



# Self-assessment, reflection on practice and critical thinking in nursing students



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## ABSTRACT

In accordance with the principles of the European Higher Education Area, the aim of this study was to contribute to the implementation of self-assessment through the application of reflection on learning and critical thinking. The theoretical framework employed was Habermas's critical theory and emancipatory interest as a preliminary step to generate educational transformations. The methodological contribution is the design a student self-assessment document that promotes reflection on action and critical thinking.

**Results and Discussion:** The development of assessment through peer evaluation and other intermediate solutions until achieving self-assessment entails a shift in the educational and scientific paradigm, but also involves the implementation in practice of democratic and ethical principles, values and premises in society. Self-assessment is a novel concept for students, and obliges them to reinterpret their role. Due to the diversity of students' principles, values, motivations, interests and aspirations, this reinterpretation of their role can have a positive outcome, stimulating an active and critical attitude towards group work and self-assessment; or, on the contrary, can generate a stance characterised by disinterest, passivity and lack of critical thinking.

**Conclusions:** The forms of assessment adopted in a given educational system reflect ways of thinking related to ideologies, values, ethical principles and educational paradigms: in order to render implementation of effective self-assessment feasible, it is necessary to undertake structural and regulatory reforms. Students have little experience of reflection on practice or critical thinking. Massification and cultural and structural factors determine the form of assessment. In this context, it would seem advisable to move towards self-assessment gradually and cautiously.

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## 1. Introduction

Assessment constitutes one of the pillars of education and the teaching-learning process. Each society develops different forms of assessment that reflect its ideological, economic and cultural characteristics and which vary according to the nature of the social group. Assessment always entails an evaluation of the worth or performance of something or someone, and depending on when and by whom the evaluation is conducted, may take the form of initial, process, shared, peer or self-assessment (Angulo Rasco, 1994). Regardless, assessment constitutes the cornerstone that determines all the other elements comprising the curriculum. The different forms of assessment have gone "(...) from expert authority-based models to a critical model based on democratisation of university education and the principle of student responsibility for learning and, therefore, assessment" (Trigueros Cervantes, Rivera García and De la Torre Navarro, 2012a, p. 473).

One of the goals of the European Higher Education Area (ANECA, 2003) is to transform assessment systems based on academic authority into systems based on active and responsible student involvement (Fernández, 2003). This requires a series of parallel changes that contribute to transforming the mentality, beliefs, attitudes and values of all stakeholders involved in the teaching-learning process; changes that involve the educational paradigm, democratic thought, responsible participation, reflection on learning and critical thinking (Siles and Solano, 2011).

## 2. Rationale

The overall aim of this study was to facilitate student self-assessment through reflection on learning and critical thinking. To this end, we designed and implemented a self-assessment document to achieve the following specific objectives:

- Enhance students' critical self-assessment of their overall performance in the teaching-learning process.
- Stimulate reflective and critical self-assessment of time/effort and strengths/weaknesses in the teaching-learning process.
- Reflect critically on self-assessment, identifying any subjective biases that may influence it.

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## 2.1. Research Question and State of the Question

Our research question was as follows: Do students have a sufficient level of reflection on action and critical thinking to support effective implementation of a self-assessment system?

Assessment is an extremely complex exercise that encompasses a variety of approaches, procedures and goals from diverse perspectives:

- Focusing on self-assessment, reflection on action and critical thinking as their central themes, [Habermas \(2010\)](#) has clarified the inescapably ideological nature of science and education, while [House \(1994\)](#) has related assessment to power relations and ethical principles. Other studies have provided interesting information regarding the democratisation of education ([Elliott, 1996](#); [Rivera and De la Torre, 2005](#)). The impact of self-assessment on students has been studied by [McDowell \(1995\)](#), while [Kerr and Bruun \(1983\)](#) have analysed the influence of self-assessment on students' adoption of their new role, identifying some of these roles in relation to group work and different forms of assessment.

Several authors have coincided on the need to employ reflection on action and reflective journals as basic tools to develop critical thinking ([Baker, 1996](#); [Schön, 2010](#); [Porlán, 2008](#); [Siles and Solano, 2011](#); [Levett-Jones, 2007](#); [Epp, 2008](#); [Montagna et al., 2010](#); [Zabalza, 2004](#)). [Vermunt \(1998\)](#) has suggested employing a phenomenological approach to study cognitive, metacognitive and affective aspects of learning styles. [McMahon \(1999\)](#) has proposed alternatives, such as using negotiation in traditional summative assessments prior to implementing peer evaluation, as a means to stimulate and practice critical thinking. Other authors have argued the need to involve students in all forms of assessment before arriving at self-assessment ([López Pastor et al., 2005](#)).

- Focusing on the process of convergence and self-assessment entailed in the EHEA as the central theme, the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation ([ANECA, 2003](#)) has published a document describing the present structure of Spanish education in relation to the EHEA. A study by [Siles, Solano, Fernandes and Oguisso \(2010\)](#) is illustrative of research on the social, political and educational reality of Spanish nursing. Other studies have essentially focused on the educational structure of Spanish nursing in the context of the EHEA convergence process ([Zabalegui and Cabrera, 2009](#)).
- Focusing on a review of the new information and communication technologies as the central theme, several studies have offered important information regarding educational innovations involving virtual environments and the Internet. Such is the case of the “hot potatoes” tool for self-assessment of learning ([Rozas et al., 2008](#)), a study on nursing student self-assessment of simulation exercises ([Cato et al., 2009](#)), and studies on collaborative virtual learning ([McConnell, 2000](#); [Salinas, 2003](#)).

## 2.2. Theoretical Framework

The present study was based on the principles of critical theory as postulated by [Habermas \(2002, 2010\)](#) (Table 1), in which self-assessment essentially consists of becoming aware of teaching-learning experiences through reflection on learning and critical thinking. Self-assessment was considered in line with [Habermas \(2010\)](#) and the types of scientific interest. Technical interest, inherent to the empirical and analytical sciences, is aimed at achieving resource efficacy from the perspective of the rational and technological paradigm. Practical interest, corresponding to the historical and hermeneutical sciences, is aimed at understanding the meaning of events to enable the agents involved to interpret reality and orient personal and social practice. This type of interest corresponds to an interpretive or hermeneutical paradigm, and its main goal is understanding, self-understanding, and comprehensive communication between teachers and learners. Lastly, emancipatory interest is characteristic of the critical and social sciences aimed at raising the

awareness of individuals and groups in order to generate social transformations. In this context, our study was guided by a fundamental definition of self-assessment as a phenomenon that consists of critical awareness of teaching-learning experiences and extraction of their meaning by the people at whom it is aimed: students ([Trigueros Cervantes, Rivera García and De la Torre Navarro, 2012b](#)).

## 2.3. Methodological Framework, Design and Participants

The methodology employed was a cross-sectional descriptive study that transformed the classroom into a setting conducive to self-inquiry and research on learning ([Kemmis, 1999](#)). We employed the methods and techniques appropriate to critical theory, giving a voice and an active role to students. A self-assessment document was drawn up in line with studies by [Doménech \(2004\)](#), [Pinto \(1999\)](#), [Siles and Solano \(2011\)](#) and [Hart \(1999\)](#). This document was completed in class by the students on the last day of the course.

All students participated in the investigation (50 undergraduate nursing students:  $N = 50$ ) taking the “Culture of care, education for development and critical thinking” course in the academic year 2014–15 given at 3rd year of Bachelor's Degree in Nursing at University of Alicante-Spain. Participaron en la investigación.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Critical Thinking, Power Relations and Self-Assessment

The results obtained with the self-assessment guidance document for students on the course are presented below according to the categories employed in the same:

#### 3.1.1. Relative to Self-Assessment of the Teaching and Learning Process during this Course

3.1.1.1. First: As Regards Identifying the most Important Knowledge.: Students identified the most important knowledge as being that which was closely related to culture, care, transculturality, globalisation and critical thinking.

“The influence of culture on people's behaviour and how difficult it is to step outside one's own culture to observe and understand others.”

[(A1.1)]

“All the important knowledge I have acquired becomes clearer from the perspective of critical thinking. For example, in the case of female genital mutilation, I discovered things I did not know.”

[(A1.2).]

“I have learned the meaning of the word “care” in every culture. I have learned about the social problem of female genital mutilation and critical thinking.”

[(A1.3)]

#### 3.1.1.2. Second: As Regards the Impact of New Knowledge in Modifying Previous Values, Beliefs and Traditions.

“Over these last few months, I have reflected on the beliefs and values of my own culture and of other cultures, and have analysed their positive and negative aspects.”

[(B1.1)]

“Concerning the concept of crisis, I can say that I have extended this concept to other events that happen in life, since any situation of

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