BALI – Building Assessment Literacy Initiative

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In this case study, the authors outline a student-staff partnership approach to the co-production of resources and supports to enhance assessment literacy at Munster Technological University. The multitude of partnership models used ultimately led to further projects that shifted approaches to assessment and feedback that were more student-centric across the disciplines.

Introduction and Context

BALI (Building Assessment Literacy Initiative) was an interdisciplinary, partnership approach to develop the understanding and experiences of students and staff in Assessment Literacy.

Based on the project's 'discovery phase', joint teams of students and staff co-produced assessment literary resources that could meet the needs of a multi-discipline cohort, allow for easier translation of materials across disciplinary boundaries and build a stronger understanding of learner and educator perspectives of assessment and feedback.

We know that assessment methods have a greater influence on student learning than any other single factor and are potentially more important than teaching materials (Boud, 1988), due, in part that "students can escape bad teaching but they cannot escape bad assessment" (Boud, 1995).

It is also important to develop effective learners and educators in relation to assessment and feedback and, in so doing, support students' evaluative ability, independence, which is shown to enable an easier transition post-graduation (Boud, 2009 / Boud et al., 2018).

Recent work has developed generalised frameworks to support development of learner and educator competencies in relation to the emerging field of Feedback Literacy (Dawson, 2020) but there still exists gaps in the application of Feedback Literacy into localised settings; for learners - in understanding and responding to A&F activity and educators - in using and applying authentic assessment and feedback activity with limited resource.

Therefore, BALI was addressing a known need in the sector, and a local, strategic priority as MTU-Cork's Teaching & Learning Unit, which had identified Assessment and Feedback as one of its Enhancement Themes.

Supported by the Teaching and Learning Unit, BALI was one of CIT's (now MTU) 'Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement' funded projects and provided insight our Leadership Development in Higher Education project, which had a subgroup focusing on Assessment and Feedback.

Project Outline

We intended for the partnership teams to engage with and inform A&F topics currently being discussed across MTU.

Specifically, the project set out to

- Understand key themes that were important to staff and students in relation to A&F.
- Create teams of staff and students who would partner together and focus on creating resources for both communities – termed 'partnership projects'.
- Create diagnostic tools supporting students and staff to assess own levels of A&F Literacy.

The project unfolded with three specific phases, two of which ran concurrently (Image 1 below).
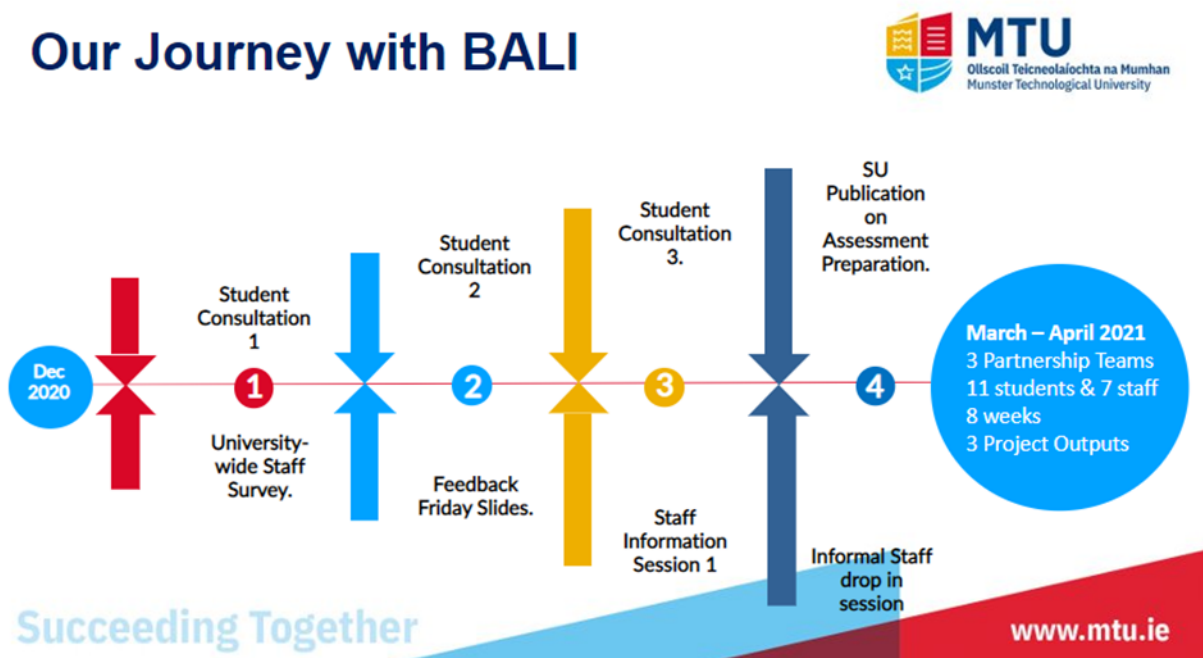
As part of the 'discovery phase', students and staff inputs were initially separate and then partnership project teams were established. The whole project ran over 6 months with partnership teams operating in Semester 2 (March – April).

On the student side:

- 25 students engaged in three consultation workshops. These were listening exercises where students were facilitated in groups to discuss good and poor assessment and feedback experiences and, aligning to MTU's 'Le Chéile' programme, were challenged by a "Hackathon" to create solutions to the very issues they experience.
- Students curated a 2 page infographic on assessment and feedback in the Students' Union publication, ExpliCIT, as part of a feature on preparing for assessments.

On the staff side:

- Staff were surveyed regarding their knowledge and awareness of A&F, with series of "Feedback Friday" slide resources developed in response. Running over 10 weeks, this information campaign explained key A&F terms and shared good practice from local and international colleagues.
- We promoted the partnership opportunity through information sessions at our programme 'Conversations on Teaching and Learning'.

Students and staff together:

- 11 students and 7 staff worked on three partnership teams.
- Individuals selected their preferred team theme based on data gathered from 'discovery phases'.
- The BALI project group coordinated the process and the support / briefing for the partnership project teams where topics such as developing relationships; managing the power dynamics; and working as team members rather than "in role" were discussed. A staff and student member from a previous partnership team contributed to the briefing.
- Each team was assigned a mentor from the BALI project group to guide and advise on partnership in practice.

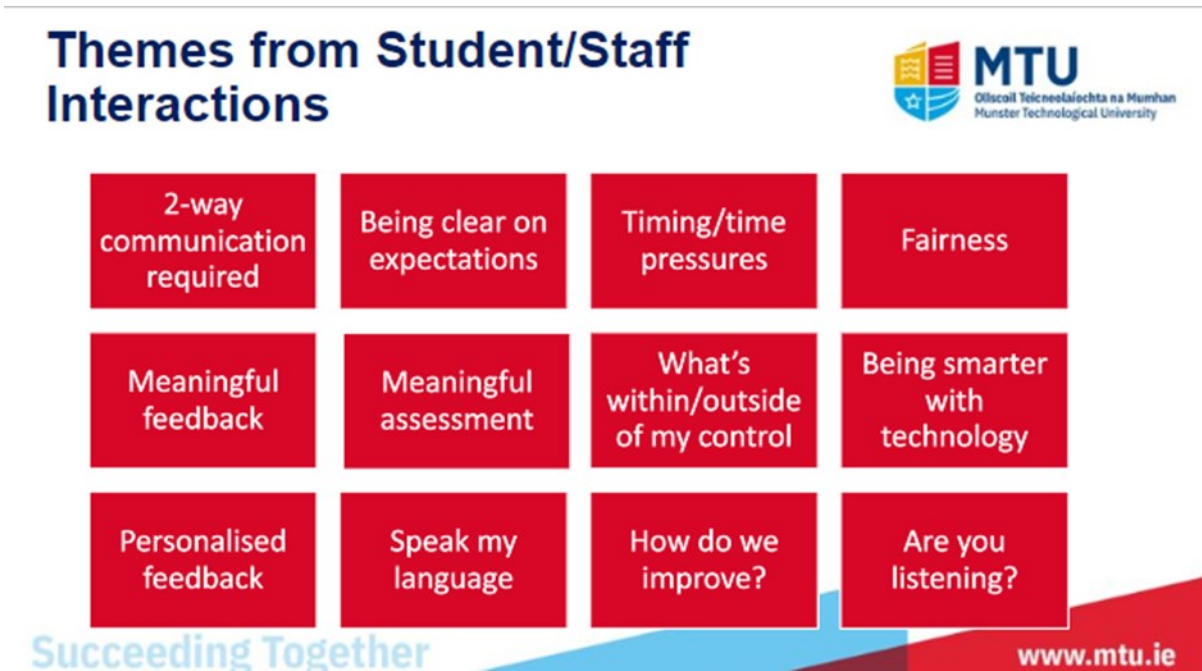**Image 2: Themes from student-staff interactions**

Image 3: Overview of assessment and feedback project themes

Examples of project outputs

(1) Is Anybody Listening: This team focused on lecturer/student perspectives on feedback, including prototyping a bouncing ball animation to indicate to the lecturer how well feedback was understood by students. This visual shows how learners would receive feedback on a given assignment and then invited to respond using a bouncing ball tool, to show how well they understood the feedback provided.

Image 4: Output from 'Is Anybody Listening?' Video available on YouTube.
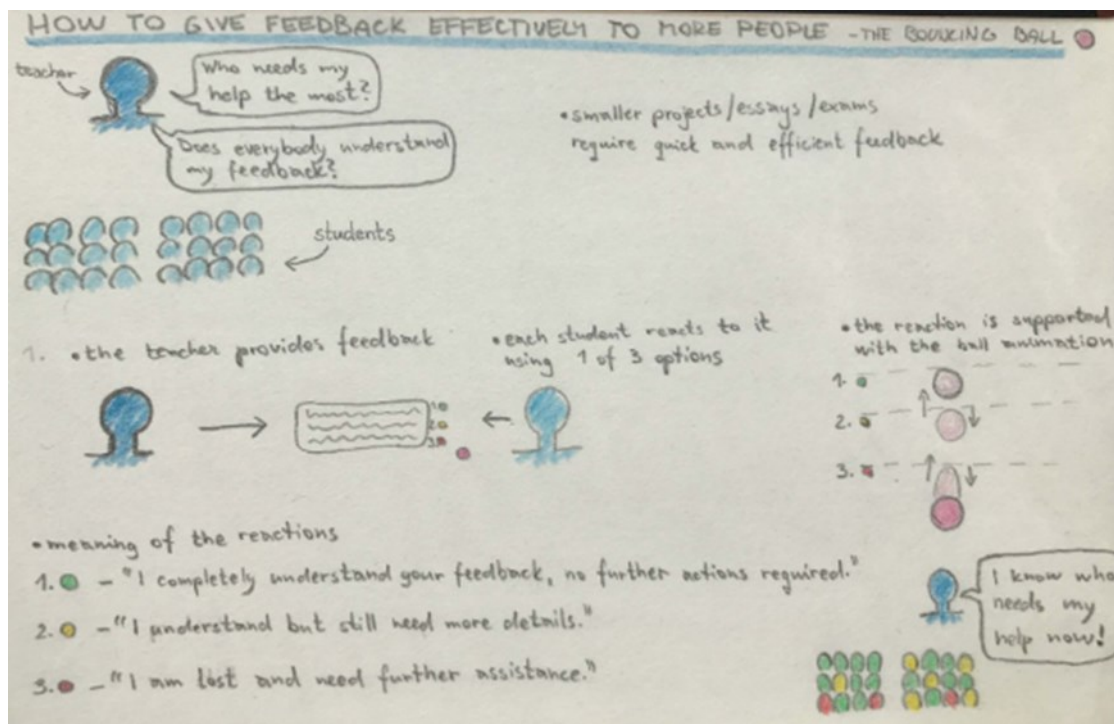
(2) Creating Authentic Assessments: This team set about creating a MTU specific database resource of sample Authentic Assessment assignments. The database provides examples that show and contrast authentic assignments and is still growing.

(3) Innovative Tools for Giving Feedback: This team focused on innovative ways of delivering feedback, including a traffic light system for students to use in setting targets for their own achievements. Their initial, ambitious, idea included enhancements to our course management system, Canvas, wasn't manageable. A simple workaround used the functionality in the 'Discussion Board' of Canvas.

Key project actions

Action	
Action A Student consultations	Our well-established programme (Le Cheile) facilitates opportunities for students to contribute to the enhancement of Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Student Engagement (Island of Ireland Symposium, 2021) and BALI used this approach. Active Learning strategies, rebalancing power dynamics, building confidence in one's own voice and, encouraging the ABCD of feedback (sparq Scotland) to frame to dialogue were all central to these consultation sessions building a strong sense of team and belonging to the project.

Action B Staff survey	We built momentum with staff (mid-Semester 1) by quickly developing the simple, accessible, and fun responses to key themes, termed 'Feedback Friday'. This demonstrated that staff voices were listened to, addressed key questions arising from the survey, and normalised that many staff were not fully clear on all aspects of A&F practice, which in turn encouraged a safe environment to have A&F conversations with colleagues.
Action C Intro to partnership and mentoring of teams	Each partnership team received good grounding and support in practising partnership. This is often overlooked but we deemed it essential to the success of the project based on our reading of "The Power of Partnership" (2020). We helped to build relationships in a remote setting with a simple pre-meeting activity – introductions via a Google Slide template (Bovill, 2020) helping what was once a group of strangers get to know one another Each of the BALI project group members mentored one of the teams providing light touch support as teams navigated their brief and brought their ideas to fruition. Anecdotally we learned that this support was appreciated. Roddy's reflection: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUNHGofjLX0 *We had discussions about the practicalities of working as a team, how the meetings would run, how communication would be managed outside of meetings and where their work could be shared. All team members contributed to these discussions and reached consensus on all of these important practical elements to ensure it was a positive group experience.* *Con's reflection:*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pnGlQArfWw *Roddy 's reflection:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIgtkDOPPpQ
Action D Captured reflections of participants along the process.	Reflections were captured as the teams progressed through the project and were useful monitoring development in attitudes and expectations. All team members, at different times, identified biases/preconceptions at different stages of the project including responses to the question 'I'm surprised by…' *"It certainly provides a different perspective in relation to student-staff cooperation and proves how powerful staff-student partnerships are when both parties agree to work together."* *"How willing staff are to improve student feedback. I thought that there may have been a bit of animosity but there was none."* *"How engaged the students are, how motivated they are and the good, valuable ideas they have."* *Karolina's reflection:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Md5_hwK91qI *Jim's reflection:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7qCVY8ilXo

Reflections

What worked well?

NB: Many of our successful approaches for this project have been informed by our previous practice in this space (and a significant amount of trial & error) but equally from the generosity of sector colleagues and literature in establishing and sustaining partnership activity – some of which is referenced throughout this Case Study.

- Working with student and staff group **separately,** at first, helped us get a real sense of each of the group's challenges and positive associations with assessment and feedback. (Cliodhna https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdoCseVDE6g)
- **Focusing on building relationships**: partnership work is about relationships and investing in relationship building at the beginning of any project is time well spent. It also deepens the experience for all involved. This was evident across the three project teams as the team members reported genuinely enjoyed working together. (Karolina https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mL3xs3JpWWo)
- **Clear expectations & No Prescribed Outcome**: Literature tells us that having a clear idea of the commitment involved gives partnership participants a sense of the size of their task. We were clear not to prescribe what outcomes they should reach – we supported the 'process', they identified and developed the 'product' based on their group's collective expertise. (Charlotte https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVVciwVZOM4)
- We built **momentum** with staff at different points of dissemination across the year. This enabled more engagement and opportunities for dialogue and exploration. It also made stepping into the partnership teams less daunting.
- The **diversity of people** (students and staff from different disciplines) and diversity of student/career stage offered a superb range of experience in BALI. (Cliodhna https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LymJd6SFUbs)

What could have been done differently?

- Earlier start – the pandemic caused some(!) challenges in the way we operated the project. Our partnership project teams were only starting in mid-Semester 2 and close to end of term assessments - not idea for any participant!
- We would like to run the project again but as an in-person activity. There were some strong relationships built online yet some of the more incidental conversations were not possible in a Teams/Zoom setting.
- Ethics – our original focus was on practice and resource development; we did not consider as much the transformational impact on colleagues, which became apparent over time. On reflection, would have given more planning to an evaluation mechanism to allow us to disseminate our project participant impact more widely.

From BALI to RAFT

The success of BALI, and the continued focus on A&F, led to a whole new project funded through the SATLE 2020, titled 'Reimagining Assessment and Feedback Together' (RAFT) – a full-year, action-research programme to challenge the dominant teacher-transmission approach to assessment and feedback and co-creating interventions across 16 different settings.

Image 6: Assessment piece included in ExpliCIT magazine
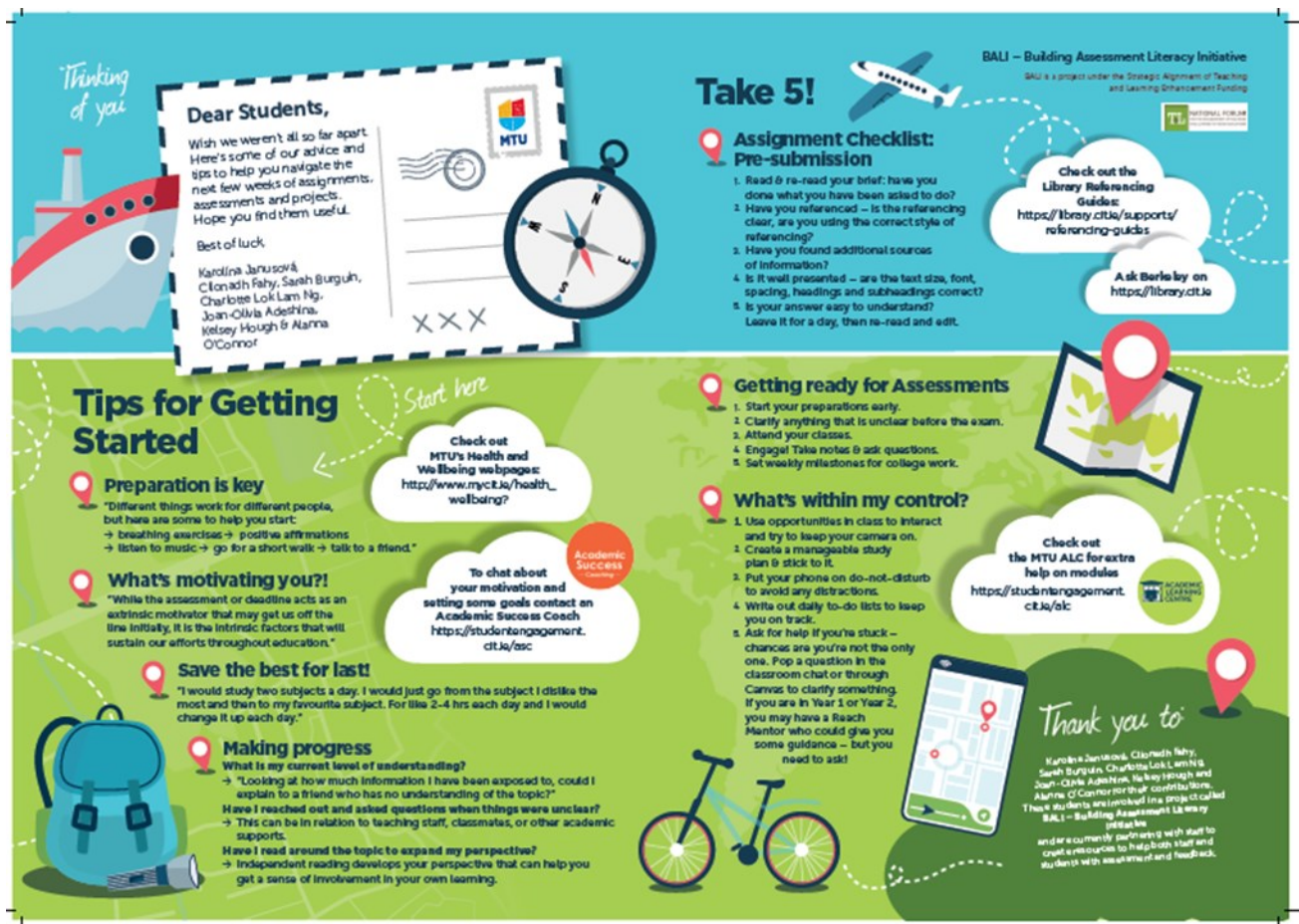
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Dawson, 2020: https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1769022

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Links to Project Resources

Innovative Tools for Giving Feedback: https://tlu.cit.ie/Innovative%20tools%20for%20giving%20feedback

Is Anybody Listening? Is Feedback having any impact? https://tlu.cit.ie/is-anybody-listening

Creating Authentic Assessments: https://tlu.cit.ie/authentic%20assessment