Authentic individual self-assessment, praxis and community

Mary Low O’Sullivan
Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
mary.osullivan@CeLTS.monash.edu.au

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of authentic individual self-assessment as a process which can foster the development of meaningful learning communities involving both university teachers and students alike. One of the important requirements for building a community is to establish commonality and lessen the differentiation between teaching and research, between teachers and students, between academics and academic developers. In this paper, I am proposing that authentic individual self-assessment by both university teacher and the student or learner involves a process whereby not only active learning is facilitated by the teacher but also one in which the teacher’s goal is to promote collaboration and partnership in the teaching and learning process. The common thread I wish to advance in this paper is the importance of positioning ourselves to learn. In our role as educators, we are constantly involved in assessing and inquiring into student learning. Thus, authentic individual self-assessment can be one way to explore the relationship between teaching and learning. The concepts of ‘praxis’ and ‘community’ are central to anchoring the exploration of this relationship.

Keywords: authentic individual self-assessment, praxis, learning community, teaching and learning, teaching and research, academic development

Introduction
In the life of today’s university, a great deal of its activity is focused on assessment. The $64,000 question is how much of this assessment activity benefits students, faculty/academics, administrators or the institutions. It is useful to examine the nature of these assessment activities and what purpose(s) they serve in relation to the educational mission of universities. Assessment in higher education is a powerful tool, which can be used more effectively for the benefit of students, academics and universities. This paper explores the beginnings, interpretations and imaginings of a journey into examining what is involved in doing academic development (Eggins, 2003; Gibbs, 2003) by reflecting on the important issue of assessment in higher education and appropriating the concepts of ‘praxis’ and ‘community’ as anchors along the way.

In the American literature ‘evaluation’ and ‘assessment’ are used interchangeably. In the UK ‘assessment’ refers to assessment of students and ‘evaluation’ to the evaluation of institutions and programmes (Johnston, 2004). In the paper I’m presenting, the American usage allows more flexibility for my intent and purposes. Here I will discuss Astin’s work on assessment, which I find illuminating for my reflections. Astin (1991, p. 2) gives this interpretation of assessment, which involves ‘the gathering of information concerning the functioning of students, staff, and institutions of higher education’. Astin assumes that
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the information gathered is for the purpose of improving the functioning of the institutions. According to Astin, ‘functioning’ refers to the broad social purposes of a university which involve three core activities: ‘to facilitate student learning and development, to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and to contribute to the community and society’ (ibid.). An ideal goal to work towards is educative assessment (Wiggins, 1998; Rust, 2002), which involves maximising learning on a set of worthy tasks as set out by the course coordinator and/or a professional body on behalf of the community and society.

In examining critically what is involved in the learning process in the construction rather than the reproduction of knowledge an exploration of the meanings of ‘praxis’ and ‘community’ is central for anchoring the discussion. Such an exploration is not apolitical as the concept of praxis has connotations of empowerment attached to it for the academic as teacher and researcher or vice versa. As Mann (2003) points out, this Aristotelian concept of praxis gives the academic the impetus and the authority as a practitioner to reflect critically on what type of relationship exists between her/his research and teaching practice. The current institutional discourses of accountability in terms of government funding and the institutional structures and procedures put in place to ascertain quality, pose teaching and research as a dualism – as separate and distinct types of activities. However, when academics were asked to reflect on their academic role and activities, many saw teaching and research as ‘much more closely intertwined’ (Rowland, 2000, p. 21). In the lived experience of many academics, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between work that is teaching and work that is research except in a superficial way. Rowland aptly points out, for the purpose of facilitating academic or educational development, it is important that academic developers conceptualise a framework ‘for how university teachers might develop the quality of student learning through some form of sustained enquiry’ (2000, p. 14). A model of authentic individual self-assessment can be adapted by university teachers to explore how their teaching, their learning and their students’ learning and their research ‘might be brought into more productive relationships’ (ibid.).

The concept of community requires that learning is viewed as ‘a set of relationships involving change and a conscious subject …’ (Rowland, 2000, p. 52). This means embracing a learner-centred philosophy of learning based on the notion of a community of learners in which its members can be both teachers and learners at various times. The learning community is built on the principle that each member is valuable and has a contribution to make towards enhancing the learner-centred learning community by bringing expertise, strengths, needs and perspectives to the learning experience. A constructivist perspective of learning, which emphasizes continuous active human agency, meaning-making or connecting with prior experience, and knowledge construction rather than knowledge reproduction, informs and guides the building of a meaningful learning community ( Glasersfeld, 1995; Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Although the focus is on the self, for learning is viewed as an active process of knowledge construction in which learners build on prior knowledge and experience, making their own interpretations and constructing new knowledge, these learners are at the same time also members of learning communities. Social interaction is also important in the learner-centred learning process because individual learners as human beings also exist and grow in living webs of social relationships. Learners in a learner-centred learning community are also organically embedded in larger social and symbolic systems. A model of authentic individual self-assessment involves the facilitation of the most valuable activity in a classroom of any kind, the creation of opportunities for students and teachers ‘to work and interact together and to build and become part of a community of scholars and practitioners’ (Jonassen et al., 1995, p. 7).

Authentic individual self-assessment: a reflexive model

University teachers can use authentic individual self-assessment as a way to enhance student learning through the processes initiated by the teacher, which can transform the logic of teaching away ‘from one-way instruction to collaboration and partnership’ (Ewell, 1999, p.147). I am proposing using a reflexive model as a way to do individual self-assessment with the goal of achieving teaching excellence and the
enhancement of student learning (Henderson, 1992). This ‘inquiring reflective approach’ (Shambaugh & Magliaro, 2001) is one way of promoting individual self-assessment, which allows university teachers to examine their own teaching while also facilitating their students’ reflection on their own learning, and which in the process leads to enhancement of both learning and teaching. The reflexive model of self-assessment is a heuristic device, which encompasses an inquiring attitude into one’s teaching and one’s students’ learning.

There is now a sufficient mass of scholarship and research on teaching and learning in higher education to be used as resources for resolving pedagogic concerns and as a basis for critical reflection of one’s teaching practices. As Gosling (2003) points out, the scholarship of teaching and learning involves critical reflection and analysis of the underpinning theories of knowledge and evidence, which inform our teaching practices. We need to examine the values, which our teaching supports or promotes, and the values embedded within the curriculum need to be examined and made explicit to one’s students. In addition, the type of social relations between the lecturer or university teacher and the students need to be consciously brought out into the open within the wider ‘context of a theory about the place of the individual in society, and the function of institutions of higher education within a state system’ (Barnett, 2000, cited in Gosling, 2003, p. 71).

The connection between teaching and learning is made explicit through this reflexive process for ‘[e]ffective teaching is one of the most important handles we have on helping students to become successful learners. And it becomes even more important as increasing numbers of students enter [university] without adequate habits or skills for learning’ (Cross, 1999, p. 35). Kolb’s model of experiential learning and Schön’s concept of the reflective practitioner provide the intellectual basis for thinking about the process of doing authentic individual self-assessment of one’s teaching.

**The reflective practitioner within the learner-centred learning community**

According to Cowan (1998), innovative pedagogies and practices for teaching and learning within higher education have increasingly given reflection a significant role in the process. Cowan points out that ‘[t]he results obtained by those educators who stimulate reflection on the process of learning itself (which is nowadays called metacognition) justify a sea change in our approach to the design of much of what is done in education, at least for adults’ (1998, p. 30). What type of activity is reflection? Cowan (1998) postulates that:

Reflection is … the power acquired by a consciousness to turn in upon itself, to take possession of itself as an object endowed by its own particular consistence and value; no longer merely to know, but to know one’s self; no longer merely to know, but to know that one knows… (1998, p. 6 cites Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man* 1955:165)

There is as yet no authoritative educational explanation of teaching and learning which is centred on reflection (Cowan, 1998). However, there are models of learning that describe reflection as part of the process (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1995). Consistent with the constructivist, cognitive and social psychology perspectives of learning, Kolb’s work presents learning as a process in which knowledge is created by the learner through some transformation of her/his experience (cited by Healey & Jenkins, 2000).

In Cowan’s composite model he represents what may be happening in the reflective process of learners. Cowan integrates ideas drawn from Kolb and Schön to describe three types of reflection which serve different purposes. In Schön’s concept of the reflective practitioner, he describes two types of reflection: *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. *Reflection-on-action* involves looking back on past action
in an attempt to analyze and summarize the past experience so as to derive useful generalizations for future use (Cowan, 1998). Reflection-in-action occurs for example, when a student encounters a learning difficulty or when a teacher encounters a problematic situation, looks to immediate past experiences and simultaneously looks forward to eminent experiences to extract a possible solution. Cowan identifies a third type of reflection which he calls reflection-for-action. This is a type of anticipatory activity involving reflecting on past experience to identify needs, establish priorities, aspirations and objectives. A university teacher who takes the time to engage in meaningful reflection of her/his teaching experience would be engaging in all three types of reflection at one stage or another.

It may also be useful to distinguish between analytical and evaluative reflection. In analytical reflection the focus is on finding answers to the following questions: ‘How do I do it? How should I do it?’ (Cowan, 1998, p. 41). Evaluative reflection takes this process further to answer such questions as: ‘How well can I do it? Should I do it better?’ (Ibid.). As Cowan points out, evaluative reflection encompasses the results of doing analytical reflection while also involving making a decision on what to do next on the basis of judging whether the development which has taken place is adequate to proceed to the next stage.

I think this is the stage when the lecturer or university teacher as an expert learner in her/his discipline or field has a crucial role to play in scaffolding learning for the student. For as Cowan states:

This is a stocktaking which judges the development which has already taken place or is needed. While summarizing development analytically, it more importantly identifies whether or not the learning is adequate to enable the learner to go on to other activities, including those in which the new learning will be used; or alternatively, whether the learner needs to go on to a further set of developmental experiences, in order to make the desired progress (1998, p. 41).

Authentic individual self-assessment is a way for a teacher to find out whether she or he is using discourse which is disempowering to students in that they are unable to appropriate the form of discourse in use within the community of practice. In order for students to co-participate in the community of practice being built around a subject of inquiry, teachers need to reflect on their practices and build interpretive frameworks which alert them to power differentials as well as giving their students ‘a shared responsibility for their own learning’ (Tobin, 1998, p. 206).

Why foster authentic individual self-assessment?

Cross highlights several advantages of university teachers being actively involved in assessing the effectiveness of their teaching. Individual self-assessment or Cross’s classroom assessment focuses on student learning rather than on evaluating the performance of the university teacher thereby removing ‘…the ring of audacity about it…’ for many university teachers, as ‘… teacher and students together are
assessing what students are learning in that classroom’ (1999, p. 38). Individual self-assessment serves a pedagogical purpose foremost by facilitating students’ monitoring of their own learning while also providing the university teachers with feedback about the effectiveness of their teaching in bringing about learning. A second advantage of individual self-assessment is that the emphasis is on examining the process of teaching rather than the characteristics of the university teachers. This allows for the important consideration of context. As Cross so importantly points out, ‘[t]eaching is highly context-specific. What works in some classrooms won’t work in others’ (1999, p. 38). The university teacher in applying the reflective model of individual self-assessment, is able to study the ‘dynamic process of teacher-student interaction in a particular context’ (ibid.) and gain valuable feedback about what works and what does not work and why. Finally, university teachers can obtain immediate and better feedback about the effectiveness of their teaching on student learning ‘…while the lesson is still fresh in the minds of both teacher and students and while there is still time to take corrective action’ (ibid.).

Authentic individual self-assessment, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and evidence-based practice

In my view, one of the main aims of authentic individual self-assessment is to integrate the two key aspects of academic development: the ‘scholarship of teaching and learning’ (SOTL) and the idea of ‘evidence-based practice’. The main characteristics of scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning include: ‘critical reflection on professional practice, systematic investigation and evaluation of teaching and learning, exploration of theory which informs our practice, accumulating knowledge about teaching and learning (in higher education) and communicating that knowledge to practitioners’ (Hutchings & Shulman 1999, cited by Gosling, 2003, p. 70). I think that it is important that the pragmatic and practitioner-based aspects of academic development and pedagogical research are linked in order to enable change to occur in teaching and learning in higher education.

Authentic individual self-assessment, praxis and pedagogical research

The concept of praxis encompasses pedagogical research so as to locate the process of inquiry with the practitioner. Praxis combines both theory and practice without implying that one is superior to the other, without privileging one over the other. For as Mann elucidates:

Theory and practice inform each other through an iterative, cyclical and reflexive process in such a way that leads to both the enhancement of theory and practice. Praxis necessarily assumes practitioners to be goal-oriented and ethical, capable of engaging in rational and critical analysis of their actions in order to understand and to improve them. (2003:83)

Authentic individual self-assessment involves university teachers taking the time to reflect on their teaching. The process includes the study of reflection-in-action. For as Schön importantly points out:

When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case…He does not separate thinking from doing (1995, p. 68).

Authentic individual self-assessment means embedding research practice in teaching practice within a new paradigm of a learning community

Academics are interested in the academic learning of their discipline, which is characterized, by research and scholarship. Light (2003) proposes a research-teaching model for moving academics from a teacher-focused content-oriented conception of teaching to a student-focused learning-oriented conception of teaching. Research and teaching are activities, which are carried out by an academic to achieve a common
goal, namely academic learning within the discipline. According to Light (2003), by focusing on the common goal of learning and the advancement of knowledge in the conceptualization of the academic’s role, the undergraduate curriculum is being enhanced by research and student enquiry. In short, Light’s model of academic faculty development, which would include individual self-assessment helps to bring about a rapprochement between methods of enquiry which faculty engage in while doing research/scholarship and those methods of enquiry that they are engaging in and developing with their students... The issue for the teacher-scholar is to go beyond the academic tension of researcher versus teacher to establish a comprehensive culture of learning that encourages active engagement in learning by all in the community. (2003, p. 157)

**Conclusion**

Scholarly teaching involves reflective practices which are informed by relevant research, theory, specialized knowledge in a field/discipline, by expert and critical ways of knowing. Individual self-assessment is an approach to teaching which encompasses reflection on the big picture of teaching learning activities and events by both teachers and students. These reflexive occasions encourage university teachers to clarify the objectives, purposes and competences to be achieved by their students for both themselves and their students (Knight, 1995) within the context of the current class and planned learning activities. This type of assessment practice promotes dialogue between teachers and students (Boud, 1995).

Authentic individual self-assessment of university teaching can serve as a model to encourage academics or lecturers to develop strategies for researching their own teaching. The critical and intellectual orientation of research is brought to bear also on their teaching experience, which in turn would also enhance research that is informed by the scholarship of teaching and learning (Brew, 2003). Through doing authentic individual self-assessment academics can develop their abilities to observe, interpret, write about and share their reflections of their teaching and students’ learning within a new community of scholars. In an environment of scholarship both research and teaching are enhanced (Rowland, 2000).

**References**


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