Guide to **Self-Assessment**

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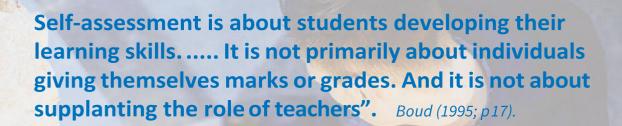**2017**

Self-assessment is about students developing their learning skills. ..... It is not primarily about individuals giving themselves marks or grades. And it is not about supplanting the role of teachers". *Boud (1995; p17).*

Self-assessment is defined as 'the involvement of learners in making judgements about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning' and is a valuable approach to supporting student learning, particularly when used formatively. Self-assessment supports student learning and is one of the most important skills that students require for future professional development and life-long learning, as it develops their capacity to be assessors of learning. This pamphlet introduces self-assessment to academics who are considering implementing it in their teaching. It provides a 'theory into practice' approach and outlines techniques and provides examples for integrating self-assessment more directly in the design of curricula. It argues for making its use in the classroom more explicit in order to help students learn more effectively.

Introduction:

Assessment has a number of different purposes:

- to measure achievement (summative assessment/ assessment *of* learning);
- to engender learning (formative assessment/ assessment *for* learning);
- to enable learners to become aware of how they learn (assessment *as* learning).

However, higher education has generally focused on 'acquisition of' rather than 'participation in' learning (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). Falchikov (2005) further outlines the changing definitions of assessment: assessment as measurement, assessment as procedure, assessment as enquiry, assessment as accountability and assessment as quality control. Ideally, assessment is *for* learning as well as for measuring achievement (*of* learning).

When students are assessed in activities that seem intrinsically meaningful or useful, they are more likely to engage and invest in deep learning (Sambell *et al.*, 2013). However, traditional assessment practices, which focus on grades and individual certification, can undermine students' capacity to judge their own work (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). Students can become passive recipients of externally imposed assessment practices. Assessment should be perceived of as a fair and transparent process (Flint and Johnson, 2011). Both peer- and self-assessment can contribute towards student perceptions of the fairness of assessment (Rust *et al.*, 2003).

What is self-assessment?

Self-assessment is defined as 'the involvement of learners in making judgements about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning' (Boud and Falchikov (1989; p 529) and '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' Boud (1995; p4). Thus, self-assessment is intimately bound up with issues of power, control and authority and the extent to which these are transferred from academic staff to students (Brew, 1999).

The underpinning axiom of self-assessment is that the individual student is able to gain understanding of their own needs, which can then be communicated to fellow students (leading into peer learning and assessment) and/or the tutor/lecturer. Self-assessment is a valuable approach to supporting student learning, particularly when used formatively (Taras, 2010). It is also useful in preparing students for life-long learning, through discussions about their skills and competencies (including the ability to assess), not just knowledge (Brew, 1999).

For self-assessment to be effective, students should first become familiar with the concept. The term 'self-assessment' is used to cover all judgements by learners of their work: it is related to and incorporates terms such as 'self-evaluation' and 'self-appraisal'. There are several different purposes of self-assessment: to evaluate understanding of the content, to demonstrate the achievement of outcomes and goals and the self-development of the learner (Figure 1). These three aspects of self-assessment are all inter-linked and will receive different emphases at different times during the process of learning.

Figure 1: Learning in self-assessment: A dynamic relationship exists between content, demonstrated outcomes and goals and the personal development of the learner. Within self-assessment, it is the learner who decides, as the need arises, which 'cog' is emphasised (adapted from Taras, 2010).

What issues need to be considered by both lecturers and students for effective self-assessment?

There are a number of open questions and legitimate concerns about self-assessment regarding its validity and reliability, its purposes and benefits, whether it should be formative or summative and its accuracy when compared to academic staff assessment (Leach, 2012; Jackson, 2014; Brown *et al.*, 2015). It is important to appreciate that there is a difference between formative self-assessment ('feedback for oneself from oneself') and summative self-evaluation (Andrade and Du, 2007; Andrade and Valtcheva, 2009).

Successful student self-assessment requires both effective implementation and management. It should be a purposeful and systematic approach integrated into course/module design. The effectiveness of the approaches needs to be monitored through reflecting on the process and the outcomes by both students and academic staff. Staff should spend time preparing students for self-assessment.

Preparing students for self-assessment

Assessment has remained the 'last bastion' of teaching and learning in higher education, from which students are excluded or kept on the margins (Taras, 2015).

> *When assessment is done in secret with tutors keeping to themselves the grounds upon which they make assessment decisions learners can find themselves in a client role and this may breed distrust and a feeling of 'us and them'.*
>
> Brow et al. (1995; p 81)

Therefore, prior to implementing a self-assessment approach in teaching, it is important that discussions and information sessions are held with students to promote understanding, negotiate and decide upon assessment criteria, and to clarify the required standards and learning outcomes. In order to do this effectively, time has to be set aside for such activities at the expense of 'in class content', which should be provided in alternative ways; e.g. through the use of VLEs or podcasts through a 'flipped classroom' for example.

> *Before learning can even commence there is a need for learners to identify for themselves what they need to learn, taking into account a range of contextual factors, and to judge what counts as good work.*
>
> Boud and Falchikov (2006; p403)

The majority of students will have pre-conceived ideas and prior experiences (good and bad; Race, 1995), which shape their expectations of teaching and learning, including what counts as valid and fair assessment. Students might expect a didactic approach to teaching and a passive mode of learning and may not feel comfortable with the concept of self-assessment. Furthermore, learners don't tend to recall positive experiences of assessment and generally do not actively seek out opportunities to assess themselves or be assessed (Boud, 1995). Also, much assessment by staff involves the use of so-called 'tacit knowledge', which is hidden. Furthermore, even when attempts are made to make assessment criteria more explicit to students, it is not always articulated clearly and precisely and it is often interpreted incorrectly (O'Donovan *et al.*, 2004).

Standardisation of marking occurs over time owing to discussions and shared experiences of marking and moderation between staff. Thus, involving students in this process should make assessment processes and standards more explicit and comprehensible to them (Rust *et al.*, 2003). O'Donovan et al. (2008) outline how student understanding of assessment standards can be developed though a so-called 'nested hierarchy' of approaches, involving students working together with their peers and lecturers as partners in socially constructed communities of practice for learning.

Why use student self-assessment?

In general, self-assessment supports student learning and is one of the most important skills that students require for future professional development and life-long learning, as it develops the capacity to be assessors of learning (Boud and Falchikov, 2006; Taras, 2010). Taras also points out that self-assessment starts from the perspective of the integration of learning and teaching. This is as opposed to the view that learners and tutors are separate and have discrete roles and distinct areas of focus. Pragmatically, self-assessment also frees up tutors/lecturers from heavy assessment loads. When the primary assessment task is the responsibility of the students, the tutor/lecturer becomes much more of a facilitator and moderator of assessment in collaboration with students.

In the self-assessment approach, teaching and learning are intrinsically participatory activities that are to some extent held together by the 'glue' of assessment. Paradoxically, self-assessment then takes place within a supportive 'learning community' in which all participants are involved in negotiating the learning and the activities that contribute to such learning. Self-assessment then becomes a tool for empowering students, since students gain access to involvement with assessment and share power in decision making, particularly grading.

The defining characteristic of self-assessment is 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.

Boud (1995; p12)

There are a number of benefits, along with barriers to and issues associated with self-assessment that are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Benefits, Barriers and Issues Associated with Self-Assessment (Leach, 2012; p 139).

Benefits	Barriers and Issues
Enhances learning, including deep and lifelong learning	Some students are reluctant to self-assess; they feel they lack the necessary skills, confidence or ability to judge their own work
Prepares students for their role in participating in a democratic society	Students prefer and expect to be assessed by experts and see it as the teachers' responsibility
Makes students feel that they have some control over their own evaluation	Students are afraid of being wrong or are too harsh on themselves and are uncomfortable with the responsibility
Develops learner autonomy, cognitive abilities and metacognitive engagement	Students do not like it and do not see benefit in it
Promotes active engagement with learning	Students cannot be bothered arguing that they have 'enough to think about as it is'
Promotes better understanding of content and increased quality and thoughtfulness on assignments	For some students cultural issues impact on self-assessment because giving themselves a good grade is considered inappropriate or boasting
Alleviates student anxiety and eases student–teacher conflict by demystifying the grading process	Who is the 'self' in 'self-assessment'? It involves one part of the self assessing another part of the self's actions and outcomes - 'it raises some deep questions about the nature of the self, self-awareness and self-monitoring'
Enhances personal or intellectual development or social competencies	Encourages the internalisation of accountability and may be linked to notions of surveillance and social control

'Weaker', 'median' and 'strong' forms of self-assessment

The terms 'weaker', 'median' and 'stronger', in terms of a spectrum of self-assessment models, relate to the degree to which students have access to power and decision making regarding the assessment process, compared to the tutor/lecturer (Taras, 2010). As the self-assessment approaches described here evolve from 'weaker' to 'stronger', they move from behaviourist to more cognitive and social constructivist theories of learning (Carlile and Jordan, 2005). However, each approach is valuable in that each requires students to reflect on, discuss and negotiate criteria, appreciate the standard of their work and justify the grade indicating the quality of their work (adapted from Taras, 2010).

'Weaker' models of self-assessment

■ *Self-marking*

- Tutors/lecturers provide marking sheets with criteria and standards required;
- A hierarchy of content and priorities defined by the tutor/lecturer and categorised according to structure, arguments and concepts;
- Students gain understanding of the interpretations of the tutor and use these to compare with their own work and correct and grade themselves;
- Students have to actively engage in clarifying, interpreting and critiquing their own work;
- Students are carrying out the same assessment process as tutors;
- *Advantages* - Relatively simple to implement, immediate feedback obtained; students engage with both the process and product of assessment; time saver for tutors; increase in trust resulting from permitting learners into the 'assessment community'.

■ *How can self-marking be made 'stronger'?*

- Increase student participation by involving them (as individuals and/or in groups) in deciding on marking criteria (e.g. producing and agreeing on the mark sheets) and in developing model answers;
- Negotiating model answers demonstrates to the students that multiple solutions/answers are possible;
- The tutor/lecturer provides two or more examples of work of various standards to the students along with an objective descriptor of 'sound standard' that is of medium level; students then discuss the examples against the descriptor to deepen the grasp of the criteria by the students (Cowan 2006; p 114);
- *Advantages* - Helps students gain greater depth in making judgements, understanding criteria for assessment and grading.

'Median' models of self-assessment

■ Standard model

- Students use criteria to judge, comment on strengths and weaknesses and grade their own work prior to submission to tutors;
- Tutor/lecturer marks in the usual way and comments are added in addition to the students' comments about both the work itself and the self-assessment
- The marked work (including all comments) is returned to students (Cowan 2006; p120);
- *Advantages* - greater initial student engagement and reflection results in increased depth of understanding about the assessment process.

'Stronger' models of self-assessment

■ Self-assessment with integrated peer/tutor feedback - 'Integrated SSA model' (Taras, 2015)

- Students carry out self-assessment based on marking sheets provided along with criteria and standards required;
- Tutor/lecturer provides feedback using the grading criteria, but without providing a mark or grade;
- Students also gain peer feedback and then, taking all feedback received into account, revise and re-grade their own work and resubmit;
- *Advantages* - students self-assess without the emotional pressure of the grade, and from an informed position combining both tutor and peer feedback.

■ Learning contract design (LCD)

- Self-directed learning: students decide on assessment tasks;
- Students supported through regular, time-tabled sessions in which feedback is provided by tutor/lecturer and peers and to which students are required to respond;
- Students engage in self-assessment by comparing their work to the criteria they develop and justifying the mark they assign themselves;
- Tutor's role is to oversee and moderate the self-assigned student marks;
- *Advantages* - a holistic approach integrating and aligning learning, reflection and assessment, where students are the primary decision makers.

Example 1: **Impact of self-assessment by students on their learning**
(Sharma *et al.,* 2016)

- Examined impact of self–assessment by undergraduate medical students on their subsequent academic performance;

- Gauged the perception of students and faculty about self–assessment as a tool for enhanced learning;

- Evaluation of two theory tests consisting of both essay type and short answer questions;

- Students self–assessed their performance 3 days following the first test and also received marks and feedback from faculty;

- A non-identical theory test on the same topic with the same difficulty level was conducted after 7 days and assessed by the teachers;

- Significant improvement in the academic performance after the process of self–assessment was observed;

- Concluded that self–assessment increased the interest and motivation level of students leading to enhanced learning and better academic performance, helping them in development of critical skills for analysis of their own work.

Example 2: **Self-assessment applied to oral presentations**
(Suñol et al, 2016)

- Designed and implemented two instruments to measure students' peer and self-assessment, and a rubric to guide the assessment process;

- Results were compared with the marks awarded by the professor;

- Applying peer and self-assessment to oral presentation activities also demonstrates their formative value above and beyond their summative usefulness;

- Study detected significant deviations between their marks and those of the teacher. In general, the marks awarded by students were higher;

- Recommendations: spending more time explaining the rubric and watching oral presentations to illustrate good and bad practices; raise awareness of the importance of constructive criticism in improving presentation skills.

Example 3: **Structuring the self-assessment by the use of prompt questions for students (Race, 2001) such as:**

- What do you think is a fair grade for the work you have handed in?

- What did you do best in this assessment task?

- What did you do least well in this assessment task?

- What did you find was the hardest part?

- What was the most important thing you learned in doing this assessment task?

- If you had more time to complete the task, would you change anything? What would you change, and why?

Some simple ideas to implement self-assessment
(From Falchikov, 2005; p120-125)

Self-assessment of coursework essays using criteria referenced approach in psychology: extent to which the question addressed, organization and structure, quality and relevance of argument, depth of understanding, evaluation of theoretical concepts and research evidence.

Self-assessment in first year sociology: marking criteria included in handbook, teacher feedback provided without grade then students self-assess and resubmit, bonus marks awarded for accuracy of staff versus student marking.

Self-assessment of essays by students of a foreign languages: assessment criteria negotiated with tutor and other students, then self-assessment carried out in two rounds so that students could gain experience.

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Guidelines for Good Practice in Self-Assessment
(adapted from Boud, 1995; p208).

The motive for self-assessment is to enhance student learning, student perceptions are considered, there is a clear rationale, which is discussed with students and the process is evaluated and modified accordingly.

Staff are willing to share control of assessment: students are involved in establishing criteria, have a direct role in influencing the process and guidelines are produced for each stage of the process

Self-assessment is one of a number of complementary strategies to promote self-directed and inter-dependent learning that permeate the whole module/course

Self-assessment promotes student engagement in and learning about a subject: expressing understanding, making decisions and justifying judgements.

Peer feedback is used as part of the process, activities are introduced in step with students' abilities to 'learn how to learn'.

Summary

Self-assessment is a valuable approach to supporting student learning, particularly when used formatively. Self-assessment is one of the most important skills that students require for future professional development and life-long learning, as it develops their capacity to be assessors of learning. It is important that teaching staff consider how they might share some of the feedback and assessment processes with students to facilitate student learning.

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