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CHAPTER 26

Assessing the Self-managing Learner: A Contradiction in Terms?[*]

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Summary

Although the ethos of the self-managing learner is becoming more widely accepted in higher education, it is frequently undermined by inconsistent approaches to assessment. If educational programmes are to support genuinely self-managed learning, there is a need to move away from content- or outcome-based assessment systems to a recognition that evaluation of content and outcome are the responsibility of the learner.

Once these implications are recognised any external assessment becomes problematic, although an acceptable solution may be achievable through basing assessment on activities or processes of learning such as enquiring, creating, reflecting and evaluating.

Introduction

Within higher education, traditional approaches to teaching and learning have tended to emphasise the content-based dimension represented by subject-matter, theories and bodies of knowledge, at the expense of developing capability in overarching processes such as enquiry, reflection, creative synthesis and self-managed learning. Although institutions often espouse these latter as desirable if not fundamental aims (Allen, 1988), the reality can be a focus which develops them in a limited and haphazard way and encourages a relatively narrow kind of academic competence (Barnett, 1994). The recent introduction of approaches based on functional approaches to competence offers little more in this respect, as knowledge-based content simply becomes replaced or supplemented by content in the form of competence standards, dominating the learning process through their focus on predefined objectives and outcomes (Lester, 1995a).

In contrast, the majority of learning which occurs in daily life is not driven by a syllabus or competence framework, but identified and managed by people in accordance with their own objectives. This form of learning may not always lead to outcomes which would be recognised for accreditation, but particularly when the learner's objective is a compelling one it is usually extremely effective.

The importance of intrinsic motivation of this type for educational settings has long been recognised, for instance by Lindeman (1926) and Dewey (1938) among others. In higher education it has gained ground through structures such as negotiated learning contracts and design credit accumulation awards, and through approaches to development which

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respect learners' self-direction and ability to manage their learning actively. The latter include for instance reflective practice (Schön, 1983, 1987), action learning (Revans, 1980) and action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), which now underpin a considerable number of programmes and have gained academic credibility as well as demonstrating their relevance to practice. There are convincing rationales for their use, both from the perspective of learning effectiveness (see for instance Knowles, 1990; Evans, 1992) and socioeconomic considerations (e.g., Ackoff, 1974; Reich, 1991).

However, a significant problem which can occur when introducing these approaches in higher education environments is that they become accepted at a surface level, but fail to become deeply embedded. Operationally, reflection / action and self-managed approaches can remain as methods within a traditional programme methodology, working at what Cunningham (1994) terms a tactical level as opposed to a strategic one. Conceptually, and more insidiously, they can be embraced as methodologies but without any real acceptance into the academic culture of their underlying epistemologies and values. In both situations learners receive conflicting messages--explicitly in the first where there are indications as to where self-managed learning is permissible and where it is not, and implicitly in the second, where a surface-level message is contradicted by a deeper one.

Assessment

One of the most revealing indicators of underlying academic theory-in-use is assessment practice. Assessment also tends to have a disproportionate influence on learners because of the perceived value of certification, so the values implicit in how assessment is carried out can easily undermine espoused philosophies of learning. This point is illustrated by the following examples, from programmes claiming to be based in reflective practitioner and action learning approaches respectively.

The first concerns a student on a full-time vocationally-oriented degree, who was completing an account of his work placement. He had developed an innovative approach to the project he was involved in, discussed its relative merits and its relationship to relevant contextual issues, and thought through quite carefully how it would work in practice. However, he was having a lengthy and unproductive argument about it with a tutor, who disagreed with the logic behind it and suggested it was inadequately referenced. The student was twice referred to books which backed the tutor's point of view, and despite including a well-argued critique of these the account was eventually given a mediocre pass accompanied by comments about needing to relate practice to theory.

The second involves an experienced manager and business owner following a postgraduate management programme. The programme explicitly aimed to develop practice, but for reasons of external prestige and apparent validity clung to a system of written examinations to supplement action learning projects and a learning portfolio. After the first year he commented that there appeared to be two types of knowledge about management, the practical knowledge which he learned (through various means) out of necessity to run his business, and the type of knowledge which the exams tested, which sounded good but didn't actually work.

These scenarios illustrate two not very useful lessons. One is that while it's acceptable to think about what you are doing, experiment, and develop your own theories, the results are practical, situational, and subjective rather than real knowledge. The first student was being trapped in a double-bind in which the tutor had tacitly accorded his own theories an objective status without making his standpoint clear. The student was developing personal knowledge and using it effectively, but his tutor was demanding that it conformed or at least had a clear relationship with more 'objective' knowledge. The converse lesson is that while theory is

good for passing courses, it doesn't help get things done in the real world. The manager was beginning to see around the schizoid nature of the assessment system, but at the same time learning to bracket the 'formal' theory rather than critically engaging with it to develop his own models. In both cases, the result is divergence between the theories students think of as valid for qualifications and those that they actually use to guide their action.

More generally, the principle which is being applied is that of a set of orthodox or 'accepted' theories (those of the expert community, whether they are authors, teachers, or standard-setters) being held up as correct or at least as a necessary starting-point, while others (particularly those of the learners) need either to conform or to be argued convincingly in terms of the orthodox theories if they are to be taken seriously. The principle applies equally whether the theories are expressed in academic terms or are theories of practice articulated as behavioural objectives or competence statements. In all cases, the problem is that the learner is presented with an external definition of what is right or acceptable, in a way which encourages referential or atomistic learning (cf. Ramsden, 1986) and discourages critical thinking, creativity and self-managed learning.

The Challenge of Self-managed Learning

Moving beyond this normative or discourse-based approach to assessment is a key prerequisite to enabling educational programmes to support genuinely self-managed learning. It is also problematic, as while the epistemologies which underpin self-managed approaches are gaining acceptance from the viewpoint of learning practice, they pose a fundamental challenge to much current assessment practice and in some respects to the idea of external assessment per se.

For instance, Schön describes a constructionist (sic) epistemology of practice in which "our perceptions, appreciations, and beliefs are rooted in worlds of our own making which we come to accept as reality" (1987, p36), and where learners are involved in "worldmaking" as much as taking the world for granted. Not dissimilarly, Cunningham (1990) advocates a Post-Modern (sic) ethos which acknowledges there are no right and wrong answers to be found 'out there', but emphasises a reflexive approach which requires value-judgement and wisdom. The idea of 'worldmaking' is also reflected in the work of Korzybski (1958), Bateson (1971), and Bandler and Grinder (1975), who identify the difference between the 'territory' or external reality, which we cannot know directly, and our personal maps of it.

The implication is not only that *"there is a necessary difference between the world and any particular model or representation of (it)"*, but that "*the models of the world that each of us creates will themselves be different*" (pp. 7–8).

From an assessment viewpoint, these ideas suggest that to assess learning by reference to what it is expected will be learned is doing no more than imposing one interpretation or model of the world on another. This is perhaps acceptable in a pragmatic sense when learning is framed as a process of acquisition and accumulation, but it is completely inadequate for learning which is purposive, self-managed, critical or creative. If the learner is recognised as a map-maker or participant in 'worldmaking' rather than as just a map-reader and interpreter, it is contradictory to expect him or her to work within and be assessed against logics, theories and discourses of others' making: the results will at best be a form of gameplaying and deception where espoused theories are set up at divergence with theories-in-use, and at worst a chronic disability with regard to independent and creative thinking, learning and action.

Validating Personal Theory

The dilemma, then, is that recognising the learner as a self-managing worldmaker or mapmaker contradicts the notion of assessment at least as commonly practised. This perspective or epistemology of personal knowledge generates particular challenges for assessment, as it starts from the position that knowledge and theory are constructed by the individual in the process of mapmaking or worldmaking. Not only does this make any direct assessment of knowledge and theory nonsensical, it suggests that because individual knowledge and practice is unique, it is also intrinsically valid through the fact of its being known and done. (This is not the same as its being useful, something which I will revisit shortly.) Whereas from a normative or discourse-based stance there are reference-points from which to judge understanding or performance--the map is either assumed to be the territory, or the best representation of it--from a personal knowledge perspective these are revealed as no more than subjective maps, even if for many purposes successful ones.

To offer theories, curricula or competence frameworks or similar maps as guidelines which might be treated as matters for reflection and enquiry is completely congruent with self-managed learning (see, for instance, Lester, 1995b), but to insist through assessment that they are followed or used as a basis for judging validity is not. According these maps a pseudo-objective validity also dictates an orientation towards the past, as it points to working rationally from a pre-existing base rather than working intuitively and imaginatively as well as rationally towards a future direction or outcome.

A self-managed, personal knowledge perspective frees learners from the constraints of having to work from a starting-point of conventional thought, and enables them to focus--critically and creatively--on the future. However, at first sight it also leaves the door open to a solipsistic latitude in which the learner can self-validate any outcome without rigour or creativity. On the other hand, as soon as validation is asked for, it is tempting to fall into the trap of holding up one model of the world as superior to another, or at least providing justification based on already familiar (or accessible, e.g. published) theory.

Introducing rigour and validation to personal theory is nevertheless achievable through the idea of ‘fitness for purpose’. In practice, we tend to review our ideas in terms of their effectiveness in leading towards a purpose, or set of purposes, which we have defined; we are responsible for deciding whether, in our own terms, our ideas are sensible or not, even if part of the validation process involves consulting written material, entering into a dialogue, or gaining an expert opinion. This test of fitness for purpose is an everyday, practical one, as well as being essential to any form of effective self-managed learning or reflective practice. It is equally applicable to practical outcomes and more purely theoretical ones (developing understandings of . . .), and because the purpose is internally defined, it respects the learner’s map or world-view and remains congruent with it. Because it is purposive rather than based on precedent (cf. Schutz, 1970), it is also future-oriented and allows room for lateral and creative approaches as well as more incremental and rational ones.

The limitation of fitness for purpose is that it operates within the boundaries set by the purpose itself, and so is totally dependent on how well the latter has been framed or constructed. In practical terms, this can often translate to blinkered thinking, ‘firefighting’, or pursuing aims regardless of their wider consequences, as well as offering scope for unethical, unjust or criminal behaviour. While critical, lateral and creative thinking can all be employed within these bounds, learning is ultimately limited because the whole learning system is controlled by the purpose and how it has been framed; fitness for purpose is essentially a single-loop test of validity which in itself has no ethical, moral or spiritual dimension, but can be as narrowly pragmatic or instrumental as the learner wants it to be.

To move beyond this limitation points to considering the fitness *of* the purpose, or how well it has been framed in terms of wider contexts and issues. Fitness of purpose represents a double- or multiple-loop test of validity, as it asks the learner to consider the

congruence of his or her objectives in broader contexts and question the assumptions on which they are based: effectively, move out of the logic or frame or reference in which the purpose is based, and question its congruence in a wider context. Clearly this can be a process of many loops or levels as the learner considers successively bigger pictures and wider perspectives, and identifies and questions assumptions embedded in both the purpose itself and the theories and actions associated with it. Fitness of purpose is still based within a personal knowledge epistemology, as it avoids imposing external definitions of congruence and asks the learner to consider assumptions reflexively, making judgements of value and exercising wisdom. However, it has moved from within-frame, single-loop thinking to a without-frame, double- or multiple- loop approach which is unbounded by predefined frameworks and where learning is ultimately unlimited. It respects the learner's map of the world, but enables the map to be extended and redrawn, including in previously unexplored dimensions.

Extending fitness of purpose conceptually leads into the idea of systemic wisdom, and to a state of systemic congruence in which wisdom becomes holistic and intuitive as something akin to Bateson's Learning III or perhaps IV is attained (Bateson, 1971). However, for the purposes of assessment it is likely that fitness of purpose is adequate at the level of anything currently deemed to be assessable, and it is sufficient to be aware that there are levels of learning which go beyond consciously uncovering and questioning assumptions and developing contextual congruence, and which also transcend the limitations of language and perhaps conscious thought.

Assessment Revisited

Although the model outlined above--personal knowledge, fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose--provides a framework for testing and questioning personal models and maps, it does not directly solve the issue of assessing the self-managing learner. It is essentially a self-assessment model which is intrinsic to self-managed learning, incorporating both a pragmatic, practical perspective and one of higher-level, critical thinking. However, it is not a model for external assessment, for its integrity and effectiveness depends on the learner managing the process; the presence of an assessor deciding for the learner how well a theory serves its purpose or what assumptions are being made defeats the object of self-critical evaluation and undermines the value of the learning process.

Assessing the self-managing learner does then appear to be a contradiction in terms. The learner has no intrinsic need for assessment, for part of the process of learning involves gathering feedback, reviewing it, and acting on it in a reflexive cycle of enquiry and action. Feedback and advice may be offered actively to learners, but there is a difference between feedback as a statement of observation or personal opinion provided as a resource for the learner to use according to his or her own judgement, and assessment which assumes to make some form of external judgement. Assessment is in itself problematic, and it has been argued that assessment commonly views people "*through a filter of assumptions denying much of their potential, dignity and creativity*" (Daley, 1971, p. xiii), something which is hardly consistent with the concept of self-managed learning.

Despite this, the perceived need for external assessment and validation is unlikely to disappear even with a wider appreciation of self-managed learning; there are still reasons for assessment which are broadly (if not unproblematically) seen as educationally and socially desirable. Traditionally, these have included:

- motivating learners to cover or consolidate a syllabus or set of standards
- identifying further learning needs

- validating a level of knowledge, understanding, or competence expected for a qualification or "licence to practice"
- selecting for further education / training or employment
- providing feedback to learners about their progress
- providing feedback about the effectiveness of a teaching, training, or learning process.

(cf. Atkins, Beattie, & Dockrell, 1993, pp. 6–7).

Of these, most can be achieved by other means; the only one which is particularly problematic is qualifications, and current trends suggest that assessment issues will increase in intensity as on the one hand there is growing pressure from governments and to some extent employers both for qualifications and for explicitly rigorous assessment processes, and on the other there is an increasing need for self-managing learners who are adept at going outside conventional boundaries.

Overcoming this conflict depends on assessment methodologies which uphold the *"potential, dignity and creativity"* of the learner, and ensure that learning is supported which goes "outside the box", rather than being constrained within perspectives and logics of others' making. These methodologies will not be found at the level of attempting to assess knowledge and understanding, or theories of practice about what constitutes competent work performance, but will need to enable learners themselves to develop and test personal theory and practice through the model discussed or something akin to it. In effect, assessment needs to move from assessment of 'content' or conformance to an expected outcome (vertical assessment, Lester, 1995a), to assessment of the learner's processes in developing and evaluating their personal models, maps and theories-in-use (horizontal assessment, Lester, !995a).

A methodology for 'horizontal' assessment might consider the learner's actions in enquiring, creating (whether in a creative or process-based sense), reflecting and evaluating. Within this, personal knowledge, fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose provide a series of levels which can be used in defining criteria, so that while at a basic level the processes of enquiring, creating and reflecting may relate to fairly self-contained and purposive personal referencing, at higher levels they will involve greater exploration of underlying assumptions and location in contexts and contexts of contexts.

Within this type of assessment there needs to be room for negotiation, as the assessment system will still be the product of a map or world-view, even if at a more overarching and less restrictive level than with a content or outcome-based model. Basing assessment on a small number of principles rather than on rules or criteria will assist this flexibility, as well as assisting learners to move beyond closed paradigms of thought. For instance, there are many methods of enquiring, based in different methodologies and epistemologies and emphasising different directions of thought, and equally, creating can be an imaginative leap in which the result just seems to materialise, a planned journey from current state to planned state, or a creative process using a mixture of logic and imagination.

Conclusion

If self-managed learning is to be assessed, it requires an approach to assessment which respects the learner's model of the world while providing a framework for testing it from within and encouraging further critical and creative development. In the model I have proposed, the focus of assessment moves from a 'vertical' or content-based dimension where what has been learned is compared with a model of what it is expected will have been learned (whether this is a syllabus, outcome or set of standards), to a 'horizontal' or process-based dimension, where value is attached to development from unvalidated personal theory through

fitness for purpose towards systemic wisdom. For the individual learner, there is now an infinite horizon rather than the invisible ceiling of my first student's double-bind, and the lessons become ones of freedom, responsibility, and wisdom.

A model of this type has several advantages. It respects the uniqueness and individuality of knowledge and action, while requiring that theories and actions are challenged and developed in a wider context than that of the individual's personal outcomes. It respects creative right- and whole-brain thinking and learning (Sperry, 1969) as well as the logical, left-brain processes which typically dominate assessment outside of the creative arts. And finally, it encourages testing against current contexts and future needs, rather than dictating historic models and discourses as starting-points. Although it is still necessarily the product of a particular perspective and therefore not unproblematic, it is more consistent with supporting the learner to be self-managing: confident as an explorer and a creator of theory and action, contextually aware, and developing towards systemic wisdom.

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