Chapter 4
Enhancing University Students’ Interaction and Learning through Formative Peer-Assessment Online

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ABSTRACT
This chapter draws upon data collected from a Swedish project with the aim to implement and evaluate peer assessment/peer review in online and distance education in the context of higher education. Previous studies of peer assessment in on-campus settings are discussed with a focus on what impact these findings had on the design of the peer assessment element. Findings from a distance course with 60 students, in which peer assessment and peer assessment preparation was carried out through asynchronous text-based communication in FirstClass, are reported. Data are collected from multiple sources and analyzed with the aim to find out how peer assessment element worked in this asynchronous text-based environment. The results indicate that the students’ engagement and collaborative efforts in general was high. The overall conclusion is that peer assessment could be worth exploring further as a tool to enhance student collaboration and learning in courses based on asynchronous text-based communication.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I will share some experiences from a joint project between the Departments of Education at Umeå University, Mitthögskolan and Luleå University, Sweden. The aim of the project was to implement and explore what peer assessment in the form of peer review contributes to enhancing the students’ learning in online and distance courses. Assessment in this article is understood as described by Sadler (2008, p 2) as: “…the process of forming a judgement about the quality and extent of student achievement or performance, and therefore by inference a judgement about the learning that has taken place”. Although peer assessment/peer review has been researched by many others in on-campus environments there seem to be fewer studies on how this element works in an online and distance education setting.

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Our first step towards understanding how peer assessment could be organised in this context was to design a peer assessment element based on ideas gained from previous studies of peer assessment and peer assessment preparation, which we tried to fit into our existing online and distance courses. An important key to enhancing the quality of peer assessment/peer review, as will be further presented in this chapter, seems to be the opportunity for students to share, interpret and discuss criteria in order to gain a deeper understanding of their tacit dimensions.

The common means for communication in our online and distance education courses are postings on asynchronous message boards. But how would this method of communication work in the context of peer assessment?

In this chapter I will present some of the background studies we carried out before we designed and implemented the peer assessment element in a course within a special needs teacher training programme and also report some early findings from the project.

- Are there any signs that the interaction with other students had any impact on the students’ understanding of criteria?
- Did the students value the peer assessment element and consider it to be of any importance for their learning process?
- How did the students judge that the text-based communication worked for negotiating meaning? What strengths and limitations can be identified?

**Current Challenges in University Education**

Recent developments in information and communication technology (ICT) have literally brought the University into our homes. For example, figures from 2005 show that 17 percent of all American students in higher education, or more than 3.2 million persons, took at least one online course at a degree granting institution during the autumn 2005 (Allen & Seaman, 2006). The Open University in the United Kingdom provides online and distance education for around 150,000 undergraduate students and more than 20,000 postgraduate students (QS Top Universities, 2008).

The same trend is visible in Sweden, where all universities provide distance and online courses and programs through the Swedish Net University (Swedish Agency for Networks and cooperation in Higher Education (NSHU)). Statistics from 2006 show that as many as every fifth student in higher education, which means around 77,000 Swedish students, were registered on courses at the Swedish Net University (NSHU, 2008).

Courses and programmes offered partly or entirely through ICT create flexible opportunities for students to conduct higher studies at the location and the times which are best suited to fit with other commitments in their lives. Students of today are expected to become autonomous, independent and self-directed learners who take responsibility for their own personal and professional development (e.g. Stefani, 1998; Sainsbury & Walker, 2007), thus changing the educator’s role from expert to coach and facilitator.

Sociocultural and constructivist theories of learning are often consulted when setting the scene for the active learner with their situated approach to learning and emphasis on learning as a collective activity in a cultural context. Simultaneously, we are experiencing a trend towards extremely fine-grained approaches to measuring student achievements (e.g. Sadler, 2005). This may seem paradoxical as the idea of being able to find methods to make an absolute valid judgement about the level of someone’s knowledge and skills derives from positivist theories and as such is questionable in this context (Orr, 2007).

This means that teachers in online and distance education are facing a challenging task to meet the demand to provide high quality education for highly heterogeneous groups of students by means of fairly new technical solutions, whose
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