

Empowering Reflective Practice Through Peer Assessment: A Small-Scale Innovation in a Scottish Vocational Workshop

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Abstract

This report presents a practitioner inquiry exploring a small-scale innovation in a Scottish vocational college. This paper presents the planning, implementation, and evaluation of innovation in teaching practice involving peer assessment in a vocational workshop context. The study aimed to promote deeper learning, critical thinking, and collaborative engagement among students. The innovation was grounded in constructivist theory and Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Peer assessment was implemented and compared with traditional assessment methods to evaluate its impact. The findings suggest that while peer assessment did not significantly affect grades, it enhanced student reflection, confidence, and engagement. Challenges included variability in feedback quality and student discomfort with evaluation roles. Recommendations for future practice are proposed.

Introduction /Background

Framed as a practitioner inquiry, this study investigates the impact of integrating peer assessment into my existing workshop-based teaching practice to enhance student learning and promote deeper knowledge consolidation. This innovation encourages students to critically engage with both their own and their peers' work, fostering self-reflection, critical thinking, and collaborative learning. The peer assessment approach was implemented in a workshop environment where learners typically work independently on simulated electrical installations. The process involved structured peer feedback

sessions where students evaluated each other's work using a guided framework which I created and provided, offering constructive feedback on technical accuracy, safety, and overall quality. This innovation draws on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development, where students can learn effectively with the support of peers who possess varying levels of expertise. By engaging in peer assessment, learners can benefit from their peers' knowledge while providing feedback of their own, reinforcing mutual learning and creating a more collaborative atmosphere. The student group consists of learners aged 16 to 22, many of whom face significant barriers such as socio-economic challenges, low levels of prior academic achievement, and low motivation. These challenges often make traditional teaching methods less effective, highlighting the need for alternative approaches. Peer assessment offers a more engaging and relatable feedback mechanism, as students often respond more positively to feedback from peers of similar age and experience. The primary aim of this innovation was to promote continuous, formative feedback that enables students to refine their work in real-time. The decision to trial peer assessment was grounded in a commitment to learner engagement, feedback equity, and self-directed development. Additionally, it seeks to cultivate a sense of responsibility, ownership, and independence in their learning journeys. By fostering a supportive and collaborative learning environment, peer assessment empowers students to develop confidence, improve their practical skills, and achieve a deeper understanding of the subject matter. (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Topping,

2009; Race, 2001; Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 1999; Gregson and Duncan, 2020).

Review of Literature

Peer assessment is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which proposes that learners actively construct knowledge through experience and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). In contemporary education, this approach is supported by dialogic and socio-cultural models of learning, positioning peer feedback as a powerful formative strategy (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005). This review explores four interrelated themes: the pedagogical benefits of peer assessment, its challenges and limitations, the role of active learning and autonomy, and its integration within broader assessment frameworks.

Pedagogical Benefits of Peer Assessment

The literature consistently highlights peer assessment's positive influence on learning. Peer feedback can be more accessible and relatable than teacher comments, particularly when students are navigating complex ideas (Nicol et al., 2006; Liu & Carless, 2006). This dialogic engagement promotes reflection, self-regulation, and deeper understanding - key principles of social constructivism and the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Peer assessment offers learners opportunities to articulate reasoning, clarify misunderstandings, and co-construct knowledge in a way that fosters metacognitive growth (Topping, 2010; Black & William, 1998).

However, this benefit is not uniform across contexts. While Topping (2009) demonstrates that peer feedback can rival teacher feedback in quality when structured well, he also highlights the importance of developmental and cultural readiness - here, cultural readiness refers to the extent to which the classroom environment fosters mutual respect, trust,

and openness to peer critique. In vocational classrooms - where students may carry negative educational histories or low confidence - successful peer assessment requires careful relationship-building, explicit guidance, and a keen sense of psychological safety (Race, 2001; Moore, 2011).

This interplay between pedagogical theory and learner context is echoed by Gregson and Duncan (2020), who suggest that peer discussion supports the acquisition of "threshold concepts" - those transformative understandings that alter a student's perception of a subject. When situated within a structured, supportive environment, peer feedback can catalyse these moments of insight and promote vocational competence.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite its advantages, peer assessment is not without its complexities. One key concern is the consistency and fairness of student evaluations. While Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) found that peer assessment can closely align with teacher grading, issues such as social bias, group dynamics, and power relations persist. These issues are particularly prominent in small, close-knit vocational groups where friendship networks may influence judgement (Canning, 2011; Race, 2001).

To mitigate these risks, the use of anonymised feedback and moderation processes are widely recommended (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Without these safeguards, peer feedback can become either overly generous or unnecessarily critical, compromising its formative value. Poorly designed systems may also result in superficial or vague comments, reducing the impact of the exercise (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Moreover, although peer assessment encourages students to take responsibility for tasks and give feedback, this doesn't always lead to greater confidence or a stronger sense of personal autonomy. Ecclestone (2000) warns that such growth

is shaped by broader institutional and socio-economic factors. In some cases, learners may feel disempowered by the very process intended to enhance their voice, particularly when feedback becomes performative or poorly contextualised.

The Role of Active Learning and Autonomy

Peer assessment is closely aligned with active learning, which centres on student participation, creativity, and engagement. Scholars argue that true learning emerges when students are given the agency to shape their own learning journey (Drew & Mackie, 2011; Boud et al., 1999). This is reinforced by Biesta (2015), who challenges the dominance of output-driven education and calls for an emphasis on broader educational aims such as democratic engagement, self-awareness, and the development of voice.

Within this paradigm, peer assessment supports critical thinking, collaboration, and learner agency. When students co-construct criteria and engage in evaluative dialogue, they move beyond surface engagement and begin to internalise professional standards and disciplinary norms (Sadler, 2010; Carless, 2006). Yet this potential can only be realised if teachers are willing to share pedagogical authority and foster authentic collaboration. A compliance-driven or assessment-heavy culture may render peer feedback tokenistic rather than transformative.

Lave and Wenger's (2002) theory of communities of practice is particularly relevant here. It conceptualises learning as social participation, whereby students engage meaningfully through observation, imitation, and contribution. Peer assessment supports this by enabling learners to critique and learn from one another's work in a shared domain. However, attention to inclusivity is essential. It is worth remembering though, that students from marginalised backgrounds may find themselves

excluded from these communities, not due to capability, but due to unaddressed biases or cultural disconnects (Gregson & Duncan, 2020; Canning, 2011). Thoughtful design and facilitation are therefore critical.

Integrating Peer Assessment into Broader Assessment Frameworks

To be sustainable, peer assessment must be embedded within wider assessment strategies and curricular design. Lucas (2015) stresses that vocational education must develop meta-skills such as adaptability, resilience, and teamwork - skills that are often best cultivated through peer interaction and collaborative feedback.

A hybrid assessment model, where peer feedback supplements rather than replaces teacher assessment, appears most effective. Race (2001) and Carless (2006) argue that such balance allows learners to benefit from multiple perspectives while maintaining the reliability of expert grading. Feedback in this model becomes dialogic - shaped through discussion and mutual understanding rather than one-directional evaluation (Carless, 2006; Nicol et al., 2014).

Furthermore, involving students in the co-creation of success criteria - as suggested by Macdonald (2006) - enhances transparency, engagement, and ownership. This participatory approach fosters a deeper understanding of what constitutes quality and encourages learners to aim for excellence in ways that matter to them. When learners understand what "good" looks like and are supported to reach it, they are more likely to internalise expectations and reflect meaningfully on their progress.

Peer feedback, therefore, is not merely about evaluation - it is a vehicle for developing conceptual understanding, especially when aligned with threshold concepts and vocational learning outcomes (Gregson & Duncan, 2020). It

must be positioned not as an add-on but as a core element of authentic, formative practice.

As Black and Wiliam (1998) assert, the most impactful feedback is timely, formative, and specific. Peer assessment holds the potential to deliver this—provided it is scaffolded by trust, clarity, and intentionality. When embedded within a socially aware, learner-centred framework, it can transform both the learning process and the learner experience in vocational education.

Methods

Collection of Data

As a teacher-researcher engaging in practitioner inquiry, this study employed a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the implementation of peer assessment within a vocational workshop context. The intervention spanned a four-week instructional unit focused on simulated electrical installations. Two groups of learners were involved: one engaged in structured peer assessment, and the other received traditional teacher-led feedback.

The design of the peer assessment task, including the use of rubrics and training sessions, aligns with the Standards' focus on professional knowledge and inclusive practice. By anticipating diverse learner needs, the intervention promoted accessibility and procedural fairness.

Quantitative data were collected through comparative analysis of rubric-based task performance, assessed at the end of the unit. A detailed rubric covering technical accuracy, adherence to safety standards, and quality of presentation was used by both peers and instructors to provide a benchmark for comparison. In addition to academic performance data, student participation rates and the depth of peer feedback were recorded to assess engagement and consistency.

To capture student perceptions and experiences, qualitative data were gathered via an anonymous questionnaire comprising both closed and open-ended questions. Topics included perceived usefulness of peer feedback, clarity of criteria, and emotional responses to giving and receiving feedback. To triangulate findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of students, ensuring a range of voices across academic ability, confidence levels, and demographic backgrounds.

Analysis of Data

Quantitative data from rubric scores were analysed descriptively, allowing comparison of final grades between the intervention and control groups. While no statistically significant differences in summative outcomes were identified, rubric indicators suggested greater attention to detail and process in the peer-assessment group's work.

Thematic analysis was employed to explore qualitative data from interviews and open-ended survey responses. Themes were identified through inductive coding, revealing key patterns such as increased metacognitive awareness, peer modelling of successful strategies, and the development of a more collaborative classroom culture. Notably, several students referenced peer feedback as more relatable and less intimidating than teacher comments—an insight echoed in the literature (Nicol et al., 2006; Carless, 2006).

The depth and quality of peer feedback were also analysed against established feedback models (e.g., Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), highlighting a spectrum from superficial praise to well-reasoned, improvement-focused critique. Iterative improvement in feedback quality across the unit suggested that structured support had a developmental impact.

Limitations

Despite the benefits observed, this study faced several limitations. First, the dual-instructor environment introduced variation in expectations and delivery style, potentially influencing student responses and engagement. Although efforts were made to standardise the rubric and learning outcomes, instructional style differences may have affected peer feedback quality and group dynamics.

Second, while anonymity was encouraged in the peer review process, it could not be fully guaranteed due to the practical nature of the workshop and the visibility of student work. This visibility may have limited candour in feedback, especially among less confident learners concerned about social repercussions.

Third, some students struggled with the evaluative demands of peer assessment, particularly those with lower literacy levels or limited prior experience in structured reflection. This variability underscores the importance of scaffolding both feedback-giving and receiving processes, especially in vocational contexts where learner needs and backgrounds are highly diverse.

Finally, while data collection was robust for a small-scale innovation, the study's generalisability is limited due to the size and context-specific nature of the intervention. Future research with broader cohorts and longitudinal design would provide deeper insights into peer assessment's long-term impact.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines (2018). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured that involvement was voluntary and would not affect academic outcomes. Best practices around privacy, confidentiality, and participant wellbeing were followed, including anonymised feedback, co-created ground rules, and

safeguarding measures appropriate to the cohort's age profile.

Evaluating the Innovation

The evaluation of the peer assessment innovation introduced in my teaching practice aimed to assess its impact on key areas: improving student engagement, fostering critical thinking and reflection, enhancing feedback quality, and promoting a collaborative learning environment. These objectives, as outlined in Section 1, were guided by a constructivist approach to learning, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This perspective emphasizes that learning occurs most effectively when students engage in social interactions and receive appropriate support from peers.

Given the diverse backgrounds of my students - many of whom faced socio-economic challenges and motivational barriers - peer assessment was introduced to encourage active participation and offer students a more relatable, interactive learning experience. The evaluation employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the innovation's impact.

Student Feedback and Perceptions

The questionnaire results indicated that most students found the peer assessment process beneficial. Many reported that peer feedback helped them identify areas for improvement they had not previously considered, leading to a deeper understanding of the material. Nicol et al. (2006) emphasize that peers often offer explanations in more relatable ways than teachers, promoting mutual understanding and critical thinking. Similarly, Machemer and Crawford (2007) highlight how collaborative activities boost participation and engagement, exposing students to diverse perspectives that encourage deeper knowledge construction.

Students appreciated observing others' approaches to tasks, which helped refine their own work and fostered reflection and self-regulation—key aspects of effective learning highlighted by Race (2001). Comparing their work with peers provided a clearer sense of standards and fresh problem-solving strategies.

One significant outcome was increased confidence. Many students felt more capable of evaluating and improving their work based on the feedback they received. This aligns with Ecclestone's (2000) concept of procedural autonomy, where structured feedback helps students take ownership of their learning journey and develop greater independence.

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Despite these positive outcomes, the evaluation also revealed several challenges. A minority of students expressed concerns about the quality and usefulness of the feedback they received. Some described it as vague or lacking in actionable suggestions, which made it difficult to implement improvements effectively. This finding echoes Canning's (2011) warning that peer feedback can be highly variable and that students often require training to provide meaningful, constructive feedback.

During follow-up interviews, some students admitted feeling uncomfortable evaluating their peers' work. They feared offering inaccurate feedback or potentially offending their peers, which affected their willingness to engage fully in the process. This aligns with Race's (2001) observation that discomfort and lack of confidence can hinder the effectiveness of peer assessment. Addressing this challenge will require additional support and training to help students develop the skills necessary for objective and constructive evaluation.

Quantitative Analysis: Peer Assessment vs. Control Group

To assess the impact of peer assessment on learning outcomes, I compared the performance of students in the peer-assessment group with those in a control group that followed traditional teacher-led assessments. The quantitative data focused on students' final grades and the quality of their submitted work.

Interestingly, the analysis showed no significant difference in final grades between the two groups. This result is consistent with findings in the literature, where peer assessment is often praised for its formative benefits rather than its immediate impact on summative outcomes (Nicol et al., 2006; Race, 2001). While grades did not show significant improvement, many students in the peer assessment group demonstrated a better understanding of critical concepts and reported increased motivation and engagement.

The feedback provided by students in the peer-assessment group was also reviewed to assess its quality. While some students provided detailed, constructive feedback with specific suggestions for improvement, others offered generic comments that lacked depth. This variability highlights the importance of clear guidelines and robust training to ensure that all students can give effective feedback. As Gregson (2020) notes, structured feedback processes help students develop "ways of thinking and practicing" that are essential for mastering complex concepts.

Student Reflections and Perspective Shifts

A recurring theme in the follow-up interviews was the idea that peer assessment helped students view their work from a different perspective. Several students mentioned that the feedback they received often highlighted small technical adjustments or overlooked details that significantly improved their final

submissions. These insights helped students develop a more critical eye, which they later applied to their own work.

However, the interviews also revealed that not all students found the process to be equally beneficial. Those who lacked confidence in their knowledge were hesitant to assess others' work and struggled to provide useful feedback. This reluctance limited their engagement and suggested the need for differentiated support, particularly for students who are less experienced or less confident. Providing these students with additional scaffolding - such as example feedback or peer mentors - could help reduce anxiety and improve their ability to participate meaningfully in the process.

Comparison with Literature

The findings from this evaluation align with several key studies discussed in the literature review. Nicol et al. (2006) and Race (2001) both emphasize the importance of reflection and collaboration in peer assessment, which was evident in the increased self-regulation and autonomy reported by students.

However, the challenge of inconsistent feedback quality reinforces Canning's (2011) argument that peer assessment must be carefully managed to avoid potential pitfalls. Ecclestone's (2000) distinction between procedural and personal autonomy offers an important lens for understanding the varied experiences of students in the peer-assessment process. While many students demonstrated greater procedural autonomy - following structured steps to provide feedback and improve their work - personal autonomy, which involves broader decision-making and self-directed learning, was less evident.

This suggests that while peer assessment can support specific learning goals, it must be part of a broader strategy to develop students' confidence and independence.

This inquiry not only supported learner development but also contributed to my own professional learning journey. In accordance with the Professional Standards' call for critical reflection and ongoing development, the evaluation informed new strategies for learner support and assessment equity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, the evaluation of peer assessment innovation revealed several key findings. While the process did not significantly impact final grades, it contributed to deeper learning, increased confidence, and enhanced student engagement. Peer assessment fostered a collaborative learning environment where students reflected on their own work and gained valuable insights from their peers.

However, the evaluation also highlighted areas for improvement. The variability in feedback quality and some students' discomfort with the process underscore the need for clearer guidelines and additional training.

Future iterations of the peer-assessment process should focus on:

Providing More Robust Training – Equip students with practical examples of high-quality feedback to improve their ability to offer constructive, actionable suggestions.

Improving the Rubric – Ensure that evaluation criteria are specific and easy to understand, reducing ambiguity and promoting consistency in feedback.

Offering Differentiated Support – Provide extra guidance and mentoring for students who lack confidence, helping them build the skills needed to participate fully.

Integrating Peer and Teacher Feedback – Balance peer assessment with teacher input to ensure students receive well-rounded, reliable feedback.

By addressing these challenges, peer assessment can become an even more powerful tool for fostering critical thinking, collaboration, and deeper learning in diverse educational contexts.

Reflections and Professional Learning

Reflecting on the implementation of peer assessment as a formative tool in my teaching practice has provided valuable insights into the nature of learning, the benefits of peer interaction, and the challenges of designing effective learning activities. This process reinforced the importance of creating opportunities for students to engage deeply with the material, reflect on their learning, and collaborate meaningfully with peers.

It also highlighted key areas for improvement, particularly around preparing students for the demands of peer assessment and ensuring a supportive learning environment.

One of the most significant lessons I learned is that learning is an active, reflective process. Peer assessment encouraged students to move beyond passive knowledge consumption and adopt a more engaged, reflective stance. Evaluating their own work and providing feedback to peers prompted students to think critically and gain new perspectives on the concepts being taught. This peer-to-peer interaction not only deepened their understanding but also helped refine their thinking.

However, the process also revealed several challenges, particularly in the variability of feedback quality. While some students offered thoughtful and specific suggestions, others provided vague comments, limiting the overall value of feedback. This highlighted the need for clearer guidelines and structured training on how to give constructive feedback.

Aligning with the GTCS Standards, this innovation demonstrates how reflective, evidence-informed practice can enhance

both student learning and professional identity. By critically evaluating the use of peer assessment and adapting my approach based on learner feedback and sector literature, I have enacted core values of the professional standards - particularly those of collaboration, critical reflection, and commitment to inclusive practice. Sharing this inquiry with colleagues contributes to the profession's collective development and supports a wider culture of dialogue and improvement across the Scottish college sector.

Looking ahead, I plan to share the outcomes of this innovation more widely within my professional learning community. I also welcome opportunities to collaborate with other practitioners exploring formative assessment strategies or seeking to enhance learner autonomy. Further small-scale inquiry projects may investigate how peer assessment can be adapted across other practical disciplines in the college sector, expanding the evidence base for inclusive, student-led feedback approaches.

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