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Self- and Peer-group Assessment
What friends are for!

Self and Peer Assessment

Empowering the Learners

When it comes to assessment, it's usually the students themselves who have the best idea of their own strengths and weaknesses, so why not involve them in the assessment process? Roy Fisher tells us how.

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad frae many a blunder free us,
And foolish notion.
                              R Burns

It is recognised by many who work in education and training, be they relative novices or vastly experienced, that the area of assessment is one of the most difficult over which it is possible to develop a sense of mastery. Assessment is fraught with complex issues surrounding such practical yet essentially philosophical concepts as validity, reliability and utility. At a deeper level, questions of subjectivity/objectivity arise to trouble the consciences of those charged with making judgements which will ultimately affect the life chances of those being assessed.

At first glance then, there is little wonder that there is often a reluctance to involve students in a process which is seemingly the province of the expert professional.

WHY INVOLVE STUDENTS?

The burden of traditional assessment lies substantially in what might be crudely characterised as 'playing God', and if the word of God is subjected to doubt then the whole deity is open to challenge. It is this kind of approach which accounts for many assessors feeling threatened when questioned; some behave as if their dispensated value judgement is unassailable. The truth, however, is that any good assessment should be able to sustain an open rational critique, and that a good assessor ought to be able to refine and amend a decision made, if reflection indicates that greater accuracy could be achieved.

> **"The more that students can be involved in the assessment process the more informed the assessor can be."**

The more that students can be involved in the assessment process, the more informed the assessor can be. This is not to suggest that student involvement is always desirable. It is important to acknowledge that there are times when distance can be a virtue; but this is generally recognised and the advantages arising from proximity and involvement are less often appreciated.

Student-centred learning approaches recognise that the logic of 'student centredness' necessarily extends to involvement in assessment. This is something which BTEC has sought to acknowledge within several of its 'General Guidelines' series. The extent to which Moderators have actively sought to promote this, and how far lecturers have incorporated self-assessment and peer-group assessment into their routine practice, remains open to question. The probability, however, is that not nearly as much of this activity takes place as many would suggest.

> **"Self and peer-group assessment each encourage students to become self-critical."**

A major point of self and peer-group assessment is that each encourages students to become self-critical. In the end it is the standards which students internalise which will constitute the benchmarks to which they work. By empowering students in this way, they are given the opportunity to learn to exercise responsibility and, vitally, to negotiate on their own behalves. When students are effectively involved in assessment they are likely to feel able to 'own' the judgement made as one which is fair and informed – they, after all, will have actively informed it.

Most students know their own strengths and weaknesses far better than their teachers do. They are also best placed to form opinions on each other's performance in group work activities. What they need is guidance, clear criteria, and confidence in the system within which they are working.

THE SELF AND THE PEER GROUP

The idea that 'the Self' ('self image' or 'self concept') develops through interaction with others is well established. It is generally

accepted that we observe and evaluate ourselves in the same way that we observe and evaluate others. This notion of 'the Looking Glass Self' provides a further rationale for actively and formally involving students in assessment: they are already assessing themselves.

"Peer-group relationships are important to most students."

The power of the peer group in the social world of young persons has been well documented. A series of studies in the 1960s and 1970s confirmed both the significance of the peer group as an influence on individuals, and the existence of relationships between peer-group types and academic achievement. Peer-group relationships are very important to most students and, for a majority, are likely to be valued above their relationships with their teachers. It follows from this that peer assessments will invariably be treated with proper regard.

In practice, of course, many difficulties can arise; loyalties and antagonisms may intrude upon the process, especially where students are intellectually immature. Staff using self and peer-group assessments with BTEC First students have reported instances of unrealistic self-evaluation, powerful group loyalties leading to a reluctance to criticise, and even some punitive grading of 'enemies'. This accords with psychological evidence which suggests that self-awareness and self-control are characteristics acquired through maturation. The development of these qualities, however, can be accelerated through ➤

BTEC NATIONAL CERTIFICATE/DIPLOMA* IN BUSINESS & FINANCE
Skills Assessment Form

Complete this form and hand it to your Tutor not later than the last day of the Study Block or other period to which it relates.

Name (Block Capitals).....................................

Your signature (with date handed in)......................

Study Block (circle as appropriate) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

A Note on Skills Assessment

The development of skills appropriate to a balanced and employment-related education is regarded as a very important element of the course which you are studying. It is therefore essential that your skills performance should be assessed, both by means of self-appraisal and by the tutors who work with you.

Towards the end of each Study Block you should complete this Skills Assessment Form which must be handed in to your Tutor before (or on) the last day of the Study Block. Members of the Staff Team will consider and, if necessary, amend your self-assessment. Any change will be discussed by members of the Staff Team. Your Tutor will be happy to discuss the Team's decision with you and give advice on how you might improve your performance in future. In some instances, of course, the Team may feel that you have been too self-critical and the amended grade will not necessarily be negative.

Please read the guidelines overleaf before ticking grades:

SKILLS	TICK AS APPROPRIATE					AMENDED GRADE (if any)
	F	R	P	M	D	
LEARNING AND STUDYING						
WORKING WITH OTHERS						
COMMUNICATING						
NUMERACY						
INFORMATION GATHERING						
INFORMATION PROCESSING						
IDENTIFYING AND TACKLING PROBLEMS						
DESIGN AND VISUAL DISCRIMINATION						
OVERALL SKILLS PERFORMANCE IN STUDY BLOCK						

Assessors' Initials...............
* *Delete inapplicable*

Fig 1

Group work invites peer assessment

exercises, and on everyday progress are integral to any student-centred educational practice. These informal dialogues contribute, not only to knowledge acquirement and skills development, but also to course evaluation. In its simplest form this involves such basic questions as "How are you doing?". In presentations, for example, speakers can be asked to talk about their feelings regarding their performance and this can be followed by the views of others.

The major problem with formal summative assessments perhaps is the requirement usually for a single, definitive grade – a grade which, typically, is based on criteria which are not controlled by the student or, ultimately, by the teacher. It is in this respect that a profiling system might prove useful, for profiling can allow for the recording of conflicting opinions and need not demand the imposition of one assessment over another.

Within conventional grading frameworks it is perhaps inevitable that the view of the teacher will prevail. There is a case, however, for that view to be 'proven' by the giving of due consideration to any counterview. Consequential dialogue is likely to be useful to all parties.

processes such as self and peer assessment. The need here is for careful management and administration of the assessments and for appropriate balance in the overall programme of assessments.

FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

The first steps in using self and peer-group assessment techniques are both simple and implicit in everyday teaching practices. It is perhaps helpful to distinguish between formative and summative assessments. Student comments on work-in-progress, on

DOCUMENTATION

Skills lend themselves to self assessment in that they are not merely associated with assignments but are in constant deployment. This places the individual students in a uniquely privileged position to have insight

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ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Assessment of skills, perhaps especially when involving an element of self-appraisal, is a difficult and demanding task. Remember that what is being assessed is not the level of skill which you think you possess, but rather your ACTUAL SKILLS PERFORMANCE within the Study Block or other assessment period to which the form relates.

Various subjective perceptions and basic intuition are certain to be influential in the decision-making process which will determine the grades selected. The views of fellow students will also be helpful. Notwithstanding this complexity, the following generalised basic guidelines may be of some value:

PASS – this grade is appropriate when the level of skills performance is considered to be at least equivalent to that which would be the minimum acceptable within the context of paid employment. Choose this grade if, with due regard to all circumstances, terms such as 'satisfactory', 'adequate' and 'reasonable' seem to describe your achievement in relation to the skill in question.

MERIT – this grade is appropriate where the level of skill exhibited is considered to be perceptibly better than that required for a PASS. Choose this grade if you feel that your performance falls within the range of 'good' to 'very good'.

DISTINCTION – this grade should be reserved for a level of performance which appears to be outstanding in relation to the group norm. This would fall within the range 'exceedingly good' to 'excellent'.

REFERRED – this grade is appropriate where, on careful consideration, the level of performance exhibited would be likely to be marginally unacceptable within the context of paid employment. To this extent, the terms 'unsatisfactory' or 'weak' would be suitable descriptions.

FAIL – this grade should be used to indicate where there is a very fundamental difficulty in relation to the skill in question. Recognition of a problem is often the first step in making progress. If this grade is awarded it will be important to discuss ways in which future improvement can be made possible.

Fig 2

into their performance in relation both to known objectives and their peers.

> **"Skills development is an area where dialogue is crucial."**

Skills development is also an area where dialogue is crucial. Students need to know how their skills are perceived and they therefore need to hear the views of their teachers and their peers.

The form shown in Fig 1 is intended for use with BTEC National in Business and Finance students. It can be administered either 'as required' or at regular intervals. Students using the form need to be familiar with the appropriate BTEC Skills Statement. They also need to be encouraged to seek the advice of their peers prior to completion. 'Standard criteria', as in Fig 2, may be adequate and can be printed on the reverse of the form, though more specific, context-related criteria could be adopted as required. When the form is submitted to the staff assessor, amendments may be made, and any such changes should provide a vehicle for discussion between the assessor and the student. Other staff and other students can be drawn into the process. In practice, all this may be difficult, but the form may serve as a facilitator for active debate on skills issues and as a basis for skills assessment.

Whenever students work together on group projects, or in some way perform to a group (by giving presentations, for example), the opportunity for peer assessment is present. The form in Fig 3 was designed for use in this type of context.

CONCLUSION

Self and peer-group assessments do not present easy options to either students or staff. They frequently give rise to disagreement and dispute as, to a lesser extent, do the more traditional methods of assessment. A crucial difference, however, is that the opportunity exists for conflicts of view to be resolved and to be used creatively. Self and peer-group assessment both harness the expertise of students to make the judgements which arise more meaningful and, with careful management, more accurate than might otherwise have been achieved. Above all, the assessment process is demystified in direct proportion to the extent that it is possible for students to be empowered as active, responsible participants.

PEER-GROUP ASSESSMENT

In order to assist the assessment process you are required to indicate on this form your perception of the quality of performance demonstrated by other students participating in the exercise.

You should consider both content and evidence of skills (as discussed in class).

Please note that: (delete inapplicable below as advised)
(a) Your assessment will be treated strictly confidentially by staff.
(b) Your assessment will be regarded merely as *additional evidence*. Staff will decide the grade which each individual is awarded *mainly* on the basis of their own observations.
(c) Your assessment will be directly used in order to award a final grade.
(d) You should/should not discuss your views with other students prior to completing the form.
(e) You should/should not discuss your views with the assessed student(s) prior to completing the form.

DO/DO NOT (delete inapplicable) PUT YOUR OWN NAME ON THIS FORM. ENTER THE NAMES OF (THE STUDENTS YOU HAVE BEEN ASKED TO ASSESS) BELOW AND ALLOCATE THE GRADE WHICH YOU FEEL IS APPROPRIATE WITHIN THE FAMILIAR RANGE OF FAIL TO DISTINCTION.

Name	Grade
....	....
....	....
....	....
....	....
....	....
....	....
....	....

Any comments which you *may* wish to make can be written overleaf. Please tick the box below if you have provided written comments.

Name of Assessing Student (where required) ....

Fig 3