

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Self assessment is central to intrinsic motivation

Whilst undertaking my research on assessment and the way students respond to it, one of the most striking findings I came across, and one that has stuck forcibly in my mind, was a little study by Dai Hounsell at Edinburgh University that showed that a significant proportion of students were not bothering to collect their marked essays from the departmental office. They had gone to the trouble of writing their essays but their interest ended as soon as they had handed it in. Other research showed students frequently glanced at their marks and then filed their assignment away without reading the feedback or re-reading their own work. Why would they do this? And what does this phenomenon tell us about our conventional assessment arrangements and their effects on student motivation and learning?

Marilla Svinicki argued, in her item 33, that teachers who want to motivate their students should “allow the learner to exert some control over his or her own learning”. Marilla really knows the literature and concluded that “learners who believe that they are the ones making choices and exercising control over what is happening to them demonstrate a higher level of engagement (and) persistence...”

This is a position that is starkly at odds with the current emphasis in much current higher

education on teachers carefully designing all aspects of courses, specifying all outcomes, and then assessing students’ achievement of these outcomes, all with no involvement of the learners themselves. Most current course design seems to me to be about control: about teachers, and their institutions, taking all the responsibility for learning. Marilla’s point reflects a central component of Carl Rogers’ notions about significant learning, in particular his seventh principle of learning:

“7. Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process.”

Humanistic educationalists, such as John Heron, have argued that students should have control over as much as possible of what, how, where and when they learnt, and, in particular, control over judgements of the value of that learning: assessment of the achievement of outcomes. We are back again to Carl Rogers’ Principles of Learning.

“9. Independence, creativity and self-reliance are all facilitated when self-criticism and self-evaluation are basic and evaluation by others is of secondary importance.”

Perhaps the Edinburgh students were not ‘participating responsibly’ and ‘evaluation by others’ was the only kind of evaluation going on.

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When I worked at Oxford Polytechnic in the 1980's the Geography Department took Carl Rogers' principles very seriously. This was in part because they had increasing numbers of students and not enough staff and they wanted to find an educationally sound way of avoiding the otherwise inevitable decline in quality. Part of their solution was to hand more responsibility over to students so that they did for themselves and for each other what teachers would otherwise have had to do for them. A central component of this was self and peer assessment. Every assignment students tackled in three years was self assessed first before it was submitted. This was a requirement – if an assignment was submitted without a self assessment it would be returned unmarked. In the first year this self assessment had nothing to do with marks. Students were given the same criteria the teachers used and had to complete a self assessment sheet against each of these criteria before they handed their work in. Their teachers then used exactly the same sheet to provide marks and feedback, so that students could learn to calibrate their judgements so that they became more similar to those that would be made by academic geographers, gradually internalising academic standards and applying these standards to their own work and assignments. Over time, as students became more sophisticated in their self-assessment, and better at managing themselves, the scaffolding was gradually taken away, until their self-assessment took the forms of writing 500 words about “why you are not going to get one grade higher than the

grade you are actually going to get”. By now their self assessments were good enough to use to review and improve their own work before submitting it, and this ability was exploited. By the second year assignments were often peer assessed before being submitted for marking by the teacher. Students swapped their work, critiqued each other, and then responded to the critique by improving their work before submitting it to the teacher, and adding notes about how they had responded to some criticisms and why they had decided not to respond to others. It is important to recognise that peer assessment here was not undertaken to produce marks cheaply, but to provide an additional input to self assessment and self improvement of assignments. All responsibility for marks still lay with the teacher. All of this improvement of assignments, and the learning associated with it, was free to the teachers – it had taken the teachers no time or effort whatsoever.

The fascinating thing for me about these practices was that they took place within a curriculum that was designed by teachers to conventional standards of specification of outcomes, assessment and criteria. Students took no part on the design and had little choice about content or process and none about timing or location. But there was still plenty of scope to ‘participate responsibly’.

My research on assessment revealed the sheer extent of students' ‘extrinsic’ motivation – studying to pass, to get marks, but not to learn for themselves. Students did things for others and their reward was a qualification. But they

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were not engaged, did not put in many hours of effort, seldom reflected on what they were doing, and I suspect the long term learning outcomes were dismal. The previous item was about choice. But even when there is little or no real choice there is scope for students to become more intrinsically motivated if they take responsibility for judgements about their own learning, ability, achievements and progression. Self-assessment is powerful – and

very cheap – and its educational benefits can be harvested with no threat to standards.

Suggested reading

[Heron, John \(1988\) Assessment Revisited Chapter 4 from *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning*, edited by David Boud, London, Kogan Page](#)

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