

A Sceptic Converts: Recognising the benefits of peer assessment

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Introduction

Through a case study approach this paper explores the impact of peer assessment in terms of enhancing student learning, developing critical thinking and consequently supporting the development of lifelong learning amongst the students at the London Metropolitan University [LMU].

The impact of assessment on student learning has been recognised widely in academic literature to the extent that, according to Brown and Knight (1994: 155), 'assessment is (viewed to be) at the heart of learning...assessment is learning'. They further emphasise that 'if you want to change student learning then change the method of assessment' (ibid: 7). Whilst student assessments have traditionally usually been assessed only by the tutor, recent innovations in approaches to assessment have included peer assessment and self assessment. In particular, peer assessment is being proposed as a major tool by which to develop lifelong learners (Sambell & McDowell, 1998). Whilst there is no consensus as to a single definition of 'lifelong learning', the author concurs with the explanation offered by Sambell & McDowell (ibid: 56) that a lifelong learner is 'an ideal learner who is sufficiently autonomous, independent and motivated to continue self-regulated learning throughout life'.

In line with LMU's mission statement, the author has a strong commitment towards the development of lifelong learning by supporting the development in students of a wide range of competencies and skills so as to equip them to effectively cope with and manage the challenges they face within their daily life activities. These skills include the ability critically and fairly to evaluate one's own performance and that of others. Peer assessment in particular develops these skills and, as argued by Brown *et al* (1997: 173), peer assessment is seen to constitute 'part of the preparation for life that a university education should give' and 'promotes critical thinking, the skills of task management, increases in self-confidence, responsibility and awareness of group dynamics'. Furthermore, Boud and Falchikov (cited in Sambell & McDowell, 1998) underline the value of peer assessment by stating that it is regarded as an effective vehicle towards the development of learners 'tak(ing) greater responsibility for their own learning'. Bostock (2002) supports this view by adding that peer assessment is also useful in empowering learners. The significance of students developing critical thinking has been underlined by Barnett (1997) who feels that if students are to carry their world forward in worthwhile fashion, then they have to become critical persons.

Trying out peer assessment

Within this context the author, initially a sceptic of innovative assessment methods, decided to experiment by moving away from tutor-led assessment methods towards a more student-centred approach to assessment within a third-year undergraduate module. Peer assessments were used to assess team presentations in a final year undergraduate seminar in 2000/01. The team presentations comprised 10% of the total assessment for the module. To ensure the validity and reliability of the outcome, the process was repeated with another group of students studying the same module in 2001/02. The first group and the second group consisted of 17 and 16 students respectively. Each group made presentations in teams of 3 or 4. At the beginning of the semester the process of peer assessment was explained clearly to the students and the assessment criteria were clarified. At this stage ample opportunity was provided to the students to clarify issues related to the process of peer assessment so as to alleviate any uncertainty or anxiety.

Before the start of each of the team presentations each student was provided with a peer assessment form. Following the presentation, students were given about ten minutes to complete the forms. They were encouraged to comment individually on the presentation and a space for this was provided on the forms. These comments were subsequently typed up so that they remained anonymous and were provided to the presentation groups as formative feedback. There were only slight overall variations between the marks awarded by the students and those awarded by the tutor. This finding appears to be in line with research in this field which suggests that the misconception that students tend to mark over generously is often unfounded in practice (Burke cited in Rowntree, 1977).

At the end of all the team presentations, in Week 12, students were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to evaluate the impact of peer assessment on their learning. 24 students from both groups completed the evaluation questionnaire. Interestingly 18 of the 24 students had already had some previous experience with peer assessment. A majority (83%) of the students reported that peer assessment had helped them in being clearer about the assessment criteria, whilst 92% agreed that peer assessment had helped them in being clearer about the learning outcomes used in the assessment. Furthermore, most of the students (88%) indicated that peer assessment had helped them in concentrating more on the team presentations, while two-thirds (67%) affirmed that peer assessment had helped them in enhancing their learning on the module. Finally, three-quarters (75%) concluded that they would support peer assessment in becoming a regular part of assessment methods within their modules. Of the six students who did not have any experience of peer assessment prior to this exercise, five indicated that they would support the peer assessment in becoming a regular part of assessment suggesting a positive experience. Of those who did not support peer assessment the reasons appeared mainly related to insecurity associated with this novel assessment method.

Discussion

Overall, the study reveals that students regarded peer assessment positively and this is further emphasised by the fact that a majority of the students who completed the evaluation questionnaire concurred that they would support peer assessment becoming a regular part of their assessment within modules. The following comments provide some insight into their reasons for this view:

'It helps students to understand what is required from them'.

'Because it enables students to know what the criteria is for the module'.

'It helps you to concentrate more on the presentation and also learn a little bit more about the module'.

The six students who did not favour peer assessment becoming a regular part of assessment gave the following reasons:

'Well it usually depends on the students' and tutor's attitude'.

'Not all students will have a clear picture of what points to look for'.

'Due to some students being biased'.

'It is not normally consistent with tutor marks'.

'Too much bias no matter what'.

'Opinions of class mates can sometimes be bias (sic), either against or for certain individuals, so I don't think it gives a true representation'.

This indicates that some students remain sceptical of peer assessment perhaps because they feel more secure with the traditional tutor-led assessment approach. However, the more that students experience peer assessment the more it is that they are likely to gain confidence, especially if this has led to a positive learning experience. McDowell (2002) suggests that the introduction of newer methods of assessment, like peer assessment, should contribute towards changing the existing culture of assessment. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that peer assessment is a useful way to develop self-assessment abilities which in turn encourages further reflection and critical evaluation of one's own work leading to skills needed to achieve lifelong learning (Brown & Knight, 1994).

Conclusion

This relatively small study has clearly demonstrated the value of peer assessment in enhancing teaching and student learning. In the future the author intends to introduce peer assessment in other modules while at the same time keeping in mind Brown and Pendlebury's (1997: 172) useful advice that 'it is advisable to provide students with some training' before peer assessment is introduced formally. Sluijsmans (2002) also offers useful advice when he asserts that '...peer assessment can be a powerful tool to increase learning but needs to be managed carefully'. Furthermore, the author is also keen to involve students in the formulation of assessment criteria as this is found to increase student commitment to the whole process of peer

assessment by forging a sense of ownership (Brown & Pendlebury, 1997: 174-5). It may be more effective to introduce peer assessment in first year undergraduate modules and then experiment with developing self-assessment in later years. In this way, by the time students reach the final year they have developed effective skills enabling them to evaluate critically their own output and the work of their peers. This will contribute to the development of their core abilities and enhance their learning throughout life, thereby facilitating the achievement of the goal of 'education for personal development' in the University's mission statement.

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Biographical note

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