

Peer evaluation of essays

Overview

Summary

Students read, discuss and write constructive feedback on essays drawn from a sample submitted by the previous year's cohort. This provides students with the opportunity to engage with the assessment criteria and discuss the characteristics of strong, good and weaker answers, before they prepare and submit their own work. The session is also beneficial in helping them understand how to frame, and learn from, constructive feedback.

Context

Department of Economics

Contact Details

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Themes

Assessment and Feedback

Rationale

This session typically takes place just before the half way point of the first semester of a one year MSc programme, shortly before students tackle their first assessed essay.

The student cohort is quite diverse, both in terms of their nationalities and their prior exposure to essay based assessment and study of economics. Some students are very unsure of our expectations when assessing their work.

This session helps clarify what we are looking for and gives them the opportunity to discuss the characteristics of strong, good and weaker answers, before they prepare and submit their own work. In my experience this helps match students' expectations with those of their assessor(s) and results in stronger submissions on average, in particular by reducing the prevalence of some previously common pitfalls in students' submitted work.

Successes

Students appreciate the opportunity to gain greater understanding of how we assess their work.

Some of the common pitfalls in submitted work tend to be avoided by a greater proportion of the class.

I have collected feedback at the end of this session on post-it notes. Comments have included:

- "I now have a better idea of what to do in my own essay and understand the importance of a focused introduction and conclusion as well as clear signposting through the essay."
- "This session really helped with understanding what's expected."
- "It was good to see how our understanding is progressing."
- "I found the sample templates for essays really helpful."
- "It was useful to see how to structure an essay well and what to include."
- "Time for group discussion in class was useful."
- "It was good to focus on different aspects of the essays in turn."

One suggestion for improvement was:

- "We could have used more time outside class to read and discuss the essays in our groups."

Challenges

If students are reading the essays for the first time in class this takes up a lot of time given that, for many, English is not their first language. I stress that prior preparation is necessary to allow us to make the best use of the time available for small group discussion based activities.

To encourage this prior preparation, I post the sample essays a week in advance, along with the instructions given to the students who prepared the essays and ask students to read all three essays and compile a list of what they like and what they dislike about each. I also ask them to bring their list to class. (A harsher alternative could be to require likes and dislikes be emailed to the tutor/lecturer in advance of the class and make advance preparation of this list a condition of participation in the session!)

These initial likes and dislikes can sometimes reveal some mismatches between students' and assessors' key concerns. Towards the end of the session it is helpful to encourage students to reflect back on their initial likes and dislikes again, after the more structured discussion has taken place. Encouraging a discussion around key priorities is also useful when identifying three key suggestions for improvement.

Lessons Learnt

I've been running this session for several years now. Engagement in the session is certainly enhanced when students have taken the time to read and think about the essays before the class. Requiring them to come with initial lists of likes and dislikes helps get the group discussion in class time started.

Sometimes students have commented that they don't consider themselves to be expert enough to judge the subject specific content of the essays. This can mean that they shy away from essays that use models they don't yet understand and instead focus on sometimes more superficial presentational issues. In some cases students "like" essays that are clear and understandable, despite the fact that the essay might lack a focus on the actual question set! This is where careful choice of questions and discussion of key priorities can be beneficial.

As the class has become larger (roughly doubling in size over 3 years) I have only adapted the way I run the class a little, but I haven't increased the discussion groups to more than 5 in a group. A change I have made is that instead of collecting hand written responses to questions from each group I tend to ask each group to have one person responsible for emailing brief responses to some of the key questions at different points during the session. This helps progress things in stages and saves me time when I consolidate the comments from across the groups, since I don't need to type up their hand written submissions.

Scalability

This works with an MSc class of around 60 students, provided they are split into groups and have space to have smaller group discussions.

The main constraints are having space in the classroom and spending time consolidating the comments and feedback collected from or submitted by the groups.

With a class of 60 it is still possible to wander round the classroom during the group discussions to answer any clarification questions and prompt them to stay focused.

Suggestions for Transferability

This approach is easy to transfer to other classes where examples of past assignments are available, and could be used to clarify expectations in a similar way.

It's likely that the approach is most useful when the type of assessment being used is unfamiliar to at least some part of the cohort.

Attachments

Further details on the instructions given to students before the session, the tasks set during the session, and the follow-up after the session are set out in the attached document.

File	Modified
Microsoft Word Document Further details for SPELT Case Study on PEER EVALUATION OF ESSAYS.docx	Mar 09, 2016 by Alex Buckley