

Self and Peer assessment

October 2008

Self and Peer assessment are key strategies to involve students in taking more responsibility for their own learning. While the benefits may not initially be obvious to students, this process offers a means of enhancing the learning experience and developing key capabilities in students. When introducing this strategy, be sure that students become aware of the benefits for them.

Students need to see the value for themselves rather than the gains for their teachers. So it is important to introduce peer and self assessment to improve learning and to develop new skills.

It can also have benefits for the teacher by leading to time saving, once you are comfortable with self and peer assessment in your teaching and students see it as a natural part of their learning. But this should not be the reason for introducing it.

What is Self and Peer Assessment?

Students are involved in monitoring and making judgements about aspects of their own or peer's learning.

- Students can develop lifelong evaluation skills both about their own work and thinking as well as others.
- They can take their first steps towards independent and autonomous learning by developing learning strategies based on their evaluations.
- They learn directly by constructively critiquing their own and others' work in parallel.

Keeping the students focussing on improvement rather than judgement alone is crucial for personal development. Students need constructive feedback to help them assess and then build on their own strengths. They need to identify ways of addressing weaknesses and plan appropriate action. The key benefit of peer assessment is the opportunity it provides for students to provide each other with multiple perspectives and lateral constructive suggestions.

Time for reflection or private discussion with a critical friend can be important for individuals to help them 'stand back' from their own work or to make sense of other's comments.

Capabilities which can be developed in students by peer and self assessment include:

- Increased understanding of own learning style
- Critical evaluation skills through commenting on other student work
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Increased awareness of personal sensitivities when receiving feedback
- Open mindedness through offering criticisms, suggestions, predictions
- Ability to justify a position

Simple examples of when to use self and peer assessment include:

- commenting on final or draft essays or project reports;
- anonymously or publicly grading colleagues' presentations;
- proposing their own grade with reasons after seeing others' work;
- discussing and suggesting improvements to others' work;
- reflecting on improvements they could implement themselves; and
- discussing in groups before collectively providing a grade and feedback.

How might students react

Introducing self and peer assessment is like introducing any change, the benefits need to be carefully explained to students.

Student criticisms of self and peer assessment include the fear of personal bias - the approach is seen to lack objectivity. Indeed, some may see assessment as the teachers' role not theirs.

So a few key general issues facing self and peer assessment are:

- helping students see the value and validity of the approach to assessment ('face validity');
- sharing understanding of assessment criteria;
- ensuring validity and reliability of students' judgements;
- maximising opportunities for students to learn from self and peer assessment;
- assisting students to provide constructive feedback..

Tips and suggestions:

- Provide opportunities for constructive qualitative feedback alongside the grades. (A guide to giving and receiving feedback.
- Suggest some ground rules for supportive and useful student-to-student feedback and again make these a subject for discussion and improvement before adoption.
- Assessments and feedback can be provided anonymously, if necessary online. Digitised pieces of assessment can be annotated with comments and suggestions – at draft or final stage. Many students can individually or in groups provide feedback online.
- Enable current students to meet and discuss self and peer assessment with past students. This could be organised by the full teaching team.

Judging Performance

The validity of student' relative to teacher' judgements in assessment has been explored by many researchers and reported in the education literature. In large part student peer and self grading works best when students share a comprehensive understanding of the assessment criteria and the characteristics of work illustrative of different levels of performance. They also need to know that you are seriously seeking their constructive input as assessors.

Tips and suggestions:

- Open the assessment criteria for discussion among all students before they conduct their assessment. What does each criterion and level of performance mean?
- Encourage students to invent examples of work which meets/ does not meet these criteria, then open up for discussion.
- Give past examples but ask students to critically analyse your choice.
- Give past examples of student work and ask the students if these are relevant to the assessment criteria.
- Get students to assess this previous work according to the levels of performance.
- Follow by free discussion, listening to your students and contributing your ideas. The same strategies can be applied with students demonstrating work practice skills.
- Similarly, outline the process of assessment in advance and open up for clarification and review.
- Address students concerns and suggestions before implementation.
- During and after the self/ peer assessment seek students' comments making improvements to maximise the prospect of your students seeing and experiencing the validity of the approach.
- Examples of previous written and digitised audio-graphic assessments can be presented online with annotations.

Taking your first steps

1. First explore the reasons for introducing self or peer assessment.
2. Start with manageable assessment tasks which you firmly believe are suited to self or peer assessment.
3. Draw details of assessment criteria and levels of performance - if appropriate - as well as the process.
4. Make sure there is time for student review and discussion as noted above.
5. Get your plan constructively reviewed by one or two colleagues experienced in student peer or self assessment prior to adoption.

References

- Boud, D. (1991) Implementing Student Self-Assessment, HERDSA Green Guide 5, Campbelltown: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia
- Biggs, J. (2000) Teaching for Quality Learning at University, Buckingham: Open University Press