

## **“Because, as a teacher, giving feedback and assessment is actually really difficult”: using self- and peer-assessment to develop Higher Education teachers’ skills in assessment and feedback**

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper explores the use of self- and peer-assessment to develop skills in assessment and feedback in a postgraduate programme in teaching and learning, targeted at Higher Education practitioners. It explores the rationale underpinning a focus on the development of self- and peer-assessment skills, particularly in the context of the challenges experienced by early career teachers in making evaluative judgments and providing feedback to support student learning. Examples from practice are included to illustrate the activities used to develop practitioners’ ability to evaluate their own learning and that of their peers against given criteria, based on a model for incremental skill development proposed by the authors. In particular, the importance of scaffolding and support, in the form of guidance, templates and rubrics, is explored, in order to build confidence and competence in assessment and both giving and receiving feedback. Focus group feedback confirms that such an incremental approach is welcomed and valued, along with a programmatic approach to the development of these skills, whereby all modules across the programme provide opportunities for the enhancement of the skills associated with assessment and feedback for academic practice.*

**Keywords:** *Higher Education; academic practice; assessment; feedback; self assessment; peer assessment.*

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## **1. Introduction**

This study focuses on perceptions and the experience of using peer- and self-assessment to develop skills and competencies in assessment and giving and receiving feedback in a postgraduate programme for Higher Education teachers. As part of the development of a range of skills and competences needed for effective academic practice, the programme team designed a range of formative self- and peer-assessment and feedback activities which were interwoven through the programme teaching and learning strategy. 'Assessment', for the purposes of this paper, is broadly defined to encompass formative assessment and feedback and to involve actions such as 'evaluation, grading, marking, rating, critiquing, reviewing etc.' (following Adachi, Tai, & Dawson, 2018, p. 454). Mindful of feedback as one of 'the most powerful influences on learning and achievement' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 81), we sought to develop an awareness among learners on the programme that they should view themselves and their peers as both producers and consumers of feedback (Andrade, 2010). As such, we sought to shift traditional student conceptions of the 'teacher as expert' – and consequently the sole source of feedback – to place greater emphasis on learners' agentic engagement with feedback processes (Winstone, Nash, Parker, & Rowntree, 2017).

## **2. Context**

This study concerns an accredited professional development programme for Higher Education teachers delivered at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Ireland. It is an evening postgraduate programme – comprised of 60 ECTS credits at Level 9 – delivered over two semesters and is aimed at offering professional development opportunities for those teaching in a Higher Education context. The programme aims to develop student teachers' knowledge, skills and dispositions in a variety of key areas, including: theories of learning and teaching, educational assessment, strategies of teaching and learning, technology and learning, coaching, mentoring and philosophy of education, amongst others. Learners also undertake a supervised practicum/placement in the course of the programme, offering supported opportunities to apply and reflect on the use of a variety of teaching, learning and assessment strategies. Applicants to the programme tend to be early-career teachers in a HEI or those who work in administrative functions and are interested in developing their teaching abilities further. The theories and strategies discussed and applied in the forthcoming sections were introduced on modules throughout this one-year postgraduate programme.

## **3. Theory: using self- and peer-assessment to develop assessment skills**

As Biggs and Tang (2011, p. 196) point out, 'assessment is the senior partner in learning and teaching. Get it wrong and the rest collapses'; consequently, it is critically important that a professional development programme for Higher Education teachers develops competences

and confidence in the skills associated with assessment and feedback to support student learning. While students on the programme undertook one 5 ECTS module entitled ‘Educational Assessment’ which introduced many of the theories and practices of assessment, the programme team recognized that skill development is maximized when a programmatic approach is adopted (Jessop & Tomas, 2017). Consequently, a key design feature of the programme was the inclusion of multiple opportunities for formative peer-assessment and feedback - as well as self-assessment - throughout all modules. From the perspective of both the learner and the programme team, embedding self- and peer-assessment across the programme allowed for additional formative assessment tasks to be introduced and for student learning to be maximized through their active involvement in the learning process (Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992; Ramsden, 1992). Higgs and McCarthy (2005, p. 37) point out that ‘students do not internalize and cannot understand nor apply learning, unless they are actively involved in it’. Therefore, by embedding effective practices throughout the programme through the design of a programme-wide assessment strategy, we aimed to promote best practice to allow for a ‘congruence between assessment practices and the kinds of learning a course aims to promote’ (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999, p. 413).

The programme team recognized that assessing effectively along with giving and receiving feedback are not innate skills and that learners on the programme need multiple opportunities to practice these skills (Adachi, Hong-Meng Tai, & Dawson, 2018; Cassidy, 2006). Consequently, the programme adopted a scaffolded and incremental approach to developing skills, exemplified in this model (Egan and Costelloe, 2016):

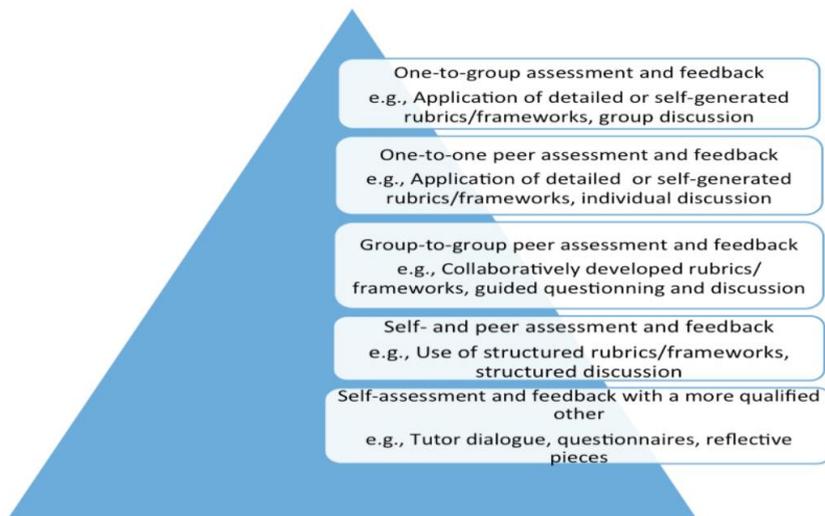


Figure 1: Theoretical Feedback Skills Development Model.

This model supports incremental skill development, particularly (i) the ability to assess others, (ii) the ability to give and receive feedback and (iii) the ability to make judgments. The model suggests that learners should firstly become comfortable engaging in self-assessment tasks, which should incorporate a form of feedback from a more competent other in order to validate their judgment of their own performance against given criteria. Mindful of the potential of self-assessment as a useful first step to support peer assessment (Carnell, 2016), the model proposes a movement towards combining self-assessment and peer-assessment to allow the learner to understand how a peer may perceive elements of assessment and feedback differently. Following this, group-to group peer assessment and feedback is encouraged, as this can enhance confidence in judgement and communication of feedback, supported by the relative “safety” or anonymity of making and communicating group judgments. From this point, one-to-one and one-to-group peer assessment and feedback can commence, as learners develop the confidence and competence to lead assessment tasks and provide constructive feedback.

#### **4. Examples from Practice: self- and peer-assessment activities**

The programme was designed to be highly experiential, therefore a range of practice opportunities were included to challenge learners' thinking and skills in different ways. For example, the “High 5” presentation was the first exercise which introduced learners to self-assessment. This exercise was designed to provide learners with the opportunity to appraise their own five-minute delivery of a topic relevant to them (placing them as experts) to their peers. This exercise challenges learners in a number of ways including; selecting a relevant aspect of a topic, sticking to time constraints, delivering a clear message and engaging their audience – all important skills for a Higher Education teacher. Although it might be possible to identify strict assessment criteria for this exercise, given the length of the presentation and the variation of presentation topics, it is more useful to ask the participant to respond to key questions as a formative self-assessment activity. To begin with, a broad question such as “how did you feel that went?” is asked and then followed by regularly interjecting with “what are you basing your view on”? This approach enables the learner to reflect on aspects of the presentation that hold personal meaning. For example, they may describe the sense of control they felt over their delivery or the level of engagement they reached with their audience or their ability to speak clearly or manage time. This free-flow of conversation supports personal reflection on performance, while understanding the basis of their views helps to focus the learner into the assessment space. This leads to a conversation about data evaluation and subjective influences in assessment. This exercise also creates the space for learners to identify personal developmental areas in relation to both task performance and self-assessment.

Another approach used on the programme was the “Gist Exercise”, which was designed as a means of supporting skills associated with peer-assessment and feedback. This is a group exercise which begins with one member speaking uninterrupted for two minutes on a preselected topic. Once the two minutes are up, the next member uses his/her uninterrupted two minutes to add to the discussion. The exercise ends when all members have had their two minutes to contribute to the topic. An important caveat to highlight is that members should focus on providing novel or new information that adds to the discussion rather than summarizing or repeating previously stated content. This exercise supports both self- and peer-assessment, and in particular, it can enable quality feedback conversations which are based on dialogue, questioning, and a focus on developmental points. In providing space for group members to voice their perspectives and experience, an opportunity can emerge for deeper knowledge sharing and understanding, which helps to develop skills in crafting rubrics or feedback structures that focus on criteria in a clear and unambiguous way.

While the above practice exercises focused on oral tasks, it is possible to modify them to focus on written tasks. An alternative approach to assessing writing is an exercise that invited learners to write in a certain way, on a specific topic, for example, a review of online engagement strategies. To assess the written responses, clear criteria are identified for learners to consider. The first step in the assessment process is for learners to self-assess their work based on the criteria. Next, their work is assessed by their peer. The final step is for the learner to compare and contrast the self- and peer- feedback to gain awareness regarding differences that may exist. This exercise is optimized if the opportunity for dialogue can exist between peers as this will serve to enhance understanding of feedback as well as providing the opportunity to ask questions regarding performance or development.

Finally, it is worth noting that while these exercises are optimized in face-to-face learning environments, they can also take place virtually through webinars and web-based technology. Through the creation of learning hubs on Moodle, the programme offered learners an opportunity to interact virtually and to practice providing informal self- and peer-feedback to contributions from a group of learners on discussion topics. The practice exercise designed to support this skill invited learners to contribute to a post from a member of the programme. There was a period of three weeks given to learners to contribute and engage in the discussion that would emerge in the hub. Once the time period had lapsed, learners were invited to assess their individual contributions and to give feedback to one other learner in the group, with the proviso that all learners must receive at least one piece of peer feedback. All feedback was posted in the hub to provide learners with the opportunity to examine how self- and peer-feedback was provided by different learners in the group.

## **5. Discussion: student feedback from focus group**

Our experience suggests that for programmes that seek to develop teachers' skills in assessment and feedback, it is of critical importance that the programme design recognizes the somewhat dual role of learners undertaking professional development programmes for Higher Education teachers. While they may be practicing teachers, or looking to move into roles that may involve more teaching activities, when participating in assessment activities they very much self-identify as learners. In a focus group conducted on completion of the programme to probe their experiences of self- and peer-assessment to support confidence and competence in assessment and feedback, learners reported that they valued the incremental approach taken to the development of skills and the opportunity to practice. As one participant commented, *"because I think that, as a teacher, giving feedback and assessment is actually really difficult"*; these sentiments were echoed by another participant who observed that *"I didn't find it [...] easy, but that's because I'm not used to it, I'm not used to getting constructive feedback, I'm not used to giving it"*. Thus, there were tensions very clearly emerging from this dual identity of both teacher and learner, which led to participants articulating low self-confidence in their ability to assess.

One element of the incremental approach to developing confidence and competence in assessment and feedback capabilities which was viewed as particularly beneficial by participants in the focus group was the emphasis in the early stages on group-to-group peer assessment and feedback. One participant explained the benefit as follows: *"I prefer when it's the whole group giving feedback together, I think it's easier than giving it 1-1. You might say 'oh I really liked when they did this' and then [another student] would jump in and say 'oh yeah, that was really good'. So you didn't feel like you were just one person"*. Similar sentiments were articulated by another participant: *"when we were marking them we could see what other people were scoring and we could say it as a group...safety in numbers!"*. These comments confirm that some students on the programmes struggled with making evaluative judgments and sought the security of knowing that their own judgments aligned with those of their peers.

Finally, participants welcomed the use of rubrics, guidelines and templates to structure the assessment and feedback activities embedded throughout the programme. The group discussed how challenging it can be to give constructive feedback, in particular their unease at commenting on a peer's performance. A clear template/rubric to guide conversations were deemed extremely useful: *"I think if you have a structure then you know what you are looking for, rather than just being like 'I really liked this'"*. A scaffolded approach to peer assessment also helps to address any challenges that can be posed by a sense of distrust among peers and concerns relating to fairness, should peer assessment be used summatively. While peer assessment was only used formatively on this programme - and there were no marks attributed to the process *per se* - some learners nonetheless expressed a lack of confidence in

the ability of both themselves and their classmates to accurately and fairly apply assessment rubrics. Thus, through their participation in peer-assessment exercises, students on the programme experienced many of the challenges that their future learners are likely to experience should peer assessment be introduced in their own academic practice. Their experience on this programme underscored the importance of rubrics, templates and clear guidelines to scaffold learners in order to maximize the benefits that can accrue from peer feedback (following Adachi, Tai, et al., 2018; Evans, 2013; Topping, 1998).

## 6. Conclusions

The interventions described above relate to the deliberate use of formative self- and peer-assessment activities to develop early career Higher Education teachers' confidence and competence in assessing student learning and providing constructive feedback. The programme team recognized the challenges that face these teachers in the domain of assessment and feedback and sought to offer multiple opportunities to develop these skills throughout the programme. Using a variety of means in both face-to-face and online environments, learners were supported to engage with their peers to comment on, critique and evaluate learning against a given set of criteria. Students on the programme experienced these activities using their dual identity as a learner and a teacher. Indeed, it is perhaps in this dual identity that the true benefit of this approach comes to the fore; as one participant commented:

*To be able to have a space to do that to learn how to build up that skill is really good. So then you at least have the tools to use it when you are teaching. And it's good to give you a sense of how does that feel for me, as a learner being assessed [...]. And then how is it for me as a teacher?*

As a programme design team, we sought to model best practice and to introduce learners on the programme to innovative pedagogical approaches which can best support student learning.

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