Review for Session Topic:
The interaction of peer & tutor feedback

Commentary on:

Bates "Collaborative Problem-solving in First Year Physics"

Crossouard & Pryor "Formative assessment in a professional doctorate context: developing identities as researchers"

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COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING IN FIRST YEAR PHYSICS

This is clearly a well designed and in many ways very original assessment scheme, which has been very positively evaluated. So one obvious comment is to encourage others to take up the scheme, as it stands, and see whether it transplants. This can reveal difficulties in either the scheme or in its transferability or, of course, both. So I very much hope that there will be takers!

The assessment is only part of a more general teaching and learning scheme which – on the basis of evaluation - is successful, although substantially unorthodox; indeed one of its outstanding features is the considerable change in it compared with even good orthodoxy.

The general scheme meets many of the standard objections to change:

1. It is successful with a large and very mixed intake;
2. It uses interactive lectures and workshops, replacing the standard tutorial-plus-laboratory format. Presumably, the 'standard tutorial' was largely non-interactive, while the standard laboratory was of the very old-fashioned type, where students largely go through pre-determined motions;
3. Technology and online learning materials are used non-didactively, in support of student learning;
4. It uses collaborative problem-solving with subsequent assessment;
5. It uses teaching spaces more efficiently and intelligently.

The assessment of collaborative problem-solving forms the substance of the paper. Assessment is 'soft', ie it follows extensive feedback on on-going work before three of the group of questions in a particular week are designed to be written up for full solutions, to be handed in the following week. They are marked by staff and postgraduate students. The scheme fosters not only the 'hard' skills of a physicist, but more qualitative and more general 'thinking' skills.

Reviewing such a scheme cold from the outside is very difficult, liable – as it is – to lead to reactions by the originators such as 'tried that; didn't work'. So it is with considerable diffidence that I offer a suggestion for a possible – and possibly – very radical change:

1. The scheme is student centred only up to the point of assessment. Should aspects of self and peer assessment (for real!!) be included?

2. If this was considered, why was it rejected? If not, should it be tried? I seem to recall John Cowan doing this very successfully with First Year students, who then reported on it at a SRHE conference.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN A PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE CONTEXT: DEVELOPING IDENTITIES AS RESEARCHERS

This innovation accepts the firm distinction between formative and summative assessment and, rather than critique it within this assumption, I would like to challenge it on the basis of an experience of mine which did not accept that distinction. This was a programme for a Postgraduate Diploma/MA in Higher Education, which was evaluated jointly by one of the successful course members and myself: L. Stefani and L. Elton, 'Continuing professional development of academic teachers through self-initiated learning'. Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education **27** (2002), 117 – 129.

The programme was based on action research over topics in seven modules, followed by a final summarising module. In each module, a course member had to put forward an appropriate action research programme to be discussed with me as the course tutor (the programme was ahead of its time and had very few takers, so that I was able to cover it by myself, with eventually some assistance from a co-tutor, Carol Baume). Only if we agreed, could the member carry out the module programme. We never seriously disagreed but this clearly was formative assessment of a kind. When the member had completed the work for the module, it was assessed by me (as the internal examiner) and – if necessary – returned for improvement, after which it was assessed by me on a pass/fail basis, a decision that was reviewed by Phil Race who acted as External Examiner. Thus the initial formative assessment of each module, based on a proposal by the course member, was followed by a formative assessment of the outcome and this – after improvement – formed the basis for summative assessment, which grew naturally out of the previous formative assessments.

The 'students' (we called them 'course members') were all experienced academics, who had their own students; I would not have dared at the time to use such an approach with less experienced 'students'; now I might.

IN RELATION TO: INTERACTION ON PEER AND TUTOR FEEDBACK

Peers need to know the 'ground rules', if they are to give good feedback. So the first step should be an open discussion between tutors, peers and students to whom feedback is given to establish these.

After that, they should be left largely alone, unless the students to whom feedback is given raise issues with tutors.

Tutors and peers should share their respective feedback with each other on the basis of equality.

The above points are equally valid, whether feedback is for improvement or judgment - what Peter Knight called high stakes feedback.

If peer feedback is confined to improvement and excludes judgment, it will probably not be taken seriously by either tutors or peers, and almost certainly not by the receiving students.

It is therefore very important that peers should be allowed to give high stakes feedback. If institutional regulations forbid this, start with for improvement feedback by peers and use the outcome as an argument with the authorities, to allow it for high stakes feedback. If the authorities prove adamant, try any of the following strategies:

- call in John Cowan as an expert witness
- threaten to leave
- write a piece for the THES
- leave.

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