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Second teaching cycle:
Self and peer assessment
Overview of the module

My second teaching cycle was carried out during the delivery of the elective module, Commercial Property, Planning and Environment. I designed and delivered the bulk of this module for the first time a year ago, incorporating some changes to the syllabus for this teaching session. Eight students opted for this module this year, and all have completed the compulsory module, Property Law & Practice. The elective module builds on the knowledge of practice and procedure developed during that course. There is a marked range of ability in the group, which, on the basis of their performance in the compulsory subjects examinations, includes the weakest and the strongest student of this year’s LPC cohort.

Rationale and aims

All the elective modules are short, intensive modules delivered over ten weeks, summative assessment being a single three-hour written exam at the end of the course. Students do not have the opportunity to attempt a mock exam. In common with students responding to the National Student Survey, those who undertook this module last year commented to me on the fact that opportunities for feedback on their performance were limited (Williams and Kane, 2008). They were uncertain as to how they were progressing with their learning and would value some more formal formative feedback during the module, in addition to discussion and questions in class, particularly given that there is no mock exam.

Furthermore, the Written Standards for training set down by the Law Society indicate that students should be able to learn from experiences on the LPC and experience in practice (Solicitors Regulation Authority, 2004). To that end, the Written Standards state that students should:

1) be able to reflect on their learning
2) be able to demonstrate an awareness of the limits of their own knowledge and skill
3) know when and how to ask for assistance or specific supervision
4) be able to identify their future learning needs.

Having completed my first teaching cycle, I wished to address what I perceived as a lack of engagement on the part of students in determining for themselves their own areas of weakness. I decided to address these issues simultaneously during my second teaching intervention.

The aims of my second teaching intervention were therefore:

- To provide students with formative feedback during the CPPE elective module;
- To encourage self-assessment skills and learner autonomy;
- To promote learning through peer feedback.

**Brief review of the literature**

Formative, as opposed to summative, assessment offers students an opportunity to improve their understanding and reflect on their own learning and progress (Bransford et al., 2000) and there is a case for building such feedback or “feed­forward” into practice (Juwah et al., 2004, Bone, 2006, Sprack, 1998). Seven principles of good feedback practice have been identified and include the development of self-assessment and reflection, the encouragement of teacher and peer dialogue, clarification of what “good performance” is and opportunities for students to improve their performance, as well as giving information to teachers that can help shape teaching (Juwah et al., 2004). It has been suggested that in order to maximise the effectiveness for students of formative feedback on learning and understanding, certain matters should be addressed in presenting that feedback: it should be given in good time, with a specific purpose in mind, and relate to performance criteria (Knight, 2002). It is also crucial that comments provide the learner with guidance for their future development, which is appropriate and easily understood.
Students need to develop their metacognitive capabilities to improve their ability to recognise their strengths or knowledge limitations in the context of solving new problems, and a more sophisticated level of metcognition is associated with the development of expertise (Biggs, 2000, Bransford et al., 2000) and the notion of professional legal development (Sprack, 1998). The practice of self-assessment, supported by peer feedback can be a means of developing metacognition allowing students an opportunity to engage with the process of learning from a different perspective, deepening their own understanding and providing a formal space for reflection on one’s own performance (Bransford et al., 2000, Knight, 2002, Liu and Carless, 2006).

Empirical studies have differed on the efficacy of peer-assessment in practice (as discussed by Nilson, 2002-2003, Liu and Carless, 2006) and a number of explanations have been proffered as to the reason for weaknesses, including subjectivity in peer-marking, where students may be biased toward or against certain classmates, a lack of subject knowledge which prevents effective feedback and a low level of effort in the feedback process (Nilson, 2002-2003). However, peer-feedback can enhance the development of effective learning through self-assessment (Juwah et al., 2004), increasing confidence, improving understanding and developing social and professional skills (Hamer et al., 2007). Students are actively engaged in the process, and are able to benchmark their own performance against that of their peers, developing critical faculties, as well giving an insight into what other students have done well or the types of errors which should be avoided (Race, 2001, Hamer et al., 2007).

The teaching intervention

During the course of the module students were required to complete, as homework, three separate pieces of written work. Having done so, they were required to complete a self-assessment grading sheet, giving themselves a score against certain defined criteria and completing some open questions in relation to quality of the work and areas for improvements (Appendix 5). The assignment and the self-
assessment sheets were handed in to me at the beginning of the next class. During this session, I handed out “points to note” containing the issues which should have been addressed in the assignment, together with another grading sheet (as above) and set aside time during the session for each student to provide written feedback on the work of a peer. It was intended that this process would be anonymous, with feedback given and received by candidate number rather than name. I then marked the work of each student and returned the grading sheets to them. The forms did not include a final “mark” but instead provided feedback on performance in relation to defined criteria, with general comments on strengths, weakness and areas for improvement.

Thus for each of three written assignments students:

- Completed a self-assessment sheet;
- Completed a peer-feedback sheet;
- Received a feedback sheet completed by a peer; and
- Received a feedback sheet completed by me.

Copies of each of the completed feedback forms (self, peer and tutor marked) are attached (Appendices 7, 8 and 9).

Having marked the third assignment, students were invited to discuss the grading sheets with the peer who had commented on their work.

**Implementation of the teaching intervention**

The majority of students completed each assignment and self-assessment sheet on time. All those attending the class willingly completed the peer-feedback sheets, providing comments on the work of a peer. They also took the time to review the comments provided by both the peer and the tutor. Due to absence, not all students were in fact able to provide or receive peer feedback for every assessment, and not all completed every assessment. This process did require some re-organisation of
class time, reducing the time for in-class exercises on new topics by around 20-30 minutes. This reduction was overcome by providing certain materials in advance of the session, allowing students to arrive prepared, thereby maximising the use of class time.

Evaluation

At the end of the teaching cycle, I sought feedback on the self- and peer-assessment exercise in the form of a short questionnaire (Appendix 9). Seven out of the eight students completed an evaluation form (Appendix 10).

Of those who responded, the majority of students found that receiving feedback from peers on their work was a useful learning exercise for them (71%, Figure 2). A smaller majority also found that giving feedback to peers was a useful learning exercise (57%, Figure 3). The majority of students who found it useful to give feedback also found it useful to receive feedback. Only one student indicated that giving feedback to peers was a useful learning exercise, but that receiving feedback was not. Further comments on the peer and self-assessment processes were in the form of open questions and are discussed below.

The assessment sheets which were completed during the teaching intervention were based on grading criteria on what was essentially a 1-5 scale. Four of the criteria related to content and the rest related to use of language, structure and
presentation. I separately analysed the grading criteria for scores for content and for scores for language and presentation given by each student (a – h) on the self-assessment sheets, against the scores given by the tutor for those elements (Figure 4). A negative number indicates that a student gave a lower score than the tutor, underestimating their own performance, whereas a positive number indicates that the student overestimated their performance. I carried out the same analysis for peer-feedback versus tutor feedback (Figure 5).

Whilst few conclusions can be drawn from such a small sample size, this analysis does suggest that many students are overly-critical when carrying out self-assessment, as compared with providing peer feedback. Having reviewed the data against final grades in the compulsory subject examinations, I made an interesting observation in relation to student performance. The data suggest that stronger students are more likely to mark themselves more harshly, as compared to tutor assessment, than weaker students. In the main, stronger students are more generous in the feedback given to their peers than weaker students, although one student in particular gave consistently harsher peer feedback than any other.

The evaluation form also asked a number of open ended questions. When asked “How did you find the process of carrying out self-assessment?” some students
indicated that they were uncomfortable with the process and were overly critical of their work, for example:

- Don’t enjoy it. Don’t want to mark myself too low, but don’t want to mark too highly as I’m not sure whether I’ve met the requirements and don’t want to assume it is really good.

Another response indicated a level of capacity for self reflection:

- I find that I factor in my “effort level” when assessing the completed work. For example, if I have spent ‘time’ and prepared thoroughly I am more likely to give myself higher ‘grades’. Arguably, I therefore do not actually assess my ‘output’ but ‘input’.

Self assessment was seen as “really useful” to gauge performance, when used in conjunction with tutor feedback as “an authoritative standard”. Other identified benefits included increased motivation in completing the assignment: “it does make me try harder doing homework”.

As noted in the brief literature review above, subjectivity, effort and lack of knowledge on the part of students have been seen as barriers to effective peer feedback. Comments made by students in their responses on the evaluation forms mirror this perspective:

- As a close knit group it’s difficult to remain objective.
- When an experienced tutor marks work, that counts for more than a mark given by a student that maybe has failed multiple assessments. I know it’s harsh, but it’s how I see it.
- I find it quite difficult that candidates not as good as me mark my work down. It’s hard to take the feedback too seriously.
- I do not feel comfortable criticising other’s work especially when I am not completely sure if it has met the criteria or not

However, the literature also iterates the value of enhancing the learning process for students through the practice of peer assessment, and the majority of comments received confirm that many do find it a useful process for developing their own
understanding: “Helps to better evaluate your own work”; “it makes you more confident in the areas you are sure of” and:

“I enjoy assessing the work of others and actively looking for the strengths and ‘weaknesses’ (areas of opportunity!) in the completed task. I find this can be a beneficial process that reinforces my understanding of any specific area.”

One student also noted that the ability to give feedback in a positive way would be useful beyond this course of study: “Useful tool to have for the workplace”.

Receiving feedback from peers was also a useful learning exercise for the majority of students in the class, who valued the perspective that another student provided, indicating their willingness to review their understanding in the light of comments made by others, for example:

• Think others criticism of me is good as it gives a different perspective and tells me things that I have missed.
• To gain a different perspective and insight.
• To see how others perceive your work/style.

One student remained focussed on the relevance to exams: “Because in a way it is almost as if you are getting direct feedback from an examiner”.

Conclusions

To determine whether this teaching intervention was a success I return to the stated aims, which were:

• To provide students with formative feedback during the CPPE elective module;
• To encourage self-assessment skills and learner autonomy;
• To promote learning through peer feedback.

Students received formative feedback at several stages during the CPPE elective module, engaging in their own learning through the peer and self assessment
process, with tutor feedback providing a “standard” against which to compare their own assessment. Whilst a number of students found it a challenging exercise, the comments regarding the self-assessment exercise indicate that students had engaged with the opportunity to reflect on their own performance and understanding. This process was enhanced by the peer-feedback exercise, which the majority of students found to be a useful learning tool: they were able to engage more deeply with the material by reviewing the work of a colleague, and receiving feedback from their colleagues encouraged additional reflection on their own work.

I also asked students for suggestions for changes to the self and peer feedback process as implemented in the teaching cycle. One response was emphatic: “Peer assessment? Personally I’d scrap it”. However, some made suggestions for improvement which will be useful to implement next time I use this approach. Recommendations for changes to the use of self and peer assessment in this way would include:

- Preservation of anonymity, although this is difficult in such a small group, to avoid issues of lack of objectivity and the discomfort some students experienced in being identifiable as the marker;
- Additional guidance for self-assessment, including handing out the “points to note” before the self-assessment sheet is completed.