



Using peer formative assessment with social work students

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Course details

Course title: BA Social Work

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Discipline/Subject areas: Social Work, Social Policy

What I did

I introduced formative peer assessment on an essay that would eventually be submitted for summative assessment on a first year social work undergraduate social policy module.

Why I did it

A change in learning and teaching practices at University level required all modules to incorporate an element of formative assessment. I used this opportunity to incorporate peer assessment in this process too as the literature suggests this can also be a powerful trigger for aiding student learning.

My aims were to:

- facilitate the process of peer feedback to enable students to give each other formative feedback on their work to improve the final essay they submitted as their summative work.
- engage students with the feedback process and highlight the importance of giving and receiving feedback in both academic and professional contexts.
- engage students actively in the assessment process and help to 'demystify' the assessment criteria and their application to summative work.
- provide opportunities for students to see each other's work and to take ideas from this in terms of structure, focus, referencing etc.

What I wanted to achieve

To promote students' understanding of the assessment criteria and process in order to enhance their learning and achievement.

A short description of what I did

My colleague and I had 45 students in the group as a whole. We split students into groups of 5 students.

Each group was asked to share their essays and to formatively assess each other's work giving feedback on the programme marking sheet that would be used to summatively assess the submitted essays at the end of the module.

They were then asked to have an on-line discussion in their Home Groups in relation to their feedback.

Prior to the essay exchange we held a two hour workshop to discuss the feedback process with the students. We also provided essays and feedback on the essays from the previous year for students to see and to discuss in groups. Initially, my colleague and I were not intending to be directly involved beyond facilitating the peer assessment process.

Students were keen, however, that we had a more active involvement. We agreed that we would provide feedback on the feedback given in the Home Groups rather than on each individual essay.

Students were asked to comment on how they used their formative feedback to improve their work as part of their summative assessment.

At the end of the module I held a focus group with students to learn more about how they had experienced this process.

What worked well

- Students benefited on the whole from the feedback they received on their work and were able to demonstrate how they had used the feedback to improve their summative submissions.
- Overall, it did appear to give students a clearer understanding of the marking criteria and how it is applied.
- It gave an insight into the standards expected on the programme and allowed such often 'tacit' understandings to be more explicit and open to debate.
- Students appeared to benefit from seeing the work of other students and how 'answers' might be approached in a range of different ways.

Problems and/or issues

- Students experienced considerable anxiety about the initial thought of someone else reading their work and about how others would judge them as a result.
- Students appeared to experience an even higher level of anxiety about reading the work of others, particularly if they thought the work they saw was not academically very good.
- Many groups were reluctant to feedback on-line and so met face to face as a group to give their feedback instead.
- Feedback given was variable across the group – ranging from detailed constructive criticism to very brief comment.
- Although everyone saw the rationale for using the marking sheet, several students commented on the need to spend time in advance 'decoding' the language.

What students thought about it

From reading the reflective accounts of how students used the feedback to improve their summative work, from module evaluations at the end of the semester and from the views expressed in the focus group interview with students, it appears that overall students found the experience to be a very positive one. I noted above some of the problems / issues that arose during the implementation of this process. Overall, however, I think the following quote from a student in the focus group appears to sum up the main feeling from the students' perspectives:

"It was probably – I hate to say this – but probably the most enjoyable and helpful thing this year."

Key messages

- The potential value of peer assessment in enhancing student learning.
- The value of engaging students actively in their assessment process and clarifying academic and professional standards.
- The need to stress full involvement of all students in the process to strive for comprehensive feedback being provided for all.
- The reluctance of the students to discuss feedback on line which needs to be explored further.

Related documents or links

Considerable literature exists in relation to both formative and peer assessment.

A few key texts I have drawn upon are:

Juwah, C. Macfarlane-Dick, D., Matthew, B., Nicol, D., Ross, D and Smith, B. (2004). *Enhancing Student Learning Through Effective Student Feedback*. The Higher Education Academy (Generic Centre). Retrieved April 15 2007 from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/id353_effective_formative_feedback_juwah_et al

Taras, M. (2002). 'Using Assessment for Learning and Learning from Assessment.', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 27 (6), pp. 501-510.

Taras, M. (2005). 'Assessment – Summative and Formative – some theoretical reflections', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53 (3), pp. 466-478.

van den Berg, I. Admiraal, W. and Pilot, A. (2006). 'Student Peer Assessment in Higher Education: Analysis of Written and Oral Peer Feedback', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11 (2), pp. 135-147.

Any other comments

I would be really interested to hear about other colleagues' experiences of using peer and formative assessment with social work students.



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