Self ≠ on your own
Self-assessment as a consistent part of a truly learner-centred approach

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Have you heard about the European Qualification Framework (or EQF) in the jargon of those who know? No? (Not yet – have a quick look here: http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home_en.htm) Basically it is an attempt to put the presentation skills workshop of a local secondary school and a master's degree in international law into the same reference system – with the desired aim that all over the EU, at some point, all learning outcomes no matter how formal, informal or non-formal their educational context can be attributed with the qualification label "Level…" (1 or 2 or 3… up to Level 8).

I am not mentioning this to argue whether such a framework makes sense or is realistic. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the EQF is comparing learning outcomes and not the content of different educational activities (like when comparing restaurants you do not consider the menu but how you feel once you have eaten something from the menu). This is an aspect the institutional promoters of the EQF consider a very important innovation and do not hesitate to highlight in all their publications about it.

Last year I attended a conference in Brussels on how to include non-formal education into the EQF, or to be precise into the national qualification frameworks. Listening to the presentations – referring to theory as well as practice – I became more and more curious about the "learning-outcomes focus". Who assesses those learning outcomes and how? Naively I asked a presenter from Ireland, where they have a lot of experience with a national qualification framework, if there was self- or external assessment in place. With a slightly puzzled look on her face she replied that there has to be a certain degree of external assessment involved for it to be valid!

There we are – there is increasing acknowledgement that people learn valuable things in all kinds of contexts and forms but exactly what they have learnt we have to tell them; or at least if they know we have to check. In other words there is not sufficient trust in what the learner identifies as his or her learning outcomes.

Why is this so? Well, obviously traditional patterns in formal education have shaped our thinking about learning and its assessment. Where would we end up if everybody just went out into the world declaring what s/he thinks s/he has learnt and is therefore able to do. Shocking! Anarchy! We need to control this! In a university class I am running on lifelong learning, during a discussion about the value of learning acquired outside formal education contexts, a student said: "Well, I understand you can learn soft skills like this but for the real professional qualifications you need formal education to certify your learning – how otherwise would 'clients' know if this person is really qualified?" When I questioned why she was so sure that a person who has a university degree is qualified for a job she argued, "well after so many years of studying…".

Do not get me wrong! I am not lobbying for replacing testing or external assessment in all educational contexts by self-assessment procedures, believing this would solve all our problems. But I do argue that self-assessment of learning outcomes has a huge potential if it is a consistent part of an educational approach which is truly learner-centred and promotes principles of trust and support rather than checking and control. We can trust that each learner knows best what s/he needs to learn – and can effectively pursue his or her learning objectives when supported by peers as well as a mentor.

Let's clarify at this point how we understand the prefix "self-" in this context – before images appear of ego-centric learners doing it all on their own. It is about responsibility – self-assessment in this context refers to the fact that the learner is responsible for identifying (and documenting) his or her learning. Based on the assumption – which has been confirmed to be true many times in the courses we run using this approach – that learning identified through a self-assessment procedure leads to more conscious and consequently more sustainable learning.

"The Self-Perception Inventory (note: this is a self-assessment tool based on a competence profile for trainers) turned out to be a very helpful tool. I filled it out in the 1st seminar and came back to it in the 3rd and it helped me realise my learning achievements, but also the fields that I didn't find important before, but where I now see the need for some improvement. And the other way around: things I found important at the beginning lost their relevance. So, it really showed that learning is not linear and that it depends a lot on where you are at a certain point and that 10 months later, it can change/evolve into something different."

These are the thoughts of a participant of the SALTO course "Training for Trainers for European Youth Projects" (see: www.salto-youth.net/tot).

Self-assessment in such an educational approach has to be evidence based: "What makes you say that you have learnt this?" This evidence would be a combination of self-perceptions and feedback from others in relation to specific experiences that are considered by the learner to be learning moments. Therefore any learning outcome would not be the result of only self-perception.

A truly learner-centred educational approach respects the fact that in any educational activity participants have different starting points (prior knowledge, experiences, competences, etc.) – and when given the chance they develop differentiated learning goals. It is only logical then that the learning outcomes at the end cannot be the same for all participants. How that goes together with a certain level each participant should have reached according to the EQF system, I do not know. This brings us back to an often neglected piece of wisdom that human learning and education cannot – and should not – be forced light-heartedly into standardised schemes especially if appreciation of diversity is an underlying value.

Last but not least, self-assessment of learning outcomes as a consistent part of a truly learner-centred educational approach supports the development of the "learning to learn" competence, which is essential for lifelong learning. The key in this respect cannot be the infinite accumulation of certificates but rather learners who are confident in identifying their learning needs, know how to follow them up, are competent in assessing the outcomes and who belong to a community of autonomous learners supporting each other.

Self-assessment is like painting a picture of your learning where feedback, self-perception, observation, reflection and experience make up the colours.

FRAMEWORK

SELF-PERCEPTION