

Using Assessment to Engage Students and Enhance their Learning

University of Bristol, 22nd September 2011

Organisers: Phil Langton and Judy Harris

This was a lively and enjoyable workshop attended by 35 delegates from around the UK. The day began with a thought-provoking keynote presentation from Paul Orsmond (Staffordshire), which introduced the idea of learning as a social, as well as purely cognitive, process. Paul argued that a well-designed curriculum, and its assessment practices, needs to take account of – and capitalise upon - the communities of practice that students develop outside the overt curriculum.

This was followed by two presentations describing and evaluating different approaches to on-line assessment. Frankie MacMillan (Bristol) described how web-based pre-practical quizzes, consisting of MCQs and numerical problems, can be used very effectively to prepare students for physiology practical classes. Students value the feedback they receive and engage better with laboratory sessions when they know what to expect when they come into the lab. Sally Jordan (Open University) described how interactive computer-based assessments are being used in the OU to support distance learning. Interestingly, this approach is being used not only for marking answers selected from a range of pre-determined options, but also for free text answers in which 'smart' software looks for certain key words (and their order) in the answer. Both Frankie and Sally emphasised the benefits of on-line assessment in providing students with instant feedback and in freeing up staff time.

Over lunch, delegates completed two tasks that sought their views on the effectiveness of peer assessment in supporting learning. In one task they were asked to place coloured stickers on a 'Wall of Opinion' to indicate their advocacy or scepticism of the use of peer assessment for different tasks and at different stages of a degree programme. In the other task, a 'Table of Pros and Cons' was built up using post-it notes on which delegates wrote different statements (either positive or negative) relating to peer assessment, grading each statement on a scale of +3 (very important and reliable benefit) to -3 (a serious pitfall, difficult to avoid).

The theme of peer assessment was explored further in the afternoon session. Harriet Jones (East Anglia) described how it is being used to improve a range of biology students' skills at UEA including writing, critical thinking, proof-reading and presentation skills. Harriet also described how not providing hand-outs in lectures forces students to concentrate and has been shown to increase their engagement. Angela Hague (Bristol) talked about three different models of peer assessment she is trialling in group work for dental students. These included peer assessment of the final version of a written assignment, peer feedback on written work prior to tutor marking and peer review of contributions made to group work. Finally, Momna Hejmadi (Bath) described how she is using peer assessment to give students formative feedback on a range of activities in a cancer biology unit, including lab reports, oral presentations and team-working activities. Common themes that emerged from the three talks were that most students felt their learning benefited from receiving, and providing, peer feedback but they often find the process difficult and many are uncomfortable with peer assessment being used summatively.

Over tea, delegates were invited to add further votes and comments to the Wall of Opinion and the Table of Pros and Cons to track any shifts in opinion as a result of the afternoon presentations. The results are currently being analysed and will be uploaded to <https://wikis.bris.ac.uk/display/ASS/Home>, where a discussion blog and the slides for the presentations can also be found.

The organisers would like to thank The Physiological Society, the MEDEV Subject Centre and the Education Support Unit, University of Bristol for their sponsorship of an enjoyable and productive event.