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Preliminary enquiries should be addressed to Agi Ryder: [a.i.ryder@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:a.i.ryder@mdx.ac.uk), Centre for Learning and Teaching Enhancement, Middlesex University, The Burroughs, London, NW4 4BT.

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# What the Eye Doesn't See: A Case Study Exploring the Less Obvious Impacts of Peer Assessment

**Pat Cartney**

*Principal Lecturer and Learning and Teaching Strategy Leader for HSSc, Mental Health Social Work CETL, Middlesex University, [p.cartney@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:p.cartney@mdx.ac.uk)*

## Abstract

For many years now literature has drawn attention to the close relationship between assessment processes and student learning. Increasing attention is currently being paid to exploring some of the inherent complexities in this relationship and how assessment can both promote and inhibit student learning. The role of peer assessment is currently being explored within this framework. This paper reflects on the beginnings of an evaluation into a peer assessment exercise introduced with the aim of enabling students to work actively with the assessment criteria whilst feeding back to each other on their formative work prior to summative submission. Current findings highlight the importance of engaging in an assessment dialogue with students as key issues may impact on student learning but remain invisible to the tutor. The emotional as well as cognitive aspects of peer learning are highlighted alongside the need for learning pedagogies to be incorporated at programme, as well as module, level for peer assessment to be most effective.

**Keywords:** assessment dialogue, emotional component of learning, cognitive components of learning, programme pedagogies

## Introduction

There have been many changes to the landscape of higher education in recent years. The re-conceptualisation of assessment as a vehicle not only for measuring the outcomes of learning but also as a crucial factor in enabling – or preventing – the process of learning taking place has been a key shift in conceptual thinking about learning and teaching. Assessment is increasingly acknowledged as a fundamental part of the process of learning and not simply as its end product. Research by Snyder (1971) initially highlighted how assessment requirements dominate both how and what students learn. This theme has been continually built upon by an increasing amount of pedagogic research and literature (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Boud, 1995; Gibbs, 1998; Ramsden, 1992).

Knowing that students tend to focus on what they need to do to meet the assessment requirements of their programmes has provided an insight into where students channel their energies and on the close relationship between assessment and learning. Such insights have led to a chain of interrelated events. 'Assessment for learning' rather than simply 'assessment as measurement' has been increasingly promoted (Juwah, 2004). Seeing assessment in this process-focused way has led to increased attention being paid to the importance of formative assessment and the impact of feedback on enhancing learning (Orsmond et al., 2004). The role of peer assessment has been signalled increasingly as having the potential to improve student learning, particularly in the context of formative assessment. Current

research findings strongly suggest that engaging with peer assessment can have positive outcomes for student learning (Cassidy, 2006; Topping et al., 2000). Recent research has stressed the advantages of students actively participating in their assessments alongside the value of an assessment dialogue taking place between students and tutors in this process (Rust, 2007).

The complex relationship between the provision of assessment feedback and its use in enhancing student learning is increasingly being acknowledged. The provision of feedback alone appears insufficient to effect higher standards of work by students (Crisp, 2007). Whilst feedback is now recognised as a powerful pedagogic experience (Kenyon & Chambers, 2009), whether students are able to act upon their feedback is increasingly debated and the gap between feedback given and feedback used is acknowledged. Whilst increased attention has been given to assessment processes and the provision of feedback in recent years, the results of the National Student Survey have consistently revealed that students appear least satisfied with the assessment and feedback aspects of their courses (HEFCE, 2009). Furthermore, the Quality Assurance Agency consistently identified assessment as one of the weakest features across many subject areas (Rust, 2007).

In this turbulent climate many changes are taking place within the higher education arena in relation to how both assessment and its corresponding feedback are understood. Some commentators are suggesting that a 'new assessment culture' is emerging (Rust, 2007). Carless (2006) notes that feedback is central to learning in this context but is currently 'comparatively under researched'. Abrahamson (2009) points out that the multifaceted dimensions of assessment and feedback require understanding, analysis and review.

## **The Teaching Fellow's Project**

I was awarded a Senior Teaching Fellowship from Middlesex University in 2008 and for my Teaching Fellow's Project I chose to focus on exploring the complex issues involved in promoting 'assessment as learning' and engaging with the exploration of this 'new assessment culture'. My work has been undertaken within the School, University and the broader learning and teaching community. For the purposes of this paper, however, I have focused on one particular peer assessment project I introduced as part of my own teaching as a way of highlighting some of the issues involved and stressing the need for an assessment dialogue with students. I was particularly interested in the work of the Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe) CETL at Oxford Brookes which highlights the notion of assessment as a socially constructed concept and the need to induct students into understanding the assessment criteria. I was also impressed by literature I read about the power of peer assessment in enhancing student learning. I, therefore, aimed to introduce a peer assessment exercise which enabled students to work actively with the assessment criteria whilst feeding back to each other on their formative work. As this exercise was planned to be used with first-year undergraduates it seemed pertinent to focus on formative as opposed to high stakes summative assessment feedback.

'Social Policy for Social Workers' is a one year compulsory module taken by first-year BA Social Work students. The module had traditionally been assessed via a summative essay. When revising the assessment scheme for the module I chose to

include a formative peer assessment exercise as a key component and assess its impact on student learning via an action research approach.

The student group comprised forty-five students in total who were divided into Home Groups with five students per group. Each Home Group was required to give feedback on a draft essay that would eventually be the student's summative submission for the module. Each member of the Home Group was required to give feedback on the formative essay submitted by the other four students in their group. In turn, they were to receive feedback from the other four group members on their essay. These formative essays were then to be reworked following feedback and submitted for summative assessment at the end of the module.

Giving and receiving of feedback is a complex undertaking and it was clearly necessary to prepare students before they undertook this exercise. Firstly, students needed to be prepared to undertake the responsibilities of giving each other feedback. A workshop was held to explain the processes to students and to answer any questions or make changes in light of their suggestions. Students were provided with copies of anonymised summative essays submitted previously on the module, alongside copies of tutor's written feedback. Students were also given copies of the marking sheet and discussions took place about the wording of the criteria and what was being assessed. Suggested key areas for feedback were discussed as a group and the purposes of the exercise were highlighted. Reading each other's work for ideas about structure, how to argue their case, use references etc. was suggested as a key opportunity for learning alongside receiving feedback from other students on their work. Discussion also took place about how using the marking sheets was a potential way of students' familiarising themselves with the assessment criteria and demystifying some of the assessment processes.

Students were given a date to feed back their marking sheets electronically to each other and a further workshop was planned for students to discuss how they experienced the feedback process rather than giving detailed feedback at this point. Students were then encouraged to have an online discussion with other group members outside of the session to talk in more detail about their feedback and to ask and answer questions. Tutors were provided with hard copies of each essay and the feedback each student had received from their peers. Students were subsequently required to comment on how they used their formative feedback from other students in their Home Group to improve their summative work. They were asked to provide this information as the first section of their summative assessment.

## **Evaluating the Impact on Student Learning**

I was keen to explore in some detail how the students had experienced the peer assessment process and to engage in a dialogue with them about how the experience impacted on their learning. I chose to investigate the students' experiences by holding a focus group to discuss these issues. A Research Consent Form was devised asking students for their voluntary participation in a focus group and ten self-selected students were invited to participate in a focus group. Goldman and Schmaltz (2001) recommend that focus groups consist of eight to twelve participants. All the participants were female which was representative of that cohort (forty of the forty-five students were female) and a third were from minority ethnic groups.

The students were all assured that participation in the focus group would not impact on their assessment on the programme. The purpose of the session was to hear in more detail than the module evaluation forms allowed how they experienced the assessment task required for the module. The session was audio taped and subsequently transcribed. All participants were informed that the contents of the focus group may be used in an article to be submitted for publication and their written consent to this was sought and agreed. The data was subsequently analysed and a number of key emergent themes were identified. For the purposes of this paper I have focused on some of the unexpected outcomes of the peer assessment process and, in particular, on outcomes which were not apparent to the teachers on the module and may have gone unnoticed if information from the focus group had not been available.

## **Anxieties about Future Impact on Peer Relationships**

Throughout the module emphasis had been placed on the importance of giving and receiving critical feedback as an aid to learning. The giving and receiving of feedback as a gift was continually acknowledged (Birch, 2009). Within group discussions between students and module tutors this appeared to be accepted as an important – albeit potentially uncomfortable – aspect of the peer assessment process. In-module discussions focused on anxieties students felt about giving critical feedback to their peers and this was mirrored in the focus group findings. Several comments were made in relation to this. Apposite comments included,

*'It is about me giving comments about someone else's piece of work who had put time, effort and energy into it, invested a lot in it. So who am I to say actually it is not that good?'*

*'I was very worried about what would happen if someone gave me an essay to read and it is, in my opinion, clearly rubbish. What do you say and how do you say it?'*

Whilst such anxieties were openly expressed within the module, one area that emerged from the focus group was the high level of anxiety students experienced in relation to how giving negative feedback on students' work could impact on future relationships and create longer lasting 'tensions' between people. Initial anxiety was expressed in relation to not wanting to 'upset' people on the module but a deeper anxiety about the longer term impact on group relationships emerged as a theme from the focus group. This was also expressed in terms of receiving feedback from other students. Some students were concerned that the assessments other students made on their work would be remembered and impact on their future peer relationships. One student commented:

*'I can just about take criticism from teachers but to get it from peers as well! It was like, it will stay with them for the rest of the time that I am with them...and how are they going to judge me?'*

Such potential anxieties about the longer term impacts of the peer assessment process had not been raised by students during discussions within the module. Module tutors had focused more on facilitating discussions around the feedback anxieties generated in the actual completion of the exercise rather than exploring any longer term impacts on peer relationships. From the tutors' perspective such

concerns clearly fell in the category of ‘what the eye doesn’t see’ as our focus primarily began and ended with the module we were teaching although we hoped the learning would be transferable to future years. In future peer assessment exercises it may be important for module tutors to acknowledge the potential for anxieties that post-date the module assessment processes and to facilitate an open discussion around such longer term areas of concern.

## **Compulsory or Not So Compulsory Feedback? The Emotional Impact of Lack of Engagement**

Module tutors debated whether the formative exercise should be voluntary where students had an option about whether to participate or whether the exercise should be compulsory. It was decided that the potential benefits to the students were high and that initial anxiety around peer assessment could result in students not undertaking an exercise that they could ultimately benefit from. As noted earlier, it was decided to require students to comment on how they used their formative feedback from other students in their Home Group to improve their summative work. They were asked to provide this information as the first section of their summative assessment. In this way students were required to complete the formative work as reflections on this formed part of their summative assessment.

Discussion took place within the focus group about whether it was appropriate to make the formative exercise compulsory. All respondents were unanimous that the exercise should be a compulsory one. When asked whether they would have participated in the exercise if it had been voluntary all group members said ‘no’. Additional comments included:

*‘We were all against it at the start, so I think we would have all said no.’*

*‘I would definitely go for compulsory and not voluntary. I think the initial fears are valid and need to be recognised but I think if they are recognised and put into context then people would get over that and realise that it’s got far more value at the end of it.’*

In many ways such comments were not surprising as the module tutors had anticipated initial resistance and had hoped this resistance could be worked with allowing the benefits of undertaking the exercise to emerge as a concluding experience. Some students also raised additional issues about lack of engagement by other students in the formative process:

*‘Even though it was compulsory I think I heard that some people might not have handed their essays over.’*

*‘I know I gave a lot of feedback but I did not receive it.’*

*‘Some people gave really constructive feedback ....but some people did not respond at all....Some literally gave feedback on the day - a couple of quick notes to the tutor and I thought that’s not fair!’*

Experienced module tutors tend to anticipate that there will be varying degrees of engagement with any assessment process and so confirmation of such variability was not too surprising. In peer assessment exercises, however, variability in effort

and engagement is highly visible to other students and can have a direct impact on their own work. Lack of feedback from peers can be experienced as a loss and feelings around unfairness and lack of equity were clear experiences voiced by some members of the focus group.

One of the more unexpected outcomes expressed by the focus group was the level of anger felt towards students who had not fully engaged in the peer assessment process. Representative comments here were:

*'I had someone say to me " am not going to be giving feedback....I am too busy". Even though she wasn't in my Home Group I felt hugely angry towards her because I thought, "You are letting your group down".*

*'The tutor needs to make people accountable...People who have let other people down need to be answerable because that is so unfair on certain individuals.'*

*'We are adults – we can't be allowed to get away with this!'*

*'You hand in all your feedback sheets and it is a pass and if you don't hand them in then that is a fail. It's harsh but...'*

Such comments highlight clearly the sense of injustice some of the students felt about the different levels of engagement displayed across the group as a whole and how this led to a rather punitive response towards those who were perceived as 'letting others down'. From the tutor's perspective such concerns clearly fell in the category of 'what the eye doesn't see' as the module tutors had received copies of completed feedback sheets from each student. Whilst some were more comprehensive than others it did appear that all students had engaged in the provision of feedback. It was not apparent that some of this feedback had been completed on the day of hand-in and not shared with the intended recipients. The level of feeling generated on this topic ran high and illustrated that feedback exercises can have positive and negative impacts on whole group dynamics which may be experienced acutely by the students but remain hidden from module tutors' awareness.

## **Online Feedback: A Bridge Too Far?**

The feedback exercise was devised to be carried out online. The initial idea was to set up online discussion boards on the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and to create separate spaces for individual Home Groups to feed back to each other. After discussion, it was decided to postpone this as the exercise was taking place with first-year students who would be familiarising themselves with the VLE and may not be confident enough to engage fully with online discussions. The aims of the exercise could be achieved by students emailing their essays to each other and engaging in online discussions in their Home Groups via email using a distribution list that included all their Home Group members. This was to be reviewed at the end of the year and the feasibility of using the VLE was to be reassessed.

When students were asked in the classroom how the feedback process had been experienced students spoke positively within the large group and no suggestions for change were offered. A muted response was received to suggestions that we may

move to using discussion groups on the VLE for future feedback but strong opinions were not expressed either way. In the focus group, however, a very different picture emerged in relation to how students had used – or not used – online feedback discussions. It emerged that most groups had chosen to send their essays to each other via email but had chosen to meet up to discuss their feedback as an alternative to engaging in online discussions. Several reasons were put forward for this:

*'We thought discussing things face to face would make so much difference – if someone misunderstands something you have written you can actually explain it.'*

*'How we say things is completely different to how we write. When I am trying to write something it can take me ages to get the thoughts the right way to put on paper – whereas if I can just say something it is easier to clarify.'*

*'Verbal feedback is essential...You would have to write a whole essay for some feedback where you could just explain it in a few words.'*

Module tutors had agreed, at the students' request, to read through all formative essays and to offer individual support to students who were seen to be at risk of failing their assignment without major reworking. Interestingly, however, one student commented that she chose not to give formative feedback to other students in writing because

*'I was aware that this essay is going to go to the tutor as well and it's going to make them aware about certain things they do not need to know. Maybe certain things you wanted to make the other person aware of but not so much let the tutor know.'*

The unexpected assumption in the above statement appeared to be that the module tutors would not be aware of any deficiencies in the students' essays unless these were pointed out by another student.

Several of the students in the focus group were highly technologically competent and many frequently used social software. The lack of engagement with online feedback appeared to be connected more to anxieties about giving written as opposed to verbal feedback regardless of the medium used to provide this. In response to these findings a Home Group feedback session has been programmed into the timetable and students will now give each other verbal feedback within their groups. This may also be helpful in encouraging students to engage more fully in the feedback process as their feedback is displayed more clearly to others in person and they may be less likely to attempt to 'get away with' cursory feedback in this setting.

Reflecting on the feedback process overall, expecting students to give sensitive written feedback may have been something of a bridge too far in year 1 and the idea that they would embrace this may have been misplaced due to the anxieties they expressed about both giving and receiving feedback from their peers. They clearly voted with their feet and chose what they considered to be a safer medium to deliver their feedback – one where misunderstandings might be less likely to occur.

Within the focus group, however, some students did comment on the importance of being able to give written feedback too and the need to have the opportunity to



practise this. This raises issues for the programme overall. If written peer feedback is considered inappropriate in this context in Year 1 will the students be encouraged to work towards practising giving such feedback in years 2 and 3? This signals the need for a wider debate about how we can encourage students to communicate in writing to each other and later to other professionals and service users in their work.

Whilst the rejection of written feedback per se appears to be a key issue it is also helpful to reflect on the way e-learning is incorporated into the programme as a whole rather than at module level. For many modules e-learning technology is often a source of information giving rather than a vehicle for creating a meaningful dialogue with and between students. In this context, our expectation that students would engage with an online discussion relating to their feedback may have been overly optimistic. Where students experience e-learning as a key aspect of their programme they may be more open to utilising the facilities provided by such technology e.g. using discussion boards, blogs and wikis (Hatzipanagos & Warburton, 2009). Advancements in technologies and software are acknowledged as encouraging a 'reconfiguration of learning, teaching and assessment' within higher education (Ribchester et al., 2008, p.2). To fully utilise the opportunities offered by developing technologies, however, the rationale and commitment to fostering e-communication skills needs to be acknowledged at programme level and be integrated throughout as part of the overall pedagogy of student learning.

## **Limitations**

This is a small-scale case study, with limited claims to generalisability. A further limitation of this research is that the self-selected focus group was a small sample and that their comments being representative of the student cohort overall is clearly debatable. It may be, for example, that students who had a particular interest in the feedback process chose to participate. Whilst the all-female composition of the group was representative of the cohort, it may be that if the focus group had included representation from the small number of men in the group some different issues may have been raised.

## **Conclusion**

The case study outlined here is offered as the first stage of an action research project focusing on the potential role of peer assessment in enhancing student learning. Changes in assessment practices have been introduced following student feedback received and future focus groups are planned to evaluate these changes. The author has focused in depth on the student focus group responses as a way of highlighting key issues which may impact greatly on this process. Many of the concerns raised by the students are ones which remain invisible to staff unless an assessment dialogue between tutors and students is explicitly sought. In this context 'what the eye doesn't see' does not appear to suggest that 'the heart doesn't grieve'. These issues have the potential to impact greatly on any attempts at engaging students with the feedback process and promoting 'assessment as learning'.

Whilst many of the experiences of students were initially hidden from the tutors' eyes, the emotional content of the findings suggest that some of the students had experiences that 'grieved' their hearts. The findings highlight the emotional component associated with assessed work, ranging from feelings of anxiety about

the giving and receiving of feedback, to anger towards students who had not fully participated in the feedback process. Many commentators have highlighted the deeply emotional nature of assessment processes (Boud, 1995) and the need to understand the psychology of giving and receiving feedback as being of considerable importance (Yorke, 2003). The emotional component of peer assessment appears to be a particularly pertinent issue for students. Carless's (2006) study highlights how students are impacted upon emotionally by written feedback from tutors. The emotional dynamics of feedback from peers may be even more challenging for students and may impact upon group dynamics in ways that are not necessarily visible to tutors. These findings support earlier research suggesting that for peer assessment to work most effectively tutors need to have an understanding of the potential emotional as well as cognitive aspects of group learning (Cartney & Rouse, 2006).

The relationship between module and programme influence is also highlighted in this paper. This was raised in relation to e-communication in particular but broader questions about the need for an integrated whole programme approach to student learning is also suggested where peer feedback and e-technology are introduced in Year 1 and refined and built on further in subsequent years as part of an overall programme pedagogy of learning.

This paper has sought to raise issues for debate rather than seeking to provide answers to all the complexities involved in using peer assessment. The evaluation of changes made on one programme is at an initial stage with further follow up research planned and so is presented as a work in progress. The usefulness of engaging in a dialogue with students directly about their assessment experiences is strongly suggested by these findings. Without such communication many pertinent issues which impact on the students' experience of assessment would remain hidden and unaddressed. The initial findings have pointed to some of the potential benefits to utilising peer assessment and also highlighted some of the challenging aspects which need to be considered when seeking to use peer assessment to enhance student learning. The primary focus of this paper has been on exploring some of the less obvious challenges highlighted by the students.

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