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## Peer Assessment: Benefits of Group Work

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With the increased use of group work in college courses, exploration of the role of peer assessment has broadened, as has its use. In one survey, 57 percent of students reported that their faculty had incorporated peer evaluations into group assignments. We've done articles on this topic before, but mostly we've highlighted resources, specifically good instruments that direct peers to provide feedback in those areas known to influence group outcomes. Recent literature includes a variety of peer assessment systems (find three examples referenced at the end of this article), many of them online programs that expedite the collection, tabulation, and distribution of the results. Here's a list of the benefits of making peer assessment part of group learning experiences.

**Peer assessment can prevent group process problems.** Several studies show that it helps, and sometimes virtually solves, one of the most egregious group problems: free riding, as in students not doing their fair share of the work. One study found that the very possibility of having peer evaluations improved the performance of group members. Of course, that benefit is enhanced when peers receive feedback from each other as they are working together as opposed to when the project is finished.

**Formative peer assessment also improves individual and group performance.** Even if the group is not experiencing major problems, formative feedback from peers can help individual members fine-tune their contributions and help the group increase its overall effectiveness. Some of the processes faculty are using to achieve this benefit include individual and group responses to the feedback. Individual students comment on feedback from the group via an email to the teacher, and groups use the feedback to develop an improvement plan. They also make note of what the group is doing well. Online peer assessment systems make multiple exchanges of formative feedback possible, which is helpful when the groups are working on complex, course-long projects. The Brutus and Donia system resulted in measurable individual improvement during a second semester when the system was used. In other words, students took what they'd learned about their performance in the group and acted on it the following semester.

**Peer assessment activities develop important professional skills.** Students will be assessed by peers in most professional contexts. Group work experiences in college can "help them learn from others' observations of their behavior," according to Anson and Goodman (p. 27). That's a skill developed, not theoretically, but by actually getting some feedback and having to deal with it. And students need to learn how to deliver constructive feedback—what kind of comments motivate the desired behavior change and how those comments can be delivered without engendering excessive defensiveness. The rating systems described in the literature help students by identifying feedback areas and by proposing individual and group activities that should follow receipt of the feedback.

Most of the online systems give teachers the opportunity to preview student feedback and comments before they are delivered to the group members.

**Peers are in a position to provide valuable feedback.** They are actually in a better position than the teacher, who, in the majority of cases, cannot be with all the groups all the time. Even if the teacher sees the group some of the time, peers see each other all the time. And peers see each other when individual members aren't trying to impress the teacher with their performance. Brutus and Donia go so far as to say "... peers possess a privileged viewpoint to evaluate performance." (p. 653)

**Peer assessment adds credibility to the grading process.** If peer assessments count, students start to take them seriously. And if faculty are using reliable and valid assessment systems, the data more accurately reflects what happened in the group than do the teacher assessments alone. Faculty are starting to recognize this benefit and incorporate peer assessments into the grading process. In the Brutus and Donia study, 74 percent of the faculty using their peer assessment system reported that they counted the peer assessments for between 5 and 50 percent of the grade calculation.

That's an impressive list of benefits, but they don't accrue automatically. Students aren't used to delivering or receiving feedback from peers. That's why it's important to use a good feedback tool and make it part of a set of assessment activities and events.

#### References:

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