Who Provides the Feedback - Self and Peer Assessment?

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Introduction

The FAST Project is underpinned by a set of 11 conditions, whereby assessment supports the learning process (Gibbs and Simpson 2004). Conditions 5 - 11 emphasise the importance of feedback in the learning process. Initial research carried out for the FAST Project in 2003 indicated a lack of appreciation by students on Science modules at SHU and the OU, of the different forms of feedback available to them. Students overwhelmingly perceived feedback as written comments on returned work and any other form of feedback, such as oral feedback, as "teaching" or "help" (Glover 2004). This prompted the production of the Sheffield Hallam University Questionnaire (SHUQ) which allowed a clearer insight into student perception of feedback and its usefulness (Hills and Glover, 2006). Guidelines for providing feedback have been outlined by QAA (2004) which stress the effective use of feedback, its reference to assessment criteria and the role of oral feedback; and by authors such as Hughes (in Glover 2004).

The provision of feedback should be a three-way process, viz. staff to students, students to staff, and student to student. Powney and Hall (1998) examined the impact of student feedback to staff on subsequent changes to the learning environment and this has also been a major outcome of the FAST Project, involving the AEQ, the SHUQ, structured interviews and other tools to obtain feedback from students.

Earlier FAST surveys (see www.open.ac.uk/fast) worryingly indicated that, on some science modules at SHU and the OU, few of the 11 conditions were being satisfied. Students told us that feedback was not being returned quickly enough to be useful (conditions 6, 10 and 11) and this was attributed by staff to high student numbers, pressures on staff and to some over-assessment at SHU. Predominantly, in the learning process, feedback was from staff to students, with little feedback being provided on assessed work by the students themselves - either in the form of self-assessment or as peer-assessment.

Self and Peer Assessment as an integral part of the learning process

Gibbs et al. (2003) outline examples of assessment tactics that have the potential to meet the 11 conditions above including the use of self and peer assessment. Involving the student in self-assessment develops a culture of reflection and critical analysis not only of their own work but also of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria involved in their learning process. Boud (1991) defines self-assessment as the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work, and making judgements about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards. The promotion of work skills, autonomy, self-directed and lifelong learning was deemed to be an essential part of this process (Boud and Falchikov 1989, Falchikov and Boud 1989, Boud 1994, Boud 1995, Butter and Winne 1995, Black and William 1998, Boud 2000, Black and Harrison 2001, Race 2001, Sluijsmans et al. 2001).
Peer assessment, or the involvement of students in judging each other's work either formatively or summatively, can play an important part in a student's learning experience through provision of immediate feedback (Falchikov 1994, 1995; Race 2001, Hall 2006, Mills and Glover 2006). In a seminal meta-analysis of studies on peer assessment, Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) found definite evidence of agreement, on average, between peer marks and teacher marks. They go on to say that a combination of a high quality study, an academic task and a global judgement based on consideration of several dimensions or criteria would appear to lead to the highest correlation between peers and teachers.

Preparing students well is also emphasised by these and other studies (Wilson 2002, Orsmond et al. 2002, Mills and Glover 2006) that emphasise the value of training students in the underlying pedagogy and producing clear and understandable assessment criteria (Brown 2001). The vagueness of using simple scoring criteria has been criticised by Miller (2003) who argues for increasing the specificity of the scoring criteria by increasing their number and targeting them at very discrete areas of student performance. Orsmond et al. (2002) involved the use of exemplars to overcome students' difficulties in contextualising tutor's comments and found they formed a focus for more meaningful formative feedback.

Areas for criticism which may arise are outlined by Race (2001) and include the student knowledge base, expert witness feedback, reliability issues and unconvinced external examiners. These areas have been some of the main causes of reluctance amongst staff to hand over responsibility for assessment to students. However, earlier research by Stefani (1994) and the work of Falchikov (2000) demonstrated that peer assessment can be as reliable as that of lecturers and led to a higher degree of student motivation; this was also observed in the study by Mills and Glover (2006). Stefani's work also goes some way to dispel fears that high achievers mark themselves down and lower achievers award themselves higher marks. The deeper learning achieved by students who engage in peer and self assessment has been shown to improve subsequent assessment performance (Race 2001, Coleman 2006, Mills and Glover 2006, Oduyemi 2006).

Whilst there is no doubt that staff involvement can be high initially and careful planning is needed, long-term benefits in terms of a saving in staff time, including marking time (which can effectively be reduced to zero) can accrue (Mills and Glover 2006). Above all, the students' active involvement in assessment can be an essential part of their learning process. Peer assessment enables assessment for learning, as well as assessment of learning, offering benefits to staff and students alike, and contributing towards a holistic approach to enhancing the student learning experience.

References


Hall, A (2006) - Level 5 DNA Technology Module (see Case Studies section of www.open.ac.uk/fast)

Hills and Glover (2006) - How to understand your own practice: quantitative and qualitative methods (see Commentary Articles section of www.open.ac.uk/fast)


Mills, J and Glover, C (2006) Using assessment within course structure to drive student engagement with the learning process (see Case Studies section of www.open.ac.uk/fast)


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