

## **STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT: THINKING ABOUT THE WAY WE "KNOW"**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Narrative student-self assessment as an evaluation procedure provides a rich source of information for faculty about student learning, and also serves a unique role in encouraging students to become more engaged and empowered in their own learning. This paper describes the uses of narrative student-self assessment in both non-traditional interdisciplinary undergraduate colleges, which use self-assessment as the primary mode of evaluation, and in other more traditional college settings in which self-assessment is used within the context of letter grades. Self-assessment strategies for both formative and summative evaluation are discussed and the benefits found and the problems faced in the commitment to self-assessment are addressed.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT, THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND THE CURRICULUM**

Assessment of student learning is a major thrust in higher education today. Colleges and universities are increasingly being asked to provide evidence of how our students are affected by their college experience. Some of this pressure comes from our own commitment as educators to know more fully what happens to students in their college years. For others, increasing assessment activity has come as the result of state-mandated requirements to examine "outcomes" of the college experience, often to justify funding. As Pat Hutchings said: "It's clear now that assessment isn't going away, but how will it change our work on campus? What conception of undergraduate learning does it imply? How can it alter the ways we think about and work with students - or with one another?" (1990, p. 1) The special challenge for learning communities is to develop assessment procedures that have a "fit" with our institutional missions and philosophies.

For a number of colleges using learning communities, student narrative self-assessment has provided one alternative. Self-assessment is used in both formative and summative ways, at varied points in learning communities and as a capstone exercise at the end of a student's program. At my institution, Fairhaven College, there are no letter grades; in order to receive credit, students must write narrative self-assessments of their progress and accomplishments in the class. The faculty member responsible for the class responds to these evaluations in writing. Copies of evaluations and responses become part of both the students' and the faculty's permanent files.

Evergreen uses a similar self-assessment procedure; students but the formal point for self-assessment occurs at the end of each-year long program. The School of New Learning at DePaul University's uses self-assessment at specific transition points in both the undergraduate and graduate programs. Antioch University asks students to self-assess their progress in undergraduate programs on a quarterly basis. Many writing programs use a 'reflective essay' as a self-assessment strategy in the preparation of writing portfolios. Other programs invited students to develop a cumulative portfolio that is organized by a reflective essay.

Self-assessment occurs not only in non-traditional colleges. Seattle Central Community College uses them in the context of learning communities and freestanding classes in conjunction with more traditional grading rubrics. In many of the Coordinated Studies programs (theme-based blocks) at SCCC, these extensive self-evaluations resulted so often in students owning and becoming more involved in their own education that faculty began to incorporate them in other discrete courses as a final assignment in classes or as an evaluation process for individual assignments.

### **THE AGENDA AND CONTEXT FOR USING SELF-ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION**

In all these institutions, the premise for using student self-assessment (SSE) is simple; one way to discover what students are learning is to ask them. Self-assessment helps students find the learning that happens in the space of mediation between self and knowledge, in the transaction of self and environment. SSEs should not be included as an afterthought, but should be integral part of goals of class, imbedded as part of the curriculum as a supplement to other work and discussion.

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Deciding to use SSEs as part of the evaluation process does not mean that faculty give students complete control over determining standards or criteria for performance, but rather that faculty encourage students to reflect on their own participation in the learning process and to find the connections between knowledge and their lives.

Some SSEs are simple record of learning and a moment of accountability, but at their best they are also a process of self-discovery. As students "name" it, something happens. They begin to construct the "meaning" of what they did. Frequently the SSEs become an "epistemic" writing experience -through the writing something is discovered that was not clearly seen before. As one student's self-assessment said:

"...This did not occur to me as I was trying to write the papers. It only occurred to me right now, as I'm typing this." (Taylor, 1990)

However, the deepest reasons for asking students to evaluate their own work do not pertain to ranking students or even to describe the strengths and weaknesses of what they did. The power of self-assessment lies in the development of reflective habits of mind.

I have been on sabbatical this past year after nearly 30 years of teaching and 20 years in educational administration and leadership. I spent this time interviewing faculty in colleges and universities across the country about reflective practice and self-assessment - folks like you who are hungry for a different kind of learning experience and struggle to create spaces in the teaching/learning paradigm. I want to share with you some of what I've learned from listening to them and some of my own developing ideas, which I confess, are still embryonic. Frankly, I appreciate this opportunity to tell you their stories and, as I weave them together, to find the larger story within them.

**HEAD, HEART AND HANDS** - Marie Eaton  
© 1985 (on *Precious Stone*, Motherlode, Nexus 123)

Name your wisdom. Tell your stories  
Weaving book and lifetime in  
Speak our lives or we are lying  
Name the knowing from within  
How do we know? Where is our voice?  
Head, heart or hands; do we make a choice?  
Or can we weave them together in the end?

Name your passion. Sing your heartbeat  
Join your life to all you speak  
Hear our hearts or we are dying  
Name each feeling, strong and weak.

CHORUS

Name your power. System breaker  
Weave the whole from separate strands  
Speak with language of connection  
Claim the knowing in your hands

CHORUS

## REFLECTION DEFINED

Head, heart and hands - how do we weave the whole? To set a context for these stories, let's think together for a moment about reflective practice and self-assessment. These terms often have multiple meanings when we talk about the ways we work with students in classrooms.<sup>2</sup> Learning Community work can create the space for more reflective practice and self-assessment. I am most interested in the kind of reflective practice described by Van Manen<sup>3</sup> - a practice that constructs understanding through a dialectic between theory and the stories of our personal experience, a movement back and forth between the text and our lives; a practice that views knowledge as emergent and transactional, with the learner engaged in a continual reframing, recasting, and reconstruction of past understandings. This kind of pedagogy values personal experience and applied settings as ways to develop fresh appreciation for tensions between ideas and theories and as tools to help us rethink the assumptions on which our initial understandings of a problem are based. Self-assessment as an evaluative tool is a logical outgrowth of this kind of pedagogy.

The relationship between assessment and learning is receiving more attention in the academy today. Faculty increasingly share some common assumptions about learning which guide assessment: Learning includes more than gathering facts and concepts in any one content area; accountability should include the voices of students. Learning is more likely to occur when students have a sense of ownership, engagement and agency and are encouraged to move beyond the stance of 'received knower' to construct their own knowledge. Learning involves making an action out of knowledge - using knowledge to think, judge, decide, discover, interact, create; learning succeeds to the degree that it gradually assists the learner to take control of his or her own learning process. All of these aspects of learning involve building the skills of reflection and self-assessment.

Reflective practice is nothing new. Educational theorists familiar to us, such as Dewey, Kolb<sup>4</sup>, Bloom, and other educational theorists were writing about the connection between reflection and learning a long time ago. They understood that "reflective observation" is essential to build understanding, and that the kind of learning that leads to synthesis and self-development is distinctly different from the acquisition of the objective, factual content of a course.

In this time of increased focus on testing, accountability, and outcomes measures, it doesn't hurt to be reminded that those measurable outcomes are only the beginning of what we hope to accomplish in our classrooms. In this time we need to be asking not only the questions of the mind, but of the heart and hands as well. If you are at all like the faculty I have been interviewing, you also seek ways to help students explore the nature of their humanness and how we understand our own existence. You want to help them think more deeply about the nature of lived experience and how to understand the life-worlds of those with whom we interact. You want to entice them to examine the underlying assumptions, norms and rules that shape our behavior. You think about education as an emancipatory activity - a way to introduce new lenses and reconstruct taken-for-granted assumptions. And you know that creating

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<sup>2</sup> Process that leads to thoughtful mediated action. Knowledge from external authority (theory) reflected on and put into practice. Contemplation leads to deliberate moves/action in order to apply theory or research in particular environment. The *knower* uses knowledge to *direct* practice. (Cruikshank, D. R. (1985) *Uses and benefits of reflective teaching*. Phi Delta Kappan 66(10). 704-706.) 2. Process of deliberating between conflicting or competing theories, anticipating outcomes and choosing. Knowledge is seen as relativistic. Reflection is used not to *direct* practice but to *inform* it. Attention to the context of events and the idea that reflecting about the outcomes of these events in context (Schwab, J. (1969) The practical: A language for curriculum. Washington D.C.: National Education Association. & Zumwalt, K.K. (1982) *Research on teaching: policy implications for teacher education*. In A. Lieberman & M. McLaughlin (Eds.) Policy making in education. Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.) 3. Process of reorganization or reconstruction of experience. Source of knowledge is in the setting and in the personal knowledge. Dialectical. Knowledge is emergent. Continual reframing, recasting, reconstruction of past understandings. Knowledge includes personal experience and the applied situations, all are used to transform understanding. Fresh appreciation of puzzlement. Rethinking assumptions on which initial understandings of a problem were based. (Van Manen, M. (1987) *Human science and the study of pedagogy*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. Hamilton, Ontario)

<sup>3</sup> Van Manen, M. (1987) *Human science and the study of pedagogy*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. Hamilton, Ontario

<sup>4</sup> Kolb, D. *Learning Styles and Disciplinary Differences*. in A.W. Chickering & Associates. (1981) The Modern American College. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

this kind of learning environment requires more than presenting the content and a syllabus of readings. SSEs are an important part of the evaluation process in this kind of learning climate. There are benefits in both faculty and student development from the inclusion of SSEs as part of the evaluative process.

Two minute writing exercise - Dialogue journal on current thoughts about self-assessment and it's role in teaching/learning. What do you know or do? What are you curious about?

**A DIFFERENT KIND OF CONVERSATION ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED IN CLASS** Reading the students' self-evaluations in their own language often provides insight into cognitive and affective development that may or may not have been an overt objective of the course. Access to the student's own description of the experience gives a faculty member a better understanding of the kind of learning that is not easily tested.

"During this quarter I realized that to accomplish something extraordinary you've got to step out and attempt something you're not comfortable with. That one insight is worth any length of time." SCCC

"The book gave me information that enables me to carry on a conversation about topics in psychology, but the teacher has taught me more about life, causing me to take a look at my surroundings, actions, friends, and values and make some changes for the better that open doors...." SCCC

"Where once my world was black and white, good vs. evil, I am beginning to see beyond the need to draw boundaries in our thought processes." FHC

"I do believe I have regressed to a certain degree this quarter. I could say that this quarter has helped change my goals, because it has, but now I'm stuck in that huge box called square one. The goals I started the quarter with have been dispersed in a new wave of possibilities." SCCC

In addition to assessing their increased understanding of the content of a course, reflective exercises can provide an opportunity to examine some other kinds of problems that may arise in these kinds of educational experiments. Learning communities situations often put students in teams for projects. In addition to the challenges the course content may bring, teamwork can often present another own set of problems. Some faculty use reflective exercises to explore the ideas and challenges of community. Eric Mankowski explores the tension between individualism and life stresses, community partner needs and needs of the community as a whole with students in his Capstone course at PSU. Many students do not welcome group work because they have not had many positive experiences of working in groups. They come from environments in which autonomous work is reinforced, and most don't like to be 'responsible' for doing work in community. They would rather be assigned to individual projects. Eric extracts questions from their own journal work to explore these ideas, asking "Can you dictate a community? Can it be intentionally built?" His students reflect on previous violations and disappointments in previous group work in order to examine the ways in which they can change these interactions in their particular community project.

Vicki Reitenauer poses questions for journal responses about what makes a healthy team asking students to reflect on ways they have been in teams before. How have they participated? What do they want to do differently? If a student replies, "I always pick up the slack for the team" she challenges them to reframe their response by posing counter-questions. "In what ways have you willingly picked up the slack? How has that created a negative impact? How might it prevent someone from sharing? What would happen if you didn't do all the work?" These questions lead to good conversations in the class. Out of these reflective exercises, students to write group agreements, creating and articulating the kind of environment in which they wish to work.

#### **MORE EXPLICIT ABOUT LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Narrative self-evaluations and other reflective activities also give the instructor a clearer idea about what students perceive to be the most significant areas of learning. Many times what students learn is not what we planned when we wrote the syllabus. Narrative self-assessment allows us to tap the power of their language, their own "voices" to describe what happened for them in the class. For example, concerning a Chemical Dependency and Domestic Violence class, a student wrote:

"In terms of writers or others involved in the field, I was introduced to a host of professionals who are doing a great deal of research and work in the fields of domestic violence and voice. In looking at lesbian battering, I see myself continuing to read updates on what is being done to make services available to lesbians, and to follow the breakdown of the silence surrounding the issue in the lesbian community." SCCC

Other students had similar experiences of stepping beyond the syllabus and the class requirements.

"The final paper is just a slice of my research and confines itself to one focal point. It is in itself a great exercise in centering in my writing. The process of the paper, on the other hand was a multi-dimensional exposure of my learning in this course." SCCC

"American Sign Language is a foreign language. I had to forget the use of complete, descriptive sentences in ASL, and instead concentrate on concepts. The key to learning ASL is knowing that a concept has to be created and a formulation of images connected." SCCC

"Within the learning of this rudimentary, building block level of algebra, nothing would be gained by my trying to assert my voice or inflict my opinion upon the proceedings of the class. I find that learning Algebra is like learning the most succinct language of all. If within this language I chose the incorrect 'word,' the 'meaning of the sentence' would be totally erroneous." SCCC

SSEs can be a form of action research, giving feedback on the effectiveness of our efforts as educators. From their reflections, faculty learn about the strengths and weaknesses of curriculum and pedagogy. SSEs provide glimpses of where certain practices over-challenge or under-challenge students in their learning, and about where practices inhibit, rather than promote students' progress (Taylor & Marienau, 1989).

This feedback about the learning process is found in a wide variety of SSE exercises and does not need to occur only at the end of a term. The "one minute papers" suggested by Patricia Cross and her colleagues (1988) are a kind of SSE. This strategy asks students to reflect at the end of each session about what they understood from the day's work and to identify and skills or ideas they still do not grasp. Faculty who use this kind of strategy report:

" 'I just never know this much about my students' thinking,' he told us. Wanting to understand more, I asked him, 'So, the power of Classroom Assessment is in giving you more information about students. Is that right?' And he paused and said, 'Well, yes, it's information. But really, you know, the bigger difference is that I never thought to ask these questions before.' " (Hutchings, 1990)

The use of the self-assessment process instead of or in addition to grades changes students' and faculty's relationship to subject matter. Although the assessment process ought at minimum to provide an indication about whether students are learning what faculty members believe they are teaching, typically any assessment or evaluation process is surrounded by questions that have little or nothing to do with the content or the student's relationship to the content. As Pat Hutchings (1990) indicated, most of these questions are all too familiar to faculty.

"What do I have to do to get an A?  
Why do we have to do this paper?  
Why don't you just tell us what you are looking for?  
Do we have to know this?"

Additionally, when graded tests and other more traditional forms of assessment are used, sometime the material used to garner the assessment data is that which is easy to measure, rather than what might be most important to know. If narrative self-assessment is used as an evaluation procedure for an assignment or a class, there can be a shift toward understanding the material rather than wringing a grade out of the class assignments. Assignments can be tailored to what suits the material being studied rather than what is easy to grade.

"That is what I enjoy most about this class (Anthropology), actually being able to enjoy the terms and concepts. It isn't about memorizing from a book, but about thinking." SCCC

Many students have difficulty valuing their personally constructed knowledge. They are too well trained to be receivers of information. One Fairhaven student wrote articulately about her shift from this passive stance to a more active, engaged kind of learning in her senior reflective essay.

"I knew upon arriving at Fairhaven that my old ways of learning were going to be challenged, which is exactly what I wanted. I have always been an expert at memorization and regurgitating information to satisfy an instructor or requirement of the class (i.e. grades). I have also for many years been silent, afraid of my own voice, intimidated by others' knowledge and the ease with which they spoke... I have learned to ask questions of my self and others... I feel as if I've been gently forced through the material to ask deeper questions, requiring deeper answers and to realize that the learning, my education, will continue as long as I'm open to new information or ways of looking at the work. For the first time in my life, I feel as if I'm being educated."

Historically we have asked students to leave that 'selfness' at the door as they enter the classroom. We ask them to passively wait to be told what to think, and we tell them their feelings are not relevant grist for our discussions. They learn early lessons that the pronoun "I" does not belong in the classroom or in their academic writing. They are rewarded for distance from their own knowing and punished for questioning the knowledge that does not fit with their own personal frames.

More and more, we are coming to understand that the key to deepening thinking seems to lie, not with the separation of the self from the text, but with the *both/and*. Shuttling back and forth between personal and public spaces, between the new concepts presented and the frames of understanding built from the experiences that we bring to this new learning, can provide ways for students to bring this knowledge actively into their lives.

Thich Nhat Hanh,<sup>5</sup> the Buddhist philosopher, reminds us in his little book Peace is Every Step that the word 'comprehend' comes from the Latin "*cum*" or "with" and '*prehendere*' which means "to grasp or pick up.' So to *comprehend* something, we have to pick it up and be one with it. Getting to the place of being one with something means finding the connections with your own self, the ways in which this knowledge, this being, is also part of you.

Students benefit from the opportunity to examine the ways they define knowledge and what it means to learn. Our teaching benefits from finding ways to help students make connections by anchoring their work in content or discipline to things they already know, and can know whatever limitations exist. Educational reformers like Parker Palmer and Diane Dubose Brunner<sup>6</sup> challenge us to create spaces for the private to enter into the classroom. Teaching is not only about presenting abstractions that mystify and elevate, but also about connecting this work to things we know from experience and can make known to others - it's about the power of narratives and stories. Narrative self-assessment provides a powerful vehicle for exploring these important connections.

Miriam Raider-Roth and Carol Rodgers, faculty in the Teacher Education program at SUNY/Albany, both stressed during their interviews how important it was for the students to be given assessment activities where their voice matters. Moving back and forth between text and story, between outer thought and inner life, invites students to review and reflect on their own work and experience and bring them into the classroom space. This practice asks them to give their experience and stories the same careful attention and the analytical review as they give to the texts.

The transactional nature of this practice, building a live circuit between the student and the text, is very profound. Reflective activities and self-assessment can build bridges between the theory and personal experience, and primary or personal relationships with the text lead the way toward more critical analyses. Of course, inviting personal stories as part of the assessment process can be dangerous. Problems arise when students focus on their own experience to the exclusion of the text and content of the course. When they do not engage in a transaction, do not visit the text at all, they can all too easily adopt an essentialist view that their own personal experience reflects the sum of learning in the course

### **SHIFT IN STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY AND LOCUS OF CONTROL**

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<sup>5</sup> Hanh, Thich Nhat (1991) *Not Two, Peace is Every Step*. New York: Bantam Books. pg. 100

<sup>6</sup> Brunner, Diane Dubose. (1994) *Inquiry and Reflection: Framing Narrative Practice in Education*. New York: SUNY Press

Through the narrative faculty response, students are given more concrete feedback on the nature and quality of their work, which gives them more power to define themselves as students. As one student remarked:

"The self-assessment process helps me understand not only that I am considered a good student, but why I am considered a good student. This kind of feedback gives me the tools to improve." FHC

Through the self-assessment process, students also often describe some new insights about themselves as learners.

"I kept thinking this would get easier once I wrote it down. It only got harder. I kept hitting wall after wall, coming to no conclusions with my ideas and my time was running out fast. A classmate called me two days before it was due and said, 'I want to read your notes, let's go have dinner.' We went out and ended up just talking about things we'd been afraid to say in class because we thought we were wrong. It dawned on me that these 'wrong' things were the things we thought to be most important about the readings and they directly related to the questions on the exam. Suddenly, we both began writing furiously. We both had our answers. Before this dinner I had thought two things: 1) my writings aren't good enough to let anyone read, and 2) I do not need anyone else's input on my writings; that will only distract me. I was dead wrong." SCCC

"Another important idea I expanded upon this quarter was my ability to speak out, to use my voice. This idea is probably the most connected idea of this quarter because of the fact that I've used it in every class and area of my life. In English, I was using my voice the second week of class when I read my paper on lesbian and gay youth aloud. In Japanese, I found my voice when I found the courage to talk with my teacher face to face about my grade at midterm. And at home, I found my voice when I told my lover that I needed time alone and I told myself that yes, I was a victim of all forms of childhood abuse." SCCC

Additionally, using the Self-assessment process instead of grades requires that students confront their own learning and participation in the learning process more directly. As one student said:

"When I take a graded class, I can just live with the C+, but when I have to write a Self-assessment, I have to take responsibility for what it was I did or did not do that earned me that grade. It makes me confront myself more directly. The process makes me be more honest, both with the instructor and with myself." FHC

"I realize there is nothing anyone can do that will help me change if I'm not going to try. I must discipline myself and only then will I know what true success feels like." SCCC

This is risky work. John Dewey reminded us that "Reflective thinking...involves a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty.... [Reflective] persons... weigh, ponder [and] deliberate...a process of evaluating what occurs to them in order to decide upon its force and weight for their problem."<sup>7</sup>

Lee Knefelkamp is fond of telling the story of her senior exam at Maccalaster College. Students spent weeks and months preparing for this culminating examination and when they walked into the examination room, they found three questions: "1. What have you seen? 2. What have you heard? 3. What will you do now?"<sup>8</sup> This examination was simple, yet powerful, and was constructed on the same premises as narrative student self-assessment: there are multiple voices and ways of knowing and perceiving; we each have a responsibility to make meaning and own it; and there is a responsibility to act upon what we know.

The faculty member who constructed this exam understood deeply about creating space for the "doubt, hesitation, and perplexity" that Dewey describes. Offering students the opportunity to see something in a new light requires a kind of unraveling, before the connections (raveling) can happen. This space can be vulnerable and emotional. We unravel what *is* to find what *might be*. This implies a taking apart, to create a disruption of the ordinary course of things. This is exactly what Annie Dillard's bird watcher in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, does.

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<sup>7</sup> Dewey, John (1933) How We Think. p. 120.

<sup>8</sup> Strohm, M. Address given at the National Conference on Student Centered Learning, Bellingham, WA, 1988.

She says, "When I lose interest in a given bird, I try to renew it by looking at the bird in either of two ways. I imagine neutrinos passing through its feather and into its heart and lungs, or I reverse its evolution and imagine it as a lizard. I see its scaled legs and that naked ring around a shiny eye; I shrink and deplume its feathers to lizard scales, unhorn its lipless mouth and set it stalking dragonflies, cool-eyed, under a palmetto. Then I reverse the process once again, quickly; its forelegs unfurl, its scales hatch feathers and soften. It takes to the air seeking cool forests; it sings songs."<sup>9</sup>

The watcher moves from bird to lizard and back to bird to find a clearer way to see the bird. She can completely see the lizard and the bird together. Evoking stories and their attendant emotions in to the classroom does not mean we give up the life of the mind, but rather that we can honor the both/and, honor the life of our hearts and the work of our hands along side the mind as equal partners.

### **META-COGNITION: THINKING ABOUT LEARNING**

Another part of self-assessment and reflection is the examination of who we are as learners in the learning setting. Not only reflection about what is to be learned, but also how I - as learner - go about the task of learning it. "The object here is graduates who know their own strengths and weaknesses, can set and pursue goals, who monitor their own progress and learn from experience. There's considerable evidence now that students who are self-conscious about their processes as learners are better learners, that they learn more easily and deeply, and that their learning lasts. The fashionable label for the skills in question here is 'metacognitive,' but whatever you call them they represent a kind of learning that speaks to a belief that learning is personally liberating, self-empowering, and for *all* students."<sup>10</sup>

Keith Hjortshoj at Cornell asks his writing students to interview other students about how they approach writing as an avenue into understanding their own strategies.

As part of his portfolio assignment, Lewis McClellan, who teaches Italian at Cornell asks his students to "tell me how you're going about learning what you're learning."

### **STUDENT WORK AS TEXT AND PROGRAM SUMMARIES**

Summary Essays: Too often undergraduate learning experiences are like being in the supermarket, getting all the right packages from the list to the checkout stand, but not really thinking about if it's a meal. Students do all the assignments and make all the required community visits, but do not always step back to view the whole experience. Summary reflective exercises ask students to go back look at their work over time and make meaning. "What does it add up to? How have your perspectives changed? What will you take forward?" Self- assessment and reflection can affirm that there has been change, even if a grade may not reflect this aspect of their work. Summary reflective narratives invite students to go back to their first assignments or early writings with new lenses to build another layer of reflection. They examine how these experiences might be understood differently now that they know more about the content, the issues, and the context. Colleen Dyrud from PSU said, "There are times when I have been frustrated with the journal entries. It seems that they are done in haste, just touching the surface, yet I know that the student is capable of more. When I ask them to go back and do a summary narrative, they often turn out to be very good. Perhaps they are more familiar with the summary than commenting on the on-going process?"

In longer programs, these summary reflective tasks can be transformative. At Fairhaven College, all students take a capstone seminar at the end of their programs. As part of this seminar, the students write reflective "Summary and Evaluation" (S&E) papers. In these papers students describe and critically evaluate their experiences in their concentrations, paying attention both to ways in which the institution helped or hindered their progress and to their own developing knowledge of their subject matters and themselves as learners. The Summary and Evaluation Paper requires students to take a self-evaluative stance as they reflect back on their college experience and is usually a rewarding experience for students. Students work through a series of drafts with feedback from both faculty and peers. For both the class self-evaluations and the S&E, faculty frequently use a series of prompting questions and activities to help students attend to some of the major themes which might be developed in a self-reflective process.

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<sup>9</sup> Dillard, Annie. (1984) Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. New York: Harper & Row. p. 104

<sup>10</sup> Hutchings, Pat "Assessment and the Way We Work" Closing Plenary Address, Fifth AAHE Conference on Assessment, June 30, 1990. p.7

For example, in Fairhaven's Law and Diversity Program, the Summary and Evaluation exercise guides students to take a self-evaluative stance as they reflect back on their experience in the federated learning community studying issues about justice in the American society and in their internship in field settings. The students have an opportunity to examine how the concepts developed through the academic work in the program intersect with their own lives and with the communities they represent. Issues of how diverse populations are impacted by both government and legal systems are foregrounded through writing and reading assignments and seminar discussions and then re-examined in light of students' experiences in their field settings. As one graduate reflected in an alumnae interview:

"The Integrative Seminar and S&E were very positive. I think it would be so valuable in law school to have something like that. It was an opportunity to tie up all the ends, to bring everything together, in the sense that we were studying in different classes, and to synthesize, to hear feedback on it, to talk about it. That's one thing that I feel is missing for me in law school. I'm studying a whole bunch of different topics that are only related by virtue of the fact that they're law. It would be really nice to sit in a class and talk about how these classes relate to each other and to my work. My understanding of what I was studying would be much more enhanced than is the case now, and as I recollect, that was the case in the Law and Diversity Program."<sup>11</sup>

Students from other programs at Fairhaven also find this exercise transformative:

" In writing the summary and evaluation paper, I had to assess my education as objectively as I could. In doing so, I was able to understand that my education has been shaped by many forces, both good and bad...There have been a number of professors, books and classes that have given me greater insight both to myself and my chosen field of study. Also, I realized that bad forces, such as homophobia, racism and sexism have been just as important to my education as the good forces. It is only by experiencing the bad that one can understand what the good is, and to strive for it."

"This seminar has provided a wonderful structure within which I have been able to thoughtfully look back over my four years, reviewing, questioning, bringing to articulation a portrait in words of my experience here...Writing my Summary &Evaluation paper was a chance for me to come to a sense of completion with what I have accomplished at Fairhaven College and to also see I take with me much work still to be done."

"The Advanced Seminar is one of Fairhaven's meaningful rituals, making graduating a meaningful experience. I was obsessed for weeks by the process of summing up and evaluating my entire, life-long, education."

Portfolios. Many learning communities use some kind of ending portfolio as a means of summative reflective activity. Students reflect on the goals for the learning community and the community-based learning and select work that illustrates their learning. They interpret each goal, connect it to their own work, and write a reflective piece describing which elements provide evidence of the goals. Portfolios can provide the opportunity for serious reflection. Students re-examine their work and ask how their actions and perceptions have changed. How do they see themselves as both actor and agent? If these portfolios are shared, the reflections from varied students can surface patterns and common experiences that enhance the individual learning experience and the group understanding.

Portland State University (PSU) has implemented electronic portfolios that require students to reflect on the goals of University Studies and articulate how their work over the year demonstrates these goals, linking their work to key pieces of evidence. The portfolios are an opportunity to think about the material, the activities, and the homework, in light of the four learning goals PSU has for first year students (inquiry and critical thinking, communication, variety of human experience, ethical issues and social responsibility).

Eric Schocket and Brown Kennedy at Hampshire spend time advising students about the retrospective paper they are required to write at the end of their college work. To prepare for this task, they ask the students to go back over

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<sup>11</sup> Eaton, M. *Diversity and interdisciplinary education: Lessons learned from the Law and Diversity Program.* Evergreen Conference on Interdisciplinary Education. Olympia, Washington. October 1997

their work in the portfolio, look at the questions proposed in their major contract, and read back through their papers and assessments. As they review their own work, they should consider whether in some ways they are writing the same paper over and over and look for buried themes or big ideas. Schocket and Kennedy suggest that the students adopt the role of a graduate student 20 years from now search through the literature to find the early roots of their own thinking. In fact, they are inviting the students to view their own work as the *text*. This seems very profound.

### LIFE LONG LEARNING

Most faculty agree that effective adults are those who are able to assess accurately their own efforts and use the assessment to improve future attempts. Most of us share Hutchings' view of the goal of a college education.

"The object here is graduates who know their own strengths and weaknesses, can set and pursue goals, who monitor their own progress and learn from experience. There's considerable evidence now that students who are self-conscious about their processes as learners are better learners, that they learn more easily and deeply, and that their learning lasts. The fashionable label for the skills in question here is 'metacognitive,' but whatever you call them they represent a kind of learning that speaks to a belief that learning is personally liberating, self-empowering, and for all students." (1990, p.7)

We hope that part of the college experience will be the development of these skills of self-assessment. However, they may not develop for some students without practice and feedback on the process. Through the self-assessment process, Fairhaven students often show growth in becoming more self-reflective. They begin to develop self-evaluative skills and carry them forward into other areas of their work. Although this phenomenon is recognized by faculty, we are only now beginning to take the steps to document some of this growth through a project using the Measure of Intellectual Development (MID) which uses the Perry model of cognitive development to track student development through their own writing. The following quotes from student evaluations over time illustrate this kind of growth. The kind of evaluative statements made become more sophisticated and more reflective over time as the following excerpts illustrate.

Student #1 FHC Year one: "I really don't know how I can evaluate myself or the class. I learned a few things - a lot that was covered was new to me. I didn't fully participate, but I did attend whenever I could."

Year three: "Although I did not find the time to accomplish all that I would have liked to, I feel a sense of accomplishment at the completion of this study... I hope that my contribution to the class has provided some new insights for some and at least opened up some new areas of discussion. I felt that at times I could have expressed myself better.

Year five: "The work I did this quarter, though mostly research and the formulation of questions for further inquiry, was probably the most important study I have undertaken. What began as a follow-up research project for clarifying what I had learned in the previous two quarters has become the basis of what promises to be the most important product of my education."

Student #2 FHC Year one: "I attended this class every day. I participated in discussions and field study. I did a research paper on Janis Joplin and I feel I did a very thorough method of research."

Year three: " This class was sometimes difficult for me. At times I felt extreme emotions toward the different ideologies expressed during class. However, these different ideologies helped me examine and change my own attitudes and ideologies. At other times I felt unchallenged and apathetic. Although my attendance was average, it could have been more regular toward the end of the quarter."

Paolo Freire, in his discussion of pedagogy, argues that students must be given work that they can think of as theirs; they shouldn't be "docile" listeners but "critical co-investigators" of their own situations "in the world and with the world." The work they do must matter, not only because it draws on their experience, but also because that work makes it possible for students to better understand, and therefore change, their lives. The self-assessment process can assist students to "...perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation." (Freire,

1984) The self-assessment process often helps students articulate and recognize that they have learned more than the class syllabus advertised as reflect on the ways learning will continue after the class ends.

"I don't know what my major will be, but what I have learned about critical thinking, working with other people in groups or as partners, and being able to visualize things as they are being related to me, will be of benefit to me throughout my life. Equally important is the realization that I have a right and a responsibility to question what I don't understand or agree with. I hope that I can instill this in my son..."  
SCCC

"The book gave me information that enables me to carry on a conversation about topics in psychology, but the teacher has taught me more about life, causing me to take a look at my surroundings, actions, friends, and values and make some changes for the better that open doors..." SCCC

### **CHANGES IN POWER RELATIONSHIPS**

Students must be active participants in the process of evaluation. When the faculty assume the entire task of assessing 'reflecting' for students, we alone decide what their strengths and their weaknesses are. As long as we do it all, through our lectures, exams, our grades and our black books, we hold the power and the object of learning becomes finding out what the teacher wants remembered instead of what the student wants to know.

When grades are not the only driver for doing the work in the class, students often find there are intrinsic reasons for tackling the material and concepts presented in the course. Additionally, they often begin to recognize that they have responsibility for their own experiences in the learning situation and become their own best critics. The self-assessment process demystifies authority. Even if grades are assigned, no performance or achievement can be merely labeled with a letter; the student's substantive description also carries the weight of evaluation and makes the work, not the letter symbol assigned, real.

"I feel that I accomplished everything that was asked of me during this seminar. My only question would be: did I accomplish all that I might have expected from myself?...I don't feel I was able to gain as complete an understanding of "leadership" and the "biography" as I feel I should have. I think I would need more study in these fields to feel completely comfortable with them. I feel I might also have been more assertive in class." FHC

"Giving yourself a grade (in a way) probably contributes more to your strengthening as a student and an individual than receiving a grade from a teacher (someone else). It is easier to disregard some other person's analysis of your efforts if perhaps you are given a low grade. On the other hand, your ego may be overly inflated because you received a high grade. The self-assessment makes students look more closely at their efforts and puts a demand on students to be honest with themselves: a difficult but righteous thing to do." FHC

"I learned that it was up to me to take responsibility for my learning and I stopped placing the blame on the course or the instructor." FHC

"My understanding of the issues was not entirely reflected in my work. Overall, I am pleased with my interactions with the readings, discussion and writing assignments. The area that could stand the most improvement on my part is in the written assignment department. This is a continual problem with my academic career that is due partially to procrastination and partially to intense writing blocks that I have problems overcoming. As a result, I have yet to complete one of the assigned papers and another paper I am not at all pleased with. I feel I have the potential to interact well with the material on paper once I overcome problems with writing paranoia." FHC

"It is extremely difficulty to be honestly critical of a class, of a professor's performance within that class, when you like and admire them. But if the class failed me, then I have to be able to say that. When I failed a class, or my standards as a learner or student, I have to be equally critical of that. I have to accept my responsibilities as I perceived them to be, not as the dominant paradigm would have them. That is another part of practicing my full citizenship..." FHC

Using SSEs gives students a voice to describe their own experience in the class, and also gives them some power. The evaluation is not relegated only to others, but is also involves the self. Faculty traditionally have enormous power and control through grades (the "sacred GPA"). SSEs gives some of that power back to the student.

"It is not grades that define me or my learning, a reality that I can easily forget at times." SCCC

"In a school like SCCC which has such a multi-cultural population, we are learning from everyone's cultural experiences as well." SCCC

Additionally, using the self-evaluation process instead of grades requires that students confront their own learning and participation in the learning process more directly. As one student said:

"When I take a graded class, I can just live with the C+, but when I have to write a self-assessment, I have to take responsibility for what it was I did or did not do that earned me that grade. It makes me confront myself more directly. The process makes me be more honest, both with the instructor and with myself."  
FHC

### CHALLENGES

Using SSEs is not without problems and challenges, however. When students express concern about narrative grading, the focus usually centers on their fears about access to other programs in academia. The currency of the academic world is the GPA. Students are faced with competing in that world. Their fears are often justified as many programs do use GPA as an initial screening method. However, most colleges using narrative self-assessment have been able to work successfully with graduate programs, law and medical schools and scholarship committees to help them interpret narrative evaluations and determine appropriate equivalencies. This step does require extra time and commitment from faculty and staff.

Additionally, inviting students to connect their learning to their own lives and to examination the relationship of self to current and past learning situations can sometimes be emotionally laden. Many faculty are neither comfortable with the kinds of self-disclosure that may happen, nor are they prepared to help students when they confront the kinds of issues which may arise. When faculty and students set mutually agreeable parameters early in a course to guide the self-assessment process and when appropriate resources for talking through the "unexpected learning" are identified, this difficulty can be largely avoided. Not all learners enjoy or value the process of self-assessment. As Taylor (1990) reported:

"One woman described it (an SSE) as 'psychological ka-ka' and indicated that she would do it only because it was a requirement, but 'kicking and screaming all the way.' And, despite our suggestions for a shift in perception, her 'self-assessments' have really been program critiques." (p. 23)

However, most students, when interviewed at the end of their programs, view SSEs as a valuable and important part of their learning experiences in college. Apparently there is something about self-assessment which they are able to generalize to other areas of their lives. The ability to examine one's accomplishments in a particular learning environment sharpens the ability to evaluate oneself in a variety of other arenas.

There are some additional potential problems that center on the faculty's perception of the importance of the narrative grades. Writing narrative responses to the student's self-assessment requires concentration and commitment. Some faculty respond in vague or relatively superficial ways, or slip into the use of cliches which find their way into all evaluations, robbing them of the personal focus. Other faculty find it difficult to be constructively critical. The narrative process then becomes simply an affirmation of all the student did well with little critical dialogue about those areas that could have been improved. Both these kinds of responses undercut the power and purpose of the self-assessment process.

There are also some administrative considerations that must be addressed when considering the use of narrative evaluations, particularly if they are considered as a replacement for letter grades. The first is simply the increased amount of paper flow. Grades don't take up much room (4 digits each) and are easily stored. The narrative evaluations require triplicate forms, filing cabinets, and staff time to process them.

The commitment to the use of narrative evaluations also has implications about the size of classes offered. Although students in large classes could still be encouraged to write self-assessments, either for individual assignments or as summaries of a class experience, personal responses from faculty to these evaluations are difficult to impossible to do for large classes.

The audience for the SSE must also be considered. If the dialogue is simply between the student and the faculty member, the language might be quite informal and personal. The kinds of language and content may shift somewhat if the self-assessments are going to become part of a permanent record with a potential audience of future employers or graduate programs.

Finally, the curriculum must provide avenues for students to learn the skills of self-assessment. Most students come to college with little or no experience in taking a reflective look at their own learning.

"I found the Self-assessment difficult to write. I've never had to do a self-evaluation before, so I hope they will get less difficult as I progress..." FHC

For many students, the self-evaluation can become a reprise of the syllabus or a reciting of events in the class. For example:

"We read a progression of autobiographies for the class. The first is a short chronicle of events lodged in familiar time and place; it matched my initial idea of what an autobiography could be. Then we read the diary of a woman. It used a complexity of prose and structure I had not seen before...The last autobiography, like the first, is a chronicle of events, but more specifically a chronicle of a life's work."  
FHC

Both Fairhaven and SCCC have addressed this concern by becoming more self-conscious about teaching the skills of self-evaluation. Some faculty structure the exercise so that it does not become a simple list of what they have done, but rather a personal statement of what mattered to them in their learning. Instead of re-telling everything that happened, students are asked to pick two or activities, readings, or discussion that mattered and put them in a context. Using drafts of the self-assessment, feedback, prompts and focused questions, we are attempting to provide students with a more structured experience to build these skills.

## STRATEGIES

### **In-class writing exercises**

Prompts for short writing Many faculty use short in-class writing exercises as a strategy to build toward a summary self-assessment. Students are asked to write for ten minutes on a focused question or prompt, posed by the faculty member (see attached) pertaining to their work. Students use these short writing pieces to begin a discussion about their work, sometime within small groups.

Metaphor or simile. Colleen Dyrud, a field supervisor in Portland State's Teacher Education program uses metaphors and similes as a vehicle to surface reflection for self-assessment. "I get better self-assessment when I ask the students to use a metaphor or simile to start a reflective writing. For example, I give them a sentence stem, 'This stage of my practicum is like.... because...' I ask them do a brief two-minute write with their first idea, and then share their writing in small groups. Metaphor and simile seem to pull out more reflective language and insight." She then asks the class to explore patterns and common themes of these similes and metaphors, and follows this exercise with a journal entry. Colleen told a story about a student whom, after doing the simile exercise said, "Wow, I realized that my whole journal has only been telling the good things that have been happening." Her prior practicum log entries had been very positive, but the simile she chose was "This practicum has been like wanting something really, really bad for Christmas and Christmas morning your sister gets it." This exercise helped her recognize that she really wanted to be working in a different part of the agency. The simile allowed her to surface her feelings that she was in the wrong part of the agency and to think more deeply and learn from these feelings, and to recognize what about the current practicum didn't fit and why. The exercise lead to some important career clarification.

Tony Grasha uses a constructed writing exercise to elicit words, images, feelings, and guiding metaphors about their work.

MORE

### **Non-verbal reflection**

Not all successful self-assessment activities involve narrative writing. Varying the form of reflection can often surface some different ideas about the community experience and connections to the course content.

Mind maps. Yves Labissiere, a faculty member in the Freshman Inquiry Program at PSU, uses mind maps as a reflective activity. "We do collective reflections by making mind maps in small groups. I break them into groups of five or six students and ask each group collectively to construct a mind-map (major ideas and theories) of the course and share it with the other groups. Often each map has very different configuration." The class conversations about these differences can be enriching and enlightening. This kind of exercise could also be extended to learning communities that have a significant community-based learning component. Repeating this exercise at a later point in a term and comparing the mind maps to the earlier set would also help students think about the ways their understanding has changed.

Artifacts Jennifer Samison, in the Early Childhood Education Program at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia encourages students to select an artifact that symbolizes something important in the way they have developed their philosophy of practice. Although they finally do write a formal philosophy of practice essay, the first step is to select a three-dimensional artifact, and to explain the links between the artifacts, their thinking and their experiences in the field. Through the artifact they explore the following reflective question, "What have you learned from your practicum, from guided experience that has helped you further develop your philosophy, and to what extent do you think your current thinking will assist or hinder you in becoming the kind of teacher you want to become?" The students report that this exercise made them think more than a more typical writing exercise and that talking from the artifact helps shape the reflection.

### **Effective use of journals or logs as sources for self-assessment**

Many faculty use students' reading logs, observational logs or journal descriptions as a class assignment. Two challenges of using observational logs or journals are the time required to read them and give this kind of careful critical feedback and the difficulty of 'grading' such personal work. Prompting questions can guide the student to deeper reflection and self-assessment using the logs or journals as raw material. Catherine Patterson, in the Early Childhood Education Program at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia collects and reads the journals periodically. To move the students toward self-assessment, she asks them to write and submit an analysis of the journal, highlighting the themes that recur in their observations or the connections to the course, identifying both the key issues and the things they did not write about. She skims the whole journal, but carefully reads and marks only the analysis. Jodi Levine at Temple University uses a similar strategy. In the Teacher Education Master's program, she asks students to select passages from their journals that reflect their growth as teachers and write short essays that comment on this growth.

Multiple entry reflective journals. Colleen Dyrud uses multiple entry journals with practicum students in early childhood settings as a formative self-assessment strategy. The students divide their journals into three columns. In column one, the students write a direct narration of what happened in the field setting - their actions and the actions of others. In column two the students respond to the 'actors,' using the following questions: "What do you suppose they were feeling? What are your feelings? What do you think was going on?" In column three, students re-read both column one and two after a day or two, and respond again after some time to reflect. "What happened? How did you feel? What now? What can you add after a little time and space? Dig a little deeper." Colleen found that if they do all three steps, they tend to be more reflective in the third step addressing their assumptions and values. "How did I come to this place? Why was this incident challenging to me? What assumptions did I bring into the room? Will I make a change?"

Toby Smith, at Fairhaven College, uses a similar strategy, but adds an additional writing task in her 'course workbooks' in which the student is asked reflect on the intersection between their observations and the readings and theories they have been discussing in class.

These kinds of exercises challenge students to use their textual analysis skills on their own work. Students rarely are invited to use their own work as text, or lay their own work against some other template or theory or mode of practice and ask these questions. This exercise can lead to extremely powerful and empowering learning as the students begin to understand that their thoughts and their learning have meaning and worth alongside all the experts they study.

### SUMMARY

Previous research has indicated that students who were given an opportunity to regularly reflect on their learning and life at college described the satisfaction gained from being offered the chance to engage in self-assessment. Perry (1970) indicated that students often regarded the interview about their previous year's work as a highlight. Students in colleges that have incorporated self-assessment into the curriculum concur. They are eager to discuss and study their own learning and development.

"Student enthusiasm was noticeably high throughout the quarter. It felt to me in the front of the room as if a current of water was rushing to fill a space where previously a vacuum had existed...Here was time in their studies to reflect on the higher learning for which they were paying and to which so many people were dedicating so much time. Here was time to 'jump off' education as an industrial treadmill and time to contemplate and hold seriously the knowledge and processes to which students were being introduced."  
(Waluconis, 1990)

The act of encouraging reflective practice and self-assessment in our students is the art of becoming ... a process that no one can do for us or for which there is no formula, only a stance of questioning. When we create the spaces in our classrooms in which our students are asked to take more responsibility for their the assessment of their learning, the learning will be deeper and richer. In order to capture the doubting, wondering, questioning space that Dewey describes, reflection and self-assessment must be dialogic... that is, in conversation both with self and others, examining our own perspectives against the backdrop of the text, the course activities, our classmates, and our own situated being.

Even though there may be difficulties in integrating self-assessment into a college curriculum, we believe that the benefit to students is substantial and justifies its use. Given a world in which paradigms are shifting rapidly, growth in student ability to be self-reflective and to evaluate both performance and process may be one of the most important outcomes of a college experience. The use of narrative self-evaluation is one method to develop those skills.

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