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Tomorrow's Professor Msg. #350 Peer Assessment

PEER ASSESSMENT

CONDITIONS WHERE PEER-ASSESSMENT WORKS WELL

Peer-assessment can be an invaluable means of involving students closely in their own and each other's learning. It is not a 'quick fix' solution to reduce staff marking time, as it is intensive in its use of tutor time at the briefing and development stages. It has high pay-offs in terms of improved learning. The following suggestions show some areas where peer-assessment produces excellent benefits.

1. Student presentations. Peer-assessment is particularly useful for the style and process of student presentations. It can also be useful for the content if students are well-informed enough to make judgments on the content of each other's presentations.
2. Reports. Peer-assessment helps to alert learners to good and bad practice in report-writing, and helps them develop awareness of the importance of structure, coherence and layout in reports.
3. Essay plans. Peer-assessment of essay plans can widen learners' horizons about different ways of brainstorming the content and structure of essays. It takes almost as much creative thinking to design the content of an essay plan as it would to produce the final essay, so peer-assessing such plans helps students to share a lot of ideas in a relatively short time.
4. Calculations. Peer-assessing correct answers is simple and quick. Peer-assessment allows students to identify exactly where things went wrong when marking incorrect answers, and alerts learners to potential trouble spots to avoid in the future.
5. Interviews. Peer-assessment allows students to exchange a range of opinions, attitudes and reactions to each other's interview performance, in a less threatening way than can be the case when such performance is tutor-assessed.
6. Annotated bibliographies. Peer-assessment of bibliographies can be a fast and effective way of alerting learners to other sources of reference, which learners working on their own might otherwise have overlooked.
7. Practical work. Peer-assessment of experimental work can allow learners to receive feedback

on their practical skills, when tutor-assessment of such skills may be threatening - or not possible, for example, due to limited tutor availability when large groups of students are involved.

8. Poster displays. Peer-assessment of poster displays can be a rapid way of alerting learners to a wide range of approaches to the visual presentation of ideas.

9. Portfolios. Where students are familiar with all the requirements for the successful demonstration of their achievements through portfolios, they are often highly competent in assessing each other's, particularly if they themselves have recently undertaken a similar task.

10. Exhibitions and artifacts. Art students in particular have a long tradition of participating in critiques of each other's paintings, plans, models, garments, sculptures and so on. Students participating in 'crits' learn a lot about the level of work required, and the ways in which aesthetic judgments of work are found within their own particular subject.

STARTING TO USE PEER-ASSESSMENT

Increasingly, peer-assessment is being used to involve students more closely in their learning and its evaluation, and help to enable students to really understand what is required of them. It can have enormous benefits in terms of learning gain, but is not to be regarded as a short-cut to tutors wishing to lighten their assessment burden. Setting up peer-assessment may well involve greater effort from tutors in the early stages, although long term there will be savings in tutor time. The following suggestions may help you get started with student peer-assessment.

1. Take it a bit at a time. Some people (students and tutors) find the use of peer-assessment very radical, so it is a good idea to introduce it gradually, on a small scale, until you, your colleagues and students are confident about how it will work best.

2. Keep everyone in the picture. Tell everyone what you are doing and why. Students and colleagues need to understand the thinking behind what you are doing, to avoid them perceiving it as a soft option or abdication of responsibility. If they understand that peer-assessment is actually part of the learning process, they may find it more acceptable

3. Provide mark-free rehearsal opportunities. This helps students get the hang of what is required of them, and also builds in an opportunity for students to get interim feedback at a stage when there is time to bring about improvements.

4. Provide, or negotiate, really clear assessment criteria. Students should not be able to over-mark friends or penalize enemies if the criteria are unambiguous and explicit. All marks should be justifiable by reference to the criteria, and to the evidence of achievement of them.

5. Make peer-assessment marks meaningful. Some argue that peer review is really only suitable for feedback purposes. However, if students are to take peer-assessment seriously, it should

count for something, even if it is only a small proportion of the final grade. You may prefer to 'parallel mark' with tutor grades counting as well as averaged peer grades if this is appropriate.

6. Moderate peer-assessment. To ensure that the students see peer-assessment as fair, tutors must overview the marks awarded and provide a 'court of appeal' if students feel justice has not been done. This may mean offering vivas to any dissatisfied candidates.

7. Keep the system simple. Try not to give yourself really complicated addition and averaging tasks to do after peer-assessment has taken place. Too many separate components make it laborious to arrive at final marks. If the numerical side can't be simplified, it is worth using computer programs to do the donkey work!

8. Involve students in the assessment criteria. You can do this by involving students in the generation of assessment criteria, and in the weighting given to each criterion. Alternatively, you can provide criteria in the first instance, and give students lots of opportunities to ask questions about what they really mean.

9. Allow plenty of time. Just because you can assess a poster display or an essay fairly quickly doesn't mean that students will be able to do so too, especially if groups are assessing other groups and are required to provide a mark by consensus. Presentations always over-run, and students will tend to make snap conclusions and 'guesstimates' when under pressure regarding time.

10. Monitor student achievement. It's a good idea to review how well students are peer-assessing, by the same kinds of methods you may use to review your own assessment, to ensure reliability and validity of marking. It is often reassuring for students (and colleagues) to see that peer-assessment using explicit criteria, and based on the production of clearly specified evidence, produces data that are very similar to those produced by tutors themselves.

By Paul Rogat Loeb, author of *Soul of a Citizen: Living With Conviction in a Cynical Time*
(See www.soulofacitizen.org for more information)

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The excerpt below looks at the uses and benefits (as well as the cautions) involved in student peer reviewer of class assignments and tests. It is from: 500 TIPS ON ASSESSMENT, by Sally

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Regards,

Rick Reis
reis@stanford.edu

UP NEXT: Collaborative Learning and Constructive Alignment

Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning

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