

# Peer Assessment of, for and as Learning: A Core Component of an Accredited Professional Development Course for Higher Education Teachers\*

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## Abstract

A core competence associated with effective teaching in Higher Education is self-awareness and is associated with reflective practice, an active process of learning and teaching development. Through reflection, teachers can gain insight into personal strengths and limitations which consequently can be of benefit when focusing on enhancing the knowledge, skills and dispositions of their learners. This study concerns an accredited programme for the professional development of teachers in Higher Education, developed for both experienced and novice teachers to learn new skills and share existing ideas. The design of the programme ensures that peer assessment and feedback are embedded to support assessment of, for and as learning. This study examines the perceived value of peer assessment and feedback in relation to learning from the perspectives of both learners enrolled on the programme and the academic programme team. Attention is paid to how the use of peer assessment and feedback has impacted on the learning experience of teachers and a conceptual model is proposed as to how peer assessment and feedback can be effectively used as a method of assessment of, for and as learning.

**Keywords:** Assessment in Higher Education; Learning; Teaching; Peer assessment; Peer feedback; Continuous Professional Development in Higher Education

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## 1. Introduction

Mindful of the importance of assessment for students as a key ‘driver’ for learning (Race, 2010: 91) and of detailed and developmental feedback as ‘the single most useful thing we can do for our students’ (Brown, 2009), this chapter considers the perceived value of peer assessment and feedback *of, for* and *as* learning from two perspectives. Firstly, from that of learners undertaking an accredited professional development course for Higher Education teachers and secondly, from the programme design team seeking to create effective assessment strategies to promote learning. Throughout the programme a variety of peer assessment approaches and strategies were adopted – encompassing both formative and summative assessment – with a view to scaffolding learners in developing confidence and competence in peer-assessment activities which had the express aim of developing learners’ abilities to reflect, self-regulate and both give and receive feedback.

This study focuses on learners’ perceptions and experience of peer assessment on our programme. It begins with a discussion centring on theory; specifically, how assessment *of, for* and *as* learning may be understood as well as the context within which the programme was delivered. The design of this study is then outlined and the main findings are highlighted. An examination of the implications of the findings for learners, the programme team and the institution is then presented before overall conclusions are drawn.

## 2. Theoretical Observations: Assessment *of, for* and *as* Learning.

In designing the assessment strategy for this programme we recognised the distinctions that can be identified between assessment *of, for* and *as* learning (c.f. Dann, 2014; Lam, 2015; Gupta, 2016). Briefly, assessment *of* learning (AoL) views assessment as being solely for judging learner achievement for the purposes of accreditation, largely used for assessing summatively through timed examinations. Assessment *for* learning, however, recognises the pedagogical benefits of assessment for promoting student learning: as Lam (2015: 4) points out, the aim of AfL is ‘to *facilitate student learning [...] through alternative assessments including observation, conferences, self- and peer assessment, and portfolios. AfL also serves to provide useful feedback information for students and teachers to improve their learning and instruction, respectively*’. Thus, in adopting an AfL approach, emphasis is placed on designing and embedding assessment practices which seek to promote learning autonomy (Pedder and James, 2012) and the development of skills beyond those which are summatively assessed. While distinctions have been drawn between AoL and AfL since the early 1990s, a recently

designated sub-set of AfL has emerged whereby assessment can be viewed as learning. Assessment as learning (AaL) refers to assessment designed to promote students' ongoing development of cognitive and metacognitive capacity in self-evaluation (Lam, 2015). Dann (2002: 153) explains that '*assessment is not merely an adjunct to teaching and learning but offers a process through which pupil involvement in assessment can feature as part of learning*'. For AaL to be effective, students are required to be guided towards recognising their own learning processes and goals and to be actively involved in the cognitive and metacognitive processes needed to effectively use formative assessment and feedback as key drivers of their learning (Dann, 2014). Embedded within an AaL approach is an active approach to teaching, learning and assessment whereby learners engage in and are formatively assessed on productive learning activities (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004) in which they are required to actively apply, create and present. Consequently, emphasis is placed on what the student does (Biggs, 1999) and learners become '*animators of their own effective teaching learning processes*' (Pedder and James, 2012: 36).

### **3. Context of the Programme.**

This study concerns an accredited professional programme for Higher Education teachers delivered at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Ireland. It is an evening postgraduate programme – comprised of 60 ECTS credits at Level 9 – delivered over two semesters and is aimed at offering professional development opportunities for those teaching in a Higher Education context. There is an increasing recognition of the importance of offering training and development for teachers in HEIs and to professionalise teaching across the Higher Education sector (OECD, 2010; European Science Foundation, 2012; Norton, 2012). The programme aims to develop student teachers' knowledge, skills and dispositions in a variety of key areas, including: theories of learning and teaching, educational assessment, strategies of teaching and learning, technology and learning, coaching, mentoring and philosophy of education, amongst others. Learners also undertake a supervised practicum/placement in the course of the programme, offering supported opportunities to apply and reflect on the use of a variety of teaching, learning and assessment strategies. Applicants to the programme tend to be early-career teachers in a HEI or those who work in administrative functions and are interested in developing their teaching abilities further. The programme was designed for both experienced and novice teachers to learn new skills and share existing ideas.

#### 4. Rationale for the Study.

This study aims to examine the perceived value of peer assessment and feedback *of, for* and *as* learning from the perspectives of both learners undertaking an accredited professional development course for Higher Education teachers and the programme design team. The key drivers in assessment *of, for* and *as* an approach to learning on this programme were peer- and self- assessment, with the explicit intention of developing learners' metacognition and encouraging a deep approach to learning (Brown, 2004). A key design feature of the programme was the inclusion of multiple opportunities for peer-assessment and feedback – as well as self-assessment - throughout all modules, recognising that self-assessment is '*at the heart of widely-commended learning practices of reflection and metacognitive thinking*' (Knight, 2000: 246) and thus supporting an assessment *as* learning approach. Opportunities for formal and informal peer assessment were established from the outset of the programme and existed within all modules. From the perspective of both the learner and the programme team, embedding peer assessment across the programme allowed for additional formative assessment tasks to be introduced and for student learning to be maximised through their active involvement in the learning process (c.f. Gibbs and Jenkins, 1992; Ramsden, 1992; Moore et al., 2007). Higgs and McCarthy (2005: 37) point out that '*students do not internalise and cannot understand nor apply learning, unless they are actively involved in it*'; therefore, the importance of embedding assessment strategies across a programme was recognised (Boud et al., 1999; Knight, 2000) and designing a programme- wide assessment strategy allowed for a '*congruence between assessment practices and the kinds of learning a course aims to promote*' (Boud et al., 1999: 413). This study seeks to identify the impact of peer assessment activities on learners with the aim of considering how peer assessment is perceived by learners and how their experiences can better inform the programme team. Mindful of the importance of continually updating programmes, the outcomes of this study will be used by the programme design team to review the teaching, learning and assessment strategy for all modules.

#### 5. Methodology.

##### 5.1 Design.

To collect data on learners' perceptions of peer assessment a focus group was organised on conclusion of the academic year. A qualitative approach was deemed the most valuable method of gathering learners' perceptions as it allows for an open sharing of ideas and it also

provides the facility to prompt ideas, thoughts and discussions. This was our aim as researchers; a space to allow for conversation and learnings to be shared on the topic of peer assessment. As described previously, each of the modules on the programme integrated opportunities for both formal and informal peer assessment. Formal activities included; voting anonymously on group outputs and the use of rubrics to guide assessment and provide a structure for feedback. Informally, there were opportunities provided for peer assessment to take place which were not based on rubrics, score charts or criteria and in these circumstances discussion and questioning were the primary methods of feedback used. Thus, throughout the programme peer assessments were used predominately as A<sub>f</sub>L and A<sub>a</sub>L. A<sub>f</sub>L included strategies such as group-to-group feedback using rubrics and one-to-one feedback using rubrics to guide the assessment and feedback processes. Strategies for peer A<sub>a</sub>L included one-to-group feedback on ideas and outputs, pair-to-pair review and feedback on approaches and strategies and students were also in hubs (small groups) online to provide feedback to each other on ideas for approaching an assessment task for one particular module on the programme.

## **5.2 Sample.**

All learners who had just completed the programme were contacted and provided with information on the study and invited to volunteer to take part in a one-hour focus group. One member of the research team acted as a coordinator and a point for which interested students could make contact. Six learners who had just completed the course volunteered to attend. The sample group comprised teachers from different disciplines in the College including Early Childhood Education, Psychology and Education, while years of teaching experience ranged from 1 to 4 years across the sample. The group was predominately female (5:1 male) which can be argued is reflective of the disciplines that were represented (Lynch, 2010; UNESCO, 2011). This sample reflected 40% of the total number of students on the programme.

## **6. Findings.**

To gather learners' perceptions, a series of questions were asked during the focus group. To begin, learners were asked to indicate the words and ideas that came to mind when thinking specifically about the term 'peer assessment'. Following this, the learners were asked to share the words and ideas that occurred when thinking specifically about the term 'peer feedback'. These questions were asked to ascertain any perceived links between peer assessment and peer feedback or if participants viewed a distinction between these two assessment

components. 4

Analysis of responses highlighted that with regard to 'peer assessment' four themes were identified and in relation to 'peer feedback' two themes emerged. These themes are highlighted in Table 1 below and are presented in order, based on the strength of the responses.

| Themes for 'peer assessment'   | Themes for 'peer feedback'   |
|--|--|
| Th1: Collaboration.<br>Th2; General assessment characteristics.<br>Th3: Positive outcomes for learner.<br>Th4: Concerns. | Th1: Distrust and tension.<br>Th2: General feedback characteristics. |

Table 1: Themes identified from participant responses to the prompts 'peer assessment' and 'peer feedback'.

Table 1 highlights how the responses to 'peer assessment' generated by the learners were primarily concerned with 'Collaboration'; for instance, learners mentioned terms such as 'team building', 'support' and 'teamwork'. In contrast, most of the responses to 'peer feedback' can be classified under the theme of 'Distrust and Tension' where learners used terms including 'risky', 'collusion' and 'negative competitiveness'. 'Feedback' was closely associated with peer assessment, as was 'learning' and 'self-development', which were identified as only having an association peer assessment. This latter finding is in line with research that suggests peers place greater value in assessment over feedback (Liu and Carless, 2006).

Participants were next invited to comment on the value peer assessment and feedback had for them either as learners or as teachers. Three main responses emerged: the first centred on the provision of multiple opportunities to engage in peer assessment and feedback tasks, to allow confidence in giving and receiving feedback to develop. This can be regarded as assessment for learning and was described by one learner as 'a life skill', while another reported:

*'It takes time to learn the language and be clear on the message and have the confidence to deliver the feedback.'*

Learners were in consensus that the more practice and engagement they had with these types of tasks the more enhanced their skills in assessment and feedback became. The second response focused on the importance of scaffolding learners through the process of peer assessment. Specifically, it was recommended that peer assessment and feedback

practices should follow an incremental trajectory. Strategies such as moving from self-assessment to peer-assessment or from conducting peer assessment and feedback as a group initially, would support learners and enable them to more effectively participate in individual peer assessment and feedback processes.

The final point made by the learners concerned the use of tools, specifically, the efficacy of rubrics for the development of confidence in assessing peers (as a teacher) and to enhance the development of skills and knowledge (as a student). There was consensus in the group that using structured rubrics with clearly defined criteria during the initial stages of peer assessment and in the feedback process aided learning and skill enhancement. It was reported by one learner that:

*'...the use of rubrics enhanced the credibility of the feedback being received, as the learner was fully aware of the criteria that judgements were being made against.'*

Learners also reported that the use of tools, such as rubrics supported dialogue between peers, which helped to build confidence, lessen distrust and strengthen self-reflection.

Participants were asked to share their views on the components which they deem necessary for effective peer assessment and feedback to take place. Responses were categorised into three themes; emotional, practical and physical. Emotional responses focused on the qualities of individuals which include the following: *'openness'*, *'confidence'*, *'trust'*, *'ability to express oneself'* and *'an ability to self-assess'*. The practical ideas focused on *'having ground rules'*, *'guided conversations on peer assessment'* and *'formal frameworks to help peers engage in the process and understand the value of feedback'*. *'Time'* was also considered necessary, as assessing and giving feedback to peers is a skill that will be enhanced through practice, feedback and reflection. Physical conditions were concerned with the actual learning environment, as one of the learners stated that *'all barriers need to be removed'*. These barriers were described as anything that negatively impacts group dynamic or communication. The ideal environment, according to the learners has *'space for movement'* and *'face-to-face communication'*. The space must *'feel safe'* and *'comfortable'* for learners and facilitators should ensure an *'atmosphere of equality'* and *'inclusion'* exists.

Finally, learners were asked if peer assessment should have been part of the summative assessment strategy for the modules on the programme (i.e. AoL). Just over half of the group responded positively to the suggestion of using peers to formally grade summative assessments, or a component thereof. Reasons offered in support focused on the value that this exercise would have on personal learning and the development of skills, not only skills relating to assessment, but also critical thinking skills including self-regulation and self-

reflection. However, reports of '*...fear of inconsistency in marking*' and '*...an assumption that grades would be challenged more as a result of being assessed by a peer rather than course lecturer*' were offered by other group members as counter-arguments to this suggestion. These latter responses reflect the theme of distrust and tension of peer assessment and feedback earlier identified.

## **7. Implications And Discussion.**

### **7.1 Implications for learners.**

This study suggests a number of implications for learners studying towards an accredited postgraduate teacher training programme for Higher Education teachers. In many contexts, giving and receiving feedback is a challenging task and this point was stated clearly by the learners in this study. By including multiple opportunities for learners to engage in peer assessment tasks which focused on assessment *for* and *as* learning, learners reported a belief that a range of critical thinking skills and dispositions were enhanced. These skills included evaluation, communication and self-reflection. Higher cognitive skills is more readily associated with tasks that focus on AaL, which is '*...characterised by students reflecting on their own learning and making adjustments so that they achieve deeper understanding*' (WNCP, 2006: 41). The provision of peer assessment opportunities also develops learners' ability to assess effectively as well as their ability to give and receive peer feedback.

It should be noted that the findings mentioned have implications for the student teachers in two ways: both the student teacher as a learner, and the student teacher as a practicing professional. Learners noted a tension between this dual identity and throughout the focus group spoke of themselves in their capacity as both learner and teacher. Consequently, the implementation of peer assessment and feedback activities must be considered from both points of view.

### **7.2 Implications for Programme Design Team.**

The realisation that assessment and feedback are not necessarily innate skills for learners is an important consideration for programme design teams. Consequently, time, practice and effective facilitator feedback are crucial for the development of these skills. Programme design teams need to ensure that a strategic and targeted approach be taken to allow for knowledge, skills and dispositions to be developed over time. Therefore, peer assessment should be introduced to learners from an early stage in a programme and followed up with multiple



scheduled peer assessment opportunities. Peer assessment tasks may also be considered once learners have displayed a level of competence and confidence in self-assessment. Based on the results of this study a conceptual model (see Figure 1 below) has been developed which suggests how learners might be scaffolded through a process of self- and peer assessment *for* learning to peer assessment *as* learning, which reflects the transition from lower order to higher order thinking.

The model suggests that learners should firstly become comfortable engaging in self-assessment tasks, which should incorporate a form of feedback from a more competent other. From here, self-assessment and peer-assessment should commence to allow the learner to understand how elements of assessment and feedback may be perceived differently by a peer. This can allow for dialogue and a deepening of understanding. Following this, group-to-group peer assessment and feedback is encouraged, as this can enhance confidence in judgement and communication of feedback. From this point one-to-one and one-to-group peer assessment and feedback can commence. It can be argued that for a learner, this trajectory also mirrors the move from assessment *for* learning to assessment *as* learning. The ongoing emphasis on self- reflection is an important cognitive aspect that should be focused on throughout this developmental process. It is anticipated that self-reflection will also develop over time, once it is actively encouraged, practiced and facilitated. Assessment *of* learning can also be incorporated once the learner has the skills and confidence to assess peers and provide feedback on summative learner achievement.

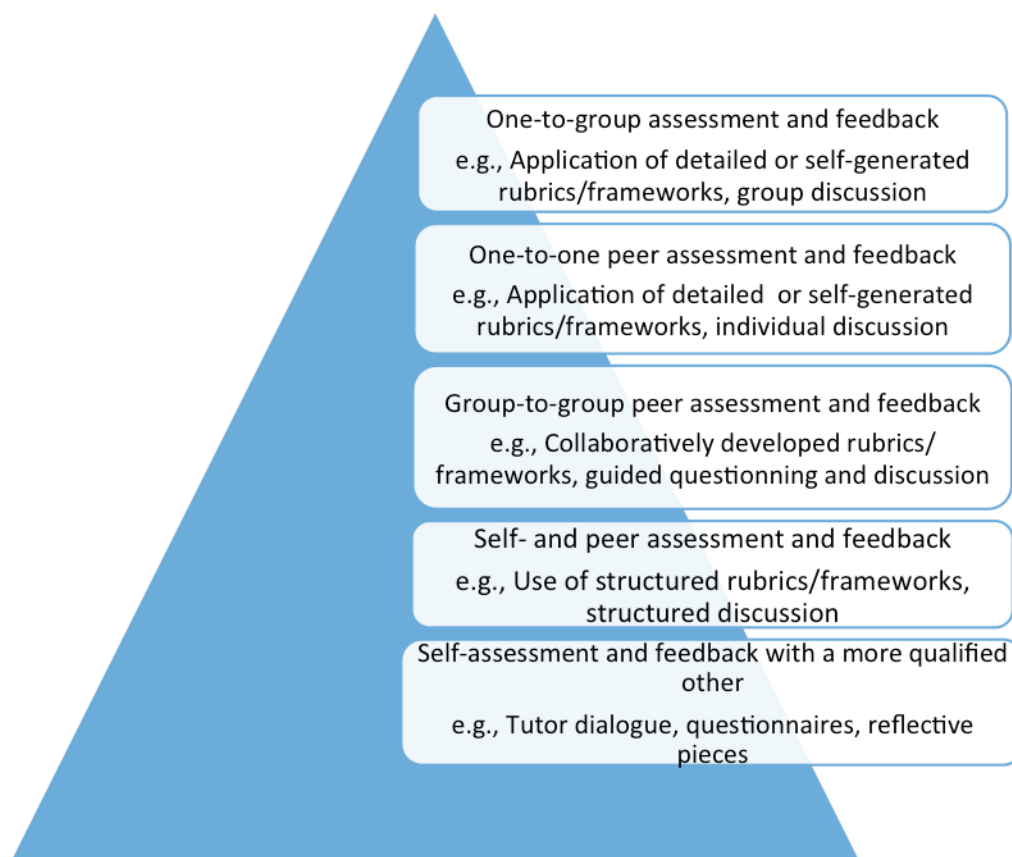


Figure 1: Model of the incremental trajectory for building confidence and competence in peer assessment and feedback.

We argue that a developmental approach is required whereby learners participate in “low stakes” peer assessment exercises which allow them to develop their abilities, using processes that support incremental skill development.

It is of critical importance that the programme design team recognise the somewhat dual role of learners undertaking professional development programmes for Higher Education teachers. While they may be practicing teachers, or looking to move into roles that involve more teaching activities, when participating in assessment activities they very much self-identify as learners. There are tensions very clearly emerging from this dual identity, which led to learners articulating low self-confidence in their ability to assess, a sense of distrust among peers and concerns related to fairness and fear also emerged during the focus group.

While peer assessment was only used formatively on this programme – and there were no marks attributed to the process *per se* – some learners nonetheless noted a lack of confidence in the ability of both themselves and their classmates to accurately and fairly apply assessment rubrics. From these discussions, a key learning for the programme team

emerged: should peer assessment be used for the purposes of summative assessment, a high level of competence and rigour is required for learners to have confidence in the assessment process. Nonetheless, peer assessment activities offer significant opportunities for learners to actively engage in self-monitoring or self-regulating their own learning and thus have the potential to enhance a professional development programme for Higher Education teachers.

### **7.3 Implications for institutions.**

Such shifts in conceptualising assessment require a reconsideration by both teachers and students of traditional roles and related conventions regarding 'how teachers teach and students learn' (Marshall and Drummon, 2006). Indeed, the transformation of learner and teacher roles and relationships has been viewed as a 'necessary condition' for building AfL or AaL into a classroom culture, requiring a challenge of existing conditions of trust and norms of participation (Pedder and James, 2012). A more significant consideration of this point is that peer assessment and feedback was not viewed as an innate skill, instead it was viewed in part, with distrust and tension. At an institutional level there are many voices criticizing the contained environment the mindset that teaching is in essence a 'private activity'. Our research suggests that institutions have a responsibility to change this mindset in ways that were outlined by the learners in this study; by providing a safe, comfortable place for learners and teachers to develop, removing all barriers that can infringe on positive group dynamic through the enhancement of collaboration and communication and providing an environment of equality and inclusion. From this study it can be argued that the necessary components for effective peer assessment and feedback at a class level, if applied at an institutional level, may also result in learning and development of teaching staff.

## **8. Conclusion.**

The choice in assessments *of, for* and *as* learning that are available to educators is now vast and intriguing, given the focus that has been placed on assessment innovation over the past two decades. However, over that time the central tenet of sound assessment has not changed, that is; assessment must be fit for purpose. The research into our use of peer assessment on our programme provided a strong reminder of the misassumption that all teachers have confidence in their abilities to assess and give feedback to peers. Instead we discovered that teachers, like learners wish to develop these skills in a safe, trusted and supported environment. Our model is proposed to support incremental development of

knowledge, skills and dispositions to peer assessment over the course of a programme. The use of such an approach should benefit as participants on the programme as learners and in their professional practice as well as helping to build knowledge within and across institution on sound assessment practices.

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