

Assessing English Language Student-Teachers' Contributions to Online Discussion Forums: Is Self-Evaluation Report Writing the Answer?

Phillip A. Towndrow

Assistant Professor

Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice

National Institute of Education

Nanyang Technological University

Singapore 637616

phillip.towndrow@nie.edu.sg

Abstract

This paper presents the outcomes of the author's explorations into the use of self-evaluation report writing as a means of assessing student-teachers' contributions to online discussion forums. As part of the requirements for a Bachelor's degree in education, two groups of student-teachers, one in 2006 and the other in 2007, took an elective module where partial credit was given for writing two self-evaluation reports (one formative, one summative) based on their online learning experiences. The evidence presented shows the pragmatic and pedagogic benefits of self-assessment especially in terms of allowing student-teachers the time and space to describe their work in detail, reflect on its significance and devise future plans of action both within and beyond the course of study. The paper also draws attention to the potentially negative aspects in self-assessment of making oneself identifiable and knowable. In conclusion, the paper notes that teachers and students require a prior understanding of the ideological, moral and theoretical underpinnings of self-assessment practices if they are to be used productively in the search for pedagogic solutions to issues surrounding the design, implementation and assessment of challenging, open-ended tasks in online learning environments.

Keywords: Student-teacher education, self-evaluation reports, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), formative and summative assessment, collaboration, authenticity, disciplinary power

Introduction

This paper presents the outcomes of the author's explorations into how student-teachers' contributions to online discussion forums might be assessed in meaningful and manageable ways. The broad rationale for this enterprise is located in the increasing emphasis placed in contemporary contexts on learning with understanding (cf. Tomlinson, 2001; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). In response, educators and course designers have sought various pedagogic solutions to the issues of setting and assessing clearly stated, challenging, multi-faceted, open-ended, extended, flexible and frequently administered assessments both in and (sometimes) beyond their classrooms. One particular method—the subject of this article—for diversifying assessment in contemporary learning contexts involves the recruitment of student self-assessment as an integral part of situated, context-specific curriculum requirements. Specifically, this mode of assessment focuses on what is being learned and the quality of instructional interactions and relationships (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Stobart, 2008).

The concept of self-assessment, which developed out of wider interest in the fields of autonomous and independent learning (Coombe & Canning, 2002), serves a variety of closely related functions and purposes. These include:

- Self-diagnosis—identifying learning needs and seeing how to do better next time (Stiggins, 2005);
- Self-regulation or self-monitoring—gathering information about where students are in their learning and providing feedback that helps them move forward (Hattie & Timperley 2007; Stobart, 2008); and

- Self-understanding—increasing clarity about what is working and what is not, what is understood and has been accomplished, and what remains to be done (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

As can be seen from this list, self-assessment is based on the sharing of responsibility for assessment between teachers and students. The involvement of students in assessment is claimed to maximize the learning that comes from productive teacher-student interactions (Stiggins, 2005) and make assessments more manageable, especially in terms of the deployment of teachers' time (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). When students are able to self-assess successfully they become more committed and more effective as learners, especially in terms of persistence and self-efficacy—defined as a belief in one's ability of organizing and enacting courses of action required to succeed in actual or prospective situations (Bandura, 1995). They can also better evaluate their levels of understanding leading to improvements in relation to their learning goals and expectations.

Typically, self-assessment involves students making judgments about their own work, which could include reflecting on their achievements in wide variety of ways: essays, portfolios, journals, reports, progress cards, peer reviews, questionnaires, inventories, rating scales, peer reviews, video tapes, presentations and performances (Coombe & Canning, 2002; McTighe & Wiggins, 2004). However, despite this diversity of techniques and procedures, and prevalence in classrooms and the literature (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Boud, 1995; Hogan, 2007; Nitko, 2004; Roberts, 2006), the implementation of self-assessment techniques and procedures is sometimes problematic (Coombe & Canning, 2002; Black & Wiliam, 1998a). Chief among concerns in this respect is the notion that learners might not have the necessary experience and skills to make the judgments necessary and this could lead to insecurity, fear and a failure to see, for example, that the feedback provided in self-assessment is a helpful signal and guide (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003). Then again, Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam (2003) show that the negativity surrounding self-assessment can be alleviated once students are taught to understand specific learning objectives and assessment criteria for particular purposes. If this is the case, then self-assessment makes good sense and is worth pursuing if it leads to the achievement of desired learning outcomes.

In what follows, a unique role was sought for self-assessment as a means of valuing and rewarding collaborative effort in online learning in a particular realm of professional practice. In an attempt to break new ground in the teacher education literature, the evidence presented below supports the views that self-evaluative writing can assist student-teachers in diagnosing their needs, describing their work in detail, reflecting on its importance and devising plans for future action designed to improve work done. Counter-balancing these benefits, the article also mentions the potentially negative effects of requiring students to make themselves known and identifiable through written self-examination and self-disclosure.

In the next section, online learning is defined and three benefits of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) are mentioned. Then the use of discussion forums in English language teacher education is introduced and a particular double-pronged problem relating to them is identified. This concerns the difficulties teachers can face in keeping track of the large numbers of students' postings and subsequently assessing the value of the contributions made.

Literature Survey and Problem Statement

Online Learning

For the purposes of this study, online learning is defined as taking place on computers that are attached to or available through a central computer or computer network. This conception is broad enough to allow for students who study on-campus to participate in a blended mode of learning. There are three main benefits for mixing online tools with classroom-based work that are derived from the long-standing literature. First, in terms of a teacher's pedagogical repertoire, the asynchronous features of CMC add flexibility to the timing and pacing of learning. CMC also supports place-independence and allows for communication to occur on a one-to-many, many-to-one or many-to-many basis (Warschauer, 1996). Second, in contrast to overtly teacher-centric methods, CMC has been correlated positively with the promotion of learner independence (Peyton, 1999), reflective practice (Salmon, 2000) and collaboration (Salmon, 2002). Third, CMC provides the means to support a wide range of pedagogical conditions and learning styles. For example, Warschauer (1999) noted that shy students, who have had trouble participating in physical classroom discussions, feel more comfortable in online settings. This may be because they are better able to transcend negative perceptions of status and social-transactional

distance common in classrooms due to the reduction of social context cues related to race, gender, handicap, accent and status in online learning environments (Dias, 1998; Peyton, 1999; Wells, 1995).

Discussion Forums in English Language Teacher Education

A common mode of CMC in social and educational contexts is the online discussion forum, also commonly known as a Web forum, message- or bulletin-board. A discussion forum is a computer-based application for holding text-based exchanges and posting user-generated content to an entire community or to a specific sub-forum dealing with a distinct topic. Messages within these sub-forums are then displayed chronologically or as threaded discussions and usually registered users of a forum can edit their previous posts, start new topics, and control their individual settings and profiles (Wikipedia, 2009). Notably, discussion forums are scalable and customizable (Salmon, 2002) and are particularly good in letting many users ask and answer questions. Given these benefits, message forums are regularly used by English language teachers and students on the Web (see, Sperling, 2008) and by professors and teachers using learning management systems (e.g., Blackboard and Moodle) on university campuses to supplement classroom interactions. However, while commentators commonly provide procedures and guidance on how to design engaging online activities (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Naidu, 2006), the use of discussion forums for pedagogic purposes is not without its challenges for teachers and students alike.

For example, when discussion forums in educational contexts are vibrant, a great deal of material is produced as threaded discussions spread over several days or weeks. As topics and online traffic mount, keeping track of what has been said, by whom and for what purposes, can quickly become onerous even for the most diligent of online moderators! Additionally, despite the best intentions of teachers in designing motivating tasks, student-contributors to online discussions can get distracted, respond inappropriately by moving off-topic or simply fail to respond because they view the work set as non-essential. Under these circumstances, and no doubt others besides, the author contends that while carrot-and-stick methods, for example, awarding individual participation grades based on the number of postings made or the number of points made and/or refuted (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004) may result in students' compliance and output to meet course requirements, such tactics are questionable pedagogically and create a lot of work for teachers. Alternatively, as the study described in the next section shows, when self-assessment is used as an integral component of blended instructional design, then collaborative effort can be better valued and rewarded—thus providing the basis for even and widespread participation—and personal initiative is promoted in so much as it adds to socially-oriented academic outcomes.

Methods

In his work as a language teacher educator, the author planned and implemented a study to find out if a particular self-assessment practice can form the basis for meaningful, efficient and sustainable interactions in blended student-teacher language education. In terms of inquiry, the author wanted to know how far his students could go in establishing the worthiness of their own collaborative efforts through self-reporting.

Participants and Course of Instruction

As part of the requirements for a Bachelor's degree in Education at the National Institute of Education in Singapore, two groups of students, one in 2006 (n=21) and the other in 2007 (n=27), took a 12-week, elective course titled "Using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the Language Classroom". The main aim of the course, which was designed and taught by the author, was to explore how teachers and learners can identify and meet their literacy, literary and communication needs in the Digital Age.

The students, who were all competent in using ICT but novices in self-assessment techniques and procedures, were required to participate in an online discussion forum worth 20% of the final course grade. As the courses in 2006 and 2007 progressed, the student-teachers initiated and summarized weekly discussion threads. They were also required to write two self-evaluation reports in response to the prompts outlined in the procedure section below. The first report, submitted at the mid-point of the course (week 6), served a number of assessment *for* learning purposes. Specifically, evidence was sought that could be used by the author and the students to track the processes of teaching and learning on the course. The expectation was that students would be able to use the evidence gathered and feedback received (from the author) in deciding where they were in their learning, where they needed to go and how best they could get there (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Gardner, 2006; Hattie & Timperly, 2007). For his

part, the author expected to use the information collected to adjust his teaching and course design (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2003).

The second report, submitted at the end of the course (week 12) was summative in intent. It was used by students to sum up their work and achievements especially in light of goals they might have set or modified at the formative reporting stage. The summative report also provided an avenue for student-teachers to determine if they had mastered and understood key information, skills, concepts and processes on the course. Finally, at the summative stage, the students were asked to consider the quality and quantity of their online learning by including a proposed rating (a mark out of 20 points) in their reports for the author to consider (see Johnson & Johnson, 2002). Importantly, there was no competition for points between students in the self-assessment component of the final course grade—each student could have earned maximum points, if warranted.

Procedure

The author advised the students to focus their self-evaluation reports explicitly on their learning. To help balance description, critique and reflection in the students' writing, the author adapted and distributed a rubric for assessing the effectiveness of student participation in online discussions (see Edelman & Edwards, 2002). This tool, which was modified slightly for clarity following the 2006 run of the course set parameters in six domains of online interaction (see Appendix). These were:

- Response to postings and demonstration of initiative;
- Accuracy;
- Relevance of posting;
- Expression within posting;
- Awareness of the needs of the learning community; and
- Reflective practice.

To guide the students in gathering and organizing their thoughts and information, the author also provided the following prompts:

- How do you think your contributions helped *others* to understand the topics under discussion?
- Did others refer to your postings? How did your classmates' input help *you* deepen your understanding of the issues discussed in the online forum?
- What did you learn after looking back at the discussions following your own postings?
- What more do you need to do to increase your performance and impact in the online forum?

Evidence

The student-teachers on both courses submitted their self-evaluation reports in e-mail messages or as e-mail attachments. In an effort to reduce self-consciousness and possible embarrassment, the author guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity throughout the self-evaluation reporting exercise and no grades or recommendations for grades were made public. However, where necessary, permission was sought and granted by a number of students to publish extracts from their reports (see below).

Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, with the aid of the SEARCH and EDIT functions of a standard word-processor, key issues, recurrent events and other activities were identified and became categories of focus vis-à-vis the six domains of online interaction specified in the assessment rubric. Second, as each report was re-read several times, three differentiating categories emerged that allowed the author to judge the students' work according to how far they were able to justify (through recourse to appropriate evidence, where necessary) their proposed grades. The first grouping concerned the students' ability to describe the work they had completed in the online forums in terms of its relevance to the topic at hand and the strategies employed in making effective postings. The second area related to reflective analysis and what the student-teachers thought worked or did not work in the discussion threads and whether they could propose adjustments to their performance in light of their experiences. The final indicator was consistent with the concept of

“authenticity” taken from Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) Fourth Generation Evaluation framework. This related to how far the students were able to make connections between the content of the online work to other areas of professional development in language teaching both within and beyond the course (Newmann & Associates, 1996). Finally, instances of confirmatory and non-confirmatory evidence were sought in the student-teachers’ online postings to establish the integrity of the codes used in the analysis.

Illustrative Results

This section presents illustrations of how self-assessment operated in the English language student-teachers’ work. A number of extracts taken from different student-teachers’ reports (at both the formative and summative stages) are linked thematically, according to the categories of focus identified previously, but not sequentially, to inform the discussion that follows of the pedagogic implications of adopting self-evaluation report writing as a way of determining the value of contributions to online discussion forums.

In the instances where formative comments are provided, these are best viewed and understood in terms of self-regulation (Stobart, 2008) and self-diagnosis (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Stiggins, 2005; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005); That is, reflecting how to go about learning given personal needs and interests, and how to do things differently or better in future. In contrast, the extracted summative comments could be viewed as building on the formative stage and reflecting what has been learned on the course of study and what might be done next.

Rate of Participation

The author’s records show all of the students on both courses successfully completed the self-assessment assignment. In terms of online activity, Table 1 provides details of the number of forums, number of posts and average number of posts per participant for both courses (academic years 2005-6 and 2007-8). As can be seen, the figures in Table 1 indicate widespread and abundant participation. On this basis, the author considered there was sufficient material generated for the purposes of the student self-assessment exercise.

Table 1. Student Participation in Online Discussion Forums

Year	Number of forums	Number of posts	Average number of posts per participant
2006	14	480	22.8
2007	18	692	25.6

Description of Work Completed

Beyond the quantity of material produced online, and the obvious advantage of having an archive of work to refer to, the students’ self-evaluation reports were extensive and detailed (reports were approximately four typewritten pages in length). Additionally, the students were able to make informed judgments about their postings. Extract 1 is a typical description of work completed. Emphasis (*italicized text*) indicates comments that drew the author’s attention.

Extract 1

I believe my posts were extremely relevant and my classmates through their responses confirmed this. For example, in week 1, I responded to student 1’s reply to student 2 about overhauling the education system in Singapore after reading through the entire thread to make sure my reply would be relevant and useful. Both student 1 and student 3 replied saying that it was a valid point to consider. In week 3 when student 2 posted the question, “What are the circumstances in which IT can add value to language learning tasks?” for discussion, my idea about using video to teach composition in class was

considered useful, enlightening and relevant to several people on the discussion forum. *I believe this post helped the class to really understand circumstances in which IT can be used and how it can be seen as indispensable in teaching.* (2007, summative)

When describing their work, other students, as shown in Extract 2, also mentioned how they went about organizing their time and contributions.

Extract 2

I log onto the discussion forum frequently, at least once every day. I do this to keep myself updated with the on-going discussion, and also to avoid a potential build-up of unread posts, which may make it difficult for me to clear them all later on. *Even though I read my classmates' postings regularly, I only respond with a post of my own under these 3 scenarios: (a) if I have a question that needs to be answered, (b) if I have a good point to make that I feel is worth their time to read, or (c) if I have something interesting, like an external website or resource, to share. Looking back at my postings, I find that I take on a variety of roles during the discussion.* I am first a responsive respondent, who responds to the questions and thoughts of others. I am also an inquisitive inquirer, who asks quite a number of questions and who tends to end off a number of posts with the question "What do you think?" Lastly I am also creative creator who comes up with a few suggestions that may help address the situation at hand. (2007, summative)

Extracts 1 and 2 point to the way the student-teachers demonstrated initiative and interest in their online work. Additionally, the self-evaluation reporting exercise provided the means for them to highlight the relevance of their work and exemplify the strategies adopted in using time effectively.

Reflective Analysis

There were two indicators of the level of reflective analysis evident in the students' self-evaluations. These related to: (i) instances where they explained what worked and why and (ii) suggestions made concerning adjustments that could be made in terms of professional practice in light of experiences in participating in the online discussion forum as a whole.

In terms of explaining what worked and giving reasons why, Extract 3 illustrates the benefits of asynchronous learning and CMC in terms of expanding learning spaces and seeing how knowledge can be built over time.

Extract 3

I see the discussion forum as a very good avenue to expand on the concepts learnt in the classroom. The discussion forum allows us more time to ponder, do some research and to share our experiences. My overall strategy was to constantly make links to the tutorial tasks and phenomena in primary school classrooms. *What was the most meaningful for me is that so much knowledge was shared and negotiated which made learning more holistic and not just a constraint within the classroom.* The use of the discussion forum and individual evaluation of our participation in the forums exemplifies just what we are learning in this course: how ICT can be used as a tool that value-adds to the stock of human knowledge. (2007, summative)

There were also occasions where student-teachers' reflections over time led to insights and further inquiry based on experience. The following comments in Extract 4 are instructive because they show how discussion forum work stimulates the making of connections between prior, current and future learning.

Extract 4

In week 1, I asked: "Do we need to have a positive attitude towards ICT? Does it now become the single tool to which we turn to, to make our lessons more engaging? Will we be moving from a text-dominated culture to an ICT-dominated one?" *I can now answer my question.* Despite being in a classroom filled with my Net Generation children, ICT might be an integral part of the lesson but not be the only way we teach students. We still need students to read texts and conduct scientific experiments etc. *A teacher's roles included one of a disciplinarian and I wonder how ICT can help in fulfilling that role.* ICT cannot replace the teacher but in the age it is an essential tool for every teacher. (2006, summative)

In addition to personal learning gains, Extract 5 shows there were occasions when the student-teachers used self-reporting as a way of gathering evidence to show how their participatory approaches were helping others to learn.

Extract 5

I believe I exercised an awareness of the needs of my classmates to define certain terms, especially of those I may have had greater exposure to previously. This was evident when I helped students 1 and 2 understand the distinction between adventure and simulator software in the forum, "ICT in the Digital Age", under the thread, "Confused about the roles of the PC". *As a result, many members of the class expressed renewed understanding.* As a side note, it is satisfying to know that my personal experience and interest in computer games can now be applied in using such tools in the classroom. (2007, summative)

As important as sharing ideas and exchanging opinions are, arguably, the greatest benefit derived from reflective analysis is when it leads to actions or adjustments made in the light of personal experience. In this way reflection powers the evaluation of professional practice and fuels personal improvement (James, 2001). Extracts 6 and 7 are representative of the many instances recorded of personal revelation, overcoming difficulties and vows of action to come on the course.

Extract 6

I'd be the first to admit that participating in asynchronous discussion forums has never been one of my preferred modes of assessment. As earlier mentioned, I find myself being overly concerned with saying the "right" thing that nothing gets said (by me) most of the time (since others have already said it so well). Therein lies the frustration; I need to spend less time deliberating over my words and just say it out straight! *Now, having done this reflection, I guess I'd have to loosen up and just go with the flow of things. I need to get over the hurdle of worrying and take the chances expressing my ideas more freely.* (2007, formative)

Formative reporting also helped the student-teachers adjust their online learning strategies and to set objectives for the second-half of the course.

Extract 7

I am glad that I was given this opportunity to do a midterm self-evaluation. *This formative evaluation really makes me reflect on my own learning journey and the contributions I have made to help others understand things in this course.* I have identified a few areas, which I can improve on. Firstly, I will work towards initiating new posts so as to contribute more to this learning community rather than merely replying to other's the postings. Secondly, I need to put up my postings earlier as I reckon some of the postings were not as prompt and as a result, peers may miss them out as they will not be referring to the forum as regularly by then. Thirdly, using of the spell checker will definitely help me eliminate my spelling errors. Lastly, I want to look at ways where my postings will motivate more discussions which in turn help others to understand things better. (2007, formative)

In summary, although the student-teachers were new to self-evaluation report writing as a form of assessment, Extracts 3-7 show they were on-task and able to reflect meaningfully on their online discussion forum work.

Authenticity

The issue of authenticity is multifaceted and relates, as far as this paper is concerned, to the impact of the online discussion work on the student-teachers' professional development and learning. The first aspect of authenticity explored here seeks evidence of an enhanced perception of the world. In Extracts 8 and 9 the students demonstrated an appreciation of the value of purposeful collaborative effort in building knowledge and helping oneself and others to learn.

Extract 8

I realized there is a need for collaboration between teachers if we are to make IT more prevalent in the classroom. For example, there was some hesitation about the use of Computer-based Tests (CBTs) in the classroom, as they do not necessarily provide insights in pupil's thought processes. I suggested teachers could construct two-tiered CBTs that required pupils to justify their initial answers by writing a short statement or choosing their answers from options given. I also suggested that the setting and storing of CBTs for repeated use as a form of professional collaboration between teachers. (2007, summative)

Beyond making suggestions about what could be done, the reporting exercise showed at the summative stage, in particular, that the students' answers to their posted questions were a valuable source of knowledge and learning.

Extract 9

*I was motivated to gain insights from the learning community. For example, as I anticipated teachers' difficulty in implementing ICT in their lessons, I posted a query in the discussion thread, "Implementing ICT to add value in education": How can teachers discover the novelty of a value-added lesson integrating ICT? This yielded many solutions or opinions such as organizing a nation-wide competition and using ICT to search for information. I critically analyzed suggestions made and raised the issue of plagiarism. Then students 1 and 2 stepped in by sharing their knowledge about "Net Etiquette", which was entirely new to me. *All the valuable responses generated with regard to my query have had a great impact on the learning community as well as my teaching practice in the future.* (2007, summative)*

In terms of assessing authentic learning experiences, there was some acknowledgment, as in Extract 10, that effort was required in order to derive benefits from online collaborative interactions.

Extract 10

*I do fall short in terms of actively building a contested scenario that elicits many possible responses. I need to work on helping others (and myself in the process) grasp the bigger or debatable picture and hopefully direct the flow in a fruitful direction. Similarly, I am uninvolved in dialectal component of online discussions. Instead of engaging in a bi-directional flow of ideas, I find myself leaving messages in pigeon holes hoping someone would pick up on my points. However, my issue here is one of sincerity and responsiveness. I believe that unless the discussion or a member needs a certain perspective into issues, I would lend a hand in helping resolve it. *It is quite difficult to bring myself to reinforce an already established agreement without necessarily adding value. I could do well to be the first to respond, yet I find the purpose of doing so affected if done insincerely. I believe, responding purposefully beats contributing perfunctorily.* (2007, formative)*

Extracts 9 and 10 offered a profound and honest critique of online learning practices.

The second facet of authenticity involves understanding and appreciating others' viewpoints. For example, in Extract 11, the student-teacher indicated a broadening of her perspectives on key issues in the course through her online interactions.

Extract 11

In summary 5, I stated that students' abilities, prior knowledge and language needs are the three most significant factors for me. Besides students 1 and 2 who posted before me, students 3 and 4 agreed with me but student 3's approach differed from mine. I used the example of a typical classroom where students have varying abilities. Teachers often have to cater to all of the pupils and it is no wonder that some of the lower ability students may be lagging in understanding. Relating this concept to using ICT in the classroom,

even if some teachers or adults have difficulty grasping ICT skills, how motivated would the low ability students be when a task is to be performed using it? However, student 3 stated that there is no one approach or technique that is uniform for all. Thus, it depends on the teacher's approach and instruction to ease the learning for pupils. *Therefore, to be more direct, student 3's view is more optimistic than mine, and with regards to this topic, I have benefited from her point-of-view* (2006, formative)

As evident in Extract 12, the student-teachers also seemed to realize that diversity and disagreement in online discussion work could be dealt with effectively through tactful explanation and reasoned justification.

Extract 12

I respect the fact that different individuals are entitled to different opinions so I made sure that I do not impose my views on others but instead try to support my position with clear explanation and examples. For example, in summary 2, in response to student 1's comments about having "a standing order as to what can be done and what cannot be done" and her question of whether "students (can be allowed to) install software such as MSN Messenger onto the PC they are using", I explained in my post that the MSN Messenger could be installed "if it is to be utilised for the purpose of learning, e.g., using it as a platform for conferencing and communicating ideas". I gave this example to justify my view that teachers should not use guidelines rigidly and that teachers should be the ones who decide what and how the students learn. *I did not put down student 1's view even though I disagreed with it to some extent because it is through the interaction of ideas that we learn something new.* (2006, summative)

The third characteristic of authenticity explored concerns the prompting of further action and decision-making beyond the course. As shown in Extract 13, a teacher with considerable experience in the full-time profession was keen not to lose the momentum of the in-course discussion forum.

Extract 13

In my post I asked my classmates to join a Google Group that a fellow classmate suggested I set up. *The Google Group will allow my classmates to share ICT resources even after we have graduated from NIE [National Institute of Education].* (2007, summative)

Extracts 8-13 illustrate the benefits of using self-evaluation report writing as a mechanism for fostering persistence and self-efficacy in learners. In these instances, the student-teachers demonstrated a sense in which certain aspects of the course of instruction could be managed and valued for their inherent qualities both in and beyond the immediate context of learning.

From the 96 self-evaluation reports submitted, there was only one instance, given in Extract 14, where a student-teacher expressed some negativity concerning her on-line learning experiences. Interestingly, the self-reporting exercise provided a confidential channel for such views to be communicated.

Extract 14

I believe the whole class has been moving in the same direction for the entire semester, thus we all have been successful at motivating one another in the group discussion. I must admit I haven't been driving the group discussions as it seems to me like a mini-essay submission each week instead of a discussion. Even as I read through the postings, almost everyone places a courtesy greeting once in a while to acknowledge each other's presence. There seems to be a lack of "marketplace vibrancy" like in a typical discussion group. Perhaps we are too civilized as this is a graded component. (2006, summative)

Discussion

To this point a positive view of self-evaluation report writing as a means of assessing contributions to online forums has been presented. The illustrative results above show how the student-teachers successfully described their learning in detail, reflected on their actions, valued collaborative effort and proposed adjustments to their patterns of online behavior in order to enhance their knowledge building

and learning experiences. What is more, requiring students to self-assess seems like an efficient way of getting to know about students' learning, their interests and concerns, and, importantly, dealing with a large amount of online generated material. In contrast to these views, this discussion takes a critically reflective step backwards to consider if self-assessment is unconditionally empowering and whether it is a sustainable practice within the context of the author's work in teaching and administrating the course of study described above.

Advocates of self-assessment subscribe to the view that self-evaluation is an intrinsic and important aspect of reflection on learning. However, it could be a double-edged sword. For example, one potentially debilitating and perhaps unexpected effect of student self-assessment concerns the transfer of power from teachers to students. In an insightful and hard-hitting critique of classroom practice relating to assessment for student learning, Tan (2004) remarks that students' participation in self-assessment tasks can have a controlling or disciplining effect that is manifested in two interrelated ways: examination and confession.

First, with respect to examination, self-evaluation practices can promote the close observation of students by teachers. This practice, whether intended or not, renders students as knowable and identifiable. According to Tan (2004) one implication of the resultant self-disclosure is that:

... students who self-assess and demonstrate competence (or lack of it) invite and incite power to be exercised against them ... The paradox of student self-assessment is that by providing students with more autonomy to judge their own work, more is known about the student in terms of how they view themselves. Students are then subject to greater control and surveillance as a result of exercising more autonomy in their assessment (pp. 658-9).

Second, students may exercise self-governmentality by confessing their views of effective learning in self-evaluation and thereby, unwittingly perhaps subject themselves to the disciplinary forces that such knowledge serves. Reynolds and Trehan (2000) warn of the risk of participative assessment imposing a form of governmentality through the action of individuals being their own policeman. This results in participative assessment becoming part of the machinery of normalization, utilizing confessional techniques for the purposes of self-subjection. Tan (2004) concludes that self-evaluation may subject students to even more power than it is intended to eliminate with negative effects predicted in self-esteem and professional development capability.

Bearing the proceeding points in mind, which seem to contradict the participatory and emancipatory affordances of CMC identified above, the author admits that he exercised disciplinary power over his students by requiring them to write self-evaluation reports for his sole scrutiny. Furthermore, it was clearly in the students' best interests to complete the assigned work in the hope, no doubt, that their self-assessments would fall in line with the author's undisclosed estimations of their online performance (compare with the final sentence of Extract 14).

As a result of the analysis conducted in this study the author fully accepts that he gave his students little or no choice in the matter of self-assessment and that they may have felt subjugated as a result. What is more, he reserved the sovereign right to accept or reject comments and recommendations received without the need to explain or justify his actions. If all of this is correct, the transfer of power in the assessment experiences described in this article was circumscribed and could have impaired the quality, honesty and moral integrity of self-evaluation report writing as a pedagogic and administrative practice. Thus, for self-assessment to be sustainable and effective in the present course of study, some modifications in its planning and implementation are clearly warranted and necessary. These issues are taken up in the conclusion.

Conclusion

This paper concerned the author's explorations into the use of self-assessment report writing as an integral component of curriculum requirements. The following conclusions are offered concerning the extent to which, given sufficient opportunity, student-teachers can establish the value of their own knowledge-building, learning and collaborative efforts in a series of online discussion forums.

First, the evidence presented indicated that the student-teachers were able to focus explicitly on their learning through self-evaluation report writing especially under the circumstances where there was no competition for self-assessment grades. In terms of utility value, their writing provided evidence of an

emerging sense of agency in achieving meaningful and useful academic outcomes within and even, in one instance, beyond the immediate course of study.

Second, from a pragmatic perspective, the student-teachers' reports helped the author considerably in organizing and making sense of a large web of information that was configured in complex threads.

Third, one important consequence of this study, as far as the design and management of online learning is concerned, is the author's realization that self-evaluation report writing has its benefits and is a practice that can be subject to a substantial opportunity cost. On the one hand, the self-assessment method served a valuable pedagogic function in allowing the student-teachers time and opportunities to better understand their online contributions. On the downside, the students' empowerment in this exercise was potentially limited by the covert power play involved. Fourth, as a result of preparing this article, the author now understands that student empowerment to self-assess is best accompanied by knowledge of how the power that underpins it can be used to increase understandings in one's professional practice.

There are two limitations that need to be acknowledged and addressed in the present study. The first limitation concerns the choice of participants. The sample was small and confined to subject-specific student-teachers who had an interest in the subject matter of the course of study undertaken but not necessarily in self-assessment, per se. As a result, further data would be required to establish if the claims mentioned here are sustainable over time and not just attributable to temporary study effects or researcher bias. For instance, it is unknown if the student-teachers felt subjugated by the author's self-assessment practices beyond what could be normally expected on an undergraduate course.

The second limitation relates to the processing of data. It is possible that the data collected could have been analyzed differently with different outcomes. For example, there was no comparison or links made between formative and summative report writing and no follow-up on individual students to check if they did what they said they were going to do at the formative stage.

Nevertheless, the exploration of self-assessment practices in online learning is still at the developmental stage, which opens the door for further work to be considered. In particular, self-assessment in language teacher education requires more to be known about the ideological, moral and theoretical underpinnings of its tools (cf. Brookfield, 1995) and greater prominence in mainstream educational discourse. If self-evaluation report writing is to play a useful role in the planning and implementation of online learning, then teachers and students must be educated in taking a critically reflective stance when self-assessing for particular, site-specific pedagogical purposes. It is the author's expectation that this study can assist in making this different type of work understandable and feasible.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Professor Michael Vallance and Denise de Souza for their comments on previous versions of this paper.

References

- Bandura, A. (Ed.). (1995). *Self-efficacy in changing societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & Wiliam, D. (2003). *Assessment for learning: Putting it into practice*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998a). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 7-73.
- Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998b). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80(2), 139-148.
- Boud, D. (1995). *Enhancing learning through self-assessment*. Abingdon, Oxon: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Coombe, C. & Canning, C. (2002). Using self-assessment in the classroom: Rationale and suggested techniques. Retrieved 15 October 2009, from <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/selfassess2.html>

- Conrad, R. -M. & Donaldson, J. A. (2004). *Engaging the online learner: Activities and resources for creative instruction*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dias, J. (1998). The teacher as chameleon: Computer-mediated communication and role of transformation. In P. Lewis (Ed.), *Teachers, learners and computers: Exploring relationships in CALL* (pp. 17-26). Tokyo: The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT).
- Edelstein, S. & Edwards, J. (2002). If you build it, they will come: Building learning communities through threaded discussions. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, V(1). Retrieved from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring51/edelstein51.htm>
- Gardner, J. (Ed.). (2006). *Assessment and learning*. London: Sage.
- Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Hawthorne, New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Hattie, J. & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81-112.
- Hogan, T. P. (2007). *Educational assessment: A practical introduction*. New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.
- James, P. (2001). *Teachers in action: Tasks for in-service language teacher education and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (2002). *Meaningful assessment: A manageable and cooperative process*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- McTighe, J. & Wiggins, G. P. (2004). *Understanding by design: professional development workbook*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Naidu, S. (2006). *E-learning: A guidebook of principles, procedures and practices* (2nd ed.). New Delhi: Commonwealth Educational Media Center for Asia (CEMCA). Retrieved October 12, 2009 from <http://www.cemca.org/e-learn.htm>
- Newmann, F. M. and Associates (1996). *Authentic achievement: Restructuring schools for intellectual quality*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Nitko, A. J. (2004). *Educational assessment of students* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Peyton, J. K. (1999). Theory and research: Interaction via computers. In J. Egbert & E. Hanson-Smith, *CALL environments: Research, practice and critical issues*, (pp. 17-26). Alexandria, Virginia: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).
- Reynolds, M. & Trehan, K. (2000). Assessment: A critical perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(3), 267-278.
- Roberts, T. S. (Ed.). (2006), *Self, peer, and group assessment in e-learning*. Hershey, Pennsylvania: Information Science Publishing.
- Salmon, G. (2000). *E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online*. London: Kogan Page.
- Salmon, G. (2002). *e-tivities: The key to active online learning*. London: Kogan Page.
- Sperling, D. (2009) *Dave's ESL Cafe*. Retrieved July 11, 2009 from <http://www.eslcafe.com/>
- Stiggins, R. J. (2005). *Student-involved assessment for learning* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Stobart, G. (2008). *Testing times: The uses and abuses of assessment*. London: Routledge.
- Tan, H. K. K. (2004). Does student self-assessment empower or discipline students? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 29(6), 651-662.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

- Towndrow, P. A. (2007). *Task design, implementation and Assessment: Integrating information and communication technology in English language teaching and learning*. Singapore: McGraw-Hill.
- Warschauer, M. (Ed.). (1996). *Motivational aspects of using computers for writing and communication*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Centre.
- Warschauer, M. (1999). *Electronic literacies: Language, culture and power in online education*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wells, R. (1995). *Computer-mediated communication for distance education: An international review of design, teaching and institutional issues*. Research Monograph No. 6. University Park, Pennsylvania: American Center for the Study of Distance Education.
- Wiggins, G. P. & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Wikipedia (2009). *Internet forum*. Retrieved July 11, 2009 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_forum
-

APPENDIX

A rubric for assessing contributions to online discussions in English language learning and English language teacher education (reproduced from Towndrow 2007, p. 87).

Students that get maximum points:

- Consistently and strategically respond to postings in good time and demonstrate good self-initiative and selectivity
- Consistently post accurately written messages (grammar, spelling and punctuation are faultless)
- Consistently post messages that are related to the topic at hand and cite additional references related to the topic
- Express opinions in a clear and concise manner
- Are constantly aware of the needs of the learning community; frequently attempt to motivate group discussions; present critical and creative approaches to the topic at hand
- Consistently exploit opportunities to analyze, synthesize and draw out implications for personal and professional practice

Students that get good points (i.e. between average and maximum points):

- Respond to postings in good time
- Have few noticeable grammar, spelling and punctuation errors
- Frequently post messages that are related to the topic at hand and can provide prompts for further discussion
- Express opinions and ideas freely but there is occasional lack of connection to topics
- Frequently attempt to direct discussions
- Frequently exploit opportunities to analyze, synthesize and draw out implications for personal and professional practice

Students that get below average points:

- Respond to postings but demonstrate limited initiative
- Have several noticeable grammar, spelling and punctuation errors
- Occasionally post messages that are unrelated to the topic and/or offer no further insight into the topic
- Express minimal opinions or ideas
- Occasionally reflect on the learning community's efforts; minimal involvement in directing the course of discussions
- Occasionally exploit opportunities to analyze, synthesize and draw out implications for personal and professional practice

Students that get the lowest points

- Do not respond to most postings
 - Have poor grammar, spelling and punctuation in most postings; postings seem to be rushed
 - Post messages that do not relate to the discussion at hand
 - Do not express ideas or opinions clearly
 - Do not make any effort to participate in the learning community
 - Rarely exploit opportunities to analyze, synthesize and draw out implications for personal and professional practice
-

Manuscript received 2 Aug 2009; revision received 19 Oct 2009.



This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike License

For details please go to: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>