Peer Assessment in Higher Education: The Roadmap for Developing Employability Skills in Potential Job Seekers

By

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Abstract

The focus of the study was on the assessment of students’ attitudes towards both being assessed by and assessing other students’ work. Concerns about graduate employment issues, the world over, suggest that employers are concerned by the lack of employability skills exhibited by entry-level job applicants. It is also suggested that employers consider it the responsibility of higher education institutions to develop and sharpen such skills. The current study seeks to identify peer assessment as a potential strategy for developing employability skills and aims to examine, from a students’ perspective, the process of introducing peer assessment into higher education teaching programmes. Data were gathered from a sample of undergraduate students following a semi-structured interview. The study found that students expressed a positive attitude towards peer assessment but had concerns relating to their capability to assess peers and to the responsibility associated with assessing peers. Students felt that peer assessment would raise standards in higher education and equip graduates with the needed employability skills. The study recommends that peer assessment should be adopted as regular practice on undergraduate programmes wishing to equip students with a complete repertoire of employment-relevant skills.

Keywords: peer assessment; higher education; employability skills; teaching programmes

1. Background

Higher education is characterised as having “an unfulfilled agenda” if it lacks peer assessment in its practices (Stauffer as cited in Koslowski, 2006). Higher education has to do with teaching, learning, and knowledge (Birnbaum (2000) that equip students with employability skills and these can be instilled through peer assessment. The assessment movement, an explicit outcome of quality thinking, whose goals it would seem, have been inadequately communicated and/or understood throughout higher education, (Koslowski, 2005) can be used to develop employability skills among undergraduate students in higher education. Assessment is viewed as providing an opportunity for individuals and workgroups to step back from daily activities and reflect on their learners and organisation in terms of strengths and areas for improvement (Ruben, 2005a; Pool, 2000; Schraeder, 2004). This process is also useful in creating a common language and analytic framework, establishing improvement priorities, and providing a foundation and impetus for effective strategic planning and organizational change (Ruben, Russ, Smulowitz, and Connaughton, 2007). It is generally accepted that a programme of assessment which incorporates an element of peer assessment, in some form, is beneficial to learning (Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000). Specific benefits cited includes, (Cassidy 2006, p. 509):

- increased student responsibility and autonomy;
- evaluative skill development;
- insight into assessment procedures and expectations for high quality work;
students work harder with the knowledge that they will be assessed by their peers;

- potential for providing increased levels of feedback without increasing demands on tutors (Walker, 2001); and

- encourages deep rather than surface learning (Brown et al., 1994).

Peer assessment has been gaining significant ground as a means of fostering an environment of accountability and responsibility for group projects in higher education (Neus, 2011). There is an increasing amount of attention being given in higher education to the concept of peer assessment, which can be understood as an educational arrangement in which students assess the quality of their fellow students’ work and provide each other with feedback. This development is in line with other recent developments in university teaching, such as collaborative learning and writing, and real-life task performance (Van Weert & Pilot, as cited in Berg, Admiraal and Pilot, 2006). Studies on peer assessment in higher education have shown positive effects on students’ writing skills. Students learn from assessing and commenting on the writings of peers (Topping as cited in Berg, Admiraal and Pilot, 2006).

Boud (1999) also highlights the particular potential that peer learning and assessment has for helping meet both the goals of “new” undergraduate courses, which emphasise more generic learning outcomes, and the demands of graduate employers, that graduates present with a “… broader range of skills and are able to communicate beyond their specialisation” (Boud, 1999, p. 415). In addition, Boud notes that those skills which develop through peer learning and assessment are also relevant to the cultivation of lifelong learning, which Maher and Neild (2005) identify as a highly valued attribute for maximising graduate employability.

There is also evidence which suggests that students often fail fully to understand or utilise assessment criteria, do not know what a good or bad piece of work looks like, are focused towards the awarded mark or grade and, as such, fail to read, understand or adequately process tutors’ feedback or act upon it (Cre’me and Lea, 1997; Ding, 1998; Glover and Brown, 2006; Hounsell, 1987; Lea and Street, 1998; Wotjas, 1998). This is further reason for the inclusion of peer assessment given its reputed benefits in terms of skill development and improved learning and performance on assessed work (Brown et al., 1994). Despite such compelling justification and some evidence of increasing implementation, it is suggested that many undergraduate courses are still failing to fully incorporate peer assessment for either formative or summative assessment. The reason for this is likely to be due, in part at least, to reports that the introduction and successful implementation of peer assessment is notoriously problematic, particularly in terms of concerns regarding reliability and validity and resistance from students. Studies examining peer and self-assessment have raised issues relating to the reliability of marks, the potential for group and gender bias and acceptance by students (Boud and Falchikov, 1989; Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000). The current study seeks to identify peer assessment as a potential strategy for developing employability skills and aims to examine, from a students’ perspective, the process of introducing peer assessment into higher education teaching programmes. Reports from various studies suggest that while students welcome peer assessment in some form, they are uncomfortable taking on the responsibility of assessment (Walker, 2001).

2. Conceptual framework: Peer assessment

Topping (1998, p. 250) defines peer assessment as “an agreement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality, or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status.” Similarly, Van Den Berg, Admiraal and Pilot (2006, p. 19) propose that “student assessment is
Peer Assessment is to be understood as an educational arrangement in which students assess the quality of their fellow students’ work and provide one another with feedback (Dochy et al. 1999). The main thrust of peer assessment seems to be creating shared educational spaces for university students that can be either physical or virtual in character, and in which the students, among other activities, can engage in communication with each other; discuss course-related issues; help each other in order to deepen their understandings; and facilitate learning processes (Scott et al, 2009). Peer assessment can be understood as a type of collaborative learning (Falchikovas cited in Berg, Admiraal and Pilot, 2006) but is more limited. It simply means that students assess each other’s work using relevant criteria, and give feedback, not only for the benefits of the receiver but also for the purpose of their own development.

3. Employability

Employability refers to a person’s capability of acquiring employment, maintaining employment, and obtaining new employment if required. For individuals, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes an individual possesses, the way they use those assets to present themselves to employers or for self-employment, and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work (Pigozzi, 2010, p. 262).

4. Literature

In the literature relating to student learning in higher education (HE), there is general agreement on the crucial role of assessment (Chetwynd and Dobbyn, 2011). Assessment helps to improve the skills students require for employability purposes in various jobs in the market. The skills learned by students during their academic career can be placed into the two broad skill categories of technical and non-technical. Technical skills refer to subject-specific or content-specific knowledge and competence relevant to, or within, a particular discipline such as information technology or psychology. Technical skills then are those skills necessary for competent functioning within a particular discipline, while non-technical skills are those skills which can be deemed relevant across many different jobs or professions:

- Employability Skills are not job specific, but are skills which cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs from entry level to chief executive officer (Sherer and Eadie, 1987, p. 16).

Because of their relevance to professional functioning, non-technical skills are commonly referred to as employability skills and include basic skills such as oral communication, reading, writing and arithmetic, higher order skills such as learning skills and strategies, problem solving, decision making, and affective skills and traits such as dependability and responsibility, a positive attitude, interpersonal skills (cooperation, team work), self-discipline and self-management and ability to work without supervision (Cotton, 2001). Cotton (2001) reports that the literature surrounding employability indicates that whilst employers may be satisfied in general with the level of technical skills of new graduates, they are not convinced by their competency in non-technical abilities or employability skills. In her extensive review of key issues in employability, Cotton (2001) found that employers want employees to possess employability skills; that employers value generic employability skills over specific occupational (technical) skills; and that employers consider many entry-level job applications to lack the required employability skills and express deep concerns regarding this deficiency. It is a fair conclusion then that those skills bracketed within the term “employability skills” are fast becoming a requirement for employment rather than desirable, and that employers see the responsibility for the development of
such skills lying with educational institutions. With this in mind, and given that a primary aim of many undergraduate, if not all, programmes is employability, then course development, delivery and assessment should include the development of employability skills as a major focus.

There are a number of factors reported in the literature that might contribute to the successful teaching of employability skills. These include instructional method, teacher attributes, the inclusion of skill acquisition as an explicit learning goal, student involvement and activity, relevant context and student responsibility and autonomy. Cotton’s (2001) review of the issue of teaching employability skills demonstrates the need to identify and implement specific educational practices which directly address the issue of employability skill development – which may not be entirely straightforward given the diversity of constraints governing many educational settings.

Student peer assessment is one example of educational practice which is likely to contribute positively towards the development employability skills (Cassidy, 2006). It is described by Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) as involving engaging with standards and criteria in order to make judgements about the work of peers. It is associated with the development of the ability to make judgements, to supervise one’s own work and to encourage responsibility for learning (Gibbs, 1995). As such, the current study considers both the potential of peer assessment for developing skills relevant to employability and the potential problems when introducing it in undergraduate teaching programmes.

5. Results

Communication is a necessary skill for employability
Respondents were of the feeling that by looking at the assignment drafts for their colleagues, they would be able to correct the language, sharpen ideas and improve communication in the assignment. This would improve the quality of work. They had this to say:
Communication skills are a necessary condition for employment. One has to present ideas in a logical manner to other employees and to senior staff and this has to be learnt. Peer assessment enables us to share such skills and thus to make one another ready for employment.

Peer feedback seems to be most valuable in the collaborative writing process. Peer assessment can, to a certain extent, be understood as a type of collaborative learning in all of which students produce a collective outcome, share knowledge, and learn from the collaboration (Falchikov, 2001).

Teamwork is very important at work
Respondents reiterated the need for teamwork in work situations. They had this to say:
You find that people need to work together as a team in order to accomplish given tasks. This is a skill which requires one to be honest, free and diligent. One has to show high levels of commitment and dedication to the work in order to be a good team member. Lack of such skills is a sign of lack of employability skills.

Organisations of all kinds are made up of people working together to achieve some common goal. Because people are frequently required to work in groups, considerable attention has been focused on team building in recent years (Dyer, 2008). Improving the team means better performance by the individuals and the group. Team work is all about diagnosing and improving the effectiveness of group members with particular attention to performance and collaboration within the group, especially the role of the leader in relation to other group members (Cavanagh, 2011). Team work is typically directed towards goal setting, development of interpersonal relations, role analysis, and team process analysis (Kayser, 2012).
Negotiation skills are a precondition for employment
Respondents highlighted that at work places there are quite a number of issues that employees have to negotiate with workmates and with management. An individual who lacks such skills has missing employability skills. Students in higher education have to be equipped with negotiation skills in order to be useful members at work places. Peer assessment helps students develop the ability to make judgements, a necessary skill for study and professional life (Brown, Rust and Gibbs, 1994).

Acceptance of diversity/ life skills is necessary at work
Peer assessment “promotes the acquisition of life-long skills due to the active involvement of students in the assessment experience” (Ballantyne et al, 2002, p. 428). This is because formative feedback from peers, especially detailed and open-ender feedback on assessment tasks is linked to improvements in students’ confidence, presentation, and skills appraisal (Topping, 1998).

There is need for peer assessment in higher education but our capability to assess peers is our worry
Respondents indicated that they lack capability to assess others but they underscored the importance of peer assessment. Most students found the peer-assessment process time consuming, intellectually challenging, and socially uncomfortable, but effective in improving the quality of their individual work and developing their skills (Topping et al, 2000).

It is not easy to be tasked with the responsibility of assessing peers
Respondents seemed to hesitate to assess other students. They had this to say: It is not easy to be tasked with the responsibility of assessing peers. You begin to doubt your competence in such practices. Sometimes fear of the unknown affects you. Umm, you feel like the responsibility is too big for you.

Many students are apprehensive about their capability to assess their peers and the responsibility associated with such assessment (Cassidy, 2006), leading to anxiety, stress, and discomfort.

Peer assessment would raise standards in higher education
Respondents were of the feeling that peer assessment would raise standards in higher education by improving cognitive gains for each student. They had this to say: In the process of coming to know there is need for intellectual gymnastics. Students need to share the knowledge levels and knowledge gains sometimes among themselves. This enhances search for truth in terms of data and the matter that is needed in the world of work.

Topping (2005, p. 640) asserts that “peer assessment can enhance self-assessment, and both can yield metacognitive gains.”

Peer assessment equips graduates with the needed employability skills
Respondents were of the feeling that peer assessment encourages student autonomy and higher order thinking skills. They had this to say: Peer assessment aims to improve the quality of learning and empower learners, where traditional forms can by-pass learners’ needs. Peer assessment has the potential advantages of improving the development of the skills of evaluating and justifying, and using discipline knowledge.

Discipline knowledge is what employers look for and products of the education system who do not possess such knowledge are considered defunct. Peer assessment is advocated as a means of improving employability skills, especially those related to non-technical (generic) aspects including oral and written
communication, reading, learning skills and strategies, problem solving, decision making, dependability, and responsibility (Cassidy, 2006). It is therefore often recommended to be routinely implemented in the context of higher education as one of the ultimate objectives of university students is to obtain suitable employment.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Even for those students who have access to secondary education and complete it there is concern that what their learning is not useful to living and working in a world outside of formal education. Higher education and corporations are united in finding that the young people they receive are ill-prepared for the reality of the next stage of their lives. This argues for a different focus in secondary (and primary) education that helps young people develop skills and competencies in areas such as communication, teamwork, negotiation and acceptance of diversity, sometimes called life skills.

References


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