

LSIS Practitioner Enquiry: Improving students' essay-writing skills and longer response answers through online peer marking

LSIS Research



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Background and context

This study took place simultaneously in two colleges in the East Midlands. One study focussed on AS level Sociology students; the other upon AS level Chemistry students.

AS Level Sociology students are required to write five essays under exam conditions to achieve the qualification. This is something that they can find difficult, boring, and confusing. The students involved in the trial were primarily 16-18 years old, who did A-level sociology or A-level chemistry alongside two or three other A-levels, in a further education (FE) college.

Normally, the way students learn how to write good essays is through individual feedback written by the teacher on their essays, and by writing/copying A-grade essays as a class.

This seems to help only a few students improve their skills, and the marking workload for a teacher can be enormous. Moreover, teaching and learning is becoming ever more dependent on information learning technology (ILT), and the students are comfortable and keen to use ILT in their studies.

AS level chemistry students are not required to write essays but there is now an increasing emphasis on longer response answers in the examinations. Many of the students under perform on these and struggle when it comes to revision, perhaps due to a lack of available similar past questions.

So the aim of our investigation was to use ILT to enable students to mark one another's essays and longer response answers and suggest improvements. We felt this should reduce the teacher's

marking workload, improve students understanding of essays, longer response answers and mark schemes, as well as being an enjoyable and novel way of learning.

Starting point

We collected initial data through written, anonymous questionnaires. We asked students about their ability to differentiate between good and bad essays/answers; how well they felt they could produce high quality essays/answers; whether they valued and followed their teacher's feedback; and how they felt about the prospect of online peer marking.

The survey revealed that students felt moderately able to tell a good essay/answer from a poor one, but few felt that they were able to produce good quality essays/answers. The students also said that they

valued and tried to follow their teacher's feedback, however their main concerns about the prospect of peer marking were that students might not mark accurately, and that cyber bullying or embarrassment could ensue.

We therefore decided to issue all students in the experimental group with pseudonyms so that their identities would be protected, both as the marker and the student whose essay was being marked. The study was implemented using two AS sociology classes whose results were of a similar standard in the January 2010 examinations. One class was chosen (at random) to be the experimental group, and the other class would be the control group. Two classes of 20 chemistry students also took part with a further group acting as the control.

Teaching processes and strategies

Every two weeks, both sociology groups were set the same homework task of writing an essay, (sometimes accompanied by some short answer questions). When the essays were handed in, the control group's essays were marked by the teacher and given back to the students in the normal way (so they only saw their own work).

Meanwhile, the experimental group's essays were scanned and uploaded onto a purpose-designed online workspace, used for free through <http://pbworks.com/>. These essays

were not marked by the teacher, but by other students in the class, who gave marks out of 20, along with feedback in the form of praise and areas for improvement.

The students in the experimental group had one week to mark and give feedback on four students' essays, meaning that every essay was marked by four students. The role of the teacher was to oversee students' marking, and to mark a few (three to four) essays each week so that students could see whether their marking level was in line with the teacher's marking, thus providing an element of standardisation/internal verification.

This happened for a period of five months, at the end of which, students sat another exam; the results of this exam were compared with the results of the exam which was sat at the start of the trial, to see whether any noticeable improvement had taken place.

Both the control group and the experimental group then answered another anonymous survey, which asked many of the same questions as the initial

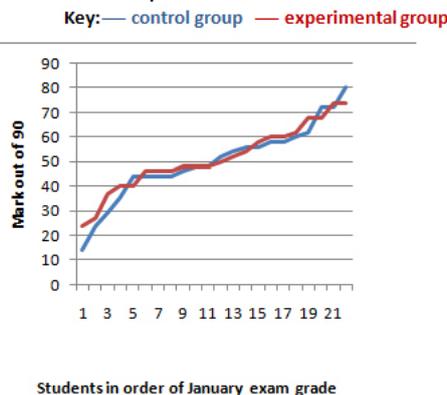
questionnaire, as well as asking the experimental group about whether they enjoyed the experience, and whether they thought it was useful to them.

An almost identical process was used with the chemistry students although formal scoring was not used. Time restraints of study leave and examinations also reduced the amount of time available to approximately seven weeks.

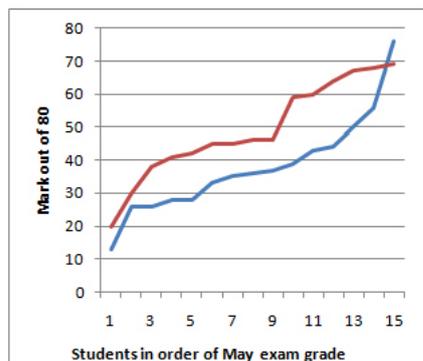
Impact

As the graphs show, the new online peer marking approach had a clear effect on the sociology students' ability to write high-quality essays. The sociology students also felt a little more confident than the control group in their ability to produce good essays, and they felt they had made more improvements to their essay-writing skills over the previous five months than the control group felt they had made.

Lower attaining students were the least likely to complete the peer marking tasks (in line with their general lack of work completion) however, the lower ability students who



January exam results – scores out of 90
 Average score of control group: 48
 Average score of experimental group: 51



May exam results – scores out of 80
 Average score of control group: 36
 Average score of experimental group: 49

did complete the peer marking were the ones who benefitted most from the experience, as shown by the improvement in their grades.

The experimental group was also asked about how much they enjoyed the new learning methods, and how useful they felt it had been for them. Most said they enjoyed the experience and found it useful. Comments included:

- I liked seeing what was needed on the mark scheme, so I could apply these to my own essays
- It was useful to read other people's essays
- It was good to get a few opinions on my essays instead of just one
- I found it beneficial to read how other students wrote about points I may have struggled with
- Knowing the marking scheme was useful, and allowed me to give out reasons why the essays

were good (or bad!)

But some did not feel that they had particularly enjoyed the process of marking others' work and having their marked by others. Negative comments included:

- Some people marked inaccurately or did not mark others' essays at all
- Sometimes I think they rushed it and just wrote any mark. Teachers would put more effort in
- Some students aren't thorough and their marks can't always be trusted, so it wasn't clear how well you were actually doing
- There was a clear difference in the quality of advice and this made it very difficult to improve when being marked by a student

The impact of the new approach on the chemistry students was assessed in a different way. The students were asked to score their

perceptions before and after the activities had been completed of their ability to score marks on longer response questions, their understanding of the mark schemes, their ability to revise for longer response questions, their enjoyment of longer response questions and their information technology (IT) skills. As the table below shows, students who had used the online peer marking site at least once rated themselves considerably higher on most of the categories than before. The control group and students that did not participate showed much smaller gains.

As with the sociology students, many of the chemistry students spoke positively of the benefits of the online peer marking approach, commenting for example:

- It helped me to learn, seeing how other people presented the correct answers
- It gave me an indication of where I needed to improve
- I think it helped me in realising how much I needed to know when checking other answers

But many felt that the approach hadn't helped them, saying, for example:

- I prefer to use my time to study content (rather) than longer response questions
- I don't feel that reading others' answers can help me improve
- It didn't help; learning mark schemes is more efficient than reading mixed levels of answers
- I prefer other methods of revision

% increase in students' own perception of self Participating students				
scoring marks on longer response questions	understanding longer mark schemes	revising for longer response questions	enjoying longer response questions	IT skills
21.6	24.7	22.7	6.9	-4.4
% increase in students' own perception of self Non Participants				
scoring marks on longer response questions	understanding longer mark schemes	revising for longer response questions	enjoying longer response questions	IT skills
8.3	3.9	10.4	5.1	-2.0

Conclusion

While the sociology students' enjoyment of the peer marking activities was not overwhelming, the marks of the exams sat in January and May provided compelling evidence: the experimental group showed a clear and consistent improvement of 10 marks (on average), compared to the control group, who showed little or no improvement.

The chemistry students' self-assessment exercise similarly indicated that the peer marking activities were worthwhile, although their written comments on the whole seemed to contradict this. All students were invited to offer suggestions to improve the activity in future and further

investigation utilising these is now ongoing. In particular, students were keen for the activities to be based within the college Moodle rather than externally and to include published mark schemes.

Further reading

You can read more about peer assessment in Inside Evidence – the evidence bulletin for busy professionals in the learning and skills sector: www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=195275

If you are ready to carry out your own small scale enquiry, research tasters will help you plan your approach and link you to the evidence. You can find them at: www.rtweb.info/ls

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