THE ART OF PREACHING: SHOULD WE PRACTISE WHAT WE PREACH OR JUST PREACH LOUDER?

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the effectiveness of a peer-assessment innovation within a teacher education program at a regional university in Australia. A qualitative methodology was used for this study. While the majority of students involved in the process agreed in principle with the notion of peer assessment, personal involvement was contested on the grounds of inexperience. Students moved from initial scepticism to a deeper understanding of the possibilities and values inherent in peer assessment.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY: WHERE I AM NOW

I speak to you as an early researcher who has just discovered a path through the haze of research methodologies. Using Clandinin and Connolly's personal-experience method (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 416), I plan to elaborate on a story of formal peer assessment, where university students grade the work of their peers. Throughout this story I use multiple "Is" as I assume the roles of school teacher, lecturer, commentator, research participant, and theory builder (p. 416); and I will be "simultaneously focused in four directions, inward and outward, backward and forward" (p. 417). Clandinin and Connolly define "inward" as the internal conditions of the researcher, the "outward" as the researcher's environment, and the "backward" and "forward" as temporality – past, present, and future. This paper is more than just a report. It shares my reflections on past actions and future directions as an educator and researcher.

Two years ago I was seconded from Education Queensland to work in a regional, Queensland university whose Faculty of Education had undergone a major reformation resulting in the change of the Bachelor of Education program into the Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) program – a degree whose graduates could demonstrate " a futures' perspective of teaching and learning… expert pedagogy…professional behaviour… maintain learning networks and partnerships…and support for learners to take responsibility for and manage their own learning" (Central Queensland University, 2002, unpaged). An analysis of the components of the BLM degree emphasises this point. Ten standards are stipulated within the four domains of the degree:

Networks and Partnerships (1 standard), Futures (1 standard), Professional Knowledge (1 standard), and Pedagogy (7 standards). The principle of continuous improvement pervaded the faculty as staff members and general staff were then, and still are, often engaged in conversations to ensure that student experiences are as rich as possible.

I joined the faculty when the new degree was in its second year of operation. I was teaching second-year students three courses: *Ensuring Student Success, Study of Society and the Environment (secondary),* and *English (secondary)*. In my endeavour to help my students to become as work-ready as possible upon graduation, I wanted to ensure that they would be prepared for the role of assessor – one that they would continually play in their profession. In each of these courses, students were asked to complete two assessment tasks – one small-group, oral task; and one written task. In each course I followed a similar procedure. Initially, I suggested to students that as future teachers, they needed to gain a deep understanding of assessment practices, and to develop confidence in their ability to make judgements of the assessment products of others. Therefore, I invited them to become intimately involved in the assessment procedure for each of the courses. I wanted to provide them with multiple opportunities to "think systematically about practice, learn from experience and revise practice" (Pultorak, 1993, p. 288). They were assured of my support in this process and were told that they would be strongly supported. Students were given copies of both the tasks set for the course and the particular graduate standards that the course addressed. We began in workshop mode, where they considered all relevant documents and eventually – collaboratively – devised a set of criteria against

which final grades would be awarded. Only the oral task would be peer assessed and the grade for this task would equate with 50 percent of the total course grade. I emphasised that peer assessment focuses on practising the skill of personal detachment – judging a product and not a person. To ensure students felt supported as they experimented with the process of evaluation, each judgement would be made by a panel of three or four peers. These student panels would be given tutorial time to discuss their initial judgements and to arrive, collaboratively, at a final-grade decision. Students were asked to individually provide feedback on individual mark sheets which would be then collated as one, group-awarded result. I would act as the final arbitrator. In one course, all presentations would be videotaped because not all presentations were completed in the same tutorial room, and in all cases, students had the right of appeal. In this regard, video taping assisted lecturer accountability.

To prepare students for this process, we reviewed each of the criterion and its descriptor. In these early days of teaching 12-week courses – where time seemed always in short supply, and no paper or videotaped evidence of peer assessment at a university level existed, and students had no prior experience in this arena – the preparation for the process was not as thorough as it was in the following year. Throughout the process I adopted the role of reflective teacher, one who constantly evaluates and seeks to improve. Beedle (2002) views reflection as more than a passive mental activity and states, "Reflection is for purpose, geared to action. It should be explicit and systematic, but personal and meaningful" (p. 12). I had not yet made the transition to researcher and saw myself as a reflective practitioner, always refining my teaching craft. The procedures I adopted at university were derived from my many years in a secondary classroom. I was pleased to discover they could all be substantiated through research.

BEING A TEACHER AND REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

It was at a time when I was teaching a Year 10 English class (15 year-old students) four years ago that my commitment to peer assessment commenced. The unit was *Parliamentary Prattle*, a vehicle through which I planned to lead the students in their discovery of the principles of Australian democracy. I wanted to establish procedures for students to make

decisions important to their worlds. I intended to give them multiple opportunities to exercise power at a variety of levels and to operate in their classroom environment as active citizens. At the beginning of the school year when I first encountered this student group, its members assumed control of the running of the elections for the Student Council. This representative body consisted of approximately 25 students elected from a total population of 1000 students. Groups of students were allocated various tasks: calling for nominees for all positions, designing ballot papers, distributing campaign flyers, staffing the polling booth (our classroom) during voting times and, finally, vote counting. They experienced the necessity of working collaboratively with others during this rather busy time. Completion of the elections completed the orientation phase of this unit.

Next, the students from my class organized themselves into political parties, held elections, formed and operated a class parliament, and operated a committee structure. Each committee assumed responsibility for organizing a major function – one committee initiated a Year 10 "semi-formal" social event for 200 students. These committees met weekly and each student maintained a learning log. We decided collaboratively upon the criteria students would use to self-assess this writing task. Students also engaged in peer assessment and each of the criteria was negotiated. Every student allocated a criterion-referenced mark to each member of his or her group for contribution to the group. In the synthesising phase of the unit, students in pairs were given the task of producing a newsletter for distribution to the Year 10 population. The criteria used to evaluate this task were also negotiated and, in pairs, students were requested to judge the work of two peers, with the teacher as final arbitrator.

It was the intellectual, emotional, social, and ethical gains made by these students when they were involved in awarding grades – the ultimate exercise of power in the classroom – that made me a devotee of peer and self assessment. I had dabbled with this notion before, both in my teaching and in my capacity as a head of department, and considered it a useful strategy to ensure student engagement, but these previous experiences had not revealed the power of the tool to me. Perhaps these earlier experiences had refined my abilities and caused me to realise some of the potential of peer and self assessment. The capacity for problem

solving, decision making, and effective communication skills; and the ability to plan and organize activities, and to collaborate with others, are key components of the national goals for schooling in Australia (MCEETYA, 1999); and I witnessed each of these aspects of learning occurring in my classroom during this unit. If university education faculties wish to move in the spirit of these national goals, then it follows that they are obliged to ensure that graduates possess these attributes, and that they have or acquire the skills necessary to ensure their future students become critical thinkers capable of living successfully in a complex world. I believe peer assessment is one type of exemplary pedagogy that produces productive citizens. My reflections on school-based experiences – as discussed above – acted as a springboard for considering the possible role of peer assessment in the education of future professionals.

WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS

Peer assessment has been an issue in university practice for the past 25 years (Zariski, 1996). A variety of justifications and exhortations have been voiced in favour of peer assessment at university including, the importance of lifelong learning, metacognition, students involved in accepting responsibility for learning, and the acquiring of professional expertise. Zariski asserts, "Students should be encouraged to think of their university degrees as a milestone in the life of learning rather than a terminal in their intellectual development" (p. 1). Zariski (1996) cites Stefani's strong argument:

> …life-long learning requires that individuals are not only to work independently but also to assess their own performance and progress. Involvement in the assessment process would hopefully heighten our awareness and knowledge of the student approach to learning and enable students to make rational and objective judgements about their own strengths, weaknesses and range of skills. (p. 2)

These arguments are endorsed by other academics who offer strong support for peer assessment in the context of learning at university (Bostock, 2003; Falchikov, 1996; Freeman & McKenzie, 2002; Gatfield, n.d.) in a variety of disciplines including, law, mathematics, economics, information technology, medicine, nursing, business, and education. While one could argue that all professionals need to be committed to the process of lifelong learning and continuous improvement, it is an imperative for the education of future teachers whose professional business is learning. This paper seeks to highlight the ethical, intellectual, social, and emotional gains from introducing peer assessment into the grading operations of a university education faculty.

A FACULTY'S ROLE IN ASSESSMENT

Taylor and Biddulph (2001) report that the New Zealand Ministry of Education has long recognised the pivotal role that peer assessment can play in the development of critical thinking; a skill that future teachers need to possess as part of their professional repertoire, and one that they need to be capable of imparting to their future students. Throughout the 1990s, the ministry made a number of recommendations to include peer assessment in the school curriculum, but acknowledged the gap between recommendations and action. "These semi-official and professional proposals may be valuable but, in our experience, unless teachers have personal experience of them they are simply not aware of the issues included in implementing peer assessment into their classrooms" (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM], 2000, as cited in Taylor and Biddulph, 2001). The NCTM issued a call to action for New Zealand education faculties to include peer assessment in the education of future teachers. The National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education (Adey, 1998 as cited in Taylor & Biddulph, 2001, p. 476) state graduates, "should have the confidence and ability to engage in collegial peer assessment and self assessment as part of every-day work". While the BLM Graduate Standards are not as explicit as those of the New Zealand national standards, the notion of peer assessment, I believe, is implied throughout the document. This is particularly the case for Standard 3 of the Pedagogy domain: "Bachelor of Learning Management graduates will design and maintain learning environments that engage learners in meaningful, socially interactive experiences which encourage and develop the management of their own learning" (Central Queensland University, 2002, unpaged).

INTRODUCING PEER ASSESSMENT TO FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS: A SMALL CASE STUDY

A qualitative case-study method (Merriam, 1998) was selected to investigate the process of peer assessment in two courses that I first developed, then delivered, late in 2003. These two courses, *Designing for Optimal Outcomes* and *Understanding Inclusion in Education* were the first two of an elective suite of four courses designed to broaden and deepen students' understandings of the notion of inclusion. It is acknowledged that the modelling of explicit teaching of inclusive strategies is embedded throughout all courses of the BLM, but Education Queensland requested students be offered the opportunity to develop some expertise in this area. From my school experiences came a deep awareness of the fundamental link between self-esteem, understanding assessment, and the achievement of educational goals. I viewed this as essential learning for students who had chosen to complete this suite of courses.

Case study is an appropriate research methodology due to its potential to yield insights into education students' beliefs, practices, and challenges associated with peer assessment through maximizing opportunities for each participant to explain their views and actions (McLuskie & Zipf, 2003). Data were collated through a pre-course and a post-course questionnaire. This study was conducted in intensive mode at the conclusion of the students' first year of university. The minimum total of 72 hours of the course was delivered three days per week over a period of five weeks. Peer assessment was practised thoroughly in one course and implemented as the assessment form for the second assignment in the other course. The procedure used to implement peer assessment was the same as outlined above. While only 13 students were enrolled in the trial course, the implications of this case study have strongly influenced our future academic direction.

THE PRE-COURSE QUESTIONNAIRE

Results from the pre-course questionnaire revealed these first-year students had a small level of understanding about peer assessment. They had been involved in the process of evaluating oral presentations in two subjects. In *Numeracy in the Classroom,* small groups of

students had constructed written feedback on oral presentations. In *Futures*, again in small groups, students had graded peer presentations against a criteria sheet. These were designed as learning experiences only and did not contribute to final grades. Little preparation of the students for the construction of such feedback was undertaken. In both of these tasks the evaluation criteria had been predetermined. When asked what assessment forms could be used, every respondent suggested oral tasks. Perhaps this response comes from their university experiences where they had not been exposed to peer assessment of written tasks. Prior to commencing this research I too had only contemplated peer assessment on oral tasks. Other academics, however, have reported successful outcomes on formal peer assessment of written tasks. They expound the value students perceive from developing the skill of giving written feedback (Falchikov, 1996; Knoy, Lin, Liu, & Yuan, 2001; McLeish & Shaw, 1999). Knoy et al. discuss the uses of peer assessment as a copyediting tool; yet another application I had not considered. The vast majority of student respondents felt peer assessment was not a valid form of assessment because they perceived themselves as lacking such expertise.

The responses revealed a level of uneasiness among relationships between members of the newly assembled group. I was not aware of this until after reading the responses and, as a result, I followed the advice of Ljungman (2003) in carefully constructing relationship-building activities to provide students with opportunities to reflect on their own reactions to certain situations and to see themselves as trainee professionals before we negotiated the protocols of peer assessment**.** Ljungman argues that self reflection is an essential prerequisite for developing professional competencies, yet higher-education assessment practices frequently miss the mark in this regard.

Ljungman (2003) also suggests that peer assessors should be anonymous markers. This notion is supported by Milton (2001). I argue that students need to gain confidence in their ability to make decisions and fully comprehend the ethical issues of this procedure. Zariski (1996) claims peer assessment is an essential component of expertise in professional, business, and academic life. He asserts that building students' confidence in their abilities to make judgements about themselves and others is

part of assuming a professional role. Students expressed feelings of discomfort with the thought of peer marking and stated they would need support in the process through collaboration with peers, construction of feedback, and positioning the lecturer as final arbitrator. During the initial phase of their learning with this process, they also argued the marks awarded should be formative only, or that they should only be allocated a minimal weight towards the final result. This concept is also common among some advocates of peer assessment in higher education (Falchikov, 1996; Sparrow, 1997; Taylor & Biddulph, 2001). While it may be workable in some faculties, I believe it is inappropriate in an education faculty. Peer assessment encourages students to move away from the transmission model of teaching and learning, where full responsibility falls on the lecturer to ensure that transcribed information is given and received, and towards becoming more involved in the production of their own professional knowledge.

THE POST-COURSE QUESTIONNAIRE

Data collected from the post-course questionnaire revealed that 12 of the 13 students now felt comfortable about the peer marking process and could recognize its contribution to their understandings of the craft of teaching. A 1-5 scale was used where 1 indicated the lowest level. When asked whether they now possessed a deeper understanding of peer assessment and the assessment process, had further developed their interpersonal skills, and now felt more confident in their ability to judge the assessment product and not the person, all of the participants responded with ratings of 4 or 5, with the exception of two students who responded with a 3 rating. Most participants indicated a 3 or 4 rating for the validity of peer assessment for their learning, although some indicated they did not have the confidence to assume the role of sole marker. I had no intention of introducing this concept but wanted to gauge student responses to the possibility. Seven participants marked this notion with a 3 rating.

When asked whether students should be involved in the process of designing the task and criteria, all were in strong agreement (i.e., all gave a 5 rating). Student input into task and criteria design as an essential component of the peer assessment process is supported in the literature (Falchikov, 1996; Isaacs, n.d.). Every

student respondent allocated ratings of 5 to the videotaping of presentations, the lecturer as the final arbitrator, the process being modelled, and the allocation of class time to practise this type of decision making and to reflect on their learning.

The level of trust in the group also scored highly, as did the students' new belief that peer assessment in schools would lead to better student understandings of the assessment process. Only one participant indicated difficulties in remaining objective during the marking process. When asked whether they saw peer assessment as a method of reducing lecturer workload, the majority replied strongly in the negative. Sparrow (1997), and Freeman and McKenzie (2002) suggest that in the delivery of online courses with large enrolments, lecturer and tutor workloads could be significantly reduced after the course was established. Students strongly agreed that it is one method that could reduce the possibility of lecturer bias and make the allocation of grades more transparent.

LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

As I conclude this paper, I would like to share some reflections with you, the reader. The skill of giving and receiving feedback has assumed greater prominence in my thoughts about teacher education, and I now believe it to be an area teacher educators should more explicitly address; in other words, ensuring that graduates attain this skill. The extension of peer assessment of written work in a university setting is another area I now wish to explore. Even though I used peer assessment of written work in a school setting, I had not visualised it as part of a tertiary-teaching toolkit. The group of university students who constitute this study, while agreeing philosophically with the notion of peer assessment, were, at the beginning, strongly opposed to its implementation. I was surprised by the very strong reactions to peer assessment that were revealed through the initial questionnaire. I had assumed that, as adult learners, they could see the inherent value in the process. When asked to indicate how many of their courses should contain at least one assessment task evaluated by peers, a typical response was, "None in which peers give a mark." Another common comment was that peer assessment should be formative only due to the lack of experience of the markers.

These comments were in strong contrast to the data collected following the implementation of formal peer assessment. One of the participants in the case study endorsed peer feedback and wrote she had read somewhere, "Feedback is the pathway to greater understanding". This struck a chord with me, an early researcher and one not accustomed to the professional challenge of peer review. Another student commented, "All courses should have at least one assessment item peer assessed, especially in our program. As future learning managers we need lots of practice, practice, practice, practice!" Yet another student discussed the critical approach she now feels capable of employing as she listens to her peers and lecturers. She wrote, " I believe peer assessment is great as we have the opportunity to ensure we become fair assessors and have lots of experience with marking." It is clear from these typical statements that students now perceive peer assessment very differently to how they originally viewed it. They can now make the intellectual connections between decision making as individuals, as university students, and as future professionals. As a tutor I was very pleased with the depth of knowledge the students now possess about some of the many complex issues surrounding assessment practices. I now practise what I preach, hoping that group peer assessment of both oral and perhaps written tasks will become part of each participant's professional toolkit. With my colleagues, I advocate the macro-level embedding of a variety of types of peer assessment throughout the degree's core courses, confident that this will enable our graduates to "develop and maintain a commitment to the teaching profession through the appropriate application and continual renewal of essential professional knowledge" (Central Queensland University, 2002).

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LIFELONG LEARNING, GEOGRAPHICAL SPACES, AND NOMADIC NECESSITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates my personal experiences of being "situated" as an educator within a regional context. Current dominant discourses encourage individuals to take responsibility for their own lifelong learning and imply there are opportunities available in regional locations to use this knowledge and "education". While the desire to contribute to the social fabric of place and community may be keenly felt, the impact of globalization and economic rationalism ultimately constrains opportunities and undermines lifelong-learning discourses. I conclude this paper by suggesting that Central Queensland University could play a role in building sustainable regional communities through fostering local growth in employment opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I reflect on the way that government policies within contemporary Australia have impacted on my own positioning, both geographically and occupationally. My "living space" and my "work space" are domains that are constantly changing in response to global issues and events. I indulge in the pleasure of exploring the multiplicities, competing discourses, ethics, and values that make up the place in which I live and the space that I occupy as a female body. To do this I divide my paper into three sections. The first section deconstructs the notion of place (McDowell, 1999) and positionality, where I establish the contexts associated with work, occupation, and lifelong learning in a specific geographical space. Very broadly, I summarise social indicators and present a snapshot of Rockhampton – the place where I currently reside and work. In the second section I use the concept of "multiple mes" to explore my own

positioning within diverse communities – both real and imagined. In the last section I raise the issue of nomadic necessity and divide this section into two subsections. In the first subsection I use the notion of the nomad (Braidotti, 1994) to outline my journey through occupational groups and opportunities in Rockhampton. In the second subsection I explore the ways in which I am also positioned as a non-nomad by my desire to contribute to the social fabric of the local community culturally, educationally, and occupationally; I constantly negotiate tensions between the desire to remain and the necessity to go if I want to pursue a professional career, problematising the notion of sustainable regional communities.

PLACE AND POSITIONALITY: BEING A COMMUNITY

McDowell (1999, p. 100) contends that the concept of community carries with it visions of warmth and solidarity with the corresponding