

What do you mean I should think for myself?

Aim of the project

The aim of the project evolved as an investigation into whether peer assessment could be used to improve students' independent learning skills in the lifelong learning sector.

Dimensions of the study

Initially the project involved 65 Level 2 & 3 students, between 16-19 years, studying Business Administration at Colchester Institute. This group consisted of 80% female students and 20% male students. As the project progressed students from the Level 4, first year of the Foundation Degree (FdA), in the same department, were added to the sample. This group consisted of 14 students, including one male. Half of the group had progressed through the administration vocational programme at the college and the other half came from a more traditional academic route via sixth form colleges. Three staff from different centres in the college were also involved, but the main focus was on the students, their experience and views of the peer feedback process.

Summary of main findings

The main findings included:

- Students who took part in the project now take more responsibility for their own learning
- The quality of students' written work improved
- Observations of students showed a significant difference between those who had used peer feedback over a period of two years and those who had not, in their ability to think independently
- Lower attaining students found it more difficult to engage with peer assessment

Background and context

Since joining the teaching profession late in my career, I have been passionate that my students would not have the same

'dull' learning experience that completely switched me off from education. I wanted my students to be willing to learn, not just for qualifications, which of course I wanted them to achieve, but for the knowledge and skills that this would give them in preparation for their future careers. The challenge for me was to keep the learners engaged and focused. The introduction of a new course in 2006 gave me the opportunity to think creatively about using peer assessment to involve students more in the learning process and to stimulate independent learning.

The chance to explore strategies for peer assessment and independent learning and to share ideas and thinking with other practitioners was given to me by a Research Development Fellowship, from the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), with support from the University of Sunderland Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT) and the Institute for Learning (IFL).

Teaching processes and strategies

Level 2 and 3 students used the 'buddy feedback' method and staff on the level 3 programme used a variety of other formative peer assessment interventions throughout the course.

Buddy Feedback with Reflection

The main intervention was a buddy system set up for the assessment of one unit on the business administration course. Each student was allocated two buddies; one buddy was a friend in class and one was not directly in their friendship group. This helped to give a spread of comments, and reduced the likelihood that friends would not be constructive enough in their comments. Students were given a logbook and directed to collect feedback on their work from both buddies and tutors over a 4-6 week period.

Initially the buddies fed back on layout, spelling, grammar and punctuation, as the focus on functional skills is shown to improve students' chances of achieving qualifications. Later they were asked to assess the content against the learning outcomes/criteria of the task set. On completion of tasks buddies were asked to write a 'feedback sandwich' consisting of:

- positive comment;
- constructive criticism (which could cover more than one point); and
- final positive comment.

In the written reflections, at the end of each period, students identified areas for improvement and planned how this might be achieved. They also commented on their perceptions of the process.

Peer Feedback for Presentation Preparation

Peer assessment was used to allow students to practice and prepare for presentations. Students worked with one other person first, then in fours and finally the presentation was given to the

whole group. At each stage the students collected peer feedback to refine their presentations. Using this intervention allowed each student to improve without tutor support, and all completed a ten minute presentation in front of a group.

Peer Feedback on Written Documents

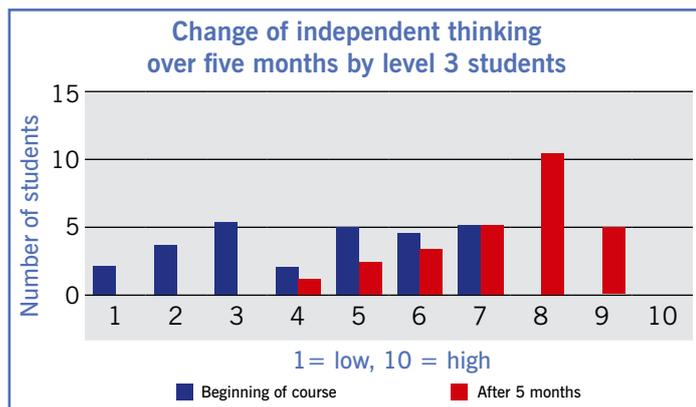
Other written documents were also used for peer assessment, including letters, memos, reports and CVs prepared by the students. Some tasks were marked by peers against an exemplar answer sheet but others were marked against learning outcomes or set criteria. In the case of CVs, students collaboratively created a checklist of requirements before marking their peers' CV. CVs were then improved and marked against an exemplar, given by the tutor, before a final copy was created.

The findings

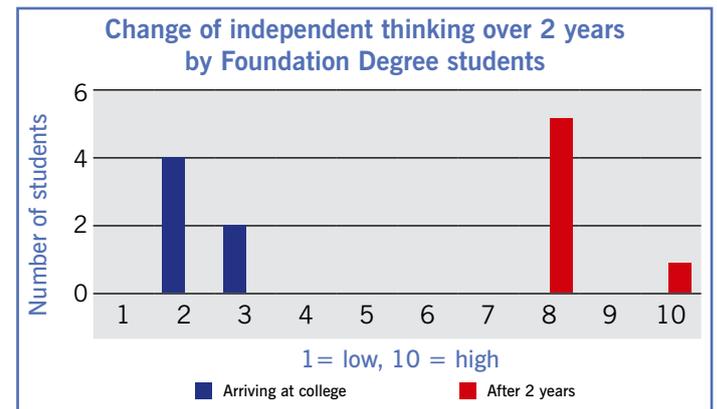
Increased responsibility for learning

Students who took part in the project now take more responsibility for their own learning. Three of the eight level 3 students interviewed in December said when they started giving feedback to their buddies they thought the process was 'a waste of time, pointless and hated it'. With one exception, all thought that peer assessment had made them take more responsibility for the work they created. One said "it brings a challenge to get better" and another agreed that "it makes me check my work more carefully". All agreed that buddy feedback must be constructive (giving them a chance to change or improve something) to be useful. Staff also witnessed a new independence developing.

A class of level 4 Foundation Degree students were also included in the case study. Seven students had come through the level 3 course at the college and had used the buddy feedback system for two years. The other seven had come from sixth form college and had no experience of peer assessment. In the first months of their course I observed that the progressing students showed much more willingness to share ideas, to support one another and to think independently, than those who had arrived from a more 'academic' route from the sixth form college. All the progressing level 3 students felt they were more confident and relied less on help from tutors than they did when they arrived at the college.



A scale of 1-10 was given to 30 level 3 students, who were asked to indicate how much they thought independently at the beginning of the course and after five months, shown in the first chart. The same scale was given to the Foundation Degree students, but over a two year period, and the results are shown in the second chart.



The survey results were reinforced by the findings from focus groups with the level 3 students. These confirmed a growing confidence among the students to engage with peer assessment as a useful tool, both directed by staff and self-directed. One student commented "the longer you do it the more beneficial it is" and another said "it gives us a responsibility". At the end of the discussion each person in the focus group was asked if they thought peer feedback had helped them to become more independent thinkers; seventy eight percent said yes!

Improved attainment

Initially students were not confident using peer assessment but became more so. Three months after the intervention began 74% of the group felt happier using peer feedback and 94% said that it was helping them to improve. Asked how they thought it was helping them, most identified

- It was helping them to see their mistakes
- Giving them new ideas and other opinions
- Making their work improve

Semi-structured interviews were held with the Foundation Degree students who had progressed from the level 3 programme. The buddy feedback process had not been enjoyed by the students when it started, but all commented enthusiastically about how it had helped them. Comments included "my English improved", "It made me improve my work more", "it made me aware of my weaknesses" and "I looked at my work more because of my peers". This was confirmed by tutors who were marking work produced.

Feedback from staff

The experience of staff trying out peer feedback for the first time varied considerably. Their experiences included:

- Lack of communication between staff members meant the peer feedback element of an assessment was ignored where it was introduced and never used
- Lower attaining students found it more difficult to engage with peer feedback
- An IT tutor successfully used peer assessment by getting students to mark each others work against a printed answer sheet.

The three other tutors involved wanted to gain experience of using peer assessment in their classes, but the pressure of running a course and completing all the paperwork required left them little time to prepare and try something new. However all want to continue with using peer assessment in some form and are adapting areas of their programmes to incorporate it.

Research methods

- Structured questionnaires with 65 level 2 and 3 students at the beginning, mid-point and end of the project
- Semi structured interviews with 8 level 3 students from the case study group and with 7 students from the Foundation Degree group
- Observations by the tutor team of level 3 and 4 students
- Focus groups with 34 level 3 students
- Recordings of the student comments from the final reflective reports of the buddy feedback process
- Interviews with staff members who trialled using peer feedback in different ways

Conclusion

Much of the previous research about peer assessment has been in schools or in Higher Education and there is a lack of dedicated research on the topic in post-compulsory education. This Action Research project supports peer assessment as promoting lifelong learning and reducing the reliance of students on tutors in the FE sector. However it is not proven that the improvement in independent thinking skills is entirely due to the use of peer assessment over the period, although evidence from student feedback suggests it is a strong contributing factor.

Complicating factors include:

- Students at different levels and ages
- Different levels of experience of tutors
- Different relationship of tutors with students

The project has given me a unique opportunity to experiment innovatively in my own teaching practice and openings for me to promote this to my colleagues. It has changed my teaching practice as I now continually consider how collaborative learning or peer assessment can be used in teaching sessions. It has made the students who have been involved take more responsibility for their learning. However, as this was quite a small sample group, in one subject area and over a short period of time, further research needs to be undertaken to establish other factors which may be affecting the development of independent thinking skills.

In the end I have more questions than answers:

- What other factors aid the development of independent thinking skills?
- Would the results change in different subject areas?
- Are the results affected by different teaching styles?

In order to answer such questions it will be necessary to do further research, perhaps using a larger sample group, a longer period of study, different subject areas and different interventions.

Whatever else the project has not discovered, it has shown that using peer assessment can allow students to take more control of their learning and to start to develop those independent thinking skills that are needed at university and in the workplace. If you are a teacher reading this I would encourage you to try peer assessment out in your area of study and let me know how you get on...

Suggestions for further reading

Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998) *Inside the black box – Raising Standards through classroom assessment*. London: NFER Nelson

Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (2009) *Developing the theory of formative assessment*. Springer Science + Business Media, LCC

Coffield, F. (2009), *'All you ever wanted to know about learning and teaching but were too cool to ask'*. London: Learning and Skills Network.

Race, P. (2001) *A briefing on self, peer and group assessment*. York: Learning and Teaching Support Network. Available at: <http://www.york.ac.uk>.



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