Chapter VII
Issues in Peer Assessment and E–Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses some issues relating to the use of e-learning tools and environments for implementing peer assessment. It aims to weigh up the opportunities and the challenges that are offered by considering peer assessment for learning and peer assessment of learning. In doing this, reference is made to some of the general issues that arise in implementing peer assessment in higher education, as well as to the functionalities of e-learning tools and environments, and the characteristics of those who use them in this context (teachers and students). Discussion of opportunities focuses on strategies for peer assessment available from tools and environments that are categorized as pre-Web 2.0 (and continuing) technologies, Web 2.0 technologies, and ‘other tools’. Consideration of challenges focuses on the characteristics and requirements of teachers and students as users. It is concluded that opportunities outweigh challenges, particularly in relation to peer assessment for learning, but that peer assessment of learning is more challenging and likely to be more limited in uptake because of the expectations that are placed on users. It is also noted that the capacities offered by Web 2.0 technologies for peer-based relationships and interaction with content present both an opportunity and a challenge which may have future implications for the role of the teacher and for supporting a reconceptualization of how evidence used for peer assessment of learning is presented and judged.

INTRODUCTION

The use of peer assessment in e-learning environments raises a number of issues, not all of them related to reliability and validity. Unpacking these issues requires consideration of the nature and purposes of assessment, examination of the nature and functionalities of particular e-learn-
ing tools and environments, and consideration of factors affecting the teachers and students who use them. In relation to the nature and purposes of assessment, the statement by Rowntree (1977) that assessment is an interaction which is aimed, to some extent, at knowing another person, foreshadowed a view that has become influential in recent years, suggesting that assessment is about more than the measurement of performance, which in turn raises issues beyond those associated with reliability and validity. Serafini (2004) identifies three paradigms of assessment: assessment as measurement, followed historically by assessment as procedure, and thirdly, assessment as inquiry. It is in relation to the last of these that students may become involved in taking an active role in assessing their own learning and that of their peers in a wide variety of ways. This may also require a change in teachers’ perceptions about their own roles as they collect information about students’ learning in order to inform subsequent teaching and learning activities. Students’ involvement in this process is frequently related to the formative function of assessment in improving learning, rather than to its summative function in establishing the quality of learning by making judgments based on the application and verification of standards. However, students may also be involved in summative assessment of the performance of their peers.

The chapter addresses these functions in relation to peer assessment and e-learning in order to consider some of the associated opportunities and challenges, and their implications for assessment practice, including their implications for reliability and validity. This requires exploration of the functionalities of different kinds of e-learning tools and environments and of some of the factors impacting on their use by teachers and students. In this chapter, the implementation of peer assessment for e-learning includes use of the networked environment as a medium for undertaking assessment tasks and/or for peer communication about assessment, as well as the use of electronic tools which may or may not make use of a networked environment, where peer communication does not necessarily occur electronically. In particular, it will focus on whether the opportunities outweigh the challenges for one or both of these functions of assessment. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the value of e-learning tools and environments in relation to peer assessment for learning and of learning, commenting on how this compares to peer assessment in a face-to-face environment and noting the potential implications that Web 2.0 technologies offer for supporting a reconceptualization of how evidence for assessment is presented and judged.

BACKGROUND

Peer Assessment

Roberts (2006, p.6) defines peer assessment as ‘the process of having the learners critically reflect upon, and perhaps suggest grades for, the learning of their peers’, distinguishing it from group assessment in that ‘students assess each other’s learning, even though the learning may have occurred individually, or at least outside of any formal collaborative groups.’ However, this does not exclude assessment by or of students working in groups.

The above definition accommodates the use of peer assessment for learning (by the peer assessor through critical reflection, by the peer who is assessed through the feedback provided, and by both through the communication involved) and assessment of learning (through its use in grading). Many teachers may encourage the former use of peer assessment more readily than the latter because of concerns about reliability, validity and practicality when peer assessment is used summatively. In doing this they would also be reflecting recent views about assessment which focus on its value for learning (e.g., Boud, 1995a, 2007; Carless, 2007), involving the idea of
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