

[O11] Self and peer assessment: a role for learning in higher education

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A RATIONALE FOR USING SELF-AND PEER-ASSESSMENT

Writing over fifty years ago Rogers (2003, page 387) outlines the goals of democratic education, he includes such attributes as being *'a critical learner, able to evaluate the contributions made by others and being able to self-initiate actions and be responsible for those actions'*. Further considerations as to the objective of the educational process, a self-determined person, are given by Heron (1988, page 77) *'someone who can set their own learning objective, devise a rational programme to attain them, set criteria of excellence by which work is assessed and assess their own work'*. This emphasis on the 'self' is perhaps not surprising given Rogers (2003, page 389) assertion that, *'a person learns significantly only those things, which they perceive as being involved in the maintenance of, or enhancement of, the structure of self'*. Involvement in the importance of self is central to the self-assessment philosophy. Consider the definition of self-assessment, formulated in a series of questions, given by Boud (1995, page 1) *'How am I doing? Is this enough? Is this right? How can I tell? Should I go further? In the act of questioning is the act of judging ourselves and making decisions about the next step. This is self-assessment'*. This definition of self-assessment encapsulates some of those aspiration of education defined above, whilst at the same time indicating two fundamental requires for self-assessment, the role of criteria (Boud, 1986, page 18; Adams and King, 1995) and feedback (Taras, 2001 and Nieweg, 2004). Other aspiration of the outcome of education may be addressed by

peer assessment, which has been defined by Topping et al. (2000 page 150) as *'an arrangement for peers to consider the level, value, worth, quality or successfulness of the products or outcomes of learning of others of similar status'*. Peers can be used in self assessment. Boud, (1995, page 200) discusses how self-assessment should not be seen as a process undertaken in isolation, but as a process where the learner ultimately makes a judgement about what has been learned, and advocates that peer discussion and feedback be built into self-assessment exercises.

SELF- AND PEER-ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING

At the heart of both self-and peer-assessment is the student. Brew (1995 page 24) commenting on the conceptual shift in higher education from a focus on teaching to a perspective in which student learning is central, illustrates the importance of this student centeredness, *'the essence of the learning perspective is that it considers all decisions about teaching and assessment in the light of the impact or potential impact on student learning'*. The importance of the 'student-centred' approach is illustrated from work considering the type of learning students engage with in higher education. Trigwell and Prosser (1991, page 263) show how the quality of student learning is linked to the perceived learning environment. The type of teaching experienced may influence that environment. Prosser et al. (1994) showed that teachers use five different ways to conceptualise their students learning and teaching. The

importance of these findings were illustrated by Trigwell *et al.* (1999) who demonstrated a link between approaches to teaching and student learning, such as, an information transmissions approach leads to a surface learning in students, and a student-focused approach leads to deep learning in students.

In consideration of the link with between student-centeredness and learning, it may be helpful to consider how assessment may be integrated into the learning process. This is the background to a model for formative learning considered by Orsmond (2004, page 9), where four separate components, student, assessment, learning task, and facilitator are all contained in a learning environment giving a focus referred to as a *Zone of Formative Learning*. Assessment is therefore inclusive in the learning process.

Aspects of this integration between self-assessment and learning have been reported. Hinett (1995) reported how effective close integration can work at an institutional level, in a study, which compared assessment practice at a British University with that carried out at the Alverno College Milwaukee USA. A major difference in the approach to assessment was the use of self-and-peer assessment. At Alverno; each student was actively encouraged to self-and peer-assess. Attitudes ranged from 'it's painful, but it works and I learn more' to 'I like self-assessment because I can reflect back and know I should study more in this area'.

At the British University little value is given to self-and peer-assessment, which means students lack confidence and faith in their own judgements. On self-assessment, some typical comments students made were 'no-one takes it seriously' and 'it is just a hassle' (page 216). Furthermore, students learnt in a prescriptive environment, being told 'you will do this'. They generally validated their work in terms of grades and admitted to getting into the mentality of '*what am I going to get out of this in terms of credit*' (p.213). When asked 'How do you know what is expected of you?'

The majority suggested that they didn't really know as '*they never actually say what they are looking for*'. Students also often talked of 'guessing' (page 213). These student responses illustrate the effect of a hidden curriculum, which is defined by Snyder (1971, page 3-4) as the '*difference between messages coming from the formal goals of teachers and their curriculum and other, contradictory messages associated with the means that students find and must use in order to attain high grades*'. A way of overcoming this hidden curriculum is by considering explicit assessment criteria, something that self-and peer-assessment encourages, as Hinett illustrates. Students at Alverno use feedback constructively, to help them to plan their work and to understand how they are developing as learners. Explicit criteria and integrated learning into the assessment process allowed students through self-assessment to *take control of their own learning* (my italics, page. 219).

Self-and peer-assessment can also encourage a deep learning approach, as exemplified by Boyd and Cowan (1985). In this study two groups of civil engineering undergraduates appear to learn in different ways, one group taught in a conventional way, the other group entered a learning contract with they tutor based on self- assessment. This group set themselves individual learning goals; the tutor would provide neither advice nor direction when they did so. However, the tutor agreed to facilitate both the learning to which the students aspired and the assessment by *them* of that learning (page 225). In the second term of study, the students were asked 'What is your real priority in your work this week?' This question was intended to gauge the approaches to learning taking by the different groups. Some of the answers given were:

From the traditional taught students:

10 students wished to be able to answer questions similar to those on the tutorial sheets.

6 students wished to keep up to date with work issued to them.

From the self-assessment student volunteers:

3 students wished to improve their ability to conceptualise viable and distinct solutions to real design problems.

1 student was attempting to integrate both theoretical and practical requirements to give a total approach to designing, using relatively undocumented material.

It was felt that the self- assessment group were demonstrating a deep approach to learning (page 228-229).

There does therefore, appear to be a role for self-and peer-assessment in HE, as both these assessment practise do focus on current learning concerns as well as addressing long held goals of a democratic education.

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