

What is the Place of Assessment for Postgraduate Coursework Students?

Nicola Parker

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Nicola.Parker@uts.edu.au

Postgraduate coursework students make up a significant proportion of students in universities today and make major contributions to institutional budgets. However, they remain an under-researched cohort of students, whose specific experiences of assessment have had scant consideration. Individually completed essays or reports have been commonplace in postgraduate courses. This showcase session argues that more attention needs to be paid to the place of assessment for postgraduates and particularly to the affective dimensions (Boud 2007) of their experiences of assessment. The role of affect in assessment although recognised, has usually emphasised negative emotions: anxiety, uncertainty and challenges (Parker 2006). A small-scale qualitative study of postgraduates' experiences of assessment has revealed the undeniable centrality of the affective dimensions of postgraduates' experiences of assessment through an intensive, extended process of audio analysis of longitudinal interviews. Transcripts were also used to capture the context and audible emotional responses (Damasio 2004) on audiotapes. This provided evidence of the place of assessment and affect in their experiences, where they utilised a variety of strategies to successfully balance control and inspiration enabling them to move through the process of preparing a report for assessment. The postgraduates' negotiation of the complexities of this assessment task moderated and influenced a range of feelings, moods and 'emotional strategies' that carried them through the task and formed a space for learning in the process of assessment product (assignment) creation. Additional tools and approaches need to be developed to help us recognise affect as a driver for learning and the role of emotions in assessment for postgraduate students.