Sharing Responsibility for Learning Through Formative Evaluation: Moving to Evaluation *as* Learning

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Abstract

When gathering student feedback on courses and programmes in higher education, the emphasis is often placed on adaptations that academic staff can make to enhance teaching approaches and thereby improve the learning experiences of students. These are commendable aims, however, it is argued in this paper that the focus on academic staff making changes to teaching and learning misses an opportunity for students to reflect upon their influences over, and potential to enhance, their learning experiences and those of their peers. Many undergraduate and postgraduate programmes aim to develop students' skills in critical analysis and autonomous learning, with some courses specifically requiring participants to engage in critical reflection on their practice. Yet it is relatively uncommon for evaluation of courses to include any requirement for students to evaluate their own role in the learning experience. An example is presented of a simple, small-scale formative evaluation exercise where course participants were encouraged to give feedback on a course, their learning experiences and on the teaching approach used. However, this evaluation also required participants to reflect on the role they played in their own and others' learning. It is argued that the approach described in this paper that encourages student self-reflection on learning as an integral part of evaluation processes, is a form of evaluation *as* learning. This is an approach that could be adapted for use in a wide range of courses for the purpose of encouraging students to reflect more deeply on their role in their own and others' learning.

Keywords: Evaluation, evaluation as learning, student autonomy, student responsibility, reflection

Introduction

It is widely accepted in the higher education sector that student feedback on courses and programmes is an important element of quality assurance and enhancement. Often student feedback is gathered about organisational elements of the course such as handouts and timetabling, and about teacher performance such as suitability of the pace of lectures and how well prepared the teacher was. These are useful indicators of teaching quality but they tend to only partially investigate the quality of teaching approach and learning experiences taking place in any classroom or online teaching space. What is emphasised less within many evaluation exercises is asking students for in depth information about their learning, for example, what elements of the course they have found engaging or troublesome, and what has helped or hindered their learning (George & Cowan, 1999). In those instances where students are encouraged to give feedback on their learning experiences, there is very little focus on supporting students to reflect upon their role within their own individual learning and that of their peers.

In the next section, I present background literature arguing for the importance of course and programme evaluation in higher education and specifically literature referring to the potential for evaluation to become a more integrated element of students' learning. I argue that as we have witnessed a move within assessment literature to recognise that there are approaches to assessment that can be assessment *of, for* and *as* learning (Montgomery & McDowell, 2008; QAA, 2007), similarly, adopting different approaches to evaluation with a greater emphasis on self-evaluation within learning processes, could contribute to re-conceptualising evaluation *as* learning. The following section includes an account of using an adapted form of a common evaluation technique – George and Cowan's (1999) 'Stop start continue' exercise to elicit self-reflection from course participants about their role in learning experiences. The outcomes of this exercise are included here. The paper concludes with some recommendations to maximise the opportunities for students to take greater responsibility for their own and others' learning through the medium of evaluation.

Exploring the purposes and practices of evaluation

There are many internationally and nationally recognised ways of evaluating student satisfaction and student learning experiences, with some of the most well known large scale surveys being the UK National Student Survey (NSS), the North American National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). While these surveys can produce a broad view of students' learning experiences at University, they are not without their critics. Many surveys are considered too clumsy to achieve a deep understanding of the complexity of student learning and there is some criticism of the implicit assumption that it is possible to 'measure' contested concepts such as student satisfaction (see for example Beecham, 2009).

Some of the most common evaluation measures used at institutional, programme and course levels in universities are the end of course and programme questionnaires that ask students for feedback on their views and experiences of courses and programmes. However, there is great variability as to the extent to which student views alter existing and future teaching practices. Some academic staff treat evaluation instrumentally as something that is required of them, and evaluation responses can be filed away with no action taken. Alternatively, some academic staff may make a range of changes to teaching practice on the basis of student feedback and report these changes back to students. They may explain anything they have not changed and the rationale for this. Some academic staff may also have further dialogue with students about ways to continue to enhance teaching and learning that moves evaluation towards more of a partnership between staff and students sharing responsibility for teaching and learning.

Higher education institutions often require academic staff to gather student feedback at the end of a course or programme to facilitate future enhancements for new cohorts of students. This can be very beneficial, but it is also recognised that gathering feedback part way through a course makes it possible to undertake teaching and learning enhancements for the benefit of current cohorts of students (Fisher & Miller, 2008). Many academic staff now regularly utilise formative evaluation as a way to improve students' learning experiences.

Evaluation questionnaires often include questions that are written in a way that implies the teacher is expected to somehow 'fix' or respond to the comments made by students. Whilst this can be appropriate, evaluation forms are frequently missing any questions expecting or encouraging students to identify areas of their own learning that they wish to enhance, or acknowledging that students may have agency to enhance some aspects of learning for themselves and for their peers.

Within current evaluation practices, the relative paucity of questions requiring students to reflect upon their own role in the learning process seems to be a missed opportunity and is surprising in the current higher education policy context with its emphasis on the development of students' graduate attributes that include self-evaluation and independent learning (Cowan, 2010; Jenkins, 2009). Critical self-reflection is also considered a key contributing factor to the development of deeper approaches to learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985).

Some exceptions in the literature are noted here. Tucker, Jones, Straker & Cole (2003) used an online evaluation tool that incorporated students reflecting on their learning in a physiotherapy course. They argued that transformative learning can be engendered by students participating in course evaluations that encourage them to reflect on their own learning. Fisher and Miller (2008) described using an 'evaluation' tool they called the 'expectations snapshot' which included questions asking students "…how they would contribute to their own learning, and to state how they expected to contribute to group effectiveness for their small-group projects" (Fisher & Miller, 2008:193). This work asked students aspirational questions of how they intended to act rather than being retrospectively evaluative. This could be a valuable way of prompting students to realise, early in their studies, that they might be expected to play an active role in their learning.

Evaluation of teaching and learning has the potential to facilitate teacher and student reflection on both teaching and learning. This implies evaluation based on a partnership model where dialogue between academic staff and students is at the heart of decisions about adaptations and innovations in teaching and learning. This reflects a Freirian view of shifting agency within the classroom from the 'teacher-of-the-students' and the 'students-of-the-teacher' towards new roles he has defined as 'teacher-student and

students-teachers' (Freire, 2003:63). In this shift, everyone involved in teaching and learning has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to design and redesign of teaching and learning processes rather than academic staff being in control of evaluation processes. Some examples of this can be seen in Bovill et al (2010) and Cook-Sather, (2009) where students have been enabled to collaboratively evaluate their own and others' learning experiences and courses, so enabling a sharing of responsibility for evaluation, teaching and learning. This work is indicative of how the extensive student voice literature from schools education (Fielding, 2001; Ruddock, 2007) has increasingly begun to influence higher education learning and teaching discourse (Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten, 2011; Cook-Sather 2009; Delpish et al, 2010).

Moving towards evaluation *as* learning

This move towards enhancing the roles and responsibilities of students for their own learning can be detected within recent assessment literature where emphasis has shifted from focusing on assessment *of* learning – the idea of testing what students know, which is often equated with summative assessment, towards assessment *for* learning – commonly interpreted as synonymous with formative assessment. Here students are learning through the process of completing and receiving feedback on the assessment, with an emphasis upon enhancing student capabilities. More recently we have seen reference to assessment *as* learning – emphasising students being actively involved in self-assessment and decision making processes around assessment (Boud, 2000; Montgomery & McDowell, 2008; QAA, 2007).

I argue that we have not made the same degree of progress in conceptualising approaches to evaluation. Students sometimes comment that evaluation questionnaires prompt them to reflect on a course and that this is a useful stimulus to thinking about learning. This is a potentially valuable aspect of any evaluation tool. However, where evaluation methods ask students to consider the role they have played in their own and others' learning, perhaps this could be defined as evaluation *as* learning. Asking students to reflect upon their own influence upon their learning emphasises the individual learning experience. Asking students about their influence on others' learning reminds students of the social nature of learning and of the value of learning from peers. In addition, asking students about their influences upon, and their views of, learning and

teaching approaches opens a dialogue about learning and teaching with academic staff. This encourages a greater metacognitive awareness of both how students learn as well as how different teaching approaches can impact upon, and influence, learning.

An example of formative evaluation *as* learning

Within the Masters in Academic Practice programme at the University of Glasgow, the course 'Critical Inquiry into Academic Practice' aimed to provide an opportunity for academic staff participants to critically engage with and critique academic practice literature and foster deeper understandings of a broad range of academic practices. In 2009-2010, there was a small class of six participants taking this course, all of whom were academic staff at the University of Glasgow. Evaluation is one of many academic practices examined and discussed within this course from a critical standpoint. In discussing evaluation practices, participants had expressed their strong reservations about the University's standard end of course evaluation form. Their key criticisms related to the lack of relevance and depth of some of the questions as well as the relatively greater number of questions about teaching compared to questions about learning. Other themes within our discussions about evaluation related to ensuring there are opportunities for students to gain benefits from evaluation through teachers 'closing the feedback loop', having more discussion about teaching and learning between teachers and students, and students being provided with opportunities to make meaningful contributions to teaching and learning design. These discussions prompted me to try to ensure that evaluation methods used within this Critical Inquiry into Academic Practice course utilised some of these ideas we were discussing.

There is a relatively well known and simple formative evaluation exercise outlined by George and Cowan (1999) called 'Stop/start/continue' where students are asked what they would like their tutor to stop doing that they are not finding helpful, and why this is the case. They are then asked to give some suggestions for things the tutor should start doing that they are not currently doing. Finally, students are asked to list things they would like the tutor to continue doing, focusing on things they are finding helpful to their learning. I decided to adapt this approach by having two sections of the questions normally asked: in the first section students were asked what they would like the tutor to stop, start and continue, and why; in the second section, students were asked what they

thought they should stop, start and continue in order to enhance their own and their peers' learning.

I considered that it might be of particular interest and benefit to participants and to me to use a new type of 'evaluation *as* learning'. The intention was simply to use a new evaluation approach to encourage deeper reflection by participants about their role and others' roles in individual and peer learning, and to stimulate discussion in class about evaluation methodologies. The evaluation was conducted using the stop start continue questions within a questionnaire format as can be seen in Figure 1. This questionnaire was handed out in class mid-way through the 12 week long course. The questionnaire was also replicated within the Moodle virtual learning environment for the course. Students had the choice to return the form anonymously via Moodle, anonymously through the internal university post or to send it non-anonymously to me by email. I sent one reminder via email to participants one week after giving out the evaluation form in class.

Figure 1. Stop start continue questionnaire

TUTOR SECTION

STOP (outline to the tutor something you would like her to stop doing to help your and/or your peers' learning)

START (outline to the tutor something you would like her to start doing to help your and/or your peers' learning)

CONTINUE (outline to the tutor something you would like her to continue doing to help your and/or your peers' learning)

STUDENT SECTION

STOP (outline something you think you could stop doing that would help your and/or your peers' learning)

START (outline something you think you could start doing that would help your and/or your peers' learning)

CONTINUE (outline something you think you could continue doing that would help your and/or your peers' learning)

The evaluation outcomes

Five out of the six participants on the course completed the questionnaire and all of these respondents returned the questionnaires via email. The outcomes from the more traditional tutor section of the questionnaire are presented first. Three participants had no suggestions for things the tutor should stop doing. One person suggested the tutor should stop/restrict the number of biscuits consumed by the class (!), while another participant suggested that the tutor should be less self-deprecating. Two participants had no suggestions for things the tutor should start doing, one participant suggested the teaching sessions could last longer, one participant suggested that some outside speakers could be invited to give tutorials and presentations on the course, and another participant stated that they didn't know what the tutor should start doing, saying: "I don't know, this feels a bit like not knowing what I don't know". All five participants had suggestions of things that they wanted the tutor to continue doing. Three participants commented that they wanted the tutor to continue facilitating discussion in an open, inclusive, friendly and supportive way and to continue the easy going atmosphere where it was comfortable for people to express ideas and issues. One participant suggested continuing to let people have some decision-making input over the structure of the course. One participant mentioned continuing to be open to what might be considered strange questions and to requests that result in an increased workload (this specifically referred to a request to provide a range of exemplar assessments covering a range of grades). There were also comments about continuing to give useful handouts and to cover a broad range of topics.

The comments were overall very supportive and affirming of the tutor's aims and approach to teaching the course, but the feedback led to some very useful discussions in class and enabled a range of changes to be made directly in response to participants' comments. Key changes included providing exemplar assessments and moving towards using a wider range of teachers to contribute to the whole Masters programme in future.

If we turn now to the outcomes from the section of the questionnaire asking participants to reflect on things they should consider stopping, starting and continuing. One participant did not write anything that they thought they should stop doing. One person stated they should stop interrupting people in class discussions. Similarly another

participant suggested they should stop digressing in the class discussions. Another participant stated they should stop using intimidating terminology, while finally another participant thought they should stop always being in such a hurry when undertaking the reading and online discussion postings. Interestingly most of these comments related to behaviours which impacted on other's learning as well as their own learning.

When focusing on what participants thought they should start doing, one person left the section blank. Two participants mentioned finding more time to prepare and two participants mentioned interacting more within the online discussions. There was also a comment about starting to read around the subject a bit more, "skimming the readings is a nice strategy but engaging a bit more is much more enjoyable and makes a difference to what I can add to discussion." In terms of things that participants thought they should continue doing, two participants left this section blank. One participant thought they should continue to do the preparation even where time was limited. Two participants focused on a wish to continue to challenge ideas within the educational research literature and to raise ideas and questions to debate in class and online. Again, comments in both the start and continue sections referred to things that would influence participants' own learning as well as that of their peers.

I placed the collated anonymised feedback from the tutor and participant sections of the evaluation onto the Moodle virtual learning environment area for this course. We then discussed the findings in class, which was considered to be an interesting exercise by the participants. It was noted that there might be more pressure on the tutor to be able to demonstrate that they had responded to feedback from participants, when compared to the pressures on participants. So participants reported finding it useful to have to think about how they could influence their own and their peers' learning and enhancements they could make, but they were aware that they would not necessarily be held to account for things they had said they should start, stop or continue doing.

However, the comment to the tutor asking to continue to be able to contribute to decision-making processes that related to teaching and learning within the Masters programme, suggests that some participants valued the way their views could influence their course. The outcomes from this small scale, simple evaluation that I conducted resonate with the results from Fisher and Miller's study:

> the overall benefits to students from use of the instrument included greater reflection on the influence of the individual over his or her own learning, heightened awareness of the need for thorough preparation in terms of reading and discussion…and the need for active participation in lectures and tutorials (Fisher & Miller, 2008:199).

It is useful to note, from a practical perspective, Fisher and Miller (2008) recommend ensuring that students have access to copies of their own feedback, so they can refer back to their ideas and reflections at a later stage.

The stop, start, continue tutor and student evaluation was not the only evaluation approach used in this course. There were a number of other evaluation approaches that included questions such as 'what could you do to improve your learning experience?' Responses to this question tended to focus on: trying to find time to do more reading outside the core texts; searching for more educational literature; being open-minded to new ideas raised in class and online; and reflecting more before coming to class about key points raised by the literature that would benefit from in-depth discussion in class.

Discussion

The stop start, continue, tutor and student evaluation is just one simple and small-scale possible way of encouraging deeper reflection on individual roles and responsibilities within learning that has the potential for wider use. To be more effective, I would suggest that in hindsight, there would be value in revisiting the outcomes of this kind of small scale evaluation and conducting another similar evaluation later in the course, to increase the likelihood of students taking increased and shared responsibility for their comments. It is important to recognise the difference between participants' comments and the reality of whether responding in this way actually changes learning practices.

This exercise and other evaluation methods building in questions about the student and tutor roles in learning and teaching could be integrated in a more structured way throughout a course. These methods could be used to underpin and augment a course aiming to promote deeper reflection and the development of more sophisticated meta-cognitive awareness of learning processes. This approach also offers the opportunity to develop a more collective responsibility for individual and shared learning among tutors

and students. Perhaps this could be enhanced further by having a third section of stop, start and continue referring to the behaviour of participants' peers. This is a potentially missed opportunity to expand discussions of how we impact upon each others' learning.

To transform the approach described above into a 'stop, start, continue tutor and student partnership evaluation', the evaluation questionnaire could also be completed by the tutor and the group could be responsible for gathering together the responses and working through the feedback in partnership with the tutor. The group could then make collective sense of the feedback, rather than the tutor collecting the student evaluations before bringing them back for discussion and thereby continuing to broker the evaluation process. Current conceptions of evaluation as a quality assurance and enhancement tool mainly for the benefit of staff and institutions, and indirectly of benefit to students can be transformed in this context. Instead, any evaluation tool can be used by students and tutors to enhance shared deeper understandings of teaching approaches and learning experiences. This approach to evaluation links well with the use of participative research methodologies (Seale, 2011). However, this requires us to challenge our assumptions that evaluation of, and decisions about, the teaching and learning process are to be controlled and acted upon by academic staff. Where we start to contemplate the possibilities of evaluation *as* learning, we may be inclined to start asking different questions in our evaluations and start to use different evaluation methods. We can also consider adapting existing evaluation approaches towards more reflective possibilities simply by ensuring we discuss evaluation findings with students, by ensuring we are open to some of the changes suggested by students, and by realising that some of these changes might be actioned by students.

Conclusions

Within higher education, large scale quantitative evaluation surveys are often seen as the gold standard of evaluation practice. Clouder (1998) asks,

> how then are we to break out of the, all too often, vicious circle of routinised student evaluative questionnaires, reflecting ill-informed expectations and comparisons with some hidden benchmark which differs from one student to the next? (Clouder, 1998: 191)

This is not to suggest that all large scale evaluations should be avoided or that there is no value to these approaches, but this paper has presented some small scale research and some ideas that suggest there may be value in exploring further the role of students in the evaluation process.

It is clear that there has been a development of ideas within assessment literature that has enabled the re-conceptualisation of assessment to include assessment *of*, *for* and *as* learning. This paper has suggested that so far within the evaluation discourse, this same development of ideas has not been seen. Evaluation has the potential to be viewed as evaluation *of*, *for* and *as* learning, where evaluation *as* learning integrates self-evaluation and the development of meta-understandings of learning processes within the aims of evaluation. In this small scale study, the processes and outcomes presented suggest there is the potential for further discussion between staff and students about evaluation for the benefit of teaching and learning approaches. However, further studies are needed which explicitly examine the role of student reflection and responsibility within evaluation, and which explore the potential for student agency within the design of learning experiences.

So can we design our evaluation processes to better help academic staff and students reflect on teaching and learning processes? Can academic staff and students work collaboratively to interpret evaluation findings and enhance existing teaching and learning practices? Some academic staff are already utilising these kinds of evaluation *as* learning approaches, perhaps most frequently at a local level. The challenge may be in scaling up this activity, investigating it more rigorously, and ensuring the idea of evaluation *as* learning becomes more widely known.

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