# THE USE OF PEER ASSESSMENT ON A BUSINESS MODULE: WORKING TOWARDS AN EFFECTIVE SYSTEM

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## Abstract

*As an experienced teacher and former course leader on a large undergraduate business programme the author was aware of students' reluctance to engage in group assessment, especially on modules where the outcome would have an impact on final degree classification. However the same students were seeking employment in graduate positions in the corporate environment, where "In the list of the highly ranked skills, team working skills (67%) are followed by sector-specific skills and communication skills." (Europa 2010). Accepting that group assessed assignments should continue to be a feature of assessment in the business school as a means of enhancing graduate employability, the author sought to explore ways of improving perceptions of group work via the peer assessment process.*

*The focus of the study was a module in the subject area of Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour. As it was 'elective' in that students had chosen to study it as part of their degree programme, it was reasonable to assume a degree of willingness to engage in group work, as students opposed to the concept would have chosen an alternative module with different assessment methods. The assessment component of the module that was subject to peer assessment was a training programme, which comprised 40% of the marks for the module. The remaining marks were allocated to individual assessment elements. Participants were drawn from a range of business, accounting, marketing and HR related courses in the business school and the author aimed to survey their views on collaborative assessment with a view to incorporating improvements in the peer assessment model for the module, disseminating findings amongst academics involved in peer assessment at the business school and thus instigating discussion on a common model of peer assessment. A literature review and issues arising from the author's own experience on the module informed the nature of the primary research which comprised a questionnaire survey and follow up interviews. Findings were that most students viewed peer assessment positively for its impact on motivation and learning and perceived it to be a fairer process than tutor allocated group marks alone, but that a significant minority of mainly non-native English speaking students were wary of peer assessment in terms of their competence in implementing it and their treatment by native English speaking students. Also students were willing to provide additional feedback to supplement the current ratings but*

*were not interested in devising their own assessment criteria and not enthusiastic about implementing a common system of peer assessment throughout the business school.*

**Keywords:**

*Employability; peer assessment; heterogeneity; collaborative assessment; business students; group work; equity; social loafing.*

**Biography**

Christine Daley is a senior lecturer in the School of Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour at Leeds Business School (LBS) within the Faculty of Business and Law at Leeds Metropolitan University, specialising in the delivery of learning and development and performance management. Her experience as course leader on the BA (Hons) Business Studies programme at the faculty has informed her interest in the teaching, learning and assessment of undergraduate students.

**1.0 Introduction**

Cotton (2001, cited in Cassidy, 2006) found that generic employability skills including interpersonal skills such as co-operation and team work were more highly valued by employers than occupation specific(technical) skills. Aware of the need for graduate acquisition of so called 'soft skills', many Higher Education establishments have implemented measures to enhance the employability of their graduates.

During her time at the university, the author has been module leader on several modules that have employed group assessment. She is mindful of students' concerns about collaborative projects, especially with respect to perceptions of fairness and *'social loafing'* (Ringelmann, 1913 cited in Kravitz and Martin, 1986). However in her experience, when peer assessment is incorporated into the process, group work becomes much more acceptable, perceptions are mainly positive and complaints lessened.

Peer (or collaborative) assessment may be defined as *'engaging with standards and criteria in order to make judgements about the work of peers ,'* (Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000 quoted in Cassidy, 2006, p.509).

The module which is the focus of the primary research of this study is called 'Developing People'. It is concerned with that element of HRM known as Human Resource Development (HRD). It was a final year undergraduate module and was elective, in that students chose to study it as part of their degree course. In the group work component (worth 40% of module marks) students had to design and deliver a learning event (training session) to their fellow

students who role played the part of trainees. The peer assessment used was a group rating system where each student brought 20 marks to a 'pot' that was distributed against pre-designated criteria.

The cohort studying the module might be described as Leeds Met in microcosm, in that it was a heterogeneous mix of UK, EU and international students on several different degree programmes. Some international students were Leeds based, others were visiting on the ERASMUS programme or completing their final year studies in Leeds after two years in Shanghai. Previous experience of assessment had been wide-ranging, with some students were often accustomed to assessment by examination and others having experienced a more varied assessment diet including examinations, essays and reports, oral and poster presentations.

The author introduced collaborative assessment to the group work component of the module on assuming module leadership, in order to minimise discontent and to help equip students with a *'complete repertoire of employment-relevant skills'*, (Cassidy 2006, p.508). The module had run for several academic years, without any serious issues being raised about the peer assessment, but it was it instrumental in improving perspectives on collaboration? Were students were entirely satisfied with it? It was time to find out more. Therefore the aims of the exploratory study were:

- to obtain in-depth perspectives of students on collaborative assessment
- to incorporate findings into a peer assessment model for the module
- to disseminate findings amongst academics involved in peer assessment at the business school with a view to instigating discussion on a common model of peer assessment.

**2.0 Literature Review**

**2.1 Collaborative Assessment: A Good Thing**

In collaborative assessment, students can engage in communicating, co-operating and negotiating with their peers; the very activities that are involved in networking and team working, **(**Boud, 2001; Gillespie, 2001, cited in Greenbank, 2003). Cassidy (2006) found that students who had participated in a peer assessment process considered themselves to be more involved with all aspects of the assessment process, not just the peer assessed element.   Pope (2001) observed that peer assessment was central to the development of deeper learning and that students admitted to having worked hardest on peer assessed

elements of a subject, but felt the pay-off had been worth the effort in terms of greater learning.

## 2.2 Student Perspectives on Peer Assessment

Collaborative assessment improves learning and enhances the standards of student work, but this can only happen with student commitment to the process, (Gibbs 1999). The majority of students surveyed by Basheti *et al.* (2010) agreed that peer assessment had been a useful experience. Campbell et *al.* (2001) reported had similarly positive student impressions, noting that peer evaluations encouraged active participation in the learning process.

Pope (2001) concluded that peer rating resulted in improved motivation for students and 'deeper' learning but that it could be stressful for participants, who were wary of marking the work of their peers. However Cassidy (2006) noted that whilst students were initially cautious of the peer assessment process, these concerns were gradually overcome with exposure.

## 2.3 The Validity of Peer Assessment

Assuming that the marking of the tutor provided the benchmark, how consistent were student marks with those of their tutors? Basheti *et al.* (2010) reported that when students were allowed to mark the work of their peers, the marks allocated were consistently higher than those of their 'expert' tutors. Lack of agreement was not perceived as a barrier to validity by Falchikov and Boud (1989, p.427) who described peer assessment *'…as a valuable learning activity, even in the absence of agreement between student and teacher and* (it) *can provide potent feedback to the student about both learning and educational and professional standards'*.

## 2.4 Equity in Peer Assessment

Whilst students' perceptions of peer assessment were mainly ones of fairness, certain issues might inhibit equity in terms of students' ability to deal with the process and their treatment within it.

Greenbank (2003) suggested collaborative assessment would be hampered by a lack of social skills on the part of students, whose previous educational assessment experiences may have rested on individual performance and whose social networks were narrow.

Langan *et al.* (2010), concluded that there was insufficient consideration in literature of the differences in attributes in students and the way they assess each other. The student cohort at Leeds Met and on the module was cosmopolitan, heterogeneous and therefore culturally

diverse. A significant minority of students originated outside of the UK and EU. The previous educational experiences of such students had often been of a didactic, 'chalk and talk' nature, where discussion and interaction between students had not been encouraged. Therefore the ability of such students to engage with peer assessment was limited not just by a language barrier, but by their lack of exposure to processes that would facilitate it.

## 2.5 Involving Students in Developing Assessment Criteria for Peer Assessment

Involving students in the setting of criteria for peer assessment was deemed to be instrumental in enhancing engagement, satisfaction and learning in most of the research surveyed. Bloxham and West (2004, p. 731) reported that the 'systematic, incremental exercise of involving students in generating and using assessment criteria, applying a marking scheme, generating feedback and being assessed on the quality of their peer marking did appear to have a number of beneficial effects on the students' in terms of engagement, accuracy of grade prediction, attention to the marking scheme and self-development. Langan *et al.* (2005) found that students awarded marks 5% higher than their tutors, but that this deviation reduced radically for those student groups who had participated in the development of the assessment criteria.

## 2.6 Ratings and Feedback in Peer Assessment

Sommers (1982, p.25-6) suggested that '*a single score is not a valuable instructional tool to enhance future performance'* .Research from Basheti *et al.* (2010) indicated that students felt that the use of a grade in peer assessment meant that students were concentrating initially on the score rather that the peer comments.

Pope (2001) concluded that such peer rating was accepted and valued by students as a major source of learning and was worthwhile despite earlier concerns about how peers would view the individual after work was rated.

## 2.7 Peer Assessment Systems

Brutus and Donia (2010, p.654) described multiple benefits of using a centralised computerised peer evaluation at a business school. With experience students and tutors became comfortable with the system and their performance on modules that incorporated group assessment improved. Academic staff recognised the value of the system as '*a developmental tool aimed at improving group-related competencies',* but concerns were expressed about inflexibility and the fact that competencies were dictated by the fixed nature of the model.

**2.8 Enabling Peer Assessment**

The importance of ensuring students received 'adequate' training in any peer assessment system was documented by Basheti *et al.* (2010). Haggis and Pouget (2002, quoted in Bloxham and West, 2004, p. 722) suggested that the greater heterogeneity in the student population in contemporary higher education demands greater clarity and explicitness about the approaches to be adopted in order to deal with students' confusion and disorientation in the working context of specific subjects and actual writing tasks at the time they are experienced. Cassidy (2006) reported enthusiasm for peer assessment from students who had participated in the process but noted their reservations in terms of their 'capability to assess the work of others and the weight of this responsibility. Boud (1999, cited in Cassidy, 2006) suggested that these reservations might be overcome with familiarity with the process and this is supported by Cassidy (2006, p.515) who concluded that facilitating peer assessment opportunities for students should become *'a fundamental but critical element of successful implementation'.* McMahon (2010) found that students were initially reluctant to criticise the work of their colleagues in case it should cause them to fail the assignment and/or be construed as a personal attack, but that adequate instruction in the peer assessment process was instrumental in overcoming reservations.

**3.0 Methodology**

**3.1 The Research Subject and Participants**

One reason for choosing the DP module as a research subject was its size. Only one seminar group was in operation during the most recent delivery and therefore surveying the views of the entire cohort became a possibility. The other modules with peer assessment components, on which the author was involved, had cohorts between 200 and 500 students per semester. The small number of students on the module, the varied delivery pattern of whole cohort and small assessment group instruction plus the fact that the author was the only tutor involved in delivery (although not assessment) meant that students and tutors were able to form an unusually close working relationship. Although the author recognised the implications of this relationship in terms of jeopardising subjectivity and being able to make generalisations from results, she also predicted that this might result in a high response to her research.

**3.2 Research Design**

The research was exploratory in nature, in that the author was seeking to find out as much as possible about a set of circumstances, but she was guided by and given parameters by

the finding of her literature review. Pragmatic considerations such as time constraints, access to subjects and ethical considerations were influential. A multiple methods research strategy was chosen as a '*choice increasingly advocated within business and management research'* (Curran and Blackburn, 2001, p.51). The study comprised a combination of secondary research from the literature review and primary research from a survey (questionnaire) and interviews. The survey was emailed to all 28 students on the module and followed up by in-depth interviews of a smaller sample of students. The questions were designed to facilitate quantitative as well as some qualitative data analysis. A questionnaire was chosen for the survey because it represented *'an opportunity for the researcher to probe deeply, to uncover new clues, open up new dimensions of a problem and to secure vivid, accurate, inclusive accounts that are based on personal experience',* (Burgess, 1982, cited in Easterby-Smith et al, 2008). The questions for the survey were piloted by the last of the five assessment groups to undertake their training programme during a formative feedback session in November 2012. This group of six students formed over 20% of the students on the module and was representative of the cohort in terms of its heterogeneity. As a result of their feedback, some questions were modified to avoid complex language and potential ambiguities in interpretation. The rationale for all questions was explained by the author and none were felt to be inappropriate or irrelevant.  Questions were mainly derived from and informed by the findings of the literature review and phrased in a manner to allow both quantitative and qualitative analysis of responses.

Survey questions were framed in order to identify any key differences in responses and thus perspectives from students in terms of gender, course, origin and previous experience of peer assessment. Students responding to the survey were asked to indicate willingness to participate in interviews with the author and subsequently seven interviews were undertaken with participants representing varying perspectives on peer assessment as expressed in the survey. Interviews were based around themes emerging from the survey, but interviewees were encouraged to raise other issues with respect to their views and experiences of collaborative assessment. Therefore the interviews undertaken might be described as 'semi-structured' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill,2008) and 'qualitative research interviews' (King, 2004).

The research timing was considered instrumental in securing a high response. Students would be anxious to keep in touch with the author as module assessment was incomplete at the time of the research period and the author would be able to secure interview subjects as most students would be anxious to secure meetings with her to receive formative feedback on individual assessment components for the module. Entry to a prize draw for a £50 academic book voucher was offered to all survey respondents as an additional incentive.

**3.3 Research Findings**

Twenty- two of the 28 students on the module responded to the email survey and whilst some declined to offer detailed explanation of answers, a minority of students did justify their preferences. The author was then able to approach a representative sample of this latter group to undertake seven interviews. Numerical responses to the survey questions are summarised in the Appendix. More in-depth responses drawn from some survey responses but mainly from the semi-structured interviews are reported below.

The response rate to the survey (79%) far exceeded the author's already positive expectations and the six students who did not respond to the survey could not be grouped by any personal characteristic common denominator, e.g. gender, language or course, therefore it can be said that those who did respond were representative of the diverse nature of the cohort.

Seventy-seven per cent of respondents considered the peer assessment model used to be a valid and reliable means of assessment and the same majority of students, (but not always the same students), preferred peer assessment against tutor allocated group marks for the peer assessed component of the module. The most common reasons cited related to their perceptions that peer assessment offered a means of rewarding committed and industrious workers and penalising the poor team players who had previously shared the winners' spoils. A typical response was *'In my first year we did a group presentation, two of us worked really hard and we got a first, but the other two did hardly anything and just turned up on the day. But we all got the same mark. The tutor said there was nothing he could do about it.'* Others cited reasons such as tutors' not having the insight into the group work process and suggesting that the positive impressions made by confident presenters on the day might sway tutors in their favour to the detriment of the more introverted students whose 'behind the scenes' labours would be less obvious.

A third of respondents were non-native English speakers and a majority of this group expressed a preference for tutor rather than peer assessed work. Several such students felt that they did not understand how the process worked, but none of these students had any prior experience of peer assessment on any module before DP. One reason given for avoiding peer assessment was that: *'tutor have gained better personal expertise and experience in the area of HRM and can judge the performance better than student and could make it more objective for the measurement of performance.'* The issue of incompetence in assessment was also cited by several students as a reason for not setting their own assessment criteria. Only two respondents thought this would be a good idea, but both thought it impractical in the time constrained context of the module. Even students, who had

engaged in peer assessment criteria setting on previous modules, did not consider it a worthwhile exercise because *"as a whole the assessment criteria do tend to come out very similar so I think the tutor should outline the assessment criteria, to make sure that all aspects are covered."* The author was reassured to note that the majority of students considered the pre-set peer assessment criteria for the module to be '*fair*', '*well-set out*' and '*easy to follow*'.

Although students did not feel concerned and/or competent enough to set their own assessment criteria, most considered themselves able and willing to provide written feedback to justify the current rating allocation. One student suggested this would help him overcome reticence with respect to claiming his due marks: '*I myself found it hard to justify on the spot why I deserved a higher mark than what I was given because I felt shy in front of my group. If I had a bit of time to write out why I deserved to be marked higher than other students I may have achieved a better grade.*'

Even those students wary of the peer assessment process were in favour of proving written feedback. On response even suggested that this would allow the tutor to moderate peer assessment: '*This is a good idea because each student has their own opinion of the whole process on how to divide the work up, how the work finished, they may write the feedback against the allocation to justify and let the tutor decide whether they made the mark correct or not.*'

Opinion was divided with respect to implementing a single system of peer assessment across the faculty. Although several respondents suggested familiarity with the system would facilitate engagement and confidence, others noted that such a system would only work if the same criteria were being assessed all the time. One sceptic noted quite alarmingly, that '*half the tutors would not be bothered to use it anyway, as some of them seem to do their own thing regardless of what it says in the module guide*'.

The positive impact of peer assessment on individual motivation was apparent with 73% of respondents agreeing that peer assessment had motivated them to work harder mainly because they had not wanted to let the team down and also because they believed their individual efforts would be rewarded. However the negative impact of peer assessment on stress levels was significant, in that although only a minority of students stated that they had felt more stressed because their work would be peer assessed, a majority of those students were almost entirely international, non-native English speakers. Lack of understanding of the process was cited as the main contributory factor, but there was a perception amongst several students that this disadvantage was not taken into consideration by group members who were native English speakers, in the peer assessment allocation.

**4.0 Conclusions and Indications for Further Research**

Most students on the DP module consider peer assessment to be a fairer method of assessing group work than tutor assessment alone and most regard the current DP model of peer assessment with ranking against designated assessment criteria to be valid and reliable. However there is clearly a need for the module leader to set aside time to ensure all students feel competent in implementing the process and confident that the process will be fair. Therefore one innovation for the module delivery will be to incorporate student and tutor tuition on peer assessment as part of scheduled seminar activity. This tuition should incorporate instruction in the process and dialogue on the issues that might arise when students from heterogeneous backgrounds are brought together in groups. This may serve in part to allay fears experienced and diminish the stress suffered by  non-native English speakers with respect to equitable treatment, but this issue demands and will receive further investigation by the author, who intends to examine cross-cultural perceptions of peer assessment and the team work process at FBL.

As little enthusiasm for criteria setting was demonstrated by DP students, the peer assessment criteria for future cohorts will continue to be set by the module leader and subject to peer ratification during the usual assessment validation processed employed in her school. However the current rating system will in future be supplemented by a requirement for all students to justify mark allocation with written feedback.

Student perspectives on implementing a common system of peer assessment will be communicated to colleagues as a means of initiating dialogue about its advantages and disadvantages, sharing the elements of good practice identified in this study and hearing of those initiated by fellow academics.

The issues covered in this study were defined by the author's experience of implementing peer assessment and the findings of the literature review, but there are other matters pertinent to the whole area of collaborative assessment that are yet to be explored.

The introduction of self-assessment as part of a more rounded assessment process including tutor and peer assessment would be consistent with the introduction of 360 degree feedback in workplace appraisals. This would arguably add realism to a module, that does after all belong in the field of human resource management.

On the DP module, the tutors currently assess the content of the group element and the students assess their peers' contribution. This is a pragmatic approach that utilises the superior knowledge of both parties: the tutor on the content and quality; the students on the

dynamics of the group work process.  Would it be practicable, reliable and acceptable to ask students to assess both dynamics and content and quality on the group assessment element?  Carlsson and Smith- Howell (1995, cited in Campbell *et al.* 2001) examined student and tutor assessment in introductory public speaking classes and found a high correlation between marks awarded by both parties against the same content-based criteria. Therefore it is a matter worth investigating.

The DP module implements a summative peer assessment system, but consideration is given in the literature to the benefits of formative peer assessment. Surveying student opinion on the use of formative peer assessment was beyond the parameters of this study, but given the acknowledged benefits of formative assessment per se, research on implementing formative peer assessment in the DP process is a prospect, especially with respect to possible impact on amelioration of stress experienced and perceptions of inequitable treatment.

The findings of this exploratory study were mainly affirming, but occasionally alarming to the author. She is encouraged by the mainly positive perceptions of the current DP module peer assessment process and engaged by the prospect of further research into peer assessment in general.

**Developing People Peer Assessment Survey Questions with Quantitative Responses Only**

| 1. Are you male or female? | |
|---|---|
| male | female |
| M=  10; F= 12 | |
| **2. On which course are you a student?** | |
| e.g. BA(Hons) Business Studies, ERASMUS etc.<br>Business Studies = 2; Accounting and Finance = 4; Business and Management = 1; Business and Human Resource Management =6; Marketing  = 1; International Business 4; ERASMUS = 4 | |
| **3. Is English your first language?** | |
| Yes | No |
| If you answered no to question 3,  please indicate your first language<br>Yes = 15; No = 7<br>Arabic = 2; Norwegian = 1; Chinese = 2; German = 1; Farsi = 1 | |
| **4. Have you participated in peer assessment before?** | |
| Yes | No |
| If you answered yes to question 4, please indicate the modules on which you have previously participated in peer assessment<br>Yes = 17; No = 5<br>Business Decision Making = 13; Skills for Accounting 2; = 4 Skills Development for Business = 13 | |
| **5. When undertaking group work do you prefer peer assessments to group marks?** | |
| Yes | No |
| Please explain your answer below to question 5.<br>Yes = 18; No = 4 | |
| **6. Did you find the peer assessment method used on DP a valid and reliable means of assessment?** | |
| Yes | No |
| Please explain your answer below to question 6.<br>Yes = 17;No = 6 | |
| **7. Did the fact that your work would be peer assessed, motivate you to work harder?** | |
| Yes | No |
| Please explain your answer below to question 7.<br>Yes = 16; No=8 | |
| **8. Did the fact that your work would be peer assessed make you feel more stressed?** | |
| Yes | No |
| Please explain your answer below to question 9.<br>Yes = 16; No = 6 | |
| **9. Do you think all of the group members including yourself were equally able to assess performance fairly?** | |
| Yes | No |
| Please explain your answer below to question 9.<br>Yes = 14;No = 8 | |
| **10. On DP the assessment criteria for the mark allocation was given to you in advance. An alternative approach would be for students to set their own assessment criteria for the peer assessment under the guidance of the tutor.  Would you support this move?** | |
| Yes | No |
| Please explain your answer below to question 10.<br>Yes = 2; No = 20 | |
| **11. The peer assessment for DP is based on a quantitative allocation of marks against the assessment criteria. One suggestion would be to require each student to provide written feedback against their allocation as a means of justifying the mark. What do you think of this idea?** | |

| Yes | No |
|---|---|
| Please explain your answer below to question 11. Yes = 19; No = 3 | |
| **12. Although peer assessment is a feature of modules on several courses in the business school and there are similarities in the peer assessment systems used, there is no common system in use. Would it be beneficial to introduce one peer assessment system for all modules with a group work element across the faculty?** | |
| Yes | No |
| Please explain your answer below to question 12. Yes = 6; No = 16 | |

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