

# A GUIDE TO **PEER AND SELF ASSESSMENT** IN TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION

The capacity of students to make fair and unbiased judgements about the work of their peers with whom they may feel a sense of competition for the highest marks is often cited as a challenge.

To offset the challenges, the peer assessment process in transnational education offers feedback and learning opportunities through cross-border group work, project teams, blogs, discussions and student presentations. The development of inter-cultural skills may be enhanced by a level of peer assessment.

Some transnational teachers allow their students to allocate a set number of marks to their peers for their contribution to the work of the group, to class presentations or blogs, or to make recommendations as to the allocation of marks. The provision of marking rubrics along with discussion, examples and explanation of the rubrics and how the criteria are interpreted, are critical to effective peer assessment.

## Peer feedback

The provision of feedback to students by peers is perhaps less challenging than peer assessment as students are not involved in distributing marks. Peer feedback involves students in providing written and/or verbal commentary on the work of their peers, for example:

- what has been achieved in relation to relevant criteria
- what still needs to be done
- what was stimulating or challenging
- ideas on how to improve the work
- further reading and/or materials to explore.

The advantages of peer feedback include:

- development of the learner's ability to make judgements about the professional work of others
- development of self-evaluation skills through consideration of peer feedback
- offering a range of feedback from alternative perspectives

- encouraging cooperative learning in that by writing and discussing feedback the person providing feedback also learns.

Negative feedback or criticism can be damaging so the peer feedback strategy needs to be carefully managed and monitored. An explanation of purposes and processes is essential, as is a level of practice in, and discussion of, both written and verbal feedback prior to embarking on the activity. In transnational education it is useful to discuss for example: what might be perceived as criticism; the question of 'face'; issues related to personal power, and how these might affect the giving and receiving of feedback in various cultures.

## Example: Peer assessment of group work contribution

In a transnational education cohort project teams comprising students from sites in Australia and Malaysia were formed. The teams were required to submit a formative report early in the project. This took the form of a checklist indicating how well the team was cohering, the level of involvement of each member, and any issues or challenges. The teacher was able to ensure groups were supported or reformed if required.

The teacher discussed the peer assessment process and provided an assessment rubric. Examples of work were provided for the students to assess along with a discussion of an imaginary case in which a student did not contribute to group work. Variations in expectations and understandings that might be attributable to culture and language were discussed.

At project's end students allocated marks to each team member on the basis of their contribution according to criteria. This was signed by each group member with a comment agreeing or disagreeing with the majority verdict. The teacher then distributed 20% of the marks according to student assessment.

## Preparing students to give verbal and written feedback

It is essential to explain and discuss the purpose and process of peer feedback. In general students are asked to provide a summary of the positive features of the work, ask some questions for further reflection, and make one suggestion for improving the work, if possible.

Work through some of the following activities:

- Provide a set of criteria or headings that students might address
- Provide some examples of effective and ineffective written feedback comments and ask students to discuss
- Give the students practice in providing and receiving feedback - ask students to reflect on questions such as:
  - » how did you feel when you received feedback
  - » how did you feel when you provided the feedback
  - » what aspect of the feedback was most important.

## Giving and receiving feedback

Feedback can easily be perceived as ‘criticism’ from one’s peers and this can be challenging, threatening, upsetting. It is important therefore that students feel as comfortable as possible with each other and feel they are operating in a collaborative and supportive environment. There should be no ‘put-downs’ or other forms of negative behaviour. The language that is used is very important and should be discussed and modelled. It should be quite clear to students that this is not judgemental – ‘you made a mistake’ – ‘you did something wrong’.

Giving verbal feedback becomes difficult if the person receiving the feedback interrupts. When receiving feedback it is easy to become defensive. It can be tempting to jump in and justify or explain our actions if we feel we are being criticised. It is really important to simply listen or read carefully first, without making any judgements about the feedback. Interrupting to defend or explain our actions stops us from really ‘hearing’ the feedback because our main concern is to defend ourselves.

## Ideas for peer feedback

### • **Feedback groups**

For example, a ‘feedback group’ of four students is formed. Each member of the group reviews the blogs of the other members. Reviewers provide feedback to the other members of the group.

### • **Two stars and a wish**

Students identify two positive aspects of the work and make a wish about what the peer might do to improve it.

### • **Edward De Bono’s thinking hats**

Thinking hats encourage thinking from different perspectives. For example, a Yellow Hat question might be: Why will this work? A Black Hat question might urge evaluation: What are the weaknesses? Green Hat questions encourage creative thinking. In giving feedback in groups each student might adopt a particular hat.

### • **Using a rubric**

A rubric guides students, provides structure to follow and reduces the possibility of ‘off the wall’ comments. Developing the rubric with the students will build collaboration and involvement.

## Providing feedback on blogs

Feedback might focus on key areas:

- thoughtful responses
- good writing
- original ideas
- cultural understandings
- taking advantage of the medium (linking, video, audio) where appropriate.

These might be a useful start in developing a rubric. Some ideas that might inform a rubric for peer feedback include the following.

The blog entry:

- is focused and coherently integrates examples with explanations or analysis
- offers new insights
- demonstrates awareness of its own limitations or implications, and considers multiple perspectives
- reflects in-depth engagement with the topic.

## Providing peer feedback on oral presentations

Presentations involve thinking, planning, structure and execution. It is not possible to observe the thinking that goes into the structure and execution of a presentation. It may be that a well thought out and planned presentation may go awry because of the presenter's fear of public speaking, nervousness, intimidation and so on. The criteria on which feedback is given should be clear and students should be careful not to go beyond the criteria. Feedback on the presentation plan, visual material and communication skills is appropriate.

## Self-assessment

Boud and Falchikov (1989) defined self-assessment as 'the involvement of learners in making judgements about their own learning, particularly about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning' (p 529). Both peer and self-assessment may be explained as a form of experiential learning (Figure 1). In order to learn from the feedback experience students need to reflect on learning and feedback, develop ideas and form abstract concepts. Ideally, transnational students would try out their learning through new blog posts and receive feedback on those.

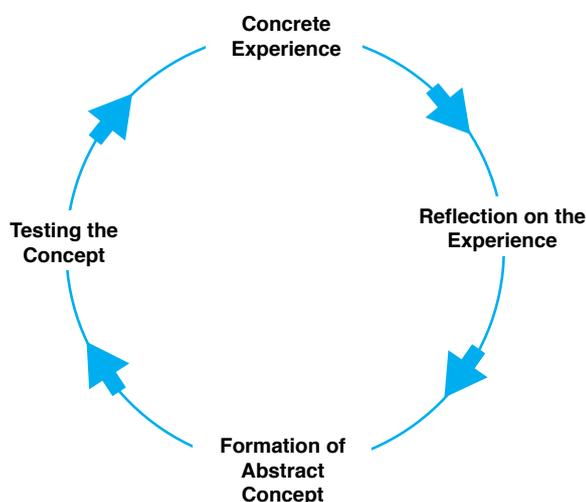


Figure 1 The experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984)

Through peer and self-assessment students develop the ability to:

- critically reflect on the feedback they receive from their peers
- evaluate the suggestions of their peers
- critically reflect on how they have learned
- evaluate - what they have learned and what they still need to learn and set learning targets.

Self-assessment requires critical reflection on the learning experience. This is sometimes submitted in the form of a student portfolio which demonstrates some of the work they have done, what they have learnt from that, and what they still need to learn. In transnational education, self-assessment may require students to post an evaluation of a series of their own blogs together with the understandings they have developed from giving feedback to their peers.

## Reflection on experience

Examples of the kinds of questions students might ask themselves when reflecting on their own learning experiences include the following.

- Why did I choose that approach?
- How effective was that or could it be improved?
- How do I know this?
- What have I learned from peer feedback?
- Are there any contradictions in my thinking?
- Did I make any assumptions?
- Are there any other explanations?

## Abstract conceptualisation

Students should be encouraged to interpret their own analysis from the style of self-questioning above. They should be encouraged to develop generalisations, abstract concepts, personal theories through questions like those that follow.

- What conclusions can I draw from this?
- Are these conclusions sound?
- Are there any concepts, generalisations or principles I can develop from this?
- What can I try next time to test this concept, generalisation, principal?

**Offering and receiving feedback can be quite challenging because it involves the application of complex interpersonal skills.**

(Piccinin 2003)

## Self and peer-assessment of blogs

Students might begin by critically reading all of their posts as if they were written by somebody else. Reflection and analysis might include responses to questions such as:

- What did I usually write about in my posts? Were there broad themes or specific concerns that commonly occurred in my writing?
- Have I provided evidence, argument to support my ideas? Have I made any assumptions, unsupported judgements?
- How has the nature of my posts changed over time? How might I account for those changes?
- What have I learned from my peers?
- What aspects of blogging, if any, do I value or not appreciate, and how does it show up in my posts?

When assessing the blogs of peers, students might ask the same questions. They might also comment on:

- What surprised me as I read your posts
- Ideas in your posts that might be worth revisiting
- What inspired me to further investigate the topic

Finally, all students might ask themselves:

- What have I learned about giving and receiving feedback?

## Source material

Much of this material has been adapted from the following sources.

Bell, M. (2012). *Peer Observation Partnerships in Higher Education* (2nd ed.). Milperra, NSW: Higher Educational Research and Development Society of Australasia.

Piccinin, S. (2003). *Feedback: Key to learning*. Halifax: Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

### Professional Development Principles

A set of professional development principles for transnational teaching teams informed, and were refined through, the work of the participatory action learning groups in this project.

The principles can be accessed at: [transnationalteachingteams.org](http://transnationalteachingteams.org)

## References

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For further information please contact:

**Associate Professor Geraldine Lefoe**  
Learning, Teaching and Curriculum  
University of Wollongong  
Email: [glefoe@uow.edu.au](mailto:glefoe@uow.edu.au)

**Dr Lynne Keevers**  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Wollongong  
Email: [lkeevers@uow.edu.au](mailto:lkeevers@uow.edu.au)

**Developed by Maureen Bell**

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