



Peer Assessment: A Formative Learning Tool

Quite often in higher education, when students submit a written assignment (e.g., essay, research paper, annotated bibliography), the only two people who actually see or read the final product are the student and the instructor. Further, depending upon the inclination, time, and motivation of the individual faculty member, the quantity and quality of feedback students receive on that written product varies widely (e.g., paper is not returned, only a grade is posted, grade and critical feedback are returned). One approach that can deepen and enrich this process is the use of peer assessments, which Topping (2009) defines as

an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners. Products to be assessed can include writing, oral presentations, portfolios, test performance, or other skilled behaviors. (p. 20)

In practice, peer assessment involves inserting an intermediary step when creating a written or oral assignment, portfolio, or performance, where students will evaluate the work of their classmates and provide constructive feedback on areas of strength or needed improvement. This active-learning technique offers opportunities for students to gain knowledge (a) by applying an evaluation rubric to the work of their classmates and (b) through the constructive suggestions they receive on their own work.

In a study by Cassidy (2008), students reported value-added learning from the assessment of their classmates' work, the process of sharing the results of those assessments, and in receiving feedback from their peers. Interestingly, Kishwar, Ahmad, Sheikh, and Ilyas (2015) found a high degree of similarity between peer ratings and those provided by faculty as they computed final grades on submitted assignments. Peer assessments can serve a powerful formative function as students will have the opportunity to make improvements in their own papers prior to their final submission.

The Peer Assessment Process

To begin, faculty need to make some basic operational decisions about how to implement peer assessment in a course (van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2009). Instructors should consider the following parameters:

- Will peer assessments be completed anonymously or with the knowledge of the writer?
- How will assessment responsibilities be assigned (i.e., students and a partner assess one another's work or students work with multiple partners)?



“ I think it’s very important to have a feedback loop, where you’re constantly thinking about what you’ve done and how you could be doing it better. I think that’s the single best piece of advice: constantly think about how you could be doing things better and questioning yourself. —Elon Musk, entrepreneur and inventor ”

- Will the results of the peer assessment be delivered verbally or in writing?
- Will the assessments be completed in class or out of class?
- Is participation in the peer assessment process compulsory or voluntary?
- Will course credit or other incentives be awarded for participation and/or contribute the final grade?

Decisions on these questions should be embedded in overall course design and the schedule for completing assignments. Thinking about these matters in advance will lessen the likelihood of confusion during the semester. In addition, when first introducing peer evaluation in a course, including information on the syllabus can be helpful as well as having students initially complete their assessments in writing, which may be a simpler option for the pilot.

Discussing the Process and Criteria With Students

For many students, peer assessment may be a new experience. To acquaint them with this process

- provide a rubric that will be used your students to assess the work of their classmates and by the instructor to assign points or a grade;
- review the elements of the rubric (e.g., organization, introduction, spelling and grammar, voice, conclusions, references); and
- make a sample product available for review and, in class, have students discuss the feedback they would provide the author and share suggestions (begin with small groups and end with an entire class discussion).

All these steps should take place before students actually begin working on their own assignments that will be part of peer assessment process. Lastly, students must be held accountable for completing not only their own assignment but also their assigned peer assessment.

Final Steps

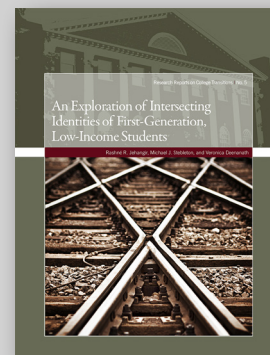
At the conclusion of the process, seek students' feedback on their peer assessment experiences (e.g., What did you learn? How can the process be improved?) This can be accomplished through a class discussion and/or an online survey. Feedback can help strengthen the process before moving ahead to the next semester.

Help your students learn through peer assessment!

References

- Cassidy, S. (2008). Developing employability skills: Peer assessment in higher education. *Education & Training*, 48(7), 508-517.
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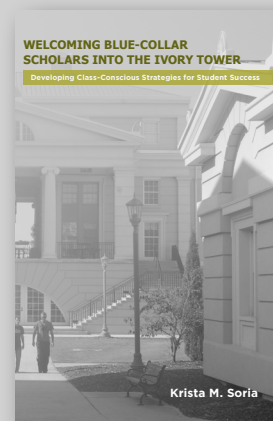
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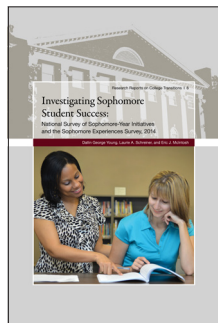
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Setting a Foundation for Critical Thinking in the First Year of College. Concurrent session by Jennifer R. Keup, National Resource Center Director, at the 2015 Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Annual Conference, January 22, 2016, 3:30-4:00 pm at the Grand Hyatt Hotel, Washington, DC.

Leveraging First- and Second-Year Transition Programs to Support Transfer.

Presentation by Dallin George Young, National Resource Center Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, at the 14th Annual Conference of the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students; February 3-5, 2016; Grand Hyatt Atlanta in Buckhead; Atlanta, Georgia.

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The Toolbox

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The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

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