7STEPS WITH PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY

7 Steps to:
Peer and Self Assessment

Overview

A common approach for actively engaging students with feedback involves employing peer and self-assessment (PSA) (see Boud, 1995 for a 'classic' account). These techniques require the student to think more carefully about assessment aims, marking criteria, standards and feedback, as they must consider these aspects when reflecting on their own work or that of others – the goal being improved student performance (e.g. Ross, 2006). Implementation of PSA must be structured and supported, particularly where students (and staff) are new to these techniques (e.g. Dochy et al, 1999).

From an employability perspective, PSA also has much to offer. Employers tell us they want graduates who demonstrate leadership and performance management skills (of self and others). PSA therefore provides a very direct way of helping students to learn the assessment and reflection skills employers are looking for.

If PSA is to be adopted programme wide, all staff need to be positive and consistent in their messages about how and why the technique is used, in how these techniques operate and the expectations staff have of the students – i.e. there is a need for staff development. Research demonstrates the benefits of staff development to the quality and successful adoption of PSA (Sluijsmans et al, 2002, p443).

Sometimes PSA is sold to staff in terms of the time savings it can provide, particularly where student numbers are high. Care must be taken in making such claims (Price et al, 2007). PSA has the potential to offer assessment efficiencies, but its real value is in terms of its potential to impact on learning.

1. Conduct student induction and training sessions

Induction and training sessions are vital for 'selling' PSA to students and informing them of how the process works. It is common to encounter student views that "this is your job not mine". This attitude needs to be countered if PSA is to be successful. Induction sessions should include a rationale for PSA, advice on what assessors need to consider (assessment criteria, how to give good feedback), opportunities to practice assessing work, and exemplars of work of various standards (from failing work through to outstanding). Induction is best conducted by an advocate of PSA who is able to enthuse and persuade students of the merits of this approach. First year students may have fewer preconceived ideas about HE assessment. They may be more open to the process and should be comfortable in using it as they progress. However, they may need high initial levels of training and support. Second and third year students will have a greater understanding of the HE assessment process and may be more confident in relating to the requirements and standards expected but may be more resistant to the concept as they are used to tutor-only marking (Ballantyne et al, 2002).

2. Manage confidentiality in peer assessment

Students often report feeling uncomfortable with being judged by their peers (e.g. Cassidy, 2006) and also in being the judge of others work. It may therefore be necessary to manage confidentiality, for example, by using codes to protect the anonymity of both the peer assessor and assessee (Ballantyne et al, 2002). This is adviseable in one-on-one marking, but may not be workable if using small-groups to peer assess and discuss assignments.

3. Address the issue of reliability

Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) conducted a review of 48 quantitative peer assessment studies, comparing peer and teacher marks. They found that examples of peer assessment that demonstrated good design were associated with more valid peer assessments. Ross (2006), writing about self-assessment, reports that students tend to be consistent in their marking but that they tend to over-mark in relation to staff. Lew et al (2010) note weak to moderate accuracy in self-assessment but that this is correlated with student ability – the better students being more able to self-assess. Evidence suggests that accuracy problems may be countered if students are better-taught how to assess their work, they are involved in the development of assessment criteria and they know their own marks will be judged against teacher and/or peer judgements. Other potential reliability issues include gender bias – males having a tendency towards greater confidence in their performance than women (e.g. Langan et al, 2008; Langan et al, 2005; Pallier, 2003) – and possible friendship group bias (Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000).

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4. Consider how to distribute work for peer assessment

It is necessary to think about how work is distributed for peer marking. Will all the work be randomly assigned and anonymous? Will students be paired up so there is a straightforward and reciprocal peer assessment arrangement? Van den Berg et al (2006) favour setting up peer assessment groups of three or four. This allows students the opportunity to compare their work to that of several others and it also helps militate against two weak students being paired together.

5. Promote the generation of good quality feedback

Miller's (2003) research demonstrated that peer feedback was increased by providing students with specific prompts for feedback. It would therefore seem important when designing PSA to be aware of the need for coaxing feedback out of students. Programme teams may consider developing a set of generic feedback prompts or 'rubrics'. These could then be adapted or supplemented with more assignment-specific prompts where necessary.

6. Think about whether to use PSA summatively or formatively

The literature on PSA shows no agreement as to whether these techniques should be used formally as part of a summative assessment strategies or not. Some authors advocate formal usage (e.g. Keppell et al, 2006) whilst others feel that using PSA in a summative capacity inhibits the learning that this activity is supposed to generate. Staff nervous of using PSA summatively are best advised to increase their familiarity with these techniques fomatively. However, there is no reason why PSA cannot be used summatively, so long as the process is quality assured.

7. Occasional technique or curriculum-wide?

There is conflicting advice in the literature as to how much PSA should be used. Some authors (e.g. Cassidy, 2006) advocate that it should not operate in a piecemeal way, but should be embedded in the learning culture of the programme. It should be an approach students become practiced at and familiar with. Others (e.g. Ballantyne et al, 2002) suggest limiting the use of peer assessment expressing the view that over-use will lead to resentment of the technique and therefore to the erosion of 'the benefits of student learning'.