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The motif on the cover is based on a nineteenth century carving of a ship's prow from Choiseul, Solomon Islands. To *Directions: Journal of Education Studies*, it signifies forward movement.

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Research Articles

Using peer assessments for research and higher order learning in the online learning platform: Reflections and evidence from the Pacific

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Abstract

Peer assessment is a versatile teaching and learning tool that has been effectively used at different levels of education and assessment tasks with demonstrably positive effects. This study examines the differences between performance of students who participated in a voluntary peer assessment exercise prior to submitting their assignment and students who did not participate and records the benefits and challenges identified by students who engaged in the exercise. Fifty-one students from two online undergraduate research methods courses (one first and one third year course) undertook an online peer assessment exercise for a written assignment and answered open-ended post-exercise reflection questions regarding their experience. For comparison, a matching sample of 51 students was drawn randomly from a class list of students who did not participate in the study. The assignment marks of students who participated in the peer assessment exercise were substantially higher than those students who did not participate ($p = 0.0005$, $d = 1.02$). In the post-exercise reflection, students indicated that the peer assessment activity was useful in learning how to do specific aspects of the assignment, learning how to assess using rubrics, and identifying their own misconceptions and errors about assignment criteria, expectations, and performance. We conclude that online peer assessments can be effectively used in online undergraduate courses to enhance research, academic writing, and self-assessment skills, as well as assessment literacy in a Pacific context.

Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and has greatly evolved from its traditional role of certifying students' performance. Assessments determine if the learning goals have been met and effective and meaningful feedback for assessments directs student learning, motivates students, gives students an opportunity to reflect on what needs improvement, and assists in planning student-specific revisions to enhance learning (Dochy, Segers & Sluijmans, 1999; O'donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004). The shift in focus of education systems to the development of skills and practices such as learner autonomy, reflective practice, critical thinking, and problem-solving, requires reinventing forms of assessments that allow for the development and assessment of these skills and practices, and use of peer assessments is one evidence-based formidable option (Dochy et al. 1999; O'Donovan et al, 2004; Philippakos, 2017; Topping, 2009). Topping (2009) defines peer assessment as "an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners" (p. 21).

This versatile assessment tool has been effectively used at different levels of education including primary, secondary, and tertiary and with a variety of assessment tasks such as oral presentations, written assessments, test performance, and even behaviour, for example as in group contribution (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Topping, 2009). Peer assessments can be organised in a number of ways such as reciprocal or group-based peer assessments; can be conducted face-to-face, on paper, and online; and serve cognitive and metacognitive objectives, giving participating students a chance to not only learn important skills (e.g. writing style, fairness, accuracy, responsibility etc.) but also to reflect on their learning (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011; Topping, 2009).

Use of peer assessment to enhance student achievement has a strong theoretical grounding. The foremost of these relate to building learner autonomy whereby students are willing to and/or able to take charge or responsibility of their own learning (Benson, 2006, as cited in Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Nilsen, 2019). In relation to teaching and learning, learner autonomy not only develops skills such as self-regulation of learning and critical analysis, which greatly enhance classroom performance, but it is also expected that these skills translate into lifelong skills, equipping students for active engagement in democratic societies (Ahmadianzadeh, Seifoori, & Tamjid, 2020; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Dam and Legenhausen (2011) argue that evaluative practices, such as those used in peer assessments, form the “very pivot of learner autonomy” (p. 178).

There is substantial evidence indicating the benefits of peer assessments. Peer assessments improve students’ quality of performance in assessments through increasing student ownership, confidence, and self-reflections on the task (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Dochy et al., 1999; Han & Chan, 2020; O'donovan et al, 2004). Moreover, in the context of peer editing, peer assessments have been either equally, and in some cases, more effective in the improvement of student writing in comparison to marker feedback (Topping, 2009).

Peer assessments also improve quality of student outputs (Atkins, 2012; Cho and MacArthur, 2011; Zheng, Cui, Li, and Huang, 2018). Cho and MacArthur (2011) randomly assigned 61 undergraduate students to three conditions; 1) in the reviewing condition, students were required to assess three sample papers by giving written comments and rating the quality of the assignment using a rubric; 2) in the reading condition, students were required to carefully read sample papers until the experiment was completed; and 3) in the no treatment control condition, students were not asked to read or to review anything related to the experiment. The groups were matched for gender, writing skills, and content knowledge. The authors found significant differences in the quality of the writing, with students in the reviewing condition out-performing students from the other two conditions in their written assignments.

Students also describe multiple benefits of peer assessments. According to students participating in peer assessment exercises, providing feedback to peers engaged them in critical thinking, allowed them to adopt the marker’s perspective, and therefore assisted in gaining a better understanding of the requirements of the assignment (Han & Chan, 2020; Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014). Consequently, students report making modifications to their own writing after engaging in peer assessments, indicating that while engaging in peer assessments students are not only constantly comparing the piece assessed with their own work, but are also able to transfer the ideas generated through the peer assessment process to inform their own work, creating novel ideas in the process (Demir, 2018; Han & Chan, 2020; Nicol, et al., 2014, p. 111).

Including an evaluative component to peer assessments fosters self-reflection which allows students to critically evaluate what they are doing. This move from self-reflection to evaluation requires students to form an opinion and identify the reasons behind this opinion, thus allowing for greater cognitive control of the learning process which in turn encourages transfer of these skills to other similar assessments or situations (Dam & Legenhausen, 2011). Therefore, to ensure transferability of knowledge and skills that students develop through the peer assessment activity, students need to be given a chance to reflect on how they will apply the knowledge and skills gained to future assessments. This can be done purposefully by the instructor by including reflective exercises within the peer assessment activity. For example, Zheng et al. (2018) randomly assigned students undertaking a peer assessment activity into two groups. In the experimental group, the peer assessment activity was followed by 70 minute online synchronous discussion between the assessors and assessees, giving students an opportunity to reflect on and further evaluate the feedback given during the peer assessment exercise before revising their essay. The control group did not have a discussion following the peer assessment activity. Results revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group indicating that the synchronous discussion had a

significant impact on improving writing performance for the students and especially improved content writing skills (Zheng et al., 2018).

There has also been a shift in higher education in regards to marking transparency and accountability and there is a general requirement that marking criteria are made known to all stakeholders, especially students (O'Donovan et al., 2004). While it has become common practice among educators to provide sample student assessments and assessment rubrics, the literature on assessment literacy suggests that only when students are asked to work with the sample by using the rubric, as well as discussing the process, will students be able to utilize the sample and assessment rubrics effectively for their own learning and work (Dochy et al., 1999; O'Donovan et al., 2004; Topping, 2009; Zheng et al., 2018). Peer assessments using samples of student assessments and assessment rubrics can be very useful in helping students deconstruct assessment rubrics and gain better understanding of the marker's requirements (Jones, Allen, Dunn, & Brooker, 2017). It also allows students to take note of the varying levels of performance detailed in the rubric and identify the fine nuances in the differences between one descriptor and the next, which may otherwise be overlooked.

As the literature on assessment literacy and peer assessment is growing in the context of higher education in North America, Asia and Western Europe, it is still missing in the context of Pacific Island Countries (PICs). Changing education and employment contexts in the PICs (Raturi, Hogan, & Thaman 2011; Raturi, 2014) and globally (Biggs & Tang, 2011) demand that students develop skills and practices such as learner autonomy, self-reflection, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Peer assessments can be effective in facilitating the development of these skills. The University of the South Pacific (USP) is a regional university jointly owned by 12 PICs. It has 14 campuses and 9 centers spread throughout a region that spreads across 33 million square kilometres of ocean (The University of the South Pacific [USP], 2018). While USP has many courses that are taught online, in response to the coronavirus pandemic and strict border control and movement regulations in all its member countries, USP has moved all of its teaching to online mode. This move requires students to become autonomous learners, taking greater charge or responsibility of their own learning and therefore course instructors at USP are faced with the responsibility of developing these skills, in addition to existing programme and course learning outcomes, through existing course assessments. Hogan (2009) has documented that at USP, student experiences and outcomes are more negative among online learners than face-to-face learners, influenced by cultural, pedagogical and students' computer and digital literacy skills. Furthermore, the literature does not clearly indicate how students coming from contexts in which both online learning and peer-assessment (and self-assessment) activities are new, experience assessment literacy activities in their new contexts. It is also important to keep in mind that disparities in access to and quality of internet connectivity in the Pacific (Hogan, 2009; Raturi, Hogan, & Thaman, 2011; Raturi, 2014) can impact on how these types of activities are experienced and their learning outcomes.

Keeping these questions in mind, this study 1) explores the advantages and challenges of using peer assessment exercises in an online learning environment for students in the first-year and third-year undergraduate research method courses at USP; 2) examines whether students who participated in the peer assessment exercise score better in the assignment task than those students who did not participate; and 3) identifies to what extent student year, as a proxy for student experience with computer and other learning skills, and the online learning experience influences student perceptions of the benefits and challenges of peer-assessment activities. We expect that this study will document how opportunities to evaluate the work of peers prior to submitting assessments can be an effective learning tool among students from the Pacific and how such opportunities can be created in an online environment.

Method

Participants

Students were enrolled in two online undergraduate research methods courses; Ethics and Research Methods in the Social Sciences I (PS103) and Research Methods in Sociology (SO300) and were invited to participate in the study through notifications sent out through the online learning management system (Moodle) at USP. Participants' informed consent was obtained prior to participation and all students were assured of their rights to participation and withdrawal. The study was given ethical clearance by USP Research and International Office.

Both courses have a higher composition of female students (76% in PS103 and 68% in SO300) and this was also reflected in the sample. Fifty-one students (39 from PS103 and 12 from SO300) undertook the peer assessment exercise and attempted the open-ended reflection questions. For comparison of assignment marks, a sample of 51 students (39 from PS103 and 12 from SO300) were drawn randomly from a class list of students who did not participate in the study. The final sample had 75% females and 25% males and mainly consisted of students from Fiji (83%).

Materials

For each course an anonymised assignment from a previous offering and the rubric for the assessment task were used for peer assessment. The assignment chosen for the peer assessment activity and the assignment students had to submit for this offering of the course, assessed the same learning outcomes and were the same type of assessment (literature review for PS103 and research proposal for SO300) and therefore had similar formatting and stylistic requirements. However, the assignment question for this semester was different, for example, the literature review for PS103 students was based on a different set of research questions this semester. The analytic rubrics for the two courses identified the different sections and sub-sections of the assignment that was being assessed in the leftmost row followed by five levels of performance descriptors (in descending order, with the lowest being "no evidence") across each row.

As part of the peer-review exercise and to facilitate students to reflect on their own learning process, students were asked to respond to the following questions: What did you learn about the assessment by using the rubric to assess the sample paper? What are 3-5 key things you are going to use from this activity to help you do your own assignment? How did the feedback on this activity from the course coordinator help you understand the assessment criteria? What are 3-5 key things that you used from the peer assessment activity to help you with your assignment? What are 1-2 key things you are going to use from this peer-review activity to help you do future assessments (in this course or any other course)? While some may consider these to be 'leading' questions, we found it important to ensure that these questions would act as an opportunity for students to reflect on the activity and their learning, as is common in practices related to supporting the development of metacognition.

Procedure

Upon giving informed consent to participating in the study, students were given access to an assignment and an online grading platform for the assignment using the same analytic rubric that will be used to grade their assignments later in the semester. Students graded each section of the assessment by selecting the descriptor that they found most applicable to that section of the paper. After students submitted their grading for the assignment, they were given access to the grading given by the marker for the course, alongside detailed description for the grading for each section. Students were then given a series of open-ended questions to answer in relation to their experience of the peer assessment activity. Students had to then answer another set of open-ended questions after submitting their assignments through an online assignment drop-box. The time interval between the peer assessment activity and assignment deadline was approximately two weeks. Once the assignment was graded, the marks for all students were downloaded and grouped into two categories;

those who participated in the peer assessment activity and those who did not. To protect students' identity only their initials have been used in this paper.

Results

Comparing Assessment Marks

The assignment marks of students who participated in the peer assessment exercise ($M= 72.5$, $SD= 17.8$) prior to submitting their assignments were substantially higher than those students who did not participate ($M=52$, $SD= 22.4$). Students who participated in the exercise scored approximately 20.46 marks higher, 95% CI [12.51, 28.41] than students who did not participate. These differences were statistically significant with a large sized effect $t(100) = 51.05$, $p < 0.0005$, one tailed, $d = 1.02$.

Participant reflections on learning from the peer review activity

Student responses seem to indicate that the activity was useful in 1) learning how to do specific aspects of the assignment to gain research skills (e.g., importance of providing supporting evidence, choosing relevant articles, citations, etc.); 2) learning how to assess using rubrics; and 3) identifying their own misconceptions and errors about assignment criteria and expectations and performance.

One PS103 student, AR summarized the range of themes quite well. I learned:

1. the importance of instructions given by the Coordinator
2. the value of marks if carelessly written
3. the importance of reading the assignment questions
4. the importance of sentence structure and grammar
5. The need to pay attention and relate to other relevant documents as a guide for assignments
6. the importance of reading, being literate and attentive to the findings and current affairs
7. the importance of SLS in supporting the needs of students
8. I learned the importance of time
9. I learned to appreciate lecturers, technical staff, and teaching assistance meeting my needs academically
10. I learned the importance of mental behavior while pursuing a degree
11. I learned APA style and proper referencing
12. I learned to push myself to learn effectively and consistently
13. I learned the importance of research and the need to pay attention to it.

Assessment for learning.

Students indicated in different ways how the peer review activity allowed them to gain a better understanding of the assignment and specifics related to the research skills that these assignments were about. For example, some of the students in the PS103 course wrote regarding the literature review assignment,

I learnt how to correctly make the cover page by following the sample paper, how to write the introduction and its elements, how to start each review and how to in-text reference it, how to conclude the review, how to correctly reference each source, indent it and how to write the abstract after reading the literature review. [YC]

I learn how to write my own literature review assignment because at first I have no idea about it but when I saw the sample paper it helps me with it. [MT]

What I learned from the literature review assessment by using the rubric to assess the sample paper is to be able to identify various mistakes like always state the aim of the literature review when writing the abstract. And that when writing a literature review, there is a need to avoid over use or phrase taken from an article but rather have to paraphrase it to avoid act of plagiarism because we a reviewing someone else's work. Thus helps me to be able to put into practice when writing my literature review. [SF]

First of all, the feedback helped me to start my literature review, it opened the door of understanding on what I was supposed to do according to the marking rubric and my checklist. [MN]

Similarly, the SO300 students indicated the activity was useful in learning how to do research design and write a research proposal:

Going through this activity, one thing that came clear to me, is to make sure we understand what we are doing, we are clear why we are doing the research, because if we do then we should be able to relate our research question to the existing literature, identify what is left to be answered, how our research will answer those questions? what methodology will be taken given our situation? And many features of a research that need to be considered. [LF]

What I learnt from the literature review assessment is that it is very important to choose your relevant and scholarly articles carefully because the ones that portrayed a great depth of information and provide supporting evidence to your research question are the ones that should be used. In addition, the literature review very much gives a clear idea on why the research question will be answered and its relevance and how does it fill the gap in providing information that other researchers did not cover. [MT_2]

Developing evaluation of learning skills.

Student responses clearly indicated that the activity was not only helping them learn *specific* assignment skills, but that they were also gaining skills related to criteria-based evaluation, including using rubrics to assess others' work, self-assessment and taking on the 'marker's' perspective. Moreover, students clearly indicated that they were gaining skills on how rubrics can be used for learning, planning and completing their assignments. For example, students in PS103 shared:

I used the marking rubric to analyze my assignment. [OV]

The first key thing I learnt was how the marking rubric can be a great help when writing an essay. [TW]

It helped me understand the requirements of this assessment better. Marking the sample paper also allowed me to view the work through the marker's eyes and this, in turn, helped me to better understand how I can improve my own paper. [JK]

When reviewing the literature review with the rubric, I got to see writing from a different perspective and it showed how simply following the rubric and cross checking with it could prevent simple errors. [TW]

The things that I learnt from these peer review activities which really assisted me during my assignment was proper citation methods, paraphrasing and direct quotes, how to do proper referencing, and what to include in each section of the assignment according to the marking criteria. [AS]

Making criteria from the peer review activity which help me to structure my assignment well. [MT]

When I finished my assignment, I cannot find the wrong place. But when I finished reading the sample, I saw the wrong place which he has, then I realise which part of my assignment is wrong. [XM]

What I learnt from the literature review assessment by using the rubric, is that it helps me also to identify what wrongs or errors in my literature review assessment, that I can improve on. [MT_1]

This was a great learning experience for me. I had to first read through the whole literature review sample twice so that I can really capture what the literature was about. When assessing it, I felt that I was using reflective thinking and at the same time critical thinking, trying to analyse each paragraph by matching each again their particular marking rubric. And when matching each paragraph against marking rubric, I had to stop and ask myself this question - "Which one should I choose and why? It also influences and motivates me to re-check my assignment 1 again. So I had to go back and review my assignment 1 and make more corrections. Thank you very for allowing us students to undergo these activities. [OV]

It helps me pretty much in the way that it showed me whether or not I did the right thing or if I'm even in the right path. [LL]

While all of these types of responses were common in both courses *thematically*, students in the 100-level seem to engage more directly with the use of the rubric as a site of learning, while students in the 300-level seem to engage more with the value of seeing the feedback of the marker to the sample work in where they perceived these learning happening. For example, students in SO300 shared:

Very, very helpful, now I get to clearly see how the marker see my work, and what she looks for in my proposal. [LF]

The feedback helped me to analyse the activity in a closer detail. It showed me things in the activity that I did not notice. I think I have a better idea of the assessment and the criteria which will greatly help me when I'm working on my contribution to the group research. [MT_1]

The feedback on this activity from the course coordinator shed some light on some of the mistakes that I overlooked from the sample research proposal paper. It helps me not to repeat the same mistakes in the upcoming research proposal and it helps me also to take note of the important criteria and requirements that should be met to have an effective and good research proposal paper that is coherently written with all the sources and information correctly cited and described. [MT_2]

The feedback from the coordinator helped me understand some of the criteria that I was not really sure what it was referring to. [MT_3]

Students also noted that the activity had a positive motivational effect, giving students the confidence to be able to do the assessment. For example, one student in PS103 student shared:

By using my reflective and critical thinking in order to argue which is correct and why? I really appreciate experiencing these activities. Now it makes me want to focus on my assignment 1 and make it more better, so that I can get full mark. After undergoing this activity, I feel that I am now confident to do my assignment and that I can make it to score the full mark allocated for the assignment 1. [OV]

Another SO300 student noted:

It definitely assisted me with areas I was not confident in understanding such as that of the literature review and the methodology section. [KP]

Learning for marks?

While most student participant reflections indicated an engagement with deeper learning processes, some student responses do suggest that the activity may have also led to a focus on marks and rubric criteria at the expense of learning more broadly. For example, in PS103 students' responses included:

I learnt that I can lose crucial marks without using the rubric. The rubric states that the font to be used is New Times Roman with font size 12. From the sample paper, the references section did not follow this so 1 mark was lost. [LM]

It was a new experience and it gives light to how our assignments are marked. Most of the time, I just read the marking rubric but now I know what all the parts mean and how important it is to fulfil all the marking points in order to get good grades. [AS]

The one key thing that I will always use now after this activity, is to always refer back to the rubric. It really is the perfect tool to help me achieve the best possible mark. [TW]

And in SO300, responses included this:

Keep going back to the marking rubric, since I will be aiming to get the highest mark, I will see what are the requirements to get that mark. [MT_1]

In brief then, while some students seem to focus on marks rather than learning, what we find that student participants in this activity in both these online research methods courses were able to use a detailed rubric to assess sample student work on a type of assessment that is new to them (a literature review/research proposal), conduct this activity in an online forum, critically compare their own assessment of the student sample work with that of the marker, and then utilize this process to enhance their own understanding of how to do the literature review and how to use a rubric both for learning, as well as for self-assessment.

Discussion

The shift in the last few decades to online and blended modes of learning in higher education has created a need to examine how effective learning strategies in 'traditional' face-to-face learning environments can be translated and adapted (Gikandi et al., 2011). In particular, while existing research on student learning underscores the value of peer and self-assessment activities as a major way to achieve assessment literacy, research in this area is lacking on three aspects: 1) how can peer/self-assessment activities be translated to the online environment (Broadbent & Poon, 2015) how do students coming from cultural and educational backgrounds where both online learning and peer/self-assessment activities are new to engaging with such activities; and 3) to what extent can the same type of peer/self-assessment activities be used at different student levels?

Our results show that irrespective of level of study, student performance is enhanced by participation in these activities and that student engagement with, reflection on, and awareness of the benefits of these activities for their own learning is enhanced. When we take into account that students enrolling in USP usually come in from schools in the PICs where learning is pre-dominantly face-to-face and utilizes approaches that do not usually support skills related to peer-learning and self-assessment, the success of this activity for these outcomes in the PS103 course is especially promising in supporting development of assessment literacy skills in the online learning environment and as such facilitating the development of independent learning by students. Often academic staff are concerned about the use of peer assessment because they worry about students' ability to assess using external

criteria and limit bias (Azarnoosh, 2013; Matsuno, 2009; Cho, Schunn, & Wilson, 2006). The kind of peer assessment activity described here shows that students are able to both assess other students' work using a rubric, as well as learn to self-assess and improve their own work using the peer assessment process. Moreover, this kind of activity, in which students are utilizing skills of peer assessment for learning (and not grading a peer), should also allay the concerns staff may have about student ability.

Interestingly, students at the higher level seem to suggest they benefitted more from the marker feedback aspect of the activity, compared to 100-level students focusing on the use of the rubric itself as a site of learning. The difference in focus from the PS103 vs. SO300 students in terms of where they felt they were learning the most from in the activity may be related to a range of issues, including differences in student experience with using rubrics, the quality of feedback from the marker in each course, and differences in quality of rubrics between the two courses. While our current study does not allow us to assess which of these factors may be at play, we would suggest that starting these type of activities from 100-level courses can be beneficial for students at higher levels being able to use self-directed learning strategies that include using rubrics, samples and self-assessment for assignment completion and learning, which has been also proposed in previous studies (Thomas, Martin, & Pleasants, 2011; Liu & Carless, 2006).

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