The Real Problem of Self-Assessment: Implications for the Self-regulating Professional

Glenn Regehr, PhD

The Rhetoric of Self-Assessment

- Adult education literature promotes expertise as a process of effective self-reflection
  - Lifelong, self-directed learners
- The health professions have embraced a philosophy of professional autonomy and self-regulation
  - “Demands competent and trustworthy self-assessment by members”

The Reality of Self-Assessment

- Hundreds of articles
- Many literature reviews
- One conclusion:

  Self-assessment ability is generally poor
Three Key Patterns of Data

- Little or no relationship between externally generated scores and self-assessed scores
- All but the very highest performers tend to overestimate ability
- Worst offenders are in lowest quartile of performance

The Result

- Morbid fascination
- Disbelief
- Concern
- Efforts to justify
- Efforts to improve
- (Still no acceptance)

The Problem of Self-Assessment

(why are they so bad at it?)
The Ubiquitous Kruger & Dunning Study

- “Unskilled and unaware”
  - The skills required to know whether you are performing well are also the skills required to actually perform well

Undergraduate Students’ Performance on a Grammar Test

- Actual Scores vs. Perceived Scores (Kruger and Dunning 1999)

Undergraduate Students’ Performance on a Grammar Test

- Actual Scores vs. Perceived (After) Scores (Kruger and Dunning 1999)
Undergraduate Students’ Performance on a Grammar Test

Undergraduate Students’ Performance on a Grammar Test

Undergraduate Students’ Performance on a Humor Test

Kruger and Dunning 1999

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Centre for Health Education Scholarship
Undergraduate Students’ Performance on a Logic Test

![Graph showing actual and perceived scores across different quartiles.]

Kruger & Dunning’s Conclusions

- “Unskilled and unaware”
  - The skills required to know whether you are performing well are also the skills required to actually perform well
  - A form of perceptual deficit

“Domain Specificity” of Self-Assessment

- Good or poor self-assessment NOT a "generalizable" trait of an individual
  - Better for domains where one excels
  - Worse for domains where one is poor
"Domain Specificity" of Self-Assessment

- Good or poor self-assessment NOT a "generalizable" trait of an individual
  - Better for domains where one excels
  - Worse for domains where one is poor
- Therefore:
  - Can’t test for “lack of insight” (cf Hayes, 2002)
  - Can’t teach as a generic skill
  - Domains where you are most likely to need self-awareness are the domains where you are least likely to have it

The Real Problem of Self-Assessment

- Everyone believes this is a “they” problem
- Everyone thinks they are above average in self-assessment ability

“It is impossible to make people understand their ignorance, for it requires knowledge to perceive it; and therefore, he that can perceive it hath it not”

-Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667)
Perpetuating the Myth of Accurate Self-Assessment

- Easy to find extreme examples of “knowing” where you are weak
  - I would never go on American Idol (obviously I have more insight than those people)
  - I could never play in the NFL (although I never tried)

- Easy to feel confidence in “knowing” where you are strong
  - Difficulty of getting corrective feedback
    - I give good talks (people who come up always say nice things)
  - Ease of discounting corrective feedback
    - “The exception that proves the rule”
    - “It’s a one time thing it just happens a lot.”

The 2x2 Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reality</th>
<th>WEAK</th>
<th>STRONG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WEAK</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>Singing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td>Talks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge"

-Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

Implications for Regulatory Bodies

- Those most in need of improvement are those least likely to know
- For any given skill, 25% of us are in the bottom quartile of performance
- Those of us who are in the bottom 25% think we are above average
- So whose job is it to tell us (and how will they be able to convince us)?

"New" Directions to Explore

- From independent self-assessment to guided self-reflection
- From providing raw data to offering meaningful feedback
- From "assessors" to "mentors"
The University of British Columbia
Centre for Health Education Scholarship

Shaping the theories and activities of learning in the health professions

glenn.regehr@ubc.ca