

# REFLECTIONS ON DAVID BOUD'S KEYNOTE

## "A AVALIAÇÃO DAS APRENDIZAGENS NO ENSINO A DISTÂNCIA"

- Diogo Casanova<sup>4</sup>

David Boud is one of the most influential researchers in Education focusing his research on Educational Assessment, particularly in Higher Education. In his research, he advocates Assessment for Learning (Boud, 1995), an approach to assessment that places feedback as a centrepiece of the student learning experience.

Boud starts his presentation with a reflection on the impact that the Covid19 pandemic had on learning and teaching. He clarifies that what students and staff experienced with online learning was, in fact, emergency remote teaching practices (Hodges et al., 2020); notwithstanding, Boud concludes that it was a good opportunity for moving away from the time-limited closed book examination that still dominates Higher Education, replacing it with more diversified, creative and authentic modes of assessment.

Boud then introduces what, in his view, is the main problem of assessment. For him, assessment needs to satisfy many purposes but does not meet any of them well. For example, seldomly assessments represent the kind of tasks students will be doing after graduation, i.e., the dependency of using exams to assess students creates an

environment whereby students will be doing tasks that only are done in educational settings and not when they start working or are integrated into society. Equally, knowledge-based outcomes are overestimated and overassessed at the expense of other outcomes that tend to be underassessed (skills, values, or attitudes). Boud, does not find any significant difference between assessments done face-to-face and at a distance mode and therefore what he discusses is both valid for traditional face-to-face learning and for distance learning.

According to Boud, assessments give a message to students about what we value as teachers. When we use knowledge-based assessments we are encouraging rote learning and strategic approaches to pass an assessment (Boud, 1995) and we are discouraging deep learning. Accidentally, this type of approach leads to distributing learning time very poorly during the semester. Before the exam, students' activity goes up and after the exam, it goes down. It also overemphasis some skills (handwriting or memorization) at the expense of other skills such as verbal communication or presentation skills. Finally, it distracts from the focus of studying and learning to a focus on marks and grades.

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After setting the scene about the main problems of assessment in Higher Education, Boud organised his presentation into three main themes: (i) assessment to assure outcomes; (ii) assessment

that enables learning and (iii) assessment that develops student capacity to develop judgements about their own work.

## ASSESSMENT TO ASSURE OUTCOMES

Outcomes represent academic standards in terms of what students should be able to do after a curricular unit (CU) or a programme. If we state them, we should be able to assure they were achieved by the student as employers, regulators and professional bodies will expect it. If a learning outcome, in a Medicine programme, is that the student should be able to recognise if a patient is in a life-threatening or serious condition and therefore requires critical care, as a higher education institution, we must ensure that we assess whether the student achieved that learning outcome because, if the student did not achieve it, then it may be responsible for a patient dying. That is, we should be able to develop assessments that are transparent and that state which learning outcome they are assessing and those will be acting as standards. That means that students must pass each standard. This implies that when we mark, we both should be assessing the standards and the level by which those standards are achieved. Boud argues that we should be moving away from non-referenced assessment and/or marking based on the average of standards, i.e., assessing more than one standard and grading based on the average of a multitude of standards. You either achieve a specific learning outcome or you do not.

Boud then moves to discuss students' perceptions of assessment, particularly when they are enrolled in more theoretical programmes. Many students perceived traditional assessment tasks as arbitrary and non-relevant; it is an artificial exercise that is not meaningful to them. They are only aimed at learning for that specific assessment, with no intention of retaining the knowledge for the long term (Struyven et al., 2008). Program-level outcomes are often ignored at the expense of subject matter outcomes, particularly as teachers tend to look at their CU as silos with few links to other CU and the wider programme. Equally, there is a gap between the work done as part of the profession and the assessments elaborated during the degree. Boud refers to authentic assessment, an approach to assessment in HE that is both highly appreciated by students (Struyven et al., 2008) and highly effective and engaging (Gulikers et al., 2004; Pereira et al., 2013). In arguing in favour of authentic assessment, Boud says that authentic assessment: (i) brings realism (linked with everyday life and work); (ii) is contextualised (knowledge can be applied analytically and thoughtfully in a context); (iii) addresses real problems; and (iv) assessment tasks have a purpose beyond the exercise itself. Boud concludes that we need to change our testing systems so that our assessments are more realistic.

## ENABLES STUDENTS TO USE THE INFORMATION AID THEIR LEARNING NOW (FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT)

When introducing this theme, Boud refers that the literature, over the last decades, suggests a change in the feedback paradigm from feedback that teachers do, to a learning-centric view whereby students receive information from others and act upon them to improve their work. Importantly, Boud makes an ambiguous reference to others to include, in this rationale, both the teacher and the fellow students, but also other members of the academic community or even from within the society. It is therefore important that assessment goes beyond the classroom walls.

When referring to feedback, Boud makes the case for feedback not to be understood only as an input or information but as a process; it is a process where students make sense of the information about their performance and act upon it to improve their work or their learning strategy. Unless students can demonstrate what they learned from the feedback received, the feedback process is not completed. Hence, one of the strategies we can do at the start of the semester is to allow students to do an assessment task at the beginning of the semester, get their feedback and then have the opportunity of using it at the end of the semester. Feedback should be designed so that it impacts the student learning rather than basing the quality of the feedback delivered on the quality of the comment itself. If it is not understood and acted upon, then it does not have a pedagogical value. Boud then explains the difference between the marking exercise and giving feedback to students.

According to him, there is often confusion between marks justification (including grades) and the feedback process. Whilst marks justification is backward-looking, we are marking students in what they did, feedback is forward-looking, i.e., students get comments to improve the quality of their future work. Students usually get the former and not the latter (Winstone & Boud, 2022). Boud concludes that feedback is one of the only ways where teaching is tailored to the needs of the students. In most of the things we do in teaching we treat the students equally; however, we know that students are different from each other and have different needs.

According to Boud, because now all assessments are electronically submitted, students can store their feedback and reuse it throughout their programme of study. That means that they can use the feedback collected to their advantage creating their learning strategies and becoming more self-aware of how they can improve the quality of their work. This topic is also discussed by Casanova et al. (2021) and Winstone et al. (2019).

Finally, another advantage of electronically submitted assessments is that teachers can use other formats of feedback, such as audio and video feedback. They are easier to do, save time, create a better response from students and students get better quality of information.



## BUILDS STUDENTS CAPACITY TO JUDGE THEIR OWN LEARNING

To use feedback appropriately, students need to have the literacy to understand the feedback and how to use it. As a final theme, Boud discusses the value of feedback literacy, defining it as the “understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work and learning strategies” (Carless & Boud, 2018). For the authors, the key features of feedback literacy are: appreciating feedback; making individual judgments about the piece of assessment; managing emotionally the feedback received; and taking action. According to Boud, though the responsibility of acting on the

feedback received is that of the student, teachers need to develop means by which, throughout the programme of study, students can develop such lifelong learning skills. Students should be the first to be able to judge the quality of their work. To develop their skills they may be able to compare against standards or others’ work, understand notions of quality and make comparisons. Boud concludes by saying that if students cannot judge the quality of their work how will they learn effectively? How can they practise effectively? And how can they work effectively with each other?

## REFLECTIONS ON BOUD’S KEYONE AND THE IMPACT FOR PORTUGUESE HIGHER EDUCATION

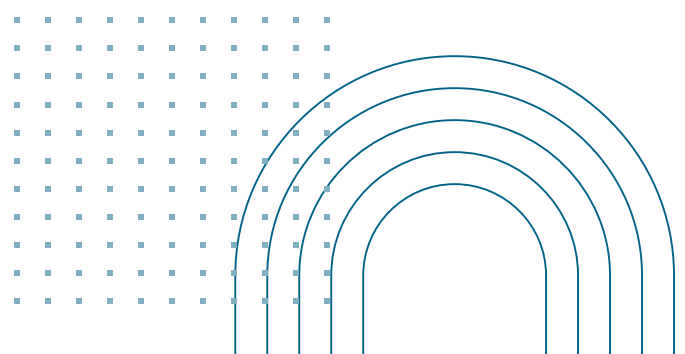
Before the pandemic, digital assessment had been rarely explored as a research topic in Portugal and, consequently, it is not easy to have a broad understanding of existing practices in the Higher Education sector. In a more sustained and institutionally supported way, it is observed that much of the research and reflections on digital assessment are carried out by researchers directly or indirectly associated with the Universidade Aberta (UAb); UAb has a pedagogical model based on a model approach to assessment (Amante & Oliveira, 2019; Pereira et al., 2007). The Virtual Pedagogical Model (Pereira, 2007) refers to the need for a continuous and digital assessment, giving the possibility of being complemented by a face-to-face element (through written examination, project presentation, work showcase, among other assessment elements).

To understand and characterise the use of digital assessment tools, Amante et al. (2019) conducted a study with HE teachers and students from several Portuguese institutions and educational settings (face-to-face, blended or distance learning). The authors observed that most assessment strategies using digital assessment tools rely on the submission of documents (text, video, and audio) or discussion forums. Students indicate that teachers lack the competence to manage digital assessment, feedback production and general skills in the use of technology. An interesting aspect addressed by the authors in this study is the idea that there is little student involvement in the teaching and learning process, which is reflected in the low incidence of responses about self-assessment and peer-assessment strategies.

With digital assessment we have, in theory, at our disposal the ability to develop more transparent, accessible and effective practices in assessment and feedback (Santos, 2018); however, what we see in Higher Education is that the platforms and processes are developed to support more effective and transparent processes, not responding to the pedagogical needs of making assessment elements conducive to learning. The natural consequence is that teachers, when using digital assessment platforms, favour assessment methodologies supported by unidirectional feedback, without the active involvement of the student in this process (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Nieminen & Tuohilampi, 2020), or even without feedback. This unidirectional logic of the assessment process is rooted in an assessment model in which feedback exists not as a catalyst for student learning, but as a platform for justifying a mark. There is, however, a body of new evidence supporting the importance of the feedback process in student learning; that feedback given to the student during the assessment process is one of the most influential and effective learning paradigms, and consequently, that socio-constructivist representation of the feedback process is more appropriate for effective learning than feedback models supported on cognitivism and information transmission; this is one of the main conclusions of Boud's keynote. We highlight here the relevant work of Fernandes (2006) or Balula (2014) who address the relevance of assessment as a teaching and learning strategy, or Amante and Oliveira (2019) with the concept they address of "assessment culture" in contrast to the "test culture", or even Casanova (2021) that argues in favour of students' agency and their active role in the assessment process.

This reflection of the Portuguese context makes sense especially considering Boud's words in the keynote explored above. In Portugal, we still use assessment strategies that are mainly dependent on a test-based assessment, strongly rooted in face-to-face written tests and rarely digitalized. This is even more evident in the undergraduate context when what Boud advocates is that we should seek to create synergies between the way we assess and the professional contexts in which students will be integrated in society to ensure a more authentic and relevant assessment and to have the possibility to equally assess all kinds of outcomes.

In the Portuguese context, it also makes sense to mention the Decree-Law No. 133/2019, which approves the legal framework for Higher Education provided at a distance, stating that the flexibility of time and place, provided by distance learning, recommends that students can develop their training path at the pace that is most compatible with their personal and professional life. This important contribution reflects the importance given to the assessment component as an integral part of the teaching and learning process and the need for it to allow greater flexibility, personalisation and accessibility to the assessment elements, something that is difficult to achieve with a face-to-face written exam. Specifically, about the assessment, the Decree-Law no. 133/2019 refers to the possibility that the assessment may be carried out through technological platforms, which ensure the reliability of the assessment developed. Finally,



it makes sense to reflect on the consequences of the pandemic, namely the need to make the transition, in a short period of time, from face-to-face assessment practices, mostly sustained in the performance of written exams, to emergency remote assessments. It was widely referenced, in Portugal, the use of fraudulent schemes supported by social networks during virtual exams or tutoring support centres that were used synchronously to support students during the exams or digital submissions (Kotowicz, 2020; Reis, 2020). In such examples, the assessment practices were mostly limited to the transposition of a face-to-face assessment to an emergency remote assessment and, consequently, the solutions found only sought to mitigate problems identified

with this transposition, trying to meet the needs of student identification, and ensuring online surveillance during the exams (Soares, 2021). The digital assessment made in this scenario cannot, therefore, be understood as a final product, but rather, as a mechanism in the process of development and improvement. In Portugal, we are still in an exploratory and transitional phase that requires reflection based on theoretical references and practices already established in other countries. However, based on what we found from Boud's keynote we should promote different forms of assessment that take us beyond the traditional "pen and paper exam", particularly in distance learning programmes.

## CONCLUSION

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Boud's keynote on assessment is important in the sense that it allows us to idealise a new paradigm for the assessment of learning in Portuguese HE. A paradigm that allows us to become closer to international best practices and research evidence catalysed by the technological advantages of digital assessment. In his keynote, Boud concludes by recommending an agenda for assessment for learning:

- › Assessment and feedback must be deliberately designed to have a continuing positive influence on student learning; it must leave students equipped for the future not judged on the past;
- › Students must be comfortable in using standards and criteria for themselves and with each other;
- › Building the capacity to judge one's own work and that of the others is an educational outcome of which all others are dependent;
- › students are equipped for the future not primarily through specific knowledge and skills but through their capacity to make informed decisions through their own practise.

By diversifying assessment strategies, encouraging the development of feedback literacy and enabling students to use the information to aid their learning, we are not only ensuring a more authentic, motivating, and relevant assessment but also guaranteeing that all learning outcomes are equally assessed. We are ensuring that there is no excessive association with knowledge-based assessment supported by theoretical exams that promote rote learning and do not develop, in our students, lifelong learning skills.

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