



Self and Peer Assessment

by Alison Farrell

What is the issue?

To learn effectively throughout the life course, and to practice effectively as future professionals and graduates, students need to be equipped to engage in self assessment, so that they can routinely make reliable evaluative judgments, (Tai et al., 2018), about what they know and can do, and what they do not yet know and can't yet do. While some students appear to work this out for themselves, many need explicit encouragement, advice and support to develop the skills and dispositions necessary to make informed judgments about the quality of their own work and that of others. Hence, university staff are increasingly promoting formative and summative self-evaluation activities, and the closely related activities of peer assessment or peer review as valuable strategies that develop *all* students' abilities to become realistic judges of their own and others' performance, enabling them to monitor their own learning effectively, rather than relying on their teachers alone to fulfil this role for them (Sambell et al., 2013). Such activities promoting evaluative judgment can be viewed as important tools for learning, as they underpin the development of learner autonomy and long-term success by activating students' roles in the assessment process itself.

Unpacking evaluative judgment

The discourse of self assessment has shifted recently to using the term 'evaluative judgment' because research about self assessment has tended to focus

students need to be equipped to engage in self assessment, so that they can routinely make reliable evaluative judgments

on grade accuracy, whilst many would argue that the main learning benefits accrue from **developing students' abilities in the process of making judgments** by understanding criteria and learning to apply them actively. Researchers, including Boud (Boud et al., 2018), now argue that the skill of evaluative judgment is best developed when it **doesn't count for grades**, and is best honed by practices which enable students to see what is entailed in doing something well and involves them in ongoing discussion and practice of the effectiveness of their judgment (rather than grade guessing, which distorts true evaluative judgment). It includes being able to process a variety of information (feedback from a variety of sources), which has a bearing on the tasks with which students are engaged, and acting upon it. It also involves **generating as well as processing feedback** (Sambell et al., 2013).

While we might not call it ‘assessment’ *per se*, as staff working in higher education, we engage in self and peer evaluation of our work on a regular basis, perhaps even daily. We need to judge our own work consistently, and we may also often reach out to colleagues to ask for their opinions and feedback. In turn, we are asked to evaluate the work of others and to comment on it. Likewise, in all walks of life our students need to be able to self-evaluate, in the same way that they need to be able to receive and potentially give feedback. It is essential, therefore, that we provide our students with a good foundation in practicing self and peer assessment, review, and giving and receiving feedback. Besides the fact that these processes contribute to learning, they can also be key to developing important knowledge, skills and dispositions which we hope students can transfer beyond the university into work, citizenship and other settings. A central issue, however, is that ‘Despite increasing evidence that both forms of assessment are helpful for developing key capabilities in students ... both forms of assessment are still not the norm at universities’ (Wanner and Palmer, 2018, p. 1032). As a result, formal opportunities for engagement in either self or peer assessment may be limited at present.

In this short guide we share some of what appears in the literature, including definitions, on the topics of self and peer assessment. We also provide practical advice, inspired by the literature and related resources, on how to implement self and peer assessment. We conclude with some ideas about how you might get started in this space if you are new to the approaches.

Research-informed thinking about self and peer assessment

Adachi, Hong-Meng Tai and Dawson (2018a) frame self and peer assessment, in the most simplistic terms as follows:

- **Self assessment:** students judge and make decisions about their own work against particular criteria.
- **Peer-assessment:** students judge and make decisions about the work of their peers against particular criteria. (p. 295)

While Andrade and Du (2007) describe self assessment as a ‘process of formative assessment during which students reflect on and evaluate the quality of their work and their learning, judge the degree to which they reflect explicitly stated goals or criteria, identify strengths and weaknesses in their work, and revise accordingly (2007, p. 160). Peer assessment, in turn, is described by Falchikov and

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Goldfinch (2000) as requiring students to ‘judge the work of their peers’ noting that ‘an important educational function of peer assessment is the provision of detailed peer feedback’ (2000, pp. 287-288).

Looking at both self and peer assessment, Adachi et al. note that they are separate ‘but potentially intertwined entities: both require judgements by students, but the subject of those judgement is different’ (2018a, p. 295). In their review of assessment and feedback literature for the HE Academy, Jackel et al. (2017) also make connections between peer and self assessment. They note that ‘Research is consistently suggesting that the biggest benefit of peer assessment is its impact on the ability of students to self-assess in the meta-cognitive sense’ (p. 29). They continue ‘The consensus position on the formative value of peer assessment is compelling and coherent, as is the emerging conviction that it is the **provision more than the receipt** of feedback that has the most potential’ (p. 30, emphasis added). The development of the ability to judge work, one’s own in this instance, is considered as well by Nicol in his publication which contrasts self and peer assessment. Nicol considers the development of **inner feedback** through comparing one’s work with that of others, and the generation of new knowledge as a result of the process (2022).

The literature suggests why self and peer assessment might matter and argues for the benefits of these approaches including enhanced learning, greater student self-awareness of themselves as learners, development of transferable skills including those associated with giving and receiving feedback,

teamwork and critical thinking, greater understanding of assessment criteria and learning expectations, development of students' evaluative judgement, amongst others (Kearney, Perkins and Kennedy-Clark, 2016; Adachi et al., 2018a; Boud and Soler, 2016; Adachi et al., 2018b; Tai et al., 2016).

The literature also highlights that the implementation of self and peer assessment is not easy, and engaging students in these types of activities can involve practical challenges including those associated with time and resources (Adachi et al., 2018a). There may also be concerns amongst students about their capacity to judge their own work and that of others in an accurate and fair manner. Kearney et al. note that concerns have been recorded in the literature with regard to 'the reliability and accuracy of peer assessment' (2016, p. 842) but that these concerns 'are not generally supported by empirical research, which finds satisfactory levels of agreement when students are working with criteria (Falchikov and Goldfinch 2000)' (p. 842).

Practical advice

Should you wish to use self and peer assessment, as with all approaches to assessment, it is important to do so in a systematic and strategic manner. The 'Assess for Success' guides argue that for every assessment innovation it is important to ask: Why are we assessing? What is being assessed? How is this being undertaken? By whom? And when? (see the *Approaches to Assessment* guide). These questions are equally relevant when introducing self and peer assessment. In addition, further necessary steps might include:

- **Sharing the assessment criteria.** It is good practice to share assessment criteria with students regardless of the approach to assessment that one is using. The assessment criteria may be devised by the lecturer, or by the lecturer and students collaboratively. It is important that the criteria are clear, readily interpretable and written in plain English so that students know exactly what they are looking for in the work they are reviewing, be it their own or another student's.
- **Supporting students in the self and peer assessment process.** Self and peer assessment may be new approaches for students. As such, students will need support and guidance to successfully engage in these processes. This support might include involving students as much as possible in the assessment process from the beginning, opportunities to practice self and peer

assessment, modelling the process and the provision of assessment tools, for instance, meaningful marking rubrics or feedback templates.

- **Valuing professional development and decision making in self and peer assessment.**

Wanner and Palmer note that 'The teacher is central to the successful implementation of formative self- and peer-assessment' (2018, p. 1044). As with any new approach, it will be important for colleagues to engage in some professional learning in preparation for the associated assessment design considerations and decision making. Adachi et al. (2018b) outline many of these in their framework for designing, implementing, communicating and researching peer assessment. Some of the considerations outlined in the framework for peer assessment will also be relevant for self assessment, for instance, the situating of these approaches in an overall assessment strategy, decisions around formative or summative, and the need to be mindful of topic or discipline specific considerations.

- **Focusing on feedback.**

'The role and quality of feedback is important for effective formative self and peer-assessment' (Wanner and Palmer, 2018, p. 1034). As noted in the 'Assess for Success' *Feedback and Feedback Literacy* guide, 'feedback [is] a process in which learners make sense of information about their performance and use it to enhance the quality of their work or learning strategies' (Henderson et al., 2019, p. 1402). The experience of giving and receiving feedback in self and peer assessment will be useful for students in their lives within and beyond the university. This experience will involve the development of specific skills, cognitive capacities and competencies (Ion et al., 2019). A focus on feedback can also help students to think more carefully about the sort of feedback that they would find useful, thus encouraging a more intentionally reflective approach to their own learning.

- **Involving students in discussions about the meaning and application of criteria.**

This is one of the most powerful learning benefits of self and peer assessment as it helps students get to grips with expectations and standards in a contextualised setting.

To sum up

The area of self and peer assessment offers a range of largely untapped approaches to helping students to know where they are with their learning and preparing

them for life and work beyond the university. With the necessary time and support for staff and students, self and peer assessment could be an effective addition to the assessment strategies adopted in our HE settings.

Over to you - what might you do next?

- ✓ Dip into some of the articles noted in the 'References and wider reading' or the resources section of the 'Assess for Success' hub to learn more about self and peer assessment.
- ✓ Discuss the pros and cons of self and peer assessment with colleagues within your own or other departments and decide how they can best help your students to learn effectively.
- ✓ Consider where an element of developing evaluative judgment through self and peer assessment could feature in the modules or programmes on which you teach.
- ✓ Have an informal conversation with students in order to explore how they can realistically make better evaluative judgments about their own and each other's work, so as to help them understand self and peer assessment in action, and to gather their responses to it.
- ✓ Plan how you could make one small change in each programme, at each level, to use self and peer assessment productively.

References and wider reading

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