Overview

Student self-assessment occurs when learners assess their own performance. With practice, they learn to:

- objectively reflect on and critically evaluate their own progress and skill development
- identify gaps in their understanding and capabilities
- discern how to improve their performance
- learn independently and think critically.

Use self-assessment to develop the learning skills students will need for professional competence, and to make them aware of and more responsible for their own learning processes.

Sometimes teachers use self-assessment and peer assessment together. For example, they might require students to use a rubric to provide critique on the work of their peers, and then to apply the same criteria to their own work. Nulty (n.d.) argues that students must first learn to peer assess if they are to self-assess effectively.

Skilled self-assessment can be as reliable as other forms of assessment, but you must provide students with training and practice if you want results to closely align with other assessors’ results.

When to use

You can introduce students to the idea of self-assessment using:

- ongoing structured formative learning (for example, by using online quizzes that give students immediate feedback on their performance) or
- summative assessment (for example, requiring students to grade their own performance).

The literature suggests that self-assessment may be more useful as a formative learning tool than for summative assessment.

Benefits

Self-assessment benefits the learner by:
helping develop important meta-cognitive skills that contribute to a range of important graduate capabilities. All professionals must be able to evaluate their own performance, so this practice should be embedded in higher education learning as early as possible.

increasing their self-awareness through reflective practice, making the criteria for self-evaluation explicit, and making performance improvement practices intrinsic to ongoing learning.

contributing to the development of critical reviewing skills, enabling the learner to more objectively evaluate their own performance—and others’, when used in conjunction with peer assessment. With peer assessment they become more practised in giving constructive feedback, and receiving and acting on feedback received.

helping students take control of their own learning and assessment, and giving them the chance to manage their own learning and development more independently.

giving students greater agency regarding assessment, thus enriching their learning.

possibly, in the long run, reducing the teacher’s assessment workload—although on its own this benefit is not sufficient to introduce student self-assessment.

Challenges

Although studies have shown that most students are fairly capable self-assessors, introducing self-assessment can raise dilemmas and challenges. For example:

- Lower performing and less experienced students tend to overestimate their achievements. As with peer assessment, students’ ability to self-assess accurately must be developed over time, and with substantial guidance. It is definitely not a time-saving exercise for the teacher, initially.
- Students may resist self-assessment, perceiving assessment and grading to be the teacher’s job, or having no confidence in their ability to assess themselves.
- Issues can arise if students’ self-assessments are not consistent with peer or staff assessments.

Strategies

Design self-assessment

Students often readily accept the use of self-assessment as part of a formative learning process. It satisfies their need for formal self-reflection on their progress, and gives them agency when they are planning their learning. It may also give them valuable experience for self-assessment that contributes to their grade later in the course.

Design self-assessment carefully, and ensure that you integrate its use into the assessment plan. This way you optimise the benefits to learning, appropriately engage students in the process by giving them clear directions and explanations, and ensure that contingency plans are in place for if issues arise.
Here are some factors to consider when designing for student self-assessment:

- **How experienced are students in self-assessing?**
  - It is unreasonable to expect students to become experts in self-assessment after a single course.
  - It is reasonable to expect that they will be capable self-assessors by the end of their undergraduate program.

- **How will we introduce students to self-assessment?**
  - Consider students' different experience levels when designing tasks, and support the development of their self-assessment capabilities accordingly.
  - For less experienced students, provide more guidance and facilitation.
  - Make clear to students the rationale for self-assessment and its intended benefits to their learning, so that they do not misconstrue the strategy as evidence of the teacher being lazy.

- **Who should develop the assessment criteria?**
  - At first, you can provide pre-determined assessment criteria for students to use in self-assessing their work. In some areas and at higher levels of study these may be best determined by the teacher.
  - Students may find it significantly more interesting and motivating if you involve them in developing the assessment criteria. This also encourages their autonomy and self-management as learners.
  - Helping develop assessment criteria develops students' assessment literacy and promotes a shared understanding of tasks and assessment standards.

- **How can I support my students as they develop their self-assessment skills?**
  - Students can be capable assessors of their own and their peers' performance. Build their meta-awareness about this capability so that they can articulate and defend their critiques of their own work, and clarify what they can do to improve their performance.
  - Providing an expert assessment of students' work allows them to cross-check their self-assessment, as does combining self-assessment with peer assessment.
  - Use assessed examples of students' work to illustrate different levels of achievement. This will clarify the standards and show how criteria are applied.

- **Should students' self-assessment contribute to the summative grade?**
  - This is a complex decision. Self-assessment for grading may be more appropriate in high-level undergraduate or postgraduate courses, especially where class sizes are smaller.
  - If you decide that self-assessment will contribute to the grade, precisely state to both students and assessors, at the outset, how much it will contribute.
  - Introduce self-assessment for practice and familiarisation before you use it to contribute to grading. For example, have students attach a self-assessment report to their submitted work.

- **What processes will we use to moderate student self-assessment?**
  - Assessment of learning is intrinsically inexact and subjective. Use assessment rubrics, whether pre-
determined by the teacher or negotiated with students, to specify expected standards of performance against stated criteria.

- Shared use of a rubric by staff and students can prompt valuable conversations about assessment principles and quality standards.
- The more a student's self-assessment contributes to the grade, the greater will be the need for the teacher to moderate the grade with their own assessment. Remember, though, that "if tutors moderate student self-assessments with anything other than a light touch, students do not put their hearts into being objective in their self-assessment" (Race, 2001:14). But if self-assessment results are not moderated, the fairness of the process will be questionable, no matter how capable the students may be as self-assessors.

A moderation process can simply consist of comparing the tutor's and/or peer's grade and the student's self-assessed grade. Where they are very different, you can discuss the discrepancy with the student, with an eye to possibly reviewing the grade. Such processes are more difficult to manage in very large classes.

**Practical methods**

**Reflective journal**

Having students produce a reflective journal about their own learning and achievements is a logical way to engage them in self-assessment, as it gives both them and their assessor(s) insights into the process.

Extend the reflective journal task to include their thoughts on how they can and/or intend to improve their performance.

You can assess the reflective journal, or the students can. That is, they can reflect on their reflections, or assess their peers' journals and give feedback.

One version of this type of assessment task is the "self-assessment schedule" (Boud, 1992), a formal document prepared by the student that presents their achievements alongside their learning goals and comments on what they feel they have achieved.

**Self-assessment prompts for students**

You can incorporate self-assessment into almost any assessment task, either at or after assignment submission time.

Race, (2001) suggests structuring the self-assessment by prompting students, asking them, for example:

- What do you think is a fair grade for the work you have handed in?
- What did you do best in this assessment task?
- What did you do least well in this assessment task?
• What did you find was the hardest part?
• What was the most important thing you learned in doing this assessment task?
• If you had more time to complete the task, would you change anything? What would you change, and why?

Self-assessment in group work
Self-assessment can focus on aspects of a task that only the student can comment on, such as their contribution to teamwork and the collaborative production of a group's outputs. When students are allowed to do this, they see it as reducing the risk of being judged unfairly (Nulty, n.d.).

Self-assessment of class participation
Assessing students' participation in class discussions and activities is often seen as an overly subjective process. If students can see that you value their perceptions of the quality of their own and their peers' contributions, they are likely to become more active in the classroom. Combining student self and peer assessment with tutor assessment makes for a more reliable grade (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005).

Use technology
Use online tools such as journals or blogs to manage self-assessment based on reflective activities. You might, for example, require students to publish regular reflections in response to question prompts. Both you and they can then assess their learning process. You can set up a private journal for this purpose, or a blog that can be shared with other students (or made public) and comments invited.

For more objective tasks, such as scientific or mathematical calculation, you can provide online automatically marked tests where students can test their skill. Invite students to create questions to contribute to the test database; this adds a meta-cognitive layer to the exercise. Online tools such as Peerwise are being developed for this purpose, but the Moodle Learning Management System allows the compilation of question banks, and self-assessment can be incorporated into a Workshop activity.

Additional information

External resources

Race, P. (2001), A Briefing on Self, Peer and Group Assessment—Assessment Series No. 9. LTSN Generic Centre.

UNSW Teaching Gateway:
• The Moodle Workshop tool
Further readings


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