

**Peer Survey as a Group Assessment Component**

**Authentic Assessment**

**By**

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## **Outline of the Initiative**

A peer survey component was introduced to the team assignments in the Graduate Business School of Griffith College, Dublin, during the second semester of the 2010/2011 academic year. The modules *Corporate Responsibility: Business Ethics* and *International Operations Management* which form part of the PG dip in International Business Management both assessed through team projects and included a peer survey element for the first time.

This initiative falls under the category of Authentic Assessment.

## **Motivation for the Introduction of the Initiative**

As a teacher and a specialist in business ethics, I have long had concerns about the effectiveness of group project assessment and in particular how fair it is and how fair it is perceived to be. Since it is posited (Trevino et al 1999) that perceived fairness is a key indicator of whether employees regard a company as ethical, it is fitting that fairness is of particular concern for assessment of this class. My concerns led me to research group assessment methodologies for the Level 9 award in Training and Education. This research opened my mind to new ideas and best practice examples.

A further spur to action was student feedback at the November 2010 course committee meeting of the Graduate Business School (GBS). Student representatives expressed frustration with what they saw as the unfairness of assessment with regard to team projects. They felt that some students who were less focused on high marks were taking advantage of other students and that there was an unfair division of labour. Notes from the meeting regarding this issue were recorded as follows:

*A team mark versus a team component mark for the team plus an identification of individual contribution – as long as it doesn't become a series of three or four individual pieces of work and one common piece written at the end by one person – the marking scheme has to preserve the team or group nature of the project.*

Following the meeting I made a proposal to the GBS Academic Advisor that a peer survey element could be introduced to the two modules in which assessment took place through team projects, *Corporate Responsibility: Business Ethics* and *International Operations Management*.

## **Planning for Implementation**

I wrote to the *International Operations Management* lecturer suggesting that we collaborate on incorporating a peer survey into the assessment of group projects recommending a jointly facilitated classroom session covering the following as dictated by my research:

- Discussion on the difference between a group and a team
- What characteristics make a good team member (we would ourselves agree what we need out of this beforehand)
- Pick out the most important characteristics which would form the basis of a survey for team members to fill out about each of their fellow team members and also to rate themselves
- Agree and document with the class what the criteria are for someone being excellent, good, average, below average, poor for each chosen characteristic (by the way not suggesting this has to be the 'grading' system, for illustration here)
- Use the outcomes to create the survey forms that we would both use to provide input into the group grade
- We could suggest that teams may want to make the outcome of the group discussion the basis of a team contract

Over the following month we developed our thinking, planned the joint session with the PG Dip groups and found a slot in the timetable. Time constraints and practical considerations meant that some of our initial plans for facilitating the development of the peer survey with the students themselves – best practice as indicated by the research – had to be watered down or removed, for example the development of a team contract.

We spent a great deal of time clarifying our own thoughts and discussing the characteristics we felt would be important to include in the survey and how we would guide the discussion in relation to the evaluation of different criteria e.g. what was Excellent as opposed to Good. This effort proved to be invaluable both in helping us guide the students' development of the survey but also in helping me facilitate a much shorter session with the part-time class. The part-time students were available only in the evening and no additional time could be found to give them a separate session. In addition the only group project this class was submitting in the semester was for my subject. Due to timetable constraints I had to facilitate a short session with them prior to the session with the full-time students which I would have found very difficult to do without the prior planning discussion.

## **Implementation**

We facilitated a session to explain the initiative and develop the peer survey criteria with the students (see Appendix A for class plan). The completed document of all criteria (see Appendix B) and a worked- through example was posted on the intranet. The worked-through example was included to provide clarity for all on the process and to ensure that students who had not been present could understand what was required.

At the end of the project students were required to fill out a survey form for each of their team members and one for themselves. As well as awarding a grade for each of the criteria, students were required to write a comment in order to make them think about their justification for the grade they were awarding. They sent the completed survey forms to the relevant lecturer. Their self-survey did not count towards their mark but was intended to encourage reflection on their own performance. The combined result awarded by team mates made up 30% of a student's grade for the team project as research demonstrates that this kind of initiative is seen as mere lip service unless a substantial proportion of marks are assigned to it (Biggs and Tang, 2007 p.219 citing Morris, 2001, Boud et al, 1999).

Each student received a feedback sheet showing the combined mark awarded to them by their team mates for each criterion and the overall percentage this represented. This offered a degree of transparency in the process but for reasons of confidentiality the comments were not shared.

### **Benefits of the Initiative**

To date I have done no formal evaluation of the success of this initiative. Anecdotal feedback indicates that students do at least recognise that there is an effort to mark group work more fairly. Comments made by students on the peer survey forms or in e-mails to me also indicate that they found it a difficult but realistic task and that they reflected on what was required to evaluate fairly,

"I thought long and hard about it"

"I would feel much better about writing a glowing report, but if I do that then I am not being honest or true to myself"

"This project was a real life situation"

"This CSR project was a mirror of my real work situation"

The self assessment part of the survey appeared to encourage useful reflection in some students with comments which showed recognition of their own shortcomings such as not giving enough time to review colleagues' work or not being assertive enough with underperforming colleagues, for example.

It was reported to me that the external examiner had "commented enthusiastically on the format and outcomes of the CR BE module" but unfortunately, due to other work commitments, I could not be present on the relevant day to discuss specifically the assessment strategy. A clear benefit is the ability of the GBS to demonstrate responsiveness to feedback and input from the

student representatives. Another possible benefit from this kind of exercise is a greater appreciation by students of the challenges their tutors face in marking work and giving considered feedback.

### **Challenges of the Initiative**

Introducing this was not without its challenges, some of them only a challenge in the initial introduction but some will present ongoing difficulties.

In the planning stages it was very difficult for the other lecturer and I to get time to discuss this as we both have other work commitments. Finding a slot in the timetable early in the semester that suited both of us and suited the students involved was difficult. Other lecturers helped by being flexible to allow us engineer a slot. It also meant that we had to be paid for two additional teaching hours which of course has a financial impact. Since only some subjects have group projects the financial impact is little and is outweighed by the positive effect of student ownership of the survey criteria. However this is a consideration for educational institutions.

The forming of teams early in the semester is an ongoing problem as is late arrival of some students. Ideally teams should be formed before the session to discuss and develop the peer assessment criteria but it becomes an absolute necessity if one wants to include enhancements such as the development of a team contract.

Since I could not get additional time with the Part-time class I had to do a cut down version of the criteria development as already described. Despite being more experienced in the workplace the Part-time class did not appear to handle the peer survey as well as the Full-time students. For example, nearly half of this small class neglected to do a self survey until prompted and many neglected to fill in all comment boxes as required. They were less focused on the criteria in their comments. Was this because they didn't get the specialized facilitation or was this related to other issues? I have no way of knowing. But it does seem strange that a more mature audience with more work experience had greater difficulty with this task.

Getting the completed surveys from all students was challenging. About 30% required follow up by me and sometimes more than once. As well as creating a lot of extra work for me it also worries me that students who were chased to submit surveys may not have spent enough time reflecting on the task to do it really well.

The *International Operations Management* lecturer encountered a problem when one group gave each other excellent grades on all but one characteristic. She discussed this with me and we agreed that she should speak with the group outlining that we had discussed that perfection in all areas was unrealistic and requesting them to fill out the surveys again in a way that

reflected their actual experience. The comment box on each characteristic was helpful as she could tell the group that the comments made were similar to other groups' comments where they had marked Good or Fair. This situation also demonstrated the benefit of having two lecturers collaborating on the peer survey project as we were able to discuss and agree a common approach to any difficulties.

The inputting of grades for each criterion was extremely time-consuming and tedious. It also required a great deal of checking as mistakes were so easy to make. So doing this is a significant workload for the lecturer.

Many students awarded much higher grades than the finished projects would appear to merit and overall there were far more grades at the excellent or very good level than I as a lecturer would expect. Low performing teams that liked each other tended to mark much higher than would appear to be justified. As I wrote to the Academic Director at the time:

One flaw in the peer survey system is that a team that gets on well and agrees everything may give each other a higher score than the finished work merits which happened with team (X).....However from a learning point of view I have made this clear to them in the detailed feedback sheets which they will receive.

So the question we need to ask is whether the benefits of the fairness and transparency and the learning and reflection achieved by carrying out the task outweigh the possibility of students getting a somewhat higher grade than deserved. I believe they do but that we can also fine tune this kind of assessment to achieve grades that are a truer reflection of reality. It's interesting to note that as indicated in the research (Lejk & Wyvill 2001), good people tended to underscore themselves and the not so good to over estimate their contribution. The feedback showing the collated scores awarded to them by team colleagues should therefore be useful if taken on board. Some students also appeared to treat the self assessment as a way of talking themselves up or defending themselves, maybe a response to what they feared would be negative feedback from their team mates. Since the self assessment scores did not count towards their grade it is interesting that they felt the need to do this.

The feeding back of marks was also made more complicated by this initiative. Previously a single group feedback sheet sufficed for a group project and could be posted in a group forum on the college intranet. By including a team work score based on the team survey each student now had to receive a feedback sheet and also the combined marks for each criterion so that they would have transparency about the scoring without compromising confidentiality.

I did not hear any reports of subsequent problems in groups due to people being annoyed with team members about the peer survey scores that they were awarded but we must recognise

that this could happen and it that it could be necessary for a lecturer to moderate a discussion with a group.

### **Future Plans**

I intend to use this peer survey exercise in the assessment of the group project in future semesters. If possible I would like to develop the team contract with teams but this may be constrained by the timetable.

I would like to do a structured survey of participating students to get their reactions and hopefully make the process even better. To really understand if this is a better way, it would be necessary to survey students engaged in a group project without the benefit of such peer assessment as a control group.

I suspect that more in-depth research of cultural reaction to group projects and the fairness of marking might yield some interesting results. For example do students from more collectivist cultures have the same concerns about fairness in the marking of group projects and do they see any necessity for a peer survey element in group project assessment?

The college directors have indicated willingness to invest in developing or purchasing some technology to make the peer survey process easier for both tutors and students and to enable this practice to be rolled out across other departments in the college that assess through group work.

### **References**

- Biggs, J. & Tang, C., 2007. *Teaching for quality learning at university : what the student does* 3rd ed., Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press
- Boud, D., Cohen,, R. & Sampson, J., 1999. Peer Learning and Assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 24(4), 413-26.
- Lejk, M. & Wyvill, M., 2001. The Effect of the Inclusion of Self Assessment with Peer Assessment of Contributions to a Group Project: a quantitative study of secret and agreed assessments. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 26(6), 551-561.
- Trevino, L., Klebe, L., Weaver, G.R., Gibson, D. & Toffler, B. 1999. Managing Ethics and Legal Compliance: What Works And What Hurts. *CALIFORNIA MANAGEMENT REVIEW*, 41(2), 131-151.

## **Appendix A**

### **Class Plan**

#### ***Lecturer Introductions –***

Who we are, Background, Subjects we'll be teaching

#### ***Reason for session –***

Importance of teamwork in the workplace

Part of the grade for the team projects will be decided by the marks given by team members to each other. Give example to make this clear.

Our desire to help them achieve a good mark and to have a useful team learning experience



Session today to develop the criteria for the peer survey which we will use to mark participation in team work – they are going to decide the criteria and marking themselves.

Explain that this is to ensure all students are marked as fairly and transparently as possible. Desired outcome – a fair marking system

***Discussion –***

What is the difference between a group and a team? Chart up answers

***Discussion –***

What characterises an effective team member? Chart up answers

***Characteristics of an effective team member –***

Agree with class a distillation of the charted up characteristics that is representative (something about referencing and researching from proper sources must be one of the characteristics).

Chart these up to left of whiteboard explaining that we want to use these characteristics as the basis of a peer survey that will be used to mark each individual's contribution to the team.

***Setting the grade for each characteristic –***

Present the grades Excellent, Very Good, Fair and Poor and write these up along top of board so that we now have a grid.

Discuss and agree what characterises each grade for each criterion and write it on the board so we now have a marking grid for them to use in judging the input of their colleagues.

Explain that we reserve the right to mark down on the characteristic associated with referencing and sources if it is clear from the finished piece of work that this is poor even though all team members have given each other high marks for this

***Completing the Peer Surveys –***

Lead a discussion about being honest in the feedback even if it feels uncomfortable.  
What are the problems with giving someone a better grading than they deserve? Denies

them the learning and feedback, they unfairly get awarded more marks even if they did not contribute as well as others.

As managers they will have to make judgements in performance reviews and in feedback to employees so it is important to be able to think about making fair and accurate judgements.

Explain that comments will be required on each criterion and that this is to encourage reflection on what is a fair grade for your colleague. It is to prevent just ticking a box.

***Team contract –***

Explain the concept of a team contract and invite them to do this in their teams if they wish.

***Next Step –***

We commit to post a document showing all the criteria and grading descriptions as agreed in the session.

## Appendix B

Criteria	Excellent	Very Good	Fair	Poor
<b>Delivers what is promised in a timely manner</b>	Always delivers on time	Delay has no impact on the overall delivery	Delay or delays with some impact on overall delivery	Delay or delays with significant impact on overall delivery
<b>Attends classes and participates</b>	100% attendance with excellent participation (e.g. taking good notes, taking part in exercises in class, asking relevant questions)	85% - 99% attendance with excellent participation	75%-84% attendance with participation	<75% with or without participation
<b>Quality of technical elements of work produced*</b>	Referenced fully and using Harvard System with quality sources	Referenced fully and using Harvard System with quality sources with minor rework	Some accurate references and good sources, some weak references or weak sources with some rework required	Weak referencing, poor sources (e.g. wikipedia) with a lot of rework required
<b>*Note that if team members have been awarded high marks for this criterion we reserve the right to mark down in the event that the project referencing and sources are actually poor.</b>				
<b>Quality of Content of work produced</b>	Excellent analysis of key issues and inspirational application of key theories covering full scope of questions asked	Very Good analysis of key issues and very good application of key theories which addresses questions asked	Fair analysis of key issues and fair application of key theories but which does not address all issues or full scope	Poor analysis of key issues and poor application of key theories
<b>Meeting attendance and contribution to the meetings</b>	100% attendance at meetings and actively participating	Misses 1 meeting but participates actively otherwise	Misses up to two meetings or doesn't participate actively in meetings	Misses more than two meetings and/or lacks participation
<b>Good Communication with respect</b>	Proactively communicates, actively listens and asks for contributions	Sometimes proactively communicates, actively listens and asks for contributions	Communicates but mostly when prompted	Doesn't communicate actively
<b>Feedback</b>	Always gives constructive feedback respectfully, using the feedback	Mostly gives constructive feedback respectfully, using the feedback	Sometimes gives constructive feedback respectfully, using the feedback	Rarely gives constructive feedback or does not give it respectfully

	sandwich (positive, constructive critique, positive)	sandwich	sandwich	
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