SELF-EVALUATION, REFLECTION AND STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract: The paper addresses the issues of self-evaluation and development of reflection skills as important factors for the meaningful involvement of students in education. Special consideration is given to reflective learning which turns students into active learners, rather than passive recipients of information.

Key words: self-evaluation, student involvement, reflection, reflection process

Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation is the process and practice of looking at our progress, growth and learning to find out what has become better and what areas still need to be worked on and improved. Self-evaluation involves comparing the present situation with what has been before and our achievements with those of the others. “Self-evaluation of education and/or learning is the process of systematic collection, analysis and exchange of data concerning educational processes of either individuals, groups or organisations (institutions, etc.) in order to facilitate learning among all parties concerned so value judgments and decision-making may be based on evidence rather than on intuition” (Lakerveld & Caals, 2006: 3).

The terms self-evaluation and self-assessment are usually used interchangeably. In social psychology, self-assessment is the process of examining oneself so as to assess features that are essential to one's identity. Sedikides (1993) looks at self-assessment as a strong motive that will provoke people to look for information to confirm their uncertain self-concept rather than their certain self-concept. People also use self-assessment to enhance their certainty of their own self-knowledge.

In a world which demands a lot from all of us all the time, it is crucial to be able to self-evaluate ourselves. The self-evaluation skills are not something we are born with. They are learned and need to be taught to young people. In order to become life-long learners, which is the trend in 21st century, students need to learn the significance of self-evaluation by practicing it. This can be done by completing purpose-made self-evaluation forms, taking tests, writing revisions of projects and other types of written work, asking questions, participating in discussions, asking what their seniors’ opinion of them is. Thus they can find out what they know, do not know, and what they should and would like to know. Frequent self-evaluation facilitates the process of setting realistic and achievable goals and of improving oneself.

Teachers should encourage self-evaluation because it turns students into active participants not only in their education (Sloan, 1996) but also in the life of the community. One way of conducting self-evaluation is to use evaluative questions which stimulate students to consider their work, achievements and failures (Hart, 1999). Some of these questions are:
1. How much time, energy and creativity did you invest in this activity/endeavor?
2. How can you define your strengths and weaknesses, your successes and failures?
3. What do you need to do to improve your performance?
4. What are the most important lessons you have learned so far?
5. What factors hinder your good performance as learners/leaders?
6. What changes need to be made in education/community/society?
7. What can your peers do to help you do better at school?
8. What can your teachers do to help you be successful in what you do at school?

The last question is particularly important as it requires feedback from the students concerning the teachers’ performance. Teachers should strive to be good role models by doing their own self-evaluation and sharing the results with the learners. The students’ opinion should seriously be taken into account and evidence of the teachers’ efforts to improve their work need to be demonstrated. This is the way to prove to young people that continuous improvement is important and self-assessment should be a life-long practice.

When asking for feedback from the students, a number of principles should be observed. Some of them are:

• Information must be organized and displayed to young people in a clear and accessible way;
• Young people must be informed why they are being asked to give their opinion, and how it will be used to lead to improvements;
• Young people should be free to participate or not;
• Young people should be told in advance what they can benefit from taking part – increased skills and self-confidence, accreditation or qualifications, certificates, etc.;
• Young people should be notified about the outcomes and if change has not been made, they should be told the reasons.

The impact of self-evaluation depends on a number of internal and external factors. The internal factors involve presence/absence of skills of reflection, previous positive/negative experience, assumptions about abilities or lack of them, too much or too little self-confidence and self-awareness. The external factors involve environment and people, personal status, social forces, pressure coming from peers, family or seniors, or their expectations, etc.

In order for the collected data to be reliable, self-evaluation must be done in an open and democratic environment in which the participants feel free to express themselves. It should be self-initiated and self-controlled even when it is stimulated by the institution or the teachers. It allows students to participate actively in the education process and establishes a healthy and productive communication among all stakeholders. It not only increases students’ self-awareness and self-confidence, but also makes transparent the decision-making process and efficiently matches the needs of students, teachers and educational administrative staff.

**Student voice and student involvement**

Hearing the voice of the students is about developing a school and university culture in which all stakeholders have the opportunity to express themselves and have a say in the institutional decision-making which concerns their education and well-being as outlined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). To hear somebody’s voice has become a cliché and has lost some of the meaning „to make a difference or create a change”. In the process of engaging students as partners in all educational matters it is crucial to hear what they have to say and make a step further – create conditions for their meaningful involvement in all processes that relate to them.
Student self-government entities such as school and university student councils, eco-committees, support groups, peer mentors, etc. are indispensable elements of this approach but they can be efficient if all students participate actively in the life of the educational institution. And one way of stimulating their participation is by involving them in self-evaluation. There are consultation mechanisms such as questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, and opinion and suggestion boxes which can provide a lot of important feedback. Students should be encouraged to take part in planning, reviewing and applying policies and measures, including the institutional development plan, allocating and spending the budget, etc. The academic and administrative staff should create opportunities for students with additional learning and other special needs to also participate in these procedures.

In order to employ working strategies for a meaningful student involvement, the breadth of such involvement and what it entails should be understood. Some of its constituent parts are:

Student authority: The power and the right to participate in making decisions on an institutional level alongside teachers, administrative staff, parents, local government, and members of the community.

Personal dedication: All adults in educational institutions encourage and teach every young person to become an active partner in the process of improving the school environment, the teaching/leaning and evaluation process.

Sustainable support: All students and all educators can all the time rely on professional assistance coming from the community.

Recognition and validation: Students’ knowledge, skills and competencies are demonstrated and appreciated through meaningful education-oriented roles.

Developing Skills of Reflection

The process of self-evaluation requires good reflective practice which, in turn, entails critical, constructive and creative thinking. Thinking about previous events is what almost everybody does on a daily basis. However, the difference between this kind of thinking and reflective practice lies in that the latter involves an intention to understand how and why something occurred, and to learn from the experience. Where reflection is involved in the learning process it can enhance the quality of learning because the learner gets to compare the theoretical world with the real world which is more diverse and full of constraints and dilemmas unaccounted for in the theory.

Boud, Keogh and Walker created one of the most frequently cited models for understanding the process of reflection. According to them „Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull over and evaluate it. It is this working with experience that is important in learning”. (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985: 43).

Reflection is a dynamic process which does not always provide simple solutions and easy answers. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) outline three stages in this process:

• returning to experience – a detailed description or recollection of events;
• focusing on the feelings (positive and negative) that the experience has triggered;
• re-evaluating that occurrence in the light of the learner's aims, self-knowledge, and the new knowledge that has been acquired in the process.

Since reflective practice strongly depends on people’s critical, constructive and creative thinking, it is essential to develop it. Neil Thompson (2015) suggests six steps in this direction:

• **Read** – more about the topics which are included in the studied subject area;
• **Ask** – other people about their way of doing things and their reasons for that;
• Observe – the events happening around us;
• Feel – do not neglect your emotions, try to understand what has provoked them and how you cope with the negative ones and how the positive ones stimulate you;
• Talk – communicate your thoughts and feelings with your friends and colleagues;
• Think – about how you have performed in your work and learn from the mistakes you have made.

The practical application of these steps enhances active learning. Active learning is reflective learning which endorses the knowledge, skills and experience used in practice. Learners are active participants in the process, rather than passive recipients of information, who gain confidence in learning. And if this issue was considered important more than forty years ago when Freire criticized passive learning by saying „This is the „banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (Freire, 1972: 72), in the 21st c. active learning is the key to success. Critical thinking and knowledge ownership stimulate creative learning and ensure young people’s active participation in educational decision making.

The importance of enhancing student involvement
Students are key stakeholders in education. Their quality of learning and their overall experience during their educational growth to a large extent determines their well-being, career development and personal achievements, as well as their active and articulate citizenship. This is why it is essential to take their opinion into consideration while designing, planning and managing the services they are offered in the educational institutions. By increasing the opportunities for their active participation, educationalists and policy makers become instrumental in enhancing students’ self-esteem and motivation for lifelong learning, and in developing their personal, social and leadership skills. This helps build a healthy rapport between students and teachers and among the student body. Some of the positive outcomes of student participation are:
• Improved and sustainable student-staff and student-student relationships;
• Improved student and staff well-being, performance and learning;
• Improved institutional policies and measures, matching the real needs of the learners;
• Better opportunities for students to develop skills which are recognized as useful on a personal and community level.
• More inclusive communities where everybody, those who are confident and those who are not so confident, is encouraged and supported to participate.

References: