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**STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF
LEARNING AND SELF-ASSESSMENT
IN CONTEXT**

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education
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ROSEANNA BOURKE

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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.

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