Self-Assessment: Giving Up Control and Trusting in Human Potential

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“Tests and grades are anathema to andragogy, which assumes adults are capable of self-evaluating their own learning” is an important quote to dissect and explore (Merriam, & Bierema, 2014, p.57-58). The topic of self-assessment as a method of student evaluation became an increasingly important topic in post-secondary education with the development of Knowles’ theory of andragogy in the 1970s (Leach, 2012). In the theory of andragogy the learner is at the centre of the learning experience and plays an active role in collaborating with the teacher about all aspects of the learning process, including evaluation. The use of self-assessment has been an area of interest for me because I have previously utilized it as an evaluation method but always grappled with its validity. I wondered if it was an accurate representation of the learning, efforts and quality of work that students were inputting. I questioned if it was a make-work project for all involved, as it was a time intensive endeavour that had questionable rich learning outcomes. As an instructor, I am more than happy to invest time and energy into something that is worthwhile but I question whether self-assessment is. This reflection will be the exploration of the validity of self-assessment with some strategies to make it a worthwhile endeavour for both the instructor and the students.

Objective

Self-assessment fits within the Reflective Observation phase of Kolb’s cyclical experiential learning theory (Kersh, Evans, Kontiainen & Bailey, 2011; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The student reflects on their learning experience, which moves them to re-think about certain course concepts, which then promotes them to apply these concepts into action. Self-assessment also fits within the constructivist theory, as the student is engaging
in knowledge construction through the exploration of his or her learning experiences (Dolcourt & Zuckerman, 2003).

Since the student is the key stakeholder in the learning experience the student must be involved in the creation of the assessment criteria and then judge the extent to which the criteria was met. The creation of the criteria is the essential part of the self-assessment process and is often the step that is missed, and much to the detriment of the learning (Dolcourt & Zuckerman, 2003; Leach, 2012) and the ownership of the experience.

Self-assessment has numerous benefits to the learner. It helps to develop the student’s confidence by making the student’s strengths and capabilities and the interrelationships between them visible to the student (Kersh, et al., 2011). Kersh et al. (2011) state that the valuation and recognition of the student’s abilities by the instructor, through the self-assessment process, promotes the further development of these abilities. Self-assessment empowers the student to take ownership over their learning, motivates the student to learn, builds the student’s adaptability and creates more joy and engagement in the learning experience (Currie as cited in Kersh et al., 2011). The grading process is demystified and the handing over of some of the control to students helps alleviate the common anxiety that students have about being evaluated (Edwards, as cited in Leach, 2012). The reflection of personal abilities and the extent to which the learning objectives have been accomplished helps the student understand the content more thoroughly and to critically think. This can in turn, increase the thoughtfulness and quality of subsequent assignments (Strong, Davis & Hawks, as cited in Leach, 2012).

The literature also highlights some disadvantages to the implementation of self-assessments. The use of this method of evaluation in the classroom typically focuses on
testing the potential and capacity of an individual to carry out an action rather than on the actual performance of the student (Galbraith, Hawkins & Holmboe, 2008). Galbraith et al. (2008) also says that self-assessments often don’t lead to self-improvement plans so the learning from them can be limited. There has also been an ongoing debate that self-assessment is not an accurate tool for measuring learning because the high achievers typically give themselves lower marks than their teacher, and the students rated the lowest by their teacher tend to inflate their marks (Andrade & Du, Kirby & Downs as cited in Leach, 2012; Galbraith et al., 2008).

**Subjective**

There is extensive research that proves that most students agreed with their teachers’ marks and any variation that did exist was that the high-achievers underestimated their performance and low-achievers overestimated it (Leach, 2012). In Leach’s (2012) study of four hundred and seventy-two students, of those who under or overestimated their grades, more than seventy percent of them did so by only marginal numbers, of one or two grades. Less than five percent of them were excessively over or underrated, by five grades or more (Leach, 2012). Leach’s (2012) statistical analysis demonstrated that the teachers’ marks were so similar to the students that “the correlation was statistically highly significant (p>0.01)” (p.141). It is important to note that in this study the students were given a choice whether they would like to engage in the assessment process. Only thirty-eight percent of students chose to do it, so the ones who did participate in the self-assessment were committed to the process (Leach, 2012).

With this low participation level the instructor is driven to ask if he/she should then make self-assessment mandatory, which goes against the very benefits that it suggests of
empowerment (Leach, 2012). If the students are forced to do self-assessment will the students just ‘go through the motions’ (Leach, 2012) and thus get minimal learning from it? Forcing students to participate in an evaluation method creates a power shift in the classroom. It becomes teacher centered, where the instructor holds the control of the learning experience; this goes against the principles of adult learning. The students could end up resisting and resenting their instructor for this power over method (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

An interesting phenomenon in this study by Leach (2012) was that when the students were given an opportunity to participate in the creation of their own self-assessment criteria, no students took the opportunity to do this and opted to use the criteria that the teacher had developed instead. I have encountered this in my own teaching experience, and was baffled that adult learners would choose not to take the opportunity to have control over their learning. This brings me to question are they really adult learners then? It may be that the students have been so used to a more pedagogical approach to teaching and learning that they are unable to be self-directed when given the opportunity. Since the principles of andragogy are on a continuum it makes me question if perhaps the students who chose not to engage with the self-assessment are quite novice when it comes to self-directed learning, including self-assessment. The students may lack the needed skills to produce an accurate self-assessment, which are self-awareness and reflection. This reminds me of a parenting book I am reading that incorporates many of the same principles of andragogy. In this book it says that when parents give control over to the children in one instance, and then in another use the ‘power over’ method, children become untrusting of their parents (Gordon, 2000). They become suspicious when some control is handed over
at a different time, as they are just waiting for the parent to exert their control again. This could be the case with the students not choosing to self-assess. Usually if the students and the teachers are far apart in their marks it is proposed that the teacher and student meet together to explore this variation and re-negotiate a fair mark. The student could be untrusting of this, and think that the teacher will just use their power to manipulate the marks towards the teacher’s in the end anyways.

The other reasons for the lack of participation in the self-assessment may be that students don’t see the benefit of it or don’t have the time for it (Thompson, Pilgrim & Oliver, Leach, Neutze & Zepke as cited in Leach, 2012). There may be cultural reasons at play where culturally it is inappropriate for the student to be seen as boasting and therefore do not feel comfortable giving themselves a good grade (Leach, as cited in Leach, 2012). Other cultural reasons could be for example, according to Hofstede’s Cultural Dimension research, that Chinese students prefer their instructor to be a figure of authority (Phillips & Vaughn, 2009) and therefore prefer that their instructor assess them.

**Interpretive**

An interesting observation of the author was that as the students progressed in their courses they became more accurate in their judgments and marks were more closely related to their teacher’s marks (Leach, 2012). I believe this proves my points above. Self-assessment is a learned skill that requires maturation and growth of the student towards self-directed learning. It also may have taken some time for the students to ‘buy into’ this method of evaluation and see its validity, worth and simply trust the whole process.

The other very interesting point that Leach (2012) makes is that when arguing that the discrepancy between student and teacher’s marks makes self-assessment ineffective, there
is an assumption that the teacher’s marks are a more accurate representation of the student’s learning. Extensive literature has proven that teachers are actually unreliable markers and “aren’t necessarily any better at evaluating students’ learning than students are” (Boud, Cowie, Falchikov, Kirby & Downs, Rowntree, as cited in Leach, 2012). Learning is a personal journey, and so much of the learning is happening internally, within the depths of the student’s mind. The student is the one that can truly represent what learning changes have occurred within them. The teacher can evaluate an assignment, but is all the learning that occurred for the student truly captured within it? Perhaps the student has not had the opportunity to express his or her knowledge in the mode they prefer. Gardner’s research proves that there are eight intelligences and most teachers focus on evaluation of just two of the eight intelligences (Phillips & Vaughn, 2009). So unless the instructor has evaluated all eight intelligences a true representation of that student’s abilities and learning may not have been uncovered. By the instructor depending entirely on his or her own evaluation of the student’s learning, incidental and serendipitous learning is not captured. The richness of incidental learning goes far beyond the learning outcomes and can have profound effects on the student’s learning (Dolcourt & Zuckerman, 2003; Galbraith et al., 2008).

Decisional

Through this reflection I see the validity and potential for rich learning in using self-assessment as an important evaluation method. I do, however recognize that it will take some time, patience and may be an uphill battle at the beginning. The key to making it a success is to create some strategies to empower students to engage with the self-assessment process.
Leach (2012) suggests that the teacher promote self-assessment by clearly outlining the benefits of it in various venues, including the course syllabus and discussion in class (Leach, 2012). To increase the student’s comfort with self-assessment, the teacher can implement self-assessment as an ongoing activity in class. The teacher can provide feedback and direction as needed to guide the students if they are struggling. Feedback and practice will develop the student’s critical reflective and self-awareness skills to help them improve their abilities to accurately self-assess their own work and learning. I plan to use the ‘Five Minute Paper’ at the end of class to provide students with five minutes to reflect on the following questions: How did I contribute to my own and my peers learning in class today? What can I do in the future to further increase my competence and depth of knowledge in these concepts? These questions encourage critical reflection, highlight the students’ role in the learning process to increase ownership of it, and also move the student to continue the learning journey by creating goals.

The teacher should create a space for negotiation of the self-assessment criteria to evolve, either in face to face or in online discussions (Leach, 2012). If class time is allotted the self-assessment process is seen as a priority for learning and students may begin to see its importance. Class exploration of the criteria also allows for optimal engagement of the majority of students, instead of this negotiation being done in an online venue, where limited participation may be a barrier. Leach (2012) suggests that if particular students are not engaged in the criteria building process then the teacher should approach them individually to explore their rationale (Leach, 2012). I believe this strategy should be approached cautiously and with much compassion, because it could be viewed as coercive.
The student may comply because they fear the teacher and the repercussions of not doing it or they feel pressure to please the teacher.

The research by Leach (2012) focuses on the quantitative aspect of self-assessment. This limits the ability of the self-assessment method to capture incidental learning and minimizes the importance of the qualitative part of the learning experience. As an instructor I plan to create an assignment at the end of the course that asks students to explore their development towards three or four course learning outcomes of their choice whilst including other incidental learning they acquired, and using literature to support this exploration. The students will also need to create two or three learning goals in areas they feel that they require or want further development and create strategies for accomplishing them. Utilizing the knowledge I have gained from my Trends and Roles reflections on honouring cultural diversity, the students should have the freedom to select the mode that they prefer to demonstrate this growth. The students could have the choice of doing: a written assignment, create a video, work with partners and conduct a peer assessment by creating their own assessment criteria, write a collaborative paper or create an individual or collaborative poster presentation. Another strategy for obtaining this self-assessment data could be the use of professional portfolios, where students demonstrate in a variety of ways their competencies. The students could have creative freedom to include whatever data they wish best represents their abilities (Kersh at al., 2011). Some examples of portfolios could be given as a framework but ultimately the student could make the portfolio their own.

Providing students with the autonomy to choose which learning outcomes they will assess, the mode they will do this and including exploration of their incidental learning, will
empower the student to embrace the self-assessment method and provide rich learning through the whole process. If students can gain competency in critically evaluating their learning, it sets the student up well for working in the quickly changing, globalized world they live in. It promotes deep and lifelong learning and prepares them for life in a democratic society (Taras as cited in Leach, 2012). This type of self-assessment will be a true representation of the student’s learning experience and abilities. Teachers must give up the control, nourish the concept and skill of self-assessment and trust in the great human potential of their students.
References


