

Incorporating Peer assessment in Students' Academic Learning: Students and Lecturers' Views

Leader Hilongwa¹

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences of students and lecturers on the impact of incorporating peer assessment in students' academic learning, grounded on the premise of the cooperative learning theory which supports that student learning takes place in social settings where ideas are shared. A convenient sampling technique was employed to select the study population. Eight student participants and two lecturer participants were purposively selected to take part in the study. Data was collected through focus group interviews and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that peer assessment may enhance learning and teaching through collaborative learning however, it may also discourage peer learning through ineffective practices of the peer review process. The study recommends educators to create awareness to students on the importance of peer assessment that it is not a competitive activity.

Keywords: Academic Learning; Peer Assessment; Peer Learning

INTRODUCTION


The role of higher education institutions is complex; however, the basic goal is to develop knowledge, skills and critical thinking capabilities in students. In the same vein, for students to become successful, they need to engage in a learning process where educators employ various teaching and learning pedagogical approaches aimed at facilitating this engagement. Among such approaches, peer assessment has been acknowledged as a learning tool through which students can effectively acquire subject content. According to Boud and Falchikov (2007) students are increasingly participating in various assessment methods, with peer assessment being the most prevalent. In their view (Boud & Falchikov, 2007), peer assessment takes numerous forms, notably occurring in group work and often involving feedback. Incorporating peer assessment in the teaching and learning process allows students to engage in discussions, share ideas and become aware of their abilities (McGarrigle, 2013). This type of collaboration fosters a supportive learning environment where students feel empowered to support one another. Equally, the peer-to-peer feedback that emanates from peer evaluation helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses, enhancing a more profound understanding of the subject matter. This discovery not only leads to improved student

academic performance but also develops students' critical thinking skills.

The study explores the effect of peer assessment on students' academic learning specially on how students and lecturers at the University of Namibia perceive peer assessment. Through highlighting both students' and lecturers' perspectives, the study also seeks to determine how peer assessment might contribute to collaborative learning as well as identify the limitations to its effectiveness. Even though some studies (Adachi et al. 2018, Bozkurt, 2020 & Nawas, 2020), confirm the success of peer assessment in raising academic performance, others (Kollar & Fischer, 2010; Strijbos & Sluijsmans, 2010) argue that the practice is still in its inception, contrary to decades of research in this area. In this regard, Ashenafia (2015) agrees that little has been said about how peer assessment can be integrated within holistic educational environments such as collaborative learning, resulting in most peer assessment activities being basic supplements to traditional classrooms.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Formative and summative assessments play significant roles in learning at the tertiary level, where students are interested in how well they are performing academically because of their

¹ University of Namibia, Oshakati Campus, Namibia.  lhilongwa@unam.na

academic conduct. Assessment activities should not only assess student performance but also facilitate learning by helping students recognise what they do and do not understand. Peer assessment is a form of formative assessment where students monitor and evaluate their learning. Although this process has been found to enhance accountability and metacognitive skills, students and educators express concern related to its fairness and implementation. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to present the views of students and lecturers regarding the inclusion of peer assessment in students' academic learning at the University of Namibia. The study seeks to investigate students' and lecturers' views on the usefulness and challenges of peer assessment as a pedagogical tool at university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is anchored on the cooperative learning theory by Johnson and Johnson (1990) and Slavin (2011), which holds that student learning occurs in social settings where students exchange ideas and review each other's work. Van Dat Tran (2013) asserts that cooperative learning has received wide attention because of its significant influence on student learning. Students who are taught through cooperative learning techniques develop academically and socially than those who are taught through traditional instructional methods (Johnson & Johnson, 1990). Alzaid (2017) explains that peer evaluation aims at transforming the roles of students from passive receivers of knowledge from the educator for memorisation and recall to active participants who collaborate and explore to construct their knowledge. In addition, when students engage in commenting on each other's work, the process develops their intellectual ability to make decisions. Moreover, when students receive feedback from their peers, it allows students to receive an array of perspectives on their academic work, which ultimately improves their learning (Alzaid, 2017).

Peer assessment not only cultivates critical thinking skills but also promotes a sense of community within the classroom, where learners feel valued and empowered to contribute to one another's educational journeys (Boud & Falchikov, 2017). Existing assessment approaches undermine the goals of peer learning, which may discourage students from participating in collaborative learning. If assessment communicates to students that only individual

achievement matters and that working with others represents little more than a form of cheating, the potential of peer learning will not be achieved (Boud, 1999).

Benefits of Peer Assessment

Peer-assessment has positive implications for both students and educators (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Educators develop personal benefits from the success of their students. A study by Bangert (1995) on the effects of peer assessment supports the notion that students who engage in peer assessment activities perform significantly higher than those who do not. Other benefits of peer assessment include students taking the lead in their learning and developing presentation skills (Dochy et al., 1999; Price & Cutler, 1995). Furthermore, peer assessment enhances students' critical and independent thinking skills and improves their intrinsic motivation (Falchikov, 1986; McDowell, 1995; Lapham & Webster, 1999).

In their attempt to provide meaningful feedback to their peers, students gain a better understanding of what is most valued in learning and become more precise and effective at evaluating both their learning and that of their peers (Tsunemoto et al., 2022). Students may be more likely to use the teacher's feedback along with peer or even self-evaluation in school settings if they feel that their peers respect and support them. This is more effective at helping students learn than just getting a grade from the teacher (de Sande & Godino, 2014).

Challenges in Peer Assessment

Peer assessment can be challenging to manage, especially when the assessment involves marks or grades and trying to associate peer marks with final performance of an individual student's performance (Gravette & Geyser, 2004). Likewise, if a student is not afforded the opportunity to learn about a grading criterion to assess knowledge or skills gained, awarding a mark may be pointless (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Educators and psychologists both highlight the importance of peers in learning since they are an important part of education in both the classroom and the workplace (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). In their view, regardless of the method of peer assessment employed, students should be able to make meaningful assessments about how close they are to the target.

Furthermore, if students are not competent enough to assess themselves and their peers, they struggle in these activities (Makovskaya, 2022), and the decisions that they make may not align with the suggestions from educators (Cirit, 2021). Students may also encounter challenges, particularly regarding peer assessment, as they may feel anxious in providing grades to their peers (Stancic, 2021). Additionally, students may perceive peer assessment as a competitive atmosphere when evaluating others' performance, leading to distrust in others' opinions and being influenced by negative feelings toward their peers (Tait-McCutcheon & Knewstubb, 2018).

METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative design to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' views toward the integration of peer assessment in academic learning. A convenient sampling method was used to identify the study population from the University of Namibia, from which eight student participants and two lecturers were purposefully selected. Convenience sampling method was used, as it enabled the researcher to select the participants based on their availability (Schutt, 2019). An open-ended focus group interview was conducted to obtain in-depth data

from the participants. The data obtained from the students and lecturers was analysed using thematic analysis. By focusing on the recurring data elements, the study found two major themes, one reflecting the students' and lecturers' positive attitudes towards the inclusion of peer assessment in academic learning and the other highlighting the negative attitudes of students regarding the same inclusion.

FINDINGS

Demographic Information

The study included eight students who were enrolled in a first-year course and two female lecturers who taught those students. The students consisted of four females and four males between the ages of 19 – 24. The lecturers were between the ages of 30-60 and had over 10 years of teaching experience at the tertiary level.

Two key themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the focus group interviews: (1) Students' and lecturers' positive attitudes toward peer assessment in academic learning (2) Students' negative attitudes toward peer assessment in academic learning. Each theme consists of four subthemes, illustrating students' and lecturers' experiences and perspectives of peer assessment.

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes identified from the research findings

Theme 1: Students and lecturers' positive attitudes toward peer assessment in academic learning	Sub-theme 1.1: Peer Learning
	Sub-theme 1.2: Motivation
	Sub-theme 1.3: Positive feedback
	Sub-theme 1.4: Improved teaching
Theme 2: Students' negative attitudes toward peer assessment in academic learning	Sub-theme 2.1: Negative feedback
	Sub-theme 2.2: Peer assessment promotes jealousy
	Sub-theme 2.3: Peer assessment promotes favouritism
	Sub-theme 2.4: Lack of assessment skills

DISCUSSION

Positive attitudes toward peer assessment in academic learning

Peer learning has gained recognition as one of its benefits is that it improves students' academic achievement. The student participants accord significant value to peer assessment because it enhances collaborative learning and less competition, creating more respect for the participants' diverse experiences and backgrounds (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999). Most students dislike learning that is competition-oriented and thus would prefer to learn from each other harmoniously. Students who took part in

this study acknowledged that every classroom had some brilliant individuals. What students found most interesting was that during peer assessment tasks, the least intelligent students had the opportunity to learn from the more intelligent ones. The lecturer participants equally highlight that peer assessment promotes peer learning. Through peer assessment, educators observe how students learn and, by observing, develop ways to improve their teaching.

Student assessors normally correct the assessed students' erroneous answers by writing them down on the scripts they are grading. This exercise makes it easier for the corrected student to see

the marked paper with the right answer there. The student who receives such assessment learns where they are experiencing challenges with the subject matter. This explains why cooperative learning groups promote the transfer of learning among students, leading to increased academic accomplishment. According to Sardareh and Saad (2012), it is through peer learning, where students work together to complete a task, that helps them improve their problem-solving skills, reflect on themselves and proceed to the next level of their learning.

Peer motivation and feedback also surfaced as benefits of peer assessment. Peer motivation greatly assists student learning, since it promotes an environment where students look up to each other which results in students reaching their academic and personal goals. Peer assessment is primarily about feedback, and the main goal of feedback is to assist educators in understanding and monitoring student progress while they are still receiving instruction and to find out where they need to improve. Feedback is also crucial since it helps students see how far they've come and where they need to enhance their learning. However, for feedback to work, it needs to be timely and constructive, to ensure it does not negatively impact students' confidence and motivation.

Negative attitudes toward peer assessment in academic learning

When students have the opportunity to comment on the work of others, it helps build their ability to make intellectual choices and decisions. Likewise, when students receive peers' feedback, it enables them to gather varied perspectives on their work, thereby enhancing their learning (Alzaid, 2017). The student participants in this study demonstrate that not all students appreciate each other's work, especially in instances where the other peer's performance is good. This is what the students refer to as jealousy. The researcher interprets this as academic achievement jealousy, where the assessed student feels that the assessing student does not feel good about assessing a performance higher than their own. The challenge with this is that it creates an environment where the assessed students feel oppressed and the assessor feels powerful to do whatever they want because they have the right to do so. Tsagari and Cheng (1997) point out that, no matter how important peer

assessment is for students' learning, subjectivity should not be ignored, as it would have a detrimental effect on students' learning. Based on these points, supporters of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1990) suggest that educators should clearly outline goals and tasks, encourage teamwork, promote a sense of shared responsibility, and ensure that students take responsibility for assisting each other.

The student participants argue that peers who receive negative feedback from others often perceive it as personal failure. They become victims and fail to understand that some comments are directed at the incorrect answers they have given, which is not to be taken personally. There are, however, assessors who deliberately ridicule their peers. In the process, such conduct encourages negative perceptions of peer assessment as a learning and teaching strategy, making the method ineffective in accomplishing its intended goal. The affected students eventually develop poor self-esteem, which ultimately affects their academic performance and personality.

The participants further expressed that some students make preferences when assessing others. This is often attributed to the fact that peers may assess their friends leniently or award undeserving marks to their friends who should have scored less or failed in an activity. These feelings are consistent with those of Dochy et al. (1999), who state that students are concerned about bias that might occur during peer assessment. Inequity assessments do not lead to educational objectives nor impart the desired education; they rather create false representations of students' academic progress.

Another challenge identified by the student participants regarding their dislike of peer assessment is the belief that peer assessors lack assessment skills. Students generally do not trust others with issues about their learning. This kind of distrust is what Hauff and Nilsson (2022), refer to as one's level of knowledge compared to that of others and the level of trust one thinks other students have in them. In this regard, Dochy et al. (1999) believe that it is inevitable for students to feel less confident in their ability to assess others' work well. The student receiving the assessment may lack the competence or understanding necessary to comprehend the feedback provided

(Boud, 1995). As a result, students do not appreciate other students judging their work.

CONCLUSION

In addressing the objective of this study, the study found that both students and lecturers strongly favour incorporating peer assessment into their academic learning, though with some reservations. Students and lecturers acknowledge the usefulness of peer assessment, citing benefits such as peer learning, motivation, constructive feedback, as well as challenging factors that hinder students from embracing the benefits that come with peer assessment in their learning. These findings demonstrate that, while peer assessment is vital in education, its success depends on addressing students' concerns, boosting their confidence and creating a more conducive learning environment, highlighting the fact that peer assessment is not a competitive activity but rather a strategy for student learning.

REFERENCES

- Adachi, C., Tai, J.H.-M., & Dawson, P. (2018). Academics' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of self and peer assessment in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(2), 294–306.
- Alzaid, J. M. (2017). The effect of peer assessment on the evaluation process of students. *International Education Studies*, 10(6), 159–173. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v10n6p159>
- Ashenafia, M. M. (2017). Peer-assessment in higher education – Twenty-first century practices, challenges, and the way forward. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(2), 226–251. DOI:10.1080/02602938.2015.1100711
- Bangert, A. W. (1995). *Peer assessment: An instructional strategy for effectively implementing performance-based assessments* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of South Dakota.
- Boud, D. (1995). Assessment and learning: Contradictory or complementary. In P. Knight (Ed.). *Assessment for learning in higher education* (pp. 35–48). Kogan.
- Boud, D., & Falchikov, N. (Eds.). (2007). *Rethinking assessment in higher education: Learning for the longer term*. Routledge.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (1999). Peer learning and assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 24(4), 413–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0260293990240405>
- Bozkurt, F. (2020). Teacher candidates' views on self and peer assessment as a tool for student development. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(1), 47–60. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2020v45n1.4>
- Cheong, C.M., Luo, N., Zhu, X., Lu, Q., & Wei, W. (2022). Self-assessment complements peer assessment for undergraduate students in an academic writing task. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 48(1), 135–148.
- Cirit, D.K. (2021). An analysis of self-, peer-, and teacher-assessment within the scope of classroom teaching activities. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 9(S2), 150–163.
- De Sande, J. Carlos & Godino Llorente, J. (2014). Peer assessment and self-assessment: Effective learning tools in higher education. *International Journal of Engineering Education*, 30, 711–721.
- Dochy, F., Segers, M. & Sluijsmans, D. (1999). The use of self-peer and co-assessment in higher education: A review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 24(3), 331–350.
- Falchikov, N. (1986). Product comparisons and process benefits of collaborative self and peer group assessments. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 11(2), 146–166.
- Gravette, S., & Geyser, H. (2004). *Teaching and learning in higher education*. Van Schaik.
- Hauff, J. C., & Nilsson, J. (2022). Students' experience of making and receiving peer assessment: The effect of self-assessed knowledge and trust. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 47(6), 959–971, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1970713>
- Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (1990). *Circles of learning: Cooperation in the classroom* (3rd ed.). Interaction Book Company.
- Kollar, I., & Fischer, F. (2010). Peer assessment as collaborative learning: A cognitive perspective. *Learning and Instruction*, 20(4), 344–348. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2009.08.005>
- Lapham, A., & Webster, (1999). Peer assessment of undergraduate seminar presentations: Motivations, reflection, and future directions. In S. Brown & A. Glasner (Ed.). *Assessment matters in higher education: Choosing and using diverse approaches*. Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Makovskaya, L. (2022). Towards sustainable assessment in higher education: Teachers' and students' perspectives. *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education*, 13(1), 88–103.
- McDowell, L. (1995). The impact of innovative assessment on student learning. *Innovations in Education and Training International*, 32(4), 302–313.
- McGarrigle, J. (2013). Exploring student engagement and collaborative learning in a community-based module in fine art. *Irish Journal of Academic Practice*, 2(1), 1–23.
- Nawas, A. (2020). Grading anxiety with self and peer-assessment: A mixed-method study in an Indonesian EFL context. *Issues in Educational Research*, 30(1), 224–244.
- Price, J. & Cutler, H. (1995). The development of skills through peer-assessment. In A. Edwards & P. Knight (Ed.). *Assessing competence in higher education*. Kogan Page in association with the Staff and Educational Development Association.
- Sardareh, S. A., & Saad, M. R. M. (2012). A sociocultural perspective on assessment for learning: The case of a Malaysian primary school ESL context. *Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 66, 343–353.
- Schutt, R. (2019). *Investigating the social world: The process and practice of research* (9th ed.). Sage.
- Slavin, R. E. (2011). Instruction based on cooperative learning. In R. E. Mayer & P. A. Alexander (Eds.). *Handbook of research on learning and instruction* (pp. 344–360). Taylor & Francis.
- Stancic, M. (2021). Peer assessment as a learning and self-assessment tool: A look inside the black box. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 46, 852–864.
- Strijbos, J. W., & Sluijsmans, D. (2010). Unravelling peer assessment: Methodological, functional, and conceptual developments. *Learning and Instruction*, 20(4), 265–269. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2009.08.002>
- Tait-McCutcheon, S., & Knewstubb, B. (2018). Evaluating the alignment of self, peer and lecture assessment in an Aotearoa New Zealand pre-service teacher education course. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43, 772–785.
- Tsagari, D., & Cheng, L. (1997). Washback, impact, and consequences revisited. In E. Shohamy, G. Lair, & S. May (eds.). *Encyclopaedia of language and education: Language testing and assessment* (3rd ed.). Springer.
- Tsunemoto, A., Trofimovich, P., Blanchet, J., Bertrand, J. & Kennedy, S. (2022). Effects of benchmarking and peer-assessment on French learners' self-assessments of accentedness, comprehensibility, and fluency. *Foreign Language Annals*, 55(1), 135–154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12571>
- Van Dat Tran. (2013). Theoretical underlying the application of cooperative learning in the classroom. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 2(4). 101–115. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v2n4p101>