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Making the case for democratic assessment practices within a critical pedagogy of Physical Education Teacher Education

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Abstract

There has been growing interest in alternative assessment strategies that focus on student participation within Higher Education over the past twenty years. At the same time, it is important to note that there is very little published research dealing with alternative forms of assessment in the field of Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE). In this paper we seek to make a case for democratic assessment practices within a critical pedagogy of PETE. We begin by outlining developments in assessment in higher education in general, before considering student participation in assessment processes. We then consider some strategies of participative assessment, and discuss their benefits, risks and difficulties. An account of the experience of the National Network of Formative and Shared Assessment in Higher Education in Spain provides us with a working example of the implementation of democratic practices in assessment in PETE. We conclude that the lack of research in physical education on democratic assessment practices raises serious questions about the extent to which our field is committed to producing teachers capable of meeting the complex social and cultural challenges they will surely meet in the schools of tomorrow.

Keywords

Democratic assessment, critical pedagogy, Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE), self-assessment, peer-assessment, co-assessment, Higher Education
Introduction

In the last twenty years, international journals have published an increasing number of studies on self and peer assessment which show a growing interest in assessment strategies that focus on student participation. Much of this research is concerned with alternative, student-centred and democratic forms of assessment as well as the benefits and educational values of these practices (e.g. Adams & King, 1995; Boud, 1989; Boud, Cohen et al., 1999; Davies, 2003; Dochy, Seguers et al., 1999; Evans, Mc Kenna et al., 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2006; Hanrahan & Geoff, 2001; Hinett & Weeden, 2000; Ibane & Jauregizar, 2010; Ibarra, Rodríguez & Gómez, 2012; Kirby, & Downs, 2007; López-Pastor, 2008; López-Pastor, Castejón, Sicilia-Camacho, Navarro-Adelantado & Webb, 2011; Orsmond, Merry et al., 1997; Taras, 2008; Thompson, Pilgrim, et al., 2005; Williams, 1992). At the same time, some studies point out difficulties in implementing these strategies, with some even questioning that they are necessarily a positive thing (Beackley, 2000). Other studies have raised concerns about power relationships inherent in assessment practices (Fernández-Balboa, 2005), and some have sought to confront the risks to traditional hierarchies of power in higher education when authentic student learning is the major goal (Tan, 2008, 2009; Taras, 2010).

We think there are several reasons for this increasing interest. First, the work of authors such as Freire, McLaren, Giroux and Apple, for instance, has promoted a program of critical pedagogy that endorses the pursuit of justice and equity through
education based on the social democratic values necessary for living in a plural and free society. Second, in the UK, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Report) published in 1997, sought to outline the key requirements for UK Higher Education for a twenty year period. Third, many of these proposals for alternative forms of assessment appear at a moment of educational reform in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Each of these developments share one feature: a search for alternative forms of teaching and learning which focus on students rather than teachers and where teachers not only pass on knowledge but facilitate the learning process. There are direct consequences in these developments for assessment methods. At the very least, students’ participation in assessment is required, suggesting a more democratic process involving students taking responsibility for their own learning and thus beginning to develop skills for lifelong learning in the rapidly and continuously changing world of work.

In this context, it is important to note that there are very few papers dealing with alternative forms of assessment in the field of Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) either in the Anglophone or Hispanic literatures. Nonetheless, over the last seven years there has been a growing interest in alternative forms of assessment in Spain, probably due to new guidelines from EHEA for Spanish universities and the boost provided by the Network of Formative and Shared Assessment in Higher Education in Spain (Buscà et al. 2011). This Network, created in 2005, comprises more
than 60 teacher-researchers from different Spanish universities who use action-research as a common methodology for investigating formative and shared assessment in their own practice and sharing their work with colleagues engaged in similar projects (López-Pastor, Martínez-Muñoz & Julián-Clemente, 2007; López-Pastor et al., 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to review the current situation of assessment, with a particular focus on Europe, and to make a case for democratic assessment practices within a critical pedagogy of PETE. We believe that the development of democratic assessment practices rests, in the first place, on effective pedagogy. Effective pedagogy consists in teachers facilitating the learning of their students towards particular learning outcomes consistent with specific bodies of knowledge. There is then a constructive alignment between ‘good’ teaching and ‘good’ learning. But while so much of the literature on alternative assessment practices sees effective pedagogy as an end point, we want to argue here that it is a means to a further end, which is to assist teachers and students to engage in a dialogic practice. Such dialogic activity, we will argue, addresses front and centre issues of power and hierarchy that constitute traditional assessment in higher education generally and in PETE in particular, and facilitates a form of critical pedagogy essential to democratic practices.

We begin by outlining developments in assessment in higher education in general, before considering student participation in assessment processes. We then consider some strategies of participative assessment, and discuss their benefits, risks
and difficulties. An account of the experience of the National Network of Formative and Shared Assessment in Higher Education in Spain provides us with a working example of the implementation of democratic practices in assessment in PETE. We conclude with a consideration of implications of these developments in democratic assessment and critical pedagogy for professional development, research and practice.

Assessment in Higher Education

The Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) agreements and the European Credits Transfer System (ECTS) started a converging process towards EHEA which was the first step for reaching common ground on Higher Education criteria around universities across Europe. Earlier agreements had focused on developing a system which could allow students, academic and administrative staff to move freely across European territory as well as transfer theoretical and practical knowledge and methodologies, thus promoting professional equal opportunities. Later agreements (Prague, 2001; Barcelona, 2002; Berlin 2003; Bergen, 2005) and the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference, 2009) focused on developing pedagogical guidelines to unify criteria for university learning-teaching processes.  

Behind all of this work towards the creation of common ground across European universities was a notion that changes had to take place in terms of the ways in which
teaching, learning and assessment are understood, organised and carried out. A clear
implication was that student-orientated pedagogical models should prevail and,
consequently, a consistent approach be taken to assessment using strategies such as self-
asessment, peer assessment and co-assessment.

However, the consequences of these European Higher Education initiatives for
student-based strategies do not belong to the last decade only. As we already noted,
advocates for critical pedagogy in the 1980s and 1990s promoted education as a means
of emancipation, of setting people free to become social change agents. To work
towards emancipation, students must be at the core of the educational process through
teaching based on dialogic learning, equal relationships, and democratic practice.
Teaching in this context means having respect for students’ knowledge and autonomy.
It means the teacher being a good listener and leading by example (Freire, 1998). In this
classroom, teachers must create relevant content for students so that they participate in and
create a problematic and critical experience (Giroux, 1988). Knowledge is co-
constructed by teachers and students, not merely given to students by teachers. There is
a clear goal of change within a critical pedagogy perspective, and so it is essential to
create opportunities in the classroom to develop critical thinking in which students
develop the skills required for participation in democratic processes (McLaren, 1994).
We can see that critical pedagogy goes beyond mere participation in teaching and
assessment processes. Instead, it promotes a democratic process through thinking about
equity and social justice, questioning power structures in the classroom which reproduce hegemonic relations in society, and seeking social change.

At the same time, some researchers had been working on alternative forms of assessment before European guidelines on teaching and learning in Higher Education were established. For instance, in the early 1990s Boud denounced university assessment methods because they had no consistency with academic values, goals of independent and meaningful learning, and developing critical thinking skills (Boud, 1990). According to Boud, to achieve consistency, another teaching model was required. He proposed a student-focused model acknowledging students’ prior knowledge, using assessment methods such as self-assessment, problem-based and contextualised, holistic and cooperative learning (Boud, 1993). Assessment had to be consistent with self-directed learning (Boud, 1992), an idea that the author has developed more recently, in which he makes some proposals for assessment reform in Australia in relation to when assessment has most effect. He states that assessment is more effective when students and teachers become responsible partners in learning and assessment (Boud and Associates, 2010:2). Moreover, Black and Wiliam’s work on assessment for learning is very close to these ideas. Since 1996, their work provided guidance for implementing formative assessment and assessment for learning in Britain. Although there was little criticism of their work initially, more recently there has been a more thoroughgoing examination of their key ideas and concepts (Taras, 2007, 2009).
In the UK, recommendations in the Dearing Report for Britain’s higher educational needs for a twenty year period included developing innovative strategies emphasising students’ autonomy and critical thinking skills. Indeed, we can see the impact of this report in many universities’ strategic plans and in a similar discourse from Guidelines for Quality Assurance development from the 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference, which locates the student at the core of learning-teaching processes with consequences for assessment strategies.

Much of the assessment in Higher Education does not, however, match these various forms of guidance (Sluijsmans et al. 1998). According to Fallows & Chandramahan (2001), up until the beginning of the 21st century, assessment was very much in the hands of university teachers. Moreover, McMahon (1999) claims that HE’s vertical organisational structures require students to seek their teachers’ approval when it comes to assessment, which contradicts the intentions of alternative approaches. He adds that self-assessment could help to break this tendency towards student compliance and to promote critical thinking. Although this idea has been widely accepted in Higher Education (Dearing Report’s 1997; Stefani, 1998), recently it has been questioned by Tan (2004, 2008) who pointed out that the uses of self-assessment to empower students depends on the way this is understood and applied (Tan, 2008:16). Boud et al. (1999) add that inappropriate assessment practices can lead to competition among students which does not promote the team work required in current working environments.
According to Clifford (1999) and the Dearing Report, if we want to promote autonomous learning in universities, teachers need to develop new teaching-learning concepts, competences and change from a knowledge-expert to a knowledge-facilitator role. At the same time, students need to develop new learning strategies and move from a passive to a more active role. The latter role is appropriate for the whole educational process, including assessment. In this way, “students themselves need to develop the capacity to make judgements about both their own work and that of others in order to become effective continuing learners and practitioners” (Boud, 2010:1).

**Student participation in assessment processes**

When we talk about student participation in assessment processes, we are particularly referring to self-assessment, peer assessment and co-assessment. There has been some confusion in the literature concerning the notions of peer and co-assessment, which are sometimes considered in the Hispanic literature to be synonymous (López-Pastor, 2012:121). Peer assessment refers to reciprocal assessment between equals. We understand co-assessment to refer to “the direct and active involvement of the student(s) in their own assessment through a process of dialogue (with the teacher) to arrive at an agreed or collective decision” (López-Pastor et al., 2011:81).

Considering student participation in assessment processes can only be achieved within a student focused pedagogical model which seeks students’ autonomy
(Falchikov, 1998), is suitable for employment demands and develops students’ skills in a formative way (Somerwell, 1993). Stefani (1998) states that students must participate through dialogue, they need to understand assessment criteria and work jointly with the teacher in order to become autonomous and reflective people. That means we need to talk about the process of planning through to implementation of educational programs as a democratic practice; however, this is not always an easy task especially when considering assessment for marking levels and grades. According to López-Pastor et al. (2009), for an assessment process to be considered democratic it should have transparent criteria, information exchange, student participation, negotiation, communication links, dialogue, respect, equality, justice, shared responsibility, shared power and meta-assessment (p.31). To achieve democratic and educative assessment in the classroom means to create a community of shared practice where nothing of the assessment process is hidden from the students and they can assess their own learning. According to Elwood and Klenowski (2002), in order to improve teaching and learning, educative assessment must be formative in its functions and objectives, and it must place the student at the core of the assessment process.

Dochy et al.’s (1999) review of 63 studies of self and peer assessment in HE shows the necessity of reconsidering the relationship between learning and assessment. They suggest that combining different assessment strategies, particularly those which place the student at the core of the process such as self, peer and co-assessment,
motivates students to become more reflective and responsible for their learning. On the other hand, Brew & Riley’s study (2009) shows a variety of students’ and teachers’ views on participative practices which reveal that self and peer assessment are negotiated and set within the context of their production, in other words, assessment practices are a social construction (Gale, Martin & McQueen, 2002). Accordingly, we can understand that every teacher within her context and with her students will develop her own paradigm considering different degrees of student participation in assessment decisions. The degree of student participation may vary from participating in assessment for learning activities without any influence on final marks (McMahon, 1999) and including participation in the negotiation of assessment criteria (Boud, 1992; Clifford, 1999; Elwood & Klenowski, 2002; Gale, 2002; Orsmond et al.,2000;; Stefani,1998 ) to having real power over assessment decisions throughout the process including their final grades (Alkaslassy, 2011; Boyd and Cowan, 1985; Taras, 2008; Woods et al., 1988; Walker & Warshurst, 2000). In other words, student participation may range from very little to total control.

To thoroughly engage in these democratic practices we need to find evidence of their benefits but also to consider risks and identify difficulties in their implementation. This evidence can then assist us to create the ideal conditions in which democratic assessment practices could be successful.
Strategies of democratic assessment: benefits, risks and difficulties

There are links between formative assessment (including participative strategies as self, peer and co-assessment), and methodologies based on students’ participation in learning-teaching processes and learning improvement (Biggs, 2005; Boud and Flachikov, 2006; Brown and Glasner, 2003; Dochy, Segers & Dierick, 2002; Fraile, 2004, 2006; Humphreys, 1997; Knight, 2005; López-Pastor et al. 2006, 2009, 2011; Pekic, 2007). Furthermore, Sluijsmans et al.’s (1998) research on 62 cases provides evidence of self, peer and co-assessment as effective tools for developing professional competences and the appropriate use and application of knowledge in a range of work-related contexts.

Additionally, these practices can have significant impact on critical thinking skills (Fitzpatrick, 2006), since they have the potential to promote a better understanding of grades and develop empathy when students engage in assessment together with the teacher. They can also increase motivation (Andrade & Du, 2007; Hanrahan and Geoff, 2001) and the level of awareness of thinking and learning processes (Mok, Lung et al., 2006; Thompson, Pilgrim et al. 2005; Walser, 2009). Results from Orsmond al.’s (2000) work suggest that self-assessment can be extremely useful for students to achieve their own goals and that it is a very strong educative tool. Self and peer assessment can help future teachers in different ways, such as understanding formal assessment requirements by developing and practicing formative
comments, boosting learner confidence and motivation for learning, and increasing their grasp of subject content (Hinett & Weeden, 2000; Kennedy & Allan, 2009; Lorente & Kirk, 2013).

Nevertheless, we must be cautious and not assume that these are positive practices in and of themselves. For example, Beackley (2000) thinks that self-assessment has not been critically analysed. Advocates consider self-assessment as a positive thing without questioning the assumptions underpinning the psychological-humanistic approach which informs it, for instance, the notion of the transparent nature of the self. Other critics point to further issues: power and equality in self-assessment, tensions between formative and summative assessment (Taras, 2008) and empowering or disciplining students (Tan, 2004). Tan (2008) analyses how teachers understand and apply assessment and students’ ideas about assessment. He believes it is necessary to identify types of power in those practices and to understand the context in which they appear (Tan, 2009). Some studies have researched students’ perception of these strategies and have found that students are not always motivated by self and peer assessment (Brew et al., 2009; Humphreys, Greenan & McIveen, 1997; Lorente & Kirk, 2013) particularly when used for levels or grades (Walker & Warshurst, 2000). Walker & Warshurst (2000) conclude that self and peer assessment are welcome by students for formative but not for summative assessment purposes. Amongst the reasons explaining this lack of enthusiasm for summative assessment, they found students believe they are
not able to judge their own work objectively in self-assessment and finding it difficult to be critical when assessing their peers’ work (Lindblom-ylänne, 2006). Hence, it appears necessary to have certain previous conditions and training to carry out these practices.

Andrade & Du’s study (2007) provide some possible means of resolving these difficulties. They argue, as Sluijsmans, Brand-Gruwel and Van Merriënboer (2002) do for peer assessment, that students have a better attitude towards self-assessment after practicing it for a while and that this practice can be more effective when they know their teachers’ expectations. This study also shows tensions between students’ and teachers’ expectations of acceptable standards. But merely discussing assessment criteria is not sufficient to involve students, especially when these discussions concern students who have limited experience with peer assessment (Prins, Sluijmans, Kirschener and Strijbos, 2005). Oldfield et al. (1995) highlight the importance of students’ learning process when assessing others’ work and when assessing their own work later on. Consistent with Andrade and Du, Oldfield et al. agree on the need to build up confidence through experience and feedback. We would add to this, agreeing with the results of Prins et al.’s research developed in computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) environment, that collaboration skills and social skills are essential for effective peer assessment (p.436).
Also, it would appear to be important to consider how university teachers use these practices, whether with formative or summative purposes and, moreover, to consider the purpose of assessment. Some authors such as Lublin (1980) consider these strategies should only be used as diagnostic feedback so that students can be realistic about their judgements. At the same time, many studies point out the need for some training to develop self-assessment skills if we want these strategies to be productive and beneficial (Adams & King, 1995; Cassidy, 2007; Hanrahan & Geoff, 2001; Pain & Mowl, 1996; Taras 2001). In this sense, Taras (2001) proposes the following guidelines to prepare students for self-assessment: a) to use self-assessment as summative assessment, in other words with grading purposes, b) to receive tutor feedback to understand mistakes, and c) students should know their grade only after completing formative self-assessment.

Another important aspect to take into account when thinking about self-assessment is individual student learning styles. Cassidy (2007) relates self-assessment skills to student learning style and concludes that there is evidence of a tendency of learners with a superficial learning style to underestimate their achievement while learners with a more in depth learning style correlate with precision their self-assessment skills. To be able to handle diversity in the classroom in a positive way, it is necessary to supervise and to develop this skill; however, there does not seem to be agreement on this matter. Stefani (1994) argued that most students had a realistic
perception about their own skills and that they could make rational judgements on their peers’ achievements.

As regards teachers’ response to these assessment practices, Brew et al. (2009) found that many teachers supported peer assessment because of its good use of time rather than because of its pedagogical values that flow from involving students in their own assessment processes. They conclude that it is necessary to prepare students for those practices by showing examples and explaining the reasons for using those strategies. On the other hand, Fitzpatrick (2006) found that teachers believe participative assessment takes too long, generates anxiety and requires lengthy negotiation and cooperation between peers and teachers.

Something that concerns those who add these participative strategies to their teaching practice is correlating grades and comments given by students with their own grading as a teacher. Lew et al. (2010) say that there is a weak-moderate correlation between self-assessment ability and self, peer and tutor assessment results. A more academically competent student can assess themselves with more accuracy than those considered as less competent, and this accuracy does not increase after practising self-assessment for four consecutive periods. On the other hand, Sullivan and Hall (1997) in a similar study show that there is good level of agreement between students and teachers’ marking; however, there is a tendency of students to overestimate in their marking. After several interviews these authors could confirm that those who have
overestimated their grades did not have a clear idea about the marking criteria and they wanted a more specific guideline from the teacher. Giving clear success criteria tends to improve self-assessment practice.

This point has been noted recently by Sadler (2010). According to Sadler, the task is not to train students to use preset criteria, criteria sheets and rubrics. This, he argues, does not necessarily prepare them for lifelong learning. Seeking a rubric for the assessment of each and every situation graduates are likely to encounter in their lives beyond university is, for Sadler, unrealistic (p.547). He suggests it is better to assess the work as a whole, identifying deficiencies and weaknesses, since the use of preset criteria will not necessarily assist students to make the best or most appropriate judgements.

Once again we may note how difficult it is to compare studies on the use of participative strategies since the idea that teachers and students have of these strategies is a crucial element as well as the way they experience them. Nevertheless we could suggest some ways of tackling these issues. For instance, Falchikov and Boud (1989) analysed studies on self-assessment which compared self-assessment marking with teacher marking and found that in order to increase consistency it was important to consider the quality of the study’s design (a better design provided more agreements on marking), course level (a higher level provided a more accurate self-assessment) and the subject area (scientific subjects show more accurate results). For this reason it is very
important to have a good design and an accurate report of the research. Similar results 
rise from peer-assessment experiences (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000).

Finally and with regard to participative strategies with summative purposes 
(grading), there have been several studies in which students had been involved in 
producing their own marking criteria. Orsmond, Merry and Reiling’s study (2000) 
provided evidence of students being unable to discriminate between marking criteria 
they themselves produced and those produced by the teacher. Furthermore, the fact of 
creating their own criteria through a dialogue with the teacher did not necessarily 
facilitate agreement. Indeed, producing their own criteria seemed to lead to other forms 
of learning compared to those obtained from pre-established criteria. Other research on 
this issue concludes that this practice is not totally transparent and does not easily reveal 
general characteristics. Consequently, it is necessary to have training and practice and to 
create an adequate environment promoting honesty and personal responsibility.

Democratic assessment practices in PETE. The experience of the 
National Network of Formative and Shared Assessment in Higher 
Education (Spain)

After an exhaustive review we found very little research in the English language 
literature that makes explicit reference to the participation of students in the processes 
of assessment in the field of the Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE). Sport
Discus showed no references on this theme in PETE programmes. The key words in our search criteria were ‘self-assessment+PETE’, and ‘peer assessment + PETE’. In a general search of EBSCO Education search elite looking for ‘self-assessment+HE’ we found 165 references but only 71 of relevance to peer assessment and co-assessment. In the same database we only found three publications with the search of ‘self-assessment+PETE’. The searches in both cases were for papers and other outputs published between 1990 and 2013. Nevertheless there are some papers relevant to the theme of our paper which we have listed in the references section that are not indexed or do not appear in the databases.

While there is a similar dearth of publications in the Spanish context, nevertheless there has been an increase of the publications on alternative approaches to assessment in recent years (Sicilia-Camacho et al., 2011). Buscà et al. (2011) carried out a study on articles published in Spanish between 1999 and 2009 on formative assessment and concluded that only 32 of 165 articles correspond to university level and the majority are accounts of professional experience and are not research articles. At the same time, Buscà et al. (2011) are unable to establish the exact number of publications that are directly related to formative and alternative assessment practices in PETE, despite the fact that there are other indicators of the increase in its use in universities.

From our point of view, there are two possible reasons for this increase in publications and other evidence of alternative assessment practices in Spain. The first is
the development and implementation of the guidelines of the EHEA in Spanish
universities. And the second is the creation in 2005 of the Network of Shared and
Formative Assessment in Higher Education, led by Víctor López-Pastor at the
University of Valladolid (López-Pastor et al. 2011). The Network currently consists of
68 researchers belonging to 20 universities, 24 faculties, and 14 areas of knowledge
(mainly in PETE with 32 HE teachers) carrying out research on their teaching practice
using formative and participative assessment strategies. Factors motivating its members
to join the Network include an interest in improving their own assessment practices in
relation to the demands of the EHEA, taking opportunities to update and revise their
own teaching, taking opportunities to combine teaching with research, and the chance to
share knowledge on this subject.

The teacher-researchers involved in this Network set out to test two educational
paradigms to integrate two positions: a pragmatic paradigm, based on recognition that
there are benefits of participatory and contextualized assessment; and the other a critical
paradigm based on the change of the model of assessment, rooted in democratic
practices and with strong ethical requirements. Informed by this value position, the
members of the Network facilitate collaborative work that starts with individual case
studies to become, after sharing and discussing the information, collective case studies
investigating successive cycles of action research (Manrique, Vallés & Gea, 2012;
Pérez-Pueyo et al. 2008). Currently in Spain this Network is carrying out a research
project\textsuperscript{1} funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation to map the current situation regarding assessment in PETE programmes within and beyond the Network with the main objective to design, implement and evaluate an intervention for formative assessment in Higher Education. The study focuses not only study on formative assessment but on the students’ participation in the processes of assessment through self-assessment, peer-assessment and co-assessment. The project involves 17 universities and 35 researchers. Data from the first phase has been generated through 1129 questionnaires and eight student discussion groups; 217 questionnaires and eight discussion groups to learn about teachers’ perspectives; and 228 questionnaires and six discussion groups to discover graduates’ views. The first results of the diagnosis phase were reported to the VI International conference of Formative and Shared Assessment in 2011 held at the University of Zaragoza (Spain). Some of the main findings of this report were that teachers lack training in the use of participative strategies on assessment. There are thus some inconsistencies in action when they implemented such practices in relation to what the literature has advocated. In addition, self-grading and co-grading have so far been relatively little used. These early results seem to indicate that alternative assessment strategies involving students are not widely used and totally match with other research recently conducted in Spain in the field of Higher Education (Rodríguez-Gómez et al. 2012). A next step is to find out why this is the case and to
learn about the difficulties facing the Higher Education teachers as they seek to apply these strategies.

The report of the second phase of this project presented to the VII National Conference of Formative Assessment in Higher Education held at the University of Vic (Spain) in 2012 indicated that generally teachers use self-assessment and self-grading but very few use peer-grading. According to them there is a variety of reasons for this: a) students’ insecurity and fear to assess their classmates, b) difficulty of accepting criticism from peers, c) difficulty of transforming the information obtained in the peer assessment in grading and d) inflexible university systems. On the other hand, teacher-researchers involved in the study reported that to improve the use of these strategies is necessary: a) to facilitate tools for doing both self and peer assessment, b) to generate a climate of trust in the classroom, c) to end the process with a co-assessment, d) to use this strategy in some subjects that have few students or in placement practices and e) to negotiate the assessment criteria between teacher and students at the beginning of the unit.

This is the first time the Spanish government has financed a large-scale research project in this theme, with the project due for completion by 2013. A number of publications (books and papers) are planned that will provide case studies of the experience of working through networks in Higher Education and concretely about the
case in which we are especially interested, the use of alternative assessment practices in Higher Education.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this paper has been to review the current situation of assessment, and to make a case for democratic assessment practices within a critical pedagogy of PETE. Proposing democratic assessment that seeks to promote the participation of students in the assessment process has implications in a number of contexts, for professional development, for research and for practice. Despite the difficulty of discriminating between these contexts, we conclude with a brief discussion of these implications based on the experience of one of the authors as a member of the Network.

From the point of view of a member of the National Network, research about one’s own practice has a clear and direct impact on personal professional development, which encourages continuous and critical reflection on all aspects of education. In this particular case, an issue that always produces doubts and uncertainties in both teachers and students is the students’ participation in grading processes. As other studies have shown, sometimes the main reluctance comes from students rather than the teacher. Although there are some strategies we mentioned earlier that may assist us to overcome such difficulties, we think is also appropriate to look to other professional fields for answers. It is for that reason that the potential for professional development is even
greater if this work can be shared through networks involving various higher education professionals interested in this topic. It is necessary to create communities of learning spaces where the results of our own personal professional experiences can be shared with other professionals involved in similar work. We believe this should be an ongoing and sustained process that transcends disciplinary and national borders, sharing with professionals from other countries and contexts with the intention to move forward our understanding of democratic assessment.

After noting the scarcity of studies on this theme in PETE we can say with some conviction that we need more case studies and more action research on democratic practices on assessment to reaffirm, refute or challenge currently dominant practices. Only with a critical view of these practices we can have some force to promote the use of democratic assessment. But this research must be coordinated, so that there are some commonalities that all professionals can learn from. An example of this is the work developed by the Network in Spain, which, year after year, is defining new cycles of action research developed by its members.

There are also implications for practice of our advocacy of democratic assessment that can be seen from two perspectives. The first is the perspective of the teachers involved in these practices, who find out for themselves the benefits, difficulties and the risks of democratic assessment. They learn firsthand what type of power relationships are generated in the classroom, as well as the students’ expectations
and reactions to these alternative practices. In our view, this firsthand experience provides encouragement to continue working and developing these types of strategies. But above all it is only through this personal experience that teacher-researchers come to understand, in an embodied sense, the kinds of changing relationships between curriculum, teaching and learning that democratic forms of assessment requires. The second is the perspective of student teachers and future physical educators who also experience for themselves democratic practices. Several studies and our own experience shows that these future teachers feel more secure when implementing these strategies in their own practice after having experienced them firsthand, and after seeing for themselves the consistency between, discourse and action (Hinett & Weeden, 2000).

We suggest that the discourse of critical pedagogy is little more than empty rhetoric without serious attention to assessment practices in PETE and in Higher Education more generally. This is because assessment lies at the heart of educational practice. It is the pedagogical space in which relations of power are most clearly visible since it is through assessment that particular kinds of knowledge are recognised and valued. We think that the lack of research in physical education on democratic assessment practices raises serious questions about the extent to which our field is committed to producing teachers capable of meeting the complex social and cultural challenges they will surely meet in the schools of tomorrow.
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