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STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING AND SELF-ASSESSMENT IN CONTEXT

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education at Massey University

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2000
Abstract

This study investigates years 7 and 8 students’ conceptions of learning and self-assessment and then examines these conceptions in a number of learning contexts. The study was undertaken in two phases within a sociocultural framework. The first phase used a phenomenographic approach which involved indepth phenomenographic interviews with 26 students from one school. The second phase used ethnographic methods to explore the learning and self-assessment experiences of seven students during learning activities in both school and out-of-school learning settings. Interviews and observations with these students took place over a school year period, and their teachers and parents were interviewed.

The phenomenographic results indicate that students hold a range of conceptions of learning and self-assessment. The less sophisticated conceptions of learning involve learning as a process of gathering facts from the teacher or other sources (books, computers) in order to “fill up the brain”. More sophisticated views of learning involve students seeing learning as understanding, identifying different ways of knowing and applying different perspectives when solving a problem. The less sophisticated conceptions of self-assessment involve learners requiring external sources such as teachers, grades, stars, stamps or stickers to confirm learning, while more sophisticated conceptions of self-assessment involve the recognition of learning through pre-established or own identified criteria, and students would measure their performance in relation to these criteria.

The ethnographic phase of the study portrays how students learn and self-assess in a number of different learning contexts and settings. Specifically, the thesis identifies that both the context and the assessment practices associated with the context, play a major role in identifying how students viewed learning and, ultimately, how they approached learning tasks and the way they self-assessed their work. Out-of-school learning settings established clear guidelines for the activity, identified explicit goals for learning and encouraged a community of practice. School settings tended to encourage fragmented learning and adherence to teacher expectations, rather than students’ personal goal setting.

The results from this study offer insights into how students conceptualise learning and self-assessment, and how different settings and contexts impact on the learner. Learners assume different roles and responsibilities according both to the group in which they are participating and to the meaning they attribute to the task.
Acknowledgments

Getting to know something is an adventure in how to account for a great many things that you encounter in as simple and elegant a way as possible. There are lots of different ways of getting to that point, and you don’t really ever get there unless you do it, as a learner, on your own terms. All one can do for a learner en route to her forming a view of her own is to aid and abet her on her own voyage. (Bruner, 1996, p. 115).

This thesis is a celebration of learning, completed with the support and encouragement of many people who have aided and abetted me during this time.

I am indebted to my supervisors Associate Professor Janet Davies and Dr. Alison St. George for their encouragement and support during this research. Their collective wisdom and expertise have assisted me greatly in this work, and ensured the research process was an enjoyable and exciting adventure. I learned much through their insightful questions and the challenges they posed.

I would like to thank all the students and teachers who took part in either Phase One or Phase Two of this study. Over a two-year period, the teachers allowed me access to their school, classrooms, staffroom and grounds. I owe thanks to the students who took part in Phase One of the study who illuminated the phenomena of learning and self-assessment in such delightful ways; and to the seven students who allowed me to follow them over a school-year period in both school and out-of-school settings, thank you. As participants and often co-researchers, these students showed an insight into learning that would otherwise not have been possible.

My appreciation and thanks to Massey University for the Academic Women’s Research Award during 1998. This released me from my teaching and administrative duties to begin the analysis and writing of this work, which proved invaluable.

Finally and not least, I extend much heartfelt thanks to Alasdair and all my family and friends for allowing me to indulge in my interest in learning, and for believing (and hoping!) that one day I’d finish this. I have, and join you all in a toast:

Here’s to one journey’s end!
Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... i

Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................... ii

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................... iii

List of Figures ................................................................................................................... vi

Chapter 1  Introduction ................................................................................................. 1

1.1  Background to the study .......................................................................................... 2
1.2  The preliminary study ............................................................................................... 5
1.3  Understanding students’ views ................................................................................ 7

Chapter 2  Review of the Literature ............................................................................. 9

2.1  Theoretical understanding of learning ...................................................................... 9
2.2  Approaches to learning ............................................................................................ 18
2.3  Learning and context ............................................................................................... 21
2.4  School learning ........................................................................................................ 24
2.5  Out-of-school learning ............................................................................................. 27
2.6  Assessment and learning ........................................................................................ 29
2.7  Students’ roles in research about learning and assessment ...................................... 38
2.8  Summary .................................................................................................................. 39
2.9  Research aim ......................................................................................................... 41
2.10 Research questions ............................................................................................... 42
List of Figures

Figure 2.1 Conceptions of learning in adult learners ..............................................19
Figure 2.2 Benefits gained from using self-assessment techniques .......................37
Figure 3.1 Characteristics of Qualitative and Quantitative research ..................50
Figure 3.2 Questions to avoid during the interview process ...............................62
Figure 3.3 The Access Ladder (Neuman, 1997, p. 352) ..................................75
Figure 3.4 Strategies used in the present study to address the criteria identified by Spindler and Spindler (1992) ..................81
Figure 3.5 Overview of study: Phases One and Two ........................................83
Figure 4.1 Procedures used during Phase Two ..............................................105
Figure 5.1 Categories of description for students’ conceptions of learning ..........132
Figure 5.2 Prevalent conceptions of learning identified for individual students ......134
Figure 5.3 Categories of description for students’ conceptions of self-assessment ...158
Figure 5.4 Prevalent conceptions of self-assessment identified for individual students ..........................160
Figure 5.5 Relationship between students’ conceptions of learning and self-assessment in a school setting ..........................164
Figure 5.6 Relationship between students’ conceptions of learning and self-assessment in an out-of-school setting .................164
Figure 5.7 The number of students holding conceptions of learning and self-assessment in school and out-of-school contexts 167
Figure 6.1 Participating students, parents and teachers in Phase Two .................170
Figure 6.2 Explanation of coding reported data .............................................170
Figure 6.3 Conceptions of learning and self-assessment for students selected to take part in Phase Two ..................................................171
Figure 6.4 PAT results represented in age percentile ........................................172
Figure 6.5 Student self-assessment responses during a food and nutrition class ..............................................221
Figure 6.6 Learning identified through the community, interpersonal and personal planes in school and out-of-school contexts 230
Figure 6.7 Self-assessment identified through the community, interpersonal and personal planes in school and out-of-school contexts 231