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Taking Self Assessment Seriously

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Self assessment seems to be an ability whose time has come to take its rightful and continuous place in higher education. Now that making student learning outcomes explicit has become an accreditation requirement, where does self assessment fit? As a starting point, who of us does not see lifelong learning as an outcome of a college or university education? And, when encouraged to define what lifelong learning means, who of us would not include the ability to evaluate the state of one's understanding and competence, one's progress in developing them, and the determination of what needs to come next? In light of that, self assessment seems to be an ability logically essential to effective lifelong learning.

Yet, in my experience, most college graduates do not recognize self assessment as a skill they have systematically developed, although they might have experienced it in a freshman writing class or as a required part of a portfolio they produced. Already back in 1982 the results of a survey of college graduates in Australia identified problem solving and self assessment as the two abilities graduates most need. The participants indicated that their university education contributed less than it might have to the development of these two abilities (Midgley & Petty, 1983). In that survey, the graduates implicitly recognized that self assessment is not something they can do just intuitively well, but that it is something to be learned. Researchers—especially in adult learning—have confirmed the importance of self assessment (Boud, 1995; Candy, 1991; Chickering and Reiser, 1993; MacGregor, 1993; Yancey, 1998).

My own experience, as well as that of my Alverno colleagues, strengthened by our formal research, has verified for us that self assessment enhances learning and extends the responsibility students assume for their own education if they take self assessment seriously and work to develop it with increasingly sophisticated understanding. (Alverno College Faculty, 1994; Loacker, 2000; Mentkowski & Associates, 2000).

Seven Concepts of Self Assessment

On the basis of that experience and research, I set forth seven concepts here to define the kind of self assessment that is not merely a matter of self-grading nor of an occasional summative analysis of a series of one's performances. It is an ongoing process of evaluating one's performance in a way that makes it a sustained and sustaining essential part of lifelong learning.

The first of these concepts is the understanding and practice of self assessment as a developmental process that, like understanding itself, is never exhausted in its ability to grow. Our research in self assessment has formally revealed what we've all probably experienced—that a beginning student "makes judgments on her own behavior when someone else points out concrete evidence to her" (Alverno College Faculty, p. 106) and "expects the teacher to take the initiative in recognizing her problems and approaching her about them." (Alverno College Faculty, p. 106).

After several years of consistent practice in self assessment throughout her academic program, a student "emphasizes reliance on self assessment," "gives evidence of internalizing standards of self assessment," and "shapes her aspirations realistically commensurate with her abilities." (Alverno College Faculty, p.107). These indications of growth suggest that with self assessment, as with any other ability, understanding increases with practice and further understanding refines practice.

A second concept essential to the kind of self assessment that underpins lifelong learning is the use of observable performance as the basis or evidence for judgment. Ideally, students assessing

themselves for effectiveness in teamwork in science experimentation, for instance, judge it on the basis of a series of observable performances. Within a perhaps overall uneven pattern of effectiveness, they are able to discern patterns of strengths and weaknesses that can assist them in their plans for improvement.

Two more concepts that define the kind of self assessment called for here are careful observation and reflective analysis. Several basic subskills involved are distinguishing observation from inference and discerning detail that is apt to be overlooked. The challenge of precise observation lies especially in the ability to separate one's expectations from actual performance, for our research has uncovered the tendency in a beginning student to "experience evaluation of her performance as general affirmation or rejection of herself." (Alverno College Faculty, p.106). Typically, a student's perception of his or her own speaking ability can be that it is nonexistent. That student will find it very hard to discern what might be excellent articulation or any other signs of effective speaking even in a video recording of his or her performance, much less in a performance recorded only in memory. For this reason it is important to assist a student to understand that each self assessment is an evaluation, not of the person, but of a performance in a specific context or a series of performances in various contexts. The self is doing the judging as the agent rather than being judged as the object.

For an understanding of one's observations, reflection plays an essential role in self assessment. Getting at the how and why of one's actions seems an obvious preliminary to avoid leaping to judgment. Boud, Keogh, and Walker say it well, in identifying the role of reflection in relation to self assessment as a concern "with how the learner works on the experience, links new knowledge with old, reexamines the initial experience in light of his or her own goals, integrates knowledge into his or her existing framework, and rehearses it with a view to subsequent activity." (1985, p. 21).

A fifth concept incorporated into self assessment as a developing process is that of the use of criteria that are gradually internalized. These criteria are constantly refined by instructors, who initially articulate the criteria, and by students, who at first might or might not

be able to express some criteria. Both keep coming to an increased understanding of the sought abilities and knowledge the criteria represent. Part of students' learning to self assess is their seeing criteria (in effect, shared mental models) as specifically defining the nature of an ability or a cluster of abilities. A given student might know that effective organization is a criterion for good writing, but it takes some time to understand exactly what that means in performance, how context and audience require it to vary, and how one integrates its myriad nuances and varieties and levels of expression.

The development of criteria is enhanced by instructor and peer feedback, which is the sixth defining concept identified here as essential to the kind of self assessment needed for lifelong learning. Through such feedback, a student expands his or her operational understanding of what constitutes effective performance. Anne Brockbank and Ian McGill stress the point that, without the interaction of thought brought about by external dialogue, "critically reflective learning may not happen." (1998, p. 79). Feedback from instructors and peers can highlight points the student missed, can discover gaps in the student's analysis, can provide other perspectives from which to view a performance, and can raise questions that might lead to further understanding.

The final concept for defining self assessment in relation to lifelong learning is planning for improvement. Clearly the process of careful observation and reflective judgment, if recorded, can provide valuable information for ongoing improvement. Specifically, it can assist students to transform vague hopes into realistic goal setting. Directed assignments for self assessment designed and administered by the classroom instructor can encourage students into a habit of articulating goals for improvement, whether the student is an aspiring scientist who needs to raise questions that evoke thinking rather than factual answers or an aspiring historian who needs to analyze assumptions before drawing conclusions. A goal might be set for the next single performance until it becomes a habit or it might span a semester or year. In any case, it encourages the student to reexamine and verify his or her intuitive decisions as well as intentionally informed ones.

Conclusion

The potential of such self assessment to become a natural part of how a student approaches his or her challenge to continue to learn to live and work and relate to others effectively is pointedly summarized in words from an informal conversation with one Alverno College student about to graduate: "I think I kind of figured out what the goal is behind this whole self assessment thing that I have spent three and a half years on. The whole goal is to become a self-directed learner, to become responsible for your own education because we are not always going to have the opportunity to be here and to be guided by a teacher and to lean on a teacher. You have to be able to have an accurate idea of where you are and how you are doing, especially when you take in new information or new areas and you don't have these people as resources anymore. It's very difficult to get all this knowledge and keep going unless you are able to figure out how it is that you are doing—and that takes practice to get accurate and realistic." (Alverno College Faculty, 1994, p. 78).

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