



“Other students are saying.....”: Harnessing peer feedback for a formative assessment task

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This case study shows how informal peer consultation was turned into structured small peer group presentation and feedback on a formative task. As module tutor I had noticed that students on a first year social work module were relying on information and feedback from other students. Although some came to see me to ask for guidance on their summative assessment task, they would often preface their questions with “Other students are saying.....” and ,when offered guidance, would be reluctant to take it on board, objecting with “But people are saying.....”. Realising that my one-to-one meetings with students were not particularly effective, and were only being taken up by relatively few, I considered ways of developing and using informed peer feedback.

At the same time as I was becoming aware that peer advice was held in such high regard on this module, I was also planning to introduce a formative assessment task. Previous students had been rather daunted by their 3,000 word summative assessment on this module and I wanted to devise a task which would encourage them to undertake some early work on the first section of the final assignment. This early work would focus on a range of viewpoints on social issues and the validity of sources of evidence. The weakest assignments had relied heavily on internet sources of limited relevance and so students needed early feedback on their selection of evidence and their referencing.

The summative assessment entailed the examination of a social issue, the way in which it is portrayed as a ‘social problem’ by government and the policies addressing it. The new formative task required each student to present a source of evidence on each of 5 perspectives on their chosen social issue: a media view, the government view, an academic perspective on underlying causes, a service user perspective and the findings from an independent research project.

Informal oral presentation and structured feedback in small peer groups was chosen as a way of harnessing an approach to learning with which students were comfortable. The students were given a half-day private study period in which to find their five sources, and the subject librarian made herself available on this day. The following week the students worked in groups of three to present their work informally to each other, ask and answer questions and give feedback. Each student had a proforma with guiding questions and they were encouraged to take notes to help them develop their work in progress.

During the peer feedback sessions students exchanged suggestions for relevant service user, research, campaign and government sources and some lively discussion took place. Their feedback indicated that they found this session helpful. The two social work tutors, having set up the peer group sessions for the 50 students, used the time to give written feedback on referencing on all the formative assignments.

The desired outcomes of students making an early start to their reading and, in their summative assessment, drawing on a wider range of viewpoints and appropriate sources were largely achieved. Relevant, up-to-date material was used in most assignments, including in the later section on policies. Students had found a range of service user sources, including individual case studies, member surveys by campaigning organisations and reports by local groups, and some interesting independent research. General referencing was much improved, but the referencing of electronic sources was identified as an area for future development within the formative task.

Most of this module is taught jointly to housing and social work students, but the two groups are assessed entirely separately. Social work student feedback indicates that they would welcome some form of joint assessment. Whilst this is not possible for the summative assessment, it might be possible to devise a joint formative assessment which prepares students for their separate summative assessments. Timetabling constraints led to the private study and peer feedback sessions taking place quite early in the module. It might be more useful to hold them later once the students have more knowledge of available sources of material.

The external examiner commented that this was an innovative assignment which had been appropriately sub-divided into manageable parts. The housing and social work tutors are reviewing the inter-professional learning programme in the light of student feedback so scope for joint work will be considered. The peer feedback guidance will be reviewed to see if it needs to be more, or less, directive, and consideration will also be given to new ways of developing referencing skills.



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