Overview

Peer assessment is the assessment of students' work by other students of equal status. Students often undertake peer assessment in conjunction with formal self-assessment. They reflect on their own efforts, and extend and enrich this reflection by exchanging feedback on their own and their peers' work.

Peer assessment is a powerful meta-cognitive tool. It engages students in the learning process and develops their capacity to reflect on and critically evaluate their own learning and skill development. It supports the development of critical thinking, interpersonal and other skills, as well as enhancing understanding within the field of knowledge of a discipline.

Peer and group assessment are also often undertaken together. Typically, the members of a group assess the performance of their peers in terms of their contribution to the group's work.

[See Transcripts of the videos on this page]

Peer Assessment of Assignment Drafts

About Peer Assessment - Dr Louise Lutze-Mann

Dr Louise Lutze-Mann, from the School of Biotechnology and Biomolecular Sciences, explains why and how she implements peer assessment for drafts of student assignments.

When to use

You can use peer assessment formatively (that is, without grading it), or summatively. Early in the course, use formal assessment criteria and assessment instruments designed by the teacher, but as students' competence increases, involve them in negotiating the criteria, or include criteria determined by others such as industry professionals.

Benefits

Peer assessment has the following benefits:

- It engages students in the learning process and develops their capacity to reflect on and evaluate their own
learning and skill development. Race (2001) argues that "the act of applying assessment criteria to evidence such as essays, reports, presentations, and so on is a much deeper learning experience in itself than just reading or observing the assessment artefacts."

- You can use it to promote and provide evidence of the development of generic skills and attributes:
  - working cooperatively
  - thinking critically
  - giving constructive feedback
  - learning from critical appraisal received from others
  - managing one's own learning autonomously
  - developing interpersonal skills and
  - developing an awareness of group dynamics.

- Particularly when structured marking schemes are used, peer assessment has an acceptably high level of validity and reliability. Although students tend to award higher marks than tutors, they do not tend to be any more generous than external examiners.

- Peer assessment is usually a positive experience for students. They appreciate its value in exposing a wide range of learning activities to critical and more public review, including class discussions and debates, extended writing tasks, oral and digital presentations, project management processes and demonstrations of leadership.

- In the context of assessing group work tasks, peer assessment can promote a sense of fairness, by illuminating individual contributions and encouraging greater commitment to the group's effort.

- With formalised peer assessment processes, students can become more active agents in assessment procedures. They can also gain insight into the complexities of interpreting and grading evidence of learning, and see more clearly the processes underpinning scholarly review and publication. Students thus "feel ownership of the assessment (and learning) process rather than alienated or victimised by it" (Nulty, n.d.).

**Challenges**

Peer assessment can present the following challenges:

- If it does not contribute to the summative grade, students may undervalue its significance for their learning and avoid seriously engaging with it.

- If it does count towards the grade, it can raise social tensions and issues of loyalty. Students can be reluctant to criticise their peers; recipients may not consider peer feedback to be sufficiently objective.

- Many students don't think they have the expertise necessary to give feedback on the work of their peers. Or they may feel that the "expert" opinion of the tutor is more valuable than the opinion of a peer.

- Without adequate preparation or clear assessment criteria, peers can produce ratings based on uniformity, race and friendship. This can be a particular issue with group work: Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans (1999) note the tendency to "friendship marking" resulting in over-marking (grade elevation); collusive marking, resulting in a lack of differentiation within groups; decibel marking, where individuals dominate groups and get the highest marks; and parasite marking, where students fail to contribute but benefit from group marks."

- Peers tend to award higher marks than do tutors, although they tend to be no more generous than external
Unless the peer assessment process is carefully prepared, it can undermine the spirit of collaboration fostered by group work, by setting individuals up in competition with each other for marks.

**Strategies**

**Designing for peer assessment**

Here are some strategies for including peer assessment in the overall assessment design:

- Make it very clear to students why you are involving them in peer assessment, and how it will benefit their learning. Clarify this in terms of the intended learning outcomes and graduate attributes.
- Ensure that peer assessment activities are supported by detailed and explicit criteria and standards in the form of a rubric. If you engage students in the process of developing the criteria, they will gain a much clearer understanding of how assessment is carried out, and an increased sense of ownership.
- Before you employ peer assessment in high-stakes formal assessment for grades, develop students' peer assessing skills using structured formative learning activities. This will accustom students to exposing their work to more public scrutiny, giving them safe opportunities to improve their performance using informal feedback, while developing their competence as assessors.
- Make the peer assessment process anonymous, especially if students are still new at it. Students like anonymity; it means that they need not be aware that they are marking the work of friends.
- Only use peer assessment to contribute to grading where students are sufficiently knowledgeable and well prepared to make informed judgments about the work of their peers.

Complement peer assessment processes with a formal and explicitly stated moderation process so that students can see that grading is reliable even while students have a significant role in it.

**Examples of peer assessment**

**Develop peer assessment criteria with students**

*Race (2001)* outlines a staged in-class process for developing criteria to use in peer assessing a particular task. Race notes that the process itself engenders student engagement and a sense of ownership.

To ensure that students reflect critically and early during a large, summative assessment task such as a report or essay:

1. Divide the class into small groups with three or more members.
2. Have students present to their group a short draft of their work to date.
3. Ask the group to give informal feedback to their peers on their progress.
4. You can also have the group provide a formal assessment based on, for example, how well points are supported by evidence, as well as the style and presentation of the draft.
With this exercise, students can reflect on their work early in an assessment process. Of a sample group of students who followed this process, two-thirds reported it to be useful, and the majority stated that they started work on the assignment earlier than they would have otherwise, and that they incorporated elements of the peer feedback.

**Build in back-feedback**

Give an active role to the student being assessed by letting them respond to the assessment. Students who are required to provide feedback to their peer assessors display greater meta-cognitive awareness, a higher overall performance and significantly better attitudes and commitment to the peer assessment process than students who are not engaged this way. For example:

- Students engaged in an extended writing task anonymously exchange work for feedback on a few occasions during the drafting process. Rather than grading each other's work, each student assesses their peer's performance as a reviewer, and this contributes to the final grade of the student doing the peer reviewing.
- An early submission in a semester-long group project is reviewed by two other groups, who give feedback. The lecturer assesses the quality of feedback given, and this contributes to the group mark of the feedback-providers.

**Allow the group to mark its members**

One possible process for formally assessing group work is for the teacher to assign a mark to each group, then for the students to assign an individual mark to each member of their group, based on the contribution they perceive each to have made to the group's work.

A major contributor would receive a mark higher than the group mark and a lesser contributor would receive a lower mark. An average for each student can be generated from the range of marks their peers give them (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997).

**Base the lecturer's grade on peer assessments**

Students are allocated 8 essays written by peers for review, as well as a set of communal criteria (relating to, for example, readability, personal conclusions, referencing, examples and case studies). They assess each essay according to the criteria and assign a positive or negative judgment for each. This enables a numerical mark to be awarded, based on overall criteria. Students then provide more expansive feedback. The lecturer analyses all the feedback given and makes any adjustments they deem necessary (Davies, 2006).

**Ensure fairness**

- Students with language or learning difficulties may be particularly challenged by peer assessment activities. So may those from educational backgrounds in which student critique is not encouraged. But rather than seeing such students' differences as obstacles, consider the value of peer assessment as being amplified by the diversity of backgrounds and perceptions students bring to the feedback process.
- Emphasise this viewpoint by strongly guiding the peer assessment process to highlight the benefits of divergent views. It may be helpful if you set up early peer assessment activities as group activities, so that less experienced or less able students can learn from their peers.
• In implementing peer assessment, the lecturer must shift to a moderator role, to "monitor the process, protect students from unfair marking and guard standards" (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997).

Use technology

• A number of online tools provide a structured framework to support the use of peer assessment. Tools supporting group work such as WebPA, SparkPlus, TeCTra (Team Contribution Tracking System) and iPeer provide customisable rubrics that students can use to anonymously rate the performance of others in their team, and provide text feedback if desired.

• For peer assessment of student assignments, online tools include CPR (Calibrated Peer Review) and the Self and Peer Review tools within Moodle. These allow students to provide anonymous qualitative and quantitative feedback on their peers’ essays, in a manageable format.

• For smaller classes, you can also use discussion forums (with anonymous contributions allowed) to distribute and post reviews.

Case studies

Using Peer Assessment to Enhance Learning

In the following two films, COFA's Dr Arianne Rourke discusses her strategies for using peer assessment, in both face-to-face and online environments. Her MA Art Administration course is conducted wholly online and utilises peer and self-assessment for 30% of the course mark.

Strategies for peer assessment - Dr Arianne Rourke

Online peer assessment - Dr Arianne Rourke

Video Series - Peer Review

In these 4 videos, Associate Professor Julian Cox discusses peer review.

Additional information

External resources

Northumbria University. (n.d.), Signpost 10: How Am I Doing? Using peer reviews to improve assignments—Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Northumbria University, UK.
Further readings


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