# Those Formative Peers: Improving First Year Academic Writing Through Peer Assessment Groups

## Key Words

formative, summative, peer assessment, peer writing groups, feedback

## Abstract

There is general agreement in the literature that peer assessment, particularly formative assessment, promotes effective learning for University students (Boud, 2000; Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999; Falchikov, 2007; Lui & Carless, 2006; Sadler, 1989; Topping, 1998). Where summative assessment has been criticised for its emphasis on awarding credentials (Boud & Falchikov, 2006) and, in turn, its competitive nature (Boud et al., 1999), formative assessment has been credited for promoting skills that foster life-long learning (Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Given that summative assessment is still an integral component of tertiary education, and that formative feedback provided by academics is not only minimal but often dismissed by students (Marcoux, Marken & Yu, 2012), participation in peer assessment groups may assist students to develop skills necessary for success, both in their current studies and in their future learning. Ultimately, what is sought is a means of assessment that consistently upholds the principles of sustainable assessment, "not only address[ing] the immediate needs of certification… but also contribut[ing] in some way to… prospective learning" (Boud & Falchikov, 2009, p. 400). This study, which will be conducted with selected first year Education students in Semester 2, 2017, will explore the benefits of peer assessment groups. Previous studies have demonstrated that writing groups significantly boost students' confidence, as well as their awareness of academic expectations (Marcoux, Marken & Yu, 2012). Research also indicates that peer assessment is a reflective and reflexive process in which students learn about their own writing by critiquing others' (Boud et al. 1999; Falchikov, 2007; Lui & Carless, 2006; Van den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot, 2006). With this in mind, interested students will be asked to attend a Learning Adviser led writing circle for one hour a week, for the weeks leading up to the submission of their first University assignment. They will continue to participate in these groups until the submission of their second assignment, at which point their confidence, as well as their ability to write, assess, and self-assess will be qualitatively analysed by way of anonymous participant survey. This study could contribute to innovations in peer learning by considering the potential contribution of peers to the development of sustainable skills and, subsequently, the relevance of this formative approach to progressive assessment design.

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