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IMPROVING SELF-REFLECTION AND PEER FEEDBACK

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Abstract

Skilled managers of conflict need to continuously engage in self-reflection and need to be constantly open to feedback. According to Kolb's experiential learning theory, the important stages of learning are experience, reflection on practice and reconceptualisation before re-experiencing. Therefore, when teaching Managing Conflict, there are two mutually reinforcing reasons for requiring students to engage in self and peer assessment; they are effective learning techniques and they are important practitioners' skills. With this in mind, the assessment tasks for this subject required students to engage in self and peer assessment. However implementation proved difficult. Students felt that peer assessment and engaging in the process of self assessment were difficult. Drawing from the literature and feedback from students, these tasks were refined in 2006 to focus on peer feedback and self-reflection. This paper presents the rationale for the changes and explains the expected benefits. It then draws from student feedback to give a preliminary evaluation of the success of self-reflection and peer feedback and identifies opportunities for further improvement.

IMPROVING SELF-REFLECTION AND PEER FEEDBACK

This paper discusses the self and peer assessment tasks trialled in 2005 and 2006 in an undergraduate subject entitled Managing Conflict. There are two mutually reinforcing reasons for requiring students to engage in self and peer assessment; they are effective learning techniques and they are important practitioners' skills. In 2005 these tasks were incorporated into an experiential learning program and provided a useful first step for improving reflective and conceptual learning. However there were a number of significant problems which needed to be addressed. Accordingly a number of changes were made in 2006. This paper draws on student feedback to reflect on the success in 2006 and identify areas for further improvement. The paper concludes that the self-reflection and peer feedback requirements were effective and should be continued, although aspects of the peer feedback activities need further refinement.

The subject Managing Conflict is an undergraduate subject which seeks to provide a theoretical base for analysing conflict and major dispute resolution systems. It also seeks to provide students with a range of skills for managing conflict, including effective listening and questioning techniques, the ability to negotiate and to mediate. The delivery mode is a combination of lectures and tutorials. Lectures are largely content driven, with some class discussion. The tutorials are largely role plays with opportunity for reflection and feedback. The assessment tasks include an end of semester exam, an analytical essay and tutorial participation in the role plays. This paper focuses on the tutorial participation assessment activities.

THE LEARNING MODEL

Drawing from constructionist theories, Kolb and Kolb (2005) propose that experiential learning is a process of creating and recreating knowledge through four learning modes: experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. Experiences are the basis for reflection and from reflection learners develop abstract concepts which are applied to new experiences. All stages are purported to be necessary for effective and deep learning to occur. This subject seeks to provide an experiential learning opportunity for students by enabling them to engage in experiences, reflect on them, and create new abstract concepts for further experience. Thus the role plays and associated reflection and reconceptualisation are an essential part of the learning process. A significant problem that this subject faced prior to 2005 was that the learning cycle seemed to be stuck at the experience stage, without any real engagement in reflection or reconceptualisation stages. Consequently the learning program needed to be revised to ensure that all stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle were completed.

No matter how coherent the learning model, as Biggs (2003) explains, the activities that are marked drive student learning. Therefore the assessment tasks needed to be designed carefully to ensure that students engage in the complete experiential learning cycle and to ensure that learning experiences meet the desired objectives of the subject. It is also important to note that assessment generally serves two purposes; one is to determine whether learning has taken place, termed summative assessment; and the other is to improve the quality learning, known as formative assessment (Boud, 1995). Formative assessment provides students with feedback on their performance, enabling them to learn from their mistakes and motivating them by their progress. In this subject, an important objective is the development of skills for the management of conflict, thus both formative and summative assessment are appropriate learning strategies for this subject.

The decision to utilise self and peer assessment for both summative and formative assessment draws from constructivist understandings of learning. Constructionist models of learning (as explained by Renshaw, 1996) assume that learners enter situations with already established ways of acting on and interpreting the environment. The learner is assumed to be an active agent in imposing meanings and interpretations on physical and social phenomena. Building on this model,

self assessment is concerned with learners making their own judgements about what they have done and what they should be doing (Boud, 1995). Therefore self assessment was deemed to be an appropriate means of both summative and formative assessment in this subject.

Importantly self assessment is not done in isolation, but within particular domains of knowledge and in communities of common understandings. Peer assessment can provide the opportunity for the "joint construction of knowledge through discourse" (Topping 1998:254). Boud (1995) suggests that formative peer assessment (i.e. peer feedback) is essential for effective self-assessment as it creates opportunities for both the assessor and the assessed student to learn from engaging in the process of dialogue and the opportunity to challenge existing ways of thinking. Other authors suggest these opportunities are also available from summative peer assessment as it enables students to learn from the process of assessing others (Orsmond, Merry and Reiling 2000).

Another important aspect of self and peer assessment is the transference of power from the teacher to students (Brew, 1999), enabling students to take responsibility for their learning experiences and contributing to the development of life-long learning skills. Given that this subject cannot teach students how to manage conflict in all situations, the ability to engage in life-long learning is an important objective.

Effective feedback should be timely, prompt, clear, specific and consequential (Kingston University, 2004). In this subject it is not possible for the tutor to provide effective feedback to all students as the tutor would not be witness to a number of the activities (several parts of the negotiation process take part in private and many role plays are performed simultaneously). Even if the activities were witnessed, it would take time to give clear feedback to each student and therefore would not be timely nor prompt. Feedback from peers involved in the activities can provide a way for overcoming these shortcomings as it can be done immediately and with specificity (Boud, 2001).

Self and peer assessment also offer the opportunity to engage in a variety of learning experiences, including thinking about what makes good performance (Searby and Ewers, 1997; Falchikov, 1995) and learning from the mistakes and good performance of others (Race, 1998). As well as more time on task, a variety of learning modes are available to students (experience, reflection and abstract conceptualisation) (Boud, 2001).

Prospective employers are reportedly seeking a generic set of skills that include collaboration and teamwork skills, becoming a member of a learning community, critical reflection and learning to learn (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001). Peer assessment is thought to contribute to these skills as it requires students to work together, to engage in reflection and to take responsibility for their learning.

Consequently the learning model adopted for this subject in 2005 and 2006 was one based on self and peer assessment of role plays, utilising both summative and formative assessment.

THE 2005 EXPERIENCE AND RECONCEPTUALISATION FOR 2006

In 2005, and in recognition of students' lack of participation in unassessed activities in previous years, a summative grade was added to each of the self and peer assessment activities (though only 5 percent for each activity). Having determined on a summative component, the question arose as to what should be used to assess the quality of the work. As the objective of these tasks was skill development, criterion referenced, rather than norm referenced, grading was thought to be appropriate; in other words, the attainment of skills should be assessed, not comparative student cohort performance. Further, Boud et al. (2001) argue that norm-referenced, or ranking inhibits the co-operation necessary for peer collaboration. In an attempt to ensure the reliability and validity of student evaluations, the teaching staff developed pro-forma and criteria check-lists based on their interpretation of good skills and evidence of learning. This was assumed to

enhance reliability by standardising the marking criteria, as well as to enhance validity by ensuring appropriate criteria were used. Consequently, the teaching staff developed clear criteria for the self and peer assessable tasks for 2005.

Self-Assessment

For two of the self assessment tasks students were provided with criteria sheets setting out skill-sets. Students were required to address specific questions, such as what went well and what did not go well and to grade themselves against the criteria sheets. However the actual summative mark was determined by the tutor. The third self assessment task required students to complete a short self-evaluation essay on the negotiation role play which was conducted over a number of tutorials. Students had much more flexibility in how they went about their self-evaluation and this essay was summatively marked by the tutor.

Most students engaged reasonably intelligently in the self-evaluation essay, reflecting on their experiences quite well and contemplating changes for future experiences. Nonetheless, there were problems, for example, the poorer performing students were unable to identify their weaknesses; their reflections indicated that they believed they had performed very well. The summative component may have motivated students not to reflect too deeply on their weaknesses, but instead concentrate on telling the tutor how well they did.

Boud and Walker (1998) warn that assessing reflection can be counter to the developmental aim of reflection, especially as students are used to being assessed in terms of understanding the subject matter. They draw from Hatton and Smith (1994) to recommend that if reflection needs to assessed then it should be assessed in terms of criteria for the recognition of reflective, not academic writing. In this subject, the question of whether self-reflections were assessed was reconsidered for 2006. However, the motivation for students to focus on summative assessment was considered strong enough to continue summatively assessing these tasks. It was determined that clearer understandings about the purpose and nature of reflective writing needed to be established in 2006.

The self-evaluations that followed the supplied criteria check-sheets and specific questions were less valuable as a learning experience. As suggested by Boud and Walker 1998:193) the criteria sheets seemed to inhibit reflection, leading to 'recipe following' such that students 'work[ed] through in a mechanical fashion without regard to their own uncertainties, questions or meanings. ' The provision of criteria sheets seemed to impede the learning opportunity for students to construct their own understandings of the topic and thus engage more deeply in thinking about constitutes good conflict management skills. Further it also ensured that power remained in the teachers' hands. The opportunity to engage students in the constructions of what makes good conflict management skills and enable student directed learning was missed.

The decision not to provide teacher developed criteria sheets raised the question of how to ensure validity and reliability. Topping (1998), drawing from Devenney (1989), posits that high reliability might not be necessary. This fits with social constructionist understandings of learning, such that the purpose of formative self and peer assessment is rich and meaningful dialogue. Therefore, in order to enable students to engage in reflection, it might be appropriate to dismiss the idea of criteria sheets or checklists altogether. However, these concerns need to be balanced against the objective that reflection results in valid learning. Boud and Walker (1998) warn that reflection must occur within the conceptual frameworks of the subject. It was therefore determined that for 2006 students should be required to develop some guidelines for feedback and reflection, that is points from which discussion can commence and refer back to, rather than having specified criteria check lists provided for them.

Peer Assessment

An important component of this subject is the development of negotiation skills as these skills cross all conflict resolution processes. The negotiation role-play was a complex scenario stretching across a number of weeks. Therefore peer assessment was included in the negotiation activity. Also, as the students were learning negotiation skills, it also seemed appropriate that the process for determining the summative grade should be one of negotiation. This meant they would have the opportunity of experiencing a 'real' instead of 'role play' negotiation, in which issues such as open communication, good listening skills, reframing ideas, interests of other stake-holders and power would all shape the negotiation. In order for peer assessment to provide timely, clear and specific feedback and the opportunity for detailed discussion in a safe environment, time was set aside in the negotiation tutorials for students to provide feedback to each other and to negotiate their marks.

In most cases students did not engage in either a negotiation or a rich discussion of each others' performance. In many cases, students appeared to have collaborated and rewarded each other with top marks. During the tutorials, many students did not engage in open feedback, nor use the criteria set-out on the pro-forma feedback sheet that was provided. As noted above, the self-evaluation essay for this task engaged students in deeper levels of reflection, however most students did not draw from feedback provided from peers. There were some exceptions to this, with some pairs endeavouring to provide each other with constructive feedback and realistic 'scores.'

The major mistake with the peer assessment component of this subject was the mixing of summative and formative peer assessment. Attention was clearly focussed on the mark rather than the feedback. As in Jordan's (1999) and Lapham and Webster's (1999) studies, students tended to collaborate over marks rather than engage in discussion. Since the objective of peer feedback was to provide rich feedback in which students could jointly construct knowledge, the process should have focussed on feedback only. While the idea of negotiating a grade seemed relevant, the process of negotiation is not the same as feedback, and therefore was counter-productive. In addition, an important limiting factor in peer assessment is power. As Brew (1999) explains, having power over each other is unpopular with students. In this assessment scenario it is likely that students may have feared retaliation if they put forward a low mark for their peer. This has resulted in the awarding of very high grades for many students. This raises questions of validity, as it is not measuring the skills or required learning outcomes, and reliability as, depending on the ethics of the students concerned, differing results occurred. An important change for 2006 was to remove the summative component from peer feedback and not to complicate feedback with negotiation.

Another factor that prevented open and constructive peer feedback was discomfort with the process and lack of skills in giving and receiving feedback. For feedback to be effective, Nilan (1983, as cited in Topping, 1998) suggests that the source needs to be credible and the feedback needs to be valued. In this case, even if the peers were adequate in their abilities to give feedback, one constraint might have been the perception that their peers were not credible and that the feedback proffered therefore not valuable. Indeed, a number of studies (as cited in Topping, 1998) suggest that the students perceive peers as unreliable sources of feedback and would rather receive instructor feedback.

Perhaps even more pertinent than perceptions of reliability are the emotions that affect students, particularly anxiety. As Boud and Kilty (1995) explain, each person is vulnerable to discoveries of personal frailty and fallibility. Feelings of anxiety can inhibit both the assessor's openness, who in turn will be assessed, and the assessed's reception of feedback. Consequently feedback and reflection need to be seen as normal, so that students are not anxious about it. To do this Boud and Walker (1998) emphasise the need to build trust in the classroom, but note that this might be easier said than done. They also point out the need to establish some ground rules, particularly the requirement that difference be respected.

In 2005 these self and peer assessment tasks provided a useful first step for improving experiential learning through summative and formative assessment, however a number of significant problems needed to be addressed in 2006. The specific changes to 2006 were to remove the summative component of peer assessment; to change the language from assessment and evaluation, to dialogue, reflection and development; to provide guidance in giving and receiving feedback; not to provide criteria sheets and instead encourage tutorial groups to develop their own guides for discussion points. As in 2005, students' written self-reflections were summatively assessed by their tutor, but the criteria for assessment (reflective writing, not academic writing) was strongly emphasised. The aim was for students to demonstrate to the tutor that they engaged in a process of critical self-reflection and considered and responded to the feedback they received. The number of topics covered was reduced to enable deeper levels of feedback and reflection on the remaining topics. The course focussed on negotiation skills as the major learning outcome as this skill is required in all conflict resolution processes, and six tutorials were devoted to negotiation exercises.

For 2006 students were required to write two short (500 words) and one long (1000 words) self-reflection essays that responded to peer feedback received in class. These self-reflection and peer feedback tasks were in addition to the academic essay which required students to analyse a current conflict, and an end of semester exam.

FEEDBACK FROM 2006

At the end of the 2006 semester, feedback about the role plays, self reflection and peer feedback was sought from all students. Thirty-eight of the fifty-four students enrolled in the subject (70 percent) responded to a short questionnaire that was distributed in the last tutorial. The questionnaires consisted of eight Likert-scale questions about the effectiveness of the role-plays, self-reflection tasks and peer feedback as learning experiences, with space for comments. There were also four specific questions, asking what worked well, what did not work well, what students would change and what students would keep.

Thirty-six of the 38 students who responded thought that the role plays were effective or very effective learning experiences and two thought they were O.K. No students thought they were ineffective. Students reported that they were valuable learning experiences, as opposed to enjoyable tasks, suggesting that a deeper level of reflection and conceptualisation occurred than in previous years. Comments included:

> This was a very valuable way to understand the theory. It's much easier to understand something that you've experienced.
> I found it confronting, however very valuable in learning about myself.

The tentative conclusion that deeper learning took place is reinforced by the responses to the self-reflection requirements, again with almost all students agreeing that they were effective or very effective learning experiences, and no students reporting they were ineffective. Indeed one student reported that:

> I found these to be the most effective exercises in this unit.

Importantly most students reported that their self-reflection skills had improved, with students commenting as follows:

> I have never done any self-reflection prior to this tute, so it made me think about my behaviour, skills and so forth.
> Makes you stop, think and evaluate.

Many comments revealed that the value lay in deeper levels of learning:

> The reflections covered more than two standard essays could.
> It's a great way to recall and critically analyse what we have learnt.

Encouragingly these comments suggest that students have moved further along Kolb's learning cycle to engage in both reflection and reconceptualisation. This conclusion is reinforced by the standard of the self-reflection and development essays which, for most students, demonstrated much deeper levels of reflection than in previous years.

Another encouraging aspect of the feedback from the students was the desire of a few students for more self-reflection opportunities and longer essays:

> There could perhaps be more self-reflections so that students will reflect on each week's material.
> I found that the word limits were too small to properly discuss pertinent issues.
> Perhaps the long reflection could be 1500 words.

The encouraging aspect of these criticisms is that these students were clearly engaged in the process of self-reflection, and that the essays were not constrained by the summative assessment component. However, some important criticisms were received about these tasks. In particular, some students indicated that the opportunity for re-experience after reflection and reconceptualisation was insufficient:

> Another opportunity to do again needed.
> Self-reflection was helpful, however, writing about it as opposed to actually trying to improve is probably not as effective.

These comments reinforce the importance of completing Kolb's learning cycle. While the role-plays attempted to build on each other, offering the opportunity to utilise and further develop skills in subsequent role-plays, this linkage was not apparent to some students. Also, due to time constraints, some students may not have had the opportunity to re-experience. It is therefore important to consider ways to enable all students to re-experience and continue the learning cycle.

Some students wanted more structure to assist with their reflection:

> A better link between theory and role plays is needed.
> Maybe more structure for reflection time.

These comments bring to the fore the difficult balance between empowering students to construct their own understandings and the provision of criteria for this to occur. In view of the 2005 experience with prepared criteria sheets, and noting that few students in 2006 reported a need for more structure and stronger theoretical linkages, it is not appropriate to return to criteria sheets. However, alternative ways to help students to make the theoretical links need to be considered.

The peer feedback was not as effective as the self-reflection. Less than half of the students thought that were able to give effective feedback. Typical comments were:

> Sometimes hard to be direct in a class/peer situation.
> You're always tentative about how they might react.
> A bit daunting – anonymous if possible.
> It is difficult to be too critical of other people in such an open environment.

These comments echo Boud and Kilty's (1995) warning that feelings of anxiety and vulnerability constrain students' willingness to provide frank feedback to each other. While attempts to normalise giving and receiving feedback were made in 2006, they were not sufficient. The idea of

anonymity is important to consider, as it offers a way to overcome anxieties about reaction from peers. However, in this subject it may be difficult to implement as observers are known. Also, the opportunity for rich and detailed dialogue is limited by anonymity. Nonetheless the comment about the openness of the environment deserves consideration, and ways to ensure that feedback is given in a safer environment need to be explored.

Despite concerns about their own ability to give feedback, many students reported that they had received effective feedback from their peers and over 60 percent believed that it helped them to reflect on their skills and practices. An encouraging comment was that:

> Peers learned and improved as we went, which was quite effective.

It would seem that despite reticence about giving feedback, it was nonetheless a useful learning experience. However it can be improved. Comments from students who felt that they did not receive effective feedback from their peers included:

> I felt people either didn't bother giving any or just said you did well, which is not constructive.
> Peer requirements became a bit of a chatting session.
> More structured feedback would have been useful.
> There should be much more time for peer feedback.
> I feel that general discussion of exercises was far more beneficial. It allows for more relaxed discussion.
> I prefer feedback from a third-party.

These comments, again, lead to the dilemma of structure versus enabling students to construct their own understandings, as well as anxiety about giving and receiving feedback from peers. While one student prefers feedback from a third party, this would result in a return to tutor only feedback, losing opportunities for timely feedback and rich dialogue. Consideration needs to be given to how the process of peer feedback can be normalised so that rich dialogue is structured around valid learning outcomes.

The responses to the questions about what went well and what did not go well confirm the comments above, with most students identifying role-plays and self-reflections as activities that went well, while the peer feedback was not as successful. However, in response to the question about what should be kept for future years, despite its problems, most students recommended that peer feedback (as well as the role plays and self reflections) be continued. Comments from students included:

> Keep all.
> Everything was great.
> Keep the peer feedback.

Thus the student feedback is a clear endorsement of the current learning and assessment model. Therefore for 2007 the role plays, self-reflection and peer feedback tasks will continue. However a number of refinements need to be made.

RECONCEPTUALISING FOR 2007

Firstly, there needs to be a much stronger focus on skill development in giving and receiving feedback. The first two lectures need to provide specific instruction in giving and receiving feedback and the first two to three tutorials need to focus strongly on practicing feedback in a safe environment. The class as a group could devise feedback for specific scenarios witnessed on DVDs, and then students could individually practice giving feedback to each other, such as feedback on each other's fashion sense.

Secondly, strategies to deal with feelings of anxiety need to be developed. Boud and Walker (1998) emphasis the need for trust and suggest that some important ground rules need to be established in order to develop trust. In particular respect for each other is an important rule, confirming that students can express themselves intellectually and emotionally and know that such expression is legitimate and accepted. These ground rules need to be developed in the first tutorial and continuously referred to throughout the semester.

Fullerton (1999) suggests that anxiety becomes less of a concern when the purpose of feedback is clearly recognised as contributing to development of both participants. The dialogue about feedback therefore needs to be carefully framed in the language of development and learning, constantly affirming the process as an opportunity.

Strategies need to be developed to ensure that feedback becomes normalised. Normality comes from repeated and continuous engagement in the process. Therefore feedback needs to be a constant in all tutorials. Further, teaching staff need to provide more opportunities for students to provide feedback to them. Times in lectures and tutorials should be set aside for student-to-staff feedback.

One way to ease the provision of feedback is to ask for feedback. Anxiety may be eased if the person requiring feedback were to ask about specific areas in which they would like to improve. Rather than returning to the idea of providing or developing constructed criteria sheets, students should be required to develop their own guides for peer feedback and be required to ask their peers for feedback on self-identified areas of importance. This should result in student directed learning such that students identify and are working within their existing levels of skill, rather than all developing the same set of skills at the same time. This would also personalise the process, so that it is not an open-class or open-group discussion of that student's performance, but a specific discussion, one-to-one and in a safe environment. In order to ensure that students engage in this process, rather than having a chat, each student's personal guide for feedback would need to be submitted with the self-reflection essay for summative assessment.

As some students were not satisfied with the connection to the theory, it would be useful in 2007 to have a class discussion prior to each role play which reviews the theory. General class guides for role plays could be developed from this discussion, and these would provide the basis, or at least a starting point, for students' personal guides. This would then enable both student centred learning and ensure validity such that the discussion occurred within the discursive frameworks of the subject. The general discussion should also consider how the next role plays build from previous experiences, allaying concerns about lack of re-experience.

A number of students suggested that more and longer reflections would be useful. Therefore for 2007, instead of a mark allocated by the tutor for general participation, another self-reflection essay will be required. Rather than setting specific word limits, the word lengths should merely be guides and expressed as a range.

These ideas seek to improve the experiential learning model by providing a safer and normalised environment for peer feedback. An immediate concern, however, is that there is limited time in tutorials. Therefore the tutorials need to be further refined such that there are fewer but deeper engagement in each role-play. This may escalate already existing concerns about lack of opportunity for re-experience. The focus of re-experience therefore needs to be broadened to include experience outside the tutorials. Students should be encouraged to consistently utilise these skills as part of their everyday life; experience, reflect, reconceptualise and re-experience as an ongoing life activity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reflected on the experience of teaching the subject Managing Conflict. It has reaffirmed the value of engaging in role plays complemented by self reflection and peer feedback. The two mutually reinforcing reasons for requiring students to engage in self-reflection and peer feedback have been validated. They are important skills for managing conflict and they also enable students to engage in the important reflection and reconceptualisation stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Further they also contribute to the development of life-long learning skills. Thus, despite the difficulties students encountered in giving their peers frank feedback, these learning and assessment activities, with some refinements, will be continued in 2007.

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