

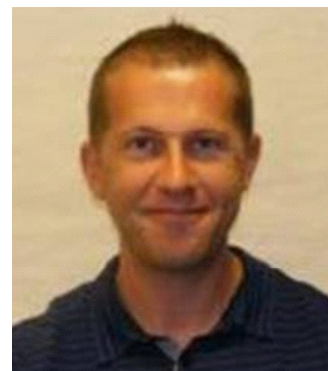
## PRACTITIONER LED RESEARCH

### Tutors find that peer marking can improve essay writing skills

Karen Lancaster teaches A-level sociology at Loughborough College, and Torben Smith teaches A-level chemistry at Bilborough College. Not much common ground there then? Wrong. Both identified the problem of getting learners to write good essays and long answers to questions. So Karen and Torben decided to investigate the impact of peer marking through information learning technology (ILT).

#### How did Karen and Torben conduct their inquiry?

Karen and Torben began their inquiry by designing a questionnaire to find out how their learners currently judged their own ability to write essays and long answers. Responses suggested that although learners felt that they were moderately able to identify a good essay from a bad one, few felt able to produce good essays/answers themselves.



Karen and Torben

With her sociology group, Karen decided to set her experimental and control class (chosen on the basis that they had similar exam results in January 2010) the same homework task every two weeks: to write an essay. Once the experimental group had completed their essays they were scanned and uploaded onto a purpose-designed online workspace that could be used for free through <http://pbworks.com/>. Each essay was marked by four learners in the experimental group. To ensure a-level of standardisation, the teacher marked three to four of the essays each week.

After five months, learners sat another exam and these results were compared with those from their January exam. Following this both classes were asked to complete another anonymous questionnaire.

Torben took a similar approach with his chemistry class although he did not use formal scoring. Instead he asked his learners for their perceptions of the peer marking approach before and after they had completed the activities.

#### What impact did peer marking have on learners' writing?

The peer marking approach proved to have a positive impact on the learners in the sociology experimental group. Their ability to write high-quality essays showed a clear and consistent improvement of ten marks (on average). The approach was particularly effective for those lower ability learners who engaged with the intervention. Compared with the experimental group, the control group showed little or no improvement in their essay writing ability.

When asked how much they enjoyed the new learning method and how useful they had found it, most learners responded positively. One commented: "I liked seeing what was needed on the mark scheme, so I could apply these to my own essays".

The responses collected from the chemistry experimental group showed that many of the learners who used the online peer marking site at least once believed the experience had had a positive affect on their ability to write longer answers. One learner commented: "I think it helped me in realising how much I needed to know when checking other answers".

Although most learners were positive about the new learning method, some were not impressed by it because they viewed marking work to be a teacher's responsibility.

## What were the obstacles?

When Karen and Torben distributed their questionnaire at the beginning of their interventions they discovered that many of their learners were worried about the potential cyber bullying online peer marking might cause. To prevent this from happening and to encourage learner engagement, Karen and Torben issued all learners from their experimental group a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Karen and Torben found that the intervention had more of a positive impact on the sociology learners than the chemistry learners. They ascribed this to two main reasons:

1. The chemistry learners were given the choice to engage with the online peer marking approach whereas it was a compulsory part of the sociology learners' homework. This freedom to choose whether to engage resulted in some of the chemistry learners not taking part in the intervention.
2. Sociology is an essay based subject requiring learners to develop good writing skills to achieve. Chemistry on the other hand is a more non-essay based subject where short answers can suffice. Regardless of this, given the increasing emphasis on longer response answers and more detailed explanations in chemistry exams, learners need to develop skills in this area.

## Cost saving or growing learner independence?

Some students thought they were being asked to do Karen and Torben's job for them. Do you use peer assessment? Do any students think they've been short changed? Share your thoughts on how to respond to this at <http://tinyurl.com/insideevidenceforum>

## Take action

- Karen and Torben found that peer marking was positive for their learners' essay writing skills, plus it reduced their workload. Are there ways you could introduce peer marking or other forms of peer assessment into your teaching? You could use the 'Peer assessment tool' review included in this edition to identify an online tool that could work for you.
- The two colleagues found that some of their learners were not keen on the peer marking approach. Are there ways you could engage your learners more in sharing decisions on changes in approach so they take some of the ownership of the change? This obstacle is also discussed in the 'Practitioner engagement in and/or with research' tool in this edition.

## Evidence source

The full research paper for this project is also available online, and can be viewed at [www.excellencegateway.org.uk/310558](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/310558)