Chapter 1
Working toward Self-Evaluation

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I have not met many educators who say that they enjoy the assessment and grading of learners' work, or find it rewarding. In my research on authentic teaching, when I asked participants what they did not like about teaching, the most common response was that they did not like grading. It was not that they minded giving feedback or comments; most people found giving feedback to be a natural and satisfying part of their practice, but they did not like "giving grades." They worried about fairness, subjectivity, and the power inherent in being the one who judges the work of another person. They worried about "giving grades" acting as an obstacle to a genuine relationship with their learners, and they worried about students being focused on "getting grades" rather than learning.

I was one of those educators for many years. It was when I first became engaged with transformative learning theory in the early 1990's and read Mezirow's (1991) book where he presented his comprehensive adult learning theory that I began to think about assessment in a different way. Mezirow not only expressed his view that transformative learning was a goal of all adult education, but he also quite clearly said that only the learner could tell us when transformative learning had taken place. In other words, learner self-evaluation needed to have a place in adult education in those contexts where we work toward empowerment and emancipatory learning.

I am well aware of the arguments about self-evaluation, and I do not propose that aircraft pilots and heart surgeons have the full responsibility for evaluating their learning, a rebuttal to

self-assessment that I have heard often enough. However, I do propose that in a great deal of adult education, self-evaluation is not only a viable alternative to educator assessment, but that it also teaches people how to judge their own learning, empowers learners, and leads to critical reflection and critical self-reflection—things that we want to happen in just about any context.

It is my intent in this chapter to provide an overview of different kinds of evaluation and a critique of each. I then give an overview and critique of different kinds of knowledge and learning, based on Habermas's (1971) model. This allows me to align different kinds of evaluation with different kinds of learning. I speculate about who can assess learning in what contexts. I present a continuum for moving toward self-evaluation, and I end with a discussion of recommendations for practice. My overall purpose is to demonstrate the role of self-evaluation in the assessment of adult learning.

1.1 KINDS OF EVALUATION OF LEARNING

Instructional design and evaluation texts have long described the different kinds of tests available to educators (multiple choice, true-false, essay, short answer, and the like) and advised us on when to use each. There is nothing new here. But perhaps we can look at the same thing through a slightly different lens and incorporate self-evaluation into the system.

1.1.1 Objectively-Scored Assessments

Objectively-scored assessments are those for which two people grading the test using an answer key, will get the same number of right answers. Included as objectively-scored tests are multiple-choice, true-false, and some short answer tests (such as fill-in-the blank tests where there

is only one possible word or phrase considered to be right, or problem-solving questions where only the answer and not the work leading to the answer is evaluated). Checklists sometimes pose as objectively-scored assessments, but two people using the same checklist and observing the same performance do not necessarily come to the same conclusion.

Objectively-scored assessments are sometimes called "objective tests" since they look objective, but this only exacerbates one of the greatest potential weaknesses of this assessment strategy—they have the illusion of objectivity, and therefore it is difficult to critically question the strategy in general or even one instrument in particular. Our social world is still primarily built around the notion that "objective is good," that rational is better than irrational or extrarational, and that we should be striving to nail down the right answer in our endeavors. It is this thinking that leads people, including educators, to value objectively-scored assessments. However, there are some things to consider here. Some person (educator or subject-matter expert) chooses which content areas to evaluate. Someone chooses which questions to ask. Someone formulates the actual questions. And someone creates the key that contains the right answers. In each of these steps, subjective judgment is involved. This is not a problem *per se*, if the person creating the assessment is knowledgeable in both the subject and test construction practice, but it is not objective in the way that we are led to believe. When we realize that no evaluation of learning is completely objective and therefore can be critiqued and questioned, then we become open to understanding and improving the evaluation process.

1.1.2 Subjectively-Rated Assessments

Subjectively-rated assessments are those that call on the educator or evaluator to judge the quality of the performance or product. People often go to

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