Grading classroom participation through peer assessment: perception and experience of marketing students

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Abstract: This paper reports the marketing students' perception and experience of grading classroom participation through peer assessment at Curtin Sarawak. This assessment strategy was introduced with a desire to improve class participation and increase student involvement in assessments. At the end of three semesters, a questionnaire was used to gather responses from a sample of 117 students about their opinions on the peer assessment practice. Students agreed that the practice promotes a sense of ownership, engagement and personal responsibility of the learning experience. But at the same time, some experienced stress in the assessment process and found it not easy to evaluate their peers. The study found students do not reject peer assessment strategy.

Keywords: classroom participation, peer assessment, marketing students’ perception and experience

Introduction

Teaching and learning in higher education institutions have shifted from instructor-centred to student-centred (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Knowles, 1984). External forces behind this change are believed to be due to the growth in consumption of higher education and the perceived need to produce employable students. Students need to acquire a whole range of transferable soft skills in their course of studies which will help them in the world of employment (Cox & King, 2006; Fallows & Steven, 2000; Schlee & Harich, 2010). Practice and literature suggest that traditional lecture format is being accompanied by and in some cases replaced by contemporary pedagogy which are more interactive and discussion-based (Spiller & Scovotti, 2008), that moved educational participants to share responsibility for learning outcomes (Hawes, 2004). Instructors utilize a broad range of strategies to actively engage students in the teaching-learning process. Of the recommended strategies, classroom discussion or participation is perhaps the most frequently used and the more often embraced “active learning” strategy (Dallimore et al. 2006).
Classroom participation, which refers to students’ active engagement in discussions of the course concepts, represents an important teaching method valued by many university courses, including marketing courses. Nunn (1996) suggests there is a positive relationship between participative and active learning. Students actively involved through class participation can better elaborate on and engage with the course content (Ackerman, Gross, & Perner, 2003; Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). Furthermore, in-class discussion enables idea sharing, encourages different points of view, develops critical understanding and oral communication skills, and provides social interaction through student-based learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Farranda & Clarke, 2004; Ponzurick, Russo France, & Logar, 2000). Many marketing educators therefore include active participation as a key learning criterion and student assessment based on the superior teaching outcomes that improve students’ learning experience. Yet these educators lack a structured approach to stimulating and measuring class participation (Sautter, 2007).

Assessments of class participation can be problematic and complicated because of its subjective nature (Sautter, 2007). Several evaluation tools have been published to assist instructors in assessing class participation (Bean & Peterson, 1998; Chapnick, 2009; Craven & Hogan, 2001; Maznevski 1996; Melvin, 1988). The use of published scales may assist in the process, but assigning a class participation grade remains difficult to objectify. The equivocal nature of evaluating class participation makes it an ideal area in which to share evaluation with students. Multiple evaluators may increase the accuracy of class participation grading. In addition, there is increasing interest in the educational benefits of students assessing their own work (self-assessment) and that of other students (peer assessment) (Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas, 2002; Brindley and Scoffield (1998); Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Topping, 1998).

Against this background, we conducted an action research with 3rd-year undergraduate marketing students at Curtin University, Sarawak Campus to test the effects of peer assessment on class participation in a marketing course over time. We investigated whether peer assessment affects students’ class participation behaviour and learning experience. This paper aims to report on the students’ perceptions and experiences of using peer assessment in grading their class participation.

**Literature Review**

Peer assessment is not a new assessment strategy in higher education institutions and the use of it is increasing. A number of studies have been done related to peer assessment (examples Stefani, 1994; Boud, 1995; Topping, 1998, 2009; Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000; and Sivan, 2000). Peer assessment has been tried out at different levels, across disciplines and with different types of assignments (examples Bean and Peterson, 1998; Gopinath, 1999; Melvin, 1988; Ryan et al., 2007; and Topping, 2009). It is an arrangement for learners to consider and specify the level, value or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners (Topping, 2009), and students grading the work or performance of their peers using relevant criteria (Falchikov, 2001).

In a review of the peer assessment literature, Topping (1998) concludes that peer assessment has been used in a wide variety of contexts and that it can result in gains in the cognitive, social, affective, transferable skill and systemic domains. The majority of the studies reviewed showed an acceptably high level of validity and reliability. A subsequent review of peer assessment by Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans
(1999) showed that peer assessment can be valuable as a formative assessment method, and that students find the process sufficiently fair and accurate. Ballantyne et al. (2002) report significant benefits of peer assessment, but at the cost of significant administrative overheads.

There is substantial evidence that peer assessment can result in improvements in the effectiveness and quality of learning, with gains for assessors, assessees, or both (Topping, 2009). A research done by Al-Barakat and Al-Hassan (2009) showed that students and teachers have positive beliefs about peer assessment because it can be beneficial if some changes are made in the way it is employed in teacher education programs.

Vickerman’s study (2009) found that generally formative peer assessment was a positive experience in enhancing students’ learning and development. However, when tutors are constructing peer assessment strategies, they should be cognisant at the planning stage of the variety of learning styles that are evident in order to maximise the developmental opportunities this can bring to students.

The implementation of peer evaluation in the class is debatable. Social processes can influence and contaminate the reliability and validity of peer assessments. Peer assessments can be partly determined by friendship bonds, enmity or other power processes, the popularity of individuals, perception of criticism as socially uncomfortable, or even collusion to submit average scores, leading to lack of differentiation (Topping, 2009).

**Method**

In view of the value of peer assessment, we used peer assessment method to grade class participation in a marketing course at Curtin University, Sarawak Campus over three semester periods in 2009 and 2010. Each week there was pre-assigned readings, case studies or open-ended assignments given to the student. Throughout the semester, student participation was evaluated during whole-class discussions, small group presentations, question and answer sessions, and other in-class activities. Class participation contributes ten percent to the final grade of the course. Students take turn to evaluate their peers’ participation in the class. In each class, two students were assigned to the role and used a scoring rubric to assess their peers’ contribution. The assessment criteria in the scoring rubric was adapted from Chapnick (2009), which include:

C1: Preparedness – attends class punctually; comes to class prepared; makes class materials readily available; contributes readily to the conversation.

C2: Sharing sources and resources – brings sources of information to the class to share with lecturer or peers; brings resources that can be used to extend the learning activities of the class.

C3: Class presence and communication – participates actively and frequently; contributes consistently to discussions and activities; raises relevant questions and shares ideas with peers; offers clear and concise oral & written presentation of ideas; demonstrates attentiveness and good command of unit materials.

C4: Accepts and provides constructive feedback to others – positively accepts constructive feedback; offers viable suggestions for improvement to peers and lecturer.
C5: Respect - shows interest in and respect for others’ views; listens to others; does not dominate discussion; helps others to succeed in class.

In order to maintain confidentiality, the name of the assessor was not included in the assessment form. The individual mark on class participation (10%) was determined by taking the average individual score obtained from peer assessment, adding to the lecturer’s score, then divide by two to derive the final mark.

A Likert scale questionnaire was performed at the end of the semester. Students were asked to gauge the extent of their agreement with a number of statements. For analysis purposes a “strongly agree” response was given a value of 5 and a “strongly disagree” response was given a value of 1. The statements were derived from other published studies (Brindley & Scoffield, 1998; Ryan et al., 2007) and based on the authors’ experience with issues of class participation assessment. The questionnaire also included two open ended questions that asked students “What have you learned from this experience?”; “Overall, what do you think of peer assessment on class participation?”

The data from the close ended questions were collated and presented in table format following an analysis via the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) Version 17.0. An attempt was also made to compare the results for the three semesters and analyse the qualitative findings from the two open ended questions.

A total of 117 students (100%) have replied to this questionnaire, of which 42 students (36%) were from Semester 1, 2009, 35 students (30%) from Semester 2, 2009 and 40 students (34%) from Semester 1, 2010.

**Results**

In terms of reliability, Hair et al. (2006) highlighted that 0.7 is an acceptable level. The analysis of the samples found that the Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.764, which is exceeding the recommended value.

Overall, the analysis shows that the result of this study is very stimulating. Table 1 below shows that out of the total of 13 statements, 10 statements have statistically significant mean scores of more than 3, at 0.05 level. This is based on the total sample size of 117.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I fully understand what was expected of me in doing the peer assessments.</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>.694</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assessment form given is helpful in doing the peer assessments.</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>.808</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment should be the sole responsibility of tutors.</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>.922</td>
<td>.484</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comparison was made between the three semesters. The results show some differing mean scores over the three semesters. Students in semester 2, 2009 and semester 1, 2010 chose "I fully understand what was expected of me in doing the peer Assessments" and "The assessment form given is helpful in doing the peer assessments" as the highest mean scores. Students in semester 1, 2009 rated "Peer assessment to promote a sense of ownership, engagement, and personal responsibility in my learning experience" and "Involvement in the assessment process increases my personal motivation in the class" with highest mean score.

One of the statements with a low mean score was "I found it easy to evaluate my peers on their class participation." For semester 2, 2009, in addition to this statement, there are two other statements that have the same mean score, 3.17: "I feel intimidated by the whole process" and "I do not feel sufficiently capable to mark other students' participation level."

The statement "Assessment should be the sole responsibility of tutors" has the lowest mean score for semester 1, 2009 and semester 1, 2010. The comparison of average responses for each statement over the three semesters is shown in table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Semester 1, 2009</th>
<th>Semester 2, 2009</th>
<th>Semester 1, 2010</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I fully understand what was expected of me in doing the peer assessments.</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>.805</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assessment form given is helpful in doing the peer assessments.</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.764</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>.852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment should be the sole responsibility of tutors.</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>.958</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.710</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Comparison of students' view on peer assessment over three semesters
This study found that there is a significant difference on the statement “Assessment should be the sole responsibility of tutors”. This can be referred to the F-Test is 4.386 and Significant level is 0.015. However, there is no difference for the other statements. Refer to the ANOVA table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I fully understand what was expected of me in doing the peer assessments.</td>
<td>1.788</td>
<td>.172</td>
<td>No Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assessment form given is helpful in doing the peer assessments.</td>
<td>.221</td>
<td>.802</td>
<td>No Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment should be the sole responsibility of tutors.</td>
<td>4.386</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that peer evaluation was fair in helping to determine my class participation grade.</td>
<td>.410</td>
<td>.665</td>
<td>No Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel intimidated by the whole process.</td>
<td>1.321</td>
<td>.271</td>
<td>No Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I participated more because I knew my peers were evaluating me.</td>
<td>1.512</td>
<td>.225</td>
<td>No Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found it easy to evaluate my peers on their class participation.</td>
<td>2.196</td>
<td>.116</td>
<td>No Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not feel sufficiently capable to mark other students’ participation level.</td>
<td>.899</td>
<td>.410</td>
<td>No Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer assessment marks should be taken into consideration to compute the overall participation score.</td>
<td>.978</td>
<td>.379</td>
<td>No Difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend using peer evaluation grades in the future.</td>
<td>1.840</td>
<td>.163</td>
<td>No Difference</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Involvement in the assessment process increases my personal motivation in the class. | .943 | .393 | No Difference
---|---|---|---
Peer assessment promotes self-evaluation and develops my critical thinking and other professional skills. | 1.608 | .205 | No Difference
Peer assessment promotes a sense of ownership, engagement, and personal responsibility in my learning experience. | 1.369 | .259 | No Difference

Table 4 highlights the results of the two open ended questions asked to students, “What have you learned from this experience?”; “Overall, what do you think of peer assessment on class participation?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Frequency of response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Motivate students to participate more</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Is a good practice for student to improve assessment skill</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Is a good experience and learn to be responsible and self-confident</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Difficult to give participation marks</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Not so comfortable with the task, is stressful and tedious</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 More mindful of their classmates’ input</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Peer assessments are biased and unfair</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Should not be evaluated by students as they don’t have enough capabilities to do so</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Not effective or useful, as students do not take it seriously or do not know the students in class</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Dislike class participation assessment</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion & Conclusion**

Overall, this study shows that the mean score for all variables exceed 2.5 out of 5. Students have a positive perception on peer assessment. They fully understood what was expected of them. In terms of the mean score, the statement “I fully understand what was expected of me in doing the peer assessments” has the highest score (3.86). The scoring rubric with clear marking criteria (as used in this study) helps student fully understand the assessment scheme and facilitate the assessment process (“The assessment form given is helpful in doing the peer assessments” – 3.68). Without a criterion-referenced marking sheet, students would have no rational basis on which to evaluate their peers’ participation and may struggle to prompt and objectively evaluate peers’ performance consistently during class.

This study agrees with a number of previous researches, for example Pond and ul-Haq (1995), Topping (2009), Vickerman (2009) and Al-Barakat and Al-Hassan (2009) on the value and benefit of peer assessment. This can be referred to the analysis of three statements: “Involvement in the assessment process increases my personal motivation in the class”; “Peer assessment promotes self-evaluation and develops my critical thinking and other professional skills”; and “Peer assessment promotes a sense of ownership, engagement, and personal responsibility in my learning experience”. These three statements are among the statements which have the highest mean score with statistically significant mean scores of more than 3. In the open ended questions, 25 students mentioned that it is a good practice for students to improve assessment skill, and 16 noted that it is a good experience to learn to be responsible and self-confident.
Another statement which is statistically significant is “I participated more because I knew my peers were evaluating me”. So, in this study, shared responsibility in assessing class participation behavior stimulates class participation which results in improved perception of educational experiences for students. The results indicated that students’ motivation increased as a result of their active involvement in the assessment process, and their ability to gain a greater understanding of the assessment process was developed. From the open ended questions, 33 students noted that they were motivated to participate more and 11 said they were more mindful of their classmates’ input. The mechanism has contributed to enhance student learning experience and improve engagement during class discussions.

The finding reveals that students perceived peer evaluation as fair and recommend the use of peer evaluation. Three statements gauge the acceptance of this practice with statistically significant mean scores of more than 3 (“I feel that peer evaluation was fair in helping to determine my class participation grade”; Peer assessment marks should be taken into consideration to compute the overall participation score”; “I would recommend using peer evaluation grades in the future”). Whilst in the open ended questions, 8 students mentioned that peer assessments are biased and unfair, and 4 students pointed out that it is not effective or useful.

On the other hand, there are responses which were relatively less positive. As commented by Topping (2009), peer assessments can be partly determined by friendship bonds, enmity or other power processes, the popularity of individuals, perception of criticism as socially uncomfortable, or even collusion to submit average scores, and leading to lack of differentiation. In this research, the results suggested that students to a certain degree are intimidated by the assessment process. The majority of students enrolled to the course were local students from high-power-distance cultures, and therefore naturally shy and can easily be intimidated by the discussion-participation and peer assessment requirements (“I feel intimidated by the whole process” – 3.07). From the open ended questions response, 4 students stated that they dislike class participation assessment and 11 revealed that they were not comfortable with the peer assessment task, it is stressful and tedious.

The pattern of results also suggested that students are uncertain about their ability to evaluate their peers and found it difficult at times to assess their peers’ participation (“I do not feel sufficiently capable to mark other students’ participation level” – 3.16; “I found it easy to evaluate my peers on their class participation” – 2.89). From the open ended questions, 13 students indicated it was difficult to give participation marks. One student commented “it is a great way to make the students understand what the lecturer is going through in grading class participation.” Thus, this peer assessment process will make the students empathize more with their instructors.

The statement “Assessment should be the sole responsibility of tutors” has the lowest significant mean score of 2.94. There is a different opinion from three semester’s students, whether the assessment should be the sole responsibility of tutors. This can be referred to the ANOVA test, in which F-Test is 4.386 and significant level is .015. From the open ended questions, 5 students suggested not to involve student in evaluation as they do not have the capabilities to do so.

The use of peer assessment as an alternative form of evaluation method demonstrated in this study has obvious positive effect on students’ learning experience. But we do not know the
Details or the extent of these effects, which might probably be investigated in future studies. The major benefit of the current study include understanding of assessment task, appreciate the difficulties of assessing others’ performance, increase confidence and motivation, promote a sense of ownership, and engagement and personal responsibility among students. Because marketing education is in part job preparation, developing desirable managerial traits in students should be a priority for marketing educators; such qualities can be initiated and fostered by integrating a shared responsibility model in our teaching strategy.

Students in this study were generally positive towards the notion of peer assessment, but the experience was not consistently positive. The method can be a useful strategy for engaging students with assessment process and encourages students to participate more, but it may also discourage a few. Some students found no benefit from peer assessment experience. They did not learn much due to stress. Consequently in developing any peer assessment strategy, Elwood (2006), Liu and Carless (2006) and Vickerman (2009) suggest due consideration needs to be taken into account especially the diversity of student learning styles that need to be accommodated in which some will prefer more directed rather than self-directed support in relation to assessment issues.

The research issues above are fairly general. Nonetheless, we hope this article offers some new approaches and ideas to teachers who are thinking of adopting peer assessment as one of their teaching strategy. To those who may be struggling with the grading of class participation, peer assessment may be an alternative method to consider within the diversity of assessment strategies.

References


