

Ideas and Lessons

Using peer-assessment in the classroom

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Why I used peer-assessment

Peer-assessment is a non-traditional approach to student learning and skills development. Peer-assessment requires students to apply assessment criteria, construct feedback and determine a grade to reflect peer performance. In this pilot study, peer-assessment was used as a classroom learning technique to contribute towards creating an active learning environment. Active learning involves encouraging the student to acquire knowledge and develop transferable skills by taking some control and responsibility for their own learning experience.

Assessing is traditionally viewed as the lecturer's job with the students being passive recipients, waiting for feedback on their work. However, assessing is a deep and active process. Assessing involves developing and applying transferable skills such as reflecting on past experience and knowledge, applying assessment criteria, using judgement, making decisions and constructing formative feedback. Employers of business and management graduates seek such skills. It therefore seems logical to actively involve the student in assessing. Incorporating peer-assessment within programme/module teaching strategy can do this.

Studying for assessment, and assessing by the lecturer, traditionally takes place at a time distinct from classroom learning. Experience shows that students focus their learning towards these distinct assessments and not in preparation towards classroom sessions. Peer-assessment used in the classroom throughout a module creates an environment where learning for assessment and learning from assessing is integrated with learning throughout the module. In addition, the lecturer can determine whether students have understood the subject as it is covered, rather than later when grading assessments, and take immediate action.

What happened

This study involved 14 Honours students over two academic sessions. At the beginning of the module, the students and I spent time discussing active learning and peer-assessment as a teaching approach, and we devoted a whole tutorial to discussing assessment criteria and practising how to apply them. I then asked students to complete a preliminary questionnaire about participating in module delivery and peer-assessment.

Each week individual students presented a 20-minute academic paper relevant to the module. Their peers assessed and graded these presentations. After all the presentations had been assessed, I asked the students to complete a second questionnaire about their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of peer-assessment within this active learning environment. I also sent the same questionnaire to eight students two years after they had graduated.

Student perceptions of benefits

Questionnaire feedback indicated that all students felt they had benefited from this approach with respect to: (a) their participation in, and enjoyment of, the module; (b) their perception of their learning experience; and (c) the development of transferable skills.

Students enjoyed participating in the delivery and assessment of this module. Individual student reasons given for this included: 'delivery and assessment were different and continually interesting'; 'assessing was good as it gave the class continued involvement in each session'; 'because I was able to voice my opinions'; 'participation makes the time more enjoyable than when you just sit and listen to everyone else'; and 'allowed to critically appraise other people's work'. Students perceived that participating in module delivery and assessment had led to a deeper critical understanding of the issues covered. For example, they said that they: "had to include a critique of the paper presented and assess others' critiques"; and "had to understand the purpose and findings of each paper in order to present and assess". In addition, students identified several skills specifically developed from participating in peer-assessment. These included confidence, communication, analysis (discerning between good/bad presentations) and the ability to interpret and apply assessment criteria. Some students noted that peer-assessment gave them insight into the lecturer's job and contributed to demystifying the assessing process. Some students also identified the motivation to learn continuously throughout the module as a strength.

From the eight questionnaires that I sent out to graduates, four responded. All reported developing skills that were useful to their current employment. These included the ability to "think on your feet", present and discuss issues with staff and business clients, and confidence to review the work of junior staff and provide constructive feedback.

Student concerns

Most students raised concerns specifically about peer-assessment. Students were concerned about lack of objectivity amongst peers. They reported fears of favouritism amongst friends and concern that better grades would be awarded to peers who had performed well in previously completed modules. However, despite these concerns, the grades from lecturer-based assessment of student presentations showed close correlation to those from student-based assessment.

Lessons to pass on

The benefits perceived by students in the context of this module agreed with findings in the academic literature. An interesting additional finding came from the reports from graduates indicating that skills developed from peer-assessment were beneficial for the work environment. However, in agreement with the academic literature, certain student concerns relating to peer-assessment were evident. Including an assessment technique that worries the student will diminish the intended effectiveness of the approach. Student training, coupled with the opportunity for students to accumulate adequate relevant experience, ought to be employed before using peer-assessment for summative purposes.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that peer-assessment did contribute towards creating an active learning environment for the student. The academic education literature attests to the general usefulness of peer-assessment. To develop this pilot study further, it would be interesting to investigate the extent to which undergraduate business and management programmes in the UK incorporate peer-assessment. The aim of this would be to ascertain the reasons for including, or not including, peer-assessment within the teaching, learning and assessment strategy of business and management programmes, with a view to proposing a framework for encouraging wider adoption of innovative assessment approaches in undergraduate programmes.