



The use of student self-assessment questionnaires to inform practice

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Presentation abstract

Self-assessment questionnaires in which students rate their confidence across a range of discrete study skills are a familiar tool in the 'study skills' repertoire (Cottrell, 2001; Cottrell, 2019). At West Suffolk College we have made an annual online self-assessment questionnaire central to our study skills provision. Our initial motivation was to reverse our default position of starting with what we think students need, creating resources and arranging workshops, hoping students turn up and complaining when they don't. We now use the questionnaire to gauge students' perceptions of their own needs and use this to inform the content of our study skills provision and target its delivery. With a 56% completion rate this year, the questionnaire data offers valuable insights for the student support team and academics alike, providing the basis of a new way of working together that transcends 'bolt-on' or 'built-in' approaches (Cairns, Hervey and Jonhson, 2018). While this approach has felt like progress, it has also generated questions about the limitations of self-assessment questionnaires. Most striking has been the trend for students achieving lower academic outcomes to rate their skills surprisingly highly (a phenomenon with its own research literature, for example: Kruger and Dunning, 1999; Dunning, Heath and Suls, 2004; Miller and Geraci, 2011). This observation has helped us to reflect on our own unconscious theories of student success and particularly the role of self-efficacy within these (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1997; Ritchie, 2016).

The purpose of this mini-keynote is to share practical ideas for the use of self-assessment questionnaires (what to ask, when, how, what to do with the data), but also to consider their limitations and reflect honestly on the success or otherwise of our attempts to create reciprocal learning relationships with our students.

Research questions

1. How do you use self-assessment questions at your institution?
2. How does the 'evidence' generated by self-assessment questions influence practice?
3. What are the limitations of self-assessment questionnaires?

Keywords: self-assessment questionnaires; student needs analysis; evidence informed practice; higher education.

Community response

This presentation offered an interesting discussion and some thought-provoking questions regarding self-assessment tools, i.e. questionnaires. Some of these questions include: '*what* we are measuring – baseline? Confidence? Willingness to seek help? And '*why?*', '*why* do we want to know this?'. These questions initiated and led to an intriguing open discussion.

The highlight of the presentation was the discussion led by the presenter to engage the community to share their experiences of using similar self-assessment tools. In addition, the tools discussed were subtly different demonstrating that there is huge variance in how learning and development departments are using and implementing self-assessment strategies at different institutions.

In a higher education context, the presentation emphasised some important points regarding student self-assessment challenges. One of the key community responses highlighted this point and stated some focus points for improving self-assessment for first year students such as revising the language and making it more student-facing and developing strategies to help students become more comfortable with admitting areas for growth.

One session attendee captured the engaging debate that followed Jack's presentation :

Firstly, the fact that confidence-based diagnostics don't do a great job of measuring learning gain, as students tend to rate their confidence quite highly

at first, then if they redo the test after some time their confidence actually goes down as they realise how little they know!

Another attendee highlighted the amount of work going on in this area, hinting at the potential for greater sharing of ideas and best practice:

So many people are interested in diagnostics! It was fascinating, as Jack opened the floor to discussion, to see how many people chimed in with their experiences running similar tools. Also, all these tools were subtly different, so there is huge variance in how LDs are using self-assessment strategies.

Next steps and additional questions

The presentation outset primarily covered keynote discussions around questionnaires and measuring students' openness to engaging with support. However, this can lead to several further questions as raised by the community: whether openness to support and support seeking could be explored further within the context of learning and development. This can be elaborated to cover interplay of individual personality, learner background, learner self-awareness, their environment, and the learning community around them and its impact.

Author's reflection

There were two reasons why I was eager to share my work on the study skills questionnaire with the learning development community. On the one hand, I'm proud of aspects of how it's been designed and implemented. On the other hand, I wanted to be challenged – to see how people might respond differently and from different perspectives.

On the first point, I had a pleasing sense that I was sharing some good practice and that participants were likewise sharing their own ideas and making connections for further sharing. It was particularly interesting to hear different approaches to measuring self-assessment, such as confidence (for example, I have low/medium/high confidence in X) vs. behavioural (I always/sometimes/never do X).

I felt I observed two main different perspectives in how participants discussed the study skills questionnaire. Some focused on its value in a one-to-one context, emphasising its potential as a prompt for a reflective discussion between student and learning developer.

Others focused on its use on a larger scale as a measurement of a student's progress over time. From the latter perspective, more reservations were expressed as to whether it provided a reliable or helpful measure. Considering these different perspectives prompted me to reflect more carefully on what was my purpose when implementing the questionnaire. I realised how easy it can be to drift on this, especially when different stakeholders come on board with different perspectives on the data.

Another challenge to my thinking came from several participants highlighting ways students might feel threatened by the kinds of self-assessment questions I am using, for example interpreting the statements as things they *should* be able to do. Thinking further on this following the conference, I've reflected on the potential of the questionnaire to reinforce a deficit model of study skills, so influentially outlined by Lea and Streat (1998): it could imply there are a fixed set of 'study skills' that are required for successful academic study (determined by the authority of institution). Arguably, it casts students' responses in terms of a 'deficit' in failing to meet these standards. If this is how students perceive the questionnaire, I imagine there would be a range of responses: for some it might motivate their efforts to develop their study skills, for others it may lead to disengagement, for others it could even be harmful to self-esteem. I'm also aware that as Ian Johnson (2023) has observed in relation to the use of self-assessment in learning development research, the format of 'closed-response questions' can often 'narrow the parameters of what students report' (p.36). Furthermore, the format does not register anything that students might *bring* to their learning and their communities, such as strengths or interests, only what they lack. On reflection I am now considering the following alternative approaches:

- Use a similar format but have student input on the survey questions. For example, ask third year students what they think the most successful skills are.
- Have students answer the original questions but also rate how *important* they consider these skills and invite them to explain their answers.
- Ask different kinds of questions that register what learners might bring to their learning and learning communities, such as their strengths or interests.

Following the conference, I'm more aware of the tensions between possible functions of the survey (to drive engagement, to inform workshops provision, to enhance one-to-one support, to measure impact) and the need to be mindful of purpose.

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