

## **Understanding student self-assessment in terms of learning, grading and empowerment**

### **Introduction**

Many writers have emphasised the general importance of student self-assessment in higher education. It has been argued that self-assessment should be a continuing focus throughout undergraduate education (Burgess, Baldwin, Dalrymple, & Thomas, 1999) and a main goal of higher education (Sluujmans, Dochy, & Moerkerke, 1998). The development of self-assessment ability is also recognized as a distinct outcome of higher education (Boud, 1986; Dearing, 1997; Stefani, 1998) and a critical educational tool for learning beyond university education (Tamir, 1999; Taras, 2001).

The growing push towards involving students in higher education in their assessment is echoed by Boud (1992) who observes the increasing recognition that "for many purposes it is educationally more appropriate for students to be actively involved in setting goals and assessing themselves" (p. 185). Likewise, Oldfield & Macalpine (1995) identify self-evaluation of student's self-learning ability as one of the indicators of quality in undergraduate education and Marienau (1999) and Stefani (1994) identify student's self-assessing ability as a key characteristic of an effective and reflexive learner.

Consequently, many have noted that student self-assessment is a commonplace feature in courses in higher education (Boud, 1995; Brown & Glasner, 1999; Dochy & Segers, 1999). Brew (1995) in particular observed self-assessment to be "a normal and regular part of university teaching since the 1980's" (p. 52).

### **Tensions and different agendas of student self-assessment**

However, self-assessment is also problematic in that the concepts and practices associated with it exist in tension with each other. Boud & Brew (1995) observe much confusion over how the term self-assessment is defined and used:

It is important to identify what the definition [of student self-assessment] does and does not imply as there are many misconceptions about self-assessment...There are a number of common practices which are sometimes referred to as self-assessment, but which are sufficiently different to warrant separate considerations and the use of alternative descriptors. (p.130)

I view student self-assessment to be complex because it is practised and understood in diverse ways and because conflicting notions and tensions exist within its diversity. The following are some of the tensions and differences which are commonly attached to meanings and practices of student self-assessment in higher education.

#### *Tensions between formal versus informal self-assessment*

Student self-assessment occurs in informal and formal contexts. But some writers do not clearly state whether they are referring to formal or informal self-assessment.

Informal student self-assessment may be taken to refer to the ongoing consciousness that students have of how well they are doing. In this sense, some students are always informally self-assessing their work. For example, some students may form an opinion as to how good their work is and what grade they may obtain before submitting their assignments. Similarly, students may have a rough idea of how well prepared they are and what score they are likely to attain before an examination. Such self-assessments occur independently of the assessment or self-assessment practices designed by the teacher. In contrast, formal self-assessment may occur when the teacher specifically designs distinct activities for students to judge their learning. Students who had informally assessed their learning would do so again in formal contexts. Students who had not consciously assessed their learning would begin to do so.

#### *Tensions between student self-assessment as a goal or a practice*

Self-assessment also exists as a tension between being a goal of higher education that can be achieved through different practices, or as a practice that can achieve different goals. As a goal, self-assessment has been argued to be a fundamental characteristic of higher education. Marienau (1999) and Stefani (1994) identify student's self-assessing ability as a key characteristic of an effective and reflexive learner. The ability of students to be able to appraise the quality of their learning and diagnose areas for development is also identified as a critical attribute of a professional. Whilst the development of self-assessment ability is a distinct outcome of higher education, the goal of enhancing students' self-assessment ability may be targeted through course designs which do not involve any self-assessment activity (Boud, 1995).

In contrast, self-assessment practices have been recommended for achieving a wide spectrum of benefits apart from enhancing the students' ability to appraise their learning. Self-assessment practices have been linked to students' adoption of deep approaches to learning (Boud, 1995; Sullivan & Hall, 1997) and general skills that enhance future academic and professional practice (Somervell, 1993). Self-assessment activity also plays a key role in developing thinking and problem-solving skills (Woods, Marshall, & Hrymark, 1988), goal setting (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001) and the improvement of one's overall capability (Khan, Davies, & Gupta, 2001). Whilst these benefits are clearly useful for enhancing the quality of students' learning, they are distinct outcomes of the goal of enhancing students' self-assessment ability.

#### *Tensions between student self-assessment as assessment and/or learning*

Many writers have articulated student self-assessment in terms of an assessment perspective and/or a learning perspective. The tensions between assessment practices and its benefits for learning are often depicted in terms of assessment practices that have to evaluate learning and enhance it at the same time.

Boud (1995) identifies self-assessment to be a fundamental link between assessment and learning. This expresses the notion that self-assessment practice is constituted by the dual notions of assessment and learning. Consequently, it is a site for assessment and learning perspectives to exist together in dialectic tension.

The distinction between self-assessment as assessment only, or as learning only, is important for prompting academics to reflect on whether their self-assessment practices are for grading purposes only or to enhance the students' learning as well. The tension between assessment

and learning is well documented and this tension influences the academic's decision to implement self-assessment for enhancing learning or for formal assessment requirements.

In this paper, the literature on student self-assessment is reviewed in three areas. They pertain to student self-assessment in terms of an assessment practice, in terms of enhancing learning, and in terms of practices and meanings of power. The common denominator of these three areas is that there is a degree of student involvement and this involvement takes the form of making judgments concerning their learning.

### **Student self-assessment in terms of assessment**

General assessment practices in higher education have been subject to much development and change. There is an increasing recognition that assessment practices in the classroom are shaped by broad issues which have an impact on university education. Assessment cannot be conceived as “largely the preserve of teachers and a small number of professional specialists” (Broadfoot, 2001, p.285). Student assessment in higher education is subjected to the same external pressures and issues that affect university education.

Likewise, self-assessment practices have been recognized as meeting extraneous needs in various contexts. Firstly, Boud (1989) observes that self-assessment practices may possess practical advantages for assessing large numbers of students, thereby allowing students to partially relieve their teachers of the time and effort of testing large numbers of students. In this way, self-assessment has the potential to reduce the amount of time teachers spend on marking. The argument follows that if students were able to take on some assessment tasks, then academic staff would have more time to prepare and conduct educationally worthwhile learning and assessment activities for students.

Secondly, Taras (2001) alludes to increasing student consumerism manifesting in a greater demand for involvement and control of the assessment process. In the context of students being customers of an institution of higher learning, assessment grades “represent the final package that students want or expect to be delivered” (p. 612).

This emphasis on satisfying the student customer in the form of assessment grades creates a dilemma for self-assessment practices. On the one hand, teachers or academics may desire to provide opportunities for self-assessment to meet a variety of educational objectives. Such objectives may include enhancing the students' learning and developing the students' self-assessment ability. However, if consumer satisfaction was the ultimate determiner of students' grades, then their integrity and role in the assessment process may be questionable.

A third context for self-assessment practice is its potential for providing greater transparency in the assessment process for students. Self-assessment may allow students to familiarize themselves with the context(s) in which they are assessed. It allows students to experience and interpret the often arbitrary requirements which their work needs to satisfy. In this sense, self-assessment assists students to understand how they will be assessed by their teachers by having their assessments compared and discussed with the teacher's assessment.

Hence, self-assessment practices may be viewed in terms of responding to extraneous factors such as increased and diverse class populations, in terms of increased student consumerist

demands for accountability for their grades and in terms of increased transparency and understanding on the assessment process leading to their academic results.

It is within these contexts of assessment that student self-assessment is described in terms of an assessment activity wherein a greater degree of student involvement is designed. The reliability of student's self-assessment is generally approached in the literature in terms of comparing students' ratings of their work with the teachers. And the 'accuracy' of student's self-generated grades is the single most discussed issue in the literature of student self-assessment (Boud, 1995; Boud & Falchikov, 1989).

What is clear from the quantitative studies and reviews of self-assessment reliability is that no single type of student or particular method of self-assessment guarantees a higher level of student-teacher mark agreement. Likewise, it can be argued that no alternative yardstick of self-assessment accuracy is infallible. The notion of grading in student self-assessment will therefore always be limited by the futile search for perfect, universal standards.

There have been calls to move away from the notion of reliability in student self assessment altogether and to judge its value in terms of its learning benefits for the student. Hence, writers such as Stefani (1994) and Cowan (1988) argue that the benefits of self assessment are so great that we should trust students to act appropriately even when there is a risk that there could be differences between the student's mark and the tutor's mark. Likewise, Orsmond et al. (1997) argue that "it is far better to take the risk over the marks than to deprive students of the opportunity of developing the important skill of making objective judgments about the quality of their work and of generally enhancing their skills" (p. 357).

Increasingly, student self-assessment is being viewed in terms of a learning perspective (Boud, 1995; Dochy & Segers, 1999; Stefani, 1998). The role of the numerous studies and reviews on student-teacher mark agreement may be said to have paved the way for more widespread interest in self-assessment by acting as an appeasement to academics who were hostile to the concept of student involvement in the assessment process (Stefani, 1998). The collective benefit of the studies was thus to assist academic staff to grapple with the new paradigm of student self-assessment, which shifts the balance of power between students and themselves, by demonstrating credibility in student-generated assessment. In this regard, quantitative studies of the reliability of student generated marks can be viewed as the formulation of a preparatory body of statistical assurances in the literature to bulwark academic's concerns on summative assessment priorities.

### **Student self-assessment in terms of learning**

In recent years, the perspective of student self-assessment in terms of its benefit to student learning has been emphasized. The emphasis on self-assessment to enhance student learning has at various times been described as fulfilling the formative purposes of student self-assessment. A formative purpose of assessment focuses on the improvement or enhancement of learning through assessment. Formative self-assessment is likewise used to depict the intention to use self-assessment practices to enhance student learning (Bailey, 1979; Dochy & Segers, 1999). Sluijsmans et al. (1999) describe the increasing use of self-assessment for formative purposes in higher education:

Self-assessment is not a new technique, but a way of increasing the role of students as active participants in their own learning and is mostly used for formative assessment in order to foster reflection on one's own learning processes and results. (p. 297)

As opposed to identifying the extent of students' learning, formative self-assessment or self-evaluation may be understood as "a process of identifying the value of the teaching and learning experience for the student" (Klenowski, 1995, p.148). Formative self-assessment is developmental in its focus and seeks the enhancement of student learning as its principal and ultimate aim. Anderson & Freiberg (1995) argue for the focus in self-assessment to be on formative development as opposed to summative evaluation whilst Taras (2001) observes that most British universities use self-assessment in a formative way as "an awareness building tool grounded in 'learning to learn' and student reflective practice" (p. 606).

There is a healthy amount of literature exhorting the general benefits that student self-assessment brings to learning. The potential for student self-assessment to enhance learning has been reported in different contexts and covers a wide range of learning processes. Such claims include the key role of self-assessment in developing thinking and problem-solving skills (Woods, Marshall, & Hrymark, 1988), goal setting (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001), the enhancement of higher order skills for adult learners (Marienau, 1999) and the improvement of one's overall capability (Khan, Davies, & Gupta, 2001).

Much of the literature recommends student self-assessment as enhancing the general quality of learning. However, further examination of the different types of learning associated with self-assessment suggests that the nature of learning and its enhancement by virtue of self-assessment practices is problematic. The tension between self-assessment and reflection suggests that self-assessment practice may not always enhance reflection. Likewise, there has not been any research on whether students' self-assessment ability is enhanced beyond the parameters of the program of study in which it is practiced. Without such evidence, it is not possible to assert that self-assessment practices in higher education enhance students' professional practice and lifelong learning beyond university education.

Another key argument that student self-assessment enhances learning lies in its capacity for providing for more student autonomy. The student's lack of power is framed as an impediment to their learning and student self-assessment is commonly advocated as an opportunity for students to gain a measure of power or control in the assessment process. The prevailing wisdom is that the unilateral power of the academic in the assessment process is an obstacle to student autonomy and learning. Student self-assessment is viewed as an appropriate means of countering the academic's dominant influence in the assessment process.

### **Student self-assessment in terms of power**

In recent years, various commentators have written about the confluence of power and assessment in higher education. Assessment has been described as "a thing of power" (Leach, Neutze, & Zepke, 2000, p.107), "a primary location for power relations" (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000, p.267) and "the most political of all educational processes" (Heron, 1988, p. 85). Parlett (1976) goes as far as depicting assessment activities to represent "a ritual enactment of the power relationships that may be fundamental to all education" (p. 26).

It has been popular to advocate student self-assessment practices as a means of ‘empowering’ students in the assessment process. The conventional argument has been that self-assessment counters the dominant influences of the teacher’s power by allowing students to exercise some of that power for themselves. In this regard, reducing the teacher's power over students is a basis for the practice of student self-assessment (Boud, 1995; Butcher & Stefani, 1995; McMahon, 1999; Rainsbury & Hodges, 1998; Somervell, 1993; Stefani, 1998).

Heron's (1988) seminal work on the unilateral power of academic staff in the assessment process has been frequently cited as the basis and rationale for advocating student self-assessment. The following quotation illustrates the common understanding of power as teachers exercising unilateral power over students in the assessment process:

The issue here (concerning student assessment) is to do with the exercise of power. And power is simply to do with who makes decisions about whom. I have power over people if I make unilateral decisions about them. I share power with people if I make decisions on a bilateral basis in consultation with them. (Heron, 1988, p.77)

The student's lack of power is framed as an impediment to their learning and student self-assessment is commonly advocated as an opportunity for students to gain a measure of power or control in the assessment process. For example, Hinett & Weeden (2000) argue that the principal advantage of self-assessment is its capacity to elevate students to the status of a co-assessor with the teacher. Likewise, Butcher & Stefani (1995) and Stefani (1994) argue that self-assessment allows students to partner their teachers in the assessment process through being empowered to participate in their own assessment. Such statements assert the potential for self-assessment to enhance learning as being proportionate to its capacity for empowering students, and self-assessment is invaluable because it offers the “greatest autonomy that can be afforded the learner” (Hinett & Weeden, 2000, p. 252).

In the past few years, some writers have questioned the assumption that self-assessment practices will automatically empower students in the assessment process. Taras (2001) argues that the real control of power is not challenged if students are excluded from summative graded assessment. However, student participation in grading their work may not necessarily mean that students are empowered. Race (1995) points out that if students know that tutors will intervene if they think that the marking process is unsatisfactory, then summative self-assessment cannot be claimed to be participative nor empowering. These writers argue that student self-assessment does not guarantee that students are empowered in the assessment process.

Part of this argument lies in the caveat that the ability of self-assessment to empower students also depends on how it is used. Burgess et al. (1999) observe that the way self-assessment is used determines whether it is empowering for the students rather than a process that is imposed by academic staff. Reynold & Trehan (2000) even warn of participative approaches to assessment being experienced by students as a more subtle technique for disciplining them. They contend that for participative assessment such as self-assessment to “realise in practice what it promises in principle, therefore, it is important to be alert to the tendencies for hierarchical relation to persist” (p. 273). The risk is that practices of student self-assessment

may curb student empowerment by preserving existing hierarchical powers. This in large part also depends on the different ways that academics understand and utilise power in their student self-assessment practices (Tan, 2004).

### ***Does student self-assessment always benefit learning?***

While it is defensible to argue for self-assessment activities to be designed to enhance learning, it is naïve to assume that all self-assessment activities will guarantee that student learning is enhanced. I noticed that the literature in general does not differentiate between effective and ineffective student self-assessment. There is a wealth of different benefits to learning but these benefits are not evaluated against each other. The practices that are depicted all purport to be positive examples of how student self-assessment should be practiced. This leads to the impression that student self-assessment can never be designed or practised ineffectively. In addition, it also gives the impression that any self-assessment practice will benefit students.

The literature does not differentiate between different levels of effectiveness of self-assessment. One of the most significant developments in the literature on higher education has been research depicting the different approaches that students and teachers take to learning. These progressive approaches vividly portray differences between positive and negative approaches to learning. They offer grounded descriptions of what it means to learn effectively in contrast to what it means to learn ineffectively. The literature on student self-assessment contains many claims that self-assessment practices generally benefit learning. But it does not differentiate between more and less effective practices of self-assessment.

Finally, the literature in general does not acknowledge that self-assessment may have negative consequences on student learning. Boud (1995) describes the effects of assessment or testing on learning as ‘consequential validity’. Consequential validity questions the broader consequences of a given assessment activity beyond those that are immediately evident. It is high when assessment produces a positive effect on learning and low when assessment discourages learning. A further area of research in self-assessment would be the consequential validity of self-assessment practices. In particular, it may be worthwhile to conduct research that can highlight negative consequences of self-assessment on learning. There is a need to warn of undesirable effects of having students assess themselves. I argue that without understanding its negative effects, there is no assurance that student self-assessment practices in higher education will do more harm than good.

In summary, further research on the benefits of self-assessment practices for learning may focus on identifying ineffective practices, differentiating practices in terms of their relative efficacy and highlighting possible negative consequences on learning. What is common in these areas of research is the evaluation of the efficacy of self-assessment in terms of learning.

### **Conclusion**

A limitation of the existing literature on student self-assessment in terms of assessment, learning and in terms of power is a tendency to understand its efficacy in uncritical quantitative terms. As an assessment practice, the success of self-assessment is commonly evaluated in terms of the quantitative difference between the students’ and the teacher’s assessment. In terms of its formative purposes, self-assessment practices are often assumed to enhance learning without discriminating between effective and undesirable practices. In terms

of power, some writers view self-assessment as being successful when it allows power to be shared with students. Consequently, its success is proportionate to the amount of power that is devolved to students.

An alternative to understanding student self-assessment beyond its separate domains of assessment, learning and power would be to investigate how academics experience its meaning and practice across all three domains. The phenomenographic research methodology would be an appropriate approach for such an investigation.

In phenomenography, it has been suggested that greater awareness of more aspects of a phenomenon may be regarded as more advanced ways of understanding and using that phenomenon. Various researchers have sought to use the structure of awareness, the theoretical model of phenomenography advanced by Marton and Booth (1997), to identify progressively advanced ways of experiencing a phenomenon (Barnard & Gerber, 1999; Cope, 2000; Morgan, 2001; Pong, 1999). What these findings have in common is the suggestion that a more advanced way of experiencing a phenomenon may be identified in terms of the extent of awareness of critical aspects of the phenomenon.

A more advanced way of experiencing student self-assessment may imply “more complex and more inclusive (or more specific) than less advanced ways of experiencing the same thing” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 107). This progressive structure may offer a new way of understanding how student self-assessment may be evaluated in terms of assessment practice, enhancing learning, and meanings and practices of power. These suggestions also represent possible areas of future research that may advance our understanding of self-assessment practices that complement assessment, learning and power.

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