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Peer assessing composition in higher education

Mike Searby and Tim Ewers

Peer assessment is a relatively new approach, especially in music higher education where there seems to be a resistance to changes which give more control of the assessment process to student and, apparently, less to lecturers. At Kingston University peer assessment has been introduced into a number of modules on the BA (Hons) in music and also the BEd (Hons – music specialism) courses. These include: performance; music, performance and communication (a community based performance project); music and business; and composition. The latter is the main focus of this paper, although some of the observations are applicable to other curriculum areas. The main purposes of the study have been to evaluate student attitudes towards peer assessment, to identify features which have been successful, and to identify features which could be improved.

Peer assessment is a form of assessment where students assess, and give written feedback for, their peers' work. It has been used in higher education for at least the last 20 years; although not extensively, perhaps because of some doubts about its validity. However, Beard and Hartley report that a number of research papers have shown the general reliability of peer assessments in comparison with lecturers' assessments. They also argue that,

Learning to criticise their own work or that of their peers gives students insights into what is required and, presumably, it increases their ability to assess their own performances. (Beard and Hartley, 1984: 276)

Peer assessment is a skill which is of use to students once they are in employment:

Given the importance which employers of all sorts put upon the ability to work as a part of a team, it is important that learners in Higher Education are exposed to situations which require them to respond sensitively and perceptively to peers' work. (Brown and Knight, 1994: 61)

Therefore peer assessment would appear to have a number of benefits for both the student and the lecturer. The following is an account of a research project undertaken at Kingston University to introduce and evaluate the use of peer assessment in the BA in music course which focuses upon composition.

The Pilot Scheme

Peer assessment was introduced in the Autumn of 1992, initially as a way of cutting down on the time staff spent marking compositions, but also to get feedback to students more quickly, as this was a matter of concern for both staff and students. A framework for the introduction of the new method was established in consultation

with the University's Educational Development Unit, and the following guidelines were developed:

- the establishment of a full training programme in appropriate assessment approaches for students;
- the establishment of clear criteria of assessment, which would be negotiated with the student group;
- the establishment of clear and efficient management systems;
- giving credit for the quality of student input in their peer assessment;
- the introduction of a system of moderation and appeals.

These are similar to guidelines found in *Strategies for Diversifying Assessment in Higher Education* by Brown, Rust and Gibbs (1994: 24).

The result of this pilot scheme, which was operated by one member of staff, was that there was little real saving in staff time because of the amount of time spent in setting up and managing the system. This observation has also been made by Brown and Knight:

It is possible that self- and peer assessment can to some extent save time, but this is by no means a simple equation because the energy and effort involved in self- and peer assessment tend to be 'front-loaded'. (Brown and Knight, 1994: 58)

In terms of saving staff time the pilot scheme was a failure, a result which is replicated in a study, at Ulster University, of peer assessment in musical performance (Hunter and Russ, 1996). However, there were other benefits accruing from the scheme. Students had much more time than lecturers to give feedback to their peers, and consequently the feedback was often more detailed than that of the teaching staff; also, it was closely linked to the negotiated criteria of assessment. The quality and usefulness of the feedback was perceived, by the lecturer concerned, to be generally quite high. An evaluation of the pilot scheme showed that the real value of peer assessment is not the saving of staff time but the development of students' critical abilities, which in turn will have a beneficial effect on the quality of their learning and, ultimately, on the quality of their work. Peer assessment inevitably leads to greater self critical awareness, and this is vital for improving any aspect of learning. It is also a valuable way of developing student autonomy in learning, which is particularly relevant to composition. Peer assessment encourages the development of a number of skills, as Hunter and Russ (1996) confirm in the concluding section of their study of peer assessment in performance:

[Final year students] ... have developed skills as assessors: in evaluation, critical judgement, and negotiation. They have learned to work effectively as part of a team, they have gained confidence in expressing their views and articulating those views in written reports in a positive and informed manner.

Similar skills were observed being developed by students involved with the peer assessment of composition project at Kingston.

The funded project in peer assessment

In the academic year 1994–5 a funded research project was initiated in the School of Music at Kingston University developing the use of peer assessment in several of the BA (Hons) areas. The aims of this project were to implement and support systems for peer assessment and to assess the relative success of these systems as well as the

approach in general. Questionnaires were prepared to evaluate students' attitudes towards peer assessment, initially and also after experiencing it in a number of forms.

Working parties were set up to discuss assessment models, and in the area of performance a student working party was set up, giving students a large say in the resulting structure. Elsewhere student input was in the form of whole class discussion and questionnaires, resulting in several of their suggestions being put into practice. Without the support of both staff and students peer assessment cannot be implemented successfully. There had been some unease about its introduction, but positive steps were taken to alleviate those concerns by adapting the process in the light of student and staff feedback.

After discussion in the working parties, and in consultation with the Educational Development Unit at Kingston University, the guidelines for implementation were established as described above. As there were different needs for different subject areas and teaching methods, it was decided that matters of detail should be left to the individual lecturer. This would also create a variety of approaches to evaluate.

Peer assessment has been implemented in composition, music, performance and communication, and performance in years 1 and 2, and music and business in year 2. This article focuses on composition because the peer assessment in this area has been running longer than in any other subject.

One major alteration to the approach used in the pilot scheme was the change from individual to group peer assessment. In the original scheme each student would assess only one composition, whereas in the revised scheme a group of students would assess a small number of compositions. This was decided in consultation with the students, who felt that assessing a number of works was easier than assessing one in isolation. It also allowed for a broader range of views when assessing the work, rather than only one, possibly biased, view. This process took place, wherever possible, in tutorial groups with a tutor present to give advice and reassurance.

Peer assessment training consists of one session discussing and negotiating the assessment criteria to be used, and a second session applying these criteria to recorded examples of students' work which are assessed in small groups with the scores. The students' comments and suggested marks are then discussed by the whole group with the lecturer giving his/her perspective.

The management system for peer assessing composition is as follows:

- each peer assessed work is handed in to the lecturer and initialled to confirm that it has been given in on time;
- it is then marked, using the negotiated criteria, by a small group of students, not including the composer;
- 20% of the marks available for an assignment are allocated to the assessors for the quality of their feedback [this proved to be rather unwieldy and possibly unnecessary, and not all lecturers adopted this procedure];
- a student may appeal against the given mark, although clear grounds must be given;
- all work is moderated by the lecturer, and marks are adjusted where necessary.

Before any form of assessment can take place, criteria of assessment need to be identified, and ideally a set of levels for each criterion. Perhaps, in the past, there has been a reluctance to identify criteria for assessment in Higher Education. However, it is an issue which can no longer be ignored. As Swanwick observes:

Some may think that the whole business of assessment and criteria specification is an unnecessary intrusion into delicate educational transactions. At times this

may be so; but we ought to remember that these devices are a form of contract, a statement of what is under negotiation in classrooms. (Swanwick, 1988: 154)

The following are the criteria agreed by students in their second year of study on the BA composition course, 1994–5.

To what extent:

1. does the work fulfil the requirements of the brief?
2. does the music have a clear shape, structure, and coherence?
3. does the composer develop the musical ideas?
4. does the music show an individual and personal voice?
5. is the music appropriate for the instruments, showing an awareness of texture and timbre?
6. is the notation clear and legible?

This list is not intended to be exhaustive, and certain works might suggest different criteria; but these form a good starting point for discussion. They do not indicate particular levels of achievement; therefore students, when deciding upon a percentage grade, must judge how successfully each criterion has been fulfilled. Green (1990) indicates that the way criteria are used in assessing music is crucial, and that they must take into account the learning process as well as the product, avoiding too mechanistic an approach in the application of the criteria.

In general the quality of the student feedback and application of the criteria was high, and only occasionally did the lecturer supplement them with comments of his own. Students were advised to write comments which were generally encouraging but which included constructive criticism. The vast majority of student feedback reports had these qualities.

Analysis of the assessments

The extent to which the students' marks agreed with the lecturer's moderated marks was also evaluated. A total of 71 pieces of work by students in their second year were peer assessed. In 37 cases (52%) the marks were left unchanged by the moderator, and in 34 cases (48%) the marks were moderated. The difference between the students' and the moderator's marks in these 34 cases were as follows:

- 41% (14 pieces) had under 5% change;
- 53% (18 pieces) had 5–10% change;
- 6% (2 pieces) had 11–20% change;
- 56% (19 pieces) were moderated upwards, and 44% (15 pieces) were moderated downwards.

In 53% of cases (18 pieces) the change made a difference of degree classification, whereas in 47% of cases (16 pieces) it did not. The amount of moderation was relatively small and also indicated that, where the compositions were unusually difficult to assess (for example a piece exploring aleatoricism), there had to be more lecturer moderation.

Simmonds (1988) indicates that, where several groups assess the same compositions, even when clear criteria are used, there are considerable difficulties in achieving a consensus. His findings support the widely held opinion that composition is one of the more problematic aspects of the music curriculum to assess. Therefore the students at

Kingston appear to have produced relatively reliable peer assessments, given the difficulties experienced lecturers sometimes have in the assessment of composition.

An awareness of what makes a good composition should benefit students, but it is very difficult to prove that peer assessment actually improves students' performance in composition or other areas of the curriculum. This is because of a number of factors:

- the probable long term nature of any possible improvement in performance;
- the erratic and irregular student intellectual and creative development;
- the variation in the ability of each cohort.

Therefore statistics of student performance may not be very meaningful if taken in isolation.

However, it is interesting to note that second year students on syllabus A (which focuses on performance), as first year students had a mean of 50.7% in composition, whereas in their second year they had a mean of 56.1% – with the same member of staff teaching in each year. They had a substantial amount of peer assessment in their second year and some experience of it in their first year. Second year students on syllabus B (which focuses on music technology) had less peer assessment in their second year (and also different assignments from those in syllabus A); in their first year they had a mean of 57.3% and in their second year they had a mean of 57.5%, with different members of staff for each year. This might suggest that the use of peer assessment had a beneficial effect on the quality of subsequent work: often students will put more effort into a piece of work if they know it is to be peer assessed than if it is to be assessed only by a lecturer (Hunter and Russ, 1996).

The above offers no absolute proof of the beneficial effect of peer assessment on the quality of subsequent work but it may support other qualitative evidence, such as student and staff evaluation of the process. There appears to be much innate suspicion of peer assessment, therefore positive feedback from students should be seen in the light of initial strong scepticism.

Student and Staff feedback

Establishing the success or failure of peer assessment is difficult because of the different qualities of the individual students and the contrasting teaching methods and course structures. Possibly the best way to gauge the overall effectiveness of peer assessment in the improvement of student achievement is to compare large amounts of statistical information collected over a number of years from similar sized groups working with the same tutor/s and undertaking similar work: but this would be very difficult to achieve; and even then it would have its limitations because, while perceived changes in the results might be the outcome of introducing peer assessment, they could equally well be responses to other factors. This kind of information cannot be collected in isolation, although it may be useful if it confirms other responses.

In order to gauge responses to peer assessment in the short term, and to assess the ability of both students and staff in coping with this system, students were asked to fill in a number of questionnaires, and detailed interviews about the operation of Peer Assessment in 1994–5 were undertaken with all the staff involved. The questionnaires were answered by a first year group of 37 students and a second year group of 22 students (one missed much of the year and could only answer one of the questions). Analysis of questionnaires for the use of peer assessment of composition in both years 1 and 2 yields the following results:

1a. Has your experience of having your work peer assessed in this academic year been : a) very good; b) good; c) acceptable; d) poor; e) very poor?

Composition Year 1 response %	Composition Year 2 response %
a) 6	a) 0
b) 32	b) 67
c) 35	c) 33
d) 24	d) 0
e) 3	e) 0

1b. Has your experience in peer assessing other peoples' work in this academic year been : a) very good; b) good; c) acceptable; d) poor; e) very poor?

Year 1 Response %	Year 2 Response %
a) 6	a) 9
b) 35	b) 64
c) 35	c) 27
d) 24	d) 0
e) 0	e) 0

2a. Have the marks you have received for your peer assessment this year been : a) much higher than expected; b) higher than expected; c) as expected; d) lower than expected; e) much lower than expected?

Year 1 Response %	Year 2 Response %
a) 0	a) 0
b) 30	b) 24
c) 45	c) 62
d) 21	d) 14
e) 4	e) 0

2b. Have the marks awarded by your assessment group been : a) much higher than you thought appropriate; b) higher than you thought appropriate; c) appropriate; d) lower than you thought appropriate; e) much lower than you thought appropriate?

Year 1 Response %	Year 2 Response %
a) 3	a) 0
b) 9	b) 5
c) 79	c) 71
d) 9	d) 24
e) 0	e) 0

3. Has the feedback you received on your peer assessed work been : a) very good; b) good; c) acceptable; d) poor; e) very poor?

Year 1 Response %	Year 2 Response %
a) 0	a) 5
b) 39	b) 52
c) 47	c) 38
d) 14	d) 5
e) 0	e) 0

4. Has the involvement of a member of staff in group peer assessment been : a) very useful; b) useful; c) neutral; d) unhelpful; e) very unhelpful?

Year 1

Response %

a)	24	
b)	54	
c)	16	
d)	6	
e)	0	

Year 2

Response %

a)	9.5	
b)	62	
c)	19	
d)	9.5	
e)	0	

5. Do you think the peer assessment scheme in composition has : a) operated very well; b) needs some minor improvements; c) needs some major improvements; d) needs radical change; e) is unworkable?

Year 1

Response %

a)	8	
b)	40	
c)	30	
d)	14	
e)	8	

Year 2

Response %

a)	24	
b)	76	
c)	0	
d)	0	
e)	0	

When asked to suggest changes, students responses varied widely, but a common theme was that, although peer assessment had some value, perhaps it should not count towards final degree results. A similar observation is made by Rowntree (1977: 149) who suggests that self and peer assessment is more applicable to formative rather than summative assessments. This view, together with the above questionnaire evidence and the opinions of the staff operating the peer assessment scheme, suggests that some students lack confidence in their ability to assess each other.

The lack of confidence is markedly more the case with the first year students than the second, as can be observed in the questionnaire responses. Question 1a, for example, shows a wide spread of opinion in the first year which, in the second year, narrowed to a clear indication of satisfaction with peer assessment. The response to question 1b again shows a generally positive reaction from the second year students to assessing their peers' work (all thought it acceptable or better), and a wider, more uncertain, spread of opinion among the first year students. However, the two groups were different cohorts, and therefore some of the observations could be due to the nature of the groups. Changes in student attitude towards peer assessment will be monitored over two years, which will provide useful additional information.

Both years' responses to question 2a are very similar, with over 75% satisfaction rates with the marks they received. This is also the case with marks awarded to others (question 2b). In response to question 3, the vast majority of both year groups indicated satisfaction with the standard of feedback they received. Question 4 shows a wider spread of opinion among the second year students over the relative usefulness of having a member of staff present in the assessment sessions. This may indicate a growing confidence in the second year students, or, perhaps, dissatisfaction with the type of involvement offered by some tutors (several tutors were engaged in the process). Question 5 confirms second year students' acceptance of, and growing confidence in, peer assessment. A change of opinion over the next year by the first year students would obviously support this trend, and this will need to be monitored.

The members of staff involved in peer assessment were interviewed at the end of the Summer term 1995, and the following is a summary of their observations.

Peer assessment, if it is to be effective, must be very carefully introduced. The first year students must have confidence in the whole process if they are to operate it effectively. This means introducing ideas gradually, and explaining fully the methodology and the safeguards that have been put in place. The members of each new group introduced to peer assessment must work out their own criteria for assessment. A tutor can point out shortcomings, but should not suggest solutions. [The researchers do not entirely agree with this point, as the criteria for assessment must be usable.] If students are to operate the system they must feel that they own it and that they have a stake in making it work. A prepared set of assessment criteria may seem like a great time saver, but inevitably it will result in confusion and a loss of confidence in the system. The students must devise the criteria for themselves.

At Kingston several curriculum areas have criteria of assessment devised by the lecturers teaching those courses. This development, strongly encouraged by the 1995 Teaching Quality Assessment, could be seen as a backward step educationally, because students were not involved in devising the criteria. In their report the team of assessors actively discouraged the use of student generated criteria of assessment.

Conclusions

It takes a lot of time to implement a peer assessment scheme and it may have little benefit in saving staff hours. However, the educational benefits easily outweigh the problems. The principal benefits are that it encourages students (i) to be critical in a positive way and (ii) to have confidence in their opinions. These principles can be applied in many different circumstances, not least in the students' own work: the techniques learned will be invaluable to graduates entering professions in which assessment skills and critical analysis play an essential part.

In terms of student feedback and staff perceptions and analysis, the introduction of peer assessment into a significant part of the BA Music curriculum in 1994–5 appears to have been largely successful. There will always be resistance to new ideas, especially in such a sensitive area as assessment, and where students have to make an intellectually demanding contribution. A considerable amount of adaptation, expansion, and analysis is still needed for peer assessment to reach its full potential in benefits to music education at Kingston University.

Delegates at a recent conference on music teaching in higher education were concerned that peer assessment could disrupt the lecturer's role in giving expert feedback to students, and that it might create problems in dealing with student composers who wanted to explore experimental procedures.

It is essential that lecturers should have opportunities to give feedback to students. This can still happen in performance workshops of student compositions and also in smaller group tutorials. Moderation is another occasion when supplementary feedback can be given if required, and this process can also deal with the more radical student composer whose work may be seriously misunderstood by student assessors (although the latter problem has been surprisingly rare at Kingston).

Peer assessment forces both lecturers and students to think more deeply about what makes a good composition or performance or essay. Reflecting on peers' work must develop the ability of students to reflect on their own work, which should, in turn, improve the quality of subsequent work produced and enhance critical thinking. The introduction of peer assessment at Kingston has had a beneficial effect on students'

understanding of how to evaluate a composition. A similar effect was observed by Hunter and Russ (1996) in the use of peer assessment of performance. Peer assessment has helped to make students (and, perhaps, staff) more aware of the issues and problems of assessment and self reflection, which should be of significant use to them after they have graduated.

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