This month’s Assessment Brief describes an approach to the provision of feedback in a context where class sizes are increasing but the nature of the learning objectives means that essay type tasks provide more valid opportunities for students to demonstrate intended learning that options such as multiple choice question examinations. One of the reasons for the selection of this paper is the frankness with which it describes the difficulties and challenges encountered in implementing an online approach to peer assessment.

Markus Mostert & Jen D. Snowball (2012): Where angels fear to tread: online peer-assessment in a large first-year class, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2012.683770

Introduction

The paper begins with a brief overview of the literature that defines peer assessment and summarises potential advantages. It is noteworthy that several papers cited in this section are authored by current and past UQ staff members.

Background

Though the online peer assessment initiative occurred in a South African university, the background identifies contextual factors similar to those existing in many other parts of the world. Classes in this economics department have doubled in size in recent years and consequently the provision of formative feedback is a major challenge. Though the authors acknowledge a possible switch to multiple choice questions as an option for reducing lecturer workload and boosting feedback efficiency, they believe that the assessment of outcomes such as the ability to develop a coherent argument can be achieved most effectively through essay tasks. The growing number of students for whom English is a second and sometimes third language is a further challenge.

The selection of the Workshop module of Moodle as a means of providing students with opportunities for online peer feedback in is explained with reference to the features it offers including its number of additional options and flexibility.

The innovation

In order not to overwhelm students only three applications of the Workshop module were used in this innovation: (1) submission and random distribution of assignments, (2) grading and providing feedback using an assessment grid and (3) making assessed work and peer feedback available to student authors.

Other details provided concerned: the advantages of online peer feedback in providing the anonymity that can reduce feedback bias and other negative consequences such as reduced self-esteem; the decision to use the Workshop module for formative purposes only because of concerns around the validity of peer assessment; the efficiency of online as opposed to paper-based processes in large classes; the improved reliability of assigning two peer assessors to each essay; the avoidance of additional student workload through substitution of the peer assessment
task for one of the weekly tutorial tasks: and, the deterrence of plagiarism through requiring first-draft essays to be submitted to Turnitin©. An ill-timed technical problem with Moodle required adjustment of the planned timeline for the process.

**Data collection**

Evaluative data were collected through an online questionnaire containing both Likert-scale items and open-ended questions.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Students who found the peer assessment exercise had helped to improve their essays (58% of respondents) cited reasons including:

- attention drawn to minor errors and mistakes which could be removed from the final draft
- access to other approaches to or perspectives on completing the assigned essay
- the capacity of peer assessment to increase their ability to assess their own work
- insights into the marking process
- greater awareness of standards including the standard of their own work
- the motivational effect of having others read their work
- giving feedback was more useful than receiving it.

Reasons students provided for not finding the peer assessment activity useful included:

- lack of confidence in the quality of feedback provided by peers
- lack of confidence in their own ability to provide accurate feedback
- inconsistencies in the feedback provided by peers
- poor quality ('lazy') drafts submitted for feedback because of the formative only status of the exercise
- lack of appreciation of the value of the exercise
- concerns that the electronic availability of essays would make plagiarism easier
- additional workload and complexity of the process.

The authors conclude that despite some challenges including technological vulnerability, the online peer assessment practice had a beneficial effect on student essay writing and that this medium addressed some of the challenges inherent in face-to-face peer assessment, particularly in large classes. They also commented on the value of further exploration of whether there was any difference in the impact of peer review on the quality of work of native English speaking students and the work of students for whom English is a second language.

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This series of briefs on assessment topics has been prepared by the UQ Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI) for UQ teaching academics. "UQ ASSESSMENT BRIEFS" of journal articles, book chapters, reviews, websites, reports etc are distributed to Faculty and School Teaching and Learning Chairs in a form designed to encourage wider distribution.

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