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Students' Perspectives of Assessment and Learning

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ABSTRACT Students often complain that higher education promotes rote learning, wastes their time, and does not prepare them for their future professional roles. These claims advocate the need for a shift from a 'brain-dumping' assessment perspective to a more learner-centred approach in which students are actively engaged in the discovery or construction of knowledge. Assessment today has become a pivotal focus in promoting student learning, one that is fed by increasing calls to design curricula that provide learning environments to facilitate student learning. The above serves to summarise the ideas that form the background to this article; the article itself focuses on assessment practices that are able to engage Life Skills students at the University of the Free State in their learning. A motivational, behavioural and cognitive model of learning was utilised with a view to investigating how student engagement, learning and assessment may coexist in one particular classroom. A qualitative approach employing focus groups, face-to-face semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires created the opportunity to explore how final-year students in a Life Skills classroom experience learning and assessment. The findings suggest that assessment in a Life Skills classroom ought to provide students with opportunities to construct knowledge in authentic, real-life environments.

INTRODUCTION

Lecturers often hear students asking: "What is the value of this information?"; "Why do I have to study this?"; and "Will it be in the test?". Fook and Sidhu (2010: 154) believe that the impetus for these questions may come from the past, where assessment was not always seen as a process followed to create independent thinking, but rather as one that was followed in order to certify students' learning. A similar sentiment is echoed by a considerable body of knowledge claiming that students should not be tested by simply asking them to retrieve facts; they should rather be given the opportunity to construct knowledge (Broadfoot 2007: 119; Cauley and McMillan 2010: 6; Fook and Sidhu 2010: 154). From the latter perspective it can be understood that assessment should be viewed as an integral part of teaching and learning, and not as an add-on to them (Black and Wiliam 1998: 1-54; Black and Wiliam 2001: 1; Geyser 2004: 90; McMillan 2007: 7). The focus should be on "assessment to learn" rather than "assessment and learning" (Carless 2005: 42).

The increasing popularity of concepts like independent learning, assessment to learn and self-regulated learning has brought with it a corresponding resolve among educators to design courses that will truly prepare students for the rapidly changing world of work. Although an important goal of higher education is to prepare students for their professional roles (Gulikers et al. 2006: 382), it sometimes seems as if there is a discrepancy between what lecturers require from students in their assessment tasks and what the world of work requires (Boud 1995: 35-48). Studies reveal that real-world experiences allow students to activate prior knowledge of the curriculum as well as to see how this knowledge applies to the real world (Andrew 2011: 219, 220). Current society is dynamic, and employers demand that today's employees not only have both profound knowledge and the requisite skills, but that they should also demonstrate flexibility in adapting such skills to tasks requiring complex thinking and in-depth knowledge to solve real-life problems (Schell n.d.: 7).

The foregoing highlights the necessity of finding a new way of thinking about student engagement and assessment. It becomes obvious that assessment should include more than a fact-based curriculum or a "conventional empty vessel perspective" (Broadfoot 2007: 119) where a lecturer merely deposits knowledge in the student's mind and then checks whether he/she is able to retrieve the knowledge, by testing lower-order cognitive skills. A shift is thus advocated from a teacher-centred classroom - where the lecturer transmits all the information to the student, to a learner-centred approach – where students are actively engaged in the discovery or con-

struction of knowledge. It can be argued that in order for assessment to be effective, it must provide students with opportunities for true engagement in learning and for taking ownership of their learning.

Merely changing the teaching practices will, however, not be enough (Heritage 2007: 145). Biggs's constructive alignment theory (1996) views teaching and assessment as inseparable, and further emphasises that both instruction and assessment practices need to change if one aims to enhance learning. This idea stresses the need for authentic learning environments, where students can actively engage in the construction of knowledge (Zhao and Kuh 2004: 115-138; Meyers and Nulty 2009: 565). A practical issue currently confronting teacher-education lecturers is thus how innovatively to apply assessment in the current accountability environment, in order to produce teachers who have the requisite knowledge and employment skills that the future world of work demands. In order to address this issue, it would be useful first to unpack the terms 'authentic assessment' and 'engagement' as they relate to a Life Skills classroom.

There are important differences in how 'authentic assessment' can be conceptualised. For the purposes of this article, the term is understood to be a form of assessment that aims to evaluate students' abilities in real-world contexts, where students can demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge or skills (Mueller 2005: 2; Fook and Sidhu 2010: 153). Hence, in order to perform authentic tasks, students need to be engaged in learning (Linn and Miller 2005, cited in Fook and Sidhu 2010: 153).

There is no singular definition of 'student engagement', since the concept is multidimensional and can be interpreted differently in various contexts (Harris 2008: 58). Engagement in a Life Skills classroom can be defined as the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to promote student learning (adapted from Krause 2005: 1). Chen et al. (2008: 339) widen this engagement frame by reasoning that engagement is characterised by the time devoted to personal study, seeking extra help, behaviour typically associated with self-regulation, or to the students' concentration of attention, cognitive or affective resources. Ainley (2004: 2) adds that although engagement involves the connection between people and activities, the motivation gives direction to the action.

Relating engagement to the Life Skills classroom, Linnenbrink and Pintrich's framework on self-regulated learning (2003) has created an opportunity to explore the complex interrelationship between motivational, behavioural and cognitive engagement.

Theoretical Framework

A number of theories have been advanced to explain how assessment can be used to create self-regulated learning. Although much of the early research on student learning separated motivational and cognitive factors, researchers have recently started to focus on how these factors interact and jointly influence student learning (Linnenbrink and Pintrich 2002: 313-324). Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002: 313-324) emphasise the interrelationship between motivational, behavioural and cognitive engagement by explaining how students' thinking (cognitive dimension) will ultimately determine how they respond to (behavioural dimension) their assignments. Struyven et al. (2005: 325) summarise the situation by stating that students' cognition will influence both their behaviour and their drive for learning (motivational dimension). It seems that the more students study, practise or are engaged in a subject, the more they tend to learn about it (Carini et al. 2006: 2).

By exploring Linnenbrink and Pintrinch's model of self-regulated learning (2003), this article wishes to investigate how learning, engagement and assessment can coexist in one particular higher education classroom. The power of assessment thus becomes evident when it is used to stimulate engagement, to motivate students to be engaged in learning and to develop self-directed learners.

The above discussion provides the background to this article, which examines authentic assessment practices that provide opportunities to engage students in their learning. The use of Linnenbrink and Pintrich's (2003) self-regulated learning model can provide a framework for operationalising assessment.

The next section explores how the three interrelated components, namely motivation, behaviour and cognition, were addressed by engaging students in a research and community service project.

METHOD

A case-study design employing face-to-face semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and open-ended questionnaires was used to investigate how students view assessment and learning. Willis (2008: 210) argues that implementation of the case study design enables a researcher to look at a phenomenon holistically in its natural context. The rationale for employing specifically the case-study research design was that assessment could be investigated within its real-life context, and that the "what" and the "how" questions regarding assessment in the Life Skills classroom could be answered (Trafford and Leshem 2008: 89). In a Life Skills module it is expected that students are provided with authentic learning experiences to develop both knowledge (what) and skills (how), which are transferable to real-life situations. The purpose of this study was not to generalise but rather to gain insight into and an understanding of how learning and assessment is understood in the Life Skills module.

As part of their assessment the students participating in this study were given a research project in the first semester, while in the second semester they were expected to initiate and run a community service project. These assessment tasks had the following objectives in mind: (1) to expose students to different contexts in which they could apply their knowledge; (2) to develop autonomy in learning; and (3) to allow students to reflect on their learning.

After piloting, the interview schedules were refined for data collection. The questions focused on students' perspectives of learning, engagement, assessment and assessment methods, their motivation and their experiences of assessment. As Afrikaans-speaking students were in the majority, three FGDs with 5 - 10 members in a group were conducted in Afrikaans. Another was conducted in English – according to the participants' choice. Purposive sampling was used to invite students to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Three lecturers were also invited to participate in the individual interviews. This was done because some lecturers had experience in Life Skills assessment, while others added a new perspective to learning and assessment in the Life Skills classroom by reflecting on their own assessment in their own specific field of expertise.

Ten face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted. The researcher did not want to use the same students in both the FGDs and the semi-structured interviews. This was done so as to gather information on the different perspectives of participants, as Flick (2009: 448) clearly states that effective triangulation implies that researchers should aim to obtain data on different levels and not only in similar shapes. Both instruments were used to capture a more complete dimension of the students' perspectives of learning and assessment in the Life Skills classroom. Participants for the semi-structured interviews were chosen in accordance with the guidelines laid down by Flick (2009: 123), which meant that participants had to be available during the June/July holidays; be barred from participating in the FGDs; have knowledge of and some experience in assessment in general, but also specifically in Life Skills; and be capable of reflecting critically and articulately on the questions.

This research focused on ways to enhance learning specifically through assessment in the Life Skills classroom. The case study was thus limited to a specific group, namely fourth-year students in the Life Skills classroom at the University of the Free State. The population comprised 78 registered female students between 23 and 26 years of age, of whom 69 were Afrikaans speakers and 9 English speakers. They were all registered for the Life Skills Education module (DLS 112), and most would continue with the Life Skills Education module (DLS 122) in the second semester. Life Skills is one of four subjects (the others being Mathematics, Home Language and Additional Language) currently being taught in the Foundation Phase in primary schools. The DLS modules are therefore compulsory in the Foundation Phase curriculum.

The object of analysing the data was to break them down into segments in order to determine the categories, relationships and assumptions that informed the students' views of learning and assessment, and then to make sense of the information. The qualitative data yielded three categories, namely the meaning of assessment, engagement and feedback. As the data collected and analysed in the research are too extensive to be discussed in one article, the focus here will only be on the way engagement informs learning and assessment in one particular classroom.

Ethical considerations in the study were based on guidelines suggested by Fraenkel and Wallen (2008: 63-65) and Henning et al. (2004: 73). Care was taken to respect ethical issues like anonymity, informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, privacy, and conducting interviews in a relationship of trust and transparency. Ethical approval was also officially obtained from the relevant department.

Lincoln and Guba's model (1985) for verifying the data, as discussed in Mertens (2010: 225-267), was used to ensure that the findings were trustworthy. Credibility was enhanced by means of triangulation and peer examination. All participants were briefed about the focus of the study and they expressed their willingness to participate in the research. All consented to the recording of the interviews. Participants were allowed to check and verify the interview data (Mertens 2010: 256-257). Dependability was ensured by means of an audit trail of the data-gathering process using multiple sources of data methods and data collection. Conformability was similarly enhanced by means of a degree of neutrality in that the findings were shaped by the participants' perspectives, not through a research bias. Trustworthiness was enhanced by recording the interviews and transcribing them verbatim, so as to ensure an accurate reflection of participants' views. Transferability was enhanced by means of a dense description of the data, and further by maximising the range of information that could be obtained from and about the assessment context by purposefully selecting participants (Mertens 2010: 256).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, the main purpose of assessment should be to serve and support learning (Black et al. 2004: 10; Carless 2005: 42). This means that in the Life Skills classroom we should move away from the idea that assessment focuses solely on the quality of teaching, and must accept that assessment should also focus on the quality of learning. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002: 313) emphasise that motivational, cognitive and behavioural engagement do coexist, support and complement one another during learning in an educational context. The role of assessment in this complex relationship will be explored by examining the perspectives on learning and assessment, and also alternative approaches to authentic assessment.

Perspectives on Learning and Assessment

Although the idea of student-centred learning makes sense, studies reveal that student perspectives are often overlooked when investigating assessment (Brown et al. 2009: 4). The argument can thus be made that if lecturers were to know how students felt about and experienced learning and assessment, they would potentially be in a better position to evaluate whether the intended assessment tasks would indeed engage students in learning. If we consider the impact that assessment methods can have on student learning, it seems that students' perspectives should be considered when planning assessment experiences in a Life Skills module.

Motivational Engagement

This can be defined as students' energy and drive to achieve their potential (Martin 2006: 73). When students are motivated, they will understand their role in the learning process, become independent learners and assume responsibility for their own learning (Wingate 2007: 393). On the other hand, one can argue that unmotivated students are not interested in engaging in learning, and that disengaged students will not expand their abilities and skills. Pears (2010: 1-2) adds that students' beliefs about their own abilities will influence what and how successfully they will learn. Therefore, if students do not want to do anything, the motivation will simply fade away.

According to Dixon and Ecclestone (2003: 117), our everyday image of student motivation tends to comprise either intrinsic or extrinsic factors. The focus of this article is not the exploration of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation; it is rather the dynamics of student engagement in learning. Although the exploration of extrinsic and intrinsic factors per se can be regarded as material for another study, one nevertheless has to concede that motivation does fluctuate between external and internal motivation. In many cases there is evidence of the motivational value of marks, when students admit that they are inspired by the act of either passing or of obtaining a distinction:

I want to do well. [[1]Participant 1 SSI]

Marks. [Participant 4:1; 1:1, 3:4 FGD; Participant 4 SSI]

Marks, yeah! [Participant 4:2 FGD]

To get a distinction. Ooh! [Participant 4:3 FGD]

The implication of the above perception is that students only driven by marks will probably gauge their success by the marks obtained. For example:

... and to you it is, I find it rather gratifying when I know I have learned hard and I [then] get good marks. Then you are proud of yourself. [Participant 2:3 FGD]

The above comments seem to indicate that students, who have invested effort and have performed well, will feel proud. One could ask how one is to shift students' focus from marks to learning, when it seems that students are instrumental consumers driven only by the extrinsic motivation of their marks (Higgins et al. 2002: 54).

In addition to marks, knowledge and vocational value were also identified as motivators in respect of being engaged in learning:

A person wants to learn. You want to be an expert in your field. [Participant 2:3 FGD]

The only reason I studied so hard is because at the end of this year, I can go and do what I am supposed to go and do – I can go and teach. [Participant 3:10 FGD]

Comments such as the above emphasise that students want to know the subject and want to use this knowledge when they commence teaching. Successful functioning in society demands assessment methods in which students have the opportunity to apply their knowledge efficiently and are able to develop conceptual understanding (Gijbels and Dochy 2006: 399).

Following from these arguments, it does seem that active participation can be a key element that may either inhibit or motivate students to realise their potential. This involves active learning, where students are involved in authentic representations of real-life problems. It seems as if students preferred to be involved in situations in which knowledge could be applied practically; as one student noted: "... it always makes more sense practically."

The above discussion leads us to conclude that focused effort with an expectation of success is essential for successful learning. One of the participants referred to the axiom that "success breeds success". This seems to indicate that students may experience a sense of control when they realise that they are capable of success.

The challenge is that the assessment task should motivate all of the students, even though some are less likely to achieve than others. Pears (2010: 1-2) believes that students' belief about their abilities will influence what and how successfully they will learn. This implies that students who are motivated to learn may have a positive self-image as successful learners, and may be more likely to be engaged in their learning.

What about those students who do not experience success, who do not want to ask for help, and who fail to regulate their own behaviour? How can they be helped to build confidence when there is no motivational power in their efforts? The challenge is how to engage students in the Life Skills classroom in order for them to believe that there is something to be achieved. Here the cognitions play an important role.

Cognitive and Behavioural Engagement

Cognitive engagement amounts to academic study and student learning (Harris 2008: 59). This process consequently involves students' perceptions of academic competency, and may guide their behaviour (Walker and Greene 2009: 463). Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003: 124) maintain that students must think deeply, critically and creatively about the content and must know how to use a variety of strategies to increase their understanding of the learning material. For example, one student noted: "If you grasp the concept, then you will be able to give your own meaning." Metacognitive skills are important, as it is necessary to reflect on learning to increase understanding. A vital element that is likely to affect students' level of motivation will be the way in which students are engaged in the learning.

Studying involves theoretical knowledge, yet it also requires practical components that cannot always be assessed by summative activities such as tests or examinations only. This would involve assessment through active learning, in which students are involved in authentic representations of real-life problems. Bresciani (2006: 1) points out that students often complain that lecturers should rather *show* them something than tell them something. The following comments reflect this view:

Doing something practically is a much better learning experience. [Participant 3:2 FGD]

Practically, yes, so that you can learn ... it's that ... so that all those practical, visual, auditory and tactile ... Yes, so that you ... then you remember better. [Participant 1:13 FGD]

Yes, because then they judge whether the knowledge that you have learned, whether you are able to apply it. [Participant 2:14 FGD]

These comments underline the idea that in order for assessment to be effective, such assessment must provide students with opportunities to be actively engaged in learning. Integrating assessment into learning involves much more than merely memorising facts. One of the participants explained: "It's not just about knowledge ... but [being able] to apply the knowledge." This then means that students must have opportunities to be engaged in worthwhile educational experiences.

Students who want to make sense of learning are on the lookout for links between new information and familiar knowledge. Black et al. (2004: 19) express concern about the way students are involved in the learning process. They argue that in order for students to make sense of learning, a learning environment has to be engineered to involve students more actively in the learning tasks. Knowledge is constructed through active participation and interaction (Biggs 2002: 94). The premise thus seems to be simple: the more that students are involved in the learning process, the better will they understand it. Alternative approaches to assessment can create opportunities for students to be involved in the learning process.

Alternative Approaches to Authentic Assessment

As explained earlier, students participating in this study were given a research and a community service project. Alderman (2008: 13) maintains that engagement implies both investment and effort directed towards the learning, understanding and mastering of knowledge and skills. The goal of the research project and the community service assignments was to combine theoretical and practical knowledge by placing students in authentic situations in which they practised the implementation of life skills.

The research project focused on expanding learning in an authentic context, one where students had to focus on real-world problems in the classroom. Students were expected to conduct a research project during their practical teaching in the first semester in order to explore any aspect of the learning outcome: social development. In the introduction it was emphasised that if we want students to create and regulate their own knowledge, it is important that activities in and around the higher-education classroom should be considered. The research assignment required students to follow a process of careful inquiry while they were in the school classroom, to collect data and to integrate such information with a literature review. Various skills were involved, for example writing, communicating, problem solving, and inter- and intrapersonal and reflection skills. The following comment confirms that different skills were implemented in the process of completing this assignment:

I think that the time we spent in practising our skills was successful. I liked the fact that the assignment did not only involve theory but we also had to collect data and interpret the data. That developed my skills in the Life Skills classroom. [Participant 32 OEQ]

The most learning results from discovery. I experienced the research project as being positive and I feel that this is a very good assessment means of accommodating students at all levels. [Participant 9 OEQ]

The above comments indicate that students did indeed want to be active while learning. The students confirmed that they had been able to practise the skills that they had learned during the theoretical discussions of Life Skills. The following comment highlights the view that this project gave students 'hands-on' experience and a greater in-depth understanding of the life skills taught/learned in the classroom:

This learning experience made me realise the importance of Life Skills in the Foundation Phase. Through the research project I discovered how well a Grade 2 learner is able, for instance, to control his/her emotions and how good their social skills are. In this way, you as teacher discover what the skills are that you have to emphasise so that the learners will perform better. [Participant 32 OEQ)

The following comments significantly add to the perspective that students are motivated by the practical application of Life Skills:

Yes, more practical ... like that community project, understand? Something that you physically have to go and do. [Participant 20 OEQ]

... especially Life Skills, because one can't just have the knowledge and write it down. [Participant 6:1 SSI]

Given the gist of the above comments, it seems that students prefer to do things practically. They believe that it might be easier to write down the knowledge, but that it is not always that easy to apply the knowledge practically. For example:

Yes, but introverts will be very good at simply writing things down ... at writing down all they know. And that seems wonderful. And then the lecturer thinks that this person is wonderful ... this person has wonderful skills. But meanwhile, when he has to stand in front of a class, he stands in there speechless and does not know what to do and ... he isn't even able to communicate with the people. [Participant 1:12 FGD]

I think ... because it puts you in that situation ... Because it is easy just to read in a book what is out there, but if you physically see it, then you can realise: 'OK this needs to be done and OK then we can do this and do that.' [Participant 1:3 SSI]

It thus becomes evident that the students participating in the study supported the idea of active learning and knowledge construction in which they were exposed to real-life situations. They emphasised the importance of the Life Skills module in providing opportunities for them to apply their theoretical knowledge in a setting socially relevant to their prospective classroom situations.

Autonomy Developed

Making sense of what is being learned is one of the key factors underpinning successful learning. Race (2005: 26) explains this important process as "getting your head around it". Getting your head around something implies making use of metacognition and self-regulated learning. Metacognition or learning how to learn is not merely the result of being taught how to use higher-order skills, it also comprises effective learning practices in different contexts. Cognitive engagement was a part of this process, in that students were expected to go beyond the theoretical content that was explained in the Life Skills classroom.

Hagstrom (2006: 33) emphasises the need to blend 'book-smart' and 'sense-smart' skills in the classroom in order to prepare students for their future professional roles. The community service assignment provided students with opportunities to be assessed on learning by doing. The above participant highlighted that "it is not just about knowledge ... you learn to use knowledge and skills". Students need to translate their thoughts and ideas into coherent speech quickly when they have to think on their feet:

It's not just about knowledge. You learn to use knowledge and skills. If you are in a situation, you have to learn to handle it; you have to be able to apply it. [Participant 1:14 FGD]

I think it better teaches you to think on your feet. [Participant 1:12 FGD]

Because one day, in the classroom situation, you have to be able to think on your feet. [Participant 1:13 FGD]

When students want to present information or give an opinion, they must be well informed. The integration between cognitive and behavioural engagement is clear in that the student noted that "you are physically there ... and you realise this needs to be done".

Students were expected to choose any group of learners from a deprived environment and to introduce them to one specific Life Skills learning outcome, namely physical development and movement. Students had to organise and plan the project, choose between working individually or in teams, and whether they would spend all three hours on one day with the group or whether they would go there on different occasions. They had to integrate this practical experience with a literature review to justify why the specific activities had been used, and how these were applicable to that age group.

Against the backdrop of the above discussion, it would seem that an important part of helping students to manage Life Skills learning is providing them with opportunities to apply their own life skills. Not only did the community project expose students to an authentic experience, but they were given an opportunity of engaging in problem solving, teamwork, communication and self-regulated learning, in that they had to plan and organise the project, work together and write a report by integrating a literature review with the practical application. Some students included a Photoshop Compact Disk

to explain the project visually, meaning that technological skills were also stimulated.

Some students were negative about the assignment: "At first it was a headache to think that I also had to make time for this." Other students mentioned that they would have preferred to do this assignment during the first semester, because at the end of their fourth year they find it difficult to manage time effectively. Yet it seems as though it did contribute to personal growth and development. Volke (2002: 1-3) explains that student engagement actually involves psychological investment in learning where students will be affected by their motivation. The emphasis should shift from getting a good grade to the development of focus.

Although one or two students complained about the time they had had to invest in this assignment, most participants indicated that they had enjoyed doing it. According to Stiggins and Chappuis (2005: 11-18), when students are involved in collecting evidence of their achievement they develop insight into themselves as learners, which means that they are cognitively and behaviourally engaged in the learning.

During the FGDs informants were asked whether they considered Life Skills education to have changed some of their attitudes. However, those students who answered this question were not convinced that Life Skills had influenced their attitudes regarding certain aspects. However, at the end of this project students clearly indicated that personal growth had in fact occurred:

Giving is certainly one of the most enriching experiences. No amount of money can buy such experiences. Meaning something to your community engenders personal growth. Thank you for this opportunity to make a difference. [Participant 17 OEQ]

This [community] service also helped me to grow personally and to learn more about myself. [Participant 34 OEQ]

The assessment tasks in question not only served to balance cognitive, motivational and behavioural engagement, but also enhanced the impact of 'real-life'" experiences on students' personal development. It becomes clear that effective assessment implies that students should actually learn and not merely be taught. The core mission of designing assessment activities for Life Skills therefore involves careful consideration of the purpose of the tasks.

The focus of assessment should not be on marks or certification only, but rather on whether it will assist the student in becoming an independent and self-managing learner. Central to this idea is the notion that the purpose of the assessment task is one of serving student learning.

CONCLUSION

Much of the research on assessment focuses on alternative assessment methods, and propagates the advantages of these methods. Rather than reiterate the generic advantages of authentic assessment strategies, the aim of this article has been to report on a study that investigated mechanisms for learning through assessment.

What emerges from the data is that although assessment in a Life Skills classroom should focus on learning, the students must however want to learn. In other words, the assessment should be used in such a way that the learning itself becomes the source of satisfaction. This action is important, because the findings suggest the importance to students of feeling motivated, which in turn can enhance their self-esteem and increase their chances of future success.

With this in mind, one can anticipate that authentic assessment tasks can create opportunities for students to be motivationally, cognitively and behaviourally engaged in their learning. Students would then be able to demonstrate meaningful application of the theoretical aspects they have learned. The findings of the present study indicate that when students immersed themselves in authentic settings, they practised the skills of organising, analysing, thinking critically, managing their time and reflecting on their experience. These actions stimulate higher-order thinking, that underpins self-regulated learning.

Assessment experiences of this nature will not only enhance students' learning, but will also widen their perspectives and provide opportunities for personal growth. Whatever the form of the assessment task, it can potentially provide students with a variety of learning experiences when they have to interact with learners – when they are confronted with real-life problems. Students will have opportunities to demonstrate that they have developed the neces-

sary knowledge and skills – such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving competency, self- and time management, empathy and interpersonal skills – required of future Life Skills educators.

The above ideas frame the conclusion that assessment is an integral part of the learning experience, and implies that lecturers need to be mindful of the purpose of the assessment tasks while planning assessment activities. Thus, from both a theoretical and a practical point of view, it can be expected that assessment has the potential to influence student learning positively and to prepare students for their future roles as teachers.

NOTE

1. Researcher's code of data: semi-structured interviews – SSI; focus group discussions – FGD; open-ended questionnaires - OEQ

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