Online Peer Assessment: A Student Reflection

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Abstract

This short essay is based on a task given to us in our induction week to university, and what was built upon throughout our first semester in the Research and Professional Development module. Finding out in the first few weeks of starting university that twenty of your peers who you barely know are going to be reading and analysing your work is quite a terrifying thought. However, as this essay will discuss, online peer assessment is a useful tool to help people learn and develop if it is utilised and structured in the correct way. The peer assessment that we undertook was split into three stages, the first being the actual writing of the essay, second was assessing each others work and third was our own reflection of the workshops, deciphering what we had learnt and how we can apply it to our own work.

Peer assessment is an innovative practice "which aims to improve the quality of learning and empower learners, where traditional forms can by-pass learners needs" (Biggs, 1999, Brown, Rust & Gibbs, 1994 as cited in Bostock, 2000). This process certainly empowers the learner due to its nature, as it is down to each individual what they learn from analysing others work. If you submerse yourself into the assessment as I did then you are likely to take a lot away with you. According to O'Hagan (1997) learning should be on-going, mentally stimulating and relevant, for most people in this situation the peer assessment was precisely that. What this process highlighted to most people, myself included is the need for academic material to back up arguments within our essays. Coming from A levels to an undergraduate degree is a giant leap in academic terms, where you are now expected to have an in depth knowledge and understanding of subject areas rather than a surface knowledge.

Leaving feedback on others work was a requirement of the assessment, this was broken down into three sections; introduction, main body and conclusion. Feedback was left so that at the end of the process the feedback given could be reviewed section by section, this would give the student focus for their next submission and point to where their work could be improved (Cleland, 2009). Leaving feedback was a particularly challenging part of the process for myself. It was difficult to know what to write for each person and actually trying to give the right amount of feedback. As Freeman and Lewis (1998) stress feedback must be as manageable as possible, too much information can lead to confusion leaving students unsure of how to improve their work, whereas too little provides limited advice for future

submissions, this can have the same effect as too much information. When leaving feedback I also established there is a definite need to be as clear and concise as possible so it is easy for the person receiving the feedback to understand the points you are making.

Although the peer assessment was generally a successful tool used in a good manner to aid and develop us as academic writers I do believe there are ways it could be improved. Firstly, the main issue I personally had was during the evaluation of our main body, no one actually left any feedback on mine, therefore leaving me with nothing personal to focus on, only what I had learnt from others essays. I feel that a way to combat this in the future would be to split the seminar group into groups who all read each others, this way everyone gets an equal amount of feedback and gets reward for the work that they are putting into the process. Secondly, the amount of feedback in terms of numbers who were giving feedback on particular parts of a person's essay totally contradicts what Freeman & Lewis (1998) stress about manageable sizes of feedback. Some in the class received ten to twelve comments on their introductions which is brilliant. However, when they were working on the next submission it would be highly likely for them to become confused because there is so much for them to take in, which in turn points to smaller groups leaving good levels of feedback rather than high numbers leaving average feedback. Ramsden (1992) backs this up suggesting that providing quality feedback can be difficult and time consuming. Even so, it plays an undeniable role in helping students develop, thus reinforcing the argument for smaller groups so that each person has more time to leave feedback rather than rushing through as many as possible.

To finish the process off we were asked to reflect on the peer assessment of our essay. In this we were asked to discuss what we had learnt under certain headings. These were; information, content/structure, referencing, drafting of work, level of feedback and finally our overall thoughts on the assessment. I believe this was a very good way to finish the assessment off because it makes you sit down and think about the things you have actually learnt, Kolb (1984), also argues that reflective practice plays an important role in learning for all academics, this practice is constantly a on-going process providing you with excellent opportunities for self expansion.

As someone who has recently undertaken the peer assessment process for the first time it is clear to me that this method of teaching and learning is very effective. However, for this method to work it clearly has to be undertaken at the right time and under the correct circumstances, as it was with us, for it to have the desired benefits for the participants. Although there were a few issues with the actual assessment as highlighted previously, I still managed to take a lot from the process which stands me in very good stead for the coming endeavours in my degree. I believe that this is one of my first steps on Kolb's (1984) learning cycle and that as I begin to experience more new and innovative teaching techniques my experience will grow and will enable me to learn new things from them.

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