Enhancing Learning Through Self-Assessment

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Self Assessment

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Some chapters draw on previously published papers. Where the original papers were written with others, this is indicated in the contents list. The chapters which include content from previous publications which is not otherwise indicated are: Chapter 4: Boud, D (1995) 'Assessment and learning: contradictory or complementary?' In Knight, P (ed) *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*, London: Kogan Page, 35–48; Chapter 6: Boud, D and Holmes, W H (1981) 'Self and peer marking in an undergraduate engineering course', *IEEE Transactions on Education E-24*, 4, 267–74; Chapter 7: Boud, D, Churches, A E and Smith, E M (1986) 'Student self assessment in an engineering design course: an evaluation', *International Journal of Applied Engineering Education*, 2, 2, 83–90, with permission of the Editor, *International Journal of Engineering Education*; Chapter 8: Boud, D and Tyree, A L (1980) 'Self and peer assessment in professional education: a preliminary study in law', *Journal of the Society of Public Teachers of Law*. 15, 1, 65–74, with permission of Carfax Publishing Company, Abingdon, Oxfordshire; Chapter 9: Boud, D (1992) 'The use of self-assessment schedules in negotiated learning', *Studies in Higher Education*, 17, 2, 185–200; Chapter 10: Boud, D and Kilty, J M (1981) 'Self-appraisal for university teachers: a guide for workshop leaders', *Tertiary Education Research Centre Occasional Publication No. 19*, Kensington: University of New South Wales, and Boud, D and Kilty, J M (1984) 'Self-appraisal: an approach to academic staff development', in Cryer, P (ed) *Training Activities for Teachers in Higher Education, Volume Two*, Guildford: SRHE and

Chapter 1

Introduction

Whenever we learn we question ourselves. 'How am I doing?', 'Is this enough?', 'Is this right?', 'How can I tell?', 'Should I go further?' In the act of questioning is the act of judging ourselves and making decisions about the next step. This is self assessment.

In starting this book, I began to pose myself some questions. I wanted to bring together previous work on self assessment, work on student learning and ideas which have followed the renewed interest in self assessment in higher education in the 1990s. As I progressed, I began to ponder on what self assessment meant to me now. Did it rest in my earlier conception of it as a vital skill and attribute of lifelong learning? Was it the one which has unfortunately become fashionable in some places: a warm up to assessment by others that often had severe consequences in terms of status and financial support? Or was it something altogether more personally challenging?

As I began to write, I realised that my motives for focusing on this topic were much more related to my own history and experiences than I had expected. Self assessment, while commonly portrayed as a technique to enhance learning, is more transformative, elusive and confronting to conventional teaching than it is normally expedient to recognise. As I thought back to my own images of self assessment and those of students I knew, I thought of it first as a task with defined outcomes, but then reflected that, when it is conducted in a context of openness and critical reflection, it allows for the possibility of seeing oneself and the options which lay before one in a radically different way. In other words, beyond discussion of technique and strategy, in self assessment lies something worth striving for that is more than simply an addition to the teaching and learning repertoire. To reach this further point involves getting to grips with a range of issues to do with power and the influence of others. It involves confronting the controlling role of assessment in educational institutions. And it involves noting that self assessment is much more than personal introspection. As we shall see later, it can take on many guises and be used to many different ends.

The book is grounded in my experience of using self assessment in a range

of higher educational and professional settings. It is also grounded in experiences of being assessed and the feelings which accompany this. Above all I wanted a pragmatic book which would be helpful to teachers and students considering using self assessment. To start with the transformative and challenging aspects is not a good way to commence a practically oriented book. Faced with the practicalities of how to approach the task, I had to acknowledge that the starting point for the book was very much my own.

Although my experience is necessarily unique, the issues with which I deal in this volume are very common. The many people who have explored the relationship between assessment and learning will recognise features of the story. The book presents an account of a number of self assessment projects undertaken in higher education in a wide range of disciplines and professional fields of interest, interspersed with my own reflections. At various points, there are summaries of useful ideas and warnings of pitfalls to enable the reader to avoid some of the many traps that will be met in using ideas of self assessment. The realities of working within a system that places many barriers on the educational innovator are to the fore. Practical approaches that work within normal constraints on teaching are emphasised. However, some chapters focus on more fundamental educational issues and discuss self assessment in relation to them.

The question that had been constantly with me was: what are the implications of writing a book about self assessment? I had assembled a large volume of useful material, but I had failed to reckon with the reflexive nature of the task. How could I write a book on self assessment without engaging in the very act that I was commending to others as worthwhile? There is a unique challenge and a curious irony in writing about self assessment: attention is inevitably drawn to the act of self assessment itself and that can be inhibiting.

Such thoughts are not helpful when it comes to writing any book, let alone a book on self assessment. Discussing this with my co-worker on this enterprise led me to ponder on whether there is a model for self assessment that says one can't continually be assessing oneself; to do so is to inhibit action. One has to act and then assess; but not both at the same time. So I had to think of a way of writing without my critical self assessment stopping me.

The solution to this problem was to accept the advice I give to others using self assessment (which appears in Chapter 14). This is, identify some criteria for judging success early in the process then set these aside to be returned to later. I therefore listed the following:

- inclusion of some autobiographical material to help make the ideas come alive
- clarity about what is and what is not covered
- rooted in actual practice with examples given
- underpinned by theory and research
- reasonably comprehensive in coverage of higher education
- of practical use to others in implementation
- linked to key ideas in teaching and learning.

Starting with the autobiographical is a way of indicating the very tangible roots of ideas that might otherwise appear to be a little arbitrary. It provides a context for my introduction to the sections that follow. Those readers who prefer not to focus on a personal introduction should skip the next few pages and proceed directly to the section headed 'Structure of the book'.

My background in self assessment

Why have I been interested in self assessment? I hold the view that research interests are always prompted at some level by personal experience (Marshall and Reason, 1993; Reason and Marshall, 1987). So what is it that has made this an interest which spans more than 20 years? As I thought about it I realised that my interest in assessment goes back ever further, to experiences of being assessed, and subsequently to the problems of assessing my own work. I also suspected that the concern of others with self assessment is also related to their experiences of being assessed. This therefore seemed a fruitful place to start.

In reflecting on being assessed what comes to mind are not the successes. My interest in assessment was related to experiences of failure, feelings of unfairness when being assessed, increasing doubts about the validity of the judgements of others, and a slow dawning that it was not others whom I should be satisfying in my learning endeavours, but myself!

I have been reinforced in my view of the personal impact of assessment by the work of my former colleagues in the Professional Development Centre at the University of New South Wales. Sue Toohey teaches a subject on assessment in the postgraduate course for university teachers. At the beginning she asks them to write a short autobiography focusing on their experiences of being assessed. The results of this are devastating and students can't stop themselves from referring to it in other classes. They emerge from the exercise saying to themselves that they must not treat their students in the same ways in which they were treated. It is clear from their reports that even successful, able and committed students – those who

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become university teachers – have been hurt by their experiences of assessment, time and time again, through school and through higher education. This hurt did not encourage them to persist and overcome adversity: it caused them to lose confidence, it dented their self-esteem and led them never to have anything to do with some subjects ever again.

I found it strangely reassuring that some of my own problems with assessment were shared by others. However, the effects in each case are personal and have a very specific influence over one's life and work. Sometimes they lead us to avoid entire areas of activity. Sometimes they lead us to overcompensate and nag away at those areas in which we were found wanting. Some of the assessment incidents which I recalled having had an influence – both negative and positive – on me were: first, being told in primary school that I couldn't write and had nothing to say; a remark which for many years was self-fulfilling and probably led to me failing 'O' level English Language twice. Then, I was surprised about my success in school mathematics and later physics. This led to successful completion of a physics degree. I remember my experience of 'A' level chemistry as I discovered the fallibility of my teacher in covering the appropriate syllabus and realising that I had to make my own assessment of what was required and prepare myself for the examinations accordingly. Then as a postgraduate student I was given useful, detailed feedback by a friendly colleague on my first paper for an international journal. Uncomfortable though this was then, I realised that this was the first time that I had been given feedback of a type that I could use, in a context which was supportive and which respected my intentions – Sid O'Connell was a true teacher. The experience of this helped build confidence and began to demystify the process of writing.

These experiences laid the foundation for my later interests in self assessment. My discovery and use of the chemistry syllabus was my first conscious involvement with self assessment in a relatively structured way, and my positive experience of getting good quality feedback focused my mind on the role of peers in the process, the subject of a later chapter. Following these reflections on being assessed, I recalled meeting the formal notion of self assessment for the first time. This came in the early 1970s when I was involved with the Human Potential Research Project at the University of Surrey. There was a jolt of recognition along with a degree of suspicion generated by the challenge it presented to someone like me who had succeeded in a system in which the assessments of others were supreme. Through my interactions with John Heron on this project, I was conceptually convinced of the significance of self assessment and started to realise how it connected to my own biography.

The project I became involved in focused on ways of working with people

in professional and non-professional contexts to help them develop themselves. Under the inspired leadership of John Heron, the project explored how the potential of human beings could be more effectively realised in practical ways. One of these was the design and development of in-service training courses for groups who previously had no access to any kind of training or development. Courses for such groups were developed around the actual needs of the participants, without constraint from an external syllabus, assessment boards or competency frameworks. Success was judged on the extent to which the expressed needs of the participants had been met. These groups were particularly challenging to work with because many participants worked in contexts which were brutalising and not respectful of them or their clients. I clearly recall visiting one of the institutions from which they came. I found a hospital for the mentally handicapped (as they were then called) that could have come direct from the pages of Dickens: in the Victorian gloom of the brown-painted corridors nurses acted as jailers carrying huge bunches of keys for the locked wards; patients were punished by being placed in padded isolation cells if they 'misbehaved'. Some of the staff who came to our courses had been in the same job for the past 40 years with no opportunity to step aside and reflect on their practice. Meeting the needs of these participants involved overcoming their suspicion and resentment about being 'sent' on a course and dealing with a degree of personal inflexibility that was not surprising in the circumstances.

In these courses, if learners were to take responsibility for their own learning then part of this process was, inevitably, their involvement in making assessments of their own learning goals, the activities in which they were to engage and the ways in which they would judge the outcomes. Doing this was easier said than done and much effort was directed towards establishing a climate in which participants could set aside their job role and respond as people whose own needs were important. As course leaders we would often spend time licking our wounds after emotionally-draining sessions which were part of the process of working with the needs presented. In that context the only form of assessment which was conceivable was self assessment by the course participants, informed from time-to-time by the comments of peers and staff members.

This experience was a great shock to me, as a science graduate of only a few years standing. It seemed to turn my previous experience of teaching and learning on its head. It posed the fundamental question: what are teaching, learning and assessment really about? Are they the relatively well-ordered and formalised process which I had experienced as a student or did they constitute the searching, challenging, agonising struggle for meaning and growth which I was now confronting? My conception now

encompasses both, but my faith in existing structures of teaching and assessment had gone. At school and university I had had doubts about the strange processes I was expected to participate in as a student, for example, spending hours memorising information which I knew I would never use again. However, the arbitrary, socially-constructed nature of university courses and particularly the assessment element, became apparent in a way that meant that I could never return naively to the cosy assumptions of the examination, the assignment and the rest of the teacher-determined paraphernalia of the educational institution.

Although this experience had challenged my conceptions of assessment, it occurred in a university context that was quite unusual. The next step therefore was to consider the consequences for more conventional settings. The Human Potential Project was also committed to working with 'normal' university courses and a little later organised the first of a pair of intensive workshops on what were called experiential techniques in higher education. In these workshops a group of people explored the application of strategies and techniques which had previously been used in the personal and professional development context to see how they could be used within the mainstream of the university. Apart from the realisation that experiential exercises could be used as readily in academic subjects as in practical areas such as communication, the main impact on me was in the clarification and development of ideas about self and peer assessment (Boud *et al.*, 1972).

While I was becoming increasingly confident about the importance of self assessment in higher education, I did not have the opportunity to apply the ideas in my own teaching until I moved to Australia in 1976. I was given responsibility for the design and teaching of the two core units in a postgraduate course in science education at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University). As I was surrounded by colleagues in the Department of Applied Physics who did not regard this as their own field of expertise, I was left very much to my own devices. The course I developed included a major emphasis on students setting their own goals, curriculum negotiation and, of course, self and peer assessment. As I appeared to know what I was doing and I presented it in a way which suggested that such an approach was not unusual, my ideas were accepted and students took readily to making their own assessments, though not without some initial trepidation. In keeping with the spirit of staff-student collaboration which the course aimed to engender, one of the students worked with me to write an account of the process (Boud and Prosser, 1980).

We saw self assessment as a significant component in a mix of strategies which aimed to create collaboratively designed courses to meet the needs of students and the subject. I thought this design was simply an application of

what I had learned from the in-service courses, to a mainstream, accredited course, but it was regarded by others as a rather more significant shift of approach and a version of our paper appeared in Malcolm Knowles' well-known collection *Andragogy in Action* (Boud and Prosser, 1984).

Self assessment appeared to be effective but I soon discovered an additional challenge. I was responsible for offering the same subjects in distance learning mode. Could I use the same emphasis on collaborative design with self assessment when I did not have direct contact with students? At first I was intimidated by the prospect. There was only a small group of students but they were spread over the state – which was of a similar area to Western Europe. They couldn't afford to travel to a single face-to-face meeting and telephone contact was prohibitively expensive. I had already designed the internal version of the course so there was no alternative to making the distance version equivalent, even though curriculum negotiation by post over many thousands of kilometres was a very slow, and singularly non-spontaneous, process. Peer feedback and self assessment were in fact not particularly difficult to incorporate although I felt that the students had much less opportunity to explore and contribute to alternatives approaches than they would have had if they were sitting together in the same room (Boud, 1981). Teaching through paper and tape provided a discipline which forced me to be much more explicit and unambiguous about what was involved than I had been previously. The crucial importance of such explicitness in all communications about self assessment became apparent much later.

My next move took me to the Tertiary Education Research Centre at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and away from teaching students. My only access to students was through the colleagues I was assisting with their teaching and learning concerns. While it was frustrating not being able to work directly with students, I was presented with the challenge of communicating my ideas about self assessment to colleagues in many different disciplines and developing self assessment strategies which fitted their particular context. This led to many fruitful projects in architecture, engineering, law and social work. Many of these were written up and published in collaboration with the staff concerned. The examples in Chapters 6 to 8 of the book draw from these papers. What I discovered was, not surprisingly, that self assessment practices need to be created for the particular subject matter within a particular context. It is not possible to take an idea off the shelf and translate it easily into another situation. I also discovered that self assessment is an innovation which, if suitably designed, can fit any context. Some of the courses with which I was working were very conventional in format; nevertheless self assessment could be introduced into these as readily as into more innovative courses.

Although I was not teaching students, I was extensively involved in staff development. Ideas about self assessment surely could be used in the professional development context as well as the undergraduate. Prompted by some earlier work by John Heron (Heron, 1981), I developed with one of John's colleagues, James Kilty, an approach to staff development workshops which revolved around participants focusing on their own practice, making a self assessment of it informed by peers and subsequently implementing the outcomes. This approach proved quite robust and it has now been used with many different professional groups beyond the immediate teaching context (see Chapter 10).

Finally, after many years of working only through others, I taught classes of my own again. The first was a Masters subject on the evaluation of educational programmes – a suitable subject in which to explore self assessment both theoretically and experientially. I adopted a similar negotiated approach to the one I used in Western Australia. Over many cycles of modification in collaboration with different classes of students I developed an approach to self assessment which seemed especially suited for courses which emphasise student autonomy and collaborative learning and which had the advantage of students producing a document which summarised their learning at many different levels (see Chapter 9). After moving to my present institution, the University of Technology, Sydney, I have been able to use this approach without the constraint of having to generate marks which fitted a normal distribution.

This brings me almost up to date. Towards the end of my time at UNSW I had been increasingly undertaking empirical research on self assessment ranging from evaluations of the innovations which I have described, to analysis of quantitative research on self marking. The time had come to put this together in one place. Hence the present volume.

Structure of the book

The book is about self assessment in higher education. It is concerned exclusively with self assessment of learning. The learner may or may not identify as a student and may not necessarily be enrolled in a formal course of study. Self assessment has as important a role in staff development, management development (eg, Boydell and Pedler, 1981) and informal learning as in award bearing courses.

Self assessment as a term is now used in many different ways, so it is important to distinguish different uses. Self assessment has been applied to individual learners and assessment of their learning as well as to institutions

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and departments. In the latter, self assessment is applied to an internal appraisal of aspects of institutional performance, often as a prelude to an external judgement, possibly associated with funding. In the higher education quality movement in the UK self assessment is used in this latter manner. In my view, this aspect is appropriately called self evaluation, as it relates more to the evaluation of departments and courses than to the assessment of individuals.

More widely, self assessment is being used for purposes which have nothing to do with education and training. It is worth mentioning them in passing as they may begin to influence learners' perceptions of self assessment. Australians, for example, are now very familiar with what is termed the 'self assessment' of personal income tax. Self assessment in this context is a substitute for the detailed checking of each tax return by a tax officer. The return is accepted on trust, but the number of random audits has dramatically increased. Self assessment thus has a sting in its tail. Such usage can influence the conception of taxpayers towards what might otherwise be a more friendly view of self assessment. As self assessment becomes associated with other social practices it will be increasingly necessary to consider its connotations to learners. The apparent essential 'self-ness' of self assessment may be an illusion, as in the tax case, or a sweetening of the pill of external assessment.

This book is not about a new strategy for assessment nor even an approach to course design. It is about an issue which is central to all education and training in whatever context it occurs. Self assessment is not something to be added to the repertoire of teaching activities. It is a matter which needs to be taken into account in all considerations of learning.

Although the book focuses on self assessment, it necessarily reflects my own conceptions of what is important in teaching and learning in higher education. It stresses the importance of learners constructing rather than receiving knowledge, of promoting the taking of responsibility for learning, of communicating and expressing what learners know and understand and of taking a critical stance to received wisdom.

Part I provides a framework for discussing self assessment. It starts in Chapter 2 by addressing the questions of what self assessment is and why we should be concerned with it now. This places the discussion which follows in context and emphasises the key features of self assessment and the varieties of ways in which it can be used.

Chapters 3 and 4 consider the broader context of self assessment and discuss ideas which are closely related to it. The first of these chapters looks at what is known about learning and how ideas about student learning, learning from experience and reflective practice can link with self assessment. Chapter 4

reviews current ideas about student assessment in higher education and extracts issues which must also be considered in the self assessment context.

Chapter 5 starts by presenting self assessment in a wider social context – how it relates to the aims of education and the concerns of society. It proceeds to explore different conceptions of knowledge and how these can influence the design of self assessment procedures. The chapter establishes a framework for categorising self assessment practices in terms of knowledge interests of teachers and points to the use of self assessment in different subject areas.

Part II presents a range of specific examples of self assessment in practice. Each chapter describes different strategies in the context of different disciplinary areas. Chapter 6 considers how self and peer marking can be used in a technical electronics subject; Chapter 7 looks at self assessment of engineering design exercises; Chapter 8 examines the use of self and peer assessment of class participation in law; Chapter 9 presents the use of an intensive self assessment process in a postgraduate subject in education; and Chapter 10 provides an example of the use of self appraisal informed by peers in staff development. The section concludes with Chapter 11 where samples of strategies which have been developed in other subject areas for different purposes are discussed in terms of the framework established earlier.

Part III, on self assessment and marking, starts with research on self assessment. The empirical literature comparing student self marking with marking by staff is considered in Chapter 12. Chapter 13 proceeds to address the question of whether self assessment can be used for formal assessment purposes and, if so, under what circumstances.

Part IV considers some of the practical issues which arise from the examples given and the research presented. Chapter 14 looks at implementation and evaluation issues; Chapter 15 provides guidance on the design of self assessment procedures and Chapter 16 considers how peers and other parties can be used to enhance self assessment. The book concludes with a summary of good practice and speculates on issues of importance which have yet to be explored. Chapter 17 proposes some ideas for future development and returns to the criteria outlined earlier.

In keeping with the different emphases of each section, the voice changes from autobiographical to descriptive, to analytical, to pragmatic and to speculative depending on the material being considered. Many people have contributed to the development of the ideas and practices described here and these are either indicated as chapter authors or mentioned in the acknowledgments section.

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