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Self and peer assessment in action

Practitioner Research
in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study explores the contribution that can be made by self and peer assessment to effective teaching and learning. The purpose of this research was to introduce an intervention to a group of students, many of whom had non-traditional academic backgrounds, with the intention that it might enhance their academic skills and lead to more effective learning. The impact on the students' confidence in themselves as learners is considered and the establishment of a working model for implementing self and peer assessment is suggested. The participants in the research were a group of 11 higher education students who were studying in a further education college for a foundation degree in early childhood studies. An action research approach was taken to enable an examination of the impact of the intervention and to effect changes as the academic year progressed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, students' self-assessment sheets and observations of peer assessment feedback between students.

The findings indicate that, although time consuming in the initial stages, the intervention resulted in students becoming more reflective and self-critical leading to improved academic performance. Regular sharing and discussion of their work led to increased confidence in their perception of themselves as learners.

Keywords

Self-assessment; peer assessment; HE in FE; formative assessment; effective learning; study skills.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a rapid growth in numbers of students studying higher education (HE) level courses in further education (FE) colleges since the recommendations of the Dearing Committee (1997) reported that FE colleges should take on a greater role in the expansion of 'sub-degree' courses. It is widely acknowledged that inequalities exist in education and that for a variety of reasons there are many for whom a traditional university education is not a possibility. Notions that studying for a foundation degree in an FE college will eliminate inequalities may be a utopian dream, but the belief that they may go some way towards people taking their first steps into HE who might not otherwise have done so is to be applauded.

For some students on foundation degree programmes, the qualification opens doors so that they can embark on their chosen career. For others, it becomes a preparation for the third year of an honours degree programme at a university and these students are often very successful. Students arrive with a wide variety of educational backgrounds. For some, it may be many years since previous study, for others, their qualifications may not at the required standard for a university place; many students choose a course specifically for its vocational content. Whatever the reason for studying on an HE course at an FE college, there are many who lack the necessary academic skills to learn independently and effectively.

This study into self and peer assessment was as a result of my interest in the topic of what makes an effective learner. After a background in primary education, I became a lecturer in an FE college teaching subjects related to primary and nursery education. I had developed a foundation degree in early childhood studies for

this college in partnership with a regional university and the course was due to begin with a new cohort of students at the start of this study. One of the topics I taught was concerned with how children learn and I wanted the students to apply these ideas to their own learning. A small piece of action research on effective learning with a second year HND group had taken place in the previous year, but though it was somewhat effective, the intervention took place part way through the programme when learning attitudes had, to some extent, already been set.

The role that assessment can play in effective learning is emphasised by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2006); an example they give of assessment that supports learning is that of peer assessment, which they suggest, gives students a better understanding of assessment criteria and leads to deeper learning. One of the recommendations of the Dearing Committee (1997) is that learning how to learn should be a key element of higher education courses. Boud (1990; 1995) is a leading researcher in the field of self and peer assessment; he argues that self-assessment, in particular, is a necessary skill for lifelong learning and that it develops metacognitive skills. It was against this background that the current study was located.

The overall aim of this research was to explore the contribution made by self and peer assessment to effective teaching and learning. Since this was an intervention with a new cohort of 11 students, it was necessary to monitor the effects as the academic year progressed. It was also anticipated that change would result from this intervention; for these reasons, action research was chosen as the approach to this inquiry. The data collection and review of the literature took place concurrently; the final research questions that emerged from these sources are as follows:

- To what extent do students and teaching staff perceive that self and peer assessment contributes to increased effectiveness in teaching and learning?
- Does self and peer assessment have an impact on students' confidence in themselves as learners?
- Can a working model be established for managing self and peer assessment effectively?

The links between assessment and teaching, on the one hand, and learning on the other, have long been established. However in both compulsory and post compulsory education, there has in the past been an emphasis on short term, surface learning for assessment purposes, often at the expense of deeper learning (Black et al., 2003; Boud, 1995), and importance placed on summative assessment ranging from 'tick boxes' in the foundation stage for children aged 3–5, to the classification of degrees at university level.

Encouraging students to become effective learners is a pedagogical challenge for teachers of pupils of all ages. The **content** of what is learnt at an early age may not necessarily be remembered, but developing **motivation** to learn and the **skills** to manage learning is an essential ingredient for lifelong learning (Bandura, 1997). The belief that one's ability to succeed is not innate is necessary to develop and manage the skills of learning, and for a number of years now, notions that intelligence is a fixed entity have been questioned and challenged by, for example, theories of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996).

Research in the field of self and peer assessment has been largely concerned with students in higher education studying at universities, for both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, or in the secondary sector of education. The picture that has emerged from this research was of surface learning driven by tests, a lack of motivation especially among the lower achievers and little knowledge by teachers of their students' learning needs (Boud, 1995; Black et al., 2003). What is also clear from both of these areas of research is that formative assessment is vital for learning and that the type of formative assessment that contributes to students' development as effective learners is that which includes elements of self and peer assessment.

Method

The planned research took place over the course of an academic year to try to capture the attitudes and feelings of participants about self and peer assessment as the intervention progressed. It also needed to take the perceptions of the teaching staff into account, as they would be able to monitor any changes that might be taking place in the development of the group and their resultant work and adapt the assessment methods as necessary.

As there was a need to be responsive to change, **action research** methods appeared to be the most suitable for data collection. Cohen and Manion (1994) define action research as:

... a small scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention.

(1994:186)

Koshy (2005) sees action research as a:

... continuous learning process in which the researcher learns and also shares the newly generated knowledge with those who may benefit from it.

(2005:9)

Data collected in the course of the research project took various forms, including:

- semi-structured interviews with 7 of the 11 students and two members of staff
- written comments from the students on specific aspects of their experience
- self-assessment sheets completed by the students
- observations of peer assessment feedback between students
- questionnaires gathered from the three students who were unable to be interviewed.

The students had become accustomed to using 'Post-its' for recording and sharing ideas, opinions and reactions during some teaching sessions. Initial reactions to the first practice exercise in peer assessment were recorded and shared in this way both before and after this took place. These written comments from the students on specific aspects of their experience were then displayed anonymously and became the subject of discussion and then collected for later analysis. It was anticipated that anonymity would encourage the students to comment with honesty.

In addition to the above data, students completed self-assessment sheets on completion of each assignment. Copies of these were retained and monitored to note how effectively the students were self-assessing, they then became a discussion point in feedback on work. Observations of peer feedback sessions were made and – as I was a participant in these meetings – field notes written up immediately afterwards. These were brief notes intended to add another dimension to the data.

Interviews were transcribed and some basic analysis made using key words on a computer. All of the data gathered was analysed initially by using coding that correlated with the research questions. This was followed by memoing (Miles and Huberman, 1994), which allowed a deeper analysis to take place by noting underlying ideas and recurrent themes that emerged linked to the theoretical paradigms related to effective learning and to draw out the core themes noted in the conclusion.

Preliminary findings

The students were introduced to the concept of self and peer assessment from the start of the course. During study skills sessions at the beginning of the academic year, I discussed the method of assessment that was being proposed with the 11 students. They were unanimous in their desire to maintain anonymity in peer assessment as assessor and assessed, although they were made aware that they would be part of a three-way discussion of their work i.e. student, peer assessor and tutor, so face-to-face meetings would be necessary at the feedback stage.

Before peer assessment took place, the eleven students were introduced to the idea of self-assessment in an attempt to encourage increased awareness of what tutors might look for in an assessed piece of work. To facilitate this, they were asked to bring a draft, or plan, of their work to an assignment support session. Before discussions took place between tutor and individual students, each student was asked to complete a self-assessment sheet responding to some questions about the way in which they had approached their work. The self-assessment sheets then became a point of discussion between tutor and individual student. It became apparent that the student quoted below was beginning to evaluate her work:

I feel I used a variety of references for the size of the essay, however, in the future I want to expand on my reading resources. I feel I could have used more theorists to argue for and against points in my essay.

However, the attitudes towards self-assessment were varied as the students verbal responses noted at the time indicate:

It's difficult to take an unbiased look at your own work.

It helps you to look more critically at your work.

I found it difficult to say enough.

One week prior to the students handing in their first piece of peer assessed work (towards the end of the first term), they took part in a practice exercise. They were asked to complete a short piece of written work in class, which would then be peer-assessed with feedback given while I was present. The second research question asked,

Does self and peer assessment have an impact on students' confidence in themselves as learners?

With this in mind, the 11 students were asked to write a short comment on how they felt about the process of assessing another's work, and of having one's own work assessed by a peer, both before and after the assessment took place.

The feelings expressed by the majority of the group (9 out of 11) before the assessment, were overwhelmingly related to anxiety and worry, and most of these centred on their lack of experience. One student commented:

I don't feel confident about what I should be looking for and what is particularly good about a piece of work.

Others were anxious about causing offence to the individual whose work they were assessing:

More anxious about giving feedback. Conscious about other's feelings... impact of honesty?

Two students gave positive responses and these were related to the pedagogical reasons for self and peer assessment. One commented:

I find it interesting looking at other people's work to see how other people go about doing the work and other people's styles.

However, the students' comments after the feedback had been exchanged were more encouraging, with over half of the group feeling positive about the way their feedback was received, and therefore, much more confident with the whole process than they had anticipated. For example:

Felt OK – there were lots of positives and any negatives were already acknowledged in self-assessment. People tend to be harder on themselves than you ever would be on them.

All students commented positively about how it had felt to be the recipient of the assessment feedback, for example:

Felt happy about the response. I agreed with almost all of it. Will take feedback and use it.

Surprisingly comfortable. Being your own harshest critic helps. Can make you feel quite buoyant.

Some could see the benefits to their learning and, in particular, highlighted the difference between having a tutor giving feedback and a peer giving feedback:

Receiving feedback from a peer was a lot more engaging than from a teacher as more on our level.

Peer assessment in action

Students were required to submit two copies of the assignment intended for peer assessment, one of which would be redistributed within the group and one for formal marking by the tutor. Students are required to identify their work by student number only so would not, in theory, know whose work they were assessing. This, however, proved to be too much of a temptation for some students; as they were a small group who were developing some close friendships, four of the group managed to identify their partners through their conversations with one another before the feedback session took place. In the interview at the end of the year, one of the students affected stated that:

I heard that the person who'd been looking at my work had been saying stuff to people, it made me feel quite upset at the time.

This indicated a serious break with confidentiality and anonymity that needed to be dealt with sensitively and speedily.

It had been agreed with the students that the feedback would be triadic (Gale et al., 2002), i.e. it would involve self-assessment, peer assessment and tutor assessment. There was to be a meeting with all three individuals involved with feedback given both verbally and in written form. An opportunity would be available for each student to comment on the feedback, and the assessment process. As their tutor, I took part in this meeting and took notes.

Students were expected to give formative feedback only in their peer assessments. The feedback they gave one another was sensitively handled and was detailed and positive with some constructive and relevant suggestions for the way forward, for example, one student wrote:

... the conclusion summarises the main points in the report well, also including explanations and other factors that need to be looked at during observations. However, I felt that the conclusion was slightly too long compared to the main report. A solution could be to put some of the extra information from the conclusion into the main body.

Students also reported that this had been a useful exercise and involved them in looking more critically at their own work. However, one pair did not seem very well prepared and, although they had both commented on their peer's work, neither could remember their own work in enough detail to take advantage of the comments given. Both found it difficult to comment on their own and the other's work, feeling uneasy about being judgemental.

Although this exercise was showing signs of success, and the students were becoming more aware of assessment practices, it became obvious that some of them needed more time to practise self and peer assessment, a consideration noted by Brew (1999). The decision was made to use opportunities for more informal assessment to help to establish the practice of peer evaluation within the group. Much of this took place during study skills sessions where the students looked at one another's work in progress.

Effects on teaching and learning

As the year progressed, the development in the work that the students were producing was noticeable; apart from one student who was experiencing health problems, their marks were improving by 10–20%, and in the case of two students, by 30%. There was no guarantee that this was as a result of self and peer assessment, but the students' opinions on this topic were sought in semi-structured interviews.

In interviews with seven of the students towards the end of the academic year, I asked the question,

What do you think are the strengths of self-assessment?

Many responded that it made them reflect on their work, looking at it in more depth. They were becoming less complacent and more self-critical, showing increased care in the production of their work and awareness of when they perhaps had not made as much effort as they might. One student summed this up by saying:

It forces you to look at yourself and the way you work and therefore influences the way you work in the future.

During the same interviews the seven students were asked,

What effect do you think self-assessment has had on your work?

They were unanimous in identifying the positive benefits of reflection; a particular strength had been the effect it had on their time management and the planning of their work and their use of resources:

I think it's made me think about the references I use; if they're key texts like from module guides, and also I think it makes you more reflective about your own work – looking at your own practice. It makes you think you can't leave it till the last minute or you'll just end up with a mess.

It was important for the students to gain a greater understanding of the assessment criteria. During a study skills session, the students were asked to identify what they thought a marker might be looking for in assessing their study skills portfolios that they were working on at the time. They worked in groups to identify the key criteria, and then these were shared and refined to include three main areas. They then identified the nature of the evidence that could show that the criteria had been fulfilled. The criteria they chose closely matched those that were in the student handbook for the module, but the exercise had the strength of ensuring that the students were paying close attention to the criteria and had understood them fully. Following this exercise, the work was peer assessed informally. Students noted that they found this useful in identifying the gaps in their own work and in seeing the different ways in which others had organised their work. One student commented:

Other people see things that you don't; you get a different perspective of your strengths and weaknesses.

Confidence as learners

As the academic year progressed, there appeared to be a shift in the levels of confidence that students experienced. Most were happy to use self-assessment and to share this with their tutors, but peer assessment was felt to be much more daunting. At the start of the project, most of the students were reluctant to share their work, harbouring fears of being exposed for their failure or lack of academic ability. Their other main concern was that they felt they lacked the expertise to mark 'correctly'.

One of the tutors commented of his students that:

I think they didn't want to offend which is why they were, and still are, marking high, they don't want to get someone's back up. In a small group there's nowhere to hide, there's 18 months to go.

The most positive benefits to peer assessment seemed to centre on being able to look at the approach that fellow students had taken to their work, the tutor went on to note:

People are willing to share their work and let other people see what they've done. I don't think anyone's particularly precious about it or so embarrassed that they don't want to show anyone else. So I think it is quite useful to see how someone else has approached something.

Much of the anxiety experienced by the students was related to their levels of achievement. Those who had done well were comfortable with the process and felt that it could enhance their confidence, but those who had not achieved so well worried more about whether or not they were going about their work in an appropriate way.

One positive outcome that I observed in tutorials was that the students became very supportive of one another, very willing to share their efforts and able to comment on work sensitively; something that will be of great benefit to them in their future careers, and something to take forward into the next year.

Conclusions and implications for future practice

The analysis of the findings revealed three core themes in relation to teaching and learning.

Firstly, the results show that the students were developing greater skills in **reflective practice**. They were beginning to use reflective self-assessments to identify any gaps in their knowledge, thus taking more responsibility for their learning. However, at the start of the project there was a minority of students who failed to use feedback effectively. By the end of the academic year, these students were beginning to reflect and to self and peer assess more successfully, but they needed more time and support to master these skills than did the majority of the students.

Secondly, the students were developing a heightened understanding of the **criteria related to assessment**. The sessions on interpreting these criteria were particularly beneficial to the students as they reported that they made more use of them both at the planning stage and to check the content of their work. Boud (1995) suggests that teaching staff should go further and give the students the opportunity to set the criteria. This, however, may not always be possible. In our case, the criteria were published in the student handbook available at the beginning of the course.

Finally, the students were applying elements of self and peer assessment to the **workplace**. Most of these students would eventually be working with young children, often in educational settings. They were beginning to make the links between what they were learning about themselves as learners and the application of this to their work with children.

The majority of students found that they learnt much from seeing a range of work and became more reflective and critical of their own efforts leading to a greater ability to self-assess more effectively. While initial fears by the group were that they might offend their peers, these lessened as the year progressed. This was helped by providing a framework for students to use to produce feedback that was both supportive and could highlight possible areas for development. It became evident that the greatest benefit to the students was in taking on the role of assessor rather than receiving feedback on their work.

Triadic assessment proved to be very time consuming and was only possible with a small group of students. However, most of the students took their roles seriously and gave much thought to the feedback they were to give. As a more informal approach to peer assessment was adopted, the time allotted to this activity was used effectively, amounting to a saving of tutor time in individual tutorials.

The findings would indicate that there are a number of factors that need to be taken into consideration in the development of a working model for the effective management of self and peer assessment. Firstly, it is beneficial to the students to introduce self and peer assessment early to establish patterns. This gives the students time to develop and practise skills, bearing in mind that some students will need more time than others. Clear boundaries relating to confidentiality need to be established from the outset and students need to be reminded of these regularly. Informal peer assessment may be more effective than formal, but if formal peer assessment is to be employed, students will need plenty of practice initially. Self-assessment should form part of the feedback discussion between tutor and students to provide clarity of assessment processes and to enable development of the students' academic skills. Finally, a successful outcome of self and peer assessment will depend, in part, on the commitment to it by both staff and students.

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