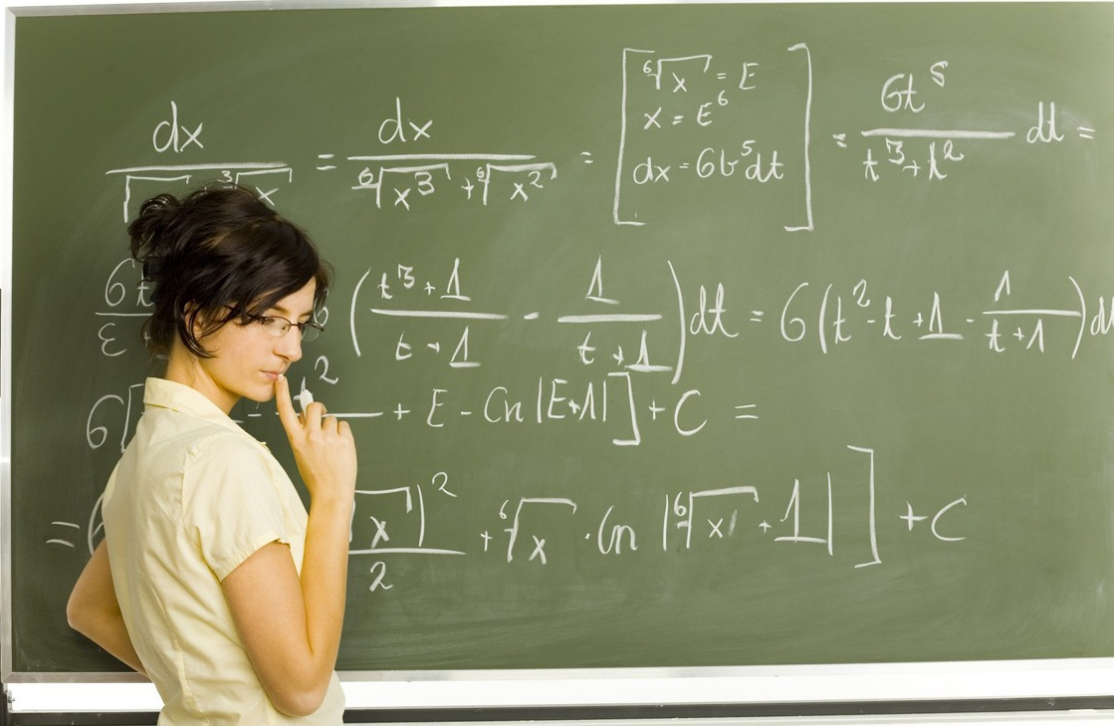# Assessment Matters:
Self-Assessment and
Peer Assessment

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Assessment Matters: Self Assessment and Peer Assessment

Introduction

The higher education literature testifies to an extensive interest in self and peer assessment. The interest in self and peer assessment is partly driven by changing conceptions of teaching and learning. Contemporary approaches emphasize the active engagement of students in their own learning, learner responsibility, metacognitive skills and a dialogical, collaborative model of teaching and learning. Assessment processes in which the teacher holds all the power and makes all the choices limit the potential for learner development in all of these aspects. Teachers who see dialogue and the co-construction of knowledge as a core part of their teaching conceptions need to consider the importance of inviting the students to share more fundamentally in the assessment processes. While many academics are trying to design classroom learning opportunities that reflect the principles of constructivist learning, this principle is frequently ignored in the design and implementation of assessment tasks. Many academic teachers still tend to retain all the ownership and power in the assessment process. There is a need to think about assessment in ways that align more closely with the ideals of

constructivist learning and self and peer assessment can play an important role in this respect. Furthermore, as noted by Boud and Falchikov (2006), active participation by students in assessment design, choices, criteria and making judgments is a more sustainable preparation for subsequent working life. There is considerable overlap between self and peer assessment, but for clarity, they will be discussed separately.

What is self-assessment?

According to Boud (1995), all assessment including self-assessment comprises two main elements: *making decisions about the standards of performance* expected and then making *judgments about the quality of the performance in relation to these standards.* When self-assessment is introduced, it should ideally involve students in both of these aspects.

Andrade and Du (2007) provide a helpful definition of self-assessment that focuses on the formative learning that it can promote:

> *Self-assessment* is a process of formative assessment during which students reflect on and evaluate the quality of their work and their learning, judge the degree to which they reflect explicitly stated goals or criteria, identify strengths and weaknesses in their work, and revise accordingly (2007, p.160).

Why self-assessment?

Making judgments about the progress of one's own learning is integral to the learning process.

- ❧ Self-evaluation builds on a natural tendency to check out the progress of one's own learning.

- ❧ Further learning is only possible after the recognition of what needs to be learned.

- ❧ If a student can identify his/her learning progress, this may motivate further learning.

- ❧ Self-evaluation encourages reflection on one's own learning.

- ❧ Self-assessment can promote learner responsibility and independence.

- ❧ Self-assessment tasks encourage student ownership of the learning.

- ❧ Self-assessment tasks shift the focus from something imposed by someone else to a potential partnership.

- ❧ Self-assessment emphasizes the formative aspects of assessment.

- ❧ Self-assessment encourages a focus on process.

- ❧ Self-assessment can accommodate diversity of learners' readiness, experience and backgrounds.

- ❧ Self-assessment practices align well with the shift in the higher education literature from a focus on teacher performance to an emphasis on student learning.

- Self-assessment begins to shift the culture from a prevalent one in which students undertake assessment tasks solely in the spirit of pleasing the lecturer (Boud, 1995). Focus shifts away from satisfying the lecturer and more towards the quality of the learning. Boud (1995), talking about the origins of his long interest in self-assessment, invokes a picture of the way in which so many student assessment endeavours are misdirected, when he comments there was "a slow dawning that it was not others I should be satisfying in my learning endeavours, but myself" (p. 3).

- Self-assessment with its emphasis on student responsibility and making judgments is "a necessary skill for lifelong learning" (Boud, 1995, p.11). Additionally, the self-assessment process can help "to prepare students not just to solve the problems we already know the answer to, but to solve problems we cannot at the moment even conceive" (Brew,1995, p. 57).

- Engaging students in the formulation of criteria for self-assessment tasks helps them to deepen their understanding of what constitutes quality outcomes in a specified area.

How to implement self-assessment

- Intensive conversations with students need to occur before introducing any self-assessment practices. It is particularly important to explore the assumptions and principles that underlie the self-assessment innovation. Introduce the concept and begin providing practice opportunities very early in a paper if you are going to use it. Coach students in self-assessment using examples and models.

Boud (1995) argues that the way in which self-assessment is implemented is critical to its acceptance by students. According to Boud (1995), the implementation process needs to include:

♦ *A clear rationale: what are the purposes of this particular activity?*

♦ *Explicit procedures—students need to know what is expected of them.*

♦ *Reassurance of a safe environment in which they can be honest about their own performance without the fear that they will expose information which can be used against them.*

♦ *Confidence that other students will do likewise, and that cheating or collusion will be detected and discouraged (Boud, 1995, p.182).*

❧ Students should be involved in establishing the criteria for judgment as well as in evaluating their own work (Boud, 1995). Regardless of the ways in which the criteria are set up, students need to be absolutely clear about the standards of work to which they are aspiring, and if possible, have practice in thinking about sample work in relation to these criteria.

❧ Self-assessment needs to be designed to be appropriate for particular discipline contexts.

❧ Self-assessment can be used in conjunction with peer and teacher assessment.

❧ Self-evaluation can be integrated into most learning activities by regularly providing

opportunities for students to identify or reflect on their progress in relation to particular learning outcomes.

- Students can be invited to monitor their progress in the attainment of practical skills according to agreed on and well understood criteria.

- Students need coaching, practice and support in the development of self-assessment abilities.

- Much of the self-assessment literature argues that self-assessment can enhance learning most effectively when it does not involve grading. For example, Kirby and Downs (2007) argue for the benefits of a "formative, low stakes, criterion-referenced assessment" (p.490).

Examples

A simple self-assessment example:
Students are invited to complete a simple self assessment sheet according to agreed criteria and submit it with a completed assessment. To extend the benefits of the exercise, students can be asked to explain why they evaluate themselves in particular ways. Students can be awarded a percentage for completing the assessment or graded for the quality of their rationale for their self-assessment. Studies that evaluated the use of a simple self-assessment component like this report a number of benefits. One of the most interesting is the feedback from students that the self-assessment requirement made them return regularly to the criteria as they were working on
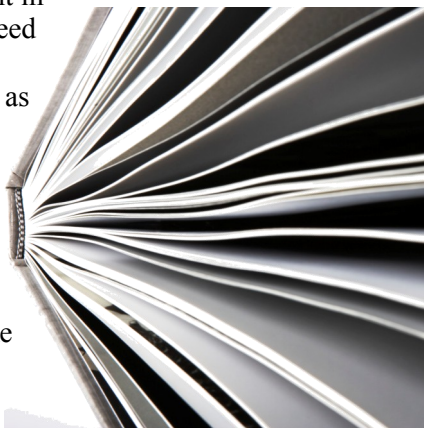
the assignment and keep checking their own performance against them (Andrade & Du, 2007, p.166). This heightened engagement with the implications of criteria can help deepen students' understanding of what constitutes quality learning.

Using self-assessment in combination with other forms of assessment:
This can be done in most assessment contexts. For example, students can be required to present a self-assessment in relation to agreed criteria for activities such as class participation or presentation. A self-assessment component like this can be rewarded in a number of ways. The teachers may decide on a final mark which is the average mark based on a combination of self and teacher (and/or peer assessment). Alternatively, the teacher can assign a mark, but an additional percentage is awarded based on the quality of the students' self-assessment and explanations for the assessment.

Good Practice in Self-assessment	Poor Practice in Self-assessment
The motive for its introduction is related to enhancing learning	It is related to meeting institutional or other external requirements
It is introduced with a clear rationale and there is an opportunity to discuss it with students	It is treated as a given part of course requirements
Student perceptions of the process are considered prior to the idea being introduced	It is assumed that processes which appear to work elsewhere can be introduced without modification
Students are involved in establishing criteria	Students are using criteria determined solely by others
Students have a direct role in influencing the process	The process is imposed on them
Guidelines are produced for each stage of the process	Assessments are made impressionistically
Students learn about a particular subject through self assessment which engages them with it.	Self assessment is only used for apparently 'generic' learning processes such as communication skills
Students are involved in expressing understanding and judgement in qualitative ways	Assessments are made on rating scales where each point is not explicitly defined
Specific judgements with justifications are involved	Global judgements within recourse to justificatory data are acceptable
Learners are able to use information from the context and from other parties to inform their judgements	The activities do not draw on the kinds of data which are available in authentic settings
It makes an identifiable contribution to formal decision-making	No use is formally made of the outcomes
It is one of a number of complementary strategies to promote self-directed and interdependent learning	It is tacked on to an existing subject in isolation from other strategies
Its practices permeate the total course	It is marginalised as part of subjects which have low status
Staff are willing to share control of assessment and do so	Staff retain control of all aspects (sometimes despite appearances otherwise)
Qualitative peer feedback is used as part of the process	It is subordinated to quantitative peer assessment
It is part of a profiling process in which student have an active role	Records about students are produced with no input from them
Activities are introduced in step with the students' capabilities in learning-how-to-learn	It is a one-off event without preparation
The implications of research on gender differences and differences of presentational style are considered.	The strategy chosen is assumed to work equally for all
The process is likely to lead to development of self assessment skills	The exercise chosen relates only to the specific needs of the topic being assessed
Evaluation data are collected to assist in improvement and for determining its contribution to student learning	Evaluation is not considered or is not used

Table 17.1 Features of good and poor practice in self assessment (Boud, 1995, pp. 208,209)

Peer assessment
What is peer assessment?
There are many variants of peer assessment, but essentially it involves students providing feedback to other students on the quality of their work. In some instances, the practice of peer feedback will include the assigning of a grade, but this is widely recognized to be a process that is fraught with difficulties.

"Peer assessment requires students to provide either feedback or grades (or both) to their peers on a product or a performance, based on the criteria of excellence for that product or event which students may have been involved in determining" (Falchikov, 2007, p.132).

Why use peer assessment?
- Falchikov (2007) reminds us that peer learning builds on a process that is part of our development from the earliest years of life (it is the practice of formal education and the centrality of the teacher that makes us lose sight of this).

- Peer feedback can encourage collaborative learning through interchange about what constitutes good work.

- If the course wants to promote peer learning and collaboration in other ways, then the assessment tasks need to align with this. It is

also important to recognize the extra work that peer learning activities may require from students through the assessment. Boud, Cohen & Sampson (1999) observe that "if students are expected to put more effort into a course through their engagement in peer learning activities, then it may be necessary to have this effort recognized through a commensurate shift in assessment focus" (p.416).

- Peer learning draws on the "cognitive apprenticeship model" (Kvale, 2006).

- Students can help each other to make sense of the gaps in their learning and understanding and to get a more sophisticated grasp of the learning process.

- The conversation around the assessment process is enhanced. Research evidence indicates that peer feedback can be used very effectively in the development of students' writing skills.

- Students engaged in commentary on the work of others can heighten their own capacity for judgment and making intellectual choices.

- Students receiving feedback from their peers can get a wider range of ideas about their work to promote development and improvement.

- Peer evaluation helps to lessen the power imbalance between teachers and students and can enhance the students' status in the learning process.

ȣ• The focus of peer feedback can be on process, encouraging students to clarify, review and edit their ideas.

ȣ• It is possible to give immediate feedback, so formative learning can be enhanced. Peer assessment processes can help students learn how to receive and give feedback which is an important part of most work contexts.

ȣ• Peer assessment aligns with the notion that an important part of the learning process is gradually understanding and articulating the values and standards of a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1999, cited in Falchikov, 2007, p.129). Drawing on Wenger's ideas, Falchikov suggests that "learning involves active participation in a 'community of practice' in which members of the community determine and structure their own practices, and construct identities in relation to these communities" (2007, p.129). Peer commentary in the assessment process initiates into the community to hear, experiment with and gradually internalize the norms of the community.

How to implement peer assessment

ȣ• The evidence suggests that students become better at peer assessment with practice (Falchikov, 2007). Students need practice to gain confidence in peer assessment and to become more competent at it. Other classroom practices can also help to prepare students for peer assessment, such as exchange and discussion of lecture notes.
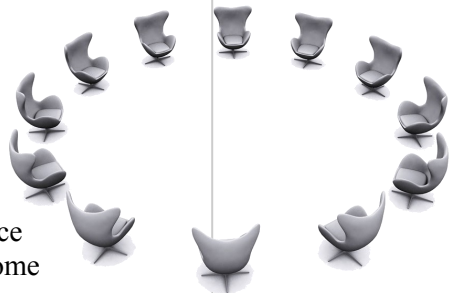
❧ Make sure the criteria for any piece of peer assessment are clear and fully discussed with students (negotiated with them if circumstances are appropriate).

❧ Spend time establishing an environment of trust in the classroom.

❧ Try to ensure that your learning environment incorporates peer learning and collaboration in a range of ways.

❧ Be aware that introducing marks creates a further set of complex issues, but if you do decide to get peers to award marks these marks should be only one of a number of different marks awarded to a specific product or process. Generally, as the most valuable aspect of peer assessment is its potential to enhance learning, marks can cloud matters as they tend to preoccupy people at the expense of everything else.

Examples

Exchanging notes

A simple introduction to the concept of peer feedback is to invite students to exchange lecture notes in the final segment of a class and to discuss perceived gaps and differences in understanding. This can be done on a regular basis and has many potential benefits. It gets students used to discussing their work with their

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peers, it can help to build a collaborative environment and it helps students to improve and enhance their understanding.

Peer editing and feedback
There are many different variants of this form of peer feedback. Essentially students prepare a draft of a section of an assessment and bring it to class. Students usually work in small groups and copies of the drafts are circulated to group members. Criteria for feedback have been discussed and negotiated beforehand or some key questions have been developed for students to use. Students take turns in providing oral feedback on their peers' drafts. It is helpful if group members write down some comments in relation to the criteria or questions and give these to the writer (prior to implementing peer editing, students should be given examples to practice with and be coached in the feedback process). A study by Lockhart & Ng (cited in van den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot, 2006) argued that students interact with their peers in four basic ways in the peer assessment process:

♦ Authoritative reader points out errors or shortcomings in the writing
♦ Interpretative reader "wants to discuss ideas emerging when reading the text" (van den Berg et al, 2006, p20)
♦ Probing reader
♦ Collaborative reader

The probing and collaborative readers are trying to get the writer to articulate and clarify their intentions - these modes of interaction appear to be more productive for the improvement of the

writing quality. This is worth bearing in mind when talking with students about the kind of questions that might be useful to ask in the peer feedback process.

Optimum design elements for peer assessment
Studies show many variants of the use of peer feedback for improving writing. Van den berg et al (2006) experimented with seven different peer assessment designs and arrived at the following list of optimal elements:

Peer assessment to support future learning

Optimal Model

Based on a cross-case analysis of the seven designs of peer assessment and their results, we draw conclusions about the most important design features supporting effective peer assessment in university teaching. These are summarized here. Important design features are:

1. Product: the size of the writing is five to eight pages. The reason is that students will not be willing to invest enough time in assessing larger products.

2. Relation to staff assessment: there must be sufficient time between the peer assessment and teacher assessment, so that students scan first, revise their paper on the basis of peer feedback, and then hand it in to the teacher.

3. Directionality: two-way feedback is easier to organize for teacher and students, as it is clear that the assessor will in turn be the assessee, which make it easier to exchange products. Oral feedback during class will not take much time, because the feedback groups can discuss simultaneously.

4. Contact: verbal explanation, analysis and suggestions for revision are necessary elements of the feedback process; these require face-to-face contact.

5. Constellation assessors/assessees: the size of feedback groups has to be three or four. In that situation, students have an opportunity to compare their fellow students' remarks, and to determine their relevance. A group of two students is too small, because of the risk that the partner might not perform properly.

6. Place: oral feedback must be organized during contact hours, because it is difficult to ascertain if students will organize this themselves when out of class. ICT-tools can be used to enable students to read the peer feedback before discussing it.

van den Berg (2006) pp.34,35

Thus, I see it as beneficial to promote peer involvement in assessment where particular characteristics are present. These include features which:

❦ Are designed to enhance learning;

❦ Require learners to take responsibility for their actions;

❦ Encourage a reflective approach to learning;

❦ Require students to identify and apply standards and criteria;

❦ Provide some degree of modelling and/or scaffolding;

❦ Involve learners in judging their performance or that of their peers—developing and using Sadlers's (1989 and 2005) evaluative expertise, providing, seeking and utilising feedback;

❦ Allow learners to practise peer and self-assessment skills in a variety of contexts;

❦ Allow fading of support so that learners may move nearer toward assessment autonomy.

(Boud & Falchikov, 2008, p.139)

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