Giving students greater responsibility for their own learning: portfolio assessment and peer marking as tools for promoting self directed learning in a second year law course

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Abstract

This article describes and reflects upon two elements of the assessment scheme portfolio assessment and peer marking which I adopted for a second year law course at the University of KwaZulu Natal in 2003 in order to promote self directed learning. The article also presents students’ perceptions of the scheme. An analysis of the findings indicates that most students designated themselves big gainers from this assessment scheme and in particular that it facilitated self directed learning, or at the very least, some form of self directed learning. The basic assumption underlying this article is that assessment strategies (such as portfolio assessment and peer marking) in which students assume greater responsibility can play an important role in promoting self directed learning.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that assessment is an indispensable part of teaching and learning and that it serves a number of functions (Armstrong and Conrad 1995; AVCC 1993; Ramsden 1992; Yorke 1990). According to Armstrong and Conrad (1995), assessment not only helps students evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their understanding but also enables the teacher and the student to determine whether student learning has been achieved. Ramsden (1992) contends that assessment is ‘about getting to know our students and the quality of their learning’. It therefore affords a ‘means of diagnosing difficulties that students are experiencing in learning the content of the subject’ (Armstrong and Conrad 1995, 93). For Le Brun and Johnstone (1994), assessment provides a basis for teachers to evaluate their own teaching and the effectiveness of their courses. In short, assessment can be used to promote student learning as well as measure it (Ramsden 1992).

There is also a consensus in the educational literature that students’ approaches to learning are directly affected by the type of assessment used (see Entwistle 1996; Le Brun and Johnstone 1994; Boud 1990). Thus, if assessment allows for inappropriate rote learning, then students will respond accordingly. Often, in law, assessment seems to be used largely, if not solely, for ‘feedout’ purposes; that is, it
has often acted as a ‘ credentialing ’ mechanism and does little to promote student learning ( Le Brun and Johnstone 1994, 181; see also Knight 2002, 276). Consequently, scholars such as Le Brun and Johnstone (1994) contend that, in order to improve student learning in law, teachers need to realise that assessment can be used to promote teaching and learning. Le Brun and Johnstone (1994) emphasise the importance of law teachers learning about and adopting a variety of assessment schemes so that they are in a position to be able to offer a ‘ variety of assessment tasks that will promote genuine learning ’.

In similar vein, Gipps (1994) argues the case for designing assessment schemes that ‘ will have a positive impact on teaching and learning ’ ( see also Fisher 1988, 143 ). For Boud (1988), high quality learning outcomes may be achieved by increasing the control that students have over their own learning ( see also Le Brun and Johnstone 1994; Watkins and Regmi 1990 ). In regard to assessment, Falchikov (1995) asserts that it is evident from the scholarly literature that increased student involvement in the assessment of their own work and the work of others is beneficial to students. Thus, giving students some responsibility for their own learning is seen as a means of enhancing student learning ( Boud 1988 ).

The above views are consistent with prevailing conceptions of teaching as a learner-centred activity ( Le Brun and Johnstone 1994; AVCC 1993; Ramsden 1992; Barnett 1992; Candy 1991 ). According to the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (1993), effective university teachers provide students with, among other things, ‘ opportunities to be involved in the structuring of their own learning experiences, and encourage them to take control of their own learning ’. In similar vein, Le Brun and Johnstone (1994) suggest that a main aim of law teaching is to develop student responsibility and independence. Consequently, they argue, teachers should consider designing learning situations in which students are allowed to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. These views inform my approach to teaching.

In this article, I describe and reflect upon the assessment scheme that I adopted for a second-year law course which I taught during the second semester of 2003 in the Howard College School of Law at the University of KwaZulu-Natal ( ‘ the School of Law ’), as a means of promoting self-directed learning. The article focuses on two elements of the assessment scheme – portfolio assessment and peer-marking. The basic assumption underlying this article is that assessment strategies ( such as portfolio assessment and peer-marking ) in which students assume greater responsibility can play an important role in promoting self-directed learning and can ultimately improve the quality of student learning. However, I do accept that ‘ assessment can inhibit and threaten students learning as well as providing incentives and rewards ’ ( Fisher 1988, 143 ).

The section that follows represents a shift from the theoretical basis of assessment to assessment in practice. Thus, I describe the assessment scheme and the course within which the scheme was adopted. Next, I provide a brief account of
my students’ perceptions of and response to the assessment scheme. In the final section of the article, I outline some insights that I gained from the project and attempt to draw some conclusions from the findings.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ASSESSMENT SCHEME

The course

The course in which the assessment scheme was adopted is ‘Interpretation of Law’ – a compulsory, second-year 8-credit point course offered within the four-year undergraduate Bachelor of Laws (LLB) degree within the School of Law. The aim of the course is to introduce students to the various rules and principles which the South African courts use to determine the correct meaning of legislative provisions to be applied in the cases before them. The course extended over one semester and catered for 148 students. The main method of instruction was through two 45-minute lectures per week, supplemented by a 45-minute tutorial every second week.

At the beginning of the course, I provided each student with a Course Outline, which set out in clear terms, the objectives of the course, expressed in terms of ability-based learning outcomes; that is, what students should be able to do at the end of the instruction that they were not able to do at the beginning of it (Taylor and Marienau 1997; Le Brun and Johnstone 1994, 134; Hort and Hogan 1988) and informed by Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of objectives. This course synopsis provided information on the scope, aims, objectives, and assessment scheme of the course as well as topics of study and information concerning the administration of the course. It also contained information concerning my expectations in regard to performance standards, workload, and assessment requirements. The specific learning outcomes were consonant with the overall objectives of legal education (that is, imparting knowledge of substantive law, issue recognition and analysis, and lawyering skills) as identified in the relevant scholarly research (see Twining 1994; Broocke 1990; Ogden 1984; Barnhizer 1979; Cohen 1954).

It should be noted that the course was not team-taught: I was coordinator and sole lecturer of the course. This allowed me a large measure of freedom in regard to choice of approaches to teaching and assessment.

The assessment scheme

Rationale

In many law courses, the standard assessment scheme comprises tests, assignments and examinations. For example, out of the 40 law courses offered by the School of Law in 2003, 30 had assessment schemes based almost exclusively on tests and examinations. In all these courses, the final examination accounted for 69.7 per cent (on the average) of the total course mark. In the first semester of 2003, the
assessment scheme in Interpretation of Law consisted of an assignment and a written examination at the end of the semester accounting for 25 per cent and 75 per cent, respectively, of the total course mark.

According to Biggs (1992), the choice of assessment schemes is difficult to make as it reflects the tension ‘between logistical convenience and sound educational practice’ (see also Gipps 1994). In my context, the choice was rendered even more difficult for two reasons. First, owing to the large number of students registered for the course, it was tempting to subordinate ‘sound educational practice’ to administrative convenience by retaining the cheaper and less time-consuming standard assessment methods; that is, tests, assignments and examinations. Second, there is virtually no scholarly research on assessment in law as it affects student learning (Le Brun and Johnstone 1994, 216) which could provide me with some guidance. Nevertheless, I was open to experimentation and prepared to learn from my mistakes. With the benefit of information from the available scholarly research on the subject, I elected to try a variety of assessment strategies, central to which was the student portfolio.

There are several reasons for my choice of assessment scheme. However, the primary motivation was to attempt a shift from a dependent mode of education which characterises many students’ experiences at high school and which many second-year students in the School of Law seemingly retain, to an independent mode of learning where the teacher assumes the role of resource and the focus is on self-directed learning. A related consideration was the need to ensure that the students were free from excessive stress and anxiety which may inhibit learning (Glesner 1991).

First, according to a colleague who taught the course in the first semester of 2003, and as confirmed by the students’ own reflections on the course, Interpretation of Law is a ‘dry and boring’ course. The failure rate in the course, at 38 per cent, was ‘quite high’. While I did not have any evidence to support the conclusion that the failure rate was attributable to the assessment methods used (assignment (25 per cent) and written examination (75 per cent)), in my estimation, such a situation called for the adoption of new assessment methods (see Gibbs, Habeshaw and Habeshaw 1986) that would not only enable students to be more actively involved in the learning process but would also offer students disadvantaged by one assessment method occasion to compensate on another.

Second, although written examinations are popular in law, there is much scholarly research that points to the limitations of examinations in promoting student learning. For example, Elton (1982) argues that the ‘traditional . . . examination . . ., in which a student answers in two to three hours some few questions . . ., is worryingly unreliable’. Similarly, Cole et al. (1995) assert that examinations represent ‘a limited, microscopic, and incomplete view of students’ abilities’. In the context of law teaching, Le Brun and Johnstone (1994) question the emphasis placed on the hypothetical written examination as the ‘central examination mode’. Conversely, they propose that law teachers should consider
‘complementing the standard exam hypothetical with a variety of other assessment tasks that cater for differences in our students and that reflects the various tasks they will perform in the workforce’. Similarly, the AVCC (1993) urges ‘effective’ university teachers to adopt a combination of assessment techniques which satisfies ‘the criteria of validity, fairness, and appropriateness for subject goals’ (see also Loacker and Jensen 1988; Currie 1986). These proposals are, in my view, consonant with the student-centred approach to teaching and learning.

Third, I was concerned about the ‘rote learning’ disposition or ‘surface’ approaches to learning of my students as evidenced by, for example, their requests for hints in regard to tests and examinations. Discouraging this disposition and encouraging a ‘deep approach’ to learning was thus an important consideration for me in introducing a new assessment scheme.

Fourth, I believed that the use of a range of approaches to assessment would enable students disadvantaged by one assessment technique to compensate on another (Gipps 1994; Le Brun and Johnstone 1994). Therefore, the assessment scheme that I adopted for the course not only comprised both formative and summative elements but was also designed to measure a variety of abilities and to minimise student anxieties (Glesner 1991).

Fifth, it has been argued that the anonymity of students in large classes tends to reduce student morale and motivation and responsibility for learning (Le Brun and Johnstone 1994, 268). Given the large number of students on the course, I formed the view that utilising the portfolio as the central element in the assessment scheme would not only reduce the perceived anonymity but would also help ensure that students assumed greater responsibility for their own learning by becoming more involved in the assessment process.

Finally, I espouse the suggestion by the AVCC (1993), that effective university teachers ‘[s]elect from a range of assessment methods for each subject, a combination of methods which meets the criteria of validity, fairness, and appropriateness for subject goals and specify these clearly and unambiguously’.

The challenge for any assessment method is therefore to ensure that it addresses the learning outcomes intended by the teacher (Armstrong and Conrad 1995). As Le Brun and Johnstone (1994) argue, objectives provide criteria against which teachers can guide, assess, evaluate and monitor students’ learning. These suggestions had a profound influence on my choice of the assessment methods. Significantly, I was mindful of the need for a link between the assessment techniques and the objectives of (legal) education and of selecting assessment techniques that encouraged a ‘deep approach’ to learning rather than a ‘surface approach’ (Biggs 1990; Marton and Saljo 1984).

The assessment scheme that I decided to introduce comprised several elements: a student portfolio (which was to be peer-marked), two tests, and the conventional three-hour end-of-course written examination. I will briefly discuss each of these elements in turn.
Modes of assessment

**The student portfolio**

According to Cole et al (1995), the most ‘desired outcome of portfolio construction is to have students assume learning responsibility and develop a desire to do their best work’. Portfolio assessment is, by its very nature, well suited to facilitating increased student involvement in the assessment process and to giving students greater responsibility for their own learning (Cole et al. 1995, 10). For this reason, and because my main aim in adopting the new assessment scheme was to promote *self-directed* learning in the course, the portfolio constituted the most important part of the assessment scheme.

Following Belanoff (1994), I decided to use portfolio assessment as a framework for: (1) *motivating* the students; (2) providing *feedback*; (3) *diagnosis* of the strengths and weaknesses of the students; and (4) establishing the students’ *level of achievement* at the end of the course. The key idea was that students should be able to provide an account of their learning in the course through self-selection of their best work and reflection on these. This was communicated to the students through the *Guidelines for Preparation of the Course Portfolio*, copies of which were circulated at the beginning of the course. Clarifications to the *Guidelines* were made as and when necessary.

In regard to content, the suggestions by Cole et al. (1995) and Brown (1999) were informative. Cole et al. (1995) argue that, in order to be effective, portfolios should contain a variety of materials to enable all concerned to get an ‘accurate picture of the student’s development’. Following Cole et al. (1995) and Brown (1999), the students were required to compile, maintain and subsequently submit a portfolio in ring-binder form, which included a table of contents, a signed student learning contract or statement of personal goals, and self-selected student work samples (including test scripts, case summaries, and lecture notes). The learning contract or statement of personal goals was included as it is generally considered useful for ‘managing self-directed learning and to manage self-assessment’ (Boud 1989, 26; see also Brown 1999).

As stated above, the primary aim of the assessment scheme was to promote self-directed learning. Consequently, following Cole et al. (1995), the students were required to include a reflective statement on each piece of work submitted. Further, each student was required to submit a reflective essay of not more than 500 words with their portfolio. The focus of the essay was on the reasons why the student thought the samples they had selected for inclusion in the portfolio were their best work; the student’s activities, issues, difficulties, and anxieties in the course; their achievements in the course (if any) and further advances they wished to make; and their reflections on these issues (Cole et al. 1995, 16). Thus, the portfolio was designed to provide an indication of each student’s development over the semester as a result of their participation in the course.
Students were also required to submit case summaries as part of their portfolios because cases constitute one of the most important teaching materials in law (Le Brun and Johnstone 1994, 248).

The large number of students on the course entailed large volume marking and feedback on my part, which I could not attend to in a realistic and manageable way. Consequently, an important part of the portfolio assessment was peer-marking (as opposed to peer-assessment). I opted for peer-marking because I considered that my students lacked the capacity to engage in peer-assessment, and, in any event, to implement peer-assessment was not possible given that this type of assessment requires time and the semester was, in my view, too short to allow for successful implementation of such a scheme.

The peer-marking exercise took place during a lecture period at the end of the semester. Copies of a peer-marking sheet were again circulated, which contained criteria against which the students were to mark each other’s work. The students were randomly paired up and each pair exchanged their portfolios for marking. Prior to the students embarking on the exercise, I explained the marking criteria to them to ensure that they understood what was required of them. Peerarkers were required to write their student number and that of the peer whose portfolio they were marking on the peer-mark sheet. After the peer-marking exercise, I collected all the portfolios and peer-mark sheets, and marked the portfolios independently using the same mark sheet. I then compared the peer-mark and my mark for each portfolio. Although there was generally very little difference between the peer-marks and my own marks, there were a number of cases of over-marking—a tendency that has been reported in previous studies of peer-assessment (Falchikov 1995).

**Tests**

These appear to be a standard requirement in the School of Law although the weight accorded to them varies from course to course. In keeping with the institutional ethos, I retained the test as one of the assessment methods in my course. However, there were two important differences. First, instead of a single test as was the case in the first semester, I decided to give my students two tests in the hope that they might, if necessary, be able to compensate for poor performance on the one test with a better performance on the other, after having received some feedback on their performance in the first test. Second, unlike in the first semester, the test accounted for 20 per cent of the course mark.

In terms of content, the first test consisted of essay, short-answer and problem-type questions. The second test was different: it contained multiple-choice questions and a cross-word puzzle. The reason for this was that most students had performed poorly on the first test and I attributed this performance to a poor grasp
of the relevant concepts and principles. The multiple-choice questions and crossword puzzle were therefore designed to assess the student’s understanding of these basic concepts and principles.

- **The written examination**

This consisted of the conventional law school three-hour examination designed to test students on their understanding of various topics. The examination consisted of short answer questions, short essays and the standard law school ‘problem-type’ questions (Brooke 1990; Mack 1993). However, the weighting of the examination within the new assessment scheme was 50 per cent – unlike the first semester’s assessment scheme where the examination contributed 75 per cent towards the course total. The reason for attaching less weight to the examination was to minimise student anxiety associated with preparing for the examination.

In accordance with school policy, the examination was marked by me and moderated by an external examiner.

**FINDINGS**

Having explained the theoretical underpinnings of the assessment scheme that I used in my course, it is apt to discuss the results of the use of the scheme. I will deal first with the problems and issues raised by or connected with the assessment scheme. I will then briefly discuss how the students interacted with the scheme, focusing on the common trends in their perceptions of the scheme against the backdrop (where appropriate) of the scholarly research discussed above.

**Problems and Issues with the assessment**

The effectiveness of any assessment scheme depends on a number of factors. In the context of my course, there were a number of factors that may have militated against the effectiveness of the assessment scheme chosen. These are briefly dealt with below.

**The institutional context**

Educational research suggests that the institutional ethos and environment both have a bearing on teaching and learning, including assessment schemes adopted (see Biggs 1996; Gipps 1994; AVCC 1993; Lunt 1993). In the School of Law, certain ‘entrenched attitudes’ such as the school’s over-emphasis on academic staff research productivity and ‘mass education’ have, in my view, impacted negatively on reflective teaching practice. As Falchikov (1995) maintains, improving student learning requires time. However, the pressure brought to bear upon staff in terms of the legal research productivity requirement means that they are left with little or no time at all for reflection on their teaching. In particular, time-constraints render it impossible for the
conscientious teacher to try out novel assessment methods. In regard to selecting appropriate assessment methods, teachers are forced to choose those methods which they consider not to be too labour-intensive and time-consuming (Biggs 1996). Ultimately, this may encourage ‘surface approaches’ to learning.

Another concern relates to the notion of ‘mass education’ in the South African context. Although I accept that this is linked to the laudable aim of achieving equity and access to education for all, it seems (to me) to be used as an excuse to lower standards (including assessment standards) in order to ensure that as many students as possible graduate. In these circumstances, assessment largely plays a ‘feedout’ function – ‘assessment for accountability’ purposes, as Gipps (1994) describes it.

Being cognisant that ‘entrenched attitudes which support traditional methods of teaching and assessment are hard to change’ (Entwistle 1996), and in keeping with the institutional ethos, I retained the traditional methods of assessment (test and examination), albeit with reduced weighting. However, as a teacher committed to improving teaching and learning I was also prepared to experiment with a novel assessment scheme that accounted for more towards the year mark and which, in my view, promoted self-directed learning and minimised student anxiety.

Students’ concerns

Students often experience problems with assessment for a variety of reasons. These include the fact that they are unaware of what is expected of them, that the workload is excessive, and that the feedback on their work is insufficient (Armstrong and Conrad 1995). In anticipation of these problems, I set out, in very clear terms in the Course Outline, my expectations in the form of course aims and objectives. I also encouraged the students to consult me on any aspect of the assessment or course that they perceived to be unclear. Following Mbali (no date), I utilised the practice of ‘interim checking’ of the portfolios. This was done midway through the semester and enabled me to ‘catch and coach the remedial students’ (Mbali no date).

Apart from a single complaint about ‘high expectations’, no student complained about the assessment workload or requirements.

Self concerns

Since the new assessment scheme was designed to promote self-directed learning, one of my key challenges was how to ensure that the students participated fully in the course activities. At the beginning of the course, each student was required to sign a student learning contract undertaking, among other things, to participate in course activities. This enabled me to discuss perceived performance problems with concerned students against the backdrop of their own commitment to complete course work as stated in the contract.
Although it was a requirement that they participate in the peer-marking exercise, a few students either turned up late or failed to attend the peer-marking session on the appointed day. This created a problem in that I was constrained to arrange another session for these students to mark each other's portfolios.

Further, given the large student numbers as stated above, one of the major problems was how to cope with the large number of pieces of student work in a realistic and manageable way (Brown 1999). Portfolios are quite labour-intensive for both the student and the teacher unlike traditional forms of assessment like essays and exams, since they often involve ‘high levels of interpersonal interaction, with discussion, negotiation and feedback’ (Brown 1999).

Brown (1999) suggests that this problem can be ameliorated to some extent by using a range of assessors such as supervisors, mentors, peers and the students themselves. To deal with the problem, therefore, the portfolios were peer-marked by the students. I then contrasted the student peer-marks with mine and made adjustments where necessary (for example, in cases of over-marking).

Students’ perceptions of the assessment scheme

As stated above, at the end of the course each student was required to submit a 500-word essay reflecting on their experiences, anxieties and difficulties in the course. Although I do not have accurate statistics at this stage, a perusal of the reflective essays indicates that most of the students were satisfied with the method of assessment. A minority of the students complained about ‘high expectations’ raised by the assessment scheme. For example, one student, while acknowledging that ‘course assessment of this nature (that is, the portfolio) is beneficial’, lamented that it sets ‘very high expectations for students to uphold taking into consideration other subjects and responsibilities’.

However, most students designated themselves big gainers from the assessment scheme generally and the portfolio, in particular. Their responses fall into four categories: (1) the scheme minimised student anxiety and stress; (2) it facilitated learning and promoted self-directed learning; (3) it provided students with an opportunity to reflect on the course; and (4) portfolio assessment is a good assessment strategy. For reasons of space, I will set out below only a few student responses which may, nonetheless, serve to illustrate the trends.

The assessment scheme minimised student anxiety and stress

It will be recalled that one of the primary considerations in my decision to adopt the new assessment scheme was to minimise student anxiety, particularly in relation to the final examination. Depending on its type or nature, assessment can impact negatively on learning (Fisher 1988) much in the same way that excessive stress or anxiety can inhibit learning (Glesner 1991). It is mainly for this reason...
that I attached less weight to the examination than it had been accorded in the first semester. My assumption in this regard appears to be validated by the students’ perceptions.

For a number of students, portfolio assessment reduced the pressure and anxiety that they commonly associate with preparing for end-of-course examinations. According to Student ‘A’: ‘[I] realise that there is still a lot of work to be done before the exam, but because of the way this course has been structured, I find that it helps me a lot in that it alleviates some of the pressure that goes with the exam because knowing that you have to work for over 50 per cent in the exam can in itself be a strenuous factor.’

And, in the view of Student ‘B’, ‘[t]his is a productive lecturing strategy that lessens the pressure on the student in relation to the exams, such that he/she may still pass the course on the basis of their continuous assessment, even if there is a possibility that they might fail the exam’.

Similarly, Student ‘C’ stated: ‘[I] must concede that the lecturer made an effort to help us get through the course in the way that the course is structured and the method of assessment in particular because of the lesser emphasis on doing well . . . in the exam in order to get a good mark. As a result I found that there was less anxiety and I was motivated to work harder.’

One student, ‘D’, while pointing out that the workload was ‘a bit steep’, was, nevertheless, of the view that the portfolio had made the course ‘a pleasure to study’. In the student’s estimation, portfolio assessment ‘is much more relaxing than stressing about writing a major exam and praying to pass’.

For Student ‘E’, the fact that portfolio assessment and the test accounted for 50 per cent of the year total not only reduced ‘the pressure during examinations, but also encouraged consistent work’.

The scheme facilitated learning and promoted self-directed learning

I have stated above that my main aim in introducing the new assessment scheme was to promote self-directed learning. I opted to use the portfolio as, among other things, a means of motivating the students (Belanoff 1994) and ultimately facilitating learning. The comments below would seem to indicate that the assessment achieved some measure of success in this regard.

Student ‘F’ (a repeat student): ‘The portfolio encouraged me to work consistently and diligently throughout the semester. I now feel confident and well prepared for the examination ahead. Comparing the last time I did this course . . . I have really improved and gained more knowledge in interpretation of statutes.’

According to educators such as Gipps (1994) and Le Brun and Johnstone (1994), a range of assessment tasks allows learners who are disadvantaged by one assessment method to compensate on another. Comments by some of my students would seem to confirm this. Illustratively, Student ‘G’ remarked: ‘[W]hat I really liked about the course is that the class test and the portfolio form a large percentage
of the final mark. This is very effective as it ensures that all students have the opportunity to perform well in the course and it also encourages them to work consistently.’

For Student ‘H’, who was ‘extremely worried about the high failure rate’ in the course last semester, ‘[I]t was a tremendous relief when Dr Lumina introduced this new way of assessing students, this portfolio together with the test has raised my mark, I am really confident as I can walk into the exam with a great DP . . . Generally, I feel that by . . . not using the conventional way of assessing students which most lecturers use for example only using test marks and assignments, he has helped students who are not so academically inclined . . . .’

It is also evident that some students perceived the assessment scheme as promoting self-directed learning. Thus, one student, ‘I’, was

[E]nthralled by the fact that each student was required to submit a Portfolio as part of their assessment . . . My reason for this is that I am given the opportunity to choose exactly which work I feel is outstanding and submit this for my assessment, rather than just having to write tests which are our only methods of assessment, and in which we may sometimes perform poorly . . . I believe that including a Portfolio is an excellent means of assessment and should be included in the assessment of other courses . . . With a Portfolio, the lecturer is able to determine what each and every student feels in relation to the course. It also creates a sense of independence because we are able to select the material that we believe is the most outstanding . . . [T]he lecturer is able to learn more about a student on an individual basis and their anxieties and high points relating to the course.

Scholars such as Boud (1989) and Brown (1999) have expressed the view that the student learning contract is a useful means of managing self-directed learning. This view is supported by some students’ comments. Thus, for example, Student ‘J’ was of the view that ‘[t]he student learning contract is . . . an important starting point as it lets us know what is expected of us and helps us to formulate and reflect on our own personal goals and aspirations for the course’.

The above comments would appear to confirm my original assumption and the views in the scholarly research that portfolio assessment can help promote self-directed learning.

The scheme afforded students an opportunity for reflection

Cole et al. (1995) suggest that the portfolio can assist students to reflect on their learning in a manner that can enhance student learning. Implicit support for this claim can be found in some students’ remarks. For example, according to Student ‘K’: ‘[S]tudents are given an opportunity to reflect on what they have done in the
course during the semester. This gives us a chance to voice our likes and dislikes about the course . . . and at the same time presents the lecturer with the opportunity to see what he can improve in the course.’

The issue of affording students an opportunity to evaluate their courses and to reflect upon their learning experiences is an important one for teachers who wish to improve teaching and learning. This is because teachers can only improve their teaching through understanding how their students learn (Ramsden 1992).

THE PORTFOLIO IS A GOOD ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

A number of students felt that portfolio assessment was ‘the best way of assessing students and giving them a chance to prove themselves’. They went on to suggest that many students would gain if this method of assessment ‘was used in other subjects’. However, given the institutional ethos adverted to above, it would be interesting to see how receptive the school would be to the students’ suggestion.

In order for portfolio assessment to be implemented successfully, it is important that the teacher provides guidelines to help students prepare for the assessment tasks. This is evident from the words of Student ‘L’: ‘I enjoyed the process and challenges of building this portfolio . . . [I]f I am ever given another portfolio to handle, I am sure I can handle it with confidence due to the guidelines and assistance given to us by (the lecturer) in class and handouts.’

The above responses provide an indication of the trends in the students’ perceptions of the assessment scheme. Although expressed in varying phraseology, there is reasonable agreement that the students benefited from the assessment scheme in the ways outlined above.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have described and reflected upon the assessment scheme which I adopted for a second-year law course in order to promote self-directed learning. I have also presented my students’ perceptions of the scheme. The key components of the scheme were portfolio assessment and peer-marking. It is clear from the foregoing discussion that most students designated themselves big gainers from the assessment scheme. For a number of students, the scheme alleviated the pressure and anxiety associated with end-of-course examinations, encouraged them to work consistently, provided them with an opportunity to reflect upon their learning, and facilitated self-directed learning, or at the very least, some form of self-directed learning.

While the scheme seems to have been a success I am hesitant to draw any final conclusions as I view this project as a work in progress. However, I have learned a number of lessons, the most important of which is that improving student learning and encouraging ‘deep’ rather than ‘surface’ approaches to learning requires time. In order to improve one’s teaching and student learning, one must be prepared to
engage in reflective practice and to experiment. Another lesson learnt is that, to be
guaranteed a measure of success, any assessment strategy designed to promote
student learning must be carefully planned. It also requires a great deal of
commitment.

NOTES

1. Rowntree (1987) provides a good introduction to assessment. See also Barnes (1990

2. In some cases, it may encourage students to engage in last minute cramming and the
 adoption of a ‘surface’ approach to learning (Le Brun and Johnstone 1994, 178). This seems to
 be the situation within the Howard College School of Law at the University of KwaZulu Natal
 where assessment schemes largely consist of tests and examinations with very little variation.

3. In the ‘dependent’ mode of learning, knowledge is merely transferred from teacher to
 student. The teacher takes on the role of expert while the student is a passive receiver of
 information (Griffith 1988, 60).

4. Given the reported tendency of anonymity in large classes to reduce student morale and
 motivation (Le Brun and Johnstone 1994, 268).

5. In peer marking, students employ a set of criteria to evaluate a peer’s work whereas in
 peer assessment, students develop the criteria which they use to evaluate the work of their peers
 (Le Brun and Johnstone 1994, 192).

6. Copies of the peer marking sheet had also been circulated to the students at the
 beginning of the course to help guide them in undertaking the portfolio related tasks.

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