

Summative co-assessment: A deep learning approach to enhancing employability skills and attributes

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Abstract

Service-learning is a pedagogy that combines academic study with service to the community. Voluntary work placements are integral to service-learning and offer students an ideal opportunity to develop their employability skills and attributes. In a service-learning course, it was considered good practice to raise students' awareness of the development of these skills and attributes. To enable this, the assessment in the course was adapted accordingly, and thus an innovative, summatively co-assessed oral presentation was introduced. This study investigates the effects of using this type of assessment, in which students were required to give an oral presentation of their critical reflections on the employability skills and attributes they had developed during the course. This practitioner research study was a small project using qualitative semi-structured interviews and a focus group with students engaged in service-learning. Although this study uses service-learning pedagogy as its basis, the concept and practice of summative co-assessment is transferable to other academic courses.

Keywords

Deep learning, employability skills and attributes, service-learning pedagogy, summative co-assessment

Co-assessment

Co-assessment is a shared system of assessment, synonymous with co-operative and collaborative assessment. Fundamentally, it involves self-assessment in addition to assessment by another, for example, the teacher, although it can also involve peer assessment. Co-assessment requires the student and teacher to reach a mutually agreed appropriate grade for the assignment through discussion and negotiation which must be supported by evidence and reasoned argument. It is thus a joint effort towards a 'shared goal' (Dochy et al., 1999: 342). There are variations, however, in the amount and nature of collaboration (Bovill and Bulley, 2011). As an example, the student and teacher may agree the criteria to be used prior to assessment, or the criteria may already be

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established. The former example in this case can be defined as a strong model of co-assessment, whereas the latter can be described as a weak model (Heron, 1988).

An essential component of co-assessment is students' self-assessment. Self-assessment is a reflective process that 'refers to the involvement of learners in making judgements about their own learning' (Dochy et al., 1999: 334) and, as such, is conducive to deep learning (Falchikov, 2005; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Race, 2001). Monitoring their own performance can allow students an opportunity to gain confidence in their learning. It can also encourage them to take more responsibility for their learning, which is valuable for developing greater autonomy. Critical self-reflection is an important metacognitive competency in that it involves students' observation and evaluation of their own work. Self-assessment is a process that necessitates the exercise of judgement or the measurement of knowledge; however, in addition to cognitive competencies, it also involves social and affective competencies. Included within these social and affective competencies are factors such as interpersonal skills, motivation, adaptability and self-efficacy (Dochy et al., 1999), which are relevant and transferable to the workplace. Being able to assess their own performance realistically is advantageous to students in the long term because this skill is conducive to effective professional development and lifelong learning (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Race, 2001; Tan, 2007). Appropriate and constructive feedback plays a vital and influential role in effective student learning (Dochy et al., 1999; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Hounsell et al., 2008; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and enables the development of reliable and valid self-assessment. The timeliness of feedback is also of value to students (Price et al., 2010; Sadler, 2010), which in the case of oral presentations, for example, can be immediately or very soon after the assessment.

Pertinently, Boud (1990: 110) asserts that '[s]elf-assessment in isolation is probably not a fruitful path to follow, but when moderated and used as an element of collaborative assessment its potential is great'. Co-assessment helps students to develop their skills of self-assessment because they receive feedback from the teacher, not only on the content of their work but also on the 'accuracy' of their self-assessment. Co-assessment, therefore, is a potent assessment method because it validates and strengthens students' understanding of their academic performance. This serves to reinforce deep learning (Knight and Yorke, 2003). Ultimately, this can lead to students' increased confidence (Boud and Falchikov, 2007; Knight and Yorke, 2003; McMahan, 1999). Additionally, this type of collaborative learning and the partnership fostered by co-assessment can empower students by encouraging them to become more active in their learning (Bovill and Bulley, 2011; new economics foundation (nef), 2008). The novelty of the non-traditional approach of co-assessment may also stimulate and energise students to become more active learners. Indeed, it has been observed that 'imaginative approaches to assessing skills and practice may significantly impact upon student engagement and achievement' (Pickford and Brown, 2006: 124).

Formative assessment, combined with constructive feedback, may enhance learning (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). If students have not previously encountered or participated in co-assessment, it is of particular value that formative assessment be used in preparation for summative assessment. Formative assessment is regarded as a 'cornerstone of student learning' (Jessop et al., 2012: 144) and is a useful 'diagnostic tool' (Jarvis, 2010: 215). Moreover, in the light of the recommendation that assessment 'should help to advance learning as well as determine whether learning has occurred' (The Higher Education Academy (HEA), 2010: 17), it is good practice to use both formative and summative assessment methods. Using summative co-assessment not only encourages students to share 'ownership' of the assessment process, but it can increase their sense of responsibility for their own learning and subsequent course grade. Consequently, summative co-assessment may inspire intrinsic motivation and imbue students with a desire to learn, which can lead to students' deep learning (Boud, 1990) and empowerment (Tan, 2008).

Co-assessment contributes to and reinforces students' personal responsibility, self-motivation and a readiness to approach new tasks, which are advocated as desirable attributes for employment (CBI, 2009). Using co-assessment, therefore, can be part of a strategy to enhance employability skills, especially if it is used to assess an employability skill per se. An example of this is to co-assess students' oral communication, for example, in a presentation without the use of PowerPoint slides. Smith and Sodano (2012: 153) agree that '[o]ral communication and presentation skills are essential competencies' that contribute to students' employability. Moreover, the process of co-assessment gives students the opportunity to enhance their communication skills further by practising negotiation in a more democratic environment than is normally associated with traditional forms of assessment. To increase the efficacy of this type of assessment exercise, the content of the presentation would be on students' critical reflections on the development of their employability skills. Articulating what and how they have learned deepens students' learning in addition to raising their awareness of the development of their employability skills and attributes (CBI, 2009; Race, 2001). Furthermore, this self-reflective process is recommended for use in students' Personal Development Plans (CBI, 2009) and directly meets the recommendation that students should 'develop and demonstrate their work-relevant skills through their courses' (CBI, 2011: 24).

Employability skills and attributes

Work-relevant skills are important for students, especially in the current labour market where competition for employment is fierce. To compete effectively, it is imperative for graduates to have more than subject-specific skills, especially if their degree subject is non-vocational, as employers seek a wide range of skills when recruiting graduates (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Knight, 2006). A range of studies claim that employers value graduates who can demonstrate competencies, such as aptitude, a positive attitude and who demonstrate a willingness to learn 'on the job' (CBI, 2009; Holmes, 2001; Knight, 2006; Lees, 2002; Pool and Sewell, 2007). It is not surprising, therefore, that there is an emphasis on employability skills and a belief that they 'should be a core part of a student's university experience' (CBI, 2009: 6).

Employability is a multi-faceted and 'multi-dimensional concept' (Lees, 2002: 2) which can include knowledge, attributes, competencies, behaviour and attitudes. Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011: 153) extend this typology, focusing on the concept of 'graduate identity', which they define as encompassing values, intellect, performance and engagement. It could be argued, therefore, that it is misleading to focus on employability skills within education as merely a set of strategic tools because this approach undermines the aims and processes of education. Rather, the development of students' skills and attributes is intrinsic to a more holistic pedagogical approach. It could be posited, therefore, that employability skills are closely interwoven with students' intellectual and personal development. This idea is reflected in Knight and Yorke's (2002) model of employability which comprises understanding, skills, efficacy beliefs and metacognition (USEM). The USEM model reinforces the view that employability concerns the development of individual and personal qualities, in addition to subject-specific and generic skills. Moreover, academic skills and employability skills are not mutually exclusive (HEA, 2006). Indeed, one set of skills can enhance and reinforce the other (Lees, 2002). Employability, therefore, refers to more than practical skills (Knight and Yorke, 2002): it also refers to being able to learn from new experiences, to apply new knowledge, and thus includes competencies, capabilities and attributes. A helpful definition of employability is given by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education (2009: 9), which states that the concept of employability involves 'a set of skills, competencies, knowledge and attitudes that make graduates likely to gain professional employment and contribute to society, their profession and their own professional development'. Another useful definition of

employability skills is ‘a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy’ (CBI, 2009, 2011). The nature of some of these skills will be examined briefly before outlining and discussing an assessment strategy to enable their development in higher education.

Although there is no universally agreed definitive list of skills, some skills and competencies are commonly cited, such as communication. Barnett and Coate (2005) highlight the importance of motivation and flexibility. They also identify the ability to demonstrate independent thinking as a vital skill, which is the ‘defining concept of the Western university’ (Barnett, 1997: 2). The development of intellectual skills includes the processes of problem solving, critical understanding of abstract concepts and metacognition. Critical reflection also allows students to recognise fully their abilities through awareness of their learning (Deeley, 2010a) and is a valuable aspect of professional development, facilitating self-evaluation and motivation (Moon, 2004). Pertinently, through critical reflection, graduates may demonstrate appropriate behaviour and take effective action in the workplace. Critical thinking is thus pivotal in the process of enhancing capability (Robinson, 2005). Without critical thinking, other competencies may remain dormant or not used to the full. Critical thinking, therefore, is the key to a metaphorical tool box of skills, competencies and attributes.

Overall, it is clear from the literature that employability is a complex concept encompassing more than a mere set of practical skills because it also involves students’ development of intellectual skills, competencies and personal attributes (Gravells, 2010; Knight, 2006; Knight and Yorke, 2002; Lees, 2002; Yorke, 2004). Students acquire various skills through their academic coursework but may not be aware overtly of these skills, their potential value in a workplace, or how to articulate the skills they have learned (CBI, 2011; Hesketh, 2000; Lees, 2002) unless they are highlighted to them through employability awareness raising endeavours made by the university, or more specifically through coursework and assessment, as recommended by the HEA (2006). Not surprisingly, it has been found that ‘experiential action learning methods combined with direct work experience’ is effective in developing employability (Pegg et al., 2012: 44), a combination which is akin to service-learning. There is a lack of evidence, however, to demonstrate the effectiveness of summatively co-assessing employability skills as an intrinsic part of academic coursework. It has also been suggested that there is a need for further research on co-assessment of oral presentations (De Grez et al., 2012). This study is a modest attempt to help to fill these gaps.

Research methodology

Context

Service-learning is a pedagogy that combines academic coursework with service to the community through a process of structured and critical reflection (Deeley, 2010a) and is based on experiential learning theory (Jarvis, 2010; Merriam et al., 2007). This research is part of a follow-up study to an earlier research project that investigated the extent to which employability skills are naturally embedded in service-learning and how they might be assessed (Deeley, 2010b). The voluntary work placements in the community, which are integral to the course, offer students an ideal opportunity to develop their employability skills and attributes, although there was not an overt acknowledgement of this prior to the initial research study. Subsequently, students’ awareness of their skills development was raised within the course and oral presentations were introduced as a method of assessment. In their presentations, students were required to reflect critically on the enhancement of their skills. The overarching purpose of this follow-up research study was to investigate the

effectiveness and effects of non-traditional assessment methods, which included critical reflective writing in addition to summative co-assessment of oral presentations on the enhancement of students' employability skills.

In this study, service-learning was an optional Honours course for third- and fourth-year students in a Public Policy undergraduate degree programme in a Scottish university. The main aim of the course was to connect the citizenship education policy and theory of citizenship with practical, or 'active', citizenship. The active citizenship was centred on students' service to the community. This was an ideal opportunity for students to raise their awareness of the employability skills they might acquire or develop while on their voluntary work placement. In the course, students were engaged in voluntary work in welfare or social care for at least 6 hours weekly over an 8-week period. Included in the summative assessment of the course was a co-assessed oral presentation in which students were required to critically reflect on the enhancement of their employability skills gained by the placement and coursework overall. As co-assessment was a new and innovative method, it was important for students to understand it clearly (Price et al., 2010), and therefore, they were given full information about the process. Furthermore, they also participated in a formative co-assessment exercise a few weeks before their summatively co-assessed oral presentation. Each student self-assessed her own oral presentation in addition to the teacher assessing each presentation. A provisional mark was awarded for the content and delivery of the presentation, and reflective comments were written by each student and the teacher. Subsequently, the teacher met individually with each student, to discuss the presentation using the written feedback comments as supportive evidence, and to agree a mark. Contained in the course documentation for students was a clause stipulating that if an agreement on an appropriate grade could not be reached, the teacher would have the jurisdiction to decide the final grade. This mark counted towards the overall course grade (10%) and subsequently also contributed to the student's degree classification (2.5%). The students later submitted a written transcript of their oral presentation, which was available for scrutiny by the external examiner.

Methods

The study took place between January and March 2010, during the period that the course was being taught. Initially, co-assessment was alien to the students as none of them had any previous experience of it. Consequently, the assessment process was fully explained to them verbally and in writing, with supportive guidance and a practice opportunity through formative assessment. Formative co-assessment of students' oral presentations took place several weeks prior to the summatively co-assessed presentations. Although on a different topic to employability skills, the first presentation afforded students an opportunity to practise their oral communication and interpersonal skills as the assessment criteria included both content and delivery. Being a new method of assessment for students, it was deemed appropriate to use established criteria, although this is a weak model of co-assessment (Heron, 1988). Through the content of their presentation, students were expected to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and critical thinking skills. Through the delivery, students were expected to demonstrate their communication skills. Students were prompted to reflect on the fluency, clarity and pace of their presentation in addition to their overall engagement with the audience.

Eight in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each of the students on the course. Students' views on giving oral presentations on self-assessment and co-assessment were sought. In addition, students were asked to comment on the extent to which they had developed their employability skills and attributes through service-learning. Students were also asked why they had chosen the service-learning course, in order to discover whether its non-traditional

assessment methods had been an attraction. They were asked for their reflections on their learning and to comment on the course assessment methods overall. Following the interviews, a focus group was held attended by all the students. The aim of the focus group was to validate and clarify, if and where necessary, the researcher's interpretations and analysis of the data.

Respondents

There were four male and four female students on the course, but to ensure their complete anonymity, all references to them were feminised.

Ethics

As this study was practitioner research, it carried an inherent element of ethical risk because the researcher was also the teacher of the course. It was imperative that students understood clearly and were assured that they were under no obligation to participate in the study. It was also explained to them that if they did participate, they could still withdraw at any time from the project and without question. Students were also given written and verbal assurance that their participation or non-participation would not affect the student-teacher relationship, nor would it affect their course grades. The coursework was marked anonymously, second marked by another teacher and examples of their coursework were scrutinised by an external examiner who ratified the final grades. The students were given written information in the form of a plain language statement and a verbal explanation of the nature, aim and reasons for the research study, in addition to a consent form. They were assured of anonymity and that all information would be kept securely until the end of the project, upon which all written records would be destroyed, electronic data deleted and digital tapes wiped. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University prior to commencement of the research.

Data collection

Each of the individual interviews and focus group lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. The questions asked of the participants aimed to elicit the effects and students' perceptions of the non-traditional assessment methods used on the service-learning course. Using a semi-structured approach allowed participants the opportunity to discuss what they considered to be relevant and important to them. Open-ended questions regarding their initial expectations of the course and its assessment were used at the beginning of the interviews, followed by an invitation to the students to reflect on how the non-traditional assessment methods impacted on their learning. In particular, the effects of the summatively co-assessed oral presentations were investigated. Students were asked to define what they believed to be valuable employability skills, and how and to what extent they had developed any of these skills through the service-learning course. Other questions included what they thought the impact of critical reflection and reflective writing was on learning, and how these factors might be useful to them in terms of employability. After obtaining consent from the participants, the data were digitally recorded and all the recordings were transcribed verbatim. The students' written transcripts of their oral presentations were also utilised as data.

Data analysis

Initially, each interview was scrutinised by reading its transcription while at the same time listening to its audio recording. Following a second close reading of the transcripts, overarching themes

arising from the data were identified. For each interview and the focus group, concept maps were drawn to reflect the emerging themes (Hay and Kinchin, 2006). The concept mapping that amalgamated data from the participants was then further refined several times to clarify the thematic framework that was grounded in the data. Further intensive line-by-line analysis of each transcript and set of notes was then undertaken to make connections and cross-cutting links between themes.

Findings

Co-assessment

Summatively co-assessing oral presentations was a method that students had not encountered before in their undergraduate studies, although all of them had had experience of giving an oral presentation and some students had also participated in formative self-assessment of an oral presentation in their first and second years of study. Co-assessment was discovered to be a major help to students in their learning because it helped to confirm and validate their self-assessment. The opportunity for students to discuss feedback on the content and delivery of their oral presentations on a one-to-one basis with the teacher increased their understanding. This was exemplified by a student who said, 'I think it's good to even just sit with you (the teacher) and talk about it and how you reached that grade'. As a result, all the students also reported feeling more confident in their self-assessments.

The negotiation and agreement of marks between the students and teacher involved diplomatic communication skills. Although there was an inevitable imbalance of power between student and teacher, the procedure was perceived to be successful and, indeed, uncomplicated as one student described it as, you 'say what you think you done good (sic), what you could have improved on and, you know, you give us the feedback as well and then from that we agreed the mark, so I mean I think it proves that it works'. Most strikingly was that students valued having 'a bit of an input' to the end result of their academic endeavours. This gave them motivation to perform well and created a sense of ownership of their learning. All of the students believed that co-assessment was more helpful to them than self-assessment only would have been, which reflects Boud's (1990) perspective.

Overall, the students felt that co-assessment of their presentations was a fairer system than self-assessment alone. This was mostly due to the fact that this type of summative assessment was novel and having the teacher validate their grades and feedback comments was reassuring to them. It was made clear from the beginning of the course that the final marks would be achieved through discussion and negotiation between each student and the teacher, although there was a reserved right of the teacher to determine the final mark in case of a disagreement that could not be resolved otherwise. It was a concern to the teacher that co-assessment might thus be perceived as mere 'lip service' to a democratic approach because ultimately it maintained the extant power relations in the classroom. Indeed, this was exemplified by a student who, prior to the assessment, had been concerned about possibly disagreeing with the teacher about the grade. She said, 'how can I challenge somebody that does know ... so well (about assessment)'. Nevertheless, after the assessments, all the students stated that the final marks were agreed through teamwork. Importantly, they felt that they had had the opportunity to defend their self-assessed mark as a student explained, 'you were able to put your case forward'. Indeed, one student claimed that the 'negotiation bit was good', while another said, 'I think it is really good to discuss things ... to be able to voice your opinion'.

Despite these positive comments, a potential downside to co-assessment was discovered in this research. During the study the students revealed to the teacher that they had discussed privately how co-assessment could be utilised in their favour, even though, as one student admitted, 'that

really takes away the whole purpose of (self-assessment)'. A student confessed that 'we were all sitting there and kind of discussing tactics' about the marks they could give themselves and how they could negotiate a good final mark. As one student said, 'at the end of the day everybody wants to try and get the best mark they can'. It was further explained by another student who had discussed co-assessment with her friend. She said, 'surely everyone's going to catch on to the idea about how you negotiate a grade and everyone is just going to give themselves 'A's ... you could start to almost play the game ... it could be abused'. This was the dark side of co-assessment that the teacher, perhaps naïvely, had not anticipated. Collectively, however, the students decided to reject this strategy because they believed it would undermine their learning, the authenticity of this non-traditional course, and ultimately would be disrespectful to the teacher. One student highly valued the course and its co-assessment, saying that it would be 'crazy' and 'such a shame' if students jeopardised its future by using a dishonest marking strategy. She went on to say that 'I just think it's very important that you don't take advantage of having an input into your own mark, do you know what I mean?'

Self-assessment

As noted above, all the students had previous experience of giving oral presentations and most had also previously engaged in formative self-assessment of a presentation. Despite this, overall the students admitted to finding self-assessment a difficult and challenging exercise. There was evidence of modesty and reluctance in self-proclamation of merit. Typically one student said, 'I find it hard to give myself positive praise'. Another student said, 'I think a real problem with it was you're not sure how to rate yourself'. This was not due to a paucity of guidelines, or that students lacked a sense of high achievement, rather it was due to their not wanting to appear 'as if I've been cocky or arrogant or being a wide-o' (a devious person). Consequently, in the formative co-assessment, most students underrated their presentations in comparison with the teacher's assessment. In the summative co-assessment, however, most of them claimed they felt more confident. This was reflected in their self-assessed marks, which were higher generally than in the formative exercise and closer to the teacher's marks.

Despite the difficulties of self-assessment, all the students acknowledged that it was a valuable exercise. In addition to strengthening their learning and giving them more self-confidence, it also increased their awareness of the gaps in their knowledge or areas of weakness in their skills. This was important because self-assessment, whether formative or summative, indicated to students how and where their learning could be developed. Furthermore, it provided an incentive to students to hone their skills, as illustrated by a student who admitted that if she had not completed the formative self-assessment, 'wouldn't have taken any action to improve on (the) next one'. Another student explained that she was 'learning how to evaluate (herself) and then improve on things'. Many of the students also expressed the view that self-evaluation was a useful employability skill in that it could be used in professional development.

Oral presentations

Most of the students claimed that initially they had felt nervous about giving a presentation but with practice their confidence had grown. One student said that it was about 'getting used to (public) speaking ... which I feel I can do confidently'. Other students, however, explained that their anxieties were not only due to the presentations being assessed but also to giving a presentation in front of the other students in the class. It was important to their self-esteem that the students performed well before their peers. As one of them pointed out, 'nobody wants to turn up and make a

fool of themselves'. She explained, 'you always like to project a positive image of yourself'. This is indicative of an intrinsic motivation for performing well in the assessment. Moreover, another incentive was that an oral presentation was deemed 'a valuable asset' to the students and one of them remarked, 'you need to do it, you've got a bit more motivation to do it, you know'. Indeed, the oral presentations were more highly regarded by the students than the teacher expected: many of them believed that its course value should be raised from 10% to 25% of the overall course weighting, while others claimed that they should have more opportunity to give presentations throughout their degree programme.

According to the students, the necessity for critical self-reflection in preparation for their oral presentations on employability and the necessity for clear expression were factors conducive to their deep learning. The presentations were effective because 'a lot of the time', one student admitted, 'you forget what you've learned in classes'. Another student explained, 'it made me really think about what I've been doing'. The specific skills and attributes that students identified as having developed on the service-learning course included time management, organisational skills, adaptability, flexibility, leadership, decision-making and problem solving. Added to this were communication skills and critically reflective thinking through their oral presentations. The presentations were, a student exclaimed, 'undoubtedly an excellent way to nurture and develop employability skills'. As one student admitted, 'you don't always realise all these skills are useful', although a mature student was aware that such skills were 'crucial', especially with the state of the current employment market, describing it as 'pretty bleak, so anything that gives you an edge is welcomed'.

Giving an oral presentation, therefore, raised the students' awareness of the employability skills and personal attributes that they had developed during the course, especially while they had been engaged in voluntary work on placement. The assessment was of more value than this, however, as one student explained, 'it's made me kind of more confident in what I've learned, it's aided my learning'. Another student added, 'I think having a presentation on employability skills was really, really helpful for me and it made me really think about what I've been doing'. This view was echoed by all the students, for example, one said that the presentation 'made me more aware of the skills I have' and another student said emphatically that a summatively co-assessed oral presentation was 'undoubtedly an excellent way to nurture and develop employability skills'.

The idea of presentations ultimately counting towards their degree was 'scary' for some students, but being able to practise first through the formative exercise was a 'learning experience' which was 'really helpful'. One student affirmed that it was 'encouraging if you have can have a bit of experience first'. One student illustrated this by saying that 'I think the pressure is taken off slightly because we've had a formative (assessment) ... you just feel a bit more confident ... it's just been encouraging to do one first ... I think it's a good idea'. As a result of the formatively assessed presentations, most of the students felt more confident. Although there was no total escape from their anxiety, most of them felt 'definitely a lot more relaxed' and less nervous in giving their second presentation, which was summatively assessed.

Discussion

The unearthing of a dark side of co-assessment raises a concern about the reliability of this form of assessment. It highlights the importance of safeguards against malpractice being in place, such as the teacher retaining the right to determine the final mark and the requirement of the students to justify their self-assessed mark through critical discussion and written comments on their oral presentations. In this study, all of the students' self-assessments were supported by their oral and written critical comments. Nevertheless, this discovery within the findings is poignant in that it

indicates the extent to which students can be imbued with a sense of strategic thinking in terms of assessment. It is also indicative of the pervasive influence of the traditional 'banking method' of education (Freire, 1970). Although the potential for a disingenuous strategy to gain high grades demonstrates a negative aspect of co-assessment, it simultaneously highlights a positive aspect of co-assessment which can ensure and safeguard integrity in the assessment process. This positive aspect is the trusting learning environment that supports, and is vital to, co-assessment. The self-assessment of oral presentations when discussed with the teacher requires trust because there is personal evaluation and disclosure by the student. For this to be authentic and effective, high levels of mutual trust and respect must exist between the student and teacher. Furthermore, this study reveals that a balance is required by students between being empowered and not taking advantage of, or abusing, their empowerment. Similarly, there is a balance required by the teacher between encouraging a more democratic approach to learning and teaching through co-assessment, and retaining a position of authority and responsibility in terms of the integrity and validity of student assessment. These are necessary balances which demonstrate the complexity and some of the implications of co-assessment.

Co-assessment is thus a risky business. It could be argued, however, that in this study the challenges of co-assessment provided students with opportunities to develop not only their intellectual skills through a deep learning approach, but also their employability skills. By giving an oral presentation, students practised a valuable communication skill and through its delivery and engagement with their audience, they demonstrated their interpersonal skills. The content of the summatively co-assessed presentations was the students' critical reflections on the development of their employability skills through the service-learning course. Added to this were the skills involved in the self-assessment of the presentations. Altogether, this was an effective pedagogical approach as both of these aspects focused on the students' self-evaluation of their learning and personal development. Subsequently, the method of co-assessment in some instances validated students' perceptions of their performance and in other cases helped them to reach a clearer understanding of the weaknesses in their presentational skills. The ensuing feedback discussion between student and teacher was also helpful in terms of enhancing students' skills in team working, negotiation and working towards a resolution in the form of an agreed mark.

The findings of the study revealed that many of the employability skills and personal attributes referred to in the literature and sought by prospective employers (Barnett and Coate, 2005; CBI, 2011; Gravells, 2010; Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011; Knight, 2006; Knight and Yorke, 2002; Lees, 2002; Moon, 2004; Yorke, 2004) were evident in this service-learning course, although previously they had not been overtly acknowledged. Rejuvenated through co-assessment, these skills were enlivened and highlighted for the students. Summative co-assessment helped students to articulate their employability skills (CBI, 2011) both orally and in writing. Although students revealed that they had gained and developed numerous skills and attributes through the course and its assessment, such as time management, organisational skills, adaptability, flexibility, leadership, decision-making and problem solving, there were other skills that were most salient relating to the co-assessment. Critical reflection and self-evaluation were central features, which are valuable as employability skills and vital to lifelong learning. In co-assessment, teamwork and communication were also essential skills. Confidence and motivation were developed successfully through oral presentations and their co-assessment. Participating in a summatively co-assessed oral presentation reflecting on the development of their employability skills also served to reinforce the students' self-efficacy (Knight and Yorke, 2002) and demonstrated that employability and academic skills are compatible (HEA, 2006; Lees, 2002).

Although the participants in this practitioner research study were assured that the student-teacher relationship would not be adversely affected, it is possible that some individuals may have

been inclined, either consciously or not, to provide more positive responses than they might otherwise have done. Moreover, there is the possibility that practitioner research per se induces positive responses from participants due to ‘the so-called “halo” or “Hawthorne” effect’ (Silverman, 2001: 233). It was also a very small scale project, so the findings would not necessarily be representative of a larger study. It would be of value, however, to investigate the longer term effects of such a study on graduate employment.

Enhancing students’ competencies and capabilities (Robinson, 2005) is central to employability skills development, but there has been little evidence to demonstrate how this could be assessed through student–teacher collaboration. This study addresses a gap in the literature by exemplifying an innovative and effective co-assessment strategy aimed to enhance students’ skills through assessment for and of learning. Saliently, it demonstrates that employability skills can be enhanced through summative co-assessment. Although applied in this specific example of a service-learning course, summative co-assessment is transferable to other academic courses. Discussion and negotiation of marks with each student, however, is a time-consuming process and may be impractical with large classes. Nevertheless, attempting to step out of the boundaries of traditional forms of assessment in this way is of value to students because it can deepen their learning while also enhancing their employability skills and attributes, thus preparing them for a world of responsible and co-operative work.

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