Insiders’ Voices: Self-assessment and Student Engagement

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Helen Woodward (h.woodward@uws.edu.au)
Geoff Munns (g.munns@uws.edu.au)

University of Western Sydney
Abstract

In this paper we consider the importance of student self-assessment in classrooms where teachers are working towards real, powerful and enduring levels of student engagement. Here student engagement is defined and characterised by students becoming fully involved as ‘insiders’ in the learning culture of their classrooms. How to recognise this level of engagement and bringing the students into the ‘insider’ culture needs careful consideration. The paper draws on current research in the Fair Go Project. This research in a Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) school is investigating ways that teachers can support students in processes of reflection and evaluation of their own learning. This support is concentrating on self-assessment probes that bring together affective and cognitive reflections in a process of increasing intellectual challenges. The suggestion here is that student engagement is most likely to be found when there are high levels of both feeling and thinking. Student self-assessment is recognised world wide as an interesting and vital way for children to learn. Through self-assessment they can more fully understand both the content and processes of their learning. As well, a focus on student self-assessment can provide a powerful impetus on important changes to the learning culture of classrooms. While it is well documented that self-assessment is beneficial to both the students and the teachers (Bryant & Timmins, 2003; Hart, 1999; Black & William 1998), not a lot has been done that takes self-assessment beyond reflection on what was learnt and what was liked to a higher level of intellectual quality and student engagement. As a response to this need the research reported in this paper has developed a multi-dimensional reflective framework to promote deeper student reflections about learning and critical changes to teachers’ pedagogies.
Insiders’ Voices

The most pressing questions for teachers working towards student engagement in the messy spaces of their classrooms are: how do you get it? how do you know when you’ve got it? This paper proposes that the pedagogical dilemmas around ‘getting’ and ‘knowing’ student engagement may well be clarified by a classroom focus on student reflection and self-assessment.

A number of key intersecting theoretical and practical frames concerning student engagement are in play to support this proposal. The first is that a distinction needs to be made between *procedural* and *substantive* forms of student engagement. Procedural engagement sees the students as being on task and complying with teachers’ wishes and instructions. Substantive engagement understands that engagement is a sense of satisfaction with, and a psychological investment in the classroom work being undertaken. The latter should undoubtedly most interest educators concerned with improved educational outcomes for their learners. The second key frame is that student engagement is an internal feeling: a consciousness and an educational identity (Bernstein, 1996). The third is that student engagement operates at cognitive (thinking), affective (feeling) and operative (doing) levels. It follows from this that when students are strongly engaged they are successfully involved in tasks of high intellectual quality and they are having passionate positive feelings about these tasks. Put another way, engagement is when the cognitive, the affective and the operative are occurring at high levels. It is reasonable also to speculate that at high levels of student engagement the cognitive and operative become the affective: students get a ‘buzz’ about the success they are experiencing in intellectually demanding tasks. The final key frame is concerned with how students might be encouraged to have a longer and more enduring engagement with schooling and education (see discussion of small ‘e’ and big ‘E’ engagement below).

There are critical connections between student engagement and student self-assessment that emerge from these frames. In classrooms where the emphasis is purely on procedural engagement there seems to be little need to have students involved in self-assessment processes. After all, the main aim is the setting of tasks by the teacher and the following of them by the students. On the other hand, when substantive engagement is being encouraged our proposal is that a classroom philosophy of individual and collective self-assessment is promoted. This will first allow opportunities for the students to share with each other and their teacher their thoughts and feelings about their learning at cognitive, affective and operative levels. Our argument here is that this is a critical classroom element that will move students closer to engagement. Importantly also, self-assessment can provide critical feedback to teachers about whether students are engaged. Indeed, perhaps this is the only way that teachers will know. Since both short-term and long-term engagement are internal feelings, they are difficult (arguably impossible) to discern by looking for external signs alone. There is an internal-external tension concerning the encouragement and recognition of student engagement. McFadden and Munns (2002, p.364), in discussing student engagement and the social relations of pedagogy, recognized this:

> It is the students themselves who will be able to tell us that they are engaged and who will say whether education is working for them in a culturally sensitive and relevant way … It is at the messy point of teachers and students responding to each other culturally in relation to classroom discourse and assessment practices where we are truly going to see whether or not students feel that school is for them.

When we accept that ‘getting’ and ‘knowing’ student engagement is a complementary process with student self-assessment as a pivotal axis, we are then encouraged to work towards classrooms where students think and talk and share about learning. They become insiders in their classroom communities and we have the privileged opportunity to listen to their voices.

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1 That the operative level is a factor in student engagement is a central argument in the research of the Fair Go Project that informs this paper (see below). Most definitions of student engagement focus on the cognitive and the affective.
Student Self-Assessment: Tasks or Ways of Thinking?

The connection between student engagement and student self-assessment established in the previous section can be extended in another salient way to do with our understanding of the position and processes of student self-assessment in classrooms. We want to put forward that there is an intriguing parallel in the internal-external tension in the ideas and processes of student self-assessment and student engagement. Both at a theoretical and practical level student self-assessment is often seen as a set of tasks to be completed by students in order that they make an appraisal of their learning (Hart, 1999; Bryant & Timmins, 2002). Of course student self-assessment has a task component that can be set and monitored externally. But it can be much more. If we are interested in substantive and long-term student engagement then we need to think differently about our intentions when we ask students to ‘do’ self-assessment tasks. In short, we need to focus on the internal processes: the ways of encouraging students to think about learning within a particular classroom philosophy.

Within this reconfigured orientation we can get to the heart of the links between quality teaching and high performance learning. These links are commonly seen in the alignment of assessment, curriculum and pedagogy (Bernstein, 1996). However, when it is recognised that this alignment has to work from both sides of the teacher-learner equation then self-assessment becomes the key. The recognition of the value of self-assessment and the necessary interrelatedness of quality pedagogy and high performance are well documented (Newmann, 1998; Cumming & Maxwell, 1999; Black et al., 2002), but there seems to be little discussion in the literature about the central role self-assessment might play at the highest reaches of teachers’ and students’ work. This is because it is seldom considered beyond the classroom activity-followed-by-reflection cycle. While reflection has been used extensively as a self-assessment task, there is little evidence of it moving beyond the students making superficial comments on their learning. Our argument here is that if the aim is for students to be substantively engaged in high level learning experiences then reflection has to be extended to deep-thinking conceptual planes where the cognitive, the affective and the operative become one.

This then is the nub of the theoretical position taken up in this paper. Self-assessment can move from being a useful classroom tool to a vital pedagogical activity. It is vital in two connected ways. First, it can resolve the pedagogical dilemmas around the ‘getting’ and the ‘knowing’ of student engagement. Second, it can be instrumental in improving learning and teaching and changing the whole context of the classroom.

Engagement, Self-Assessment and The Fair Go Project

It was these theoretical ideas that have been taken up and developed in the Fair Go Fair Share Fair Say Fair Content Project (Fair Go Project). The aim of this project is to consider the kinds of classroom pedagogies that will encourage student engagement. There are two levels of engagement that the project is interested in developing. The first is termed small ‘e’ engagement and is the substantive engagement with the learning experiences at hand. We refer to this as “in-task”, as distinct from being “on-task”, that is merely complying with teacher tasks and instructions. The second level we call big ‘E’ engagement. This is an emotional attachment to and a commitment to education: the belief that “school is for me” (McFadden & Munns, 2002). The Fair Go Project believes that these levels of engagement are dialectically linked. Small ‘e’ engagement is embedded within big ‘E’ engagement as the immediate educational experiences build to a future-oriented consciousness that sees education as a resource to be profitably employed within students’ lives. Drawing on ideas from the critical literacy literature we took up the following definitions that we believe capture the more significant concepts of student engagement being considered in the project:

… finding ways of enabling and encouraging learners to enter into communities of practice, discourse and inquiry … to become an ‘insider’ in the culture of the classroom (Durrant & Green, 2000, p.103);

2 This is a joint enterprise between the Priority Schools Funding Program and the School of Education and Early Childhood Studies (University of Western Sydney). Employing a co-researching ethnographic methodology, the project brings together university researchers, educational consultants, school teachers and community members. The project’s theoretical underpinnings derive from important research into ‘authentic’ (Newmann & Associates, 1996) and ‘productive’ pedagogy (School Reform Longitudinal Study: Hayes, Lingard and Mills, 2000) and the project has also developed its own strategic theoretical frameworks.
… involves becoming identified and identifying oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group … playing a socially meaningful ‘role’ within that discourse community (Gee, 1990, p.143).

These definitions have focussed our attention on the importance of classroom discourse within communities of learners and directed us towards seeing engaged learners as insiders.

**Insiders in their Classrooms: Lessons and Evolution**

Research was initially undertaken in one classroom in Carramar primary school in south west Sydney. Co-researching investigations began by considering the connections between engagement and self-assessment. We were influenced by the idea that authentic assessment is not possible without attention to authentic achievement (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999, p.179). A separation of the two can lead to empty rhetoric and facile assessment. Assessment cannot be investigated in isolation. It must be looked at in relation to the curriculum, the expected outcomes, the learning and the authenticity of the achievement, as these components are integral to successful assessment.

Questions surrounded seeing the relationship between engaging tasks and students becoming insiders in their learning processes.

John Koletti, the teacher, demonstrated classroom procedures that encouraged the children to be part of the learning process by giving them opportunity to make decisions about the context of their learning and propose processes whereby designated outcomes could be achieved. The three issues we saw as important were recognizing compliance, resistance and engagement, involving the children in authentic decision making within the classroom and accessing their thinking about their place in the learning framework. One of the first issues that arose was the necessity for the children to have the vocabulary to enable them to talk about both the curriculum and about their learning. They needed reflection opportunities for the children that allowed them to talk about their learning.

Children were given post-it notes to write under one or all of the following headings:
- What I learnt
- What I liked
- What I didn’t like
- What I want to know.

The post-its were then place on a chart under these headings. Other children were then able to muse about the responses and eventually the responses were entered into an assessment journal. As the children became more relaxed and more familiar with the process the entries became more expressive and assisted both John and the children to better understand the learning that was accomplished and future learning possibilities. During this period of time it was noticed that the language John used assisted the children to re-focus their work from trying to please the teacher to doing the best they could. This issue of teacher discourse became a focal point for our classroom investigations.

After a period of time John noticed that the children were just going through the process of reflection. They did as they were asked and they complied with the teachers’ requirements. Ironically, their compliance in their self-assessments became the sort of stances that we had attempted to overcome as we started the project: students going through their classroom paces without involvement in the processes or the resultant learning. At the same time we were also becoming dissatisfied with the one-dimensional nature of the reflective probes. There was a recognition that we needed to design ways of encouraging the students to think more deeply about their processes of learning and the relationship between reflection and engaged learners. It was at this stage that we started to focus on the possibility of a framework that would help us see beyond the basic level of self-assessment. Biggs’ (1995) *SOLO Taxonomy* opened the discussion and later

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3 Carramar Primary School is in a culturally diverse and poor community. The majority of the 290 students come from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds. These students make up 85% of the school and represent over 30 languages. Vietnamese, Chinese and Arabic speakers are the largest groups. People live in a mixture of public and private housing (high density flats and mainly older-style houses, many of which are fibro). The school receives funds from the Priority Schools Program, a NSW Department of Education and Training program offering support for the poorest schools in the state.
became the foundation of our thinking as we developed a framework for self-assessment. Biggs put forward the idea that assessment items should be designed in such a way that the assessment product revealed different levels of understanding. The Solo Taxonomy is a systematic way of increasing the structural complexity of learning and assessment tasks through unistructural, multistructural, relational and abstract sequences.

**The Framework**

In applying the SOLO Taxonomy to student self-assessment, the intention was to promote deeper reflections about learning and work against the compliant and routine nature of self-assessments that were being observed among the students. We interrogated this model relating it to what we were seeing in our research classroom. First we restructured the understandings and redeveloped appropriate ‘names’ for these understandings in line with our beliefs about self-assessment. We were careful not to look at these through a hierarchical lens but to focus on them as ideas that would lead to greater insights into the student’s understandings. The notional ‘names’ and descriptions for these dimensions were (reading from the bottom up):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptual</th>
<th>Translating ideas into concepts.</th>
<th>Why is it important for you to know/understand/be able to do this?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Relating to other areas or processes</td>
<td>How do these processes/content relate to something else you know. When else could you use this information?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidimensional</td>
<td>Content plus process</td>
<td>How did you learn this? What else did you learn? How did you arrive at the conclusion/answer? How do I know when I have learnt something?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidimensional</td>
<td>Basic content</td>
<td>What did you learn? Why is this my best work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next we put questions that would be appropriate to initially stimulate the student’s into thinking about the various dimensions.

Work within a Kindergarten classroom led to discussion about the value of asking students why they liked or disliked their work. Previous experience with trite replies such as “cause it’s neat” or just a shrug of the shoulders indicating neutrality resulted in us having not much regard for this form of self-assessment. Further investigations indicated that students establishing feelings about their work was very important and carried out systematically was the basis for sound understanding. It also satisfied the definitions of small ‘e’ engagement we were working with. The conclusion was that we not only needed a cognitive structure but also an affective one. Combined with this dimension was the issue of achievement. An extra dimension about what the children could do (operative) was debated and eventually added. The results were the following framework:
### Dimensions of Self-Assessment (Woodward/Munns)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Affective</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Operative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual-translating into concepts</td>
<td>What other feelings do you have about this work? How can you generate some specific feelings about your work? E.g., empathy, curiosity. Why is it important to acknowledge this feeling in your work?</td>
<td>Why is it important for you to know/understand/be able to do this?</td>
<td>Why is being able to do this important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational-relational to other areas/processes</td>
<td>Have you ever felt this way about something else? When, what was it?</td>
<td>How do these processes/content relate to something else you know. When else could you use this information?</td>
<td>Where else could you do this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidimensional-content plus process</td>
<td>Why did you like/dislike?</td>
<td>How did you learn this? What else did you learn? How did you arrive at the conclusion/answer? How do I know when I have learnt something?</td>
<td>How did you do it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidimensional-content-basic</td>
<td>Did you like or dislike this work/unit?</td>
<td>What did you learn? Why is this my best work?</td>
<td>What did you do?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we started working with this framework we found that we needed to establish probe categories that would assist those using it to unpack the meanings. The reason different kinds of probes were needed was to focus attention on the different aspects of learning. It is expected that these probes will cross all dimensions at every level. That is, different types of probes can be used at all levels for affective, cognitive and operative. The ones expressed here are by no means definitive and it is reasonable to believe that the list will be significantly added to as we explore this framework and as the framework is used by other teachers and students. These probes are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Probes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about achievement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above framework and its accompanying probes are being interrogated at several levels; in classrooms at Carramar School and with several groups of our teacher education students. It is anticipated that as we continue to develop our thinking around the connections between student engagement and self-assessment and between the affective, cognitive and operative that we will move closer to a more informed understanding of the value of students as insiders.

### Summary and Conclusion

The more we use and think about the framework the more we are convinced that it has great possibilities for classrooms where the aim is for students to operate at high affective, high cognitive high operative levels. We don’t see the framework as a proforma, rather we see it as a way of focusing attention on the processes of student reflection and encouraging students to feel and think more deeply about their work and achievement. It is our belief that these processes can play an integral role in the getting and knowing of student engagement. Their individual and collective voices will then tell us that they have become insiders.
References


