

ABSTRACT

Scholars in the field of assessment recognize its key role in teaching and learning (Knight 1998, Brown and Knight 1996, Gipps 1994, Glaser 1990, Van Rooyen and Prinsloo 2003). According to Knight, assessment is 'the most significant prompt for learning' (1998:37). This study aimed to understand the role and the nature of assessment in academic literacy modules offered in two very different teaching and learning contexts. The focus of the research is 'Foundation in English Language' at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and 'Writing English I' at the National University of Rwanda (NUR).

To conduct the investigation, three lecturers teaching on the Foundation module at Wits and, two lecturers teaching Writing English I at the NUR were interviewed individually and six students from each lecturer's group participated in a focus group interview. In addition to the interviews, all the assignment and examination tasks, as well as students' marked assignments and examination scripts were analysed.

Although the study reveals many differences in both attitudes and practices in the two institutions, it also shows some similarities, especially in relation to students' negative response to participation in one on one consultation with a lecturer.

The most important difference noticed is in the role of assessment in the two modules. It was found that in the Writing English I module at NUR, assessment is considered separate from the teaching and learning process, whereas at Wits it is an integral part of the process. This difference in orientation to assessment influenced much of the planning and assessment of the two modules. In the Foundation module at Wits, assessment was planned into the course. Consequently, assignments were carefully scaffolded to promote students' learning in regard to academic writing, with feedback given on essay drafts. At NUR where assessment was not planned into the course there was no clear focus on some important aspects of academic writing such as referencing and writing from sources without plagiarizing and there was no scaffolding of the assignments or feedback on drafts.

The study concludes with some recommendations to lecturers and students and also to the leadership of the institutions, given that some of the recommendations have resource implications.