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Encouraging student participation with formative assessment and engagement in grading criteria: hybrid peer/self-assessment activity

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Abstract
A semi-recent trend of disappointingly low levels of student participation in taking up formative assessment opportunities offered to undergraduates, for example tutorial questions for discussion, mock exams and formative coursework, has contributed to the general perception that students are not engaging with grading criteria *before* assessments. In response, the author conducted a project resulting in the development of an innovative learning and teaching strategy for final-year undergraduate law students at The City Law School, City University London.

This article introduces readers to the "hybrid peer/self-assessment activity" before turning to consider two sets of telling results arising from the project: (1) statistical data on student performance, and (2) student feedback collected by online survey.

The author presented the project previously to The City Law School colleagues in the form of a poster. This article elaborates on the context of the project and provides a discussion of the project's aims, methodology, theoretical basis and results.

Key words: peer-assessment, self-assessment, formative, undergraduate, law

Introduction

Hybrid peer/self-assessment activity

At The City Law School, one of the many formative assessment opportunities we offer to students on undergraduate taught programmes is coursework, comprising a problem-based scenario or an essay question, for feedback and a suggested mark. As the assessment is formative, students are not required to participate. Whilst levels of student participation vary widely within the School, it can be said that on average the level of participation is disappointingly low: around 40% or below. As one might expect, participation sometimes improves towards the end of the degree programme, but this was not true in the case of a final-year module on the Bachelor of Laws (LL.B.) degree programme: Commercial & Agency Law.

During the 2012–2013 and 2013–2014 academic years, I developed an innovative learning and assessment activity on a final-year, elective module: the hybrid peer/self-assessment activity ("hybrid assessment"). On reflection, I feel the activity is a good example of quality enhancement, building on the good work we already do with respect to formative assessments.

At the end of the two-year project, I surveyed students about their experience with the activity. The results from this survey are discussed below.

The aim of this article is two-fold: (1) to share good practice, and (2) to provide some interesting findings from the project. It is my hope that the activity or the results, or both, will be beneficial to others teachers.

Project context

In their seminal work, *Inside the Black Box: Raising standards through classroom assessment*, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam define assessment as "all those activities undertaken by teachers and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (1998a, p.2). Susan Askew and Caroline Lodge went on to suggest that feedback is "all dialogue to support learning in both formal and informal situations" (2000, p. 1). Taken together, these two streams put forward that the student-teacher dialogue has a direct correlation to learning and perhaps less obviously to assessment, too.

In peer-assessments, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning (Hartley *et al,* 2005) as they are given an opportunity to engage with the assessment criteria and take on a role in the assessment process (Stokking *et al,* 2004). Students are able to make a "summative judgement" vis-à-vis peer-assessment, which can be used as a learning and teaching activity *and* as an assessment task (Biggs & Tang, 2007). The peer-assessment strategy makes students' assessments an object of discussion rather than a "final mark" evidencing achievement of learning, and therefore the role of students' participation in the process of giving and receiving feedback – in this new dialogue – is recognised as important for continued learning, or assessment *for* learning rather than only assessment *of* learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998b).

One of the risks with peer-assessment is that students are unfamiliar with the assessment criteria, or they do not understand it. For peer assessment to work as a valid assessment strategy in higher education students must be trained in self- and peer-assessment by engaging them with transparent assessment criteria (i.e. marking and grading criteria) *before* the assessment takes place (Stokking *et al,* 2004). Ideally, students should ask themselves, "What do I need to achieve?" (Stokking *et al,* 2004), which of course would suggest that they understand the criteria and how to self-assess before being able to assess their peers. Not only is this useful in the intended assessment activity, but will also be helpful to students as they attempt other assessments while in higher education. And it is helpful to teachers as it provides us with feedback on whether students understand and to what extent they actually engage with the marking and grading criteria.

In addition, there has been a great deal of academic debate surrounding the reliability and validity of peer-assessment. Issues around reliability include the ability of teachers and/or judges (e.g. those in the assessor role passing judgement on another's work) to make consistent judgements *vis-à-vis* assessment criteria or "rubrics" as well as learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2007). In terms of validity, the assessment activity (e.g. examination, coursework, poster, etc) must be validated against some external criterion as a means of standardising or benchmarking (Biggs & Tang, 2007). There is a risk that peer-assessment and other types of qualitative assessment strategies are "subjective" or

"unreliable", but this may be mitigated by the teacher's own professional judgement about the quality of learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007). As educators, this of course requires our active engagement with the assessment criteria, learning outcomes and the assessment strategy.

It should be recognised that, in addition to being an "assessment strategy", peer-assessment also falls under another umbrella as well: "teaching and learning strategies". Student-centred learning is an innovative teaching and learning strategy which seeks to remove the "power" from the teacher to share it with the student, thereby shifting the traditional trust-power relationship paradigm (Wilkerson & Hundert, 1997). In other words, the student is empowered to take control and responsibility for her or his own learning (Clouston, 2005). This means that the teacher relinquishes control and takes on a facilitator role (Rogers, 1983 as cited in Clouston, 2005). For this to work, the teacher must first trust the students, which can be facilitated by forming a sound "learning partnership" with students (Johnston & Tinning, 2001 as cited in Clouston, 2005), which is why we undertake the formative feedback activity well into the academic year.

Research into self- and peer-assessment has shown that students who are encouraged to engage with the assessment criteria grasp a better understanding of what is "quality" and therefore perform or demonstrate a stronger likelihood of performing better as well as support student motivation and self-esteem (Bryan & Clegg, 2006).

Aims and Method

My motivation for developing the hybrid assessment was my desire to respond to very low student participation with the formative assessment activity during the 2012–2013 academic year on the final-year module; only 25% of the cohort (15 students of 59 in the cohort) participated.

In follow-up discussions with two students who took up the formative assessment activity during the 2012–2013 academic year, the students told me they were frustrated with the feedback they received. Whilst I met with the students individually, their message was alarmingly in unison: "I get the same feedback every year." This provided further impetus to carry out the project and prompted me to utilise the hybrid assessment as a means to check the extent to which students engage with the University's grading criteria. Do they understand "what it takes" to get an Upper Second or First Class mark?

Methodology in brief

One problem-based question with 1,500-word limit was released to students via our virtual learning environment (VLE), Moodle. Students were given three weeks to write up their submissions, which were uploaded by way of Turnitin. I marked all coursework, recording qualitative comments and a numerical mark for each submission as I went along.

Next, I prepared a bundle of documents for the students, comprising anonymised assignments (i.e. student author's assignment and peer's assignment), detailed marking criteria, the University's grading criteria, and peer-assessment and self-assessment feedback forms. I gave all students an "assessor briefing" in class on the day on which we

conducted the activity. We utilised a two-hour teaching slot to undertake the activity. The first hour was for peer-assessment and the second was for self-assessment.

Marks from the peer- and self-assessments were collected and recorded. All three sets of marks were released via Moodle along with my verbal comments on the three sets of feedback and marks. Hardcopies of peer- and self-assessments were made available to students at the start of the next class.

In outline, the process for the hybrid assessment is as follows:

1. Students submit coursework for formative assessment
2. Teacher marks all coursework submissions
3. Student A (author) assesses Student B's (peer) anonymised coursework with reference to marking criteria given and provides feedback on a feedback coversheet provided
4. Student B assesses Student C's work and so on
5. All students self-assess with reference to marking criteria given and provide feedback on a feedback coversheet provided
6. Classroom dialogue about the experience
7. Teacher returns marked work to students and provides feedback to each student on the three sets of feedback and marks
8. All students receive feedback from the teacher and is invited to see the teacher to engage in dialogue about the experience. The student author reflects on their own work through assessment and the feedback-giver (teacher) connects with learner's purposes (Askew & Lodge, 1998)

It should be noted that the method detailed requires a considerable time commitment both inside and outside of the classroom. Two hours of classroom time was used to brief students on the hybrid assessment and to carry it out. An additional three hours was required of my own time to assemble the bundles of documents, to carry out online assessment of assignments and to record verbal comments on the activity outcomes. Students visited me during my office hours for additional feedback after the hybrid assessment activity was concluded.

Theoretical basis

On the hybrid assessment, each student is assessed separately: and thrice (i.e. teacher, peer and self). This "divided mark" approach to marking is useful, but might mean more work for the marker (Exley & Dennick, 2004). It should be noted that assessments affect the motivation and self-esteem of students and should be engaged with carefully (Black & Wiliam, 1998b). To that end, anonymous submissions minimise the risk of emotional damage (Black & Wiliam, 1998b).

Despite our best efforts to engage students in learning activities, as the data presented in this article reveals, there continues to be a disappointingly low take up of formative feedback opportunities. We must recognise that coercion in a student-centred learning activity is not a recognised philosophy (Brookfield, 1987). Nevertheless, it is a reality that some students may fail to meet the expectations of the assessment, in which case adequate feedback is

essential to informing future learning. It is likely that these peers would "digest each learning experience" to "learn through feedback" received (Race, 2005).

Findings

During the 2013–2014 academic year, 34 students (of 52 in the cohort) participated in the hybrid assessment, representing a 65.4% rate of participation. This was a significant improvement from the previous year when only 15 students (of 59 in the cohort) participated, representing a 25.4% participation rate.

In 2013–2014, the standard deviation (STDEV) between peer-assessment, self-assessment and "control" marks for the hybrid assessment ranged between 0.8 and 8.5 percentage marks. Interestingly, the average deviation (AVGDEV) between the same three values was only 3.5 percentage marks, which seems to suggest that students' peer- and self-assessment marks on the whole were not far off the control mark.

Student views

On the day after the marks were released to students via Moodle, I sent students a link to an online survey I put together on Surveymonkey. The survey comprised 10 questions. There were 21 responses in total, which is a representative sample of the cohort. Only students who participated in the hybrid assessment were invited to take the survey.

From the sample, roughly one-third had peer-assessed before while the remaining two-thirds had not. Only 19% had self-assessed before while 81% had not previously.

Overall, 90% of respondents felt the hybrid assessment was useful. The same number said that "being the assessor" was an interesting or exciting experience, yet 53% felt that it was challenging or difficult to take on the assessor role.

When asked about the University's marking criteria, roughly 32% of respondents said they consulted the criteria prior to submitting the coursework for the hybrid assessment. Of the remaining students, about 5% said they had never consulted the criteria prior to submission of past coursework and an additional 16% claimed they did not know where to locate the University's grading criteria. On the whole, 85% of respondents felt that they understand the criteria better following their participation with the hybrid assessment. All respondents said they would recommend the hybrid assessment for other modules, 16% remarked that it should only be available on elective modules while 84% gave an unqualified "yes".

Reflections

Whilst consistently favourable year-on-year, student feedback collected via module questionnaires has improved for this module following the introduction of the hybrid assessment, particularly on questions relating to assessment, feedback and clarity of information.

The most satisfying outcome, on reflection, is the significant increase in students' level of participation. This is especially rewarding when considered in the light of pedagogy of practice, in so far as peer-assessment can greatly increase the quality of assessment, learning and teaching (Stokking *et al,* 2004). Nonetheless, issues with vulnerability should not be overlooked; anonymity is paramount. Upon consideration of the impact of these experiences as gained in practice (Schön, 1987), I have shared the activity and results with colleagues at the School's 2013 and 2014 learning and teaching away days. Feedback from colleagues has been extremely positive; indeed, some have decided to trial the activity in their own modules.

Without a doubt, the hybrid assessment would be useful to implement at module or programme level. It is a template that may also be adopted in other schools and departments. One suggestion is to pilot the hybrid assessment in one core subject at each programme level. An opportunity for further research is to trace student marks on the hybrid assessment to performance on summative assessment. Tracking student performance in this way as they progress to subsequent levels would make for a worthwhile future research project.

In my view, it would be useful to offer this innovative activity as early as the first-year of an undergraduate degree with a view to encouraging students to participate in formative activities in future such as tutorial preparation and assessments, engage with the University assessment criteria, and to instil greater confidence in students as regards the rigour, usefulness and challenges of formative and summative assessments. I am pleased to learn that colleagues have been inspired by this project and are implementing forms of peer- and self-assessment in other subject areas.

In conclusion, I am pleased to have developed my own repertoire and will continue to make the hybrid assessment available as an assessment strategy for future cohorts of my students and share my good practice (Yorke, 2008).

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