Embedding self- and peer-assessment in an undergraduate generic skills module

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Abstract

This paper explores the embedding of self- and peer-assessment in an undergraduate generic skills module, delivered to all 1st year students in an Irish Higher Education institution. It explores the rationale underpinning a focus on the development of self- and peer-assessment skills, particularly in the context of promoting self-regulated approaches to managing learning for Higher Education. Examples from practice are included to illustrate the activities used to develop students' ability to evaluate their own learning and that of their peers against given criteria. In particular, the importance of scaffolding and support, in the form of guidance, templates and rubrics, is explored, in order to build learner confidence and competence in both giving and receiving feedback.

Keywords

Self-assessment; peer-assessment; feedback; self-regulated learning.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the embedding of self- and peer-assessment and feedback in a 1st year undergraduate generic skills module in an Irish Higher Education Institution (HEI). Although not named as such, the module falls into the category of a 'learning to learn'-style module, implemented in all 1st year undergraduate programmes in the institution in order to develop students' skills in self-regulation of learning for Higher Education. Zimmerman describes self-regulated learners as those who are 'proactive in their efforts to learn because they are aware of their strengths and limitations and because they are guided by personally set goals and task-related strategies' (Zimmerman, 2002, pp. 65-66). As part of the development of a range of skills needed for successful undergraduate study in HE (e.g. team-work, collaboration, problem-solving, time management etc.), the module team designed a range of formative self- and peer-assessment and feedback activities which were interwoven throughout the module 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, 2017). 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 students that they should view themselves and their peers as both producers and consumers of feedback (Andrade, 2010). As such, we aimed 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) from the first weeks of their time as students in Higher Education.

2. Context

The strategies outlined below relate to a 1st year undergraduate generic skills module, implemented in all undergraduate programmes in a HEI (both full- and part-time) following an institution-wide programmatic review process. A key design feature of the module was that it should be embedded within a student's programme of study and that there should be close alignment between the ideas and concepts introduced in the

module and in other modules on their programme; for example the in-class activities and focus of the assessment linked back to the concepts and theories introduced in other modules on their programme. The module ran for a semester (12 weeks), incorporating a mixture of 'episodes' and fortnightly 'café' slots. The 'episodes' were workshop-style events, designed to be highly interactive and participative and involving a range of individual and group activities to embed module concepts and theories, centred around themes such as 'Discovery', 'Challenging Your Mindset', 'Persuasion', 'Teamwork & Collaboration' and 'Writing Your Mind'. While the module was largely delivered in a face-to-face format, students were expected to engage with materials posted on the institutional VLE and to contribute to forum discussions. To complement the workshop-style 'episodes', students were expected to attend a number of drop-in 'cafés' during the semester. The café sessions were designed to be more relaxed, informal and student-led; opportunities were provided for 1-1 discussions with module tutors and for peer interactions and to raise any specific challenges or concerns with the module concepts (or indeed learning challenges generally). Attendance at the café was closely linked to the assessment strategy for the module and learners were expected to complete activities in the café as part of their assessment tasks. As will be explored below, self- and peer-assessment activities were embedded within both the episodes and cafés in order to assist skill development and to provide additional formative feedback.

3. Implementation: examples from practice

Self-Assessment

At multiple points throughout the semester, students were given opportunities to reflect on and evaluate their own skills and competences; self-assessment, as explained by Andrade and Valtcheva (2009, p. 13) is a 'process of formative assessment during which students reflect on the quality of their work, judge the degree to which it reflects explicitly stated goals or criteria, and revise their work accordingly'. One of the most successful self-assessment approaches was the use of the mindset self-assessment template (reproduced in Appendix 1); this activity asked students to identify their key learning successes, as well as current areas of difficulty and to suggest the steps needed to address these difficulties. Students were asked to complete the template reproduced

in Appendix 1 ahead of coming to the café; these templates then provided the basis for discussions on how the student was managing the challenges associated with the transition to HE and any actions that they needed to take to address these challenges. This structured self-assessment activity allowed for students to identify any skills or knowledge gaps at an early stage in their HE journeys and it also offered the module team a useful basis for engaging students in discussions about their learning. Students can sometimes lack the confidence or vocabulary to articulate their learning challenges, and therefore this mindset template offered an entry point to deeper discussions and critical self-reflection.

Other examples of self-assessment tasks embedded within the module include:

- 'One minute papers' to encourage student to capture their thoughts in writing in response to a prompt/question;
- Use of questionnaires and evaluative quizzes themed around key concepts introduced in the module (e.g. motivation, mindsets);
- Short reflective exercises at critical points throughout each episode, to give time and space for students to reflect.

In order to maximise the benefits accruing from reflective and self-assessment activities, many of the approaches described above were combined with formative peer-based assessment activities (following Liu & Carless, 2006; Topping, 1996).

Peer-Assessment

Students were given multiple opportunities to comment on, evaluate, critique and judge each-others work throughout the module. Recognising that giving and receiving feedback is not an innate skill and that learners need multiple opportunities to practice this skill (Egan & Costelloe, 2016), peer feedback activities were highly structured and scaffolded with clear guidelines, templates and rubrics. For example, in order to build confidence in feedback skills, in Episode 2, learners engaged in an exercise whereby they worked collaboratively to propose solutions to a given 'learning challenge', sharing their response visually on an A3 poster stuck to the classroom wall. Students were then prompted to circulate and review each of the posters, attaching feedback

comments on post-its and agreeing as a group which poster proposed the best solution, including a rationale for their decision. This anonymous and group-based activity offered students a sense of security when evaluating their peers by working as a group to develop shared understandings of what 'good' looks like. Later in the episode, learners participated in a paired peer feedback activity whereby they provided feedback on personal learning goals, evaluated using the SMART framework.

Additionally, a peer review of writing exercise was incorporated into the module assessment strategy, whereby 10% of the marks available for the module were set aside for participation in and reflection on a peer review process. Recognising that learners were likely to be somewhat uncomfortable with this process (McConlogue, 2015), we sought to incrementally build skills and confidence in peer review of writing, through the following steps:

- Firstly, students were given a sample essay and asked to comment on the writing, using the module assessment rubric as a guide. This activity was completed in triads;
- Later in the semester, students were given time in class to draft a paragraph of text, in response to a given prompt. This piece of writing was then exchanged with a peer partner and they were then asked to identify one thing that their peer could do to improve the piece of writing, using the assessment rubric to guide the conversation;
- Finally, students participated in a more extended peer review of their draft assessment submission using the template reproduced in Appendix 2.

As part of the assessment strategy for the module, students were required to reflect on the usefulness of the peer review exercise and to comment on the changes made to their writing as a result. Many students commented favourably on the peer review process and noted the benefits that accrued from both giving and receiving feedback. However, students did report that found peer review an uncomfortable process and relied heavily on the rubric and template to guide conversations. This aligns with the literature which suggests that giving and receiving feedback is not an innate skill and requires time,

practice and deliberate skill development (c.f. Carless and Boud, 2018; Price, Handley and Millar, 2011).

4. Conclusions

Our experience of embedding self- and peer-assessment across a 1st undergraduate generic skills module underscores the importance of taking a holistic view of developing feedback skills, offering students multiple opportunities to make judgements, evaluate and give and receive feedback, all with the express aim of supporting students' proactive recipience of feedback (Nash & Winstone, 2017). Ideally, the embedding of generic skills and an associated assessment strategy should be viewed at a programmatic level (Jessop & Tomas, 2017) and thus it is important to consider alignment and how self- and peer-assessment truly 'fits' into the students' learning environment to ensure it is not seen as an 'artificial add-on' (Gielen, Dochy, & Onghena, 2011). While this module was ostensibly embedded within all programmes in a HEI, the extent to which it was *truly* embedded varied; for some programme teams this module was seen as an 'add on', and few programme-level discussions took place in relation to how the competences and skills introduced could be built on throughout the programme, including the application of the rubric or peer-review template in other modules for instance. For other programme teams, however, deliberate consideration was given to how this module could provide the building blocks for later modules, including designing in opportunities for students to further develop their skills in self- and peer-assessment. Consequently, our experience suggests that for generic skills modules to have maximum impact on student learning, it requires a programmatic approach with buy-in from all of the programme team and a resultant move away from a 'silo-d' modular view of assessment, both formative and summative (Jessop, El Hakim & Gibbs, 2014).

Heightening student awareness of multisource feedback from an early stage in Higher Education aims to promote self-regulation of learning and to develop students' abilities to be proactive in their requests for feedback; as such, strategies such as those outlined

above encourage learners to recognise the 'shared responsibility between educators and students' when it comes to feedback (Nash & Winstone, 2017). Our experience supports the literature which underscores the importance of clear instruction/orientation to assessment and feedback tasks to ensure that students fully understand the tasks (c.f. Adachi, Hong-Meng Tai, & Dawson, 2018; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Mulder, Pearce, & Baik, 2014; Zhu & Carless, 2018). This includes the use of templates, guidelines, rubrics, criteria etc. to scaffold learners and to build confidence and competence in the use of self- and peer-assessment to support the development of self-regulation of learning. The module team recognised the multiple benefits and opportunities of self- and peer assessment to support student learning, including the development of soft/transferable skills (particularly the skill of giving and receiving feedback), promotion of active learning by involving students in the assessment process and the development of enhanced understanding of assessment standards and criteria (Adachi *et al*., 2018).

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Appendix 1: Mindset Self-Assessment Template
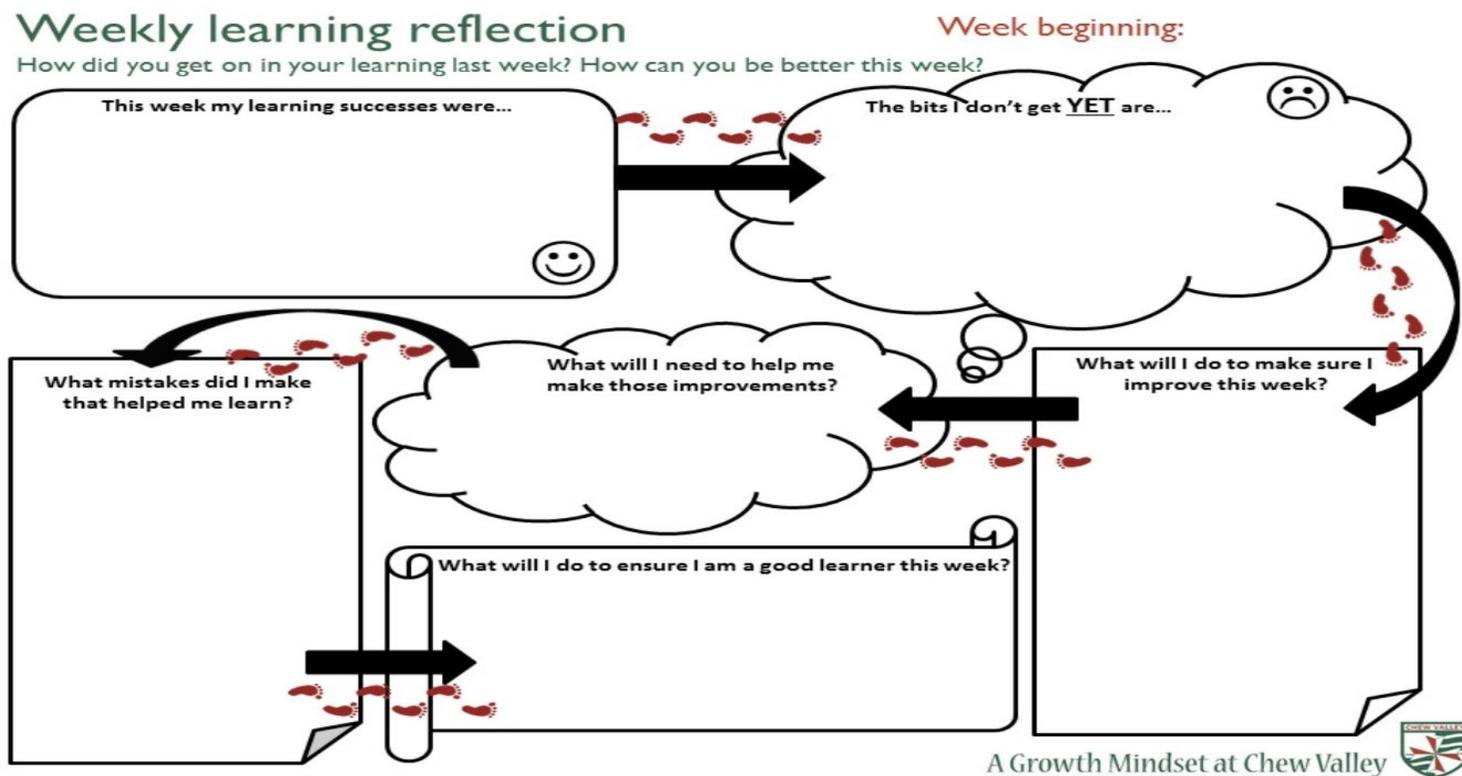
Figure 1: Weekly Learning Reflection (Hildrew, 2014)

Appendix 2: Peer Review of Writing Template

Name of Writer:

Name of Reviewer:

How would you categorise the mechanics and structure of the writing?

Well-written and well-organised	
Badly organised, some spelling and grammar errors	

Additional Comments:

Does the writer talk about their learning successes?

Yes	
No	

Do they identify a *minimum* of four key learning successes? How well are these successes explained?

Does the writer explain some areas that they don't get *yet*?

Yes	
No	

Do they explain well and in detail some areas that they feel they still need to work on? What extra detail could be provided?

Does the writer talk about what they have done and will do to improve these areas?

Yes	
No	

Do they identify some strategies they used to improve their learning this semester? Do they identify what strategies they will implement in the future? Is enough detail provided?

Does the writer talk about what mistakes were made this semester, with regard to their learning?

Yes	
No	

Is enough detail provided? What more information could be included to improve the writing?

Does the writer talk about what their plans are to continue to improve their learning in semester two?

Yes	
No	

Do you think there is enough detail? What is missing?

Does the writer use academic literature to support the points that are made?

Yes	
No	

Is it referenced appropriately using the Harvard Style?

Any extra comments you want to add for the writer?