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Does student self-assessment empower or discipline students?

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Student self-assessment is a popular practice for enhancing student empowerment in the assessment process. However, in recent times various writers have questioned whether the practice of student self-assessment automatically enhances student autonomy. Some writers have even warned that students' participation in the assessment process may discipline, rather than empower, students. How can student self-assessment be practised in a way that empowers its students instead of disciplining or controlling them? It is argued that student empowerment can only be realized if the ways that power is exercised over students in self-assessment practices are first understood. This paper examines the issues of power that underlie student self-assessment practices and analyses how different notions of power enhance or undermine student empowerment. The notion of the teacher's unilateral power as the basis for student self-assessment is critically examined against three contrasting notions of power in student self-assessment: sovereign power, epistemological power and disciplinary power.

Introduction

The unilateral power of academic staff in the assessment process is a popular basis for advocating student self-assessment. Stefani (1998), McMahon (1999), Butcher and Stefani (1995), Rainsbury and Hodges (1998), Somervell (1993) and Boud (1995) have all cited reducing the teacher's unilateral power over students as a basis for the practice of student self-assessment.

The student's lack of power is framed as an impediment to their learning and student self-assessment is commonly advocated as an opportunity for students to gain a measure of power or control in the assessment process. The assumption is that student participation in the assessment process enhances student empowerment.

Various writers have questioned this assumption in the past few years. Taras (2001) argues that the real control of power is not challenged if students are excluded from summative graded assessment. However, student participation in grading their work may not necessarily mean that students are empowered. Race (1991) points out that if students know that tutors will intervene if they think that the marking process is unsatisfactory, then summative self-assessment cannot

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be claimed to be participative nor empowering. The practice of student self-assessment therefore does not guarantee that students are empowered in the assessment process.

Burgess *et al.* (1999) warn that the way self-assessment is used determines whether it is empowering for the students rather than a process that is imposed by academic staff. Reynold and Trehan (2000) warn of participative approaches to assessment being experienced by students as a more subtle technique for disciplining. For participative assessment such as self-assessment to 'realise in practice what it promises in principle, therefore, it is important to be alert to the tendencies for hierarchical relation to persist' (p. 273). The practice of student self-assessment may therefore curb student empowerment by preserving existing hierarchical powers.

How can student self-assessment be practised in a way that empowers its students instead of disciplining or controlling them? Student empowerment can only be realized if the ways power is exercised over students in self-assessment practices are first understood. This paper examines the issues of power that underlie student self-assessment practices and analyses how different notions of power enhance or undermine student empowerment.

The notion of the teacher's unilateral power as the basis for student self-assessment is critically examined against three contrasting notions of power in student self-assessment: sovereign power, epistemological power and disciplinary power. Each notion of power explains how power is exercised in student self-assessment in ways that enhance or curb student empowerment.

The notion of sovereign power

Sovereign power can be understood as 'making one's will determine the actions of others regardless of what they would will' (Schmitt, 1991, p. 105). For example, Emerson (1962) described power in terms of 'the power of A over B is the amount of resistance on the part of B which can be potentially overcome by A'. The idea of sovereign power arises from the context of explaining power relationships between sovereign rulers and subjects in the general course of history. Such articulations of power characterizes power in episodic and interpersonal terms (Clegg, 1989).

Sovereign power causally produces explicit acts

The actions of the person exercising power and the person subjected to the power must be explicit and obvious. For example, Dahl (1957) viewed power as occurring where 'A has power over B to the extent A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do'. According to Clegg (1989), the status of causal arguments in traditional debates of power have virtually equated the exercise of power with a classical notion of causality. Hence, power existed only if it could be seen to be exercised and power was seen to be exercised if its cause could be identified.

Sovereign power is a zero sum paradigm

Sovereign power is an indivisible commodity that can only reside with one individual at any given point in time. Power cannot be shared but can only be surrendered to another individual. In such absolute terms, one was either an agent of power (an authority) or a recipient who responded to power (subject). Hence, the teacher's unilateral power over students can only be redistributed but not shared. This meant that power was seen as a commodity that some people possessed at the expense of others. There was a definite sum total of power in any given context and the key idea was to identify who had the power and how much power that person had.

Who has sovereign power?

The notion of sovereign power focuses on persons exercising power. In the context of student self-assessment, only two parties are relevant to the discussion of power, the teacher and the student. Sovereign power in student assessment means that the teacher possesses all the power and the student possesses none. Student self-assessment is then seen as the opportunity for students to be given some of the teacher's power for their own assessment.

The idea of the teacher being the sovereign power in student assessment has been adopted by Butcher and Stefani (1995), who criticized assessment processes for conferring on academic staff unequivocal control. Likewise, Reynolds and Trehan (2000) identify the issue of power in assessment as largely being a disparity of power between teachers and students, while McMahon (1999) argues that vesting such absolute power in teachers conditions students to seek to please them rather than demonstrate their learning in assessment. Such statements of power in student assessment focus on only two actors, the teacher and the student. Analysis of the relationship of power rests firmly on episodes of the teacher exercising power over the student.

How is sovereign power exercised in student self-assessment?

Sovereign power essentially focuses on episodes of control over whose knowledge is to be accepted. The discussion of sovereign power focuses on whether the teacher or the student has the power for their knowledge or assessment to reign. Hence, only one party's knowledge can resign supreme; it is either the teacher's or the student's. In the context of student self-assessment, it is about whose assessment of the student's work reigns. From the academic staff member's perspective, the issue is whether the student's self-assessment threatens the teacher's own assessment. Consequently, student's self-awarded marks are considered to be valid only if they compare favourably with the teacher's. Only one assessment outcome can be sovereign.

The implications of sovereign knowledge for student self-assessment

Because sovereign power can never be shared, there can only be one assessment that

is considered valid, either the teacher's unilateral assessment or the student's own self-assessment. If the student's self-assessment is to be accepted, then it has to be subservient to the interests of the teacher. This is demonstrated in the numerous studies on student–teacher mark agreement. Such studies judge student self-assessment in terms of the teacher's assessment.

Judging student self-assessment in terms of the teacher's assessment

The issue of whether students' assessment is in line with the teacher's has dominated much of the literature on student self-assessment (Brew, 1999). It is submitted that a notion of sovereign power underlines much of the anxiety over student–teacher mark agreement. Final authority is exercised by the individual whose assessment is ultimately accepted. Since sovereign power cannot be shared, teachers are left with little choice in student self-assessment. If they desire their students to have any power, it would mean they would then have to surrender their own power in determining the assessment outcome. The only option for student self-assessment is therefore to ensure that the student's self-assessment outcome is comparable with the teacher's. In other words, student self-assessment is viable only if the student's self-assessed outcome is subservient to the teacher's assessment.

The notion of epistemological power

Epistemological power may be understood as power that affects teachers and students in the broader politics of institutions and hegemonies. Power in this respect exists beyond explicit interpersonal episodes or confrontations. An individual can be said to possess power without having to use it explicitly against another individual. In the context of student self-assessment, students are subjected to power all the time as long as they are aware of the teacher's prevailing authority in the assessment process. This can be illustrated in the phenomenon known as backwash, where the student seeks to learn according to their perception of what the teacher desires (Ramsden, 1992). In other words, what and how students learn depends on how they think they will be assessed (Biggs, 1999). It is therefore the student's perception of the teacher's assessment demands that determine student learning rather than the formal curriculum. Hence, backwash denies that teachers need to explicitly control what students should learn in the form of a written curriculum. Instead, teachers both individually and collectively are said to possess dispositional power since the students' intuitive awareness of the teacher's prevailing authority in assessment outcomes means that students will continually act in accordance with the teacher's tacit assessment demands.

Who possesses epistemological power?

In contrast to sovereign power, epistemological power posits that power does not exist only in the teacher. This means we cannot assume that teachers exercise

sovereign power in student self-assessment. Teachers themselves are subject to power and those who seek to change assessment practices for their students may encounter resistance and obstruction. For example, Cowan (1988) reflected on his experience with student self-assessment and advised the need to find ways of making it possible without provoking opposition and demonstrating outcomes that could 'forestall any attempts to interfere' (p. 210). Power is therefore not simply the proverbial burden that teachers should discharge in the assessment process in order for students to learn freely. Power is also a constraint that has to be dealt with by the teacher in order for students to participate in the assessment process.

Who are students and teachers subject to in relation to epistemological power? The concept of hegemonies is a useful idea in explaining how collective groups of people influence what students and teachers may do in student self-assessment.

Hegemonies

Hegemonies are defined by Bocock (1986) as occurring when the intellectual, moral and philosophical leadership provided by the class which is ruling successfully achieves its objective of providing the fundamental outlook for the whole society. A hegemony establishes and maintains its power though the continual consent of the masses to its leadership (Gramsci, 1971) and by manipulating the social context in which political contests are waged (Whitt, 1979). The teacher in this context is an institutional agent invested with authority (from the academic community) to make judgements about learners, and their power is legitimated in this way. The role of assessment is to enable and reproduce subjection of students by virtue of entrenching tutors (hegemonistic agents) in a legitimated position as credible assessors of student learning.

By acknowledging the existence of hegemonies, we may appreciate how students are subjected to the epistemological powers that prescribe the membership rules for entry into their professions. The collective privileges of a hegemony depend on restricting entry to their profession and tying knowledge to their own interests. Hence, students must be inducted into and assessed in the same established knowledge frameworks of the academic hegemony in order to be accepted (Martin, 1998). In addition, there are the interests of various non-academic groups, such as the professions, who actively restrict entry into their privileged occupations. Often, these restrictions are entrenched in legislation and professional rules of conduct. Students therefore have to contend with more than their immediate assessors (agents of hegemonies). They have to contend with the over-arching hegemonies which dictate how students will eventually be accepted into professional and vocational memberships.

How is epistemological power exercised in student self-assessment?

Unlike sovereign power which manifests as explicit actions, epistemological power relies on the control of knowledge. This makes it more insidious and therefore more

prevalent. Epistemological power exists in the assessment process in terms of what can be assessed and how it is assessed.

Epistemological power in what can be assessed as valid knowledge

Martin (1998) explains the domination over students by academic staff in the form of staff exercising almost complete control over the choice of material that is taught. The driving force behind staff domination is their interest in preserving their own power and this is achieved collectively as a hegemony by tying knowledge to their entry point into their profession. Hence, in order to reproduce the academic profession, students must be inducted into the established knowledge frameworks and socialized into proper behaviour. In this way, power is exerted by teachers, hegemonies or prevailing discourses to control what students should learn for their formal assessment.

Epistemological power in how valid knowledge is determined by assessment

Students are also subject to epistemological power when the form of assessment predetermines what is valid knowledge. For example, Paxton (2000) points out that the genre of multiple choice questions epitomizes the idea of the generic student and no allowance is made for student differences or for student autonomy. By utilizing multiple choice questions, assessors are predetermining that the knowledge in a given field can be demonstrated through restrictive means and that students should not or need not be given the option to express their fuller views on the said question. This confines the student to a closed interaction and reinforces the idea that someone else knows the answers to the question, so original interpretations are not expected. The teacher exercises epistemological power over the student by stipulating a fixed number of outcomes the student can consider and by insisting that only one of the options is valid.

The implications of epistemological power for student self-assessment

Unlike sovereign power, epistemological power posits that power can be shared or negotiated between various parties in the assessment process. Hence, students and teachers need no longer face a stand-off as to whose assessment is eventually decisive. It is therefore theoretically possible for both parties to negotiate and share control over how the student's self-assessment and the teacher's assessment may be dialogued. In turn, it also means that the student's self-assessment need no longer be solely summative since the purpose of having students judge their own work is not to challenge the teacher's judgement of their work, but to assist both parties to negotiate a new understanding of the work. Epistemological power therefore allows staff and students to collaborate in the assessment process by allowing both parties

to assess the same piece of student's work and by allowing both parties to negotiate the assessment outcome.

However, the sharing of power between teachers and students is in turn limited by the prevailing power of hegemonies. Student autonomy in negotiated assessment may thus be a fiction. Whilst students can be said to enjoy some measure of autonomy from the teachers they negotiate assessment tasks with, the negotiation will always be conducted within fixed knowledge boundaries. While students may think that they are empowered by their teachers to assess their own work, such self-assessment is ultimately limited by the institutional and hegemonic forces that control their teachers in the first place.

The notion of disciplinary power

As opposed to the notion of sovereign power, disciplinary power studiously avoids stipulating who possesses power and how much power is present. Instead, its approach is to explore (and not explain) how power arises in different discourses without being limited to individuals (sovereign power) or to hegemonies (epistemological power).

Discourse and disciplinary power

The concept of discourse is central to the idea of disciplinary power. A discourse in the Foucaltian sense is a particular way of organizing meaning and hence of ordering the world (Lee, 1992). Discourses can therefore be understood as forms of regulation of social meaning and social actions. They may exist as a linguistic unity or group of statements which constitutes and delimits a specific area of concern, governed by its own rules of formation with its own modes of distinguishing truth from falsity (Gilbert & Low, 1994).

In contrast to sovereign and epistemological power, discourse views power as productive and not solely repressive and as circulating rather than being possessed by individuals or groups of individuals (Gore, 1995). Power is no longer simply the evil impediment that prevents students from enjoying adequate autonomy in student self-assessment. Power is no longer simply the province of teachers and hegemonies that students have to compete with. Power is not simply the guarantee of student autonomy that enables independent learning to take place. Instead, power relies on knowledge in order to control its subjects. While students may want to free themselves of power in order to self-acquire and self-assess their knowledge, the acquisition of knowledge in turn renders the student governable by subjecting the student to measurement, categorization, normalization and regulation (Usher & Edwards, 1994). Sovereign and epistemological power assumes that the absence of power in student self-assessment affords the student autonomy to understand and self-value knowledge. In contrast, disciplinary power warns that the act of student self-assessment exposes the student's thoughts and inadequacies and exposes them to greater disciplining and governance.

Who exercises disciplinary power?

Unlike the first two notions of power, disciplinary power does not limit power to only that which is identifiable with persons. To do so would be to vest in certain persons or bodies of persons the untenable status of supreme sovereign power. Instead, disciplinary power rejects the idea that any individual or any group of individuals possesses ultimate power.

Power is not seen to reside in persons but is in itself neutral until used by individuals for their particular purposes (Leach *et al.*, 2000). Instead of focusing on who is subject to power, disciplinary power looks at the mechanisms of how power is produced (Gore, 1995). Hence, the question is not who holds or exercises power, but what specific practices actualize relations of power in pedagogy.

In the domain of student self-assessment, teachers and hegemonies are not in themselves sovereign powers but instead are subject to the prevailing discourse(s). In as much as tutors are subject to discourse(s), they in turn utilize their own discourse to exert power over students in assessment. Higgins *et al.* (2001) warn of the complicity of complex academic discourse(s) in the formulation and conveying of feedback to students on their assessment. Students may not understand their tutor's feedback simply because they struggle to understand the discourses underpinning their tutor's comments (Francis, 2001). The problem is exacerbated by competing discourses in different disciplines/subjects.

How is disciplinary power exercised in student self-assessment?

Disciplinary power is seen to exist not merely through overt expressions of the exercise of power. Power is not viewed through episodic demonstrations of A's power over B. Neither is power viewed as pitting individuals against hegemonic structures. Instead, power is seen to subject a person through covert and overt forms. Disciplinary power may be exercised in student self-assessment through examination and confession.

Examination. Disciplinary power works through the construction of routine. Power is moved from the distant horizon into the very centre of daily life. Its object is to impose a ubiquitous pattern of normality and eliminate everything and every body which does not conform. Self-assessment practices promote the observation, surveillance and examination of students which renders them knowable and identifiable as sites of intervention and control. Because disciplinary power requires knowledge over the subjects to be exercised efficiently, students who self-assess and demonstrate their competence (or lack of it) invite and incite power to be exercised against them. Boud *et al.* (1999) identify covert forms of disciplinary power occurring when the reality of students collaborating for assessment purposes (e.g. peer assessment) is compromised through the influence of overriding assessment paradigms. The effect is that students examine themselves according to the range of outcomes unilaterally defined as legitimate by staff. Consequently, the students first learn to distrust their own judgements and then act as agents to constrain themselves.

Confession. Alternatively, students may exercise self-governmentality by confessing their knowledge in self-assessment and thereby subjecting 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 students being their own policemen in self-assessment. This results in participative assessment becoming part of the machinery of normalization, utilizing confessional techniques for the students to be disciplined. In this way, students offer themselves to surveillance by demonstrating how their self-assessed knowledge conforms to or strays from acceptable disciplinary knowledge/power. The danger of utilizing student self-assessment is that it risks becoming a form of confessional technique which hides behind notions of self-understanding but in effect act as complex mechanisms of monitoring and control (Ball, 1990).

The implications of disciplinary power in student self-assessment

In the first two notions of power, it is assumed that the acquisition of knowledge is possible for students only when power is not exercised against them. Hence, student self-assessment is a means of neutralizing forms of sovereign and epistemological power that obstruct students from their search for personal independent knowledge.

In contrast, the notion of disciplinary power argues that power is not simply a prohibition against knowledge but that the self-acquisition of knowledge actively produces power (Usher & Edwards, 1994). Disciplinary power does not merely impede the acquisition of knowledge but produces subjects who can be understood and monitored as a result of self-accessing and self-assessing their knowledge. As a form of examination, students are rendered knowable by their self-assessment and this in turns provides knowledge for the authorities to discipline students into docile bodies. As a form of confession, student self-assessment is part of the self-policing machinery of normalization that sustains compliant identities in students (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000).

Student self-assessment as a routine of practices may therefore subject students to even more power/discourse than it is intended to eliminate. 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. The teacher's practice of unilateral assessment subjects students to the teacher's overt control over what they should learn. In the context of disciplinary power, the student's self-assessment practice subjects the students to self-surveillance over what prevailing discourses dictate knowledge should (be assessed to) be.

Does student self-assessment practice curb or enhance student empowerment?

Each notion of power presents unique and pertinent issues and challenges for student empowerment in self-assessment practices.

The notion of sovereign power pits the teacher and the student in a direct struggle for power in the assessment process. Unless teachers are prepared to forego their own sovereign authority, self-assessment for students will be a token act of autonomy ultimately requiring their acquiescence to teacher control. Because sovereign power cannot be shared with students, academics with a notion of sovereign power cannot be said to empower their students in their student self-assessment practices.

The notion of epistemological power allows students to share power but only to the extent that they acquiesce to prevailing knowledge interests and hegemonies. Unless students are prepared to risk their prospects for accreditation and professional acceptance by challenging entrenched epistemologies, they cannot be expected to exercise any form of power in student self-assessment that would allow them to assess and learn independently. Because epistemological power subjects teachers to professional and institutional hegemonies, academics with a notion of epistemological power enjoy limited success in empowering their students in their student self-assessment practices.

The notion of disciplinary power perhaps presents the greatest challenge for student self-assessment. Whilst the first two notions posit that student self-assessment may simply fail in not vesting sufficient power in students, disciplinary power warns that self-assessment may subject students to even greater control.

Suggestions for enhancing student empowerment in student self-assessment practices

What can be done to enhance student empowerment in student self-assessment practices?

Firstly, power should be appreciated for its productive pedagogical potential. It is not simply an evil to be shunted away in order for students to learn freely. Power is always present, whether it is envisaged to be with individuals, hegemonies or discourses. The focus instead should be on exploring how power in requisite professions or discourses can be used for the benefit of students. Such an exploration obviously should involve the student.

Secondly, student self-assessment should be judged in terms of its benefit to students and not in terms of how much power/autonomy the student has enjoyed. Focusing on student autonomy in self-assessment is counterproductive. When student autonomy is the issue, the instinctive response is to consider how much autonomy can be surrendered and consequently how such autonomy can be checked. Focusing on learning allows all parties to consider the various impediments to students benefiting from their self-assessment in terms of learning and not in terms of autonomy. In this light, autonomy in student self-assessment should be viewed as a means to an end and not a goal in itself.

Thirdly, the naïve assumption that students are naturally able to exercise responsibility and control for their learning in student self-assessment should be avoided. Both students and teachers bring their learned notions of behaviour and power relations into the assessment process. Both may have been conditioned to accept entrenched roles in student assessment. The risk is that outward forms of

greater student autonomy in the self-assessment process may be derailed by the inward tendencies of students to self-assess according to the teacher's preferences. It is not enough simply to tell students that they have the power to self-judge and self-value their learning. Students need to be convinced and then assisted to exercise a form of autonomy in their assessment that runs counter to all their educational experiences of being assessed unilaterally.

Fourthly and finally, and this seems to be the most obvious suggestion in the context of self-assessment, academics who are considering student self-assessment should themselves self-assess their motives and agendas. Is the self-assessment to ensure that students will learn more effectively? Will the student's self-assessed mark enable the student to challenge prevailing professional interests and discourses? Is student self-assessment a means to examine the student's inadequacies? Will self-assessment compel students to confess their learning against norms of competence and behaviour?

Conclusion

> The redistribution of power in educational decision making is what is at stake. (Heron, 1988, p. 83)

What is at stake in student self-assessment practices is not the redistribution of power. Arguably, what is at stake in student self-assessment is not the stakes of assessment. Notions of sovereign and epistemological power argue that students' autonomy and learning is what is at stake in self-assessment. The reification of stakes, however, limits student self-assessment to yet another struggle for students to contend with in their disadvantaged status as subjects of unilateral power. Instead of raising the stakes in student self-assessment, academics should critically examine their student self-assessment practices for their liberating and at the same time disciplining potential. Student empowerment can only be realized if the ways power is exercised over students in self-assessment practices are first understood. Self-assessment is required of everyone in student self-assessment practices.

Notes on contributor

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