Workshop Reflection Sheet: Peer Assessment of Essay

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Abstract

Whilst in the first semester of my undergraduate degree at Staffordshire University, students were required to engage in a writing assignment titled 'Discuss the Benefits of Sport'. After submission of an initial draft of 500 words during our induction week, the question then formed the basis of one of four modules (Research and Professional Development I) which I studied during the first semester. In week 5, we were then required to submit an 800 word answer to the same question as before and, at the same time, begin engaging in peer assessment reviews over a three-week period on each others' work. Peer assessment involves students partaking in an assessment, where their work is viewed and feedback is provided by other students (Miller, Imrie & Cox, 1998). It is used to help students recognise levels needed to achieve results (Brown, Race & Smith, 2002). Moreover, Cottrell (2008) suggests that one of the best ways to learn is through new experiences, as it triggers a need for understanding. As peer assessment was a new experience, I took the opportunity to use it to my advantage. Throughout this essay, I shall take into consideration how I felt during my first official experience of this innovative practice, and assess whether the benefits suggest reason for future implementation.

Peer assessment can be used by a range of academic levels. Wen & Tsai (2006) conducted a study investigating students' opinions and attitudes towards online peer assessment. The results indicated that although students regarded peer assessment as more of a tool rather than a learning enforcer, attitudes were positive. Furthermore, students who had engaged in peer assessment before were more positive than beginners.

Following engagement in the peer assessment task, my views concerning the strength and structure of my essay altered. Although my introduction and conclusion were of an adequate length, more detail was needed, as well as referencing to the APA standard. For novice writers or those writing at different levels, it has been suggested that for University Level standard, both intention and form should be focused on (Lavelle & Zuercher, 2001). Therefore, by concentrating on the assignment in hand, with a number of re-drafts, my final

submission was of a much higher standard (I was eventually awarded a first class grade).

Rosen (1987) states the importance of re-drafting work, with initial stages providing opportunity for students to free-write, therefore allowing main focus on content rather than structure. In addition, Rosen (1987) suggests that it is in further drafts when punctuation and structure should be corrected. I found that re-drafting was beneficial as it allowed me to improve content, grammar and punctuation of my essay. Throughout drafting I also implemented as many references as possible to support my statements and strengthen my essay.

A key area in which peer assessment helped was referencing. There are many reasons for referencing text including: providing support for statements made, recognition of other researchers' investigations within a certain area and helping students become knowledgeable of where ideas originate (Neville, 2010). As my peers' work was uploaded, a set of guideline examples were provided in order to help with my final submission. Throughout the innovative practice of peer assessment, I gradually became competent with the correct APA format, using appropriate sources and eliminating the erroneous technique of including page numbers.

Feedback both given and received throughout the assessment was limited to the majority of comments regarding referencing not complying with the APA format. The ability to determine only one area of weakness, I believe, was due to the unfamiliarity of peer assessment. Brookhart (2008) suggests that the ability to criticise comes with practice and guidelines. Nilson (2003) suggests that two important guidelines to be followed when giving feedback are: to be specific about certain elements of the assignment and to be present at the outset of discussion; as a result feedback is more precise and constructive. Furthermore, it has been suggested that by asking students which form of feedback they would prefer, encouragement and motivation are initiated (Habeshaw, Gibbs & Habeshaw, 1993). I feel that students with little or no experience in peer assessment may have found this innovative practice daunting as misinterpretation may have occurred due to the standard of writing not being determined. This is further emphasised by Orsmond (2004) who states that knowing the criteria for an assessment offers guidelines and structure to the task in hand – therefore allowing more beneficial feedback.

For those students who found this innovative practice to be non-beneficial a number of reasons have been suggested. Regarding academic study, students may feel apprehensive with their own ability (Cheng & Warren, 1997) and relationships such as friendship can influence feedback (Falchikov, 2003). To overcome these problems, Sullivan and Hall (1997) suggest making students secure and confident with the assessment. In future, I am also interested in partaking in the method of self-assessment, as Sadler & Good (2006) propose that this innovative practice is better for learning than peer assessment. This is because self assessment is considered more motivating as it is a students' own work; therefore a reason for engagement is for personal benefit (Brookhart, 2008).

In conclusion, prior to engagement in this innovative practice, I was apprehensive; concerned at how my work would be judged. Following analysis of my peer's work, I learned weaknesses of my essay included a tendency to write in 1st person, and a lack of referenced support. Overall, I found the experience of peer assessment to be a revelation; students had the ability to provide beneficial constructive criticism without knowledge of a formal grade. I believe that in such an early stage of academic study, peer assessment should be given with some guidance, as a form of reassurance to those with little experience and confidence. Personally I shall be engaging in peer assessment with my fellow students in the future as I found this innovative practice to be extremely beneficial.

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