

# ***Perspectives on Translating Higher Education Peer Feedback Approaches into Schools.***

Emilia Restiglian

**University of Padova**

## **Abstract**

With the aim of understanding whether the peer review processes and the implementation of the specific peer review model (Grion, Serbati, Nicol & Tino, 2017) have learning benefits in primary and secondary schools as well as in higher education, a group of researchers and practitioners carried out a research study in several Italian schools. The peer review model was implemented as a multi-case exploratory study in twelve classes. Eleven teachers and more than 200 students were involved. Pupils were asked to review their classmates' products according to established criteria facilitated by teachers and to provide each other with feedback. Teachers' written narratives and interviews, as well as students' products and responses to three questionnaires were collected and analysed. Results so far show that teachers appreciated the peer review model as a valid instrument for making students active in their learning, thereby becoming more reflective in approaching their assignments and as a result, activating processes of self-assessment among their pupils (as suggested also by Harris & Brown, 2013). Their perceptions confirm the possibility of obtaining significant results also in school contexts.

**Keywords:** Formative assessment, peer feedback, peer review, school education.

## **1. Background and Context.**

A research study about peer feedback and peer review in some Italian primary and secondary schools is presented here. The article focuses on the research overview.

The Italian education system is organised into two cycles:

The *first cycle* lasting 8 years (primary education, 5 years, for children between 6 and 11 years of age and lower secondary school (3 years, for children between 11 and 14 years of age);

The *second cycle* lasting 5 years (for students from 14 to 19 years of age). Education is compulsory for ten years between the ages of 6 and 16. For assessment purposes, the school year is generally divided into three-month or four-month terms, as established by each school.

In the primary and secondary school, periodic assessment takes place at the end of each term. At these times, and at the end of the school year, pupils receive a personal assessment document which includes their marks in numbers for each subject (from 0 to 10, where a mark of 6 corresponds to a pass). The incremental and final evaluation of the pupils in a class is the responsibility of the teachers of that class. Evaluation focuses on the learning process of pupils, their behaviour and their overall learning outcomes. These assessments are expected to be consistent with the learning objectives established in the educational offer plan (PTOF) of each school, which, in turn, must be consistent with the general and educational objectives of the different branches and levels of study established at national level.

The comprehensive national assessment of the Italian school system “*provides broad national diagnostics and tests the performance of students in multiple subjects and grade levels in all Italian schools*” and test results should be converted “*into meaningful feedback that can help improve teaching and learning*” (Schleicher, 2019). National guidelines on the other hand point out the teachers’ responsibility concerning assessment tools and the importance of supporting accompany and progress the students’ educational path. No more indications are given. The criteria are established by each school, for example the number of written or oral tests (especially in the secondary school), but most practices remain traditional.

In most secondary classes students usually work individually, silently and pay attention to the teacher’s lesson. Not many teachers allow “participative-interactive lessons”. Then students are expected to undertake much homework at home with the main aim being to repeat concepts or to apply knowledge. Only in technical and vocational institutes and in three and four-year vocational training courses is students’ work more flexible and linked to practice. Assessment is thus the mirror of daily school life. Most of the written and oral tests require students to repeat or to apply information. This traditional assessment approach using a summative judgment leads to formal certification. The teacher decides marks while students are passive recipients of those judgments: assessment in this context is seen as identical with marking. In many cases it seems

as if students only go to school to get marks, tending not to be interested in assessment because “it’s not their task”. It hasn’t to date been a matter of discussion as a means of developing students’ performance and learning.

Practices using alternative and authentic assessment (e.g. teachers who work with self and peer assessment) are rare but the number is increasing. More and more teachers are attending specific courses trying, with some difficulties, to give students new tools and good chances to learn differently.

To enhance learning and to develop formative assessment in schools, a group composed of university researchers and teachers from primary and secondary schools was established towards the end of 2017. The research group’s first meeting was scheduled for December 2017 with four more meetings following during the year (February, May, June and December 2018), as part of the research process. A large number of teachers was invited to the first meeting because the university teachers wanted to involve as many school-teachers as possible. Group members work actively for a school renewal, undertaking research, conducting service teachers’ courses and working daily with primary and secondary pupils trying to innovate in teaching, learning and assessment practices. Four teachers had already worked with the researchers involved as leaders of some evaluation workshops for pre-service secondary teachers, three teachers are involved in the primary teaching degree students’ internships, while it was the first experience for four of the teachers in the group.

### **1.1. The research group.**

The group is named GRiFoVA: Education and Research Group for Assessment and Learning. The group attempted to apply learning from using formative assessment with university students to peer review practices with school children. The group considered it interesting to try to apply some comparable peer feedback practices used at the University of Padova (Italy) in schools, because of potential positive achievements in students’ learning (Grion et al., 2017; Grion & Tino, 2018). The research group members were aware of difficulties of translating the model implemented in HE into the school world, but they thought it would be valuable to identify some possible adaptations, sustainability conditions, strengths and weaknesses.

During the first meeting, the peer review model was presented, and teachers were invited to decide what kinds of task would be of value to their students, taking into consideration elements such as number of students, their ages, timing within the academic year and so on. From the beginning, School Principals were informed about the research through a specific document which described the research process in order to gain their approval. In fact, it is clear that Principals play an important role in the success and improvement of schools, particularly in terms of motivation and engagement (Fernet, 2011), so this engagement with the research was essential.

A platform was established using the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment to aid communication within the research group and to become a repository for various materials, e.g. national and international published papers and articles about peer review and peer feedback, as well as providing a forum to support the communication between colleagues and offering repositories to gather materials produced by students.

## **2. The Research.**

### **2.1 Aims.**

The research took place in the first part of 2018 (February-May) aiming to explore these questions:

- How can the Higher Education (HE) model of peer review be used in school contexts?
- Does the model have learning benefits in primary and secondary schools, as in higher education?
- Do teachers recognize and use appropriate technologies to support the peer review process?

### **2.2 Methods.**

The research can be defined as a multi-case exploratory study. The peer review model was implemented in twelve classes: six in primary schools, three in lower and three in upper secondary schools and in several subjects, including Italian language, Mathematics, History, and in cross-cutting activities, such as note-taking. Eleven teachers were involved and more than 200 students.

The following data were collected and analysed:

- a) Written narratives of the whole experience by one teacher for each class involved;
- b) Teachers' interviews;
- c) Students' products;
- d) Students' responses to three questionnaires submitted at different phases of the peer review process.

### *2.2.1 Written narratives.*

Teachers were asked to gather information on a specific module divided into two parts (*written narratives*). The first part allowed teachers to outline the class experience, describing the work context and the proposed activities, while the second provided opportunities to gather teachers' observations and notes about the educational approach (for example, meaningful events, possible changes and adaptations, and so on), as well as from a metacognitive point of view, some difficulties encountered, discoveries made and unforeseen events experienced. These findings were discussed in the research group meetings through a peer review process in order to collate outcomes and indicate ways in which to improve future work in the area.

### *2.2.2 Teachers' interviews.*

The eleven teachers involved were asked to engage in a brief *interview* aimed at understanding their motivation for participating in the research, their formative needs, the role of assessment in their class activity and any difficulties encountered with the outcomes presented below.

### *2.2.3 Questionnaires.*

Three questionnaires were administered to the students and were constructed by the teachers starting from some exemplars of the approaches used in Higher Education (Grion et al., 2017). The aim was to adapt the exemplars for school students while maintaining their efficacy. In the event, teachers were allowed to change the statements in order for these to be clearly understood by their own students. In fact, questionnaires proved to be particularly important to encourage students to reflect upon their learning processes.

The first questionnaire was administered after the student had given his/her feedback to the peers (e.g. What did you learn by analysing you peers' work? How did the review help the reflection on your task? How did you work on the review? What did you do to implement the

review process?), the second was undertaken after the student had reviewed his/her task but before they had read their own (e.g. What were you thinking while reviewing your peer's work? What did you change in your own work as a result?) and the third after the second review of their own tasks (e.g. What do you now think is more important: giving feedback or receiving feedback? How did you work to improve your work in consequence?).

### **3. Key findings**

Some of the teachers were very curious about the new tools presented concerning participatory methodologies and activities designed to involve pupils in their own learning. Others were looking for finding a new assessment approach to focus on the key characteristics of each pupil's learning rather than just on the final product, since students are too often focused on their marks, leading them to be passive rather than active and critical about their assignments. Assessment tools should therefore be built together so that students can understand their mistakes and work towards better results.

The research approach enabled students to change their attitudes towards assessment by improving their skills in reflecting and reviewing their tasks, thereby co-creating the assignment without waiting for the teacher's mark. They undertook the work seriously, focusing on doing good work rather than just completing a task to be marked. Thus, they became able to see the assignment as a good starting point for learning, rather than the final destination. For that reason, the most important function of the task became the development of self-awareness through active learning processes.

Teachers underlined how they saw that this kind of assessment could become an investment for the future because it fosters skills and competences that are useful for life. They found the approach interesting but acknowledged that it takes time to do such activities well with students and this approach is something to be developed iteratively over time. Teachers became aware that with this model they become both tutors and learning facilitators who support the students' centrality in the process. For many this was a new approach, that they needed time to digest and implement.

## 4. Conclusions.

As indicated earlier, this is the beginning of an innovative process for us that we are developing further. To date, only the narratives of teachers' experiences and the teachers' interviews have been analysed. Results so far show that teachers appreciated the peer review model as a valid instrument for making students active in their learning, thereby becoming more reflective in approaching their assignments and as a result, activating processes of self-assessment among their pupils (as proposed also by Harris & Brown, 2013). Their perceptions confirm the possibility of obtaining significant results also in school contexts. However, teachers also indicated some critical points and areas for consideration, in particular around:

*Anonymity:* they were concerned that students might feel uncomfortable being evaluated by peers (Vanderhoven, et al., 2012) if they are not used to this approach;

*Long-term commitment:* they suggested that Italian primary students need more time to understand the significance and process of peer review than secondary students. Therefore, on this basis they considered that implementation of peer review may take considerable time to be effective;

*Training:* Unlike outcomes demonstrated in previous research (Tsivitanidou, Zacharia, & Hovardas, 2011), it seems from the teachers' experiences that training is needed for students - in particular for those academically struggling - to create and apply criteria effectively, as reported in similar findings (e.g. Rotsaert, Panadero, & Schellens, 2018). Our initial results indicate that pupils need support to engage with peer assessment effectively, most particularly in primary schools.

In conclusion, what we can assume from our research is that the peer feedback model used here can offer both opportunities and challenges in making peer assessment valuable, achieving a balance with the traditional teacher's assessment responsibility. We considered that comparison, reflection, review, further reflection and further review of one's own product are the strengths of the peer feedback model to improve students' learning.

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