Rationales for Student Self-assessment

I require HI 216 students to engage in the process of self-assessment in order to get individualized assistance with a particular discussion assignment (see “Improving Discussions” on the how to page). Why you might ask. Well, it works to improve student performance I would reply. But historians must (and everyone else should) support arguments with hard evidence. Here in brief are the pedagogical and research underpinnings of my approach to self-assessment.

Effective student self-assessment is a major component of critical thinking. Let’s start with what critical thinking is not. It is not...

- the mere acquisition and retention of information alone
- the mere possession of a set of skills
- the mere use of those skills (plug and chug exercises)
- like training a seal to balance a ball on its nose (mere repetition and conditioning).

"Critical thinking is a particular type of thinking that makes use of other types of thinking to review, evaluate, and revise the way ideas have been understood, processed, and communicated. Critical thinking is the type of thinking we do when we need to correct mistakes, whether they are our own or those of others. (Making mistakes is an unavoidable part of life; the only way to never make a mistake is to stop living!) Critical thinking is the sort of thinking we do when we need to improve the way things are being done and solve problems." (Stratton 1999) Practice at self-assessment encourages us to become self-correcting learners, not passive ciphers awaiting orders on “what hoop do I jump through next?” You’re already skilled at hoop-jumping, or you would not have been admitted to NCSU. So let’s move beyond high-school skills and activities. Otherwise what are you paying for?

Having defined critical thinking, let’s define self-assessment. “Self-assessment refers to the involvement of learners in making judgments about their own learning, particularly about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning. Self-assessment is formative in that it contributes to the learning process and assists learners to direct their energies to areas for improvement.” “The term is used to encompass the two key elements in any assessment decision: the identification of criteria or standards to be applied to one’s work, and the making of judgments about the extent to which work meets these criteria.” (Boud and Falchikov 1989) Like any skill, it takes practice, hence my course requirement.

Self-assessment “encourages students to become self-conscious about their own development and progress rather than receivers of preordained judgments from external sources. We are convinced that the quality of the written work has improved in previous years and that this can be attributed in large part to the process of self-assessment.” (Denscombe and Robins 1980) In this sense, self-assessment promotes student empowerment and self-actualization.
Research at the high-school level has identified strong link between self-assessment and student empowerment. Teachers “promoted social empowerment, through ongoing reflection, integrated throughout school life. In Socratic seminars time was allotted for reflecting on the experience. Faculty members solicited feedback on service placements and **built self-assessment into a social studies project. Through such efforts, teachers not only supported students’ development but assessed whether these efforts at empowerment had the intended effects.” (Quillan 2005) Thus self-assessment is akin to becoming an excellent editor with the skills to improve writing and thinking (your own and others).

Self-assessment also encourages the process of intellectual maturation. “Recent years have seen an increase in interest in the ways in which **students may be encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning. Life-long learning requires that individuals be able not only to work independently, but also to assess their own performance and progress. Self-assessment may be regarded as a skill and, as such, needs to be developed.” (Falchikov and Boud 1989)

Research over the past three decades points to a correlation between increasing student abilities at self-assessment and improving performance across a wide range of disciplines. A class that merely asks you to jump through hoops teaches you little and certainly cannot enhance critical thinking skills. So use this opportunity not only to learn about history but to develop important, useful lifelong learning skills. “Student self-assessment provided a significant new dimension to the predictability of actual performance independent of and supplemental to traditional data sources.” (Trepagnier 2004)

**Final note:** The brief evaluation of other student discussions that you do each week also hones your evaluation and assessment skills. So as you examine the work of others, consciously look for ways in which you can use that information to improve your own efforts.

**Sources:**


