Title: An educational development strategy for assessment using evidence-based, discipline-specific case studies

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Abstract

This paper presentation outlines an evidence-based educational development strategy for assessment, an important element of higher education. The strategy uses institutional data on students' learning experience to collaboratively develop case studies of individual academics' good assessment practice. Audience input will be sought on using the case studies in ways other than in formal programs.

Introduction

Assessment is arguably the most important element of university education for staff and students (Campbell, 2013; Joughin, 2010). It is important because it both promotes and reports student learning (Deneen & Boud, 2013). As Bloxham and Boyd (2007) claim, "assessment strongly influences students' learning, including what they study, when they study, how much work they do and the approach they take to their [study]" (p. 29). Good assessment practice promotes students' achievement of teachers' desired or intended learning outcomes for students, and provides clear evidence of students' achievement of these outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

An important question for educational developers is therefore, "How can educational developers intervene within and/or across discipline contexts to help staff to enhance their assessment practice?". This paper focuses on working toward an answer to this question, by reporting a small-scale study of an evidence-based strategy for helping staff learn about good assessment practice. The strategy uses short case studies or instructive examples of good assessment practice, from a variety of discipline contexts, at a major research-intensive Australian university.

Case studies are used widely in teaching and learning in higher education to illustrate practice, generate discussion and develop critical thinking (Cox, 2009). Published compilations of case studies about university teaching practice include a series of cases about problem situations (e.g., dealing with a student complaint) (Schwartz & Webb, 1993), and a set of cases of 'good practices' in assessment drawn from national and international 'networks' (O'Neill, Huntley-Moore & Race, 2007).

Many universities have also published case studies of teaching practice on their websites in a variety of areas, including online teaching (Deakin University, 2014); assessment and feedback (Newcastle University, 2014; University of Glasgow, 2014); and peer and/or self assessment (Griffith University, 2014). However it is not clear whether some case studies are chosen over others to be published, and if so, whether they are adjudged 'good' in relation to specified criteria and standards.

At the University of Wollongong staff are invited to submit case studies of their successful practice in any area (University of Wollongong, 2014). Cases are reviewed by an "Excellence, Diversity and Innovation in Teaching Subcommittee" against criteria that include match with the university's strategic goals in teaching and learning, and level of innovation and sustainability of the case. Overall, a common aim of approaches to compiling and/or publishing case studies is to prompt staff who read them to reflect on their practice (O'Neill et al., 2007; Schwartz & Webb, 1993; University of Wollongong, 2014).

The case study strategy reported in this paper builds on these approaches by developing examples of real practice from local discipline contexts, with the main purpose of making the cases as relevant as possible to support staff in their learning. The strategy also extends previous approaches by identifying and selecting examples of good assessment practice using a set of transparent, evidence-based criteria and standards.

The case study strategy draws on clear theoretical frameworks: it is framed by a constructivist approach and based on explicit assumptions about how people learn. The fundamental assumption of a constructivist approach is that knowledge and skill is created from within individuals in interrelation with the world (e.g., Hendry, 1996). In the context of the strategy described in this paper, this world consists mainly of the social world of case study texts that communicate teachers' exemplary practice. The strategy is also based on a fundamental assumption in Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura 1989, 1997), which is that people can strengthen their belief in their capacity to do something by vicariously observing others' successful performance (this is called observational learning or *modeling*). The theoretical prediction behind the case study strategy therefore is that staff can create new knowledge and beliefs to enhance their assessment practice, through interrelation with (reading and discussing) written cases of others' successful assessment practice.

Method
There are four steps in the case study strategy. Each step is explained below, and then methods of analysis used in the study of each step are described.

Steps in the case study strategy
Step 1. The first step in the strategy involves consulting a student evaluation of teaching database system at the University of Sydney, called the Unit of Study Evaluation (USE) system (Barrie, Ginns & Prosser, 2005), to identify good assessment practice across faculties at the University. USE data is collected using a standardised survey that focuses on the *quality of students' learning experience* in the unit of study (unit) or subject in question.

The data available includes the name of the unit coordinator (the staff member responsible for running the unit, and usually the person who also teaches the unit); the unit code that signifies the subject area and course year level of the unit; number of students enrolled in the unit; percentage of students who responded to the survey; and students' percentage and mean ratings on a standard set of eight items and up to four faculty-designated items. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale anchored 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neutral', 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. The USE survey also has provision for students' open comments, however this data is only available to the unit coordinator. The survey includes one standard item on assessment. Results for this item (item five), "The assessment in this unit of study allowed me to demonstrate what I had understood" and the final standard item (item twelve),

"Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this unit of study", were used to identify units with potentially good assessment practice across three years: 2011, 2012 and 2013. Where faculty-designated items included an item on the quality of feedback to students, results for this item were also consulted.

Initial searches of the system for units with potentially good assessment practice used standards of 90% agreement ('agree' plus 'strongly agree') or more for items five and twelve, and a response rate of 50% or more. However this approach proved to be too restrictive, and subsequently a standard of 85% agreement or more for item five and 80% agreement or more for item twelve was adopted. Eventually response rates of less than 50% were also accepted for some units included as case studies.

As a final check, each case study was also mapped against the University's assessment policy principles. The assessment policy was updated in 2011 to reflect the increasing trend within higher education toward student-focussed teaching and learning. Without exception, all case studies to date instantiate or can be seen to implement the following five key principles from the assessment policy:

1. A variety of assessment tasks are used
2. Assessment tasks reflect increasing levels of complexity
3. Constructive, timely and respectful feedback guides the development of future student work
4. Assessment tasks are authentic and appropriate to the disciplinary and/or professional context
5. Assessment will be evaluated solely on the basis of students' achievement against criteria and standards specified to align with learning outcomes

At the time of writing, 32 cases have been written and posted on the University's website, which can be accessed here: http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/assessmentresources/case_studies.htm

Step 2. Once a unit has been identified based on data from the USE system, the second step in the strategy involves extending an invitation via email to the unit coordinator to participate in a semi-structured individual interview about their assessment practice. Often, coordinators express surprise and/or delight, or feel 'honoured' at being contacted. The interview usually lasts between 20 and 30 minutes and is structured around the following three questions:

1. Why do you think you got the USE item five result that you did (in semester #, Year)?
2. How do you communicate your assessment criteria and standards to your students?
3. How manageable is your assessment and feedback workload?

The interview is digitally audio recorded and transcribed. The educational developer then constructs a case study based on the interview transcript. Each case study includes quotes from the interview and up to three sample student open comments (that are chosen by the unit coordinator), usually from the unit USE survey. A draft of the case study is sent to the unit coordinator for editing and approval before the final version is posted on the University website.

Step 3. Since being posted on the University website for access by staff, the case studies have been promoted twice through a monthly online news 'bulletin' about teaching and learning at the University, which is sent to a mailing list of over 1900 staff.

Step 4. The final step in the strategy is to use the case studies as learning resources in an introductory, two-day program on university teaching and learning for staff new to teaching and/or the University of Sydney. This program is run three times a year in February, July and October. During a 90-minute session in the program entitled, 'Assessment at Sydney' participants are asked to work with their neighbour(s) and use their personal devices (e.g., tablets) to choose and read one (or more) case studies relevant to their discipline area(s). This activity has been implemented twice at the time of writing, in the October 2013 and February 2014 programs. In the October 2013 program, participants were asked simply to read one (or more) case studies and evaluate whether they implemented the University's assessment principles. In the February 2014 program, participants were asked to read one (or more) case studies, and then post their answers to the following question using the audience response tool, *Socrative*: "From a case study that you have chosen, which aspect of assessment would you like to try in your own teaching? (you may need to adapt an aspect to suit your context)". Participants could see their peers' responses as they appeared on the big screen in the room.

Methods of analysis for each step
To provide a quantitative overview of the case studies, the range of case studies across faculties and course year levels, and range in word length of the case studies, were calculated.

To gauge the level of online access to the case studies by staff across the University, daily unique 'hits' or pageviews were calculated since the studies first began to be posted on the website in June 2013.

To explore the credibility and instructive quality of the case studies in greater depth, the final versions (not the original transcripts) were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) by the author for qualities or 'themes' of good assessment practice. Quotes were selected from the case studies to illustrate each theme. Two days after completion of the February 2014 introductory program on university teaching, participants were also sent an online survey about the usefulness for their learning of reading the assessment case studies, and answering the question (in *Socrative*) about what aspect of a case study they would like to try in their own teaching. Participants' open comments on this survey, and their responses using *Socrative* were also analysed for common categories or themes.

Findings
Analysis of the range of case studies
Table 1 lists the faculties at the University of Sydney and number of case studies from each faculty and course year level. Case studies range in word length from a minimum of 387 to a maximum of 856 words, with an average word length of 495 words.

Analysis of unique page views
Figure 1 shows the number of daily unique pageviews of the case studies web page on the University's website between June 2013 and March 2014. The greatest number of pageviews occurred on the same days that (1) an item advertising the case studies in a University online news bulletin about teaching and learning was published, and (2) staff participated in the assessment session case study activity in the University's introductory program on university teaching and learning. At other times during the period, there is little or no access to the case studies by staff.

Faculty		Undergraduate				Post-graduate
		Year 1	**Year 2**	**Year 3**	**Year 4**	
Agriculture and Environment	1			1		
Architecture, Design and Planning	2	1	1			
Arts and Social Sciences	4		4			
Business (Business School)	2		1			1
Dentistry	1		1			
Education and Social Work	2	2				
Engineering and Information Technologies	2	1	1			
Health Sciences	2	2				
Law (Sydney Law School)	2					2
Medicine (Sydney Medical School)	2					2
Nursing and Midwifery (Sydney Nursing School)	2	2				
Pharmacy	1				1	
Science	3	1	1	1		
Sydney College of the Arts	2		2			
Sydney Conservatorium of Music	2	2				
Veterinary Science	2			2		
Total	**32**	**11**	**11**	**4**	**1**	**5**

Table 1. Number of case studies of good assessment practice from each faculty and course year level at the University of Sydney.
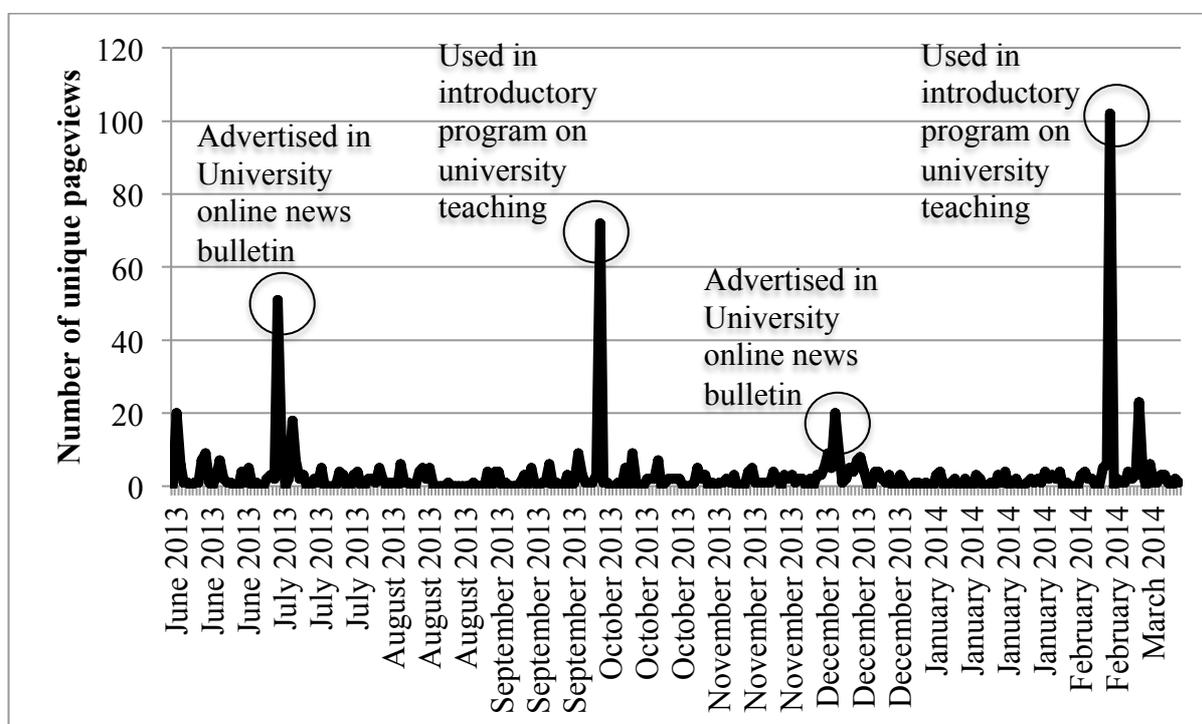

Figure 1. Number of unique pageviews of the case studies web page for the period June 2013 to March 2014, showing when the cases were advertised in a news bulletin and used in an introductory program on university teaching.

Analysis of themes in the case studies
From the thematic analysis of the case studies, a total of five sub-themes plus two overall themes of good assessment practice were identified. Most case studies featured all sub-themes, and all case studies were characterised by the overall themes of *integration* and *assessment as support for learning*.

Relevance
The most common sub-theme to emerge was relevance. In the views of most unit coordinators, students value assessment because it is relevant to their future careers. Students in health professional courses in particular value assessment that they perceive as focusing on knowledge and skills that they will need for future safe practice, e.g., in pharmaceutical, dental or veterinary practice. In other courses students value assessment because it is relevant to practice in a discipline; the unit assessment tasks are *realistic in disciplinary terms*. For example, students perceive relevant assessment as being about designing a realistic experiment in Biology; analysing a debate between real historians in History; or analysing the methods of real ethnographers in Anthropology. As one coordinator commented:

> *"We make it very, very clear [at] … every opportunity that what we are teaching them, and what we are assessing them [on], are absolutely relevant to them … we don't assess them on anything that's just for the sake of it".*

Related to relevance but less common was *choice* in assessment. Some coordinators thought that students valued and were motivated by assessment in which students could choose from a range of topics or negotiate their own topic. This made the task more relevant to students. For example, students value being able to choose a realistic civil problem to solve in Engineering or argument to analyse in Law; or a real artist's work to review in Visual Art.

Alignment
Unit coordinators also thought that students value assessment because they perceive it as being connected or 'aligned' with instruction, which includes delivery of content (e.g., in lectures) as well as in-class learning activities (in which students are often able to practice skills they will be assessed on). As one coordinator commented:

> *"The same artists that I build into the assessment task are reflected in the [seminars] that I give".*

Coordinators also thought that students value assessment because they perceive it as being consistent or aligned with learning outcomes, which teachers take time to explain and discuss during instruction.

Phased design
Another common sub-theme was *phased*, cumulative design; unit coordinators thought that students value assessment in which the next task links to and builds on the previous task (in terms of discipline content, and students' learning). Each assessment task is a phase or stage in the overall assessment design, and students' experience in previous tasks prepares them for a genuine attempt at the next task. Tasks increase in complexity over the duration of the unit. As one coordinator commented:

> *"I see assessment ... very much as a progression: it is about giving the students the building blocks to try and engage more deeply with the subject matter, from the first assignment through the essay and then to the exam".*

Integration of feedback

Linked to phased design, another sub-theme was integration of feedback; unit coordinators thought that students value the assessment (and their learning experience) because they receive feedback on previous tasks that they can use in their next task. In some discipline contexts (e.g., Music) the assessment is phased and relatively continuous, with students completing a short task, and receiving timely feedback that they can learn from to succeed in the next task. As one coordinator commented:

> *"With the first assessment [feedback] it's just ... have they got an idea of what they're doing, and then [I give] them some tips, and they go back and do some more work and the next assessment builds on it".*

Clarity of expected standards

Another sub-theme was that unit coordinators focused on making the assessment tasks and the standards of work that they expected for these tasks, clear to students. Teachers did this in a variety of ways, including providing explicit instructions for each task; providing clear written descriptions (e.g., in unit outlines) of task criteria and standards and/or explaining these to students at the beginning of the unit; sharing their marking rubrics with students; discussing criteria and standards for each task throughout the duration of the unit (e.g., in tutorials) (and usually in relation to discipline content and learning outcomes); and providing their feedback using marking rubrics. Some teachers also used model solutions or assignments, and exemplars of students' work to illustrate the standards of work that they expected.

Overall

An overall theme of *integration* characterises the case studies: the assessment tasks are integrated with each other and with instruction; and instruction and teachers' discussion of learning outcomes and assessment criteria and standards, and feedback, are all integrated with each other and the assessment. The unit is characterised by consistency between all these elements. Each case study is also characterised by teachers' view that assessment is not just about a way of judging the quality of students learning, it is also a way of supporting and engaging students *in that learning*. As one coordinator commented:

> *"Everything is cumulative [and] progressive and each assessment is designed to help primarily with the next learning task. So it's not at all the idea of 'now I have to assess whether you know this and test your knowledge on this'".*

The cases contain a range of different types of (mostly written) assessment tasks, including online postings, assignments, quizzes and tests, reports, proposals, essays, presentations, resources and guides, projects, and final exams.

In terms of workload and sustainable practice, almost all unit coordinators thought that their assessment and, in particular feedback workload was manageable, although some also acknowledged it was high. Reasons why they thought it was manageable included their practice of giving whole-class, in place of individual, feedback at different times during the unit; using combinations of standardised and personalised comments in individual feedback,

in particular by using online rubrics; providing explicit instructions to students for completing assessment tasks; and team-teaching with casual tutors. In the cases where coordinators acknowledged their workload was high and were concerned about sustainability, this was because they were transitioning from smaller to larger classes and were yet to adapt their strategies (e.g., by using online rubrics or by seeking assistance from casual tutoring staff). To manage their workload, some coordinators also used tests with automated feedback systems, and readers can find out more about one type of system used in Science here: http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/synergy/30/index.html?pageNumber=60

Analysis of case study activity
Of 81 participants in the February introductory program on university teaching, 16 responded to the online survey about the usefulness of the case study activity, which is a response rate of 20%. Of these participants, almost all (94%) found the case studies 'interesting' and useful for their learning. As some participants commented:

> *"It was interesting to see what is being done in other units of study because it made you critically evaluate what you currently use".*

> *"I liked that the case studies of the other unit teachers were shared. I found that this really opened my eyes as to how many different things there are available out there, and what I could potentially use in my own classes".*

> *"[The case studies] are practical and something you would come across in a real life situation. They also boost your knowledge on how to do your own assessments of your students and come up with what works for particular groups."*

> *"The case studies provided were all extremely useful. It was great to see a range of activities from various disciplines which has given me lots of ideas for my own teaching."*

One person also thought it was useful to use *Socrative* to read "the responses of the other people in the room [because I] … picked up other things [other people] had read and discussed". One person did not find the case studies useful, because they "didn't find the tactics listed in the case studies (at least the ones in disciplines that were most relevant to my own) to be very innovative or new".

During the case study activity there were 36 responses to the question (in *Socrative*) about what aspects of cases participants would like to try in their own teaching. Of these, more than half the responses (58%) referred to trying a new type of assessment task, e.g., "case study interpretations and presentations"; "group project"; "analyse a debate". Several responses (19%) referred to using feedback to support students' learning, in particular by giving them quizzes with quick or automated feedback. Other responses (17%) included making assessment task standards clearer to students, e.g., through using rubrics. Only a few participants (17%) mentioned they would like to try to make their assessment more relevant, aligned or phased. For example, one person commented on their interest in phased design and integration of feedback:

> *"From the assessment reviewed, the aspect I liked was how there were [three] assessments all related to same activity. The first one was a learning and skill*

base, which the students were given feedback [on], which they then would use to help them in assessment two which had a reflective aspect included. The feedback from assessment [two] then was used in final assessment [three], which was really the final work of one and two. Templates and forms were used which made it user friendly for teachers and first year students."

Discussion

Assessment is central to teaching and learning in higher education. In this small-scale study, an evidence-based strategy for helping staff to learn about good assessment practice from case studies has been outlined and analysed. The evidence base for the strategy relies largely on data from just two items on an institution-wide student evaluation of teaching survey that focuses on students' experience of learning in a unit or subject. The case studies are drawn from a wide range of disciplines and illustrate good assessment practice at a local level. Good assessment practice includes five main features: relevance; alignment; phased design; integration of feedback; and clarity of expected standards. Overall, good practice is characterised by integration of instruction, assessment and feedback, and by teachers' views of assessment as support for learning. As one coordinator commented, "[a focus on a] final exam does not teach a student. [It] does not help with their learning. So that's why I try to balance [phase] my assessments".

The features of good assessment practice identified in the cases correspond well with the qualities of good assessment found in the literature on higher education. For example, relevance corresponds with 'authenticity' of assessment as defined by Kember and McNaught (2007) in their study of award-winning teachers' practice: "in a professional programme a significant part of the assessment should relate closely to the eventual professional role. For a pure discipline, assessment should closely replicate the practice of the discipline" (p. 116). Alignment instantiates Biggs and Tang's (2007) widely accepted principle of 'constructive alignment', defined as "a marriage between a constructivist understanding of the nature of learning and an aligned design for teaching" (p. 54). Phased design and integrated feedback correspond to Brown and Knight's (2004) concept of *staged* assessment, in which students are provided with "small, simple, early tasks together with progressively more difficult ones … which [are] assessed *as a whole* at the end of a semester, but parts of which have been assessed at staged intervals" (p. 148). Clarity of standards equates to a key dimension of effective university teaching, which is making learning goals and standards clear to students (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010; Petty, 2009; Ramsden, 2003). Finally, the characterisation of assessment across the cases as support for learning is exactly what is meant by 'learning-oriented assessment' (Carless, Joughin & Liu, 2006) and the more familiar term 'assessment for learning' (e.g., Sambell, McDowell & Montgomery, 2013).

The features of good assessment practice in the case studies apply irrespective of the types of assessment tasks used, course year level, and discipline or professional teaching context. It is also noteworthy that all the units in the case studies instantiate the same key principles in the University's assessment policy.

Integration is perhaps the most powerful characteristic of good assessment practice. Bloxham and Boyd (2007) argue that assessment has conflicting purposes. However when assessment is fully integrated, as it in most of the cases in this study, then there is no conflict. Good assessment practice embraces different purposes. It is like a reversible figure (e.g., the famous

Rubin vase, shown in Figure 2): the same practice (the 'figure') is both support for learning and a report of learning, depending on how it is perceived.
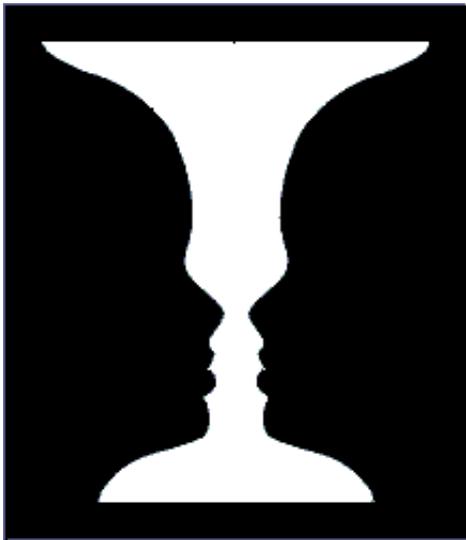

Figure 2. The Rubin vase (can be perceived as either two heads facing each other or a vase).

Practical implications

The results of this small-scale study of the case-based educational development strategy suggest several practical implications for how educational developers can intervene to help staff enhance their assessment practice.

The case studies are short (around one page long), can be easily read, and generate ample discussion between staff in a formal program on university teaching. The cases are credible to staff because they are based on evidence about students' learning experience. Staff in the two-day program were interested in the cases, and were prompted to reflect on their assessment practice and think about trying something new in their practice. The major new aspect of practice that staff wanted to try was limited to using new types of assessment tasks. Few staff wanted to try enhancing the relevance, alignment, phased design, and integration of feedback and/or clarity of expected standards in their practice. This may be because many staff in the program were new to teaching, and so were taking their first steps in developing their assessment practice, involving simply choosing practical and appropriate tasks. It may also be unrealistic to expect staff to plan to develop their practice in substantial ways from just a single experience of engaging in a case-based activity that ran for about 30 minutes. Phased design and integrated feedback may be sophisticated, or even 'threshold' concepts that require substantially more time for staff to understand and apply.

A future improvement in the educational development strategy could involve staff in a second learning activity in which they discuss and choose one of the features of good practice (e.g., clarity of expected standards), and plan an improvement in their practice in relation to this feature. In Bandura's social cognitive theory, the most significant way that people strengthen their *self efficacy* or belief in their capability to complete a task in a particular area is through mastery experiences, or repeated successful performances (termed *enactive mastery*) (Bandura, 1989). Future uses of the case studies as learning resources could also involve supporting staff in implementing their plans for improving their assessment practice, experiencing success in their practice, and reflecting on that success to begin a new cycle of enactive mastery. Yearlong, practice-based postgraduate award courses in university teaching

can provide a supportive environment for staff to experience enactive mastery. There is already good evidence that staff who complete postgraduate courses in university teaching are significantly more likely to report using effective assessment practices (Norton, Norton & Shannon, 2013).

There was no support in this small-scale study for the effectiveness of the strategy of simply making case studies available to staff on a website. Unless staff are prompted to engage with case studies via a direct email or newsletter, or are directed to them as part of a learning activity in a formal program or session, then they do not access the cases. Using the cases as part of a learning activity in a program led to the highest number of pageviews. The routine practice in higher education of posting cases of teaching practice (whether adjudged good or not) on university websites for staff to view in their own time is probably a wasted effort.

The strategy of using case studies as learning resources in formal programs on university teaching offers greater promise. The results of this small-scale study provide qualified support for an educational development strategy for assessment that uses evidence-based, discipline-specific case studies of successful practice to help staff from all disciplines to enhance their practice.

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