

Exploring the use of peer assessment as a vehicle for closing the gap between feedback given and feedback used

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The literature is increasingly drawing attention to the gap between feedback *given* to students and feedback *used* by students. This paper reflects on the beginnings of an evaluation into the potential of peer assessment to act as a vehicle to enable students to make use of the feedback they receive. A case study is presented within an action research paradigm outlining the introduction of a peer formative assessment process. Current findings highlight the importance of appreciating the emotional as well as the cognitive aspects of peer learning and suggest that cultural shifts at programme level may be required for peer assessment to be most effective.

Keywords: peer assessment; formative assessment; utilising feedback; case study; emotional impact

Introduction

The landscape of higher education has undergone a series of major changes in recent years. A key transformation is how assessment is contextualised and understood. Assessment has been reconceptualised as not only measuring learning as an end product but also as a crucial factor in enabling – or preventing – learning to take place. Since the 1970s, an increasing amount of literature has highlighted the key role assessment plays in influencing student learning. Snyder (1971) initially drew attention to how assessment requirements dominate how and what students learn. Since then, this theme has been continually built upon by an increasing amount of pedagogic research and literature. Gibbs (1999) argued that assessment is the most powerful lever teachers have to influence student learning. Wass et al. (2001, 945) highlighted that ‘assessment drives learning ... Pragmatically, assessment is the most appropriate engine on which to harness the curriculum’. Studies by Ramsden (1992), Boud (1995), and Black and Wiliam (1998), among others, all highlighted similar findings. Knowing that students tend to focus on what they need to do to successfully meet the assessment requirements for their studies is a major insight into where students channel their energies.

This insight has highlighted the relationship between assessment and learning and has promoted the concept of ‘assessment for learning’ rather than simply ‘assessment as measurement’ (Jawah et al. 2004). Increasing attention has been paid to the value of feedback and formative assessment in enhancing student learning

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(Orsmond, Merry, and Callaghan 2004). The role of peer assessment has also been important in this process, being seen as having the potential to improve student learning, particularly in the context of formative assessment. Examples abound in the literature of innovative practices in this area (Bryan and Clegg 2006). Rust (2007, 232) sees such practices as suggesting that 'a new assessment culture is emerging' and supports earlier calls for the development of a 'scholarship of assessment' (Price 2005, 15).

Recent literature signals the need for a more advanced understanding of the complex relationship between assessment and learning – stressing the need for the active participation of students in their assessments and the value of dialogue between students and tutors in this process (Rust 2007). While earlier literature stressed the potential of formative feedback to enhance student learning, it is increasingly being acknowledged that the provision of feedback alone is insufficient to effect higher standards of work by students (Crisp 2007). Recent research suggests that a gap exists between feedback being *given* and feedback being *used* by students. A key concern here is whether students are able to act on the feedback (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2002) and are able to see connections with how they could improve their work in the future (McCune and Hounsell 2005) – the concept of 'feedback to feed-forward'. Carless (2006, 219) acknowledges that feedback is central to the development of effective learning but is as yet 'comparatively under-researched'.

Commentators are increasingly highlighting assessment as a socially constructed concept and are stressing the complexity of practices in this area. Price's (2005) work drew attention to the difficulty in establishing, sharing and applying assessment standards across module staff teams. She highlighted effectively that although explicit assessment marking criteria were in place, these were only part of the assessment process. The markers' unarticulated tacit knowledge about assessment standards was also a primary factor. Such studies point to the need to create an open assessment dialogue. If markers struggle to share their tacit assessment knowledge between themselves, it is unsurprising that students often have a sense of a 'hidden curriculum' which they have been excluded from but which impacts greatly on their final results. How students are – or are not – able to utilise the subsequent feedback they receive may also be influenced by whether they feel included or excluded from such an assessment dialogue.

The current study

'Social policy for social workers' is a one-year compulsory module taken by first-year BA social work students. The module had traditionally been assessed via a summative essay. The university where the author is based recently engaged in a major restructuring of learning and teaching practices. One of the new requirements introduced was that each module needed to include some form of formative assessment. The author had been involved in devising the new requirements at university level and was tasked with supporting colleagues in implementing the required changes.

Drawing upon the 'assessment for learning' debates, the author was keen to introduce formative assessment in a way which engaged students fully in the task and impacted not only on the assessment for the above module but also had potential 'feed-forward' benefits for their future study. Pedagogic research findings strongly suggest that engaging with peer assessment can be a key way of enhancing student

learning (Topping et al. 2000; Cassidy 2006). When revising the assessment scheme for the module, therefore, the author chose to include a formative peer assessment exercise as a key component and assess its impact on student learning via an action research approach.

The student group comprised 45 students in total and these students were divided into Home Groups, with five students per group. Each Home Group was required to give feedback on a draft essay that would eventually be the student's summative submission for the module. Each member of the Home Group was required to give feedback on the formative essays submitted by the other four students in their group. In turn, they were to receive feedback from the other four group members on their essays. These formative essays were then to be reworked following feedback and submitted for summative assessment at the end of the module.

Prior to submission, several preparatory issues needed to be addressed. Firstly, how many people the Home Group would comprise? van den Berg, Admiral, and Pilot's (2006a) analysis of different peer assessment projects suggested that feedback is best given in small groups. The students were anxious about other students seeing their work and feeling 'over-exposed'. They were in agreement that Home Groups of five were most appropriate – enough people to have a range of feedback but not too many to feel too 'exposed' or be impractical to manage.

Secondly, students needed to be prepared to undertake the responsibilities of giving each other feedback. A workshop was held to explain the processes to students and to answer any questions or make changes in the light of their suggestions. Students were provided with copies of anonymised summative essays submitted previously on the module, alongside copies of tutor's written feedback. Students were also given copies of the marking sheet, and discussions took place about the wording of the criteria and what was being assessed. Suggested key areas for feedback were discussed as a group and the purposes of the exercise were highlighted. Reading each other's work for ideas about structure, how to argue, how to use references and so on was suggested as a key opportunity for learning alongside receiving feedback from other students on their work. Discussion also took place about how using the marking sheets was a potential way of students familiarising themselves with the assessment criteria and demystifying some of the assessment processes.

Students were given a date to feedback their marking sheets electronically to each other and a further workshop was planned for students to discuss how they experienced the feedback process rather than giving detailed feedback at this point. Students were then encouraged to have an online discussion with other group members outside the session to talk in more detail about their feedback and to ask and answer questions. Tutors were provided with hard copies of each essay and the feedback each student had received from his or her peers. Students were subsequently required to comment on how they used their formative feedback from other students in their Home Group to improve their summative work. They were asked to provide this information as the first section of their summative assessment.

Debating the role of the tutor

One of the underlying precepts for the above exercise was to encourage students to be active learners and to utilise peer feedback as a way of enhancing learning. Using peers rather than tutors in this process was also seen as important in moving the loci

of power at further distance from the tutors and towards the students. Brown and Glaser (2003, 153) argue pertinently that ‘assessment is ... an exercise of power’. Reflecting on the process here, power was clearly not devolved to the students in many ways and the tutors still retained the central power position. The module tutors had decided that the exercise would be compulsory in order to ensure that all students participated in the process.

In dialogue with students, it became clear that many students were anxious about the prospect of tutors being absent from the peer assessment process – voicing concern that their peers would not have a sound enough grasp of the assessment requirements in order to help them and vice versa. Concerns expressed here mirror the findings of similar studies in this area, for example, Smith, Cooper, and Lancaster (2002), Lapham and Webster (2003), and Falchikov (2005). A key anxiety was that peers could give positive feedback on an essay which was subsequently marked as a fail as tutors retained the power to pass or fail summative submissions. It was agreed, therefore, that tutors would read all the essays and would give generic feedback to each Home Group on the feedback they had given each other. The main feedback would remain via peers but a quality assurance role would be performed by the tutors.

Students were also keen that the exercise had a diagnostic assessment function and requested that tutors contacted students who were at risk of failing to offer an additional individual tutorial to discuss the student’s work. Although formative assessment is sometimes seen as a way of increasing students’ learning without increasing the tutor’s workload (Cassidy 2006), both module tutors agreed that this was a reasonable expectation on the students’ behalf. There were initial worries that this could potentially undermine the potency of the peer assessment process – what if students believe that they need to be less critical in their feedback of essays as tutors are monitoring the process and will identify any struggling students. On balance, however, this appears as a reasonable compromise on a first-year module where autonomous learning is a longer-term goal rather than an initial expectation (see Appendix).

Method of enquiry

As a way of furthering an assessment dialogue, a focus group was held with students to explore their experience of the formative assessment process and how they believed this had impacted on their learning. A research consent form was devised asking students for their voluntary participation in a focus group and 10 self-selected students were invited to participate in the focus group. Goldman and Schmaltz (2001) recommend that focus groups should consist of 8–12 participants. All the participants were female, which was not unrepresentative of that cohort, and a third were from minority ethnic groups.

The students were all assured that participation in the focus group would not impact on their assessment on the programme. The purpose of the session was to hear in more detail than the module evaluation forms allowed as to how they experienced the assessment task required for the module. The session was audio-taped and subsequently transcribed. All participants were informed that the contents of the focus group may be used in an article to be submitted for publication and their written consent to this was sought and agreed. The data were subsequently analysed and a number of key themes emerged, as outlined below.

Findings and discussion

Experience of assessor anxiety

Most participants expressed the view that the issue they were most anxious about was the assessing of other students' work. Apposite comments here were:

I was very worried about what would happen if someone gave me an essay to read and it is, in my opinion, clearly rubbish.

I just wasn't looking forward to giving feedback to anybody. There was the danger that you didn't want to be too critical and become too generous because you don't want to upset people.

I thought who am I to give my opinion when I don't know if I can even do my own stuff.

In contrast, one student commented:

I thought it would be great to see everybody else's presentation of their work and how they would manage to get over the introduction and things like that.

The level of anxiety expressed by the students overall appeared to support the decision to allocate feedback into smaller Home Groups where students could potentially build up closer working relationships prior to the submission of their formative work. This finding also suggests that students need opportunities for giving critical feedback to each other in other ways, for example, following group presentations. While some work was done on the programme in relation to this, the benefits of critical feedback as an aid to learning appear to need stressing even further and a richer feedback culture may need to be cultivated. Anxieties about being critical in giving feedback mirror the findings of similar studies in this area, for example, Xiao and Lucking (2008) and Lu and Bol (2007). This suggests that it could be pertinent for tutors to oversee the feedback process to ensure that effective criticisms do reach students and are not filtered out because of a desire not to upset people. At this stage of their learning, confidence in their critical abilities may need to be fostered further in students. Tutors feeding back on the feedback process may be a way of building such confidence on the part of assessors besides having a quality monitoring function.

Experience of anxiety about being assessed

Another anxiety expressed by all the students was the concern in relation to other students reading and assessing *their* work:

It was a terrifying experience for me to give my work to someone else to look at – not one but four people – it was almost like oh God do I really want to hear this?

I can just about take criticism from teachers but to get it from peers as well. It was like it will stay with them for the rest of the time that I am with them and how are they going to judge me?

One student said that she had felt anxious initially but then added:

When I write I get too close to my essays so I am not reading them anymore – ... I can't see the mistakes. Someone else reading them for me is invaluable.

Linking to the professional context of the work, another student commented:

In social work you write an assessment for any other professional to read. So if you put it in the real social work context, I know you might have initial fears about other people seeing your work but actually that is what happens in real life.

Where students were able to identify potential benefits from engaging in peer assessment at the start, they appeared able to focus more on this and less on their anxiety. Linking the exercise more closely with the students' future professional practice also appears beneficial in this context by stressing the 'real-life' need to share their work in a professional context. It may be helpful to set the exercise more closely within this frame and to stress the professional benefits of sharing knowledge and ideas with peers as a key to future professional as well as academic development.

This finding also suggests that attempts to use feedback to promote student learning need to begin with a 'holistic conception' (Boud 1995) of student assessment and need to consider the students' 'total learning environment' (Brew 2003). Students clearly experienced the process of both giving and receiving feedback as anxiety-provoking situations. The programme that the author teaches incorporates formative feedback across all first-year modules but feedback is given to students in other modules by tutors. Students are essentially passive recipients of tutor feedback. This may account for the high level of anxiety that students appeared to feel in relation to engaging in peer assessment in one module and being in the role of assessor. This suggests that it may be most appropriate for peer assessment to be incorporated at programme level rather than module level. Encouraging students to actively participate in their own assessments may require a cultural shift where assessment is reconceptualised as an active process done *with* rather than *to* students.

Facilitating dialogue around assessment standards

Part of the aim of the work was to encourage students to become more familiar with the assessment criteria and to more fully understand the assessment standards and requirements. This aim appears to have been achieved to some extent, as highlighted by the following students' comments:

I couldn't have done it without the marking sheet. Because I knew my essay would be marked against those criteria, it made me think about my own work as well.

When you use the marking sheet you think my God tutors have to do all of this so you need to make it easy. It was almost like stepping out and looking down – having an insight into a different world. A sneaky preview into how you are going to get better marks.

The advantage of using the marking sheet is that you get used to it – when you are writing your own essay you have already worked with it.

Several students did suggest that the marking sheet was confusing to use, however, commenting:

If the marking sheet was simpler I would have used it more. Instead I put all the things I said in the comments box because I just couldn't marry it together.

It's in tutor speak and not student speak.

The formative exercise sought to actively engage students with the marking criteria as a way of initiating them into the assessment process as suggested by Rust, O'Donovan, and Price (2005). This is also seen as a key way of transferring tacit assessment knowledge from tutors to students (Rust, Price, and O'Donovan 2003). While the findings here do illustrate some evidence of success, a key issue emerged in relation to the language used in the marking criteria and students struggling to understand the requirements. While using the programme marking sheet appears beneficial in terms of helping students to familiarise themselves with the actual marking criteria for their summative essays, it may also be pertinent to revisit the language used. While assessment criteria are notoriously difficult to de-codify and apply, assessment language drawn from level descriptors and benchmarking requirements may make an intrinsically complex task even harder for students to decipher. This finding suggests that the marking criteria need to be further 'demystified' and translated into a more readily understandable format. Carless (2006, 227) argues that assessment criteria and the 'unpacking of this discourse' represent a barrier to students in understanding the standards required. Redesigning the marking criteria, with students as contributors and stakeholders in the assessment process – alongside external examiners, quality assurance agencies, professional bodies and so on – may be one way forward as part of creating a meaningful assessment dialogue. Pertinent questions about the different audiences that the marking sheets are devised for may be helpful to debate further here, with students as contributors to this debate.

Engaging with online feedback

The feedback exercise was devised to be carried out online with Home Group members emailing their essays to each other and engaging in an online discussion on the feedback each student had given and received. When asked in the classroom how the feedback process had been experienced, all students spoke positively within the large group and no suggestions for change were offered. In the focus group, however, a very different picture emerged in relation to how students had used – or not used – online feedback discussions. Pertinent comments here were:

We actually met up to go through our essays. We thought discussing things face to face would make so much difference – if someone misunderstands something you have written you can actually explain it.

Verbal feedback is essential – what you have written on paper doesn't translate what is in your head. You would have to write a whole essay for some feedback where you could just explain it in a few words.

One group had apparently agreed to give feedback to each other online. The reasoning here was:

The discomfort level was so high ... everyone said 'no, we don't want to give negative feedback to one another's faces'.

Others debated their decision to not give feedback online and stated that they may have lost out on the practice of giving pertinent written feedback:

The most important bit of giving feedback is how you say it and how you word it. Getting that practice is important as well.

Interestingly, such issues were not raised in dialogue with the tutors and the students had voted with their feet – or their mouths – and decided, on the whole, to give each other verbal rather than electronic feedback. Reflecting on the way the programme is taught as a whole, e-learning technology is often a source of information-giving rather than a vehicle for dialogue. Students had no experience of online discussions on other modules and so perhaps the expectation that they would embrace this idea was misplaced. This year, a verbal Home Group feedback session has been programmed and plans for setting up a discussion board or using social software to promote dialogue (Hatzipanagos and Warburton 2009) have been temporarily shelved. A wider debate at programme level is suggested here, however, about how we can encourage students to communicate in writing to each other – and later to other professionals in their work.

If students experience e-learning as a key aspect of their programme, they may be more open to utilising the facilities provided by such technology, for example, using discussion boards in a feedback dialogue. Where e-learning is not incorporated into the students' overall learning, it may be difficult to encourage sensitive feedback debates to happen online. If programmes do see using e-communication as a key skill for students to develop, this appears to need a rationale and commitment at programme level and needs to be an integrated part of the overall pedagogy of learning. Again, something of a cultural shift may be necessary to encourage students to embrace e-learning.

Feedback as a gift or a burden?

A key theme which emerged from the focus group discussion was a clear discrepancy in the way some students had embraced the feedback exercise while others had minimal participation. The quantity and quality of feedback provided was variable across the groups. One student commented:

I know I gave a lot of feedback but I didn't receive it.

Some people literally gave feedback on the day ... a couple of notes to the tutor.

I had someone say to me, 'I am not going to be giving feedback ... I am too busy'. Even though she wasn't in my Home Group I felt hugely angry towards her because I thought, 'You are letting your group down'.

The members of the self-selected focus group appeared to have engaged very well with the whole feedback process and appeared to see it as a valuable learning opportunity. The voices of those who may have felt less positive about the process were not heard here. The focus group members also appeared to have embraced the potential of giving feedback as an act of academic altruism to some degree:

In our Home Group we found it was very useful for some members of the group who weren't as strong as other members. We used that to the advantage of those people and really helped them to pull their work up.

You are not putting somebody down – you're helping to build them up.

Giving feedback and helping someone improve their work is a real buzz.

Debate in the focus group ranged from anger at people who had not fully participated in the feedback process to expressions of academic altruism and the positive ways in which feedback can be used to enhance the learning of others. Students argued that those who had given cursory feedback should be 'held accountable', and there was a general, somewhat punitive feeling that this should result in the failure of their summative work. The level of feeling generated in this debate ran high and highlighted that feedback exercises can have positive and negative impacts on whole group dynamics which may be acutely felt by the students but may remain hidden from the awareness of the tutor. Tutors' reading completed marking sheets and facilitating group feedback sessions may be helpful to some degree here in moderating this process but the impact on future group dynamics may be a hidden outcome of the feedback process.

Feeding back to feed-forward

A further aim of this work was to encourage students to receive the feedback they had been given, along with the insights they had when feeding back themselves to others, to improve their summative work for the particular module and also to impact positively on their future work on the programme. Several comments from students suggested that they had started to engage with this process:

It wasn't just about giving feedback to other people it was also whilst I was giving the feedback I was questioning my own work and learning from other peoples' styles.

I could see where I had come from and where I want to go.

The students in the focus group were responding several months after undertaking their feedback exercise. There was unanimous agreement that the feedback they had received had enabled them to improve their summative submission. One representative comment here was:

The feedback was helpful to me as I could use it directly ... to improve my work.

Interestingly, several students also commented that they had now started to seek feedback from each other on work for other modules which did not have a formal peer assessment component. There was a strong sense within the group that the students saw the benefits of the exercise as being beneficial for their future work too. This is highlighted by the following comments:

You can transfer your feedback into the next piece of work. You can think, 'last time they commented on that so maybe if I do it this way'? Then if you get a better comment it is like going up a ladder.

I will hopefully take this experience with me throughout the next two years. I know that if I need a piece of advice on how to do something I can go to particular people who I know are good at picking up that sort of thing.

Much of the current literature highlights the feed-forward impact of formative feedback on improving the subsequent summative work (Falchikov 2005; Smythe 2006; van den Berg, Admiral, and Pilot 2006b). In retrospect, it may have been helpful to have encouraged the students to have been a little more specific on how the

assessment will impact on their future learning. Whether the feed-forward potential of feedback *does extend* beyond the specific module studied, however, needs further exploration. In the next stage of the action research cycle, the author will explore with the students at the end of this academic year whether they believed their feedback experience *had* subsequently impacted on their future work. Exploring the long-term gains and the transferability of feedback will be a fruitful avenue of research to pursue further here alongside finding out what factors help or hinder the 'feed-forward' process.

Limitations

This is a small-scale case study with limited claims to generalisability. Further limitations of this research are, firstly, that the self-selected focus group was a small sample and, secondly, that the question regarding whether the comments by the focus group were representative of the student cohort overall is clearly debatable. It may be, for example, that students who had a particular interest in the feedback process chose to participate.

Conclusion

The case study outlined here is offered as the first stage of an action research project designed to explore whether peer formative assessment may be a vehicle for closing the gap between feedback given to students and feedback effectively used by them. The author has focused in depth on the student focus group responses as a way of highlighting key issues which have the potential to impact on this process. Many of the concerns raised by the students are ones which remain invisible to staff unless an assessment dialogue between tutors and students is explicitly sought. These issues have the potential to impact greatly on any attempts at engaging students with the feedback process.

Bridging the gap between 'feedback given' and 'feedback acted upon' appears to be a central challenge in higher education at present. The findings of this ongoing evaluation suggest that peer assessment may offer a potential route forward in this process, particularly if integrated within a broader assessment dialogue between students and tutors and promoted at programme level.

Current findings highlight the emotional component associated with the assessed work, ranging from feelings of anxiety to anger towards students who had not fully participated in the feedback process. Yorke (2003) argues that understanding the psychology of giving and receiving feedback is of vital importance. Boud (1995) also highlights the deeply emotional nature of assessment processes. The emotional component of peer assessment appears to be a particularly pertinent issue for students. Carless' (2006) study highlights how students are impacted upon emotionally by written feedback from tutors. The emotional dynamics of feedback from peers may be even more challenging for students and may impact upon group dynamics in ways that are not necessarily visible to tutors. These findings support earlier research suggesting that for peer assessment to work most effectively, tutors need to have an awareness of the potential emotional as well as cognitive aspects of group learning (Cartney and Rouse 2006).

This paper has sought to raise issues for debate rather than seeking to provide answers to all the complexities inherently involved in using peer assessment. The evaluation of changes made in one programme is at an initial stage, with further

follow-up research planned, and so is presented as a work in progress. It is hoped that the initial findings have pointed to some of the potential benefits of utilising peer assessment and also highlighted some of the challenging aspects that need to be considered when seeking to use peer assessment to enhance student learning. Current reflections are offered as an invitation to further explore some of the complexities involved in promoting ‘assessment for learning’ and to contribute to developing a new scholarship of assessment.

Notes on contributor

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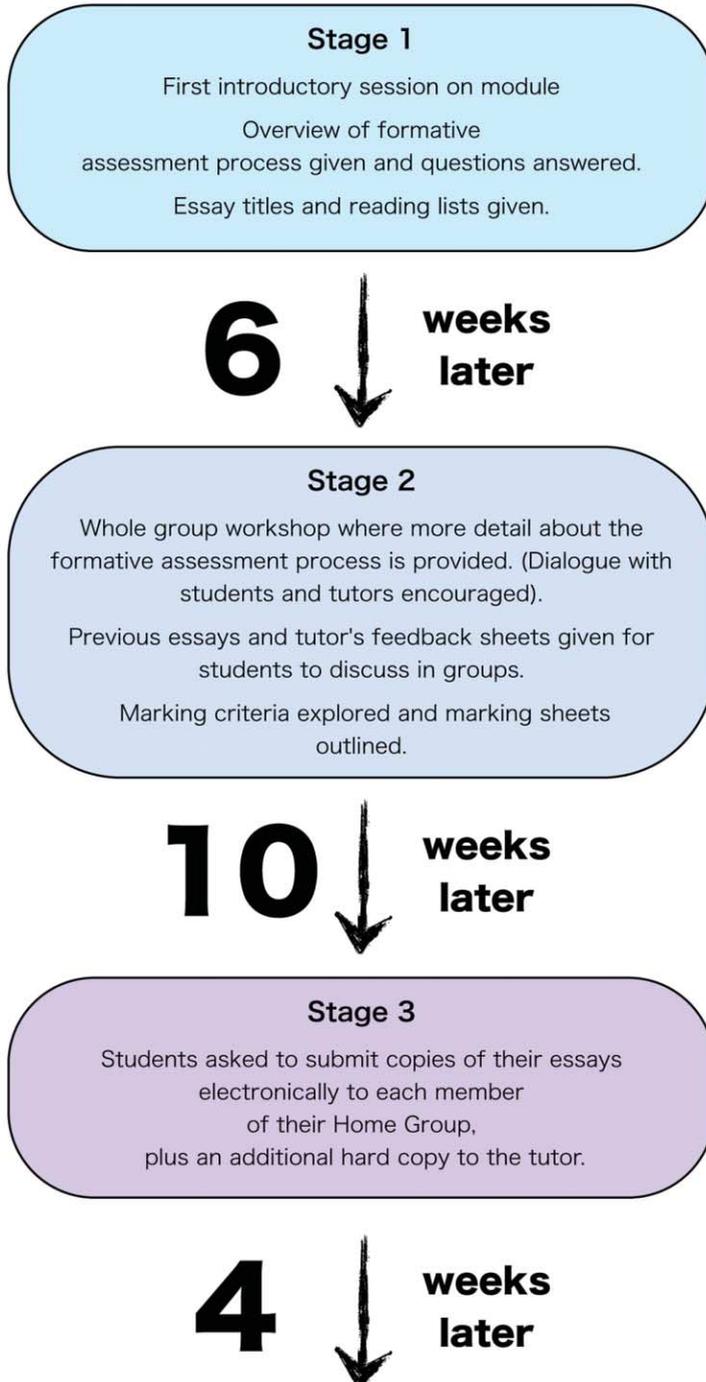
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Appendix

Outlining the assessment process



Stage 4

Students submit an electronic marking sheet to each member of their home group to give feedback on the essays they have read.

On-line discussion on essays to take place over the next four weeks.

Students encouraged to discuss the feedback they received further and to ask questions of their assessors to improve their learning.

Hard copies of marking sheets given to tutors.

3



**weeks
later**

Stage 5

Tutors provide electronic feedback to each Home Group commenting on the feedback students gave to each other.

Tutors offer individual tutorials to students whose work was marginal/failing at the formative stage.

Tutors offer generic whole group feedback on key issues that emerged from the feedback process overall.

6



**weeks
later**

Stage 6

Students submit their summative essays for tutor assessment.

First part of the summative assignment asks students to identify how they used their peer feedback at the formative stage to make improvements to their summative work.

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