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LEARNING THROUGH PARTNERSHIP IN ASSESSMENT

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Introduction

This essay is a collaborative and reflective account of two case examples of learning through student-teacher partnership in assessment within diverse Honors courses at a Scottish University. The first example concerns the co-design of essay and exam marking criteria that also involves a student peer-review exercise. The second example is the summative co-assessment of students' oral presentations. The student-teacher partnership has continued through the collaborative writing of this essay between one of the students in the courses, Ruth, and the teacher of the courses, Susan, whose voices are presented below as they reflect on their partnership in assessment activities.

Susan

The notion of students' active participation was sown initially and nurtured in my service-learning class, and grew through my quest to implement more meaningful assessment of students' experiential learning in this course. The seed of student-teacher partnership then spread to my more 'traditional' courses. Writing collaboratively with Ruth on learning through our student-teacher partnership in assessment in this essay has afforded me a rich opportunity for further reflection on this flourishing approach.

Ruth

As a joint Honors student I was limited in the number of modules that I could take for Public Policy. Consequently, I chose to take Susan's Active Citizenship module because of the exciting service-learning component. My enjoyment of this course and its innovative teaching methods formed a significant part of my decision to take Susan's remaining classes in my final year. Completing all of Susan's Honors courses has given me a great insight into her rolling out of different collaborative approaches in teaching whilst taking part in providing feedback along the way.

A teacher's perspective

I (Susan) think learning and teaching are exciting and challenging activities that require sustained effort and participation by students and teachers. I believe that such learning and teaching involve social interaction which is characterized by effective communication between everyone in the classroom. This situation is one which demands a more progressive and democratic approach to learning and teaching than is usually found in more traditional university environments.

In a one-hour lecture format, for example, there is typically and mostly only one-way communication from the teacher to possibly hundreds of students. In this setting, students invariably become passive learners and their attention and interest can decline rapidly (Bligh, 1972). This is reminiscent of a Dickensian scenario where the teacher “pours gallons of facts” into her students until they are ‘full to the brim’ (Dickens, 1854, p. 8). It also mirrors the ‘banking concept’ of education where teaching is perceived as an “act of depositing” information (Freire, 1970, p. 53). Here, the teacher is in the ultimate position of power as the unquestioned ‘expert’ and, by the same token, the student is in the position of ‘novice,’ who consequently may find it difficult to challenge the teacher’s authority.

To counteract the deadening effects of this approach on students’ interest and motivation, I believe that it is important to encourage students’ active participation in their own learning. I believe that if students are encouraged to become less dependent on the teacher for their learning, they can become more responsible for, and independent in, their learning. I regard this approach as similar to a type of students’ apprenticeship in self-directed learning, where the teacher’s role encompasses that of guide and consultant. As such, I endeavour to develop student-teacher collaboration in my teaching practice, although admittedly it does not stretch to cover every aspect of my teaching. Nevertheless, it does involve some significant aspects of student-teacher partnership in relation to assessment. Interestingly, I have found this to be a fruitful approach and plan to extend it to wider and more diverse areas of my teaching, including courses in which there are large cohorts of students.

The nature of this type of collaborative classroom results in blurring the defining boundaries between learning and teaching. These boundaries also appear to merge in lifelong learning, as I have found that my teaching incurs my further learning, through engaging in reflective practice and listening to students in the process of their learning in my classes. In this respect, I often find that my students can also sometimes become my teachers. Effective learning and teaching, I believe, concerns reciprocal communication. Of course, this stance does not deny or diminish the professional status, role, or power of the teacher by any means, as on the contrary, I have found that it enriches and authenticates my position.

I encourage students to discover the joys of learning by attempting to move towards a more democratic classroom where my students have ample opportunities to be engaged and empowered. This has become part of my evolving educational philosophy. Relinquishing some power and control in the classroom requires confidence and trust in students as there can be elements of surprise and risk. The element of surprise for me was the discovery that a few students may resist taking up the challenge of being active and taking responsibility for their learning in the classroom. On reflection, it is possible that they have internalized the ‘traditional’ methods of learning and teaching to the extent that their deeply ingrained habits of learning are difficult to shift.

By contrast, a warming surprise is the extent to which students may respond positively to student-teacher partnership in learning and assessment; in many instances, wholeheartedly embracing this novel approach, as evident in Ruth’s student voice in this essay. There is also an element of risk in teachers’ letting go of some of their power and control in the classroom because the outcomes of doing this cannot always be predicted. To facilitate a more democratic

approach to learning, I think it is perhaps ‘safer’ to do this by making small, incremental steps (Felten, 2014). So it has been with some trepidation, but also with vast enthusiasm and excitement, that I began to inject small quantities of change into my teaching by introducing student-teacher partnership in assessment that I believed would enable students to exercise more power, choice and freedom in their learning. This is from my viewpoint as a teacher, however, to obtain a fuller picture of this partnership, it is valuable, indeed essential, to scrutinise it through a student lens, as Ruth presents her viewpoint below.

A student’s perspective

From my point of view, as a student, the idea of working in partnership with teaching staff is an inspired, if not a somewhat curious arrangement. This is because until this opportunity came about, my experiences in education had for the most part been prescribed. If I think back to my journey through school, I don’t remember ever being asked about how I wanted to learn, and even when I could choose my subjects, they were predetermined in structure and content, leaving no opportunity for a student’s input. There was little room to explore how teaching can affect the way we learn, and how traditional methods that usually result in information absorption and regurgitation are often unfavourable for creative and critical thinking.

I believe now that I have always been aware of some of the limitations of certain traditional teaching methods but in a way that I was not able to articulate, and certainly did not feel I could successfully challenge. Through my reflection on working in partnership with teaching staff at university, I have come to understand the important distinction between being educated and actively learning. In secondary school I had a teacher who insisted that if we were graded with an ‘A,’ then it was her ‘A’ because she had given us the knowledge to achieve it. This angered me at the time, but now I see a truth in that assertion because she acted as ‘an educator,’ and we became ‘the educated.’ This process sees knowledge being transferred from teacher to student as in the Dickensian scenario that Susan references. In my higher education, this continued even more so in the format of a lecture, which most clearly encapsulates this provision of passive education.

On the other hand, learning is a process; it is one by which we acquire knowledge through our own experiences. In contrast to a lecture, tutorials and seminars provide the necessary ingredients for an engaging and stimulating learning environment. I believe, therefore, that the most effective way of learning requires active participation, as well as the ability to challenge pre-existing ideas, and reflect, in order to create the opportunity for a deeper understanding. It is the learning process that allows education to become interactive and I have come to realize this through doing all of these things in Susan’s Honors courses.

So rather than challenging my previous teacher’s claim, I should have challenged the ‘traditional’ way of teaching, in favor of education through participatory learning. I am grateful for my experience of student-teacher partnership, which made me realize that I do not just want to be passively educated; I want to direct and take responsibility for my learning. Challenging the practice of more traditional teaching methods of teaching through student-teacher collaborations was both exciting and in a way, liberating.

In truth, had I not been asked to become involved with this project and then share my reflections, I would most likely have continued through my degree unaware of how much better an experience I could have had. It has made me think critically about the lack of mutual engagement by teachers in my other academic subject, where aside from my final year project, I feel I had little control over what and how I learned. Instead, I produced coursework and sat exams but was given only a grade in return.

Whilst some might consider grades to be the ultimate goal, they offer limited guidance for future direction, little insight into how marking criteria have been met, and do not measure learning as a continuous process. Working in partnership gave me the opportunity to experience education as a two-way process and I now feel able to demonstrate my willingness to accept responsibility for my learning.

Partnership in assessment

Teacher

In light of the teacher being conventionally regarded as the ‘expert,’ it is in the area of assessment where her authority mostly remains unchallenged by students. Yet, research in this field points to the efficacy of students’ self-assessment and self-regulation (Boud, 1995). Indeed, in professional development and practice, self-assessment is a useful employability skill.

With this in mind, I set out to explore with my students, ways in which they could become more actively involved in their own learning and assessment. Case examples from two of my undergraduate courses are highlighted below: the first is situated in a ‘traditional’ academic course and the second is from the less conventional pedagogy of service-learning, which is based on experiential learning. These diverse examples reveal that working in partnership with students is viable in different contexts. Student collaboration was an essential requirement in both of these courses, but the courses per se were optional for the students.

Example 1: Co-design of marking criteria and peer-review exercise

In one of my Honors courses, *‘Ideological Concepts and Values,’* my students and I collaborated in drawing up a list of essay marking criteria. Initially, they worked in small groups to reflect on essays they had written in the past and then generate sets of criteria for an essay which might be regarded as ‘excellent.’ Their lists of criteria were then shared and discussed by the whole class. As there was some overlap between the groups’ findings, I summarized and later refined the criteria to a short list with which the students agreed. Subsequently, the students formatively self-assessed their essays by writing critical comments under the heading of each criterion and suggesting a suitable grade, which they submitted on a proforma attached to their essay.

I used the same criteria to summatively grade their essays so that on receiving back their marked essays, students could compare their own judgement with mine. I perceive this as a process of students’ apprenticeship in scholarship and assessment literacy, which tends to place the teacher in the role of ‘expert.’ While the teacher’s expertise is necessarily required, it is also important that students are encouraged to view feedback on their work with a critical eye. One could argue

that this is particularly salient in the arts and social sciences, where academic subjects are discursive and open to interpretation. I find that taking a collaborative approach to learning and teaching empowers students. It offers them choice and a voice in contributing to an element of their coursework assessment through co-designing the marking criteria.

Since first introducing this exercise in collaboratively generating grading criteria in 2011, my belief in the effectiveness of this approach to learning has grown tremendously. Consequently, this year I developed further a collaborative approach in my teaching which included co-creating students' individual essay titles, co-designing exam marking criteria, providing students with online feedback of their summative exams, and developing online student peer review. I used Aropä, which is a software program for peer review.

Using our co-designed exam marking criteria, I set my students a formative exam question. They typed their exam answer into a Word document and submitted it online for anonymous review by two of their student peers in the class. When each student had completed two reviews, they received two students' reviews of their own work. Naturally, collaboration is not confined to that between student and teacher. Following this formative exercise, I adopted the use of Aropä to give online feedback to students on their summative exams.

Student

As outlined above, our class helped to co-design the marking criteria which we used to self-assess our essays. This bottom-up approach was an entirely novel method, as far as I have witnessed at the University. What was interesting was that the final outcome did not vary significantly, if at all, from the criteria set for my other courses, despite the fact that we offered our own views without prompting. This could be because no one considered any other criteria to be important or that students felt unsure about making a suggestion that was radically different from those to which we had become accustomed. I felt that having already spent three years accepting predetermined marking criteria I had likely internalized these criteria as being the most appropriate. Indeed, neither I nor anyone else suggested including a criterion that strayed from the traditional, but rather the discussions centered on which were the most important and why.

I wonder now, if I had suggested that all essays should be written in first person, or should not include any references, what the response would have been from other students and the teacher. So, a potential challenge to this exercise is that, as Honors students, we already had an idea of what traditional assessment criteria 'ought to be.' Nevertheless, the greatest value for me came more from the practical elements of this exercise. Through the process itself, I gained a deeper understanding of how coursework is graded and this guided me whilst writing my essays. Equally, the formative peer-review exercise that required us to mark another student's piece of work according to these criteria helped me to practice assessing written work based on these requirements and reinforced my understanding of what is expected for an 'A' grade essay. When I was writing essays in the past, I didn't really understand why they were good, but now I have taken the marker's perspective, I am able to deconstruct my own work to evaluate it.

It is also valuable to note that this exercise was completed by the class as a whole, as a student-student collaboration within the student-teacher partnership. This not only allowed for the

inclusion of all students' contributions but also eliminated any potential bias of a teacher selecting students to participate, or the influence of those students' views that may not have represented those of everyone on the course. I greatly valued this approach to working in partnership. I also enjoyed the exercise because in addition to its designed purpose it allowed me to engage in discussion with fellow students about our similar, opposing and often transnational experiences of learning, teaching and assessment in higher education.

I commented earlier that even when students can choose their subjects, they often have no opportunity to influence the structure and content of that course. Susan's expansion of collaborative methods in teaching, to co-creation of our individual essay titles is one way of changing that. It prompted me to consider what my main interests were as well as what I wanted to get out of the course, rather than being given an essay to write as a means to getting a grade. Subsequently, I performed better in this assignment than I have on any other written piece of coursework. I decided what I was most passionate about and applied myself to researching that topic. After completing my essay, I had to submit a formative self-assessment using our co-designed marking criteria and this enabled me to highlight the strengths of my work and communicate some of the considerations I made and challenges I overcame when writing it.

Example 2: Summative co-assessment

Teacher

Service-learning is a form of experiential learning. It is a progressive pedagogy with which unconventional assessment methods can be appropriately aligned (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Deeley, 2015). Stepping across the boundaries of 'traditional' assessment, I have ventured with my students into the territory of summative co-assessment that has had few previous explorers and is, as far as I am aware, unique within the University where I teach. Being an innovative method of assessment, it is imperative that students are given the opportunity to practice and familiarize themselves with it through a formative assessment exercise before the actual summative assessment takes place.

In this method of assessment, students self-assess their oral presentation, awarding themselves a provisional grade based on the content and delivery of the presentation, which is supported by their critical and reflective comments. Similarly, I also assess the oral presentation. Immediately after the completion of all the presentations, each student and I meet individually and privately to discuss their presentation and agree an appropriate grade. Students can defend the mark they have given themselves and negotiate a mutually agreed final mark, although I retain the authority to decide the final grade should we be unable to reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. This process is highly significant because the grade contributes to each student's final degree classification. It also gives students responsibility, encourages them to focus sharply on their learning through assessment, enables their deep learning, and enhances skills which are transferable to the workplace.

Nevertheless, it is a 'risky business' (Deeley, 2014, p. 48) because it is possible that students could attempt to manipulate the assessment process in order to award themselves higher grades than are merited. It is a risk worth taking, however, as the reward is students' deep learning. As

such, I plan to develop this collaborative assessment further by utilizing newly introduced ‘lecture capture’ technology at the University in order to record students’ oral presentations. The aim of this is to make self-assessment easier, more effective and reliable by allowing greater opportunity for reflection. I also plan to utilize the idea of co-designed marking criteria with students, as in *Example 1*, for assessing students’ oral presentations. From small incremental steps, it is clearly evident that with increased confidence bigger strides can be made in the processes of collaborative learning and teaching.

Student

This type of partnership opened the door to a whole new experience of participatory learning by contributing to our own course grade, and is arguably a quintessence for one taking ‘ownership’ of one’s learning (Deeley, 2014, p. 45). This is something that as students we are encouraged to do, but perhaps is often hard to interpret or realize within the boundaries of traditional teaching methods. With the opportunity to self-assess our oral presentations, we had the opportunity to defend our efforts to achieve our desired grade, and I grasped this wholeheartedly.

In order to effectively engage in the exercise of co-assessment, we had a grade and feedback from an initial formative oral presentation. This served as a useful tool for constructing and delivering the final presentation, which could then be improved and perfected in accordance with the constructive comments received previously.

In my self-assessment I reflected on how my second presentation had achieved this, which served as justification for the grade I gave myself. I believe that by being able to use feedback to the advantage of securing a better grade which you can communicate verbally, then you are explicitly ‘owning’ your learning.

This process was enhanced by two things: the feedback element; and the self-assessment element. In my experience, useful feedback on assessments is a rarity. Having this in the first place allows for an understanding of how grades can be improved, but it then falls on the student to use this knowledge in the future. This is where self-assessment provides the psychological incentive to follow through. As I knew that I would be meeting with Susan, who had marked my initial oral presentation, I felt motivated to engage with the feedback to both improve my performance and also to avoid not being able to argue for an equal or better grade because my efforts had not increased.

It is important here to highlight that this psychological impact was greater because of the consistency of the marker. Had a second marker been involved, I do not feel I would have been as motivated in the exercise as I could have used the fact that they had not marked my first presentation to my advantage. I consider marker consistency to be potentially an effective mitigating factor against the ‘risk’ that Susan rightly identifies. Overall, this was an exciting exercise which really added value to this part of the course assessment, and I believe that when Susan introduced exam feedback, I was able to use it more constructively because of my earlier involvement in co- assessment.

Overall reflections

Teacher

As demonstrated by the two case examples of learning through student-teacher partnership in assessment, I have found that a more democratic approach in the classroom is beneficial to students. Utilising this approach in my teaching practice, I believe, encourages students' intrinsic motivation, as Ruth indicates. This approach also helps to develop a learning community within the class, and enhances students' deep learning. It is being part of this learning community that I find I learn too. Working together with students also symbolises a recognition and acknowledgement that they have the capacity and responsibility to inform and contribute to their own learning. It helps to forge a sense of students' ownership of, and responsibility for, their learning. A collaborative approach is also conducive to developing graduate attributes and skills useful and transferable to the students' further study and/ or future workplace.

Despite its advantages, working in partnership with students may not be universally suitable or appropriate and may place teachers outside their 'comfort zone.' Nevertheless, meeting challenges and dealing with discomfort can also create opportunities for learning, from both students' and teachers' perspectives. What is important, I believe, is that collaborative learning arises from an authentic desire for a more democratic approach to learning and teaching while respecting that ultimately it is the teacher who has overall responsibility for what occurs in the classroom. As higher education institutions purport to develop students as critical thinkers, independent and self-directed learners prepared for a constructive role in the world of work, I strongly believe, indeed advocate, that a more progressive approach to learning and teaching, as evident in the examples of student-teacher partnership in learning through assessment, is one way to achieve this.

Student

When evaluating the experience of student-teacher partnerships, I feel that it is important not to overlook the value of their existence alone, as independent from their aims. If it is clear that a teacher is open to your views then it is clear that they are genuinely motivated to improve your learning experience. Not only, therefore, does it set a precedent for openness and reciprocity but I believe it can also help to reduce the power imbalance that may at times deter students from seeking guidance, or questioning the 'expert' opinion. I found that partaking in these collaborative exercises made me feel more of an equal and this benefited other relationships with other teaching staff. In particular, it gave me the confidence to approach my final year project supervisor as a respected 'partner.' This in turn enabled the growth of a strong and honest relationship from the outset, which undoubtedly had a positive impact on my work. At the end of the day, a partnership is a relationship. The opportunity to build a relationship with a teacher in this unique way was invaluable as a means to building self-confidence, and self-worth.

Overall, I value my participation in a student-teacher partnership as a means of enhancing my learning experience and hopefully that of future students. However, this has also been a unique opportunity to boost my employability, for my experiences remain incomparable to those of other students, consequently equipping me with unmatched skills and attributes. For example, I

have practiced my ability to negotiate and communicate through co-assessing my work with my course convenor. I have also developed enhanced critical evaluation skills through co-designing marking criteria and peer-review exercises. Finally, I have been able to direct my own interests and demonstrate taking responsibility for my learning through co-creating my essay titles. As it is likely that I will experience working in partnerships in my future employment, I feel it ought to be a part of my university career. My experiences here have taught me how to gain from such an arrangement, as well as understand that although the contributions from each partner may be different, the importance is that they are equally valued (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

I have appreciated and enjoyed my involvement in a student-teacher partnership, and I hope that my involvement has been of as much benefit to my teacher as I feel that I have benefited from taking part. After all, as much as teachers are experts in their subjects, as students, we are experts at learning (Burke, 2013). It has made my final years at university a truly memorable learning experience. I hope also that by providing written feedback and offering some verbal input along the way, my counterparts and I have shown that students *can* be ‘agents of change’ in an educational environment (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011).

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