Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice

Volume 11 | Issue 1 Article 3

2014

Feeling good, but missing the mark. What happened to the assessment in peer assessment?

Ragnhild Sandvoll
University in Tromsø, Norway, ragnhild.sandvoll@uit.no

Recommended Citation

Sandvoll, R. (2014). Feeling good, but missing the mark. What happened to the assessment in peer assessment?. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice, 11*(1). https://doi.org/10.53761/1.11.1.3

Feeling good, but missing the mark. What happened to the assessment in peer assessment?

Abstract

This qualitative study explores aspects of formative peer assessment through looking at teachers' and students' perceptions and practices. The study takes place in a first semester course, where mastering peer assessment was a learning outcome and where formative peer assessment was designed into the course plan as a learning activity. Empirical material is derived from observing two seminar groups and from interviewing teachers and students. Findings indicated that whilst all interviewees expressed positive attitudes towards peer assessment, no one seemed to put much effort into doing it. Using Argyris' theories of action as a theoretical framework, the study explores the relationship between realities of practice and espoused theories. Discussion focuses on the apparent paradox of positive expressed views and minimal effort. Additionally, the role of the teachers in managing peer assessment will be discussed, linked to the development of their teaching.

Keywords

Espoused theory, peer assessment, professional development, theories-in-use, theories of action

Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice

Volume 11 | Issue 1 Article 3

2014

Feeling good, but missing the mark. What happened to the assessment in peer assessment?

Ragnhild Sandvoll
University in Tromsø, Norway, ragnhild.sandvoll@uit.no

Feeling good, but missing the mark. What happened to the assessment in peer assessment?

Abstract

This qualitative study explores aspects of formative peer assessment through looking at teachers' and students' perceptions and practices. The study takes place in a first semester course, where mastering peer assessment was a learning outcome and where formative peer assessment was designed into the course plan as a learning activity. Empirical material is derived from observing two seminar groups and from interviewing teachers and students. Findings indicated that whilst all interviewees expressed positive attitudes towards peer assessment, no one seemed to put much effort into doing it. Using Argyris' theories of action as a theoretical framework, the study explores the relationship between realities of practice and espoused theories. Discussion focuses on the apparent paradox of positive expressed views and minimal effort. Additionally, the role of the teachers in managing peer assessment will be discussed, linked to the development of their teaching.

Keywords

Espoused theory, peer assessment, professional development, theories-in-use, theories of action

Introduction

This article focuses on both the espoused theories and the practice of formative peer assessment among students and teachers. It contributes to the relative dearth of studies that make explicit links between teachers' espoused theories and their actual teaching practice (Kane, Sandretto & Heath 2002, p204). The impetus for this study grew out of a previous one, conducted by the author, which found significant dissonance between teachers' statements about teaching and their descriptions of their own practice (in submission). The current study is an attempt to further clarify the relation between what students and teachers emphasised as important when talking about peer assessment, in relation to how they actually accomplished it. This current investigation was conducted to increase understanding of how peer assessment is perceived and practiced among teachers and students.

Several studies have shown that the way in which peer assessment is prepared and implemented has an impact on the extent to which students engage in and learn from the process (Gielen, Dochy & Onghena 2010; Black & William 1998). If teachers do not attribute importance to peer assessment, the chances increase that students will consider it inferior to other learning activities (Gielen, Dochy & Onghena 2010).Therefore, the role of the teacher in a peer-assessment system is important and worthy of attention, especially if studies treat teachers and students as co-participants rather than, as they often do, as if they are involved in separate processes (Ashwin 2008). This article analyses both teacher and student practice and perceptions of peer assessment, although more attention is given to teachers because of their central role in orchestrating this learning activity.

Peer assessment

Peer assessment can be defined as a form of participatory assessment where students grade and/or provide feedback on the work of their peers (Topping 2009). Formative assessment refers to midstream assessment that is specifically intended to generate feedback on student performance to promote learning and engage students (Sadler 1998; Black & William 1998). The use of the term "peer assessment" in this paper implies formative assessment. In the present study, peer assessment refers to students providing oral feedback on written drafts from their peers. They were not grading these drafts.

The rationale for involving students in peer assessment is that learning primarily happens through one's own curriculum-based activities. Students have to interact with the content and discuss it with peers or others to optimally internalise meaning and connect it to what they already know (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Learning is thus seen as a social-constructivist process, distinct from the acquisition of teacher-transmitted knowledge (Lea, Stephenson & Troy 2003).

Peer assessment has several important benefits and limitations. Among the benefits are an increased likelihood of learning from active peers and the analytical nature of the assessment process (Vu & Dall'alba 2007). Peer assessment requires students to closely scrutinise their fellow students' work, guided by criteria and standards of desired performance. Both assessor and assessee benefit from this process by working actively with the criteria (Van Den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot 2006b); this can deepen the students' understanding of what is considered high and low performance (Vu & Dall'alba 2007). This fosters informed future learning, and may facilitate student development of capacities appropriate for their professional life (Boud & Falchikov 2006). An additional benefit is that students can receive more, and more-immediate, feedback from peers

than when dependent upon their teachers (Gibbs 1999a). Finally, examining the work of peers offers meaningful opportunities for articulating discipline-specific knowledge (Liu & Carless 2006).

Possible limitations are that peer assessment may involve an increased workload and time for both students and teachers, and assessors may lack familiarity with necessary procedures and skill (Vu & Dall'alba 2007). Sluijsmans and Prins (2006) stress that peer assessment involves complex skills that are not easily and automatically acquired. Hence, adequate time is needed to prepare, train and monitor assessors to foster adequate mastery (Sluijsmans et al. 2004; Sadler 1998). Vu and Dall'Alba (2007) have argued that this preparation should include both rationale and training sessions. Rationale sessions focus on the values and benefits of peer assessment and underscore the relevant outcomes this learning activity can have on the learning process. In training sessions, focus is usually on preparing assessors to use the criteria for the task assessed, and developing skills in assessing and in giving and receiving feedback (Sluijsmans & Prins 2006).

Framework for this study

Teachers appear to hold personal conceptions of teaching and learning that presumably have an influence on how they teach, which also influence their students'approach to learning, and in turn affect learning outcomes (Kember 1997; Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse 1999). Academic developers therefore often work on the assumption that enhancing students' learning by altering approaches to teaching requires that teachers' conceptions of teaching be changed as well (Ho 2000). A change in approach will not happen without a change in conceptions of teaching (Kember 2009). This implies that the way peer assessment is conducted will depend on the teachers' conceptions of teaching.

A large body of research differentiates between teachers' conceptions of learning. Some conceive of teaching as being about imparting information and transmitting knowledge to their students; these teachers are best characterised as having teacher-centred/content-oriented approaches to teaching. Others conceive of teaching in terms of helping students to develop conceptions, and of helping to facilitate learning. These are said to have student-centred/learning-oriented approaches to teaching. See, for example, Trigwell and Prosser (1996a), Kember (1997), Ho, Watkins and Kelly (2001), and Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne (2008).

Research into teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning serves to underline the important role that these conceptions have in the development of teaching practice. However, Kane, Sandretto, and Heath (2002, p177) argue that research focussing solely on what teachers say about their practice, and not on direct observation of their teaching, risks capturing "only half the story"; it remains incomplete without systematic examination of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practice. What people say is not always the same as what they do. Argyris's "theory of action" provides a useful framework for addressing this mismatch (Argyris, Putnam & Smith 1985).

Theory of action is based on a view of human beings as designers of actions, where people learn from their environment, and then use their learning as the basis for further actions. Humans construct models of their environment, developing theories on how to act to achieve intended consequences (Argyris, Putnam & Smith 1985; Kane, Sandretto & Heath 2002). These theories are "theories of action", and Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1985, p82) distinguish between two types: *espoused theories of action* and *theories-in-use*. Espoused theories are based on what people

claim to follow, while theories-in-use are those that can be inferred from their actual behaviour. When asked about their actions, individuals will often respond with their espoused theory of actions; that is, they say what they think they will do, based on their world views and on the values that they *believe* underpin their behaviour (Argyris, Putnam & Smith 1985). These are the theories "that we use to explain or justify our behaviour" (Schön 1987, p256). Theories-in-use, however, are more closely related to an individual's worldview and values; they are the theories that underpin practice and determine behaviour. They are not easily articulated, since theories-in-use are commonly based on tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966, p4). Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1985) emphasise that our theories-in-use can nonetheless be constructed from observations and examination of our own practice. As Schön (1987, p256) puts it:

> *Often we are unable to describe [our theories-in-use], and we are surprised to discover, when we do construct them by reflecting on directly observable data of our actual interpersonal practice, that they are incongruent with the theories of action we espouse.*

The utility of this type of awareness is that it can prompt critical examination of approaches to teaching in light of espoused theories, which, in turn, may engage teachers in reflections that let them explicitly analyse their own theories-in-use. Conflicts and dilemmas occuring when theories in action and realities of practice clash may initiate change and development of teaching (Argyris & Schön 1974). Fundamental improvements to the quality of teaching and learning are more likely if teachers have an understanding of the link between espoused theories of action, and can assess whether their espoused theories are congruent, or incongruent, with their actual practice (Kane, Sandretto & Heath 2002).

The study

The context

To explore how students and teachers practice and perceive peer assessment, a qualitative study was conducted that focussed on both their espoused theories and their practice of peer assessment. The study was carried out in an authentic setting within the context of a newly established compulsory subject called "Analysing and writing academic texts" at a Norwegian university. The subject formed part of an introductory semester intended to prepare newly enrolled students for tertiary study. This course aimed to introduce students to the genre of academic articles and to help students develop the necessary skills to read, understand and write academic texts. Another explicit learning outcome was the "development of basic skills in peer assessment", which was taught and practiced by asking students to comment on each other's draft work in groups of three or four, using shared criteria. The emphasis on peer assessment was based on a strategic plan for teaching, which had been newly approved by the faculty board. This plan accentuated a student-centred approach that had the specific goal of moving from teacher-directed instruction towards more peer learning and self- and peer assessment.

Potential teachers of the subject were invited to a one-day seminar primarily focussing on how to introduce students to academic reading and writing, but also containing 45 minutes on peer assessment. This session included a focus on the rationale behind the peer-assessment activities, and some brief advice about how to orchestrate the activity. It did not include anything about the teachers' espoused theories or their theories-in-use. In addition, the teachers were given a semester-long, step-by-step plan that included instructions on peer-assessment activities. Seminar

leaders normally taught in social science or the humanities, and their teaching experience varied from novice (under two years) to veterans with 10 or more years' teaching experience.

The seminar groups ranged between nine and 20 students, and all students were told to prepare for each session by writing an analysis of an assigned article and making copies to distribute to their peers. Instructions to teachers for managing peer assessment were to ask students to analyse given texts four times during the course. Each time, students were asked to prepare their analysis in writing and make enough copies to distribute to a subgroup of the seminar (three to four students). The students were then asked to comment on the analyses. No further guidance or instruction on how to give and receive feedback was provided in the syllabus.
Note: the researcher was not involved in planning or organising the course or the management of peer-assessment activities.

Methods

To capture both students' and teachers' perceptions and practice of peer assessment, the researcher collected empirical material through observation and end-of-semester interviews. The teachers were informed about the project in an email and asked to give access to the researcher during their seminars. Two teachers invited the researcher to attend. In both seminar groups, participants were informed that they could decline or withdraw at any time, and all participants signed consent forms.

Observation was overt, although the researcher did not participate in activities. Both seminar groups-were followed at all sessions throughout the semester (except once), for a total of nine meetings. Continuity of observation allowed the researcher to see how patterns developed over the course of the semester.

The intention was to capture authentic practice of peer assessment: how teachers introduced and orchestrated it, how much they interacted with the students when peer feedback was going on, what the students did during the peer-assessment activities, what kind of feedback the students gave each other, how students responded to the feedback they got from their peers, and how peer-assessment activities were wrapped up in the end. Peer assessors always sat in groups, and observation concentrated on one group per session. The choice of group to observe was random, but by the end of the semester all of the students had been observed at least once.

The goal was to get closer to the actual peer-assessment activities, although what is observed will only ever capture a part of what really happens. The many simultaneous activities and rapidly changing dynamics in classrooms naturally make observation challenging (Lindblom-Ylänne 2010). In this study, the focus was on the points listed above, although non-assessment activities were also noticed, such as how the teachers started the seminars, what the students did when the teacher was talking and so on. Field notes were taken, written in descriptive terms (Tjora 2006) that captured what students and teachers did and said. No recording was used.

To supplement observation notes, semi-structured interviews were carried out at the end of the semester. The intention was to capture student and teacher perceptions of peer-assessment activities and to enquire as to their rationale for practice. Thirteen students (four of nine students from one of the seminar group, seven of 12 from the other seminar group and two from a seminar group that was not observed) were interviewed. The two teachers (referred to here as Claire and Jude) were also interviewed. To protect participant identity, teachers and students are referred to in this study as female and by pseudonyms.

Interview questions were derived from research questions elaborated in an interview guide. Teachers were asked:
(1) How did you organise the peer-assessment activities?
(2) Why did you organise the peer assessment as you did?
(3) What kind of challenges or advantages did you experience with this learning activity?
(4) How did these peer-assessment activities work out?
(5) Do you believe that the students have developed adequate skills in peer assessment?

Students were asked:
(1) How did the peer-assessment activity work out?
(2) Can you describe how you gave and received feedback on the drafts at the seminars?
(3) What are the challenges with peer assessment?
(4) What can you gain from this activity?

In addition, observational data enabled specific incidents to be explored by presenting observations to the participants and noting their responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analytical approach

Data analysis was performed in several steps, starting with descriptions of first impressions and noting what teachers and students did during peer assessment. The intention was to infer their theories-in-use. However, there is a danger in jumping to conclusions, a risk compounded by theory-laden expectations (Tjora 2006). Iterative readings of the whole material mitigated against premature conclusions, encouraging instead inductive identification of key elements, orientations and stated perceptions of practice.

The focus in the interview transcripts was on how participants talked about peer assessment and about teaching and learning in general. What the teachers stressed as the purpose when managing peer assessment was also noted. The aim was to discover their espoused theories, what they claimed to emphasise in their teaching (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne 2008). In brief, if the purpose of their teaching mainly seemed to be to facilitate students' learning, then the conception was coded as student-centred. On the other hand, if the purpose was to transmit knowledge, then the conception was coded as teacher-centred.

The next step was to analyse whether there was congruence between students' and teachers' espoused theories and observed practice of peer assessment. Identifying the relation between espoused theories and theories-in-use happened through reading and rereading the transcribed notes. These alternating processes yielded a more nuanced picture of the practice and perceptions of peer-assessment activities among teachers and students.

The triangulation of methods and sources provided a way to validate the findings: the observations helped to develop questions about students' and teachers' practice of peer assessment, and the interviews were used to check the inferences drawn from the observations. For additional validation, another researcher and supervisor on the project read and annotated the field notes, interviews and analysis. Minor adjustments were made based on discussions.

Students' and teachers' practice and understanding of peer assessment

Findings revealed a gap between how students and teachers practiced peer assessment and how they talked about it, and illuminated the teachers' role in peer assessment.

Mind the gap

Observations showed that despite the learning outcome ("mastering peer assessment"), students made little effort to do so. The following exchange from the fifth meeting is typical of their attempts. The teacher had just organised the students into work groups and asked them to provide feedback on each other's drafts:

> *Four students, Christine, Ruth, Julia and Mary, are sitting in a group and they are quiet. After a short while, Christine says to Ruth: "You seem to have a long written draft?" Ruth answers: "Okay, I can start reading." She starts to read and when she is finished, Julia, sitting next to her, says: "Well, I can continue, but I didn't quite know how to write the introduction." She reads her short text. After finishing her reading, Mary says: "I'm sorry, but I forgot to print out my text. It is still on my computer back home." Then, there are no comments, just silence. Suddenly Christine begins to read her text. After she is finished, there is no feedback and no discussion about the different drafts. Just silence. Then Christine comments on the content in the article on which the draft is based, and they start to discuss the article. There has been no peer assessment.*

Many of the peer-assessment activities happened along very similar lines: students read their draft aloud, then there were few comments or questions and no feedback. The comments tended to be vague: "Your text is okay" or "I think your text is too long, and it has to be shortened".

Data from the observations showed that although teachers initiated peer-assessment activities, they provided insufficient structure to guide students towards successful completion. Claire used five minutes during the fifth seminar to talk about how to give constructive feedback, while Jude did not focus on any aspects of peer assessment at any point. The students' behaviour, given this level of instruction and encouragement, is hardly surprising. However, what *was* a surprise was that interviews showed that students and teachers were mainly positive about peer assessment. Jude said:

> *There are a lot of good things about working with peer assessment. The students get to know each other, and we create a good starting point for seminars and colloquiums, a start they hopefully will benefit from in their further studies. Maybe it can help them to meet outside the seminars and discuss their subjects. It's simply a way of getting the students on the track of how to study; how to read, write and discuss. Well, I only see good things with this way of working.*

Claire stated:

> *I think peer assessment has a great potential because you can learn a lot about your own work through analysing that of others.*

Both teachers acknowledged that peer assessment interrupted the back and forth communication between teacher and students, instead forcing student-student interaction.
Students, too, expressed positive views on peer assessment, as illustrated by the following:

> *Peer assessment is giving and receiving critique in a proper manner. To be constructive, not just sitting there and criticising and putting each other down. We should try to collaborate; we are in a sense a community. Yes, we should be able to help each other [….] I think it worked fine, we had a good atmosphere.*

Both students' and teachers' espoused theory of action was that peer assessment is important and can enhance student learning. Based on these positive stances, it would be normal to expect that practice showed equally committed learning behaviour. Yet the opposite was the case. Espoused theories did not match their practice.

How can this enthusiasm be explained? Searching back in the field notes turned up incidents that had previously seemed inconsequential during observation. Here is a typical example, occurring towards the end of the semester:

> *Student 1: From school I have been used to having just one textbook for each subject for the entire year, and then it was possible to remember almost everything. But that is impossible at university.*
> *Student 2: I almost can't breathe when I'm thinking of everything I need to learn here.*
> *Teacher: But that's why we are having a course like this, in order to learn how to extract the essence.*
> *Student 2: But still; it is difficult to get an overview.*
> *Teacher: It's about learning how to study. To work in colloquium, to discuss articles. And sometimes there is a lot of resistance to understanding an article; hard work is needed.*
> *Student 1: I find it difficult to read so much English. Do you have any suggestion for a good dictionary?*
> *Teacher: I just use ordinary dictionaries. For you, now in the beginning, it is important to not look at the details, but to try to extract the meaning. The only thing you can do is to read more, there is no easy way to success. And for the examinations, you are all newcomers and nobody expects you to write like a professor. Well…maybe this isn't so helpful….*
> *Student 1: Oh yes, it's good to have the opportunity to just talk about it.*

It seems students appreciated the opportunity to talk about general issues. In interviews, several students admitted feeling insecure and uncertain in their new student role. One stated:

> *I felt awful for the first months. I was unsure and struggled; I didn't know who to ask and when to ask. I didn't know anybody. I really felt bad and asked myself several times, can I manage studying? I thought about giving up.*

Both teachers stressed the course aim of helping newcomers "become students". They assumed that peer assessment was helping develop generic academic skills like critical thinking, text analysis, discussions with peers and presenting one's own or others' work.

In the end, it seemed that activities and interaction *in themselves* were more important than the content or purpose of any particular activity. Activities supported general engagement;

observations confirmed that in this aspect, they did achieve their aim. Teachers' use of these learning activities demonstrated their commitment to student-centred conceptions of teaching.

The role of the teacher and peer-assessment practice

When extracts and observations from field notes were shared with the teachers, both were prompted to reflect on their implementation and practice of peer assessment. Claire suggested that students struggled in the beginning, but they became more active as time went on. In the end, she maintained, they did respond to each other's drafts. Claire's views on increasing activity were in line with my observations, but she failed to spot that student discussions were about the articles and not about each other's drafts. In fact, many students were observed to stop writing drafts altogether. Claire's apparent satisfaction was probably due to her belief that the course was a start: a first step in how to give and receive feedback. At the same time, she admitted doubts as to whether skills were fully achieved. She noted that students arrived unprepared, perhaps, she thought, because the curriculum overloaded students with other activities and demands. However, Claire offered few spontaneous suggestions on her own role in how to implement peer assessment, and seemed to overlook any connection between students' lack of response and her own teaching.

Jude, on the other hand, seemed more aware of her own role and of the interaction between her actions and students' reactions. In the interview, she stressed her responsibility to get the seminars working as intended, and she focussed on what she could or should do better:

> *My own role became too dominant. I gave the responses, and then of course the students didn't. I first realised this at the end of the semester, then I realised that the students hadn't learnt how to give and receive feedback. And I thought, Oh no! They haven't learnt it. So, I didn't manage this part. I didn't get the hang of it.*

Jude saw herself as accountable for how peer assessment happened:

> *I talked too much. I have to admit that I find it difficult to be quiet when I'm waiting for the students to respond. I feel uncomfortable, and do not like the silence. So I start to talk, and then of course the students can just wait because they know that I am going to talk. But what shall I do when I sit there waiting for them to start talking? I just feel like an idiot.*

She admitted to fear of losing control and looking foolish. Jude saw the gap between her espoused theories of peer assessment and theories-in-use, and thought that more training in managing peer assessment was needed.

Discussion

Exploring the practice and perceptions of peer assessment among students and teachers revealed an absence of any emphasis on peer-assessment activity, and revealed students' apparent struggle to assess each other's texts. However, interviews confirmed a general agreement as to the importance of peer assessment and the belief that it enhances learning.

The gaps between what people say and what they actually do are a familiar story (Argyris & Schön 1974). Here, the question is: why so enthusiastic about something that never happens in practice? And the challenge: how to get congruence between teachers' espoused theories and their theories-in-use?

What happened to the assessment in peer assessment?

Repeated analysis of transcripts indicated that activities other than those for peer assessment affected the participants' attitudes towards peer assessment. By making time for discussion, presentation and shared attempts to analyse articles, teachers seemed to give students opportunities to start communicating in the language of academia and to practise acting according to its norms. The students talked about being newcomers, and several admitted to struggling in the new role. This study shows that organising learning activities in a way that demands students take active part may contribute to enculturation into the university. It may also explain positive reactions. They got the "peer", but not the bit about assessment.

Feeling good, but missing the mark

New initiatives for teaching and learning, such as peer assessment, are likely to have quite varied uptake and implementation. One reason is likely to be the meeting of curricular intentions and actual teacher practices and, potentially, any differences between the two (Samuelowicz & Bain 2002). This seems to be what happened in this study. However, lack of peer assessment cannot be explained by incongruence between its inherent values and teachers' conceptions of teaching. Both teachers in this study saw themselves as facilitators for learning and enacted their beliefs: their theories-in-use were expressed through use of peer strategies aligned with student-centeredness; they managed to create a learning community that emphasised the central role that peers can play in providing structured opportunities for discussion and reflection. What they did not manage was to create an automatic link between wishing peer assessment would happen and seeing that it did. Entwistle (2003) stresses that simply holding specific conceptions of teaching does not provide a blueprint for practice.

The teachers admitted weakness in implementation, and that they struggled to make peer assessment effective. Ineffective practice is usually linked to lack of adequate preparation of students (Boud, Cohen & Sampson 2001; Sluijsmans et al. 2004; Sluijsmans & Prins 2006; Sadler 1998), and neither rationale nor training sessions were given at the student seminars. The teachers were also clearly under-prepared, and the one-day seminar beforehand seemed not enough to help them orchestrate peer-assessment activities. Observed teacher practice revealed that where peer assessment is not well understood, and where the skills are not taught and practiced, its implementation is weak. However**,** what differed between these two teachers was how each talked about their knowledge and skills. Jude was analytical, questioning whether the problem lay with her, or with students' lack of skills. Was the answer, she wondered, new tools and/or methods to better align practice and beliefs? Claire had few reflections about her role in implementing and practicing peer assessment, pointing instead to extrinsic limits beyond her control, such as time constraints, student characteristics and the syllabus. She offered no ideas on how to deal with them.

Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2002) emphasise that it is imperative in the process of developing as a teacher to understand how the links between conceptions and practice are made. How teachers intend to teach (espoused theories) needs to be made congruent with how they actually teach (theories-in-use). If teachers cannot make explicit and interrogate the relationship between their theories-in-use and their espoused theories, problems may arise in practice that may have a negative impact on learning outcomes. As already mentioned, changes and development of teaching can be initiated if there are conflicts and dilemmas in the relationship between espoused theories and the reality of practice. But dilemmas are not enough, as the interview material shows

in this study. Reflection, too, is necessary, especially reflection on mismatches between espoused theories and actual practice. For Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2004, p303), reflection is the "hub of teaching excellence wheel".

As recognised by McLean and Bullard (2000, p85), commitment to reflective practice involves the creation of opportunities for participants to make their experience of practice explicit by talking and discussions. To improve practice, teachers seem to need to examine their theories-in-use (what they actually are doing) in relation to their espoused theories (what they think they are, or should be, doing), and then to be given help to adapt their practice as a consesequence of what they have noticed about the mismatch between the two. To support these reflections and to encourage the development of teachers, McLean and Blackwell (1997) stress that offering teachers some formal theory can make teachers' own assumptions and theories-in-use more susceptible to change. Theoretical ideas about teaching and learning sustain reflection and professional conversations by providing a framework for teachers who are attempting to explain what is happening in a teaching/learning interaction. This may reduce the gap between espoused theories and theories-in-use.

Conclusion

The lessons from this study concern what the introduction of peer assessment did and did not achieve, why no assessment occurred and what might make future use of peer assessment more effective. It seems insufficient to rely on teachers' conceptions and underlying assumptions when implementing peer assessment, and it is naive to believe that all will be well if conceptions are aligned with student-centred approaches. Lack of skills and knowledge, as well as contextual factors, are clearly constraints.

However, no change seems likely without prompting teachers' examination of their theories-in-use (what they actually are doing) in the light of their espoused theories (what they think they are doing or should do), then further encouraging them to adapt their practice in light of what they learn. To that end, experiences such as those revealed in this study are a valuable and useful tool, rather than evidence of failure. Teachers can turn frustration into development. However, it is not an automatic process. The research itself appeared to be useful for one of the teachers (Jude). Evidence from observation seemed to enhance her reflection about her practice of peer assessment in relation to her epoused theories.

Black and William (1998, p15) highlight that the improvement of formative assessment cannot be a simple matter. There is no "quick fix" that can be added to existing practice. It happens slowly, and the study indicates that it does not happen at all unless there are chances to stop, reflect and discuss practice in relation to espoused theories.

An understanding of peer assessment solely based on teachers' and students' perceptions may be incomplete without knowledge about the relationship between these perceptions and their actual practice of peer assessment. The combination of observation and interviews in the study did reveal contraditions between espoused theories and the practice of peer assessment. These contradictions are also interesting in relation to academic development. To enhance and develop teaching in higher education, it seems to be insufficient to focus on what teachers actually do, related to their espoused theories. In addition, formal theories about teaching and learning are important for supporting reflections and encouraging development among teachers. It would be useful for future professional development to build on oppertunities for collecting genuine observational data. That

will give a glimpse into what is actually going on in university classrooms. If there is a gap between espoused theories and practice, documenting it may encourage change and development.

This small-scale study is based on an authentic account of teachers' and students' practice and understanding, with the intention of offering insights into the variation of approaches to peer assessment and the purpose behind these approaches. It is however, not possible to generalise the particular findings in such a limited and contextualised study (Fitzmaurice 2010). This insight is therefore worthy of investigation in other instructional contexts. The study does also shed light on the importance of being aware of espoused theories and theories-in-use as a regular part of staff development and programme evaluation.

This study's focus on a specific teaching and learning practice at the micro level gives a broad and complex picture of the practice and perceptions of peer assessment among students and teachers. However, practice does not occur in a vacuum. Approaches adopted by teachers are not just a function of the individual teacher, but are also affected by the wider context (Trigwell, Prosser & Taylor 1994). This wider context would be interesting to explore in further studies.

References

Argyris, C., Putnam, R. & Smith, D. M. (1985). *Action Science. Concepts, Methods and Skills for Research and Intervention,* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Argyris, C. & Schön, D. (1974). *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness,* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Ashwin, P. (2008). Accounting for structure and agency in "close-up" research on teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Research,* 47**,** 151-158.

Black, P. & William, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice,* 5**,** 7-74.

Boud, D., Cohen, R. & Sampson, J. (2001). *Peer Learning in Higher Education: Learning From and With Each Other,* Kogan Page, London.

Boud, D. & Falchikov, N. (2006). Aligning assessment with long-term learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* 32**,** 399-413.

Entwistle, N. (2003). Concepts and conceptual framework underpinning the Enhancing Teaching-Learning Project. *Occasional Report 3.* Edingburgh: Enhancing Teaching-Learning Project.

Fitzmaurice, M. (2010). Considering teaching in higher education as a practice. *Teaching in Higher Education,* 15**,** 45-55.

Gibbs, G. (1999a). Using assessment strategically to change the way students learn. In Brown, S. & Glasner, A. (Eds). *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches.* SRHE & Open University Press, Buckingham and Philadelphia.

Gielen, S., Dochy, F. & Onghena, P. (2010). An inventory of peer assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* 36**,** 137-155.

Ho, A. (2000). A conceptual change approach to staff development: A model for programme design. *International Journal of Academic Development,* 5**,** 30-41.

Ho, A., Watkins, D. & Kelly, M. (2001). The conceptual approach to improving teaching and learning: An evaluation of a Hong Kong staff development programme. *Higher Education,* 42**,** 143-169.

Kane, R., Sandretto, S. & Heath, C. (2002). Telling half the story: A critical review of research on the teaching beliefs and practices of university academics. *Review of Educational Research,* 72**,** 177-228.

Kane, R., Sandretto, S. & Heath, C. (2004). An investigation into excellent tertiary teaching: Emphasising reflective practice. *Higher Education,* 47**,** 283-310.

Kember, D. (1997). A reconceptualisation of the research into university academics' conceptions of teaching. *Learning and Instruction,* 7**,** 255-275.

Kember, D. (2009). Promoting student-centred forms of learning across an entire university. *Higher Education,* 58**,** 1-13.

Lea, S., Stephenson, D. J. & Troy, J. (2003). Higher education students' attitudes to student-centred learning: beyond "educational bulimia"? *Studies in Higher Education,* 28**,** 321-334.

Lindblom-Ylänne, S. (2010). Students' approaches to learning and their perceptions of the teaching and learning environment. In Hughes, J. C. & Mighty, J. (Eds). *Taking stock. Research on teaching and learning in higher education*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston.

Liu, N.-F. & Carless, D. (2006). Peer feedback: The learning element of peer assessment. *Teaching in Higher Education,* 11**,** 279-290.

McLean, M. & Blackwell, R. (1997). Opportunity knocks? Professionalism and excellence in university teaching. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice,* 3**,** 85-99.

McLean, M. & Bullard, J. E. (2000). Becoming a university teacher: Evidence from teaching portfolios (how academics learn to teach). *Teacher Development,* 4**,** 79-101.

Nicol, D. & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education,* 21**,** 199-218.

Polanyi, M. (1966). *The Tacit Dimension,* Doubleday, New York.

Postareff, L. & Lindblom-Ylänne, S. (2008). Variation in teachers' descriptions of teaching: Broadening the understanding of teaching in higher education. *Learning and Instruction,* 18**,** 109-120.

Sadler, D. R. (1998). Formative assessment: Revisiting the territory. *Assessment in Education,* 5**,** 77-84.

Samuelowicz, K. & Bain, J. D. (2002). Identifying academics' orientations to assessment practice. *Higher Education,* 43**,** 173-201.

Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions,* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Sluijsmans, D., Brand-Gruwel, S., Van Merriënboer, J. & Martens, R. (2004). Training teachers in peer assessment skills: Effects on performance and perceptions. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International,* 41**,** 59-78.

Sluijsmans, D. & Prins, F. (2006). A conceptual framework for integrating peer assessment in teacher education. *Studies in Educational Evaluation,* 32**,** 6-22.

Tjora, A. (2006). Writing small discoveries: An exploration of fresh observers' observations. *Qualitative Research,* 6**,** 429-451.

Topping, K. J. (2009). Peer assessment. *Theory into Practice,* 48**,** 20-27.

Trigwell, K. & Prosser, M. (1996a). Congruence between intention and strategy in university science teachers' approaches to teaching. *Higher Education,* 32**,** 77-87.

Trigwell, K., Prosser, M. & Taylor, P. (1994). Qualitative differences in approaches to teaching first year university science. *Higher Education,* 27**,** 75-84.

Trigwell, K., Prosser, M. & Waterhouse, F. (1999). Relations between teachers' approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning. *Higher Education,* 37**,** 57-70.

Van Den Berg, I., Admiraal, W. & Pilot, A. (2006b). Design principals and outcomes of peer assessment in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education,* 31**,** 341-356.

Vu, T. T. & Dall'alba, G. (2007). Students' experience of peer assessment in a professional course. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education,* 32**,** 541-556.