Alternatives to grading:
Assessment spaces that create trusting pedagogical relations

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to show evidence, through three case studies, of how students and teachers experience personal development when alternative assessment frames allow pedagogical relations that challenge the traditional mastery model of educational assessment. These case studies include descriptions of 1) a junior high classroom situation, 2) a university physical education course, and 3) a teacher education program. For this paper we draw on a post-modern notion of pedagogy that critiques the certainty promised by the grand narratives of modernist perspectives; instead it offers what Gergen (1991) has described as a "sense of validity from a particular community of interpretation" (p. 104). As Lather (1991) indicates, pedagogy is defined as “the transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies -- the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they together produce” (p. 15). For post-modern pedagogy to develop, a sense of assessment is needed based on the pedagogical relationship between teacher, student and content. As such the agency of assessment must move from the authority of the teacher to authority of the knowledge that the teacher and the student co-produce through the structures of a course and the purpose of a program.

The paper will report the insights from the comparison of three case studies of alternative assessment methods across three different educational institutions (Merriam 1991). Case study methodology has been used to collect data and report three research projects examining issues of student assessment. The case studies will show how the alternative assessment strategies encouraged students to become self-reliant learners and have changed the nature of the pedagogical relationships between teachers, students and content they co-produce together.

The cases have been drawn from the following three case studies developed by the authors to report students’ responses and their reflections as instructors.

1. Sanford (1999; 1997) study of a junior high girls’ only alternative program.
2. Hopper (2003) implementation of game performance assessment in 100 level university sport performance and analysis course

3. Yeo (2002) reflections on the change in pre-service teachers attitude to course learning and the instructors practice after the course shifted from a graded course to a pass/fail course.

Case #1 – Kathy Sanford

I began my teaching year in a newly developed junior high school program for girls, one that gave me opportunities to rethink alternative teaching and evaluation strategies. As I began the year, I looked for ways to communicate with my students about their learning development in ways that were individualized, positive, supportive, and valued by the students. I was also concerned with gaining the support of the school administration and the students' parents. I realized, however, that there I would probably face scepticism as I changed the traditional "marking" system.

My focus was on enabling students to make choices and express themselves, initially through journal writing. In previous teaching experiences, I had used journals in a variety of forms, and found them to be an activity that offered choices to the students. I had, through these experiences, become aware of the possibilities and dangers of perpetuating traditional teacher/student relationships despite attempts to the contrary. Students, eager to determine "what the teacher wanted", would manipulate their own journal entries to please the teacher and make choices that assured them success in the assignments rather than pleasure or growth (Sanford-Smith, 1994). Discussion or "conferencing" with students about their writing would offer opportunities for students to express their opinions and ask questions about their work, I thought. The conferences, however, only became further opportunities for the students to request high marks and for the teacher to explain (or defend) the assigned marks. Continuing to allow students choices about their writing and providing chances to talk with the teacher were clearly not enough to change understandings about assessment.

Rather than discarding the approaches (reading and writing workshops, conferences, portfolios, dialogue journals) I had been attempting to develop in my classrooms, I realized that I had to reconceive learning through the eyes of the students and through my own eyes. Instead of finding ways to "motivate" my students with interesting assignments and the promise of rewards, I needed to find ways for them to develop their own voices without fear of sanction and to find ways for me to hear what they were saying. My search for alternative ways of considering evaluation opened up new possibilities for me to explore with my students that valued multiple perspectives, individual voice, choice, self-acknowledgement, self-expression, and reflexivity.

Despite the attempts to "allow" students to express their views, make choices, take risks, explore alternative styles, it became apparent to me that the teacher still held the ultimate power to declare the students' efforts successful or failed, to open doors for future development or to close them soundly. How, then, would I be able

to change the evaluation system to show that students had voice in this aspect of learning as well? How would we redistribute the power held in the classroom? How would I know if changes were taking place in the classroom?

Teacher-determined evaluation generally keeps the students dependent on an "other" in order for them to develop an understanding of their progress; students rely on teacher-assigned grades to determine their success. They cannot determine for themselves how well they have accomplished a task because they have never had the opportunity. Students do not have the vocabulary to discuss their own performances; they do not have the understanding that a piece of writing can become separate from the person creating the writing. Rarely have teachers modeled self-assessment in the classroom; therefore, students do not have a concept of how to talk about or to feel about assessing their own work.

As the students and I began to develop a learning community in the classroom we needed to develop a vocabulary that enabled us to talk together in a variety of ways to continue the creating and learning processes. I began to implement an approach to evaluation that eliminated specific grades or marks. Rather, I introduced the students to three terms that would be descriptive of their work: "incomplete", "acceptable", and "superior". I attempted to use these words in discussions of the students' work, indicating where the work was incomplete, how incomplete work was different from acceptable work, and what attributes made a piece of work superior. I developed assessment guides that focused the students on specific attributes of their work, attempting to help them read and evaluate their work better. The assessment forms asked the students to consider the level of writing being assessed (incomplete, acceptable, superior) and to provide evidence that supported their assessment.

I struggled throughout the year to establish credibility with my students -- not as a teacher, but as a learner. I asked myself, "How should I present myself in order to create a level of genuine trust? What will enable us to break down barriers of authority and self-preservation so that we may grow together?" Slowly, I was able in some ways to establish my trust-worthiness to my students through conversations that occurred randomly and spontaneously during class, at lunch, on the way to field trips, as well as in the students' gradual development of thoughtful comments that demonstrated their willingness to consider their work more deeply and recursively. As I was able to become more human in the students' eyes, they revealed to me some of their thoughts, which allowed for mutual understandings about learning. This opening-up through conversation gave importance to dialogues; students developed sincerity in listening to advice as well as giving it. The students were able to offer advice to their colleagues and to me that was genuine and well-intended: "You need to write longer responses. Don't summarize as much." "I think your work is good, but it needs to be more carefully proofread." "There are

too many spelling mistakes." "Your story is confusing and your sentences are choppy." I, too, completed my assessment of the students' writing based on the same focus and the same criteria as the one the students were using to assess their own work. I added my assessment of the students' work after the students' self-assessment was completed in the hopes that I could avoid my authoritative position of "teacher" from influencing the students' assessment of their own work.

After several different opportunities for self-assessment, I asked the students to assess the work of a peer as well as their own work. My goal was to help the students develop a broader understanding of "acceptable" work or "superior" work by having them read the work of other students. After considering the work of their peers, they could, I thought, view their own work with new eyes. As the students continued with self- and peer assessments, I was able to see the differences between the two types of comments. Although students became very adept at using our common vocabulary and giving examples and suggestions, they were unable to "see" with the same distancing when they viewed their own work. They shaped the vocabulary to justify their work rather than to examine it critically; it was very difficult for them to view their own work from a distanced stance. They felt that they were examining not only their writing but rather them "selves" in their entirety. As the year progressed, the students' conversations dealt more with the content of the writing, their own and their peers, and less with comparisons between students' ranking. However, it was still very difficult for them to distinguish their writing from their "selves".

I continued to assess the students' writing throughout the year, interspersing my teacher assessments with students' peer and self-assessments. I was able to model some of the possible responses to students' work, showing them alternative aspects to consider. Modeled responses moved the students away from standard superficial comments about their own and others' writing, such as "good effort," "I liked the story," and (about their own writing) "I worked really hard on this story," to more specific and lengthy comments such as "You should try making predictions and talking about the characters in depth." "You might enjoy a more challenging book -- you could try *The Giver* by Lois Lowry." "Could you rewrite the first sentence? It doesn't seem very clear to me." I was always wary, however, of how much I was leading the students to "give me what I wanted." Through my own comments, I did not want to suggest that these were the types of responses that would please me, but rather that they were possibilities to consider. Despite our growing sense of respect and trust, the students sometimes panicked about "how well they were doing" and wanted to find ways to show me they were doing well. Although I wanted to point out incorrect structures and usages, I did not want to paralyse the students with a continual search for "correctness." I also did not want them to rely on me for the answers; rather, I wanted them to learn ways to examine their own work. The impulses to tell the students what to do were strong -- remained strong --

as they have been ingrained in my teaching practice. I struggled, along with the students, to learn alternative approaches to discussing and assessing students' work.

Teacher-determined assessment is efficient, and I have continually struggled with my desire to complete work quickly, to control the assessment myself, and to get on to a new activity. I have had to reassess and revalue the activities that occur in a classroom and the time that is spent on them. At the beginning of the year I was instrumental in introducing activities, providing structure, and a time frame. As the year progressed, the students' voices joined in the planning, as they suggested alternative activities, requested different time frames, and created new approaches. Our roles changes; the activities became more collaborative and negotiated. Throughout the year, we maintained a self-selected reading program and a dialogue journal that provided a record of the students' thoughts and development. We maintained portfolios of the students' completed work, although we soon found that the portfolios were limiting and did not accommodate large wall maps, paintings, dioramas, or sculptures. After three months, we also began a workshop approach to writing that continued to the end of the year, culminating in a class anthology. We completed the bulk of our learning as "projects", both in groups and individually. The consideration of time lessened as I saw the students' work becoming more complex and integrative. Each activity encompassed meaningful work and varied learning. The work continued to be assessed by the students and myself using the three descriptors incomplete, acceptable, and superior.

A memorable incident strengthens my belief in the possibilities for life-long and authentic assessment. In reparation for completing first-term report cards, I distributed to each student a sheet of paper showing the projects we had completed in the term and the collective assessment that has been assigned to the work by the student herself, her peers, and the teacher. The assessment sheet helped the students to review their learning for the term and reminded them of the assessments they had helped determine for each completed piece of work. Their task was to consider their work to date and to suggest the grade (A, B, C, or D) that they believed indicated their overall level of performance for the term.

Angie received her assessment sheet and examined it carefully. Although she had always been a conscientious student, Angie's work this year showed a new level of maturity and care. Her assessment levels reflected this maturity and each piece of work except one had reached a superior level. An essay assignment had not reached a superior level, for reasons Angie herself articulated, and she asked of she could redo the essay. I replied that she could, but that it was not necessary for grade purposes. I suggested that she had already attained "A" standing. The next day I received a thoroughly revised and edited essay. It had been considerably extended, the ideas were more fully developed, and the conclusion had changed to show new

thinking about the issue. Angie had chosen to take time to improve her work, not for the teacher, not for the grade, but for her own learning.

Angie's story exemplifies for me the promise of assessments that create opportunities for both teachers and students to respond ethically and to recognize the identity of the student being assessed. Such an approach respects students' desires and allows them to see that their desires make them unique. Self-assessment, supported by assessments from peers, teachers, and family, enables students to take ownership of their writing and develop skills that allow them to make articulate judgments about their own writing and the writing of others. While this is, admittedly, a time-consuming process, the time consideration lessened for me as I saw my students' work becoming more complex and integrative. As the weeks went on, the girls' voices gained strength and control; they were confident in providing harmonic balance rather than either demanding prominence or being willing to be overpowered and hidden.

Examining my teaching and assessment practices has also caused me to reflect upon myself. I have attempted to model self-assessment in my classroom, considering alternative lesson plans, strategies, and materials with my students rather than on my own. My previously unquestioned authority has been examined as students have taken on the responsibility of their own assessment. And although initially frightening, the overall experience enabled all of us in the classroom to grow and appreciate each other. Through reversing binaries, privileging what hadn't been previously privileged, we were able to acknowledge and acclaim our unique value. We came to appreciate how, by reconceiving assessment in the classroom, students can be offered opportunities to develop a sense of self that is positive, confident, and voiced -- and along with it the ability to live fully in a multifaceted and complex world.

However, as I had come to recognize with my students, self-assessment is the most demanding challenge of evaluation and of education. Since my teaching lessons are reflective of me as a person, the same challenge applied to me. How do I know what issues of power and communication shape students' learning in ways I am unable to see?

Case #2 – Tim Hopper

The purpose of this case study is to show how pedagogical relations can be formed through alternative assessment strategies where the goal is to move the student to a self-assessment of their own ability guided by peer assessment. Three types of assessment relationships were used in this case study.

1. Grades based on teacher's test and/or judgment (Other decides).
2. Grades based on student self-assessment and final judgment by teacher (Self has input into judgment made by Other).

3. Learning based on peer assessment feeding into student self-assessment (Self decides guided by Others).

Context of the study

I teach the tennis course at a North American university as part of the sport performance and activity (SPA) classes. This 100 level course offers students content in teaching the tactics and skills of tennis with a focus on the student's personal ability and knowledge of how to teach the sport. Students in teacher preparation, kinesiology and community/recreation health in the School of Physical Education can take the course. However, students from other programs can also take SPA classes as part of their elective requirements. In line with the general aims of PE, the course encourages students to learn how to play tennis to make it a part of their active lifestyle. Within the course I have been experimenting with how to assess students' performance so that they do not feel a sense of deficit in how they play, where assessment process encourages them to succeed and continue playing, and to recognize their achievements. The course exists within the traditional university grading system where students are assigned a grade based on a series of assignments.

My initial attempts to grade the students involved a combination of assignments, including (1) a paper written by the students based on a biomechanical analysis of his or her stroke, graded by the teacher, (2) attendance in class and practice outside class, recorded by students, and (3) a rubric criteria assessment system with an incrementally developed skill playing challenges, graded by students and teacher. The focus in the criteria skill areas shifts from consistency (how many balls hit into the court) to ball placement in the court and finally to spin and power. These tennis skill areas were performed in increasing court sizes up to the whole tennis court area. The skills were divided into service, drives, net-play and tactics. This system offered a nine-point scale that encouraged students to identify their ability and work towards a more challenging task. Students were encouraged to assess themselves and then show me when they felt they could demonstrate the level. However, as with the biomechanics paper, students deferred to my judgment. In the criteria assessment the students were reluctant to assess their own ability without my encouragement and confirmation. More advanced students who progressed to an eight in any skill section could coach a peer up one level to get a nine. This did result in students helping each other and a form of peer assessment process developing. However, only the advanced one or two players ever reached this level. This system offered a way of gradually mapping their progress – however it was only from a skill focus. Students at the end of the course would comment that they felt "the assessment was fair", that they "could have done better with more time" or that the assessment "was too hard for a beginner." The later comment always gave me concern. The "fair" was not entirely true in my opinion because the rubric criteria, though spelled out with detail and diagrams, still was impossible to be totally clear, and

somewhat relied on my interpretation. The tactical section always proved too difficult for students to understand. What I needed was a way of developing students' ability to interpret their own ability and more importantly, to transfer the skill learning tactically into actual game play.

Game performance assessment based on the 4 R's

Within the course, I developed a pedagogical model for understanding game play. This model was known as the 4 R's (Hopper, 2003). The 4 Rs stand for READ, RESPOND, REACT and RECOVER. As shown in Fig. 1 the model creates a framework that enables students to learn how to scan a game to read appropriate game play cues, to then make decisions that led to actions that maximized opportunities for success.

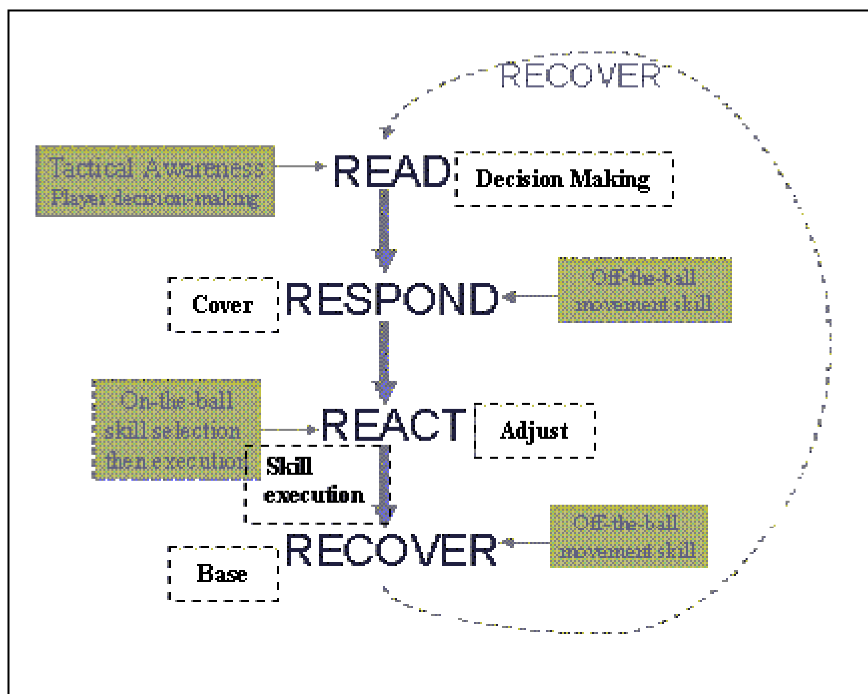

Figure 1: The 4Rs model with placement of tactical components indicated.

Drawing on Griffin's et al., (1997) game performance assessment inventory (GPAI) the model indicates the following process:

1. Before the ball is put into play, players have to READ the situation to decide where they should locate themselves within the play area. They have to "make a decision" about where they must go in anticipation of their opponents' shots.
2. As players learn to recognize cues they RESPOND, just after their opponents' play their shots, with appropriate side-steps to relocate themselves to "cover" the space where the ball will go.

3. As the ball enters the players' play areas, the players REACT to the force, spin and direction of the ball to "adjust" their position and weight. This adjustment sets up for executing the appropriate on-the-ball skill (drive, volley, etc.) with the ball in the hitting zone just in front of body.
4. After skill execution players RECOVER to a "base" position behind the opponents' target areas to set up for the READ phase once again.

The model offers a framework that players can use to help develop a schema for tactical game play. The game performance assessment inventory (GPAI) offers a framework to enable students to understand the 4 R's model. The GPAI is based on authentic assessment principles, in that it assesses all components of game performance rather than just one of two. Authentic assessment of game performance means observing what players do "off the ball" as well as their on-the-ball skill. In the case of tennis the tactical components of base, decision-making, cover, adjust to set-up skill selection and execution to then recover to base as shown in Figure 1.

I have piloted the GPAI in several tennis courses. The students work in pairs, one assessing the other. Figure 2 shows the chart used for assessing individual components of game performance. Level I focus is upon watching a whole point then assessing using the rating scheme below:

1. Not involved in the play of the game
2. Uncertain selection and execution of off-the-ball movement skill for the GPAI component (base, cover, adjust, support or decision making).
3. Not consistent selection and execution of appropriate off-the-ball movement skill for the GPAI component (base, cover, adjust, support or decision making).
4. Generally good selection and execution of appropriate off-the-ball movement skill for the GPAI component (base, cover, adjust, support or decision making).
5. Effective selection and execution of appropriate off-the-ball movement skill for the GPAI component (base, cover, adjust, support or decision making).

Once the students have used the rating form, the next time they assess they can use a tick and tally form where each successful skill execution and each appropriate use of tactical component gets a "√" or if not an "X". The totals in each column represent a percentage score of appropriate action ("√") compared to inappropriate action ("X). In this form of assessment each stroke is assessed for skill execution and use of base, cover, adjust or decision-making. This assessment requires that the game being played needs to be more like the adult version of the game in a full court, with longer intervals of time between shots and longer rallies.

By assessing their peers I found students learn to appreciate the 4 R's and realize how to improve their own game play as they give informed feedback to their peers. As indicated by the recording sheets I use a "batching

method" of assessing where students assess each component in sets of three. The shaded areas indicate the preferred order to assess. After each batch the assessor gives written and verbal feedback to the player based on what they have recorded. If the player is able to get over half marks (3 out 5 on rating scheme) then the assessor moves on to

Point	Won (✓) or Lost (X)		Skill Execution X or ✓		Base	Decision	Cover	Adjust
1	✓		✓✓✓					
2	✓		✓					
3	✓		✓✓					
4	x		x					
5	x		✓x✓✓X					
14	✓		✓✓					4
15	x		x					4
Total	W	L	✓	x	(Mode Score)	(Mode Score)	(Mode Score)	(Mode Score)
	8	7	45	15	4	3	3	4
Notes	You won most of your points on you forehand side		Lots of good strokes played. Most errors made on your backnad or when you went for a hard shot with your forehand		You returned to a metre behind the base-line well. Where is base at net?	You tend to stay back until the ball comes. If you attack the opponent's	You cover the court off your stroke but tend to stand when opponent hit's	The cover jump step will help you adjust quicker. You did adjust to the ball

Figure 2: Sample GPAI forms for tennis

the next component, otherwise after feedback the assessor repeats the same component in the next lighter shaded area and so on. Some form of practice or game modification may be needed to help the player achieve this success.

Students report new insights on their game play from using the adapted GPAI feeding into the 4 R's model. The following selected extracts from student's comments after course completion reflect these insights:

About GPAI assessment process

- "It's a learning environment for both the player and coder, it also prepares you to become a better coach or teacher."
- "Students realise that they are evaluated not in comparison to others, but rather in terms of individual improvement and not just skill performance."

Learning about Base

- "As a beginner I was unaware of my poor base. As soon as Kevin pointed it out there was an immediate improvement."
- "Since the first GPAI feedback session I can hear my coder reminding me to establish a good base by moving back and to the middle, allowing me to select more shots."

Learning Decisions Making

- Before this class I never read the opponent's response to my hit; I would just react. By figuring out whether the opponent is hitting forward or on their back foot I can stay at the baseline or move forward. This is making the game a lot easier and I'm winning a lot more points.

Learning to Cover and Adjust

- My coder pointed out that I read where the ball is going but I do not react quickly enough to be in a good position to make a high percentage shot…he suggested a split-step movement…I will apply his suggestion.
- Reviewing my GPAI form I was relieved to see that my base and decision-making were excellent…my game falls apart in the cover, adjust and skill execution portions. The reason is due to "split-stepping" being a new idea to me.

The 4 R's model creates a framework for students to grasp the tactical complexity of playing net/wall games. The GPAI works well to reinforce and diagnose tactical play that creates a foundation for skill practice. In my experience students become more focused on improving skills when they know how to play a game.

This assessment process takes the teacher away from the centre as the person giving the grade. Students write a reflective analysis of their GPAI score and peers feedback, focusing on describing how they played and what they could do to improve. This reflection can be repeated, with a GPAI form, as many times as required by the student. Within my courses every student writes an analysis at least twice. In all cases students shift their analysis of game performance into the highest grading level by the end of the course – even though each player's playing ability may be different.

This GPAI system created a way of assessing understanding by making the process of assessing an integral part of learning how to play tennis with tactical sophistication. The assessment process also made students more

aware of what enabled them to be more successful. As one student remarked, “It is all about reading the play.” When the students use this assessment form in my class I assist and I watch them. I note that assessors laugh with excitement after their players play a long rally, madly recording the ticks and estimating the GPAI component. I also observe relative beginner players reporting with authority to their more experience peers on how well they were getting back to base, doing a ‘jump-step’ to cover the space and marvelling at an effective decision made to win a point. It is these inter-actions that add a new dimension to the pedagogical relationships within my tennis class. These inter-actions encourage students to feel confident to challenge the criteria system with a forming sense of game playing understanding. By the end of the course I become a facilitator to students learning. They ask me for advice, they describe how they are playing, they get excited as they achieve a new level in the criteria system, they tell me that they are amazed at out much better they have got. Before I became a university professor I was a tennis coach. In this course I feel like a coach assisting people getting better at playing tennis, not a university instructor judging a student’s grade. In this university course students come to focus on their own and others’ learning and less on getting a high grade – a novel idea in a university culture.

Case #3 – Michelle Yeo

I was twenty-six years old when I taught my first University class - an about-to-defend M.A. graduate student, and with less than two years experience as a half time kindergarten teacher, I was put in front of a fourth year Early Childhood Education curriculum course as a sessional instructor. These student teachers were in the final year of their program. In classes September to March, they would then embark on a six-week final practicum. They had already successfully navigated a three-week and a four-week practicum during the previous year. Overall, they were a remarkably homogenous group, in the main, middle class, white young women in their early twenties, many of them recently married or soon to be married and amongst other irritations I struggled with their habit of bringing “Bride” magazines to class. As I prepared for the first day of class, I remembered vividly sitting in the very same room myself not five years before - newly married, bored, annoyed, and filled with an anxiety created by the mortal fear that only impending practicum can bring. As their new instructor, I felt completely out of my depth; in over my head and baffled by my advisor’s insistence that I was qualified to teach them. As a student, I would have been furious if an instructor hardly older than myself with barely two years experience and a brand new Master’s Degree had stood in front of me. Yet, there we all were. I was determined to be engaging; I was determined to provide useful information; I was determined to be empathetic and likable, and most importantly, I was determined to be fair.

Teaching this group proved, like any teaching, to be complex and difficult work. At the end of each 210 minute class I would retreat home to my young children with enormous relief. The house which a month earlier

had seemed to imprison me now seemed a welcome refuge. This experience taught me that I could stand up in front of thirty women and not wither; I could persist in my lesson plans until the appointed hour, plodding through my plans that traveled the continuum between lame and inspired, that at times I could even rouse them to an engaging discussion or invoke a real question.

The stage is set. Fast forward to April, when I received the package of student evaluations. With trepidation, I gazed at the envelope for a while, stomach churning, before having the courage to open it. It is interesting how, at the University level, at the end of a course, the tables are turned, and the assessor becomes the assessed. The power dynamic shifts, and the students have the opportunity to vent their frustrations and have the last word. The power of these evaluations are nebulous. No one seems to be certain of what kind of weight they carry. In the community of instructors and professors, people tell you not to worry about them, but behind the door of the assistant dean I believe they are read with interest. People can become devastated by a package of nasty comments, so in this sense, they carry real personal power to harm. Involved later in a hiring committee to choose a new instructor, I watched how the student evaluations of the applicants' were read with great seriousness, and patterns assessed. Those hired had glowing reviews. Indeed, should not students have a voice? Should they not have the opportunity to comment on the experience of their own education? Should not instructors be accountable to those that they teach?

The assessments I received from this first group of students were perhaps no better and no worse than one might expect. There was a group that gave supportive reviews and comments, a group that seemed reasonably neutral, and an angry group that took the time to write scathing and hurtful comments, seemingly designed not only to undermine me professionally but to personally attack me. Again, the common wisdom is that all of us, in our human nature, focus on those assessments which are negative, obsessing over them, while allowing the positive comments to go largely unheard. In the negative, all our secret fears are realized, and a few new ones created. After a sleepless night, I forced myself to find a sense of humour. "Thank God," I thought, "that there isn't a section for wardrobe." (I had often noticed them looking my outfit up and down, leaning over slightly to check my shoes. . .)

> *"Expectations for grades were given after she read all the papers. Marking was unfair and biased"*
>
> *"Did not follow outline."*

"She is very knowledgeable and considerate, yet I thought the assignments were hard to complete because of unclear expectations."

"The instructor never reached half of the students and did little to change her approach. The course began on a good note but quickly lost steam and was a complete waste of time and money. . . "

(Of course, not all of them were negative...)

"Very knowledgeable about kindergarten and children. . . All assignments were very worthwhile and meaningful."

Fast forward to the next September. Although more confident in how I thought I might approach the course, and more prepared to bring my own original ideas into the course, the memory of that wallop to my self-esteem at the end of the previous year created in me brand new anxieties. Much of their negativity was directed to my unfairness in grading and my lack of clarity over assignments. In a way this was not surprising, since the act of grading their major assignments was a confusing and hazy task. I could clearly differentiate between the assignments on a holistic basis, so my practice was simply to divide the assignments in comparison to one another and place them in piles on my dining room table. I would identify the best assignments, then the ones a little less good, then a little less good, and so on, and would place them in piles accordingly. The differences were found in the thoughtfulness, the quality and clarity of the writing, the reflectiveness, the creativity, and the apparent development of a coherent educational philosophy. In one or several of these areas, one paper was simply "better" than another. The pile on the left would receive A's, along with my comments and qualitative feedback. The next would receive an A-, the next a B+, then a B, and so on. Rarely did an assignment receive less than a C. To me there was a clear difference in quality between the A- and the B+ pile, and I would go through them all several times. However it was very difficult for me to articulate the difference, and quite often those receiving a B+ would challenge my mark, and try to pressure me into raising it. Sometimes, to my chagrin, I would relent, not because I felt that they were right, but because I could not clearly articulate to them the difference. They would often complain that I had not been clear enough about what I wanted for the assignment. But it struck me that the best assignments were the ones which gave me something completely different than I had anticipated - the ones that shook the frame of the assignment and had gone beyond it - the student had done

some genuine thinking, some creative response, that helped me to extend my own understanding of the topic. I became frustrated by the sense that what the students wanted was for me to be absolutely explicit about how to create an A paper, so that they could go home and replicate it. I resisted creating rubrics and handing out sample assignments for this reason. The second year, I was only marginally more confident about my marking. Now, I had 40 students in my class, and the marking became truly enormous, since I insisted on keeping the weekly journal writing component.

At the same time, I had the opportunity to begin teaching in the brand new Master of Teaching Program, which was in its first full year. I attended professional development days, and tried to wrap my mind around this program which was completely different, from a conceptual level upward. A guest from McMaster University came to teach us how to run a class based on case study. This program was meant to be inquiry driven. The classes were small, and we were to take the role of tutor or facilitator, particularly in the case study process, which was meant to be the "backbone" of the program. The program was credit/non-credit, with narrative assessment provided once or twice a term, as well as continuous informal feedback.

This teaching experience on Tuesday afternoons was in stark contrast to my agonizing Thursday mornings. It also was challenging and complex, but much more exciting. I was able to form relationships that were much closer, much more personal, much more positive and rewarding with my case group. I came to realize along with these fifteen students the difference it made to be providing continuous feedback, not in addition to grading but *instead* of grading them. To be sure, they needed time to adjust to the process of a pass/fail system. Not everyone was happy, especially at first. Many floundered without the reassurance of a grade; they felt they didn't "know where they stood" despite truly extensive written feedback, having learned to depend on the ranking. But it freed me to assess their weekly case work in comparison to their previous week's case work, in the context of my formative comments, rather than assessing their case work in relation to that of the group. I didn't have to compare Susan, a quiet and unsure ESL student from China with a background in mathematics, with Brenda, a confident and capable young woman who had just completed a law degree. I could work with both of them to improve their work: Susan to improve her comprehension and writing ability, to encourage her to speak up in class, and Brenda, to see the case work in terms of possibility, to learn to value ambiguity, rather than to sew up tight arguments with no possibility of other voices.

This first experience absolutely sold me on the case study process and on the MT Program. I believe that the assessment practices associated with this program were an essential aspect of this teaching and learning experience. We were also assessed by students in this program, with thorough written evaluations. The vulnerability of being assessed by students continued to make me pause and take a deep breath before opening

the envelope. The comments were still not all positive, but somehow the place that they flowed from seemed different. Suggestions for improvement were stated this way, rather than in angry attacks. Certainly with experience, my teaching in a University context and within the context of the program continued to refine. I tried never to anticipate or think of those assessments when making pedagogical decisions. I tried to learn to hear the good comments and take them into myself at least as deeply as the negative ones. I tried to learn from constructive criticism that was consistent over time that might point to ways I could become a better teacher. But contrast the quality of some of these comments with the ones from the graded course.

> *"Michelle's passion for teaching came through in her style. She encourages diversity of ideas and critical thinking."*
>
> *"She encourages interaction and participation and takes the time to read <u>all</u> of our assignments and respond to them."*
>
> *"The feedback given was always constructive. She asked questions that pushed me to think deeper and question my assumptions. The class was very interactive."*
>
> *"Michelle challenged us to think of ourselves as professionals."*
>
> *"Was specific with feedback, offering ideas and revealing strengths. Feedback on weaknesses was worded in an encouraging manner."*
>
> *"Very supportive, understanding, interested and LISTENS."*
>
> *"Lots of discussion is encouraged. Perhaps more facilitation and guidance."*

Overall, I would characterize a different quality in the feedback from the MT Program, which focused strikingly on the nature of the pedagogical relationship developed with the students, and in what ways they felt supported or not supported. This was true for both the positive and negative comments. The comments from the graded course focused on my competence and fairness. This was true for both the positive and negative comments. There were far fewer comments regarding my expectations for the non-graded course; the question

of fairness rarely arose. They often made comments in relation to their own growth. Their learning, rather than their grade and the fairness of it, became the issue.

In truth, by and large, I have received far more than my share of glowing commentary, and this heartens me and increases my confidence. My suspicion is that my qualitative and formative assessment of the students, rather than a comparative grading scale, helped to free the pedagogical relationship as well. Is there still a power differential? Yes. But perhaps this is mediated to some extent by the supportive role I was able to attempt with my assessment practices. Greater trust was allowed to flourish. Over time, they learned that my intent was to support their work, to encourage their growth, to have high expectations for their work, to challenge their thinking, and to genuinely engage with their ideas rather than to judge and compare them to their peers. I also learned the value of being able to encourage the excellent students to continue improving their work and reaching towards what they might become, rather than allowing them to rest complacently on their 'A'.

Through the reflection and interpretation of this experience, I am now considering how the evaluative process between teacher and students does not only flow in one direction, but in two directions, and that my assessment practices in relation to students directly affects the relationship I am able to form with individuals and the group as a whole, which in turn shows up in their experience of me as teacher, as mentor, as human being, which then shows up in their assessment of me, which then impacts my next teaching experience. . . Indeed, the assessment of the teacher by the student is perhaps as aspect of the teaching cycle which we ignore.

It seems to me that traditional assessment practices are in many instances a form of violence - a violation of the trust so central to the pedagogical relationship. In order to heal this relationship, perhaps the forms and mechanisms by which we assess need to become a central focus of our attention.

Conclusion

In each case study trusting relationships grew from the space created by the alternative assessment methods. In each case the authors argue that the importance of the grade and its currency in the educational system was challenged by a focus on what was being learned and how it was learned, students became less competitive, less concerned with being compared to others or "not measuring up." They saw the teacher not as someone finding fault ("where did I lose marks") but as a person supporting and recognising their learning. A more trusting relationship developed where the humanness of the other was recognized. In grade based assignments the teacher is framed as a judge finding a sense of deficiency in the student because he or she was not perfect, not an 'A' student. In the alternative methods the students' assessment of their own development and of the teacher reflected a changing relationship built on a sense of the other.

Although self-assessment by students is not a common practice, even amongst teachers who take assessment seriously, there is overwhelming evidence of the positive results of assessment for learning (Black & Williams, 1998) and the need for students and teachers to develop shared and collaborative ways to assess learning. Cook-Sather (2002) argues for the need to "authorize students' perspectives" and suggests that trust and dialogue are needed if education is to change and evolve. "Because of who they are, what they know and how they are positioned, students must be recognized as having knowledge essential to the development of sound educational policies and practices. Because of who we are, what we know, and how we are positioned, we need to authorize students' perspectives by changing the participant structures" (p.12). However, there is little evidence to suggest that students are involved in their own assessment. There is much work to be done to create a culture in educational institutions where teachers feel comfortable developing assessment strategies and tools with students and where students are able to use a shared language and attitude of assessment for learning. And while there are increasing numbers of examples of theoretical and practical discussions about self-assessment, there is little discussion of the final grading and reporting of the students' progress in alternative assessment situations. Self-assessment ultimately must strive for alternative ways of recognizing and reporting learning progress and success other than letter grades or percentages if the pedagogical relationship between teacher, student and content is truly valued. The agency of assessment, shifting authority from the teacher to the authority of knowledge co-produced collaboratively by student and teacher, must be recognized in ways that convey a depth of meaning to all participants. As reported in Case Study #1 and Case Study #2, this change of reporting practices poses a major challenge in changing structures for most educational institutions where comparison, ranking, and promotion rely on traditional grading practices, but these must be replaced with practices that support and sustain trusting relationships.

Looking Forward

We are now considering how the evaluative process between teacher and students is not linear but rather cyclical. The instructors' assessment practices in relation to students directly affect the relationship we are able to form with individuals and the group as a whole, which in turn shows up in their experience of us as teachers, as mentors, as human beings, which then shows up in their response to us, which then impacts our next teaching experience. . . Indeed, the formal and informal assessment of the teachers by the students is perhaps an aspect of the teaching cycle that we ignore. In professional programs (i.e., Law, Medicine and Education), the learning of content as a mark of professional socialization is fraught with anxiety, trauma, and uncertainty as prospective graduates realize the over-whelming nature of their position. As Haas (1982) comments about the medical

profession, students handle this fear through a ritual “cloak of competence”, which they develop to inspire confidence despite “the underlying unpredictabilities and ambiguities inherent in professional work” (p. 132). We recognize similar concerns in education with students articulating the same fears when assessment structures such as journals and conferencing allow a glimpse of their recognition of personal and professional learning, as well as their unarticulated fears and perceived deficiencies. The ritual nature of professional programs (despite variations in the form of those programs), and the role assessment plays in this process needs to be examined if we are to help students engage in life-long learning with a clearer sense of what they know and the role they themselves play (Samaras and Shelly 1998; Rolheiser 1999). Too often teachers protect their own insecurities and fears by reproducing the violent structures of traditional practices that maintain control and resist ambiguity.

Traditional assessment practices are in many instances a form of violence - a violation of the trust that is central to the pedagogical relationship. In order to develop healthy learning relationships, the forms and mechanisms of assessment need to become a central focus of our attention.

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