

# Collaborative Assessment as a Learning Process in E-learning

David McConnell

School of Education, University of Sheffield

[d.mcconnell@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.mcconnell@sheffield.ac.uk)

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the various ways in which students talk about their experience and perceptions of collaborative review and assessment as it occurs in e-learning environments. Collaborative review and assessment involves the student, their peers and tutor in thoughtful and critical examination of each student's course work. The process involves two stages: review and discussion of the student's work with a view to bringing different critical yet supportive perspectives to the work. This is followed by the use of two sets of criteria to make judgements on the student's work: one set provided by the student, the other by the tutor. The purpose of collaborative assessment is to foster a learning approach to assessment and to develop a shared power relationship with students. From analysis of face to face interviews, examination of e-learning discussions and student completed questionnaires, a set of analytic categories was developed describing the learners' experiences of collaborative assessment. The paper focuses on analysing and discussing these categories of experience. The research shows that collaborative e-learning assessment helps students move away from dependence on lecturers as the only or major source of judgement about the quality of learning. Students develop skill and know how about self and peer assessment and see themselves as competent in making judgements about their own and each other's work, which are good lifelong learning skills.

**Keywords:** collaborative e-learning; collaborative assessment; assessment criteria; shared power; experience of learning.

## INTRODUCTION

The case for involving students in some form of self and peer assessment in higher education is well established in the literature (eg see Boud, 1995, 2000; McConnell, 1999, 2000; McDowell and Sambell, 1999; Somerville, 1993; Stefani, 1998). Student involvement in their own assessment is an important part of the preparation for life and work. Although by no means universal, there is now a wider belief in the educational and social benefits of self and peer assessment. The place of self and peer assessment in e-learning has, however, still to be established.

What effects, if any, does self and peer assessment have on students approaches to learning? If students are actively involved in decisions about how to learn and what to learn and why they are learning. And if they are actively involved in decisions about criteria for assessment and the process of judging their own and others work, then their relationship to their studies will probably be qualitatively different to those students who are treated as recipients of teaching and who are the object of others' unilateral, assessment. Because students in cooperative and collaborative learning situations make important decisions about their learning and assessment, there will be no need for them to seek cues from staff about assessment or seek to find ways of "playing" the system. They determine the system themselves, in negotiation with other students and staff.

How does this work in practice, and what do students think about this form of assessment? The categories under which students' experiences are analysed and discussed include:

- From unilateral to collaborative assessment
- Enjoyment, frankness, anxiety and tension
- Responsibility to others and submission of assignments
- The development of collaborative assessment skills
- Insights into assessment
- Access to others' learning
- Motivation to learn
- Intrinsic versus extrinsic validation of learning

## CONCLUSIONS

Collaborative assessment in e-learning communities is not only possible it is desirable. It supports the collaborative work of the community. It is not merely a technique to be applied to students, but a value-laden approach to learning and teaching which seeks to involve students in decision making about the assessment process and how to make judgements on their

own and each others learning. It is an integral part of a whole with many benefits for those participating in it. Above all else, it seeks to foster a learning approach to assessment.

This research indicates that students involved in collaborative e-assessment actively and critically reflect on their learning and on the benefits of collaborative assessment. It also shows that these new Web-based electronic learning environments are well placed to support the complexity of this form of assessment. The architecture of e-learning systems such as Web-CT supports students in the reflective learning and assessment process.

The outcomes of this research indicate that collaborative review and assessment helps students move-away from dependence on lecturers as the only or major source of judgement about the quality of their learning. They move to a more autonomous and independent situation where each individual develops the experience, know-how and skill to assess their own learning. It is likely that this skill can be transferred to other lifelong learning situations and contexts. Equipping learners with such skills should be a key aspect of the so-called "learning society" (Boud, 2000).

The openness of the collaborative assessment process is crucial to its success. Whereas most assessment techniques are closed, involving only the student and their teacher, collaborative assessment has to take place in an open environment. (cf Ames, 1992 (as quoted in Boud, 2000) who thinks all feedback should be private). As we have seen, learning relationships have to be fostered, and trust developed and maintained in order for collaborative assessment to succeed. The balance between critique and support is very important, yet at times very fragile. Peers and tutors are involved in collaborative learning and support throughout this course. But they are also called on to review and assess each others work. In a learning community or community of practice this is not only possible but it is desirable. We cannot bring in strangers to this community to assess learning. That would endanger the sense of community and undermine the learning relationships that each learning set has developed. The community 'knows' itself and has developed a very strong sense of identity. But it also has to be able to reflect on its work, and be critical of each member's learning. This I think is achieved with some success in this particular context.

Overall this research shows the importance students attach to learning and assessment processes which take place in a social environment. This is a major theme, which is constantly referred to throughout the interviews and in the online discussions. Its importance cannot be over-stated. It is not only a major factor in supporting and motivating distant learners and in helping them overcome feelings of isolation. It also points to the benefits of social constructivism and social co-participation in learning, especially in continuing professional development contexts. Not only do adult learners enjoy learning in social settings, they are quick to appreciate the potential benefits afforded by collaboration in the learning and assessment process. It is no less so in collaborative e-learning environments.

## SELECTED REFERENCES

- Boud, D. (1995). *Enhancing Learning through Self Assessment*. London, Kogan Page.
- Boud, D. (2000). "Sustainable assessment: Rethinking assessment for a learning society." *Studies in Continuing Education* **22**(2): 151-167.
- McConnell, D. (1999). "Examining a collaborative assessment process in networked lifelong learning." *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, **15**(September).
- McConnell, D. (2000). *Implementing Computer Supported Cooperative Learning*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) London, Kogan Page.
- McDowell, L., Sambell, K. (1999). *Students Experience of Self Evaluation in Higher Education: Preparation for Lifelong Learning?*, Paper presented at the Bi-annual conference of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI), Gothenburg, August 24-28 1999
- Somerville, H. (1993). "Issues in assessment, enterprise and Higher Education: the case for self-, peer and collaborative assessment." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* **18**(3): 221-233.
- Stefani, L. (1998). "Assessment in Partnership with Learners." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* **23**(339-350).