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Self-Assessment and Democratization

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Abstract

This paper takes the stance that self-assessment is an integral part of democratization in classrooms. Defined as '*the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work and making judgements about the extent to which they met these criteria and standards'* (Boud 1986, p. 5), self-assessment uses principles that promote democracy. Freedom of expression and participation in decision making propel the student to a level outside of the norm that results in excellence in all areas of endeavour, within and without the classroom. Implications for education and society are discussed.

SELF-ASSESSMENT AND DEMOCRATIZATION

More than ever before students at all levels in the education system are demanding a say in the affairs of their classrooms. Technological advancement coupled with the widespread availability of the electronic media have made students more aware of their rights, privileges and corresponding responsibilities. With the downfall of communism, the call for independent statehood and the rise of democracy, students are challenging authorities for not only a voice in their own affairs but also participation in the learning process. In this scenario, democratization has become a bye word in most institutions.

Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, intricably interlinked, all play their unique role in the teaching/learning nexus. The current literature emphasizes democratization as a necessary part of pedagogy (Mumba, 2000, Ogunniyi, 1994). In most situations curriculum and accompanying assessment are designed by curriculum specialists and therefore do not allow the kind of flexibility that students are demanding. Besides, it is accepted that students are not in a position to know what they need to learn

and that job is better left to specialists who have a broader hands-on knowledge base from which to draw. Serpell (1993) found that children are thought of as incompetent and immature to participate in their own learning. In the light of the foregoing findings, this present paper contributes to the current literature by proposing that self-assessment facilitates democratization without upsetting the *status quo* and at the same time empowers the student to the extent that the student feels that s/he is participating in her or his destiny: a matter of grave concern especially for adult learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Democratization immediately brings to mind the word democracy, which refers to a government exercised either directly by the people or through elected representatives; a political or social unit based on democratic rule; ruled by majority or the principles of social equity and respect for the individual within a community (Webster, 1996, p. 186). When we speak of democratization of classes we therefore refer to students (the majority) having a say in the conduct of their own affairs. The implicit expectation is that students will submit easily to authority because they believe they are included in the decision making process.

Mumba (2000) in his presentation at The International Special Education Congress 2000 held at The University of Manchester, England, detailed a case study of the implementation of democratization in a rural primary classroom in Kabale Basic School in Mpika, Zambia. He discussed specific methods he used to democratize the classes and recounted how the classroom learning climate was changed, students' self-esteem improved, equality between males and females was promoted, punctuality and participation were improved, absenteeism was reduced and the society was involved in the education process. Mumba (2000) sees democratization of classes as essential to promoting genuine relationships and for learning to occur. Democratization enables students to comprehend, in a practical manner, the true meaning of democracy, especially because they would be the future leaders in democratic societies.

SELF- ASSESSMENT IN PRACTICE

An atmosphere in a classroom where the teacher is flexible in teaching and organization and students discuss syllabus and progress, share in decision making and initiative during lessons is described by Lewis as a democratic climate (cited IN Thomas and Terry, 1991). Embracing the ideals of self-assessment training, the teacher operates in the capacity of facilitator rather than dispenser of knowledge. The atmosphere is cultivated to encourage discussion, critiquing, sharing, critical thinking, divergent thinking, co-operative learning and mutual understanding in arriving at consensus. Individual rights and responsibilities are embraced in a democratic climate.

Because self-assessment transcends subject disciplines and content material, it does not matter what subject is in progress or what specific content material is being covered. In Mathematics, for example, students may be discussing congruent triangles. The criteria for congruency are established through discussion, critiquing, sharing, critical thinking, divergent thinking, co-operative learning and mutual understanding. During discussion, students are privileged to wait on each other, be patient with each other, actively listen to each other, affirm each other and consider each other as unique individuals deserving of respect, understanding and individual thought. Once consensus is established, the criteria are accepted by the class and used for all relevant examples on congruent triangles. For instance, two triangles that have two sides and the included angle of one being equal to two sides and the included angle of the other would be considered congruent. That decision would not be subjective to the whims and fancy of any particular individual.

With self-assessment co-operative learning groups are enabled to operate optimally by establishing and maintaining group goals and individual accountability (Slavin, 1994). Establishing and maintaining group goals provides motivation and promotes positive interdependence between individuals in the group so that participants have reason to co-operate purposefully. Individual

accountability measures each student's learning. Consequently, each student is empowered to

participate and sees himself as an integral part of achieving intended and unintended learning

outcomes. Challenged students are accommodated but not at the expense of high achievers becoming

demotivated. Students hone leadership skills and several obstacles like socioeconomic status, gender,

mental abilities and personal challenges are minimized whilst co-operation and goodwill are allowed to

flourish.

The final stage of the self-assessment process involves using the standards and/or criteria

arrived at by consensus to make *'judgements about the extent to which they met these criteria and*

standards' (Boud 1986, p. 5). This process entails decision making based on prescribed criteria that

cannot be changed to suit the specific situation at hand. Consistency, validity, reliability and unbiasness

are a few of the skills that come into play in this part of the process. Using our earlier example of

congruency of triangles, making a judgement may involve deciding whether a given triangle is congruent

to another triangle using the agreed criteria and determining the extent of learning that occurred.

Shared interpretation, decision making, partnership, honesty and integrity play focal roles in the

process. In such an environment teachers are enabled to flourish, be rejuvenated and motivated to

progress. Clearly, the process thus far characterizes democratization as detailed by Mumba (2000).

Self-assessment is intractably tied to democratization. The procedures used in self-assessment

are similar to those used in democratizing classes (Mumba , 2000). The promotion of democratization in

schools inevitably will have spin off effects on the society at large. Individuals will be better able to

examine and compare political manifestoes and make informed decisions about their choices for

political leadership in their democratically ruled jurisdictions. Self-assessment promotes social inclusion

that is consistent with the general aspiration for social justice (Slee, 2001). Issues of inclusion and

exclusion underpin concepts such as civil society, citizenship and public good that inform a set of

purposes of education (Nunan et al, 2000). Finally, because self-assessment has been known to be

successfully implemented without additional demand for resources (McDonald, 2004), it promises to be

an attractive viable option in today's world of dwindling resources.

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