

GESTALT EFFECT OF SELF ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Defining self assessment 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 have met these criteria and standards, this paper seeks to highlight the gestalt effect of self assessment. The total effect of self assessment on the learner is greater than the sum of the individual effects of self assessment. A Posttest-Only Control-Group Experimental Design was used for the conduct of a comprehensive study, with self assessment training as the experimental variable and the posttest as the results of the external examinations. Both treatment groups were selected from the same high schools, with the design duplicated across the 10 schools, controlling for socioeconomic status and other school variables that might otherwise influence differences between the treatment groups. Students reported feeling less threatened by other so-called superior students. The paper uses empirical evidence from the comprehensive study which showed that high school students trained in self assessment skills outperformed their untrained counterparts in external examinations in all areas of the school curriculum. This summary is hoped to bring changes to current practice and provoke much needed research in this field.

Keywords: self assessment, gestalt effect, student-centred, metacognition.

Education for the whole individual has always been a priority. The holistic nature of Man becomes most apparent when we are in some way affected by a traumatic experience. At that time every area of our lives appears to be traumatized: spiritual, intellectual, physical, social, emotional and psychological, indicative of the unique interrelatedness of various aspects of our lives. From mere daily observations, one would not be hesitant to agree that training in any multifaceted discipline that affects every area of our lives would undoubtedly redound to our success, progress and ultimate happiness. Who can know an individual better than that individual himself? Self assessment 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 have met these criteria and standards' (Boud (1986: 5), seeks to satisfy that innate need for 'something' that affects every area of our lives. Besides, whilst one is unable to control events and

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experiences outside of one's person, self assessment affords the individual the facility of exercising control over 'something' that is within his/her jurisdiction or locus of control or influence.

Whilst external assessment is mandatory for purposes of diagnosis, placement, credentialing and accountability the individual needs, on an on-going basis, to know where he is positioned on the ladder of success. Self assessment appears to provide the answer.

Hadjidemetriou and Williams (2004) showed that teachers were not always aware of their students' pedagogical content knowledge. Teachers were asked to describe qualitatively and also estimate on a Likert scale the difficulty their students would have with test items that the researchers had already scaled using their students' data. Using various models for comparison of two item-difficulty parameters, together with qualitative data, the researchers found numerous differences between teachers' and students' perception of item difficulty. Whilst further research may unearth disparate methodologies it is clear that teachers and students do have different perceptions of item difficulties and accordingly their assessment would not necessarily match each other. It is precisely for this reason, among others that self assessment skills should be formally taught and honed.

Because self assessment encourages '*metacognitive abilities and critical evaluation of the learner's educational goals and promotes student autonomy and decision making*' (McAlpine, 2000; para.15), teachers are less likely to use expressions with pejorative connotations that inevitably tend to belittle students. Students trained in self assessment skills naturally tend to be divergent thinkers, creative individuals, assertive communicators and cooperative individuals; essential attributes of an all-rounded individual. It is worth noting that since self assessment acknowledges choices and preferences in student learning styles and is particularly relevant for

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open-ended learning activities, novices are inducted into an environment where their contributions are respected and cherished. Students were caused to feel empowered, self confident and capable of achieving attainment targets. Whilst some learners prefer certain learning styles, other learners show definite preference for the very learning styles unappreciated by others. Certain kinds of normal in-house competition that would tend to bring out the worst in some individuals are not given prominence in self assessment training.

Student-centred in its focus, self assessment encourages creativity, intrinsic motivation and self-sustained learning. In agreement with McAlpine (2000), this researcher found that self assessment encourages success and lifelong learning and develops the students' responsibility for their own. Self assessment encourages an integrated, inclusive, collaborative student-teacher relationship in learning and assessment; an important constituent of personal development. Students are able to see themselves as change agents as they embrace good judgment and are complemented and complimented by their peers and the teacher. Essentially because of its non-competitive, eclectic approach, self assessment appeals to the development of the individual as a whole; a valuable goal of any worthwhile educational undertaking.

Teamwork is generally regarded as a desirable attribute for an individual especially in the workplace and in particular numerous sporting activities like softball, football, netball, basketball, volleyball and cricket. Referring to the self assessment training process that demanded student-to-student interaction, group interaction and teacher-to-student interaction, teamwork skills are honed during the process. Moreover, the more productive the teamwork, the more all-inclusive are the outcomes, to the benefit of all concerned. Students soon realize that within their own group there are untapped resources that could be harnessed for the benefit of the

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entire group. Working together in productive ways inevitably prepares students as whole individuals for the outer community. Needless to say, the general pleasant, stress-free, relaxed atmosphere cultivated in the classroom redounds to the upliftment of all concerned.

This researcher found that ordinarily disruptive students were so engrossed in the ‘novelty’ of what was happening in the classroom that they soon ‘forgot’ to be attention seekers or clowns or pests to other students but became so involved in the verbal exchanges that the atmosphere was noticeably improved. No longer did teachers have to expend their energies on student discipline but time that would have normally been spent on disciplining was usefully channeled into reinforcing concepts, clarifying misconceptions and achieving objectives. Some extemporaneous, unsolicited comments from teachers verifying this included, ‘*It is incredible what a new approach can do!*’... (Miss Jack, School A); ‘*To think that Joe was attentive and participated constructively is beyond my imagination*’ (Mr. Floyd, School D); ‘*Can I ask for better behaviour?*’ (Mrs. Holder, School J). Names and schools are given pseudonyms for preservation of anonymity.

A Posttest-Only Control-Group Experimental Design was used for the conduct of the comprehensive study, with self assessment training as the experimental variable and the posttest as the results of the external examinations. Both treatment groups were selected from the same high schools, with the design duplicated across the 10 schools, controlling for socioeconomic status and other school variables that might otherwise influence differences between the treatment groups. Students reported feeling less threatened by other so-called superior students. Overall, teachers appeared more friendly, empathetic and accommodating to students. The more

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equitable environment permitted everyone to be him/herself, sharing and mutually agreeing on standards and/or criteria for judgments and the use of these in subsequent evaluations.

Introverted students did not feel inhibited or subdued by extroverted ones because the mutually agreed and commonly accepted 'ground' rules established had to be adhered to if the process was to be seamless as possible in operation. Students learned to accept criticism and provide much needed critiques, thereby strengthening them as whole persons capable of facing the real world of work. Additionally, students learned to appreciate self-discipline, self-control and patience as they were forced to wait on each other, wait their turn in the conversation, and speak at their appointed time as dictated by the conversation at hand. For the most part, students reported feeling more like persons than merely another statistic in an impersonal environment. Some extemporaneous, unsolicited comments from students authenticating this included, '*Jane is not what I thought she was when we first met*' (Sue, School E); '*I am happy to be heard at last*' (Mary, School G); '*I feel much better about myself*' (Don, School I); '*I feel more like a person now*' (Tom, School C). These comments had the hallmarks of relief and satisfaction. Here too, names and schools are given pseudonyms for preservation of anonymity.

In an environment of scarce resources, stakeholders will do well to encourage self assessment training as no additional resources are required to facilitate the implementation of the innovative programme. Unavailable resources may be substituted in creative ways to ensure that stipulated curriculum goals are achieved in a timely manner. Students soon learn to minimize complaints but rather improvise and use what would normally have been considered as drawbacks or challenges to be setups or opportunities for innovation and progress. Negative attitudes or predispositions to respond in unacceptable ways tend to be transformed as students

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realize that they can make ‘things’ happen and ‘things’ do not just happen automatically. Undoubtedly, the whole individual is affected positively through self assessment training.

It is worth noting that self assessment may also be used to determine existing competencies. It is a useful and individualised way of enabling students to establish if their prior learning is relevant for their next learning activity. This can help students avoid wasting time studying material they have already covered. In addition to catering for the whole individual, self assessment is particularly relevant for students with special abilities. McAlpine (2000) posits that self assessment is also useful as a means of evaluating whether major learning goals have been met in learning contracts that are often used in the education of students with special abilities. Clearly, the multifaceted nature of self assessment tends to have a Gestalt effect on the whole individual. This researcher anticipates that a discussion of this nature would serve as a catalyst for more research in the area of self assessment for the more holistic development of the individual and cause changes in current practice.

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