Peer and Self-Assessment and Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

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Introduction

This document is meant as an adjunct to nine case studies in peer and/or self-assessment developed by the author in collaboration with several academic colleagues at Griffith University. While each of those case studies includes some specific account of principles of good practice which are explicitly illustrated by the case, the purpose of this document is to evaluate the utility of peer and self-assessment in a more generic way, specifically in relation to Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991, 1999; Gamson, 1991).

Generic principles of good practice addressed by peer and self-assessment

Each of the nine case studies on the GIHE Peer and Self Assessment website (www.griffith.edu.au/gihe/assessment/peer-and-self-assessment) includes a section which briefly describes some of the principles of good educational practice illustrated by that case. In this paper, each of seven general "Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) is briefly considered in relation to peer and self-assessment.

The seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991, 1999; Gamson, 1991) are, as follows.

Good practice:
1. Encourages student-faculty contact
2. Encourages cooperation among students
3. Encourages active learning
4. Gives prompt feedback
5. Emphasizes time on task
6. Communicates high expectations
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning
(Chickering & Gamson, 1999, p. 76)

Each will be considered in turn in relation to peer and self-assessment.
1 (Peer and self-assessment) encourages student-faculty contact

At first glance peer and self-assessment may not seem to promote contact between students and academics. The focus of peer and self-assessment is ostensibly upon students. However, in practice, the engagement of academics in the process is critical. Using peer and self-assessment provides and organisational basis for structuring and sequencing activities in which students seek to develop a "... knowledge and appreciation of the appropriate standards and criteria for meeting those standards which may be applied to any given work." (Boud, 1995, p. 11) *and* in which students develop "the capacity to make judgements about whether or not the work involved does or does not meet [those] standards." (p.11). In both these respects it is clear that students are novices, and that their academic teachers are (relatively at least) experts. Implicitly then, academic staff should be engaged in helping students with this learning by guiding them. One might even see this as a professional obligation. Sadler (2008) described the intent as: "... a commitment to ensuring (so far as possible) that students are inducted into an understanding and appreciation of the grounds upon which grading decisions are made." (p.18, pre-print). Boud (1995) went further, arguing that self-assessment "is a necessary skill for lifelong learning" (p.13). Sadler's (1987) article "Specifying and promulgating performance standards" presents a particularly powerful argument about the involvement of academics in this process – involvement which essentially seeks to ensure that much of what is 'tacitly' known to an academic is transferred to the students (O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004).

2 (Peer and self-assessment) encourages cooperation among students

Through the use of peer and self-assessment students (and academics alike) are encouraged to develop, embrace and experience learning that is conducted within a community of scholars (See for example Boud, 1995, p. 15). This, by definition, is meant to be collaborative. Within such a community it is axomatic that students are meant to be "inter-dependent" (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001, p. 3). In this way, the collective intelligence of the community serves to inform the learning of the individual members of that community and vice versa: each person gives to and receives from the collective and learning is substantively enriched by the different perspectives, values and cultures represented in that community. Individuals benefit from exposure to different ways of thinking, and from the experience of having their own contributions valued. In principle, this is no different from the functioning of academe more broadly: for example, the process of authoring papers entails direct discussion and debate with colleagues, indirect engagement through their published work, critique of that work, and peer review of draft papers. Authors benefit from this peer review while reviewers benefit from exposure to another person's thinking and analysis – something that is ultimately contributed to the wider academic community when the paper is published and read. Thus, although some of the ideas about peer and self-assessment, and the cooperative nature of learning therein, may sound fanciful in their apparent dependence on altruism, much of the driving force actually comes from the benefits which accrue to all individuals engaged in the process.
3 (Peer and self-assessment) encourages active learning

It is simply not possible to be a student in a course or program that uses peer and/or self-assessment and to be inactive. Any process of peer and self-assessment is quintessentially active because each and every student must participate in, at the minimum, the application of criteria and standards to judgements of the quality of work. In its simplest form students may simply be required to critique their own work. A slightly more complex implementation may involve students in groups critiquing the work of others. A yet more complex implementation may involve students critiquing themselves and each other on an iterative communal basis — critiquing critiques. By its nature all these forms of engagement, even the simplest, are transactional and entail high level cognitive processes of reasoning, judgement and evaluation to be employed.

4 (Peer and self-assessment) gives prompt feedback

It can be readily argued that many forms of peer and self-assessment provide almost instant feedback. For example, peer assessment often involves collaborative discussion with peers. What one's peers say is effectively feedback on ideas which are being collectively explored and elaborated. This happens in real time. Peer and self-assessment activities involving discussion with the academic are similar: for example, a group involved in determining criteria and standards to be applied to their work includes the academic in that discussion. Depending on the nature of the criteria and year level the academic may be more involved (more likely in first year courses and where criteria are of a particularly technical nature requiring more advanced understanding of the discipline), or less so in some postgraduate courses or where the criteria can be articulated in ways that do not require more profound knowledge of course material (See for example van Hattum-Janssen & Lourenço, 2006, p. 689). Even when the actual act of peer-assessment does not involve discussion, it is often possible to provide students who are peer-assessed with feedback much more quickly than would otherwise be the case because the total assessment burden is shared among the cohort of students — thereby negating the normal two week delay as the academic alone marks all the assignments.

Similar arguments can be mounted in respect of self-assessment. The principle here being that the students themselves are providing their own feedback, in real time. In respect of learning, these students ultimately receive feedback (from academics and/or peers) on the quality of their judgements of their own work, thereby helping them to improve on their ability to self-assess.

5 (Peer and self-assessment) emphasises time on task

The general idea behind 'time on task' is that the more time one spends on tasks which relate to desired/valued learning outcomes the better. Time spent on inappropriate activities clearly does not count for much. Thus, the argument here is that peer and self-assessment are tasks which in and of themselves relate directly to learning — or, more pertinently, to the kind of learning that is valued: that is to say so called 'deep learning outcomes' (Biggs & Collis, 1982). In this regard, it has already been noted (under principle 3 above) that peer and self-assessment activities entail students using high level cognitive processes of reasoning, judgement and
evaluation. These are processes which are directly associated with deep learning outcomes (Biggs, 2006).

Further supporting the argument, Black & William, (1998b) argued that "self-assessment is a *sine qua non* for effective learning" (p.26) Further, Boud (1995) citing Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary (1994) and Justice & Marienau (1988) says that "The ability to self assess is a key foundation to a career as a lifelong learner." (p.14) and goes on to note that graduates skilled in self-assessment "are more likely to monitor their own performance without constant reference to fellow professionals" (p.14) a key outcome for any graduate.

6  (Peer and self-assessment) communicates high expectations

Heron (1981), powerfully states that "... it is the general presupposition of higher education that the student has the intellectual competence to acquire a fully rational grasp of a particular discipline or subject area." (p.78). Accordingly, he argues that it is important and appropriate to recognise, value and use students' rational capacity to "... acquire and actively exercise a fully rational grasp of his own learning objectives, of the program that is relevant to achieve them, of criteria of assessment, and the actual process of assessment of his own work." (sic. p.78). Through the use of peer and self-assessment, students themselves are afforded the rightful acknowledgement of their competence as learners. As Sweep (2008) puts it "The honouring of human potential represents the strongest expression of integrity for the individual and for society." This turns the tables on what is the prevailing model for assessing students work which, as Heron notes, is an authoritarian one wherein "Staff exercise unilateral intellectual authority" (p.77).

What this adds up to is recognition (as one of five key conditions that stand out in relation to student retention and academic success) that "students do not rise to low expectations" Tinto (2007, p. 2). Accordingly, it is not only more appropriate, but also more respectful, to engage students in the process of inducting them into the community of scholars of which academics are already full members – in doing so, expecting students to be successful and implicitly demanding that success.

7  (Peer and self-assessment) respects diverse talents and ways of learning

It was noted in relation to principle 2 that through peer assessment in particular, participation in a community of peers substantively enriches the learning experience of students because peer assessment brings exposure to different perspectives, values and cultures represented in the community of peers. Boud (1995) makes essentially the same point in relation to self-assessment: "Self-assessment does not imply that students develop their ideas in isolation from the views and judgements of others. We live alongside others in community with them and share common cultures and understandings. Therefore peers ... are vital." (p.15).

Considering some of the activities which are involved in peer and self-assessment helps to clarify this point. The following description is offered as an illustration. In respect of a particular assignment, a common exercise entails asking a group of students to formulate a list of characteristics of high quality work. Students may begin
this process silently as individuals before progressing to share their thoughts orally with each other in open forum. The list of characteristics generated by each and student individual will almost certainly be shorter than the list which is generated collectively. Similarly, students understanding of items on these lists will inevitably be richer as a consequence of discussion about similarities and differences between items, or justifications for the inclusion, removal or refinement of items. That this process engages all students, but allows that engagement to vary, is respectful of the diversity of talent in the group, and the individual differences in the ways these people like to learn.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the ways in which peer and self-assessment practices relate to seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education as provided by Chickering and Gamson (1987). It is meant as a generic adjunct to the sections within each of nine case studies (presented elsewhere) where features of the case is related to other principles of good practice in education taken from other literature. Considered together, these help to demonstrate the potential for peer and self-assessment as fundamentally good practices. It is hoped that this analysis helps to support the case for increased use of peer and self-assessment throughout all courses and programs. As (Black & William, 1998a) put it: “self-assessment is a sine qua non for effective learning” (p.26) and, as such, is “not an interesting option or luxury: it has to be seen as essential” (p.54-55).
References


