

Re-Thinking Assessment: Self- and Peer-Assessment as Drivers of Self-Direction in Learning

Kathy HARRISON*,
Joe O'HARA**,
Gerry McNAMARA***

Suggested Citation:

Harrison, K., O'Hara, J. & McNamara, G. (2015). Re-thinking assessment: self- and peer-assessment as drivers of self-direction in learning. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 60, 75-88
Doi: 10.14689/ejer.2015.60.5

Abstract

Problem Statement: This paper focuses on assessment in Irish education, which, despite best intentions, shepherds students through the process to an extent that the individual is prone to undervalue her/his ability to trust in the *self* as a rational, self-thinking individual. In Ireland's assessment system lies the paradox whereby from childhood the learner develops the habit of depending on 'authority' (teacher/examiner) to assess their work, with the expectation that the learner will graduate a self-reliant, achieving person.

Purpose: This paper shows how a step away from the traditional form of assessment, beginning at elementary school, can help redress this incongruity. Self- and peer-assessment, in a study with 523 students and their teachers, is shown to be more congruent with developing skills, attitudes and behaviour necessary to help students graduate as *self*-reliant and *self*-directed individuals.

Methods: These were from the post-positivist / phenomenological / interpretive family. The study used Action Research from the emancipatory paradigm. Concerned with experience, phenomenological analysis emerged from the interpretive paradigm. Throughout, the quantitative element added a positivist dimension which was a constant aspect, strengthening the research. In accordance with phenomenological philosophy, attention was paid to minority viewpoints, ensuring the study was inclusive and culturally sensitive.

* Dr., Dublin City University, School of Education Studies, kathy.harrison@dcu.ie

** Prof. Dr., Dublin City University, School of Education Studies, joe.ohara@dcu.ie

***Prof. Dr., Dublin City University, School of Education Studies, gerry.mcnamara@dcu.ie

Results and Findings: A sociological phenomenon, learning applies to all, and any theory of learning must embrace all learners, in accordance with social justice. During self- and peer-assessment, students developed skills as critical, creative thinkers, effective communicators, collaborative team workers, becoming more personally productive and effective. Their self-awareness and self-reflection increased significantly. All of these aspects are essential components of self-direction.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Self- and peer-assessment, a culturally responsive student-teacher partnership approach, serves all ages in any learning context. It is a step toward redressing the balance from dependence on the teacher/examiner to self-direction. Self- and peer-assessment is a sustainable lifelong learning methodology and needs implementing urgently at all levels of the curriculum. This will lead to a reconstruction of boundaries as learners take more control of their assessment and learning. The focus is on 'self', learning control and self-direction through the practice of assessing own and peer performance. Ultimately, this creative form of assessment influences, self, community and greater society.

Key Words: Self-assessment, peer-assessment, self-reliance, self-direction, culturally responsive.

Introduction

Repeated responses to recurrent stimuli may fix a habit of acting in a certain way. All of us have many habits of whose import we are quite unaware, since they are formed without our knowing what we were about. Consequently they possess us, rather than we them. They move us; they control us. Unless we become aware of what they accomplish, and pass judgment upon the worth of the result, we do not control them.

(Dewey, 1916: 9-30)

This paper investigates one such habit which needs rethinking: the philosophy and practice of assessment. It reconsiders the tradition of entrusting the teacher (examiner) with sole responsibility for assessment, and the consequences. It documents a study which resulted from an attempt to replace traditional assessment with self- and peer-assessment (S&PA), designed to generate more self-directed learners. The research was initiated in higher education, followed by a series of studies in elementary (primary), post primary, further and higher education. It addresses a dearth of published material on: (1) research into S&PA cohesively integrated across the spectrum of lifelong learning; and (2) the role of traditional assessment in moulding conforming, dependent individuals.

It argues the need to implement S&PA as young as possible, to improve the prospect of (a) its up-take, and (b) ingraining the practice of assessing own work and that of others. Finally, it shows how this outlook reflects a democratic philosophy of

education and forms a foundation for a self-directed, lifelong educational framework.

Concepts of Assessment and Dependency

Traditionally, assessing student learning outcomes has fallen to the teacher/examiner, while in S&PA, according to Fautley and Savage (2008: 51), 'peer-assessment involves students assessing the work of other students, their peers; while self-assessment involves each individual in a consideration of their own work'.

Biggs (1999: 157) describes traditional assessment as three processes: setting criteria, selecting evidence, and judging how well the criteria have been met, concluding 'the teacher is the agent in all three assessment issues'. The Irish Department of Education and Science (DES) (1995: 30) explains about the elementary teacher's role in assessment that,

most teachers currently assess their students' progress, mainly in the cognitive areas. Assessment practice ranges from observation, classroom discussions and homework to the use of standardised tests, both norm- and criterion-referenced.

We begin with a look at the *custom* of traditional assessment because it is pervasive, perpetuating a *teacher-centred* assessment style. It fixes in the learner's mind a *teacher-in-charge* mentality. Teacher-centred assessment can lead to a loss of *sense of self*, jeopardising immediate progress and future outcomes, and can lead to Seligman's (1975) 'learned helplessness'. Boud (1995: 4) underscores the possible consequences, recalling

. . . being told in primary school that I couldn't write and had nothing to say; a remark which for many years was self-fulfilling and probably led to me failing 'O' level English Language twice.

Leaving Boud with a strong interest in assessment, he has since become a leading advocate for student involvement in assessment, maintaining, 'assessment . . . has to move from the exclusive domain of assessors into the hands of learners' (Boud, 2000: 151). Stefani (1998: 339) goes further, declaring that 'given the importance to students of developing the capacity for self- assessment and evaluation, the unilateral control of assessment assumed by many academic staff can only be viewed as pedagogically unsound'. The drawbacks of traditional assessment are compounded when you add in the changing *cultural* face of the Irish classroom. In one elementary class studied, as many as eighty percent of the students were from migrant families (English was not their first language). Diversity cannot be addressed adequately unless teaching and learning methods, including assessment, are sufficiently and routinely culturally responsive.

Some researchers found evidence that formal, traditional, assessment (a) disturbs immediate learning outcomes, promoting shallow learning, and (b) adversely affects students' long-term attitudes and behaviour. For instance, Chansarkar and Raut-Roy (1987: 116) found formal assessment

. . . resulted in the reduction of the efficiency of the course work as a teaching aid. The students were more concerned about the grading received than with using assessed work as a learning experience. It discouraged students from experimenting with the development of their own ideas and encouraged conformity with textbook opinion.

On reaching higher education, students are 'hard wired' to react to the stimulus of impending assessment. Race, Brown and Smith(2005: 131) observe that 'nothing affects students more than assessment yet they often claim that they are in the dark as to what goes on in the minds of their assessors'. Boud, Cohen and Sampson(1999: 417) add, challengingly, 'assessment is the principal mechanism whereby staff exercise power and control over students'. Unwittingly, a process designed as a learning tool to aid personal progress can thwart that progress.

Thus, traditional assessment represents short-term thinking which can neither engender self-direction nor sustain lifelong assessment. S&PA has been found to address these issues, providing sustainable assessment that 'can be defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of students to meet their own future learning needs' (Boud, 2000: 152).

The Research

Every teacher's duty is to provide a level playing field for each learner regardless of background, gender, age, creed or race so she/he can thrive and contribute unique talents to society. Taylor (1998: 218) endorses this sentiment, with the caution

all high-flyers had a teacher, as did most of those unfortunate individuals who never took off because their teachers never enabled them to do so! . . . Always remember that in choosing to become a teacher you have acknowledged your own responsibility to meet the personal, social and intellectual needs of every pupil in your care, day upon day, year upon year.

Although relating to elementary school, this principle applies universally. Research has a hand to play as a dynamic entity capable of challenging stagnant and complacent habits. Educational research sustains a mindset open to change, fundamental for innovation and leading edge thinking and necessary for survival, by engendering fresh ideas and offering continuous opportunity to begin anew by providing new perspectives.

As educators, our intention, and the aim of this research, is to facilitate the development of students as independent thinking individuals, who can work interdependently to contribute to society, capable of being agents of change. Initially Action Research provided a natural platform, allowing reflection-*in*-action and -*on*-action (Schön, 1983) into own practice, and our partnership with others.

The research began in higher education with evaluation of group work assessment. It involved a class of 52 divided into ten groups to investigate a subject and present findings. Each group presentation was graded, and each group member

received that grade, regardless of input. On the whole groups co-operated, but student feedback showed it to be having a negative impact. A common drawback was the unequal contribution of work by some students. The work was presented on time, but bore the hallmarks of an endurance test to be tolerated by most: the assessment had little to defend itself as a learning methodology.

Assessment is a *learning* methodology, a point easily overlooked. Viewing assessment as a learning methodology challenged our thinking. Our practice reflected the traditional style of assessment with students working to satisfy the assessment brief.

Although *teaching* methods were learner-centric, students were uninvolved in *assessment*: a methodology permitting student input and more learner-control was sought. This reflection and a subsequent literature review led to the introduction of S&PA. The impact was immediate: research findings confirmed that students became more motivated, showed greater interest and were more engaged in helping and providing feedback to each other. To further the research, S&PA was continued into subsequent classes.

The common thread throughout was the teacher. In each case the teacher facilitated the process and it was the teacher upon whom demands were made. Living this experience, their impressions of, reactions to and analysis of the S&PA student-teacher partnership approach forms a prominent part of the research findings: this aspect is documented in this paper. Following this initial implementation of S&PA the research expanded to include students and teachers at elementary, secondary and tertiary level and in further education with early school leavers and senior learners.

Prior to these studies none of the teachers or their organisations had experienced S&PA. According to circumstances, they had been using a combination of traditional teacher-led assessment methods including individual or group studies, written papers, oral or written tests and terminal examinations. In all studies the assessments were based on students working in small groups, for two, pragmatic reasons. Firstly, the initial study was in a group work context; secondly, the assessment design was already in use. This helped to maintain consistency throughout the studies, improving effectiveness in collaborating with each teacher. Also, eliminating as many variables as possible helped maximize the validity and reliability of the research.

The teachers allocated students to groups to work on a project and although the end *product* of the project was assessed by the teacher, the *process* was self- and peer-assessed. In all cases students chose their own criteria. The split of marks varied. The initial study had allocated ninety percent of the marks to the teacher for traditional assessment and ten percent to the students for S&PA. In later studies, teachers surrendered between twenty and one hundred percent of the marks to the students' S&PA. The S&PA was anonymous (examination conditions) and students had the right to appeal, the teacher acting as final arbiter. This was seen as important as, with some cohorts, this mark contributed to their final graduating grade.

Methodology

The research commenced with Action Research 'to improve practice' (Elliott, 1991: 49), with knowledge production a subordinate aim. Based on Lewin's (1948) model, it was informed by McNiff and Whitehead (2002). Later studies employed a phenomenological, interpretive inquiry (knowledge constructed and contextual) as it investigated the experience of other teachers with their learners conducting S&PA (Patton, 1990), containing aspects of Action Science (Schön, 1983). Eleven teachers and 523 students took part in the research. Data gathering consisted of informal initial meetings with teachers, formal, in-depth interviews after each study, observations, and a research journal.

Self- and peer-assessment design. The design was influenced by many, such as Biggs (1999), and especially Lejk and Wyvill's (2002) discussion on holistic and category-based approaches. The assessment comprised two components: 1) *formative*, with criteria for feedback to be selected by students, and 2) *summative* for students to assess overall individual contribution.

For the formative component, each student group selected criteria they believed important in the *process* (for example, mutual respect, attendance at meetings). Each student marked self and group peers on a five-point Likert scale: *none, poor, fair, good or excellent*. (For feedback, each scale-point was assigned a score of 0 to 4 which was averaged and rounded for each student).

The summative component consisted of: (a) tutor mark based on how well the *product* (the presentation) met the objectives and (b) in each group, each student awarded a mark for each member's contribution to the *process* (including her/himself), on a scale of: 0 to 4 (*none, poor, fair, good, excellent contribution*). This provided a weighting factor calculated by the student's mark divided by the highest student's mark in the group. Each group member received a *pro rata* mark which would consist of the tutor's mark for the product (a), multiplied by the weighting factor (b) and rounded up. (Group member(s) with the highest mark received the tutor mark). The calculation is summarised in Figure 1.

Mark =	$\frac{[\text{tutor mark for presentation}] \times [\text{student's mark}]}{[\text{highest student's mark in the group}]}$
---------------	--

Figure 1. Summary of calculation of marks

Results

The elementary and one secondary school were girls-only schools, the others were mixed gender. All studies operated smoothly except for the early school leavers, where new students starting at varying times throughout the year made continuity difficult for the teacher and for other students. Nevertheless, the study was completed.

Teachers' reflections have been analysed, drawing out common themes portrayed in Table 1. Findings are academic, leaning away from personal: selected participant quotes provide balance. Maykut and Morehouse (1994: 161) point out, 'much qualitative research focuses on people's words, their thoughts, their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences that can come to life when their words are read aloud'.

Further Education

Early school leavers. Teacher F. reported an unexpected result:

I was pleasantly surprised because they [students] really enjoyed it. And I learnt that they really like responsibility, which I didn't realise. Feedback is really important, which I knew, but I didn't realise how important it was to them.

This was notable: initially, the Co-ordinator, eager, voiced the concern 'I'm afraid you will come here and do a lot of work and they [students] won't buy into it'. However, F. reported students were 'more connected with the work, more motivated and more interested than they would have been in previous times'. She observed commitment between students and a sense of competition between groups which she believed the students liked.

When asked what educational level she considered introduction of S&PA appropriate, she thought nine years, because by the end of elementary (12 years),

. . . they'd have a total understanding of it and then it becomes part of the norm as you get older . . . It would help them rely on themselves in so many ways, apart from that exact assessment – to believe in themselves more, I'd imagine, and they would be more confident with what they thought.

F. considered student involvement in assessment beneficial because 'for once in the whole education system they're asked what do they think. That's a whole new phenomenon'.

She voiced some concern over honesty of marking:

. . . tensions between students, like arguments . . . they may appear problems, but they are not big enough for peer assessment not to happen – if anything, peer assessment could help iron out these situations.

Table 1
Emergent Themes

	Disadvantages						Consensus				Advantages																		
	Need set standards (for comparison, for job qualification)	Need someone qualified to assess you	Some do not like group work	Groups can agree marking beforehand	Judge severely - needs tempering with experience	Heavy workload/ no time	Students like responsibility	Students need feedback/ teaches feedback	Appropriate to this age or younger	Expand/bring into curriculum	Removes 'us; them' student-teacher divide	Fairer form of assessment	Encouraged deeper learning	Work of higher standard	Control group observed - wanted S&PA (fairer)	Fosters critical thought, judgement	More variety in assessment types	Demands maturity	Encourages introspection, 'you', self-improvement	Showed good judgement - become non-judgemental	Self-esteem, -confidence - "opinion matters" - more vocal	Encouraged cooperation/interactivity (help based in difficult)	Motivates - more student interest in work	Permits fairer assessment of group tasks	More student control, self-determination - agree criteria	Student ownership of learning, independence, self-direction	Encourages/needs/show openness/honesty	Fosters self-reliance, responsibility	
Self				x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
A									x	x		x		x	x						x	x	x				x	x	x
B					x				x	x			x								x	x	x			x		x	x
C					x				x	x			x								x	x	x						
D						x			x	x										x		x			x	x			
E	x	x									x								x										x
F							x	x	x	x											x	x	x				x	x	x
G			x	x													x							x	x	x	x	x	x
H					x	x				x						x								x		x	x	x	x
I								x	x	x							x				x		x			x	x		
J										x														x	x				x
TOTAL	1	1	1	2	2	3	2	2	7	7	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	4	5	5	5	5	6	7	8	

English as foreign language students. J. recently experienced S&PA as a higher education student. He found it benefited his students as a step toward having 'control' over assessment, something most students were not used to. He maintained,

it has always been the teacher's mark . . . so it's a very new thing to people to actually have a percentage of the mark that they can determine, both what they get themselves and what other group peers get.

He observed, 'when students gain autonomy in their own learning, the desire, the hunger, when they get to mark each other's work, it's brilliant'. Feeling strongly, he reiterated 'it [S&PA] brings a really good strong working relationship with your students in the classroom and them with each other'.

The drawback in S&PA for J. was that personalities could 'clash quite strongly' which he thought could affect the marking outcomes.

Elementary School Education

C., a teacher of forty years experience, was close to retirement. Throughout the process she was very involved with the girls, ensuring the process ran smoothly. She stressed she did not inflict her views on the students nor coach them in how to behave: the students were free to speak and act as they felt necessary to finish their work and assessment.

C. had a truly multicultural blend of European, African and Asian students. Impressed by the impact of S&PA on students' co-operation, she said it was

. . . very worthwhile. One of the students had difficulty and sometimes the penny never drops, but the girls in her group have been so kind to her. I have never seen that before.

When asked if she thought the girls understood what they were doing with S&PA, she replied, 'yes, I do, I do'. She felt that S&PA could be introduced early in elementary school and said,

. . . this particular age group [ten and eleven years] is a very good age group for it because they've had the experience of the junior, then they come to this section and then they're heading on into the senior section, so it is something that would be very good for them to know that they can avail of and use themselves as they go on.

After the assessment, C. checked the completed result sheets, remarking, 'they have good judgement. I would agreed with [their marks]'. However later she added the caveat that this was not an average class. She said she found the children's judgement 'accurate but very severe, not tempered by experience' and 'totally unadulterated'.

C. spoke of observing the girls' excitement as they worked on their project and how they enjoyed being able to assess themselves and each other. She commented that the students 'exchanged information in a way that they wouldn't have been doing up to that'.

She also noticed that some of the children were able to direct themselves towards books that were 'very unattractive to look at with no colour [but they still] read little bits here and there and gained information' for their project, which she felt added to the

quality of the work. She said, 'I found it great to be able just to let them do it in their own way and trust them to be able to do the work that was necessary and produce the goods at the end of the day'. She felt S&PA was a key influence in how the girls interacted on their project believing

they[students]knew they were . . . on the line from themselves, it wasn't a matter of 'she said at the top', so therefore it meant more to them. While the project was in progress there was more interactivity between students.

If she had been continuing teaching, C. believed she would have carried on with S&PA 'to see how it would work with different groups'. She felt the current study enabled the students 'to think more about their efforts: did I do my best? If I didn't, well it's something I can learn from and it's something I must be on the look out for again, you know'. Although satisfied that the 'advantages [of S&PA] would certainly outweigh disadvantages greatly', she acknowledged that there would be a 'lot of hard work on the person guiding [it]'.
Second Level Education

Two transition year teachers participated in the pilot studies in second level, A. in an urban, girls-only secondary school, and B. in a rural community school. During the course of the study, A. spoke about it being good for her personally. She remarked, 'I did not realise I did so much to show the students everything and tell them what to do'. B., who had said she also invested a considerable amount of time helping her students, commented,

. . . this is the first time I left the work entirely to the group. I have learned to step back from the group; I couldn't get involved in their delegation, in the work that they have produced. It is very important that the students . . . work independently of teacher so it is not teacher-directed learning.

Urban secondary school. A. spoke on the outcome of the study, saying 'I've learned an awful lot from it [S&PA] that could be used at secondary level'. She also reported that 'feedback from the girls has been very positive. You know, I think it's highlighted to them where their strengths and weaknesses are . . . it would be a great advantage to start this in second level'. Commenting on the potential to break down barriers, she said she felt she had to be more aware of herself because what the girls were doing [S&PA] was 'adult' and that 'when I was talking to them I had to bear that in mind'.

In relation to how directed the students were in their work, she said, 'I've seen how the girls have worked. They've taken it very seriously. They've pushed themselves, you know. Some of them wouldn't, they would have sat back'.

She also considered S&PA would encourage her students to work '. . . more independently [and it had] proved to them that they've gotta take full responsibility for their work and you know they'll reap the rewards'.

Community school. B.'s views were similar to those of teacher A. as she commented, 'I would totally recommend it [S&PA] and . . . I think it helped them mature. It gave them responsibility'.

She observed how S&PA could improve some students' motivation, explaining,

it creates awareness among the students of their own individual performance and the importance that that makes to the team and that it will

affect their mark as well as themselves. Their performance will be assessed by their peers and the mark that the teacher gives for the overall product may not be the mark that they get because their own peers will know whether they put in the work or not.

When it came to students speaking out, B. encountered a different result with her class. She found *'the leaders emerged more quickly and stronger leadership was evident in the group'*. She considered strong leaders in the group appeared to be more confident, but the *'quieter students submerged into the background'*. However, she considered this a learning curve for these students, remarking

the ones that didn't speak out, maybe they should have learned from that experience that perhaps they lost out. So if it was to happen again I think they would be more aware of it and would have the confidence to say, 'I am not going to let this happen again, I am going to speak out this time'.

Another concern was weaker students who may exert greater effort than a more able student, which peers might not acknowledge in the assessment. B. said, *'I don't know if they have the maturity to gauge that yet, so a weaker student might just suffer'*. However, as mentioned above, C. evidenced kindness shown to a weaker student at elementary level, making it reasonable to infer that children of a much younger age are capable of this level of empathy.

Higher Education

G. and H. teach first year undergraduate students while teacher I. works with postgraduate students. (Author views are interwoven with those of the teachers below).

Institute of technology. G. works in an Institute of Technology and considers the *'biggest benefit [of S&PA] to them [students] is to rely on themselves - to not look for other people to intervene and take the responsibility'*. He maintained that it not only helps students to *'look critically at why they should get credit'* but it also involves students *'in assessing what is creditworthy'*. Although *'heavy on time in setting it up initially'*, S&PA was not too time consuming for G. and his colleagues. He felt S&PA at all educational levels would add value to students seeking employment. He believed it would be advantageous to students *'if you can tell [employers] you have leadership skills, you have chaired a group before, you have assessed your peers'*. Since this research began, students have progressed to routinely partnering the teacher in their assessment, from first through to final year.

G. observed, during S&PA, students marked fairly as marks correlated with his expectation. He did not notice that the marks were *'harsh'* as reported by the elementary teacher. He observed students to give the benefit of the doubt in their marks, but were not overly generous.

University. Conducting S&PA with first-year students, H. found it to have advantages, giving *'a degree of control and input to the students with regard to their formal assessment [and] . . . in devising [their] assessment'*, and providing variety in assessment forms. He found it countered *'the inherent difficulties in group related assessment forms, in that it rewards people's performance and attendance and participation in groups more so than traditional forms of assessment do'*. During the interview H., when

asked about the work needed, said, *'it's probably quicker, it probably saves time. It is easier to devise and implement and mark than other forms of assessment'*.

Teacher I. works with postgraduate students and has observed several advantages for his students, commenting,

. . . it [S&PA] allows students to hear feedback from their peers which is, or ought to be, non-judgemental. Of course every feedback is judgemental, but it doesn't have the connotation of the kind coming from a lecturer, you know . . . student-lecturer hierarchy.

He expressed the hope that *'when they leave us they'll have an openness for that same process subsequently in their work'*, adding that a positive experience would leave them feeling, *'I learned a lot from that process, I've a lot to learn, but . . . we would want them to be open to participating in a similar kind of practice in their own professional work'*.

When we discussed the response to S&PA, he commented that *' . . . [students] would say that they found that module really enjoyable . . . would talk about how they've moved on and learned and developed and been challenged and grown from that'*. He highlighted one disadvantage for the teacher: it was *'certainly time consuming'*.

Senior learners. These were men and women aged from their mid fifties to early seventies. Their teacher, E., made similar comments to other teachers, suggesting S&PA provided students with opportunities for self-reflection and responsibility because *'you are asked to examine the level of learning yourself rather than having someone hand you back an answer of either you did well or badly or in between'*. She maintained that, *'because you are being called on to evaluate yourself, there is more in trying to understand how you perform, and to a certain extent who you are, to do that'*. She also observed increased interaction between the group members.

Talking about S&PA and student confidence, E. suggested that

. . . there is a certain element of both age and maturity in it . . . when you find yourself being challenged in any way, you either rise up to the challenge or you fail and you run away . . . It is a braver way of assessing.

She noted as a disadvantage *' . . . unlike your traditional assessment, you are assessing yourself rather than having someone qualified, so there is less standardisation'*. This question would normally be addressed by the teacher/examiner, in assessing the *product*. However, with this group, standardisation was not present as the programme had no external assessment and thus there were no standard criteria for E. to assess against. She does raise a good point, but a student-teacher partnership approach should be embedded in this type of assessment for all formal education, which would maintain standards. This does not take away from the value of S&PA in underpinning the use of *assessment as a learning method* for contributing towards the development of *self*, and ultimately, community.

Discussion and Conclusion

Long term impact needs longitudinal studies to determine the true value and benefits of S&PA. However, immediate findings suggest it is culturally responsive – serving all ages and ethnicities – from schoolroom, to community context. It is

'lifewide' learning with shared responsibility from planning to assessment, Knowles' (1990: 101) 'cornerstone of democratic educational philosophy'.

It offers learners at all educational levels a voice, and an outlet for using that voice. When elementary teacher C. said to her students, '*it is important that you give your opinion because you matter and it matters*', she expressed one good reason for student-teacher assessment partnerships. The earlier the *voice* is found, the greater the chance of developing a sense of *self*, of self-reliance. Stressed by Knowles, '... the process of gaining a self-concept of self-directedness starts early in life' (1990: 57).

Concepts repeated frequently in the findings were: *interaction, responsibility, accountability, autonomy, control, feedback, effort, commitment*. These concepts point to self-direction, and self-reliance, while fulfilling the teacher's main aim to help students 'become more effective independent learners' (Rogers, 2002: 138).

There is literature supporting S&PA. Its durability on the one hand and lack of progress on the other is demonstrated by Cowan (1981: 194) whose comments of thirty-two years ago resonate with the present teachers' views

... in each of the three years in which I have offered self-assessment, I have been rewarded by seeing quantum leaps in the learning and development of some of my students - which I have never observed when I have taught in the conventional way.

S&PA needs adopting urgently at all curriculum levels, leading to a reconstruction of boundaries as learners take more control of assessment and learning. The focus is on '*self*' (learner) *learning* control and self-direction through practicing assessing own and peer performance, influencing in turn *self*, group and society. Even then, the full benefits will not be realised until a generation of teachers have been through an education system committed to S&PA.

S&PA as examined in this study appears at least as valid and capable of rigour as traditional assessment. Its reach is far greater than the classroom, holding the potential to help address social and life issues as diverse as stereotyping and peer-pressure. From a young age, through setting criteria, assessing the work of both self and others and providing and receiving feedback, the learner can learn to think independently; she/he can learn the ability to judge whilst being non-judgmental, focusing on the aim of the assessment. This generates the ability to discriminate.

From a young age, the learner learns to make decisions, think critically, take responsibility and be accountable, all of which are essential ingredients of self-direction. The *habit* of looking for someone in charge to lead the way is arrested as the learner comes to understand that learning, and the way forward, lies not without but resides within.

References

- Biggs, J. (1999). *Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education; Open University Press
- Boud, D. (1995). *Enhancing learning through self assessment*. New York: Routledge Falmer

- Boud, D. (2000) Sustainable Assessment: Rethinking Assessment for the Learning Society. *Studies in Continuing Education*. 22 (2) 151-167
- Boud, D., Cohen, R. and Sampson, J. (1999) Peer learning and assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* Dec99, 24, (4) 413-427
- Chansarkar, B. A. and Raut-Roy, U. (1987) Student performance under different assessment situations. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 12, (2) 115-122
- Cowan, J. (1981) Struggling with Self-assessment. In Boud, D. (ed.) *Developing student autonomy in learning*. London: Kogan Page
- Department of Education and Science (1995). *Charting our education future: White paper on education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office
- Department of Education and Science (2000) *Learning for life: White paper on adult education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education: An introduction to the philosophy of education* (reprinted 1944). New York: The Free Press
- Elliott, J. (1991) *Action research for educational change*. Buckingham: Open University Press
- Fautley, M. and Savage, J. (2008). *Achieving QTS: Assessment for learning and teaching in secondary schools*. Exeter: Learning Matters
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine
- Knowles, M. S. (1990) *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (4th Ed.) Houston, Texas: Gulf Publishing
- Lejk, M. and Wyvill, M. (2002). Peer assessment and contributions to a group project. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 27, (6) 569-577
- Lewin, K. (1948) *Resolving social conflicts: selected papers on group dynamics*. Lewin G. W. (ed.) Collected Edition (1997). New York: American Psychological Association
- Maykut, P. and Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophic and practical guide*. London: The Falmer Press
- McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2002) *Action Research: Principles and Practice*. (2nd Ed.) London: Routledge Falmer
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. (2nd Ed.) Thousand Oaks, California: Sage
- Race, P., Brown, S. and Smith, B. (2005). *500 tips on assessment*. (2nd Ed.) New York: Routledge Falmer
- Rogers, A. (2002) *Teaching Adults* (3rd Ed.) Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1975). *Helplessness: On depression, development and death*. San Francisco: Freeman
- Stefani, L. A. J., (1998). Assessment in Partnership with Learners. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 23, (4) 339-350
- Taylor, B. (1998). Accountability: a practical guide. In Cashdan, A. and Overall, L. (eds.) *Teaching in primary schools*. London: Cassell