



SELF & PEER ASSESSMENT

By: Prue Pisani

Background

As adults, we regularly assess ourselves in a variety of ways for a range of reasons. Am I doing my job well? Do people like my cooking and if not, what do I need to improve? Or, if you're in a team, what do I need to do to help my team improve? If we have some experience in the area or a way to measure our success or product, we can improve our results. If we are a beginner with no way to measure, we can get stuck in a loop.

Every day we spend time in our classrooms with students, and there is often that one student (at least) who seeks out your opinion as a teacher about how they are going. I recall one student who would check in each day, not necessarily wanting my opinion on what the next steps were for her learning, rather that she didn't trust her own judgement that she was finding the work easier the more she practised the skills. Self-assessment was tricky as she didn't have a way to think about what she was learning and what the next steps were. Similarly, after asking a group of 11-year-old students to assess another student's piece of work, they replied that it was 'really good'. It was definitely some feedback about the work for the other student, but not what I had been aiming for.

So why is self-assessment so fundamental in learning? Regular self-assessment is a key to increasing motivation, engagement and ownership of learning in students. This is a skill that our students need not only while they are at school, but into the future. Self-assessment encourages a growth mindset that empowers them to improve their knowledge and skills. By incorporating this into your classroom, you encourage the student to be an active participant in their own learning experience, to be independent and to self-regulate (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2018).

Peer assessment is a way to build a community of motivated learners, where collaboration encourages all learners to work together in a way that benefits the whole. It also gives students opportunities to assist others and have their skills and talents utilised helping them to clarify and strengthen their own skills and knowledge (DET, 2018; Wiliam, 2011).

In my own teaching, I've recognised four key components of self and peer assessment and the feedback that comes from it, that are fundamental to creating great improvement in both student outcomes and

attitudes to learning: Classroom culture, structured implementation, tools and techniques for assessment and routines.

Classroom culture

Building a classroom culture of engaged and effective learners takes time. Some students will be open to take risks, while others are not prepared for the time when you ask them to do something that is beyond what they can achieve easily. How you prepare students to take responsibility for their own learning and how you support them to work with others is key to creating a safe learning space for them to try, plan and assess themselves and others. This assessment builds their disposition towards, and skills in, meta-cognition to reflect upon their own performance.

While teaching in a primary school, I recognised the difficulty that some students had when being asked to assess another student's work. After speaking to them, I discovered that they were worried about being critical of another student. I realised that I needed to improve the culture of the classroom. I started by giving them the specific things to look for in 'sample' pieces of writing. I would give them five minutes to find three spots that were missing punctuation in sentences and then as a class we would discuss our findings. This activity, which was repeated weekly, began a conversation about how using our own knowledge was useful in assisting others to improve.

These multiple exposures to the process allowed students to become comfortable with it before we then moved on to a shared session of examining a student's piece of work. I had strict parameters in place about what we needed to focus on and asked for a volunteer who could choose to remain anonymous. I did some research about techniques to structure peer assessment and feedback and found the 'Two Stars and a Wish' technique (William, 2011). As a class, we identified two areas that they had shown mastery (Two Stars) and one area for improvement (a Wish). After some practice, we incorporated independent peer assessment of writing using this technique. Students became so eager to show their work and have it assessed by their peers that I needed to allow more time to include everyone. The culture of sharing and improving had changed dramatically in the class and students felt safe asking for assessment of their work.

Structured implementation

The example given above employed a gradual release of responsibility approach to implementing peer assessment; from the 'unknown' student in the work sample, to a guided, whole class version to individuals working with one another. These multiple exposures meant that students were supported into being reflective learners who were able to respectfully challenge others to continually improve as outlined in [DET's Practice Principle 5](#) (2018).

Structured implementation is important not only to help you to establish your supportive classroom culture, but to also develop the metacognitive skills of the students in the classroom. Formative assessment is built around three questions (Hattie & Timperley, 2007):

- Where am I going?
- How am I going?
- Where to next?

Students will be at different levels of being able to ask these questions of themselves and instead of throwing them in the deep end and expecting them to do it independently, I believe that it is important to explicitly teach them the skills to assess themselves and others.

I remember my first year as a grade 5/6 teacher where we created digital portfolios. The fundamental idea behind the portfolio was that the students would select examples from their work, self-assess the items and then identify areas to work on next and what support they needed to help them improve. As a new teacher trying to manage twenty-seven portfolios, I ended up telling them what items to put in and to write a sentence about the item. Even on writing samples, many of the students commented on neat handwriting. I realised that I hadn't implemented the portfolios well and had thrown them in the deep end without teaching the necessary skills to be able to assess their learning.

It is important to break down the skills of self-assessment and peer assessment and explicitly teach them gradually to ensure that students can operate independently and thoughtfully in this reflective process. Where possible, follow the pattern of the teaching and learning cycle which is often seen in literacy teaching, which, I believe can be helpful in all classrooms:

- **model** using the skills articulating your thinking as you go
- **share** an experience using the skills together
- **guide** students as they attempt the skills on their own, and
- then they will move to **independent** use of the skills.

I believe that the feelings of competence that students felt deepened their learning and connection to their work in my classroom.

Tools and techniques for assessment

There are many ways to develop tools for self and peer assessment from the measurement-based ones like rubrics to those techniques which help the teacher and the student recognise the need for more support such as coloured disks on the desks.

Rubrics

As I read the fiftieth reflective comment about neat handwriting in the portfolios, I realised that I had missed a critical tool that my students needed in order to be able to answer the question 'Where to next?' I hadn't provided them with a tool to self-assess. I used many teacher tools, such as maths and spelling tests, but I hadn't let them in on the knowledge and skills they needed to progress their own learning. With this in mind, I developed rubrics written in student friendly language for their reading projects. These rubrics help students chart their own learning progression

After following a structured implementation approach where we practiced using them to the point of independence, students then began to assess their own projects and how they presented them. They

had access to the rubric throughout the process of creating their reading project and practising for their presentation. I would use the rubric when conferencing with students on how they may go about improving their project and showing their knowledge. I would often see them sitting with a peer, discussing their work in reference to the rubric.

When students presented their work to the class, we would assess in three ways: teacher assessed, peer assessed and self-assessed. I would record the students doing their presentation which they then self-assessed. They would embed the video clip in their portfolios, along with the three rubrics. This approach increased self-efficacy as students became aware that the learning and achievement was directly related to the effort they put in and that they had the tools to see the next steps they needed (Goal Setting), could monitor their own progress (Metacognition) and work with others to improve (Collaboration) as mentioned in [DET's High Impact Teaching Strategies \(2017\)](#).

After many years of trial and experimentation, I would now recommend using a framework for developing rubrics. I've enjoyed working with the 'Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO)' Taxonomy (Briggs & Collis, 1982) which is clear enough for the youngest students to understand and complex enough to show learning all the way through to university level education.

Coloured Disks

Laminated disks with a red side and a green side were regularly used in my classroom as a way of students showing me that they were confident working independently (green side up) or that they needed some support (red side up). This technique allowed students to assess themselves in how they were feeling about the learning and gave them a low risk way of giving me the teacher feedback. Another version I have seen used in classrooms is using coloured cups (green, orange and red). Stacked on top of each other, students can switch the top cup at any stage to indicate how they feel about the teaching and learning that is happening with green indicating that the student is keeping up and on task, orange indicating that the teacher needs to pace the lesson a little slower and red to indicate that the student is stuck and needs help.

Routines

Self and peer assessment needs to become part of the classroom routine to be effective. For the culture to be developed to nurture self and peer assessment, it must be seen as something that is critical to learning. To make sure that you implement it well, it must be actively structured into your lessons or you will find that something else takes up that time. For students to become adept at using the tools that you give them, they need to be similar each time so that the student has time to learn the measurement steps rather than the tool. I'm a convert to routines in classrooms as I discovered that the less time I spent explaining the activity, the more time the students got to discover, explore and play with concepts, skills and understanding at a deeper level.

The routine of using self-assessment in the classroom means that the student will see the long-term benefits of being able to track their learning, set and achieve their own goals and be active participants in what they learn. Regular, scheduled peer assessment builds that community of learners in your class

where they develop dispositions, skills and knowledge that transfers into life skills of communication, compassion and connections with others.

Key takeaways

Start small – Focus on one key learning area or technique to begin with, when you and your students are comfortable, then choose another.

Learn from others - Speak to other teachers in your school about what they do and translate it to your context. I have often found the ideas, techniques and tools that are used in a different part of the school, for example in the junior grades, have translated with a little imagination to students in the upper years.

Explain - Explain to students the purpose for using these techniques and be open to discussing it further with them. Not all students will feel safe to begin with as you are asking them to be responsible for their learning however with perseverance and support, most will enjoy the increased control they feel over their learning journey.

Discussion with your mentor

If relevant, work through these questions with your mentor:

How do your students assess themselves?

Do you use a shared assessment tool?

How do your students know what they need to do to progress?

How do you encourage collaborative learning in your classroom?

Where do your students get feedback from?

References

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