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Business education and the development of feedback skills: The impact of student peer review assignments.

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ABSTRACT

Business education not only strives to bridge the gap between related theories and applications but also seeks to develop students' employability skills. Employability skills are generic skill sets of employees and potential employees that employers across industries value. Leadership, communications, and relationship building are examples of skills that employers have reported as valuable employability skills. Feedback receiving and giving are communications skills important for employment and professional development. The purpose of this paper is to explore the pedagogical device of peer reviews in business classes to develop students' feedback receiving and feedback giving skills. Using the theoretical learning theory, connectivisim, we propose that course-related peer-review assignments due to their collaborative nature improve feedback skills. From the literature, we developed a conceptual model related to collaborative coursework such as peer review assignments in business courses. We also present some best practices for leveraging course-specific peer-review assignments to enhance students' feedback skills.

Keywords: business education, peer reviews, feedback receiving, social constructivism, connectivism

Employability skills, soft skills, or generic employment skills are not job-specific, rather these are skills valued by employers for all levels of employment from entry-level to the C-suite (Viviers et al., 2016; Welch, 2021). Employability skills include technical skills needed in a particular field as well as generic skills that are desired by employers across all fields of employment. These include soft skills such as leadership and relationship-building skills. Examples of generic employment skills that incorporate feedback skills include written and verbal communication, relationship-building, and leadership skills (Garavan et al., 1997; Griffin & Coelhoso, 2019; Mosson et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2019).

Business Education strives to bridge the gap between theory and practice by developing competencies that students will need to be successful in the workplace and in their future careers (Ferreras-Garcia et al., 2019; Tachia et al., 2019; Yasin et al., 2015). Generic business competencies that many employers look for in employees include communications, leadership, and relationship building (Cabral & Rajib Lochan, 2019; Viviers et al., 2016). For each of these generic competencies, a sub-competency is the ability to provide and utilize feedback. This paper explores the benefits of using student peer review assignments in business college classes to develop students' ability to give and take feedback. From a review of the literature related to student peer reviews and business competencies, we develop a conceptual model and offer some best practices to utilize in college business classes.

Business Education

General business knowledge and business acumen are expected of BBA graduates. Four-year business programs resulting in a Bachelor's of Business Administration (BBA) typically include curricular and co-curricular components of business education including core courses relevant to all business disciplines (e.g. accounting, finance, information systems, management, and marketing). Accrediting bodies of business schools establish standards related to assessing student learning outcomes that measure business knowledge along with critical thinking and communication proficiency. Stakeholders including future employers are consulted by business programs to assist with identifying knowledge and skills that graduates of business programs should possess. Assessments and input are used to develop business programs. Program and course-level student learning objectives are continually assessed to make improvements. Pedagogical devices such as course-level exams and assignments are used to reinforce course content. Learning research related to connectivism indicates that assignments involving collaboration and peer interaction create more meaningful learning experiences, positively affecting student learning outcomes (Bajada & Trayler, 2013; Chimruang & Yampinij, 2021) .

Connectivism Theory and Collaborative Assignments

Some educational research related to connectivism theory offers evidence that creating connections between sources of information and course content is reinforced through collaborative assignments (Bell & Bell, 2020; Chimruang & Yampinij, 2021; Hammad et al., 2020; Johnson, 2013). Peer review assignments are examples of collaborative assignments because students are working together and connecting on an assignment with intended outcomes such as improving writing skills or a final project. Learning theory research for both online and face-to-face courses indicates that engaging student in the learning process is crucial (Brieger et al., 2020; Kop & Hill, 2008; Utecht & Keller, 2019; Utecht, 2019). Using the existing research related to connectivism learning theories, we propose that student peer-review assignments improve students' feedback skills.

Business education is a combination of curricular and co-curricular experiences aimed at providing students with a combination of generic skills and technical skills. Within the classroom, methods, and tools such as lectures, readings, activities, assignments, and assessments are employed to improve student learning outcomes. Pedagogical devices such as peer review assignments that are collaborative and connect students can be employed to develop feedback skills and improve students' employability.

Peer Review Assignments and Feedback Skills

Research indicates that engaging students in active learning positively impacts student learning outcomes (Villarroel, 2020). Peer-review assignments are a form of active learning that connects and engages students in the learning process (Achen, 2018). In business education, research has been conducted related to conducting and receiving peer reviews and improving student writing and course assignments (Baker, 2016; Bostock, 2000, Brown et al., 1994; Li and Carless et al., 2010; Topping, 1998). Some studies found that the quality of feedback given by students was associated with their performance on assignments, whereas the quality of feedback received was not (Enos, 2010; Rieber, 2006; Viviers et al., 2016; Weldy, 2017). Research also found that students learned from giving and receiving feedback (Achen, 2018, p. 74). However, past research indicates that students benefit from offering feedback as compared to receiving feedback (Bostock, 2000; Li et al., 2010; Liu and Carless, 2006). Nicole et al., (2014), in their study of students, concluded that there were different learning benefits resulting from receiving feedback and conducting feedback as well as looking at the cognitive processes activated when students conduct peer reviews (Nicole, et al., 2014, p. 102).

Figure 1: Peer review assignments and feedback skill development
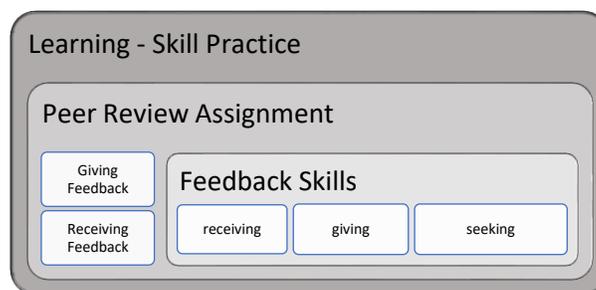

Figure 1. This figure illustrates the context in which Peer Review Assignments are embedded within the learning environment and the transferring of feedback skills.

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Figure one above illustrates how the development of feedback skills such as giving, receiving, and seeking feedback can be embedded in peer-review assignments. When students engage in peer reviews of each other's assignments, they must provide feedback on the assignment which they review.   As a result, they are also receiving feedback about their assignment. This reciprocity results in a collaborative outcome because they are working together to coordinate the giving and receiving of feedback. Students are instructed to reach out to their peers to coordinate the delivery and receipt of feedback which is a feedback-seeking activity.

An example of a peer-review assignment is to have students coordinate with two other peers in class to conduct reviews of specific assignments. Such an assignment is required for graduate students in a Masters of Management class at a regional public university. A survey was undertaken to collect students' perceptions of peer review assignments. Twenty-nine graduate students at a southeastern state university were surveyed about their perceptions related to peer-review assignments in business classes. Although this survey is not generalizable across all business students due to its limited scope, the results do provide some insight into student attitudes about conducting peer reviews in class. In particular, the survey results indicate that the process of conducting peer reviews increased a sense of self-efficacy in providing feedback in the future as well as seeking feedback.

Table one below summarizes the results of this survey. Over 96% of the students surveyed agreed that receiving feedback from peers made their final paper better. Students reported giving specific and constructive feedback to peers on grammar, structure, format, and content. Forty-one percent said that they recommended other possible sources for their peers' projects. Over 75% of the students agreed that conducting peer reviews improved their final projects. Seventy-nine percent of the students surveyed indicated increased confidence in conducting future peer reviews and that they would continue to seek feedback on their writing in the future.

This survey provides some insight into the value that business students in this particular class place on peer-review assignments. From the study, we discern that the type of feedback given may have an impact on the students' perceptions. However, it is important to note that there are other factors to consider when assessing the perception of feedback. Raemdonck & Strijbos (2013) in a study of secretarial employees found that feedback content and sender characteristics (status and performance appraisal) differentially affect feedback perceptions and attribution. It is important to note that engaging students in peer review assignments may have a positive impact on feedback-seeking behavior. What is of interest from these results is the attitude of students related to the assignments. In particular that the students indicated increased confidence in conducting reviews and also that they may be likely to engage in feedback seeking. As noted earlier feedback-seeking behaviors can have a

long-term on employability and career development (Moss et al, 2019). Figure two below shows the connections between peer-review assignments in business classes and employability.

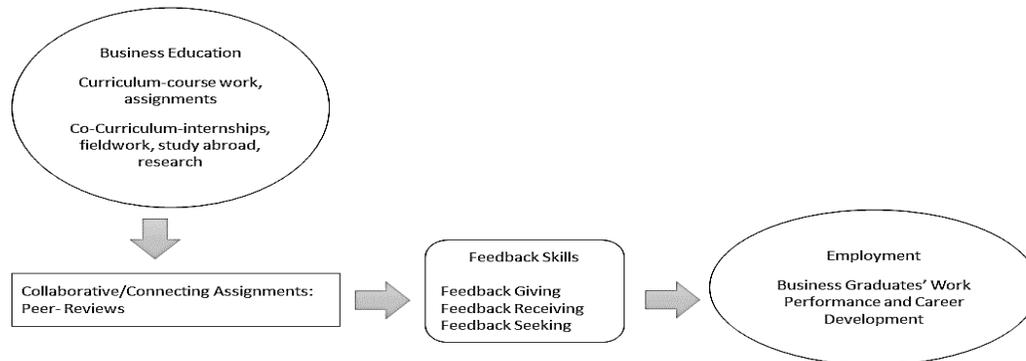**Figure 2: Business Education, Feedback Skills, and Employment**

Figure 2. This figure illustrates the relationships between business education, collaborative assignments, and business graduates' future employment.

The dynamic environments of business require that leaders and employees of business organizations remain flexible to meet both current and future challenges (Kraljic et al., 2020; Malik & Venkatraman, 2017). Due to the ambiguous nature of these open and changing business environments, it is difficult to predict all of the technical skills needed for success in the workplace. Technological advances continually impact the landscape of businesses and workers that can adapt quickly are less like to become obsolete (Tsai et al., 2017). However, some generic skills are desirable across industries as well as remain constant despite changes in technology. These include communication, leadership, and people skills. Related to these skills are feedback giving, receiving, and seeking skills. Feedback giving skills have been found to positively impact effective communications (source), leadership, and relationship (source) competencies in the workplace. In particular, these skills have been related to mentoring, leading, and training in the workplace. Specifically, feedback-giving skills are employed in the workplace when conducting 360-degree reviews that involve assessments from subordinates, peers, and supervisors (Junbang et al., 2020). Feedback receiving skills have also been found to correlate with employee development and training (source). Employees' ability to receive feedback from supervisors and peers has an impact on performance improvement (source). Research also indicates that the perceived value of feedback is related to how feedback is received (De Stobbeleir et al., 2020) as well as its impact on outputs (Krasman, 2011). Finally, research related to feedback-seeking has found that individuals who continually seek feedback from others tend to be more successful (Krasman, 2013; Moss et al., 2020; Sherf et al., 2021).

Table 1: Student Survey related to Peer-Review Assignments

Question	Response/ Themes	#	%
Q1. Thinking of both undergraduate and graduate course work, how often have you conducted and/or received a peer review for classroom assignments?	Always	1	3%
	Usually	3	10%
	Occasionally	11	38%
	Seldom	11	38%
	Never	3	10%
Q2. In this class, what type of peer review input did you provide? (e.g., grammar, spell checking, structural, etc.)	Grammar, spelling, structure	25	86%
	Input on content	22	76%
	Constructive feedback	27	93%
	Used assignment rubric to provide feedback	3	10%
	Format feedback	5	17%
Q3. Receiving feedback from multiple individuals on my paper made my final paper a better product.	Strongly agree	8	27.5%
	Somewhat agree	20	69%
	Neither agree nor disagree	1	3%
	Somewhat disagree	0	0%
	Strongly disagree	0	0%
Q4. Conducting reviews of my classmates' assignments helped me improve my assignments?	Strongly agree	3	10%
	Somewhat agree	19	65.5%
	Neither agree nor disagree	6	21%
	Somewhat disagree	1	3%
	Strongly disagree	0	0%
Q5. When conducting a peer review, did you suggest the writer use other resources or think about something differently?	Yes	12	41%
	No	15	52%
	NA	2	7%
Q6. After taking this course I am now more confident in my ability to review a peer's paper.	Strongly agree	5	17%
	Somewhat agree	18	62%
	Neither agree nor disagree	6	21%
	Somewhat disagree	0	0%
	Strongly disagree	0	0%
Q7. As a result of the peer review assignments, I intend to seek out more peer reviews of my writing in the future.	Strongly agree	3	17%
	Somewhat agree	17	62%
	Neither agree nor disagree	5	21%
	Somewhat disagree	4	0%
	Strongly disagree	0	0%

Table 1: This table presents the results from a survey of graduate students at a regional state university enrolled in a Masters of Management program, n=29.

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Summary and Discussion

As business educators continue to seek tools and methods to engage students in the classroom, consideration of skill development is paramount. Pedagogical devices such as peer review assignments that specifically aim to improve feedback skills are an example of such methods. Peer review assignments can be employed as loosely structured assignments or guide assignments. For example, students can be assigned to review one or more students' assignments with little guidance. In such a case, the assignment description may simply assign students to a peer review group and instruct them to provide feedback without dictating the feedback format without guidance in providing feedback. On the opposite end of the continue, a highly structured peer review assignment may provide guidance for conducting peer reviews as well as a rubric for students to use when providing feedback. A grading rubric for the peer review assignment may also be used to assess the assignment. The rubric for grading for student peer reviews would then award points for the quality of feedback provided as opposed to just a completion grade for conducting the peer review. It may even be more effective to have multiple grading opportunities for student peer reviews to assess if the quality of feedback being provided improves. As mentioned in the introduction, past studies have focused on assessing the impact peer-review assignments have had on improving writing skills. Future studies are needed to determine if peer-review assignments improve students' feedback skills.

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