

## Lost in the fog: The bewildering language of assessment

Dr Cathy Minett-Smith University of the West of England

Juliet Eve University of Brighton

Dr Sabine Hassler University of the West of England

Dr Laura Bennett University of the West of England

Have you ever been disorientated in a familiar landscape on a foggy day? Locational landmarks are obscured, distorting perceptions of distance creating confusion. This is the analogy that our students explained to us when we started talking about the common, but often mysterious, language of assessment. Common terms perpetuate from the learning outcome, through to the task and into the feedback with students never really being sure of their meaning. Furthermore, familiarity did not equate to confidence. Thus we embarked on a quest with students to investigate whether common words could be ranked according to their level of mysteriousness.

Perhaps not surprisingly, verbs such as synthesise, critically evaluate, and analyse were high up the mysteriousness list with a high degree of correlation between staff and student rankings. Use of these terms is context specific, there can be a lack of consistency between tutors' explanations, creating confusion and anxiety for students. Students described this as leading to a state of paralysis as they struggle to know how to start. If we know that the words are inducing disorientation, can we create an infrastructure and resources to support dialogue with students to disperse the fog? These questions prompted a successful application to the QAA for [Collaborative Enhancement Project](#) funding by the Universities of the West of England, Brighton, Greenwich and Hertfordshire.

Using data from a survey and focus groups, to extract key issues, we developed a [toolkit](#) for both staff and students to promote dialogue around the assessment and feedback journey. In line with current research on assessment and feedback literacy, we were keen to embed dialogue from the start. Many of the "slippery" words and terms used across different disciplines, and contexts, require unpacking and discussion to be meaningful. The stages of the toolkit reflect the common points of that journey, namely: design, introduction of the assessment to students, support for students as they engage with the assessment, marking and feedback, and encouraging students to engage with and act on feedback.

The toolkit can be used by educational developers as the starting point for discussions with colleagues, as well as by marking teams to help them build activities into modules and teaching sessions. These can focus on the design of assessment tasks (e.g. requiring reflection from students on how they have used previous feedback), introducing assessment briefs and facilitating engagement with them (e.g. via the use of exemplars, peer assessments and opportunities for students to apply marking criteria to their own and others' work). Importantly, the toolkit encourages dialogue, as both staff and students are invited to reflect on the same aspects but from their respective perspectives, using questions as prompts for deeper engagement.

Fog is a fact of life; we can't prevent it as a weather phenomenon and we arguably can't expect a learning journey to be free from moments when the way ahead is unclear or the finish line obscured. What we can do is support students to focus on milestones and, through dialogue, build confidence to enable them to successfully navigate their way through.

**Dr Cathy Minett-Smith is the Dean of Learning and Teaching in the College of Business and Law at the University of the West of England where she has responsibility for the strategic development of learning and teaching to enhance the student experience. Cathy is a PFHEA and vice chair of the Chartered Association of Business Schools Learning and Teaching Committee.**

**Juliet Eve, PFHEA, is Head of the Learning and Teaching Hub at the University of Brighton where she heads up a team of academic developers. She is part of the education and student experience leadership team and in particular leads on assessment and feedback.**

**Dr Sabine Hassler is a Senior Lecturer in Law in the College of Business and Law at the University of the West of England. As the Law School's Assessment Offences Adviser and Quality Assurance Lead, she is particularly interested in exploring and understanding assessment strategies and the processes behind assessment setting.**

**Dr Laura Bennett is an Associate Director of Academic Practice based in Library, Careers and Inclusivity at the University of the West of England. She works on strategic learning, teaching and assessment projects across the University, with a particular focus on inclusivity and wellbeing. Laura is a SFHEA and co-led the project with Cathy on behalf of the University of the West of England.**

**Laura Bennett (Twitter) @DrLauraB\_HE**

**Juliet Eve (Twitter) @JulietEve**