Chapter I

Self, Peer, and Group Assessment in E-Learning: An Introduction

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Abstract

This chapter provides an informal introduction to self, peer, and group assessment, especially as they may be applied within an online, or e-learning, environment. What is self assessment? What is peer assessment? What is group assessment? In what ways are they similar, and what distinguishes one from another? The principal characteristics of each are described. An assumption, made explicit from the start, is that assessment should not just be about grading, but about assisting the process of learning itself. References are made throughout to the thoughts and experiences of many researchers and practitioners currently working in the field.
Introduction

And what is good, Phaedrus, And what is not good—Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?

Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

The traditional view has always been something along the following lines: assessment is about grading. One or more instructors assess the work of the students, with the primary—and perhaps sole—aim of assigning fair and appropriate grades to each of the students at the end of the course.

An alternative view, and one that has claimed a large number of adherents in recent years, is that assessment can and should also play a vital part in the learning process itself. The most radical form of this alternative view is that the primary role of assessment is not about grading at all, but about learning, and that assessment practices should be developed and refined so that they assist the learner to learn effectively and efficiently.

This would have been an extremely radical thesis not too long ago, but these days an ever-increasing interest is being shown in nontraditional methods of teaching, and most particularly, in methods that involve learners in a more active way in their own learning. Partly, this has been brought about because of a concern that many traditional methods, such as lectures and tutorials, perhaps do not perform as well as might be hoped in some circumstances, particularly in what might be termed generic skills. Bligh (2000), for example, says, “Use lectures to teach information. Do not rely on them to promote thought, change attitudes, or develop behavioral skills if you can help it” (p. 20).

There is also a growing interest in methods where students help each other, in the form of group or collaborative learning. Two earlier books by the current author (Roberts, 2003, 2004) have dealt with collaborative learning in the context of online courses.

Any discussion of the use of self, peer, and group assessment in e-learning is therefore both important and timely. The ability to assess one’s own and others’ work is clearly a vital skill in the real world. For this reason alone, such methods should be worthy of further study. When one combines this with other identified benefits, such as: assisting learners to quickly identify areas requiring further study, improving communication skills, and increasing self-reliance, the importance of such methods should be apparent to all.
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