feed forward successfully

Under a criteria-referenced regime it is difficult to get a picture of how learners are using feed forward to close the gap between current performance and expected performance because the emphasis is on how far criteria have been met in a final product. For example, learners are sometimes given feed forward on a draft piece of work. But, learners need feedback on their action on the feed forward as part of a feedback-feed forward loop. A study of a Doctor of Education (EdD) modular programme (Hughes and Crawford, 2009) indicated that although feed forward was common for draft pieces of work, feedback on the final submission very rarely closed the feedback loop within module. Continuous feed forward from one module to subsequent modules was also rare.

Criteria-referencing inhibits effective feedforward, because the assessors are encouraged to focus on the task level rather than the process level in an unrelated task assessment scheme (see Fig 1).

FIG 1 HERE

Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) have argued that helping learners with self-feedback is valuable. However, criteria-referencing does not encourage feed forward at the self- level because learners must use assignment specific comments to work out for themselves how successfully they have acted upon feed forward.

How ipsative feedback might begin to address the limitations of criteria-driven assessment regimes

In the growing body of studies on formative feedback in higher education which emphasise the importance of giving learners developmental feedback, there is little or no reference to ipsative feedback. The assumption that feedback will refer mainly to external criteria and standards and not explicitly in relation to a learners' previous performance or progress against criteria is deeply entrenched. However, there are potential benefits of using ipsative formative assessment in helping learners find answers to all three of the Hattie and Timperley's questions on how to best provide feed up, feed back and feed forward through operating at the most effective process and self-awareness levels.

Ipsative Feed Up: students understanding of goals

An alternative to fixed criteria-referenced goals would be to provide learners with achievable ipsative goals and opportunities to demonstrate how they have met these goals. Ipsative goals will be dependant on the learner's performance so far: thus a high performing learner would have different goals from one who is performing at a lower level. That is not to abandon standards-based criteria altogether, but means providing ipsative criteria for each individual which will enable realistic progression towards meeting the overarching criteria and standards for a final product or award. Ipsative feed up thus represents a shift away from product towards process.

Providing each learner with individual goals for each piece of work is clearly not practical, but learners could be encouraged to set their own goals using the feed forward they have received. Good ipsative feed up might then help clarify individual ipsative goals for an improved performance next time at an appropriate, attainable level. Instead of assuming that all learners have the same goals, an assessor could then help learners with the self-

assessment level by encouraging reflection on how well they are meeting self-referential goals in keeping with Hattie and Timperley's model.

While criteria-led goals focus on outcomes, ipsative goals encourage an incremental approach to learning. An ipsative goal signals that learning occurs in stages and that sometimes progress is more important than outcome. This might help students better assess their current performance without some of the negative effects usually associated with criteria-referenced feedback discussed earlier.

Ipsative Feedback: Student understanding of current performance

There is always a tension between the extrinsic institutional requirements for passing the course and learners' intrinsic motivation to develop their own voice to make learning meaningful to them (Barnett, 2007; Mann, 2008). I have suggested above that criteria-dependant feedback does not appear to achieve this and often results in confusion and dissatisfaction from learners. By contrast, ipsative feedback provides information about a learner's current progress since a previous performance rather than what is lacking in a performance gap. The emphasis shifts away from meeting criteria towards formally acknowledging learner development and progress against criteria. Thus, instead of drawing excessive attention to external motivators such as grades, ipsative feedback directly encourages an intrinsic motivation to progress. The motivational effects of ipsative feedback might particularly apply to learners with low self-esteem

Ipsative feedback, motivation and self-esteem

Ipsative feedback predicated on an assumption that learning is developmental and sends a strong message that the incremental theory of learning is possible, even to those with

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negative self-beliefs. Making improvement visible in small steps which are largely self-referential and reducing the possibly negative distraction of comparison with the community of other learners, is especially helpful in providing positive self-assessments by those who do not perform well under a criteria-referenced scheme and might enable learners to make the shift from an entity to an incremental theory of learning and so respond better to criticism and help. Ipsative feedback might also signal to those with a high level of mastery that there is always room for growth.

Ipsative Feed forward: student understanding of where to go next

I have argued that providing ipsative feedback means viewing assessment in a longer term context because ipsative assessment is relational and ipsative feedback cannot be given to one piece of work in isolation from other pieces. This holistic assessment approach has advantages for both ensuring feed forward is useable and for closing feedback loops.

Feed forward as useable: generic rather than task specific

Comparison with a previous performance brings to the fore areas where the learner has progressed and areas where progress is lacking. In an ipsative assessment scheme, summative feedback could be combined with formative feedforward on the learning process for the next assessment. A discussion of progress across several modules or components facilitates feedback on development of generic skills rather than task specific skills- a process which is often lacking in modular programmes.   It could, however, be argued that such an accumulation of generic skills throughout a programme would not be appropriate if many modules have a completely different skill requirement, but this is probably rarely the case in most disciplines

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Thus, to address the problem with the usability of feedback in general, an ipsative approach to feed forward is worthy of consideration. Ipsative feed forward might ensure that comments are useable by encouraging teachers away from a preoccupation with improving content or correcting errors to emphasise the more generic skills that could be improved as part of a prolonged learning process both within modules and across programmes. Such long term perspectives on learning already exist as self-assessment in personal development planning (PDP) schemes and progress reviews, but many of these assume a level of learner autonomy that is problematic (Clegg, 2004). Good quality ipsative feed forward could provide the scaffolding which is often absent from such ipsative assessment schemes.

Closing feedback loops through supporting and encouraging sustained dialogue

Because ipsative feedback focuses on the individual's or cohort's progress over time it invites a continued dialogue. Initiating and maintaining dialogue with tutors and with peers is one of Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick's principles which is difficult to achieve under a criteria-referenced regime where pieces of work are unrelated and marked in isolation and there is little encouragement for tutors to explicitly identify the progress-or lack of progress- a learner has made since the previous piece of work. But if learners respond to ipsative feed forward and then receive feedback on that response a feedback loop can be closed. A dialogue could continue over an extended time within a module or between modules as part of a programme and assessment can become cumulative (see Fig. 2).

FIG 2 HERE

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Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) point out that constructive dialogue may occur between peers as well as between tutor and student and there are some benefits to be had here too. Providing ipsative feed forward necessitates access to a learner's previous work. A tutor might have this but other learners will probably not. However, peers could provide a very valuable role in closing feedback loops through providing dialogue on the interpretation of feed forward and assessing how well another learner has responded to feed forward.

Moving towards ipsative summative assessment

For ipsative feedback to have a full impact it may need to be supported by ipsative grading: that is a summative judgment that reflects the learner's progress rather than outcomes and level of achievement. There are two reasons why such a move to a fully ipsative regime is desirable.

Firstly, grading strongly influences how feedback is given to learners and how learners receive feedback. Transmission is still widely practised in higher education so it is not surprising that assessment feedback is often viewed as purely a means of transmission of information about why certain marks or grades were obtained (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Any feed forward is likely to be instrumental and focus on how to improve the grade in future and without some reform of grading processes these practices seem unlikely to change. By contrast, a summative grade that is determined by learner progress might further encourage assessors to provide feedback on the more generic learning process and feed forward that is strongly grade determined will need to be explicit about individual advancement. Learners too may continue to focus on the extrinsic standards to be achieved rather than developmental feedback if grades are standards-based and may be de-motivated if their efforts are not rewarded.

Secondly, I have argued that an emphasis on learning as development helps learners who have low self-esteem and may produce positive feelings about their learning. But, one consequence criteria-referenced summative assessment is to divide learners into higher and lower achieving sub-groups and developmental and ipsative approaches to assessment are undermined by competition and exclusion (Hughes, 2010). Meanwhile, an ipsative summative assessment which rewards realistic progress and achievement of a personal best rather than achievement of external standards is empowering for all learners. Personal goals mean that anyone has the potential to succeed without the negative distraction of comparison with other learners and/or failure to meet the grade and those who struggle to achieve under criteria-referenced regimes can be rewarded as well as high performers. It

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could be argued that a minority of learners might not progress or even deteriorate and not be empowered, but then we would need to consider whether continuation of study is in the best interests of both learner and institution. Keeping students in the system who are not progressing offers no benefit and, after a few iterations of the cycle, ipsative assessment might identify those who are on an inappropriate course sooner than criteria-referenced assessment.

However, there may be many practical obstacles to a fully ipsative assessment regime. Commonsense would dictate that not all grades for an award bearing programme can be ipsative. At some point a decision will need to be made on whether a learner has reached the external standard for the award. Ipsative grading could not therefore be the only form of summative assessment and externally assured criteria and standards would be also required in perhaps a 'blend' of the two approaches to assessment.

A mixed ipsative and criteria based assessment regime

Formative assessment reform is caught up in a paradox. On the one hand there are assumptions that many learners will not undertake formative activities if these are not fully assessed or are assessed as low stakes. Yet, on the other hand high stakes assessment is pressurising and learners who are judged on a large number summative assessments may not feel they have time for learning development (Irons, 2008).

One solution to an over-emphasis on summative assessment and grading is to combine ipsative grading with criteria-referenced grading. It may be workable to introduce ipsative grading for selected modules or pieces of work in a programme while reserving meeting standards for final or key pieces of work. However, a problem remains that, if ispative grades do not contribute to a final award, then they will be viewed as low stakes and may not be

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taken seriously; yet, if ipsative grades do count, learners may be tempted to start off well below their capability so that they obtain high progress marks. A compromise may be to set ipsative assessment up as a medium stakes assessment. For example, ipsative grades could be formally recorded and include a threshold for progression to the next stage of the course even though they do not count towards a final award.

A medium stakes ipsative assessment could also provides a solution to efficiency and reliability problems in a climate of competition for scarce resources. Ipsative grades would still need moderating and standardising, but when the stakes are medium rather than high, there could be a lighter touch. This could save time in moderating marks and relieve worry for learners about fairness. However, when at some point a standard is needed for an award e.g. for a final piece of work such as a dissertation or examination, and moderation of standards would be important and resources could be directed towards this aim.

Addressing some potential limitations to ipsative feedback and a mixed assessment regime

Any shift toward ipsative assessment will not be easily achieved. One of the main arguments against using ipsative feedback is that it requires much more organisation than conventional feedback because the assessor must have access to previous feedback and possibly previous assignments to make comparisons. However, there are ways of making this easier using technology. For example, if assignments, drafts and feedback are submitted electronically, then they could be stored in one easy to access place such as a virtual learning environment and feedback comments could be selected from electronic menus (Nicol & Milligan, 2006). With guidance, learners could also self-assess or peer-assess how far a draft assignment has been improved.

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With or without technological assistance, providing quality feedback is hard work. Teaching staff in particular are likely to resist ipsative grading on the grounds that it is time-consuming and evaluating learner progress in this way is unfamiliar, although there may be compensation here in terms of reduced time spent on moderation of marks and gaining a greater respect from learners through providing useable feedback. A serious approach to assessment for learning might require rebalancing workloads away from delivery or 'teaching' towards learner support and feedback in line with the models used in distance learning (Thorpe, 2002). Greater use of peer and self-assessment will need to be encouraged.

Another problem with comparison of learner progress across several modules is that modules on a programme might vary widely in the generic skills being developed and so learner progress would not be easy to assess. Also many modules are taught by different people who might not have expertise across the programme and they might find it difficult to make a judgement about learner progress from one module to another. It may therefore make sense to include selected modules in an ipsative scheme. It would be impractical to tailor a progression scheme for every student given the complexity of modular programmes which contain numerous pathways and options. However, learners could provide their own evaluations of long-term progress if there is a personal development scheme in operation. But, if providing high quality ipsative feedback does assist learning and pass rates improve, then a pay-off will be that less time will be needed for managing and marking of resit work.

A mixed assessment regime poses further problems. Learners might be strategic and give less attention to medium stakes assessments which are ipsatively assessed than to those which are criteria-referenced, perhaps by giving just enough input to meet the level for progression. Such practice clearly goes against the spirit of development in learning and it is expected that most learners will want to aim for positive ipsative feedback as a route to realising their potential. Quality managers with concerns about academic standards will also

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need convincing that there is sufficient standard-based assessment in the programme to enable a decision to be made about the award. There is also the possibility of learner resistance to ipsative grading through a persistent desire to compare performance with others arising from years of exposure to this practice. Research on learner responses to ipsative assessment will be required before the full implementation of any such scheme.

Finally, changes in educational policy and practice are slow: Black and Wiliam's (2003) work on integrating formative assessment into school teaching suggests that it takes a decade and much publicity and effort for a research-informed new approach to gain widespread acceptance. Any new assessment regime would need to be introduced very carefully. Nevertheless, the potential of ipsative grading to address some of the big issues in higher education such as motivation for those who will never obtain the highest grades and the potential benefits in terms of learner engagement and persistence might be compensation enough for the effort required for change. Again research will be needed to evaluate any longer term benefits of changes in assessment regimes.

Conclusion

The summative grade retains a privileged position in relation to the development aspect of assessment and I have drawn on Hattie and Timberley's model to suggest that the worthy intention of feedback practice which aims to promote learning is continually undermined by criteria-referenced assessment methods. Goals may be unrealistic, feedback on current performance is too often de-motivating and developmental feedback or feed forward is discontinuous. I have argued that ipsative feedback has the potential to enable learners to have a self-investment in achievable goals, to become more intrinsically motivated through focusing on longer term development and to raise self-esteem and ultimately performance. An ipsative approach also might encourage teachers to provide useable and high quality

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generic formative feedback. Introducing ipsative feedback is thus a realistic first step towards challenging the current stranglehold that published criteria and standards have on assessment.

Although criteria-referenced grading perpetuates extrinsic motivation and de-motivates those who do not achieve highly, measurements and standards are needed for awards. Combining ipsative and criteria-referenced assessment is a possible next step for devising assessment regimes in higher education which benefit the full diversity of learners. Although ipsative assessment is labour intensive, using medium stakes ipsative assessment means that there are efficiency gains in the moderation and marking process which could provide adequate compensation. Technological innovation may produce further gains.

This article has presented a radical view of assessment which is as yet untried and untested. It has aimed to provide a convincing case that ipsative assessment is worth investigating further. The outcomes of an assessment regime where an important aim is attaining a personal best as well as a comparative standard may be very different from the ones predicted here, but what is more certain is that current criteria-referenced and standards-based assessment is no longer fit for purpose in mass higher education.

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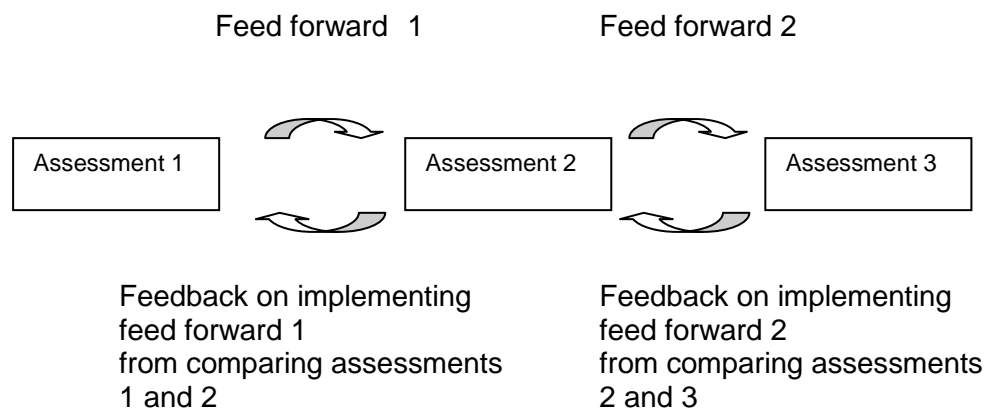
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Fig 1. Feed forward for 3 unrelated sequential assessments

Feed forward 1   Feed forward 2

| Assessment 1 | | Assessment 2 | | Assessment 3 |
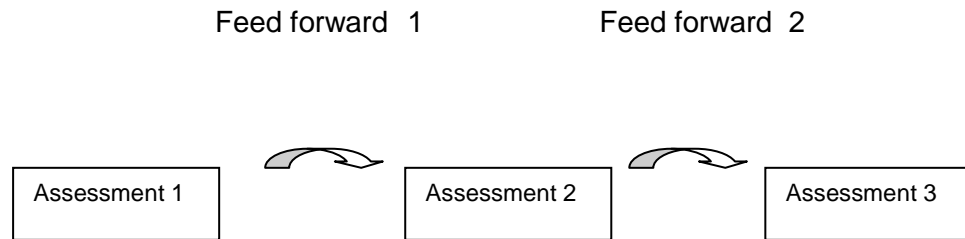
Feed forward 1 and 2 are unconnected and progress-or lack of progress- in acting upon feed forward 1 is unlikely to be followed up in feed forward 2

Fig. 2 Ipsative cumulative scheme for 3 sequential assessments

Feed forward 1   Feed forward 2

| Assessment 1 | | Assessment 2 | | Assessment 3 |

Feedback on implementing   Feedback on implementing
feed forward 1   feed forward 2
from comparing assessments   from comparing assessments
1 and 2   2 and 3

Feed forward 2 can then build on feed forward 1 if remedial action has not been completed