The Use of Self-assessment Schedules in Negotiated Learning

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ABSTRACT *The paper describes an approach to assessment in which students create a comprehensive and analytical summary of their learning in a given subject. The self-assessment schedule, as it is called, has been used in contexts in which there is an emphasis on self-directed and negotiated learning. Unlike most assessment methods which focus on a relatively few aspects of a subject in some depth, the aim of the self-assessment schedule is to capture and account for a wide range of formal and informal learning. The application of the schedule in postgraduate courses is discussed and the views of staff and students reported.*

Introduction

Most assessment techniques have been developed for courses in which teachers, or an external accrediting body, determine the goals, the curriculum and the ways in which students are tested. Increasingly it is being recognised that for many purposes it is educationally more appropriate for students to be actively involved in setting goals and assessing themselves. Through active involvement students become more committed to that which they learn, and they develop their skills of learning how to learn. While there is a growing body of knowledge about alternative ways of conducting courses in higher education (see, for example, Boud, 1988), much less has been specifically written about assessment practices. There is a need for the range of strategies in this area to be extended to match the innovations which are occurring and ensure that they are not undermined by unsuitable assessment practices.

This paper focuses on one approach which can be added to the repertoire: the self-assessment schedule. The aim of using the schedule is to provide a comprehensive and analytical record of learning in situations where students have substantial responsibility for what they do. It is a personal report on learning and achievements which can be used either for students' own use or as a product which can form part of a formal assessment procedure. It is qualitative and discursive. Students may also provide a quantitative grading of their own performance, but this aspect is not a necessary aspect of its use.

The issue which the use of a self-assessment schedule addresses is that of finding an appropriate mechanism for assessing students' work in self-directed or negotiated learning situations which takes account of both the range of what is learned and the need for students to be accountable for their own learning. Almost all traditional assessment strategies fail to meet these criteria as they tend to sample a limited range of teacher-initiated learning and make the assumption that assessment is a unilateral act conducted by teachers on students. The schedule provides a vehicle for learners to reflect on their learning and give a public

account of what they have learned. It consists of a framework which focuses attention on the goals and criteria of learners, elicits evidence of achievements and provides an opportunity for learners to make their own judgements about how successful they have been in meeting their goals.

There is currently a great deal of interest in ideas concerning self-assessment prompted by concern that much practice in the area of assessment is not consistent with goals of education such as developing independent learners and critical thinkers. The involvement of learners in making decisions about the criteria which are appropriately applied to their work and their making of judgements about achievements is the key characteristic of self-assessment. Engagement in such activities helps to encourage critical faculties and wean students from dependence on the assessments of others (Boud, 1986). A few effective students have developed such abilities, but for others, the skill of self-assessment requires attention and practice similar to other personal and intellectual skills. There is a growing literature on self-assessment in the context of traditional teaching and, in a number of recent publications, I and my colleagues have been drawing attention to issues such as the comparison of teacher and student ratings (Boud & Falchikov, 1989; Falchikov & Boud, 1989), the introduction of self-assessment practices into undergraduate courses (Boud, 1986) and the role of self-assessment in student grading (Boud, 1989).

This account will discuss the nature of self-assessment schedules and describe my own use of them. It will also relate the idea to other ideas in negotiated learning, discuss the reactions of staff and students, and explore the problems and difficulties which may be encountered in its use and how they might be overcome. Although the self-assessment schedule is presented as a technique which others might consider adopting, it also needs to be regarded as something more than simply an item to be added to the assessment repertoire. It raises issues about judgement and learning which are seldom confronted in most discussions of assessment: how can assessment contribute to reflection on learning? To what extent can assessment help students make sense of their courses?

How was the Idea of a Self-assessment Schedule Developed?

For the past 14 years, I have been teaching courses which have involved a high degree of collaboration between staff and students in their design and conduct. These have all been postgraduate courses and have ranged in content from science education to educational research methods and adult learning and in size from eight to 24 students. They were conducted in four higher education institutions (in a total of five departments) in two countries: Australia and Canada. What the courses have in common is that all were based on the idea that students bring a great deal of knowledge and expertise to a course and that courses at the postgraduate level should treat students as co-learners who have much to contribute as well as much to learn.

The particular approach to teaching was one in which the aims and objectives of the course, the content and programme of activities, and evaluation and assessment were negotiated between staff and students in the context of what Heron (1974) terms a peer learning community. In a peer learning community, staff and student learn from each other and each person is responsible for intervening at any stage in the process of the group to express their needs and interests. The course is designed around the particular needs and experience of the group and addresses both what the staff member considers important as well as that which students wish to explore. In any given institution, there are usually limits to students' full involvement in this process deriving from the exigencies of a required syllabus and assessment policy. In my teaching, I have moved as far in the direction of full

participation as I felt able consonant with the views of students and institutional regulations. In three of the departments, the ultimate constraint was the requirement that students be graded, in the others that students be classified as satisfactory or unsatisfactory. A description of an early version of this approach to teaching and learning is given in Boud & Prosser (1980).

What Issues Were Considered?

In thinking about what forms of assessment might be used, three considerations were to the fore. Firstly, traditional forms of assessment which are totally defined by teachers are not appropriate for all forms of learning. This is clearly the case in some aspects of experiential learning in which the prior experience of the learner and the linking of this to new knowledge is central, but it can apply more widely. Some forms of learning are inherently inaccessible to teachers, or may only be partially accessible, and these are no less valid than those areas on which it is possible to report publicly.

Secondly, there is a continual tension in assessment practice between coverage of objectives and depth of assessment. Often the only way to explore the full range of cognitive learning is through multiple-choice tests, but these tests have considerable limitations in the kind of objectives which can be assessed and the high level of skill required to test higher order objectives. Even then, cognitive learning is but part of the total range of objectives covered. (While it is claimed that multiple-choice questions may be used in other domains, this is often extraordinarily demanding and problematic.) More valid forms of assessment, such as a project report which involves the integration of knowledge and experience, tend to only partially cover the range of learning which occurs.

Finally, it is common for only the products of learning to be assessed. While this may be satisfactory for terminal assessments for purposes of certification, it is not sufficient for assessment which is needed to guide learning. The process of learning can be of greater importance in many circumstances, than specifically what is learned. Not all learning is manifest in a final product. Learning processes tend to be ignored in assessment practices and this contributes to the poor value which assessment can have in improving learning. Not only do most assessment results arrive far too late to influence learning, but they are not in a form which can be used by learners to aid their development.

While it would be difficult to address all of these concerns in one measure, I thought that it would be possible to make a useful move in that direction.

What Other Approaches to Negotiated Learning and Assessment are Available?

The two most common approaches to negotiated learning are the use of learning contracts and that of a negotiated curriculum with individual or group projects.

The learning contract approach involves an individual student entering into an agreement with a teacher to pursue certain goals according to a proposed programme. These are assessed with respect to criteria suggested by students and applied by staff or by external resource people with knowledge of the area of investigation. At an early stage of the process, learners submit a draft contract to a staff member for validation, and once a final version is agreed, this becomes the framework for learning and assessment (Knowles, 1975).

Despite extensions of the idea of learning contracts to accommodate further renegotiation (Knowles *et al.*, 1986; Tompkins & McGraw, 1988), they are inherently limited by requirements for the specification of goals and the design of a programme of learning activities and assessment before much substantive learning has taken place. Students are

guided, but also constrained, by their early conceptions of what constitutes worthwhile learning, and there are dangers in more rigid forms of contract learning that students either become trapped into following lines of inquiry that are progressively at odds with their needs and interests, or they complete contracts merely to fulfil formal assessement requirements.

An alternative to the highly individualised learning contract approach is the group negotiated curriculum with individual or group products. However, this also depends on the early identification of goals and involves agreement with peers on areas to pursue. While there is potentially more flexibility in the completion of projects—they need not be tightly specified in advance—learning, and the record of learning as manifest in the project report, can tend to be focused on a limited area of the curriculum. Unfortunately, accounts of curriculum negotiation tend to ignore assessment issues (see, for example, Harber & Meighan, 1986; Millar *et al.*, 1986).

The learning contract approach and group negotiated learning have benefits, but, if we regard learning as an emergent process which can be both goal-directed and responsive to new experiences, there is a need for students to both focus on their learning needs and goals at the beginning of a course and be open to new goals as they are influenced by themselves and others as the course proceeds. There needs to be a form of assessment which takes account of this and acknowledges the varieties of learning in which students can engage.

The Self-assessment Schedule

The self-assessment schedule is a document that students prepare towards the end of a course in which they summarise their learning and make judgements about it. The main guidance I provide is a handout which suggests the headings they might use and gives some tips based upon the experience of students who have used it before. See Appendix for a typical example of an explanatory handout.

The headings do not represent subject content areas, but aspects of planning for learning. Common headings are as follows.

Goals

This heading would include both those goals which were identified at the beginning of the course and those which emerged during it. It includes both those which were common for all participants and those which were unique for the individual. It also includes goals relating to the process as well as the outcomes of the course. Many of these goals would be similar to those found in any course document, but some would be clearly of a personal or context-specific nature.

Criteria

This represents the yardstick against which it is possible to judge whether the goals were achieved. Some goals might simply be at the level of awareness of ideas, whereas others might have more demanding standards. For example, in a course on adult learning, one student might be content to be aware of a range of different approaches to the analysis of learning styles, whereas another will want to have sufficient knowledge and skill to be able to apply learning styles inventories with given groups of learners and use the information obtained to generate alternative learning options.

Evidence

Under this heading, students would indicate what evidence they have for the attainment of their goals. Items might include reference to papers written, notes on readings, extracts from learning portfolios and accounts of work within their peer group. Evidence will also include statements that they have received feedback from peers and others with whom they have had contact.

Judgements

This section includes reports of what others have said, qualitative analyses of the extent to which objectives had been met, and comments about the appropriateness of the criteria which have been used.

Further Action

Finally, students would indicate what further action they might contemplate to pursue their objectives further both to extend them and to address those aspects which they felt that they had not pursued sufficiently within the confines of the given course.

Although the headings are specified, the form and level of detail is not. There are as many different interpretations as there are students who have used it: diversity—making the schedule one's own—is encouraged. It would be misleading therefore to give examples of what students specifically included under each heading.

Contexts in Which the Self-assessment Schedule has Been Used

In some situations, I have used the self-assessment schedule as the only form of assessment, but more commonly I have combined it with other assignments and with an exercise in which students propose a grade for themselves. An example of this is in an Master of Education course, Researching Educational Practice.

In this course, students individually identify goals which they wish to pursue during the first few weeks. They then discuss these goals with their peers and myself and we together negotiate a set of goals which we will pursue collectively. The group plans a programme for the course in which different members of the group take responsibility for different elements. Students keep a detailed record of their learning in the form of a portfolio (Bawden & McKinnon, 1980; Walker, 1985). The portfolio is for the compiler's eyes only, but evidence can be drawn from it for use in the self-assessment schedule.

Each student also submits an assignment consisting of a proposal to research some aspect of their own educational practice based on a particular model or approach to research. During one of the classes, a check-list for evaluating proposals of this kind is generated by the group. Each person then prepares a detailed and descriptive self-assessment of their learning in the form of a self-assessment schedule. This includes an appraisal of the research proposal as well as consideration of any other learning relvant to the subject whether or not it was formally part of the course. Each person contributes to the design and conduct of at least one session, and an appraisal of that is included also.

Although I participate fully in all aspects of the group's activity and in conducting sessions, I keep out of the way in the preparation of the portfolio and the self-assessment, acting as a consultant who can give encouragement and specific feedback as requested.

A few weeks prior to the end of the course, a session during which students receive

qualitative feedback from their peers is conducted and information from this is included in the schedule as the student chooses. Students form learning partnerships during the course (Robinson *et al.*, 1985; Saberton, 1985) and normally students in a partnership would show a draft of the final schedule to each other for comment before it is submitted.

All of the above aspects of assessment are a part of assessment for learning, rather than assessment for accreditation, and have a potentially beneficial influence on students' experience of the course. However, in most instances, the institution also requires grades to be generated. Over the years, I have used a number of approaches to this tricky task. It is always a strain on both staff and students for co-operative learning to take place in conjunction with grading. However, in most situations there is no alternative acceptable to the institution. In the case of Researching Educational Practice, grades have most frequently been generated by variations on the following procedure as negotiated with the students.

Satisfactory completion (i.e. a pass) is based upon: (1) contributions to class learning; (2) submission of a self-assessment schedule, and (3) submission of a research proposal and completed evaluation check-list. The level of grade awarded is dependent on the quality of the proposal assessed according to the criteria agreed by the class for the check-list and the published grading policy of the school. The teacher is party to the discussion on the criteria and must, at that stage, agree to the criteria or negotiate further otherwise the entire process is undermined.

Each student awards themselves a mark together with a justification for it based upon the evidence submitted in the light of the school's grading policy. Independently of this, a staff assessment is made using the agreed criteria on the evidence available but without knowledge of the student's proposed mark. If the two proposed marks fall within the same grade band (there are four passing grade bands and one failing one), the student receives his or her own mark. If they do not fall within the same band, a discussion takes place during which each party justifies their grade. Agreement generally results, but there is provision for final arbitration by a third party if needed. A member of staff familiar with the subject is nominated at the beginning of the course and in the case of a dispute, this person receives all documentation and on the basis of this alone makes a determination unconstrained by any previous grades. Resort to this step is very rarely made.

A number of variations on this procedure have been used. The level of agreement between staff and students has changed, but the general principle adopted is that the acceptable level of disagreement should generally approximate to the normal error which might be expected between markers on the given type of assignment. Typically for an essay-type assignment this would be +/− 5–10%. On some occasions, I have attempted to grade the schedule itself and contributions students make to the class, but these are difficult and inappropriate tasks in this circumstance. The schedule is an idiosyncratic document and the co-operative nature of the course would be undermined if class contributions were to be directly graded.

How Have Students Used the Self-assessment Schedule?

The idea of a self-assessment schedule and, indeed, self-assessment in general, is a novel one for most students. While very few have difficulties in accepting self-assessment in principle, the prospect of engaging in a self-assessment which forms a central part of the course is one to which some students react with caution. However, once they experiment with it, they start to see its value. The majority of students have been initially supportive and become enthusiastic having been through the process of constructing a schedule. There is much more concern about the self-grading aspect of the course than there is about qualitative self-

assessment mainly because of students' prior experience of assessment in norm-referenced situations.

Some students are highly analytical and present their schedule in a tabular form for each objective, while others adopt a narrative or free-form approach. Students are able to make it their own. However, the range of options for its use are not always apparent to them and it is useful, near the time at which they are to prepare their first draft, for some of the alternative styles to be discussed.

What are the Main Benefits of the Use of a Self-assessment Schedule?

The greatest value of the schedule appears to be the prompt that it provides for students to reflect on their learning and think about the applications of ideas in their own situations. It is common for them to report that they only start to become aware of what they have learned when they looked back on the course in a systematic fashion as a prelude to completing the schedule. Indeed, it seems especially important in a course which has objectives which emphasise the process of learning and reflective practice for this kind of reflection to be promoted. Part-time students are often under severe pressure in their studies and the opportunities for them to stand back and think about what they are doing are limited. The schedule is a mechanism which encourages this activity and legitimates it as a normal part of the course.

Certainly, it is not a panacea which will remedy faults of assessment systems. It does, though, address some of the difficulties encountered by other approaches. It recognises emergent objectives, it focuses on processes as well as products, it engages learners in making judgements about what it is appropriate to learn as well as what they have learned, and it encourages a reflective approach to coursework. It does not cope with the problem of self-assessment of areas and domains of learning of which the student is unaware.

Student Responses

Each year, the views of students about the course in general and the use of the self-assessment schedule in particular have been collected. It is often difficult for students to separate out one aspect of a course which has many novel features. In this case, it is particularly difficult to separate views on the self-assessment schedule itself from views on the generally more contentious aspect of self-grading. In the quotes which follow, common responses have been highlighted to give a flavour of student views. The reference in brackets refers to the name and year of the course [1]. Overwhelmingly, students find the use of the schedule a useful, albeit demanding, exercise which helps them focus on the learning.

> I like it. Very confronting, yet also comforting i.e. being in control of one's own process. (REP88)
>
> A very important learning tool for me. I really struggled with it but feel this process will prove to have been very helpful to me for future courses and direction. (BP84)
>
> Tends to force you to clarify your intentions. (BP84)
>
> Very difficult process but worthwhile—made me think more critically about what I had gained from the course, and also to a certain extent, what I hadn't achieved (that I had expected I should!). (REP88)
>
> This is an essential skill in life. We are so often assessed by our superiors and we

> assess the ones below us. This self-assessment procedure is practical, revealing and makes us conscious of our direction in study and work. The 'self assessment' technique is the most valuable thing I've learned in the course. (AL86)

One of the valuable aspects is the way in which completion of the schedule acts to help students review learning which is not always apparent:

> I find it absolutely critical to a learning experience—one consolidates learning which is very affirming—one clearly sees what one has accomplished and what is still possible and/or required to fulfil needs. (MP84)

> Excellent closure on my learnings! I had no idea that I had accomplished as much, until the... self assessment sheet procedure. (BP84)

Although the exercise appears at first sight to be an intellectual one, it drew a number of students into their personal experiences, emotions and feelings. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that there seems to be an initial reticence about engaging in the activity:

> Excruciating! And almost too big of a block for me to get over/around. What it added to my understanding and to my awareness of what learning had taken place was a sense of form. The outline for the... schedule was clear and concise, but its cogency masked the depths I'd have to dredge in order to satisfactorily analyze myself, the course, the contents and the process and the procedures. (MP84)

> I found this challenging and useful. It helped me with organising how I get my students to do this. Highlighted the need for me to improve my discipline of keeping a portfolio regularly. (REP88)

They report a high level of uncertainty and frustration at first during the process of preparation, but the same students express great satisfaction when it has been completed. They feel that they have engaged in significant learning:

> I procrastinated a great deal before finally launching into the task of doing my self assessment... Intellectually, I understood the rationale for doing it—particularly since much of the material I would cover would be cognitive or skill-oriented, but because there was such a large amount of affective content which could not be separated from the other stuff, I hesitated.
>
> Nevertheless, I did get started, and once involved, I found my energies to be really focused and I was amazed at how motivated I became as I went over some of the material in the portfolio. This exercise has been really useful for me as it has forced me to view the learning experience from a more objective perspective and it has enabled me to tie up many of the loose ends and conclude the experience of the course.
>
> Another outcome of the exercise that I hadn't anticipated was the change in my affective state. I was left feeling extremely fatigued, but with a great feeling of calm, as though I had wrestled with some of the 'negative' feelings that had developed during the last few sessions, e.g. anxiety, alienation, anger, hurt and had laid them to rest. (MP84)

> Difficult to begin, but once I got started I enjoyed it—it helped to clarify and elaborate on my goals—which helped me to realize what I had accomplished as an individual and as a class member. (MP84)

> I enjoy doing them—makes me reflect and analyse what I really have learned and gained from courses. (REP88)

In discussion of completed schedules, students often say that they wish that they had

added items or that they would tackle it differently the second time around. Students who use a schedule in a subsequent course often report higher levels of satisfaction about what they had achieved:

> I feel more confident in writing out the schedule this time. Perhaps the goals are clearer and the evidence more obvious. (REP86)
>
> I found it valuable this time, probably because I'd had time to think about it after trying to do it for Adult Ed. (REP88)

Establishing criteria was one of the most difficult aspects:

> It is extremely useful for me, as I tend to see any negative in regard to a goal, as the total experience, and by establishing criteria for a goal, I have not been able to allow a negative to overshadow the many positives of the whole experience. Establishing criteria is a good skill to learn and is very applicable to assessing professional competency. (REP88)
>
> The suggestion you gave on the sheet was the main reference on which I wrote my self assessment schedule. The procedure laid out was clear and precise. Difficulties occurred when I wasn't too sure about 'criteria'. (AL86)

The goal of encouraging reflection seems to have been met:

> Rather difficult to do. One is tempted to give what appears to be the expected. To do it honestly (which is really what is expected) is truly a reflective process and an introspective exercise. It had the effect of organizing my thinking about the course and preventing my feelings from being the sole influence. (BP84)
>
> Extremely difficult, but a worthwhile activity as it made one reflect back over the learning which had taken place. (REP88)

The use of the schedule which links it with self-marking, to which some students object:

> Didn't like the mark aspect, but could see some value. I learned a lot about myself. I rebelled against validation once. I learned with my own self evaluation. I'm constantly self evaluating so just wanted the traditional 'mark'—wish I didn't need a mark—a necessary part of this course—forced me to structure my evaluation—I learned that I need to give my 'evaluations' more concrete traditional evidence of my work learning. It made me re-make a commitment on paper—my writing is not detailed enough. (BP84)

A few students do it because it is required and feel no commitment to it and invest little of themselves in it:

> What happened was it made me get a learning partner . . . I didn't focus my attention too much here. I was busy with some of my goals and felt I did this just because it was a requirement. (BP84)

One student believed that there was a danger that the formal role of the schedule may detract in some circumstances from its benefits:

> Very effective because it forces one to look at *real* learnings. Can be difficult for someone else to appreciate because it is such a personal thing. Person may feel pressured because of evaluation and may not be really honest with feelings. (BP84)

Comments from earlier years led to modifications, especially more emphasis on what the criteria are and how to ease entry. Emphasis was placed in class sessions on how criteria differ from goals and evidence and what constitutes a meaningful criterion. See the section in the Appendix on 'Some tips' for further discussion of this issue. More time is now spent

in class on discussing the schedule, what forms it can take, examples of the kinds of approaches others have adopted, and the importance of separating the grade-generation component from the formative exercise of preparation of the schedule.

From the Teacher's Perspective

Hardly any students found the combination of self-assessment and self-grading an easy exercise, no matter how they interpreted the task. It seems as if any serious reflection on learning, and this is what students mostly engaged in, is hard won. The least demanding strategy was simply to treat it as another assessment requirement and conform to the apparent requirements of the teacher. That so very few took this approach is a tribute to these students' desire to learn and make sense of their learning. In general, they had been successful in getting ownership of the course and its assessment procedure. All were busy people, the majority with jobs and families to support. They appeared to be intrigued by the process and found sufficient in it for themselves to persist in making, sometimes quite ruthless, assessments of their work.

On a practical level, certain kinds of information in the self-assessment schedules of some students can tend to be omitted. Typically, these omissions tend to include information about reading and its relation to the learner's goals. It is especially noticeable when it is apparent that the students concerned have read widely. There is always the possibility that anything for which there is not a direct prompt in the instructions will be omitted. A few students in each class do not seem to be able to go beyond the limit of the instructions and make the schedule their own (not surprisingly perhaps given the overall context of courses in higher education). There is a tension between spelling out everything in detail and thus satisfying the need of the teacher for completeness in the schedule, and leaving the instructions deliberately open and hoping that learners will use it creatively. (The same tension as exists in presenting the idea in this paper!) The choice depends on (and mirrors) the nature of the context. Some learners are naturally more self-reflective or self-critical than others, some are more willing to share their learning than others. In some situations, it is important for the self-assessment schedule to be exhaustive, while in others it may suit the overall goals for it to be more open-ended.

The process described is one which taps into an aspect of higher education which is seldom explictly considered: the overall making sense of an educational experience. There is a great deal of recent research in higher education which suggests that students can do extremely well on conventional examinations, but fail to comprehend quite basic concepts (Marton *et al.*, 1984).

One of the reasons for this is, perhaps, the nature of the assessment tasks and their incompatibility with productive approaches to study (e.g. Ramsden, 1988). If students believe that they can successfully complete the required assessment tasks without a full appreciation of key ideas, then many of them will do so. The use of self-assessment and the act of reviewing learning for a course does not, of course, ensure that students will apprehend key concepts any more readily, but it does give them the opportunity to review their own understanding and it can prompt them to return to ideas and seek to make sense of them.

Although peer feedback and discussions with peers is an important part of the process, there is usually very little comment by students about this aspect. I suspect that it is regarded as such a normal part of the procedure that it is not remarked upon. By the latter stages of the course there has usually been so much collaborative activity that students would expect to continue to assist each other. The peer feedback element is also self-

regulating: if it is not found useful by the person on the receiving end, it is usually ignored. My observations suggest that comments by peers in the present context tend to lead to relatively minor changes rather than major rethinking of the content of the schedule.

From the perspective of standards achieved, like most countries, Australia does not have a system of external examiners for course-work degrees and therefore no views can be drawn from that source. The self-assessment schedule is assessing something which is rarely assessed elsewhere and no comparisons are possible. However, with regard to the quality of the papers produced, there are some indications. I was initially drawn to the use of group-generated criteria for assessment during a study of self-assessment in law I undertook with a colleague teaching International Banking Law (Boud, 1986). Following the use of a group-generated check-list of criteria for assessment of a major essay, he found that the quality of the essays increased substantially compared to previous years although his course was otherwise identical. He also commented that while he had no difficulty in readily accepting the check-list, it was a far more exhaustive list of criteria for assessment than he typically used! Although I have no comparisons to make with a time before I used self-assessment, I find that the papers that students produce address all the issues which are prompted by the check-list. A similar outcome would not be likely if they were simply furnished with a handout on criteria which they were not a party to creating.

Problems and Difficulties

There is a continuing problem in negotiating an assessment procedure in a course with external limitations on grading. There is always a tension between proposing and advocating a particular form and adopting a fully negotiated assessment strategy. The latter takes a great deal of class time partly because of the anxieties many students have about assessment in general and their need for reassurance.

One year I attempted to fully negotiate the assessment process from first principles, but students became frustrated with the proportion of the total time available which was occupied by the discussion. In a limited timescale of 2×14 hours some compromise on negotiation of both curriculum and assessment procedure is necessary and groups have to be encouraged to limit the class time spent discussing assessment and give the opportunity for students who are not satisfied to discuss particular issues outside the class. This leads to subsequent class time being spent only on assessment issues about which students feel strongly.

Students who do discuss matters with me (perhaps about one in 10) tend to have one or two concerns. Some doubt their ability to assess themselves: they are often people who have been successful in plotting a path through the conventional assessment system and have been surprised by how easy this has been for them. They are then confronted with the prospect of making their own judgements and they are anxious about what they might find. Their personal standards are high and they are worried about discovering that they are wanting in important respects: they fear that they will be exposed as not being competent. In this case, reassurance is required and the expression of confidence in their ability to tackle the challenge. Encouragement for them to produce a first draft is needed. Having started, they generally discover that they have accomplished a great deal and are pleased to document it.

The second group have objections to the notion of self-grading, arguing that grading is the teacher's responsibility and that it is irresponsible or unethical to hand this over to students and is a way of getting out of work. Depending on the particular emphasis of this criticism, it might be necessary to either start pragmatically by pointing out that this system involves the staff member in more work in that he or she has to do all the marking they

would do otherwise and that far from opting out, they act as a moderator of self-assessment, challenging interpretations and grades which do not appear justified. Alternatively, it might be appropriate to go back to first principles and discuss the nature of learning and assessment and the mutual responsibilities of teachers and students, leading to the conclusion that both have a role and that the conventional distribution of responsibilities is not intrinsically more educationally sound than the one in which we are engaged.

Scope for Wider Application

The approach described is one which, acknowledging the contradictions, works quite satisfactorily in several contexts, and I am sufficiently convinced of its value to use it in almost all courses. It suits circumstances in which a significant degree of responsibility is taken by students for the course and their own learning. Of course, it could be used in conventional classes, but it would then be another task to be completed and its potential for encouraging reflection and integration of learning might not be realised. Unless students have made a commitment to learning, as distinct from completing the course, they will turn anything into an exercise to be disposed of as easily as possible. The form is not the most important aspect of this innovation but, rather, it is the intentions and the appropriateness of context.

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NOTE

[1] MP—The Maturation Process and Adult Learning. OISE, Toronto.
BP—Basic Processes in Facilitating Adult Learning. OISE, Toronto.
AL—Adult Learning. UNSW, Sydney.
REP—Researching Educational Practice. UNSW, Sydney.

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Appendix

This is an unedited copy of the handout used in one class in 1988.

University of New South Wales

School of Education

Researching Educational Practice

Proposed guidelines for assessment 1988.

These guidelines are presented for discussion. Proposals for changes should be made by Week 3.

Principles

Assessment for learning:

(a) All students will keep a detailed record of their learning in the form of a portfolio. The portfolio itself is for the compilers' eyes only, but it should be kept in such a manner that evidence can be drawn from it for assessment purposes.

(b) Each person will submit a research proposal of around 3000–4000 words for some aspect of their own educational practice which represents the application of a particular model or approach to research/evaluation.

(c) As part of one of the classes a check-list for the evaluation of proposals for researching educational practice will be discussed and prepared.

(d) Each person will prepare a detailed and descriptive self-assessment of their learning. This will include an appraisal of the paper using the check-list and consideration of any other learning relevant to the subject.

(e) Each person will contribute to the design and conduct of at least one session, an appraisal of which should also be included in the self-assessment.

(f) In so far as it is practicable there shall be an opportunity for students to receive feedback from their peers as they wish prior to the submission of (b) to (e).

For marking:

(g) Satisfactory completion of the subject (i.e. a passing grade) is based upon:
  (i) Contributions to class learning primarily in the topic area chosen.
  (ii) Submission of a self-assessment schedule which documents and makes judgements about learning and contributions to the class with respect to the specified headings (A to E) below.
  (iii) Submission of a research proposal and completed evaluation check-list.

(h) The level of grade awarded will be dependent on the quality of the research proposal assessed according to the criteria agreed in the check-list and the published grading policy of the School of Education.

(i) It is expected that each person will award themselves a mark together with a justification thereof.

(j) The lecturer will make an independent assessment of the evidence presented and arrive at a mark prior to reading the proposed mark.

(k) If the student-proposed mark and lecturer-proposed mark do not fall within the same grade band there will be a discussion between lecturer and student during which justification of marks will be considered. If the marks fall within the same band, the student will receive his or her own mark.

(l) If a mark cannot be agreed the Subject Assessor shall make a final determination unconstrained by the original proposed marks and based solely on the original documentation provided by the student.

Self-assessment Schedule

A self-assessment schedule is basically a document which records your goals and achievements in a given area and judgements about them. It is a summary statement which needs to contain sufficient information in it to enable someone who is familiar with the general area of the subject to ascertain what learning activities the author has engaged in and what he or she has learned. While the schedule itself is a summary, brief attachments may be appended to indicate, for example, scope of reading.

It may be presented in whatever form is considered appropriate (e.g. lists of items under each goal, tabulated in a chart, etc.). Whatever else it includes it should address the following:

A. Specify the *goals* you are pursuing in this subject. These will include your initial goals, those which emerged during the course, and those which have been agreed by the class or your working group. Be as detailed as possible and list all your sub-goals.

B. Indicate the *criteria* which should be applied to judge the extent to which these goals have been met. That is, what are the appropriate standards to be used for assessing your goals in this subject? (i.e. what is the yardstick against which you are assessing yourself with respect to each of your goals?) Include both your own and any agreed as common criteria.

C. For each of the goals specified above (in A), and for each of the criteria indicated (in B) list the *evidence* which you have which relates to how well you have met each one. The main evidence on which you will draw will be your research proposal and outcomes from your reading and study in the subject matter area, but you may include other items if you wish. Do not make any judgements at this stage, just indicate the information which you have available which enables you to make a judgement about your performance/achievement. (The evidence may take the form of items from your portfolio, other pieces of work, comments from peers, etc.)

D. For each of the items listed above give your own *judgement* on the extent to which you have been successful in achieving what you have intended to achieve with respect to the criteria you have set and the evidence at your disposal. This should be a qualitative judgement based on your own criteria and should not refer to marks or marking criteria.
E. For those goals which you believe you have not met sufficiently, indicate what you would need to do in order to meet them, i.e. *Further action.*

Some Tips

(a) Don't wait until near the end of the course before you start to think about what your schedule might include. As you keep your portfolio, mark items which you want to refer to in your schedule. When the time comes to prepare your schedule it should mostly be a matter of writing it out in a coherent form on the basis of various bits and pieces which are dotted around your portfolio and making some final judgements on what they all add up to.

(b) Let yourself be open to goals which you had not considered when you started. If you find that the subject is not what you expected make sure you either attempt to modify it to suit you, or re-appraise your goals sooner rather than later.

(c) The schedule need not be long, the length depends on how much detail you include and the style of presentation. Some people can fit everything on an A3 size chart, others might take 6–10 pages. There is no standard format; its form should be a reflection of what you find most comfortable to do.

(d) Some people get stuck on the idea of criteria. Put simply, criteria are the indicators by which you judge whether you have achieved what you wished to do. For example, if one of my goals in taking the subject was to find out enough about different models of evaluation to be able to make a sensible choice in planning a review of the curriculum in my department, my criteria might include a statement of this and also break it down into parts: "Knowledge of at least three evaluation models which have been used for curriculum evaluation including strengths and weaknesses of each, identification of what expertise is required to use them, and pitfalls to avoid in implementation".

(e) If you are giving someone feedback on their schedule (this also applies to your own review of your work), it is often helpful to look at the consistency between goals, criteria, activities, evidence and judgements. For example, does the evidence relate to the goals, are the judgements based on the evidence cited? Even though you cannot comment on the substance of what is written, you can usually say something about how it hangs together and the general picture it portrays.

Self-marking

On a separate sheet at the back of your schedule indicate a percentage mark you would award yourself for your performance in this subject and the grounds on which you give it. You should take into account the criteria and evidence you have assembled, any feedback you have had from your peers and the grade distribution which applies in this School for work at a Masters level. The grade distribution gives an indication of the maximum number of students in the class who might achieve grades higher than Pass. To justify a grade higher than Pass you would need to indicate ways in which your achievements are significantly greater than most students in the class.

On the completion of the final draft of your self-assessment schedule submit your research proposal and check-list, self-assessment schedule and the mark (and justification) separately.

Sequence of Activities

The following sequence is proposed:

1. Peer feedback session. In the light of the handout on 'Giving and Receiving Feedback' students give each other feedback of a type which they define for themselves. Week 11.
2. Preparation of check-list (criteria) for assessing research proposals. Class exercise, Week 11.
3. Preparation of draft self-assessment schedule. Following the guidelines overleaf.
4. Seeking comments from others. Draft schedule is shown to at least one other student in the class and comments are received from them. By Week 12.
5. Revise self-assessment schedule, as needed.
6. Submit self-assessment schedule and paper. By Week 13.
7. Moderation of self-assessment and adjustment of grades, if necessary.