

0260

Through the Looking Glass - The use of peer assessment as a metacognitive tool to support independent learning in Higher Education

Lisa Murtagh

Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, Lancashire, United Kingdom

Background

Recently much attention has been directed towards the quality of teaching in universities, and in the United Kingdom, this is reflected in, for example, the National Student Survey. The aim of the survey is to gather feedback from students on the quality of their courses and since its commencement in 2005, the quality of feedback is one issue that has been raised across all disciplines. It is an area that has consistently scored the lowest, prompting a number of institutions, including our own, to review their assessment and feedback methods.

Research Questions

According to Janes (2007), peer assessment can be effective in deepening students' learning, development and reflection of subject related content whilst concurrently gaining an appreciation of academic conventions and technicalities. The process of peer assessment requires students to closely examine their peers' work, guided by assessment criteria. This activity, Vu (2007) notes, helps students to diversify their own approaches and strategies in undertaking a learning task and can deepen understanding.

Nevertheless, there are potential pitfalls associated with peer assessment. For example, if peer assessment is introduced purely as a supplementary activity, the additional time and workload involved may result in it being unpopular with teachers and students alike (Farmer and Eastcott, 1995). Secondly, Williams (1992), reports that although students in her study found peer assessment interesting, some felt uncomfortable doing it. Furthermore, the awarding of marks by peers is often unpopular and controversial (Brew, 1999), yet paradoxically, if peer assessment excludes marks, its positive impact on student learning and development is restricted (Vu, 2007). This implies a need for peer assessment and feedback to be meaningful, and not to be perceived as an additional activity (Farmer and Eastcott, 1995).

The purpose of the study which underpins the paper was to examine the value and impact of a peer assessment and feedback tool on the student learning experience, with specific reference to the following questions: What are the perceptions of students in relation to their experience of peer assessment? What are students' views regarding the impact of peer assessment on their own learning? What are the students' views regarding the impact of peer assessment on their own understanding of assessment criteria?

Methods

The research methods adopted by this study reflect the work of Kolb (1984) who offers a conception of the action research cycle as a learning process. In seeking to improve student engagement in the assessment process, a peer assessment tool was devised, the aim of which was to provide students with a means of providing feedback to peers and to serve as a metacognitive instrument. Having used the tool, students were invited to respond to a questionnaire and engage in focussed conversations (Nutbrown, 2002) such that practice could be reflected upon, evaluated and, critically, learned from.

Frame

In academic circles it is widely acknowledged that assessment is a fundamental component of the teaching and learning processes, indeed following the seminal review of Black and Wiliam (1998), the profile of formative assessment has been significantly raised (Tierney 2006). Black and Wiliam's theoretical framework of formative assessment prioritises the role of students in the teaching and learning process, moving them from a more passive role to a more interactive role (Dann 2002).

Murtagh and Baker (2009) acknowledge that a shift from linear approaches to assessment, in which students are perceived as 'passive' is desirable and advocate an approach to teaching, learning and assessment strategies which involve all parties, so that students are involved in a 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998), engaging in the process of social learning and shared sociocultural practices in the assessment process.

Research findings

This paper describes work in progress regarding the implementation of a peer assessment strategy in an undergraduate degree programme and aims to explore student perspectives. As such, this paper seeks to present perceptions of the barriers, and enablers, to peer assessment. In this way it is hoped that this study will contribute to the growing research in the field of assessment in higher education,

Bibliography

Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1998) *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment*. London: King's College.

Brew, A. (1999) Towards autonomous assessment: using self-assessment and peer assessment, in: S. Brown and A. Glasner (Eds) *Assessment matters in higher education: choosing and using diverse approaches*. Buckingham : Open University Press, pp.159-171.1.

Dann, R. (2002) *Promoting Assessment as Learning: Improving the learning process*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Farmer, B. & Eastcott, D. (1995) Making assessment a positive experience, in: P. Knight, (Ed.) *Assessment for learning in higher education*. London: Kogan Page.

Gibbs, G. (1999) Using assessment strategically to change the way students learn, in: S. Brown and A. Glasner (Eds) *Assessment matters in higher education: choosing and using diverse approaches*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Hofstede, G. (1986) Cultural differences in teaching and learning, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10, pp. 301-320.

Janes, D. (2007). Self, peer and group assessment in e-learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology* 38 (1), pp. 175-76.

Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential Learning. Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall

Murtagh, L. and Baker, N. (2009) Feedback to feed forward: student response to tutors' written comments on assignments. *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*. 3, pp. 20-28.

Nutbrown, Cathy (2002) in Clough, P. and Nutbrown, C. (2002) *A Student's Guide to Methodology* London: Sage

Tierney, R. D. (2006) Changing practices: influences on classroom assessment. *Assessment in Education*. 13, pp. 239-264.

Vu, T. T. and Dall'Alba, G. (2007) 'Students' experience of peer assessment in a professional course', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32 (5), pp. 541-556.

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: learning as a social system*. Systems Thinker. www.co-il.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml

Williams, E. (1992) Student attitudes towards approaches to learning and assessment, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 17(1), pp. 45-58.