A possible dialogue between Accessibility and Assessment in university context. Considerations from a case study
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Abstract

The subject of this paper is Assessment in university contexts and aims to establish a possible dialogue between the assessment of student learning and Accessibility. The aim is to offer a reflection starting from a case study, which has tried to examine the assessment processes from the point of view of cultures (the values and meanings associated with the process), of policies (the strategic and organizational choices) and practices (tools, procedures used).

The new element is represented by the specific lens that has been chosen to adopt in reading the results of the research: that of accessibility. In university contexts it becomes important to give value to a construct like this, which arises from the philosophy of Universal Design, and which reveals opportunities for rethinking and improvement starting from questions such as: is it possible to think of an assessment process that promotes accessibility for everyone? How to design a universal assessment process?

The research tools used in the study are the analysis of documents (60 documents), questionnaires (156 teachers and 380 students) and Focus Groups (16 students).

Key words: Accessibility; Assessment; Complexity; Learning; University

1. Introduction

This paper aims to propose a possible dialogue between the assessment of student learning in the university context and Accessibility, also trying to identify the obstacles and facilitators that may possibly arise in the assessment process.

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A useful perspective in reflecting on accessibility is that offered by Universal Design. The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) focuses its efforts on Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018) by defining UDL as a set of research-based principles geared towards maximizing learning opportunities for each student (Rose and Meyer, 2002). When Universal Design is applied to assessment processes, it is declined in Universal Design for Assessment (UD for Assessment) which invites us to reflect on the construction of an assessment system aimed at providing the best possible "environment" in which to assess learning (Burgstahler, 2008; Ketterlin-Geller, 2005).

1.1 The case study

The aim of the study was to explore and understand the assessment process referring to university students' learning, in the micro (practices in context) and macro (institutional policies) tension.

The research questions were: What assessment cultures emerge? What are the meanings associated with the assessment process? What are the most used assessment practices? How does the assessment process dialogue with accessibility? How can assessment be an accessibility tool?

The research design chosen is the Case Study (Stake, 2006). The context is extremely important in educational situations and often the variables introduced by the context (and the relationships between them) are so numerous and rich, that they are the same paradigmatic premises that guide the choice of placing the research design within a qualitative methodology with an interpretive approach (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Analysis and interpretation imply a complex process that develops and builds through the meanings and points of view that data collection allows to emerge, in close connection with the theoretical framework of reference. Attention to the complexity of the object of study also means conceiving it as a system that is not the sum of its parts, but rather the result of understanding the interdependencies between all the aspects that compose it. And it is for this reason that the chosen research design is the case study.

When the aim of the study is to go beyond the case, it is called "instrumental". When the main interest is in the case itself, this is called "intrinsic". In the case of the present study, the interest will be mainly *instrumental*.

Each case study is a complex entity located in its own situation. It has its own special contexts or backgrounds. Historical context is almost always of interest, but so are cultural and physical contexts. Particularly important is the opportunity to know how the study of the issues that cross the case contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon (Stake, 2006).

As regards the criteria of validity and verification, as underlined before, the qualitative analysis emphasizes the interpretation, the making sense of the information and the respect for the subjectivity of the actors involved. An attempt has been made to preserve and analyze the different aspects of the plot, the complexity of the phenomenon, the different and even opposing points of view.

Within a case study, the phase of choosing data collection tools becomes a key factor. While on the one hand the *case* tries to represent a complex practice, the *study* is the analytical explanation, constructed and created to narrate, analyze and generate, without reducing, new ways of understanding complex practices.

The case taken into study is the University of Padova. The participants involved were key-informants, teachers and university students. 156 teachers were involved in the questionnaires. 380 students were involved in the questionnaires, while 16 were involved in the focus groups.

60 documents of institutional nature were analysed: the analysis of the documents played an important role in trying to understand the policies and institutional cultures regarding the assessment of learning, and beyond. This analysis was carried out with reference to three levels: Macro (international-European level), Meso (National-Italy) and Micro (institutional-university), with the awareness that they do not represent separate realities but must be placed in a holistic gaze.

The questionnaires were created using the LimeSurvey software and aim to collect information from teachers and students regarding the practices actually implemented in the university context, in addition to the shared meanings. We have chosen to adopt a view that favors the attribution of meaning to data (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Mazzara, 2002; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

The focus groups captured students' perspectives on the meanings behind the assessment process both in terms of practices and cultures. They took place online, via the Zoom platform and with the support of the Wooclap digital platform. The ATLAS.ti software was used for data analysis following the suggestions in the literature (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

Before proceeding with the analysis, the hermeneutic unit (container) was created in which the two Word files with the text of the transcripts were loaded.

First of all, the coding of the data took place by working on a bottom-up side: from a purely technical point of view, the answers of the participants to the various questions were underlined, and one or more codes were assigned to each of them which described the content.

At the end of this first coding phase, the codes were merged, and the analysis categories that emerged were organized into families, i.e. into groups that

collect the codes belonging to the same area/dimension. The second step, therefore, was characterized by the use of some categories taken from the reference literature (therefore top-down) through which it was possible to observe and analyze the narrations of the participants.

Below is a table where the families (or groups) of codes created and frequency after the first coding phase. For three codes (Work Context, Feedback and Motivation) the families have not been created.

Tab.1 - codes families.

	FG1	FG2	Total
Accessibility of the assessment process	78	56	134
Relationship between assessment and learning	27	18	45
Student participation in the assessment process	46	34	80
Planning and organization of the assessment by the teacher	30	19	49
Assessment practices	84	83	167
Work context	0	13	13
Feedback	12	16	28
Motivation	3	10	13

2. Results

Considering the most frequently implemented exam methods, it emerged that these are: written exam – both through exercises and open and closed questions – and the oral exam. Other modalities implemented to a lesser extent: projects, papers and/or reports, intermediate assessment, peer assessment and self-assessment. On the "ideal" level, the most chosen options: projects, written exam with open and closed questions, intermediate assessment, oral exam and presentations.

It can be seen that the Project method represents a possible meeting point between all three processes (learning, assessment and teaching): it emerged that this mode implies greater involvement on the part of the students and was chosen as an ideal assessment method. This modality also implies the possibility for students to apply knowledge and skills. Another connected dimension is the work context: students see in this option a possibility to face and link themselves with what their own work environment will be. From what emerged, this feature was reported as a facilitator.

Furthermore, from what has been reported by students, being able to count on an assessment method – such as projects, for example – which is close to the working context, represents an ideal type of assessment.

Regarding the obstacles and facilitators most connected to the assessment process, it is believed that they constitute two components that interact in the same process and that dialogue with each other, adopting opposing and alternative positions in different moments and contexts.

In particular, one of the obstacles most frequently associated with assessment are assessment criteria: they are rarely made explicit, clarified and/or shared with students. In addition, some obstacles to grading are associated, including different aspects. On the one hand, in close connection with the criteria, it emerged that the students consider a lack of awareness (sometimes attributed to the teacher) of what the obtained grade really reflects. Sometimes, the differences in the scale of grades assigned to different activities are not understood; o it is considered that behind the diversity of grades, there are no clear criteria. On the other hand, it emerged that, when a teacher is considered competent (both in the subject, but also regarding to the assessment literacy), these obstacles do not arise.

In this sense, it has been highlighted how, despite the presence and usefulness of the Syllabus; this is almost never explored or discussed. This aspect is important, given that – otherwise – it is connected in a positive way to the moments in which there is greater sharing and student involvement.

As emerged from the document analysis, the AVA system adopted in the Italian context requires that the Syllabus must be compiled for each learning activity provided by the Study Programmes: the detailed program in which the teacher explains the objectives and contents of the course, specifying in detail the topics and teaching materials and describing the assessment methods (ANVUR, 2018).

Another obstacle reported by both teachers and students is the Teacher-Student Ratio: the elevated number of students per teacher. This aspect includes a diversity of aspects. Some of them concern the possibility of having a more personal discussion and sharing with one's teacher; the possibility of reducing this number to improve assessment and teaching; the possibility to have a more personalized feedback after the assessment (assignment review); the possibility of carrying out an exam in oral rather than written mode (or in any case choosing the method that best suits students preferences or strong points). This aspect was highlighted in the discussion on policies: in Italy, the number of students per teacher is among the highest in the OECD area (ANVUR, 2018).

In this sense, the students involved have expressed the need for greater sharing and involvement in the assessment process in general and, in particular, as regards the assessment criteria; for greater awareness before and when they are assessed but also to have feedback afterwards.

3. Final considerations

The sense is to try to have a vision of assessment as a complex process that removes barriers to learning, and not feeds them; which favors participation, and not which acts as an obstacle.

By making accessibility dialogue with assessment, two possible levels of reflection can be traced. The first one concerns accessibility as an intrinsic feature of assessment: considering assessment as the place to be reached in an accessible way. In this sense, it is the assessment itself that is (or is not) accessible. Hence the importance that assessment practices are accessible to all students, that they are usable, understandable and clear, based on a plurality of dimensions (format, methods, student preferences, for example). This is the accessibility of the assessment process and to achieve it it can be helpful to be inspired by the thinking offered by the UD. Specifically, the importance of the three principles of the UDL is argued (CAST, 2018; Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014): provide different means of representation, expression and motivation.

The first one (multiple means of representation), refers to how assessment information is presented in order to allow for maximum clarity of communication. It realizes that each individual may process information and knowledge in different ways and therefore requires multiple forms of communication, clarification of what is being communicated, and the provision of a range of opportunities to develop understanding. This has implications not only for the way expectations and assessment processes are communicated, but also for feedback practices; to what extent they are provided (in different formats), to what extent it is context sensitive, etc. This point turned out to be fundamentally important regarding one of the main barriers related to assessment: not only the assessment criteria, but the importance for students to understand them and to be involved. The vital importance of deepening the information present in the Syllabus also emerged: in this sense, this principle would be useful to increase the accessibility and participation of students in their processes.

The second principle (multiple means of action and expression) is to provide students with different ways of working with information and content. This means, for example, providing a variety of ways for students to demonstrate their learning in ways that are most appropriate for assessment tasks. It recognizes that assessments are often limited to a few methods (written or oral exam) and that these approaches favor those who are best suited to those methods, while at the same time disadvantage others. Using a range of assessment approaches, can support all students to be able to best demonstrate their learning. This can be achieved by providing diversity or by using flexibly designed methods. In this sense, the students believe that the possibility of choosing the format of the exam (written and/or oral), the response methods, and the assessment methods presents itself as a facilitator, even when, in practice, this choice is almost never available. Therefore, ensure a multiplicity of opportunities (ex-ante, ongoing and ex-post assessments) and, if possible, flexibility (taking into consideration a diversity of options in addition to written

or oral exams to demonstrate and apply the knowledge, skills and competences; through – for example – group work, projects, papers, etc.). In this sense, it emerged that the teachers involved strongly agree or agree that an integrated exam with different assessment methods is the most suitable way to assess students' learning. Despite this, there are some aspects to discuss with them, especially what concerns the actions that are implemented in one's daily work. As the questionnaires showed, the least frequent are: remove any barriers in the assessment process, monitor and share good assessment practices, use authentic assessment evidence and provide opportunities for choice (both regarding the format of the assignment and the general structure of the assessment activity).

The third principle (multiple means of engagement) involves awareness of student motivation, interest, and persistence through recognition of levels of engagement. Ensuring engagement also involves creating opportunities for assessment and feedback so that they are timely: not just on time, but at the best time for the student's learning journey, incorporating student choice.

On the other hand, the second level of reflection (assessment as a tool for accessibility) is deeper: if one thinks of the place to be reached as the place of knowledge (learning process), the assessment process becomes the means – together with others (such as, for example, the teaching process) – through which one's own learning process becomes accessible and usable. Consequently, the traditional situation is reversed in which assessment is considered as the final moment of certification of learning which is not correlated to other processes.

Considered as one of the tools through which it is possible to make knowledge accessible and usable, assessment can become one of the educational processes on which it is necessary to continue to reflect. It follows that accessibility in this perspective is not an intrinsic characteristic of assessment, or at least not only. In order for accessibility and assessment to dialogue in this sense, it is also necessary for assessment to be an accessibility tool: it must be rethought in order to become an element of transformation of the teaching and learning process. In this aspect lies the true strength of the assessment process. Conceived and constructed in this way, Assessment (for learning) in dialogue with accessibility represents a co-constructed interactive and dialogical process that becomes an integral part of daily teaching, within which information regarding student learning is obtained not only on the basis of formal final assessment procedures to verify profit but also during interactions between teachers and students and between peers.

Finally, some proposals are offered for thinking and constructing an accessible assessment.

Regarding the context, the intention of accessibility is to reflect on the construction of "accessible assessment environments" that give the possibility

of respecting and recognizing the multiplicity of needs, preferences and styles – in which not only the UDL principles become fundamental but also the characteristic features of modifying environments (Feuerstein et al., 1995). The substantial idea is that what is designed right from the start and without subsequent adaptations will inevitably be suitable for everyone: a design of quality contexts with a broader target user base. Assessment environments must be open, capable of ensuring access opportunities for everyone and able to create conditions of positive tension towards the new through the experimentation of small imbalances.

Another proposal concerns the culture of the quality of institutional processes where the student becomes the protagonist and center of the actions. Not only as a pedagogical subject, but also as a political subject.

In this sense, as regards the different approaches, the Student Centered Learning one (Ahn and Class, 2011; Attard, Di Iorio, Geven and Santa, 2010; Li and Guo, 2015; Zimmerman, 2002) finds echoes in an assessment practice implemented through a vision such as that of the Assessment for Learning approach, where assessment is at the service of and an integral part of the learning process. Therefore, it becomes important to adopt an approach that allows the implementation of a greater valorisation of the formative function of assessment (Black and William, 2009).

It is further important to establish the timing of the assessment: putting students at the center implies the possibility of understanding where one is, where one is going and how to bridge the gap. The various moments of reflection and sharing such as those that can emerge from an initial assessment (ex-ante), an intermediate assessment (in itinere) and a final assessment (ex-post) are to be treasured (Black and William, 1998). Consequently, the voice of the students is fundamental as the protagonist of the various processes; first of all, through the possibility of using feedback (between teacher-students and between peers) at the center of the practices and as a dialogic and co-constructed process (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Sambell, 2013; 2016).

As far as the teacher is concerned, among the strategies that can be adopted to promote and improve the quality of the teaching process (in close connection with the learning and assessment processes) one can think of a multiplicity of facilitators where the students become the active protagonists in their own learning process (Carless, 2013). In this context, the assessment could move towards experiences that approach situations that recall their future field of work. As emerged in the study, a possible method is that of the Project (both group and individual): a fundamental moment where all three processes (teaching, learning, assessment) intertwine.

In this sense, the possibility of continuous training and sharing (faculty development) becomes fundamental for teachers, taking advantage of the

various initiatives both at an institutional, national and international level (Austin, 2003; Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, and Beach; 2006; Weimer, 2002; Zhu and Kaplan, 2006).

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