ADDING VALUE TO THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

KEVIN ROBERTS, SOUTHPORT COLLEGE

Abstract

Peer assessment was used to increase achievement of Minimum/Aspirational Target Grades and potential Value Added Scores as learners were asked to grade exemplar pieces of an upcoming assignment. Assessment criteria, grading grids and definitions of the assessment verbs were available in completing this before being expected to submit their own version of the same assignment three weeks later. Following submission, data were collected via questionnaires, focus group meetings, unit front sheet comments and their own assessment grade. The findings demonstrated that this process was beneficial, supporting learners in achieving better grades, understanding the assessment process and developing assignment writing skills.

Background

Ideally, Further Education (FE) Colleges should provide an environment for achieving aspirations whilst equipping learners with transferable skills for Higher Education (HE), employment and everyday life. Recent FE budget cuts, combined with reduced Guided Learning Hours restrict delivery time for teachers and, inevitably, a superficial approach to teaching can develop. In addition, the impact of time restrictions on curriculum delivery is a bloated content (Sullo, 2009) with little scope for meaningful assessment. This raises questions within my own practice. For example: do time constraints affect learner assessment experiences? Do educators have time to guide learners through assessment processes? Are educators allowing learners the opportunity to develop transferable skills for HE/employment?

Ecclestone (1994) recognised that the approach to assessment is crucial in raising achievement levels, encouraging lifelong learning, reducing anxiety and giving value to outcomes. Hughes and Crawford (2009) and Race (2001) support assessment in the form of comparing current work with previous work (Ipsative assessment). They recognize its potential for enhancing self esteem and motivation, achieving target grades and Value Added scores through improving awareness. Petty supports the importance of involving students in assessment believing they must:

> Understand the nature and qualities of good work if they are to create it themselves.
>
> *(*Petty, 2009:254)

Involving learners supports progression towards *'higher order thinking skills*' highlighted by Bloom (1956) and Anderson & Kratwohl (2001) in their revised taxonomy.

One challenge faced by educators when supporting learners to upgrade submitted work is the amount of work and personal time it takes. Learners often submit work without correctly following criteria or interpreting verbs correctly. This results in referrals, increased workloads for teachers and students and Target Grades not being achieved. These impact on Value Added scores which Ofsted use as a key indicator of effectiveness in FE. This time could be used for planning and developing a deeper understanding of the concepts taught, achieving Target Grades and creating an outstanding learning environment. In a College striving to be 'Outstanding', Value Added is important in ensuring this judgement is achieved. Departments can progress as part of the Self Assessment Report if Value Added is positive, meaning that assessment processes must be improved and fully understood to achieve targets.

The intention in completing this research was to support learners in successfully completing assessment activities through a peer assessment process. The aim of this process was to enable learners to take ownership of assessments by deepening their insight into the requirements at a range of grade outcomes (Pass, Merit, Distinction).

The aim was to achieve three key objectives through the intervention:

1. Enable learners to meet Aspirational Target Grades
2. Develop assignment writing techniques
3. Improve Value Added scores, Achievement Rates and Success Rates.

Action research was selected to allow continuous reflection and scope for deviation where necessary. McNiff (1996:23) describes the process as '*spirals upon spirals'* which is supported by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) whose spiral approach demonstrates how action research can be fluid, open, and responsive. The ability to evolve and develop new lines of enquiry (Corey, 1949) as well as dealing with the here and now (Cohen *et al*., 2007; Koshy, (2010) was appealing. This would allow improvements in practice and understanding from a social and humanitarian perspective (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001). McNiff states that:

> Action research can lead to your own personal development, better professional practice, improvements in the institution in which you work, contributing to the good order of society. (McNiff 1996:8)

Hymer *et al*. (2009) endorse these ideals, recognising that communicating the right values to students could have a profound effect on the future of humanity. Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) also see benefits in allowing practitioners to work objectively helping them determine why constraints are so and that student involvement in collecting information nurtures confidence and determination. This project presented an opportunity to do this and, as pointed out by McNiff and Whitehead:

> It is good practice to take stock from time to time in order to decide how to move forward. (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002:1)

Methodology

The Level 3 Extended Diploma in Sport is assessed using pass, merit and distinction criteria linked to unit contents using verbs such as 'describe', 'explain' or 'analyse' to distinguish between the levels. Twenty-seven learners were issued with exemplar assignments along with grading criteria, a grading grid and definitions of the assessment verbs. Exemplars covered each grade outcome (refer, pass, merit and distinction) and learners sampled each of these. Following this, they had to submit their own assignment three weeks later then participate in data collection exercises highlighting their feelings concerning the intervention.

The following data collection approaches were implemented:

- quantitative - assessment grades
- qualitative - assignment feedback, student comments on the front sheet, student focus group discussions, questionnaires and a research Journal.

Although action research falls with the interpretivistic paradigm it was felt that the quantitative nature of the final grade should not be ignored in determining the outcomes of this research. This, along with five other methods, allowed a wide range of techniques to be used to increase the data for reliable interpretation. Bell (2010) comments that:

> No approach depends solely on one method any more than it would exclude a method merely because it is labelled quantitative or qualitative. (Bell, 2010:117)

The ethical focus of the intervention was achieved by following the simple steps listed below:

- most importantly, the research aimed to improve the situation for everyone involved

- permission was asked of every participant to take part in the data collection
- confidentiality was promised
- data was visible and accessible to all yet stored securely
- all participants knew they had the right to withdraw at any point
- as a researcher I aimed to be transparent throughout the whole process

Evaluation of the data collection methods

Focus groups were beneficial to clarify information and, despite involving greater effort recording correspondence, they provided strong evidence overall. Intentions were to follow pre-arranged questions, however, the approach varied in order to gain viewpoints and clarification on discussion points. The discussion was cautiously facilitated ensuring that responses were not influenced by the facilitator to improve accuracy, and intervention was needed when students talked over each other, allowing everybody the opportunity for input.

In producing questionnaires, Bell (2010:141) lists seven question types of which four were selected; namely open questions, closed questions, selection categories and ranking. Finally, with the questionnaire being so short (Appendix 1), it was possible to ensure that all were collected in improving reliability.

Bell (2010) also identifies the research diary as a valid evidence source for analysis. Its effectiveness in this study was minimal in terms of new lines of enquiry. However, it did back up evidence gathered using other data collection methods.

Finally, front sheet comments were chosen to highlight the feelings of learners with the hope that links to the research questions would be evident. Would they deliver reliable data? Would all students complete them? Would comments provide sufficient evidence? These were

concerns. However some useful insights were gathered.

On reflection, the methods chosen provided useful data to unitise for interpretation and supported the four ‘lenses’ offered by Brookfield (1995) to foster critically reflective teachers.

Results

McNiff (1988) describes action research as ‘messy’ in terms of the data collection, analysis and interpretation. Although experienced, this ‘messiness’ did not cloud the judgments made. Once the data were organized into themes this ‘messiness’ had been overcome and the data could be interpreted. The research questions were vital in identifying themes and unitising the data (Denscombe, 2007:294). This involved ‘coding’ then ‘categorizing’ the codes to identify the following themes:

- impact on target grades
- improved assignment writing techniques
- improved awareness of assessment
- surprises

The data were then arranged to fit into one of the above categories before being interpreted.

Research question 1: Does peer assessment improve personal assignment grades?

Table 1 reveals that 93% of learners in 2011/12 achieved the pass, merit or distinction criteria for their assignment. A substantial improvement compared with the three previous cohorts.

Table 1: Successful achievement at first attempt (2011/12) compared to three previous cohorts.

Year	Number of learners achieving	Percentage increase in 2011/12 in

group	Pass criteria at first attempt (%)	comparison to previous year
2008/09	5 of 29 (17%)	+76%
2009/10	11 of 41 (27%)	+66%
2010/11	8 of 36 (22%)	+71%
2011/12	24 of 27 (93%)	N/A

Although other variables must be considered, peer assessment was only experienced prior to submission by the 2011/12 cohort. The increases shown indicate the benefits that this approach could have on learner achievement. In support of this, Q1 of the questionnaire which focused on the usual assessment experience of the learner reveals that 4% of the 2011/12 learners usually achieve the criteria at the first attempt and 78% at the second. Again, 93% offers justification to the benefits of this approach.

Table 2: Successful Aspirational Target Grade (ATG) achievement at first attempt (2011/12) compared to three previous cohorts.

Year group	Number of learners who met their ATG at first attempt (%)	Percentage increase in 2011/12 in comparison to previous year
2008/09	2 of 29 (7%)	+34%
2009/10	5 of 41 (12%)	+29%
2010/11	2 of 36 (6%)	+35%
2011/12	11 of 27 (41%)	N/A

Table 2 carries out a similar comparison to Table 1. However, Table 2 presents the numbers and percentages of learners who met their ATG

following the intervention. Again the percentage increase in 2011/12 in comparison to previous years supports the view that peer assessment improves assignment grades.

One hundred percent positive responses to Q4, Q5 and Q11 (Appendix 1) offers justification that learners felt the intervention gave an improved insight, made a difference to their assessment experience and believe it should be part of their course. This was backed up with numerous Focus Group comments such as:

- ‘Should be done at the start of the year’
- ‘Clarify differences between a good description and a basic explanation’
- ‘Given more clarity to the assessment paperwork’
- ‘Really helpful’
- ‘Good to point out what info is required in my work’

More support for the view that peer assessment improves grades came from learners attempting more merit and distinction criteria on their first submission. Figure 1 illustrates that twenty-two of twenty-seven learners (81%) normally attempt the Pass criteria at the first attempt meaning that only five learners (19%) usually attempt all of the criteria.

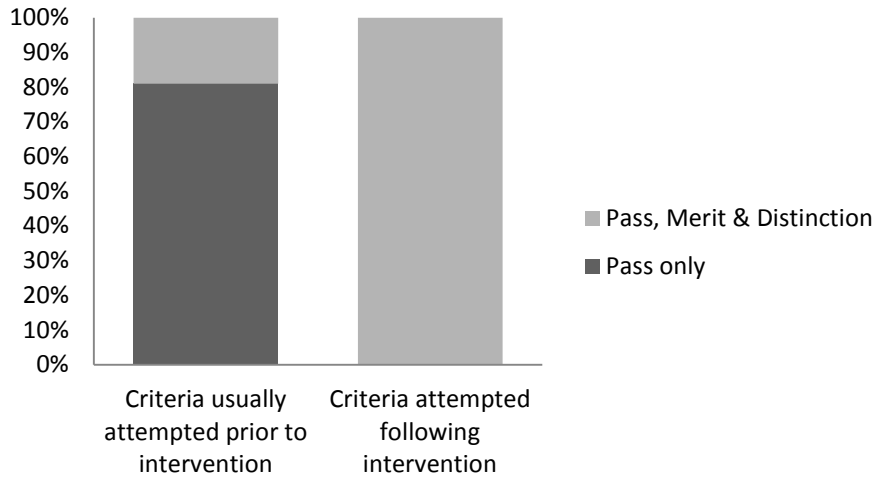

Figure 1

As can be seen, following the intervention, all learners attempted the Pass and Merit criteria (Fig. 1), with eleven of them (41%) attempting Distinction criteria. The Figure 1 data also demonstrates an increase in self confidence as all learners engaged with/achieved the higher criteria. This could be linked to reduced anxiety concerning writing techniques.

Q8 of the questionnaire (Appendix 1) was an open question asking for comments on areas benefitting from the intervention. Responses such as 'Understanding of how it's marked' and 'Went for higher criteria' highlight improved understanding and, coupled with front sheet comments, provide evidence relevant to research question 1. Examples of comments include:

- 'Was easier after seeing last years work'
- 'Made it easier by showing us different work and how it's marked'
- 'Using the Unit Content was really useful for a guide'
- 'Assessment activity helped me to understand this task'

Research question 2: Does peer assessment improve assignment writing techniques?

Figure 2 summarises responses to Q2 of the questionnaire which asked learners if they normally submit assignments to deadline. When deadlines are missed, it disrupts other assignments leading to more missed deadlines, rushed work and a reduced likelihood of meeting the criteria. In contrast to the data in Fig. 2, following the intervention, all learners submitted to deadline which allows more submission opportunities if unsuccessful due to increased time availability. If successful they can then focus on other assignments.

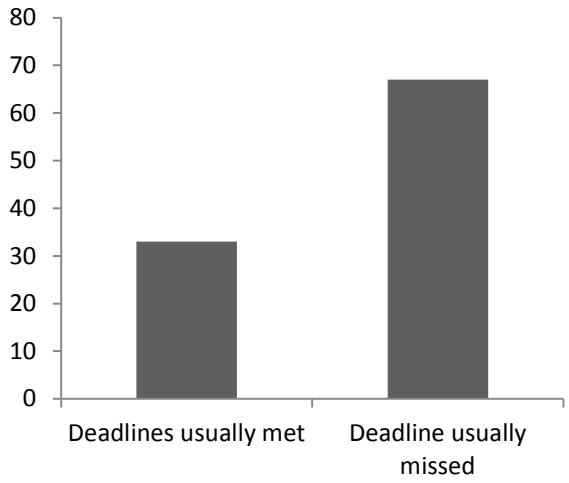

Figure 2.

Responses to Q8 and Q10 of the questionnaire in relation to the benefits of the intervention were positive, for example:

‘improved writing technique’

‘made the assignment easier’

Research question 3: Does peer assessment develop understanding of the criteria and improve Value Added scores?

Ninety-three percent of learners achieving the criteria at the first attempt provides evidence of improved understanding, and these learners are encouraged to resubmit, aiming for higher grades to meet Aspirational Target Grades. Although the impact of this cannot be measured until programme completion, these learners can now focus on upgrading which improves the potential for improving Value Added scores. Also, more learners attempting higher criteria (Fig. 1) increases opportunities for achievement which increases Value Added scores.

Other evidence collected from questionnaire responses and focus group comments demonstrates improved confidence in the learners’ ability to achieve Target Grades:

- ‘now aware of what the assessor is looking for’

- ‘understand how to use the Unit Content and plan out my work’.
- ‘made it easier by showing us different work and how it’s marked’
- ‘First time I have used my ATG as a guide. Hope I have met it’
- ‘Should meet my ATG’
- ‘Went for a D’.

Finally, a journal log (09/12/11) stated that ‘All learners completed the MTG and ATG columns on front sheet to demonstrate a greater awareness of the targets’. This was pleasing as making them aware of Target Grades is a crucial step in achieving them.

Discussion

The role of the teacher is underpinned by social intervention and making a difference to the lives of others. Improving potential outcomes and equipping learners with the essential tools to succeed is paramount and this intervention offers a valid way to achieve that.

The benefits of improved assessment experiences to achievement are supported by Ecclestone (1994:55) who believes it ‘informs learners about their abilities and progress as well as motivating them to want to continue learning’. Emphasis is also placed on ‘all parties being clear about assessment and creating a more positive experience’. In discussing four key areas of good practice when devising assessment strategies, Ecclestone (1994:16) notes that ‘confidence improves when learners are clear about how and why the assessment is used’. These comments underpin everything this intervention stood for and support the findings made.

Involving students in their own assessment is also championed by Race (2001) who states that the following list comprises expected outcomes of peer assessment:

a) Learning experience deepens
b) Allows students into assessment culture
c) Develops autonomy
d) Lifelong learning skills developed
e) Allows learners to gain more feedback
f) Minimises assessment drudgery
g) Encourages reflection
h) Enhanced performance in traditional assessment

Each of these outcomes are evident from this intervention and demonstrate the implementation of active learning. This supports the works of Hattie (1999) and (2009), Marzano (2001) and Petty (2004). Marzano (2001) and Hattie (1999) go on to say that active learning leads, on average, to a grade and a half increase in the final outcome. Similar findings were made in this intervention, suggesting that peer assessment should be incorporated into the curriculum at all levels.

Hattie (2009) also produced evidence concerning the factors that really had an impact upon student learning and achievement. The findings lend support to the interpretations of the data gathered in this study with feedback ranking as the number one influence, peer tutoring ranked ninth and peer effects ranked fourteenth. Each of these factors carried an above average effect size which means that they have ranked amongst the more positive influences on learning and achievement.

The findings from this intervention lead the researcher to consider potential curriculum changes to be made, culminating in the following question:

Should the peer assessment approach be made an integral part of the learning programme?

Based on the results gathered and interpretations offered it is obvious that there is an opportunity to have a major impact on the learners experience of assessment, the grade achieved and even the workload of the assessor with a relatively small change to the current approach. Carrying out the peer assessment early in the learning programme would be beneficial and it is also worth implementing across a number of different units to help them understand what is expected of them. It could be used to give an insight into a particular assessment method that they are unfamiliar with, to help them determine the differences between the assessment verbs or to help them plan and structure their work better.

Allowing learners an insight into the perspective of the assessor whether through the suggested approach or another should result in a positive outcome as recognised in this study. Aside from the benefits highlighted already, this could result in a greater distance travelled on the learning journey resulting in improved value added scores, progression data, survey results and self assessment rating.

Conclusion:

This piece of action research posed the question of whether peer-assessment, in the form of sampling, could have a positive effect on student achievement therefore increasing Value Added scores. The results suggest these variables can be positively influenced through the suggested approach. Learners demonstrated greater understanding of the criteria and assessment verbs leading to predictions of improved Value Added scores for this cohort.

This approach could also help alleviate time constraints. Better writing techniques and understanding of criteria would reduce submission attempts and stress for students, enriching their experience and giving teachers more time.

The increased focus on Target Grades and Value Added scores combined with constraints due to cuts create a pressure situation for practitioners and learners. This can lead to values underpinning the

educational environment being sacrificed. Peer-assessment would empower learners to take ownership of assessments, qualifications and future grades. It also helps practitioners and institutions achieve targets impacting on Self Assessment Reporting and future Ofsted grades. If adopted college-wide it could be a major factor in progressing toward an 'outstanding' judgement which is highly sought after in the FE sector.

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