



Self-assessment: Questioning My Classroom Practice

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ABSTRACT

Self-assessment activities have become commonplace in classroom environments. Just like most other primary teachers I use self-assessment activities in my classroom practice with good intentions for encouraging children to consider their own learning and achievement. Looking back, however, I see my use of self-assessment tasks served teacher and teaching purposes above student needs and the longer-term goal of developing self-directed (life-long) learners. In hindsight I believe what I was calling self-assessment could more accurately, and perhaps more helpfully, be defined as short, guided reflections. This paper questions this classroom practice and goes on to question the term 'self-assessment' suggesting we examine closely our meaning, purpose and practice of self-assessment in the classroom. This paper concludes with questions for teachers to use in reconsidering self-assessment in their own classroom practice.

MY CLASSROOM PRACTICE

As teacher of a multi-level junior class I was using all the ways I could think of to get inside the children's heads in order to develop my understanding of what they knew and could do, and what learning processes were working for them. Self-assessment was something I latched on to quickly because both the children's responses to the task and the talk around these activities allowed me improved access to their thinking.

Putting aside other interactions between teacher-student, student and student, and student and examples of work as forms of self-assessment, I focus here on my use of short 'written' questionnaires. These activities required children to read the question, consider their answer and circle, colour in, draw faces or symbols or provide a number rating using a scale in response. Sometimes on these forms there was an opportunity for the student to add a short comment. I sought examples of these types of self-assessment in commercial materials and found examples in the National Education Monitoring Project reports, often modifying them for use. I also constructed small written tasks myself and occasionally with groups of children. The time period for students to complete these tasks was usually short, and determined by me.

My self-assessment practice started in physical education classes. Working outside in variable weather conditions and attending to individual's needs for skill correction or development meant I found gathering evidence to summarise progress and achievement difficult. By getting the children involved

through self-assessment activities and encouraging discussion around how they should rate themselves I had more information than I could gather on my own. The children also seemed more purposeful when they commenced lessons knowing what we were all going to be looking for.

When reporting to parents I added short self-report forms using traffic light colours for achievement and effort in different curriculum areas. These self-reporting forms gave me some indication about each child's perception of effort. I was very conscious of not wanting to over or under estimate effort in my reporting. The children enjoyed this form filling exercise and afterwards we conferenced the ratings they gave themselves. Both of us signed the sheet before it went home with my report. The children loved putting their signature on their self-reports.

I also found having information on how the children rated their work helpful for the tone and content of my feedback. Student self-beliefs about themselves as learners and their learning progress contributed to my decision-making around what I said and how I said it in feedback. I was very aware of the costs to student learning and progress if the work was too easy or too hard.

I did not expect the children to be accurate in their evaluations. This was not about questioning their honesty. I wanted self-reporting of their thinking (How do you feel when you get a book for a present? What is the hardest part?), or their performance (How many skips can you do without stopping? How many times have you used adjectives in a page of your descriptive writing?). These tasks helped us all focus on what quality looks like for the activity and level appropriate. In many subjects we started using a two category rubric system, based on using a model or example – 1) What would quality work look like? 2) What would poor work look like?

The results from the children certainly surprised me when I set a self-assessment exercise. For example, some of my advanced readers didn't really enjoy reading for pleasure. It was always interesting to see who, in my eyes, over estimated and who under estimated their success (reflecting feelings of confidence and often current circumstances of the individual). Interpreting what an individual child indicated required sound and up-to-date knowledge of the child and what was happening for him or her at the time. Another challenge was the development of good questions. Some questions turned out to be pretty useless for everyone. Quite often I found out students didn't know exactly what I meant by the words we were using. Keeping track of the resulting pieces of paper was also a challenge. Generally, though, self-assessment evidence proved very revealing not only to me but also to parents when the results were shared with them as single events or through the children's portfolios.

I believe using self-assessment in my classroom practice improved teacher and learner understanding of what is being learned, 'talk' (focus, vocabulary and student-student discussion), and awareness of how learning was occurring. Self-assessment gave me more information than I had otherwise and the children seemed to enjoy these opportunities.

What did the students in my primary classes understand from this practice? I didn't ask. Did they think they were 'doing my job'? I don't know. I believe they liked a variety of activities and as long as I didn't use these written self-assessment activities too often they seemed willing. It is probably important to note that at that time the children at this school were relatively relaxed about assessment generally. Being a multi-level classroom helped children see how

you get better at things as you get older instilling a belief in their own improvement over time. Also the varying ages and stages make it more easily understandable that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses and can help each other. The younger ones experienced helping children older than themselves with some things, which reinforced an understanding of valuing difference, working together and knowledge of learning progressions. Although the children's experience of self-assessment seemed positive, self-assessment practice in my classroom was used to primarily serve teacher and teaching purposes.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Research shows that self-assessment can raise levels of achievement (Harlan, 2007) and can affect student motivation and self-efficacy in positive ways (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & William, 2003). Gregory, Cameron and Davies (2011) define self-assessment as a sequence of skills in a student's ability to 'reflect on the quality of their work, judge the degree to which it reflects explicitly stated goals or criteria, and revise accordingly' (p. 8). Boud (2007), with a focus on senior and tertiary students, defines self assessment as: 'the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work and making judgements about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards' (p. 122).

Self-assessment is tied particularly to assessment for learning, or assessment for formative purposes. Self-assessment (and peer assessment) is identified as one of the four main assessment practices for formative purposes or assessment for learning (Clarke, 2005) along with questioning, feedback and sharing criteria with the learner.

Assessment for formative purposes or assessment for learning is based on the pedagogical belief that assessment is more effective when students are actively involved. Green and Johnson (2010) state that self-assessment 'teaches objectivity – being able to get beyond your own point of view and look at yourself in relation to a standard. It also teaches empowerment – if you eventually understand the standard yourself, you are not as dependent on an authority to make judgements about your own work' (p. 11). The New Zealand Ministry of Education's position paper on assessment (2011) explained that 'to understand and cater for the unique context of individual students, it is important that students be educated in ways that develop their capacity to assess their own learning so that they can develop as autonomous, self-regulated, life-long learners' (p. 18).

Tan (2007) describes three ways that self-assessment practices are related to life-long learning: individuals developing critical skills (in particular, skills to conduct and evaluate his or her own learning); individuals developing self-directed learning (meaning the ability to plan and direct his or her own learning); and, developing individual responsibility for learning. Self-assessment ability is central to students' capacity for engaging in life-long learning which is seen as important in our diverse data-driven 21st century environment. Absolum (2006) put it very simply; 'learning is impossible without the on-going assessment by the learner' (p. 98).

The phrase 'assessment as learning' has been used to focus our consideration on the learner in assessment processes (L. Earl, 2003). That

students should be valued participants in their own learning, anticipate receiving and making use of quality feedback and be able to identify their own learning needs (with teacher assistance) is highlighted through the assessment as learning concept. The intention, or purpose, is that students develop skills for life-long learning and will be self-motivated through this practice. Assessment as learning emphasises the role of the learner as the critical link between learning and assessment processes. Earl and Katz (2006) explain that assessment as learning 'focuses on the explicit fostering of students' capacity over time to be their own best assessors' (p. 42).

Earl and Katz (2006) also outline the teacher's role, in relation to self-assessment, in promoting the development of such independent learners. Being able to:

- Model and teach the skills of self-assessment;
- Guide students in setting goals, and monitoring their progress toward them;
- Provide exemplars and models of good practice and quality work that reflect curriculum outcomes;
- Work with students to develop clear criteria of good practice;
- Guide students in developing internal feedback or self-monitoring;
- Provide mechanisms to validate and question their own thinking, and to become comfortable with the ambiguity and uncertainty that is inevitable in learning anything new;
- Provide regular and challenging opportunities to practice, so that students can become confident, competent self-assessors;
- Monitor students' metacognitive processes as well as their learning, and provide descriptive feedback; and,
- Create an environment where it is safe for students to take chances and where support is readily available.

Students need to know why we self-assess, how, and have opportunities to practice. Black and Wiliam (1998, p. 10) believe, 'Pupils should be trained in self-assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve'. Earl and Katz (2006) explained, 'Complex skills, such as monitoring and self-regulation, become routine only when there is constant feedback and practice using the skills' (p. 43). Students should be developing an understanding of the link between what they do and what happens next and perceive they have control of their actions to influence outcomes and or consequences. This can come from reflecting on work regularly and making decisions about what to do next (supported by the teacher).

However, assessment as learning can also be viewed as being where assessment practices take over the focus from learning and 'criteria compliance' replaces learning (see Torrance, 2007). The practice of self-assessment can develop as a personal guide to learning, enabling and supporting habits of reflection. However, if our classroom practice is more about self monitoring, time management and internalising standards then the focus is

perhaps more about making life easier for the teacher (compliance). If the focus is on control of behaviour (more than progress and achievement and improving quality in individual and class work) then self-assessment practice can give messages to individuals identifying fault and weakening rather than strengthening self-efficacy.

Self-assessment in practice arguably involves aspects of assessment of self, assessment by self and assessment for self.

Assessment of self

Self-assessment in practice can turn personal and introspective as implicit in the word 'self' is the implication to think inward therefore suggesting self-assessment is assessment of 'the self' (personal traits, or attributes). Assessment of self may contribute to supporting individualism that can lead to selfishness or egotism. The development of personal qualities is important especially in managing self and relating to others, however, culture and context are likely to influence how these play out. This kind of self-assessment as assessment of self may ultimately weigh self-worth and can be harmful.

Black and Wiliam (1998) and Boud and Associates (2010) recommend that any form of assessment should focus on the task not the self; that is, decentering the ego, to avoid harm. Brown and Dutton (1995) contend that self-knowledge is not 'vigorously' sought or 'typically' possessed. They suggest 'people are better served by having views of themselves that are a bit more positive than realistic' (p. 1288). These authors explain, 'Ability level is only one factor that determines performance outcomes. Effort, perseverance, and effective application of one's talents are also important' (p. 1294). An individual's slightly flattering perception of his or her own ability appears to support the enacting of these factors (Bandura, 1989). Bandura (1989) reasoned, 'if self-efficacy beliefs always reflected only what people could do routinely, they would rarely fail but they would not mount the extra effort needed to surpass their ordinary performance' (p. 1177).

If self-assessment focuses on just assessment of self then the process does not automatically mean that it is the individual who determines the process, makes meaning from the evidence or uses the information. Evaluation and judgment of evidence may occur external to the individual in assessment of self, even if the learner has been asked to complete the task him or herself.

Assessment by self

Self-assessment when just self-marking would likely reinforce the idea that children are doing the teacher's work and internalising controls. The importance of learner involvement in his or her learning is now generally accepted. Assessment by self, then, is about seeing self as learner, monitoring progress towards current goals, and seeking feedback. Assessment by self is the learner having hold of the process but not necessarily undertaking this practice on one's own.

Assessment for self

Assessment for self implies the meaning, usefulness and benefits of self-assessment are for the individual learner in the first instance. Perhaps this is an essential aspect of self-assessment. Self-assessment practice may provide the evidence and knowledge on which are founded individual's beliefs in their

capabilities to effect desired outcomes by their actions. Developing self-efficacy through self-assessment may also support the vital sense of purpose (intention, direction, making a difference) and sense of control over self and work.

When self assessment practice works, learners:

- Develop insights into the purpose and progression of learning;
- Develop understanding of own strengths and weaknesses;
- Develop insights into their own practice as learners;
- Are able to judge quality outcomes and effective strategies;
- Take greater meaning from feedback ;
- Are more conscious about how other's view work; and,
- Are more conscious and objective about how their own work compares with others.

Teachers report that students who practice self-assessment are able to say they need help without sense of failure, are more able and likely to talk about their learning and benefit from knowing we all have similar experiences when learning (Clarke, Timperley and Hattie, 2001, p. 50).

Was I developing student capabilities to self-assess in the model of practice I was using? In fact, the children were only occasionally involved in deciding what was important to be looked at, developing criteria, and even more rarely the timing and format of the self-assessment activity. All the children had to do, when asked, was 'pause and complete'.

SHORT-GUIDED REFLECTIONS

The language we use matters and it is important that we consider the terms and labels we use and reconsider our practices and consequences of these practices towards achieving our goals. My classroom practice of self-assessment was used essentially to solve an assessment problem not a learning problem. Looking back now I think that although I considered what I was doing was self-assessment I was really using short-guided reflections. 'Short' because there was little time set aside for completion of the task. 'Reflections' because there was little time for evidence gathering, analysis and evaluation; in fact, little time for considering much more than what immediately came to mind. Also these tasks were 'Guided'. That is, the teacher played a key role in the focus of the task, the questions, and the timing. Although these tasks could be forms of self-marking they were not assessment.

That self-assessment activities are labelled as assessment activities suggests a formality of process and that the outcomes provide evidence or data that can be used for judgements and evaluation. These assessment tasks will tell you things but not necessarily about a student's level of ability. While the results certainly provide information and further clues to what might be going on in an individual's mind – that is, their beliefs about themselves as learners and their approach to learning – this data is not reliable, depending as it does on the learner's feelings, attitude and situation at the time of this exercise and on the interpretation of the responses by a teacher who knows the child well.

There is little expectation of impartiality; something even adults struggle with. The children's responses need interpreting and task results are dependent on circumstances. Often the child's perception of their skill or success is incomplete, overly influenced by feelings at the time, what they thought the information was for and who was going to see it.

There is a great deal of potential for confusion for teachers and students (and parents) in the current high stakes assessment environment, around the term 'self-assessment'; the use of term 'self' and the use of term 'assessment'. Are our classroom practices that we call self-assessment developing the learner's sense of responsibility for their own learning and autonomy or is it about shifting assessment processes for teacher purposes including for discipline and control?

If we consider self-assessment as being linked to goals setting then this puts extra responsibility on teachers to model identification of worthwhile and timely goals. If deeper understanding of learning is being promoted by self-assessment then what children are being asked to learn can't be trivial or lack meaning.

A trivial process of self-, or peer-, assessment can further undermine simplistic or merely technical learning goals. If we recognise the importance of questioning then the quality of questioning being modelled by the teacher are important. By asking good questions both teachers and students can get at what is important to be learned. If we agree that developing shared understanding or standards of quality is important then it becomes even more important that these standards are appropriate and significant, relevant and meaningful.

The term self-assessment is not unproblematic. In practice there is potential for misunderstanding and confusion in our use of the term and this confusion may undermine learner, teacher and school goals.

CONCLUSION

Teachers engage in a variety of roles in assessment (mentor, guide, accountant, reporter and programme director) (Wilson, 1996 cited in L. Earl, 2003). It can be easy enough for busy teachers to underestimate the complexity of assessment and attempt to simplify processes and understandings in order to manage. As teacher we need to regularly reconsider and revise our assessment understanding and practices.

Self-assessment is not simply self-marking. Students need to know why we self-assess and have opportunities to practice. They need to recognise and understand that people learn in different ways and in their own time. Students need time to reflect on subject content, products of learning and their own learning strategies. The teacher plays a key role in modelling, negotiating, and refining concepts of quality.

The inclusion of the word 'assessment' in the term self-assessment can arguably distort one's interpretation and use of the evidence from these activities. The use of the word 'self' in self-assessment, I suggest, also has potential to mislead individuals about what is being assessed.

How can we evaluate our practice of self-assessment with our students in the classroom? We can ask if our classroom self-assessment practice is developing each child's ability to:

- Ask questions about criteria, quality and evidence in their work;
- Understand and use feedback;
- Identify his or her own learning needs;
- Take action in response;
- Practice habits of reflection; and,
- Develop autonomy and self-efficacy.

More specifically, we can ask when evaluating self-assessment activities:

- What is the student learning by completing this task?
- What are we going to learn from the answers?
- How could this information be used?
- What will this information depend on?

Whatever next steps we take as teachers, we can seek to further clarify what we mean by self-assessment in our theory and practice considering what is being assessed, by whom and for what purpose.

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