Undergraduate students' perceptions and attitudes toward peer assessment

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Peer assessment (PA) has recently been adopted as an alternative assessment method, particularly in higher education. This type of assessment usually entails a process through which students learn about the relevant marking criteria in a module and use it to rate their peer’s work. As a result, they are expected to engage in reflective criticism over the work of their colleagues, experience the nature of assessment, and also reflect about their own learning process.

Many studies have investigated the results of PA in relation to grading and student satisfaction (Van Den Berg et al., 2006; Sullivan et al., 1999). However, one of the main limitations of PA is that lecturers typically assume that students will automatically share their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning (Robinson & Udall, 2006). Also, there is evidence that students may not appreciate criticism from their colleagues, and fear that tensions may arise amongst peers (Wen and Tsai, 2006). Finally, some studies also suggest that students may not feel confident enough about rating their colleagues’ work (Sullivan et al., 1999), or fear being victims of peer incompetence. As a result, many students perceive marking and feedback as the tutor’s responsibility (Clifford, 1999) and prefer to leave the matter in their hands.

Considering that assessments are at the heart of the student experience (Brown et al., 1997), research in this particular area seems essential to clarify any gaps that may exist between the Lecturers’ pedagogical aims and the students’ learning strategies. To analyse undergraduates’ perceptions and attitudes towards PA this study aims to: (1) explore students’ current perceptions about PA; (2) analyze whether and how this method of assessment affects students’ learning; (3) evaluate how PA can be effectively used to provide formative assessment and improve students’ learning.

One hundred and twenty undergraduate students (level 1) filled a 20-minute online anonymous questionnaire specifically designed to explore their perceptions and beliefs about peer-assessment in the context of written essays; their participation was voluntary. The questionnaire included twenty randomly presented questions. Of these, nine questions required quantitative answers using Likert scales (e.g. If asked to participate in a peer-reviewing exercise at this point in time, how confident would you feel?; rate 1 to 5; the higher the number, the more confident) and eleven were open questions (e.g. What do you think may be positive about the peer-reviewing process?). Students’ answers to these questions were then codified and categorised for quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Results show that although 85% of the students believe that they may learn more while writing essays (in comparison with having to sit an exam), nearly 60% did not feel confident about having their essays marked by a colleague. Some of the reasons include lack of self-confidence, perceived lack of peer commitment, or they fear receiving inaccurate feedback. The data also suggests that although over half of the students (i.e. 54%) considered feedback important, most are unclear about how to best use this type of information, a point also made by Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2004). Well over a third of participants (i.e. 37%) simply stated, “I don’t know”, without further explanations and another third (i.e. 33%) indicated that they applied the information received in their “future work”, without further specification of how they planned to do so. No student seemed aware of their potentially active role while discussing marking criteria and how this knowledge could improve their learning processes.

References