Classroom confirmation panels: Facilitating feedback in communities of practice in classroom learning groups

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Abstract

This article explores a pilot project in innovation peer-assessment strategies to create and support lifelong learners. It proposes that the confirmation panel—a formal progression requirement of a postgraduate degree—can effectively facilitate feedback, function as an assessment tool, and meaningfully induct both secondary and undergraduate tertiary students into a community of practice. The confirmation panel provides immediacy and richness of feedback, promotion of accountability, empathy, confidence, content knowledge, and—importantly—the transfer of tacit knowledge specific to a community of practice. Other important results include: building and (re) structuring metacognitive frameworks, facilitation of self-reflection, and the forming of a creative , collegial environment where standards are clarified and learning is scaffolded.

The context

Tertiary education specialist David Boud (1987), wrote: 'it is my hope that the generation of my grandchildren will emerge from schooling as highly skilful autonomous learners…tertiary educators of that era will be primarily educational brokers with responsibility mainly for linking autonomous learners with appropriate learning resources' (p. 5). More than three decades later, secondary education has joined the tertiary sector in acting "as the 'producers' of human capital driving the new knowledge economy", meeting "the needs of national economic agendas and shifting higher education policy" (Sampson & Comer 2010, p. 277; Stringfield et al., 2012). Developments in teaching include movement away from the transmission of knowledge in the "empty vessel" model (Yucel et al., 2014) towards a "cognitive apprenticeship" (Sweet & Michaelsen 2012, p. 10) that emphasises autonomy and critical thinking skills. Such shifts reflect the need for students to become "lifelong learners" (Boud & Falchikov 2007, 402). Students should develop the capacity for critical reflection (Dochy et al., 1999); the ability to self-assess and self-regulate, and to manage relationships in a learning environment (Yang & Carless, 2013); to experience empathy for others (Topping, 2009); communicate clearly (Liu & Carless, 2006); develop tacit knowledge (Bloxham & West, 2007); to learn from their peers, judge others' work, and to be involved in the creation of knowledge (Yucel et al., 2014). These attributes can be gained through education tasks that resemble professional practice, including formative assessment within the context of 'communities of practice.'

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Assessment practices in tertiary and secondary classrooms

It is difficult to overstate the impact of assessment practice on student learning. Research growth in this field is a result of widely published global findings that many students are dissatisfied with the written feedback they receive (Dowden et al., 2013). Multiple studies highlight the challenges and rewards of implementing peer assessment and feedback into classroom practice (for example Liu & Carless 2006; Topping et al., 2000).

The difficulties of implementing innovative assessment tasks have been well documented, including time and workload pressures, reliability, lack of expertise and disruptions to power relationships (Liu & Carless, 2006). Others are the

problem of 'social loafing' and non-investment in the process, bias amongst friendship groups, and lack of confidence in peer feedback (Falchikov & Goldfinch 2000, p. 316; Yucel et al., 2014, p. 972). However, the issues inhibiting the full potential of student learning through peer-assessment often have the same root cause which, when addressed, may substantially alter the dynamics and hence the outcomes of problematic peer assessment practices.

The model of the teacher as 'educational broker' or 'middleman' between investors (students) and holders of intellectual capital (the academy) helpfully acknowledges the role of educator as facilitator rather than the proverbial 'sage on the stage', but can obscure the role that the community plays in producing autonomous learners. Teachers and students can be conceived as co-participants in a community of practice, and mobilise effective assessment tasks that reflect this philosophy, thus altering the dynamics that inhibit productive communities of practice.

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While many studies reported positive metacognitive outcomes by students, they also noted that peer assessment was often labour intensive, power-laden, anxiety-inducing and, at times, 'competitive' (Liu & Carless 2006, p. 282). It is often conducted too late to be useful, and not taken seriously by participants or teachers, who devalued student feedback by not according it a grade or comment. The aim of this research project was to design an assessment experience that addressed as many of these issues as possible.

The key concern in our assessment design, however, was to foster an environment that communicated to the students tacitly—that is, visually, intellectually and affectively—that they are already part of a community of practice, with intellectual capital to offer their peers. Our ideals for this assessment were to facilitate immediacy, accountability, reflexivity, empathy, confidence, metacognitive processes, content knowledge, and—importantly—the transfer of tacit knowledge specific to our community of practice.

Communities of practice

The term 'community of practice' has its origin and primary use in learning theory, a concept inspired by anthropologists and sociologists such as Anthony Giddens (1986), and Michel Foucault (1980). Three defining elements of a community of practice have been identified as: a commitment to the domain of interest; an interacting, engaged and mutually helpful community; and the common practice members are engaged in (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Importantly, key characteristics also include "autonomy, practitioner-orientation, informality [and] crossing boundaries…[which are] characteristics that make them a challenge for traditional hierarchical organisations" (p. 4). As conceived in this paper it can be described as a community in which "[n]ovices are inducted into the culture, language and practices…by (legitimate peripheral) participation in its processes, experiences and relationships" (Bloxham & West 2007, p. 78). This notion of inducting is central to this project: to induct is to welcome a novice into a community as a participatory member, by sharing the tacit knowledge scholars bring to, and develop in, their respective fields. Tacit knowledge has been defined by O'Donovan et al. (2004) as "that which is learnt experientially or in terms of its incommunicability—knowledge that cannot be easily articulated and is elusive" (p. 328). Both tacit and explicit processes must be undertaken for the transfer of meaningful knowledge about and for successful assessment to occur. It is crucial, then, that students are given opportunity and access to develop the tacit knowledge and skills related to their field. "Making … purposeful peer assessment" can give rise to "a body of unseen, unarticulated and often unheralded know-how of the intricate relationships between the appraisal elements and how they are applied" (Sadler, 2010, p. 546). Accordingly, a key consideration for time-effective assessment design "is to provide students with substantial evaluative experience not as an extra but as a strategic part of the teaching design" (p. 542). The project also underlines the importance of explicitly identifying and articulating metacognitive processes while students are accumulating tacit knowledge, helping them shift awareness to the cycle of moving from assisted to unassisted learning and back again (Orsmond et al., 2013, p. 248). For many students this cycle of assisted learning to autonomy depends on metacognitive reflection and assessment events which facilitate the transference of tacit knowledge.

Pilot project rationale and design

An important role of the teacher is to facilitate assessment experiences that "go beyond measuring the reproduction of knowledge" (Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans 1999, p. 332) and train students to be autonomous, creative and original in their fields of study. Facilitating 'discoveries' depends on 'organizational structures' that help create "social and intellectual space in which theoretical 'thinking work'…can be done" (Sampson & Comer, 2010, p. 287). These organisational structures and intellectual spaces may be conceptualised as existing within "communities of practice" (Boud & Falchikov 2007, p. 405) which can be fostered in the classroom.

The pilot project undertaken in this study aimed to

destabilise the traditional power structures inherent in teacher-student relationships in the classroom by reimagining this group as a community of practice, via an assessment structure already in place in postgraduate programs: the confirmation panel. It is not just an assessment tool, but also—importantly—an induction into a community of practice. The confirmation panel feeds forward into the candidate's research process, igniting ideas about possible research directions and refining the scope of potential projects. The feedback provided by the panel can be characterised as immediate, nuanced, dialogic, multi-faceted, formative, critical, and above all, constructive. We contend that these elements make the confirmation panel a valuable mechanism for innovative assessment at the secondary and undergraduate level. By positioning students as 'experts' in the field, and facilitating feedback to their peers in an open forum—in a capacity equal to their teachers—students are encouraged to reflect on their own capacity to evaluate the scope and sequence of a task and the content of fellow peers' work, developing confidence-building practices such as problem solving, constructing an argument, mapping knowledge and identifying gaps (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015, p. 3).

One of the most promising aspects of this practice is its potential to convey to a novice the tacit knowledge belonging atypically to teachers, namely how to assess another's work, developing skills in knowing "what quality performance involves and entails" (Carless, 2015, p. 965), and participating "in all stages of assessment and marking" (Bloxham & West, 2007, p. 80).

Participants

The results of 63 studies on peer reviewing suggests it is most effectively implemented with senior students, with the most common issue with less experienced students being a tendency to over or undermark compared to the lecturers. However, this in itself can form the basis of valuable learning experiences for students by having follow-up processes to discuss the outcomes of the peer evaluations. Peer assessment is particularly valuable as formative assessment, and the level of expertise and confidence grows as students practice the skill multiple times (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999). While the study for this paper was undertaken with methods specific to an interdisciplinary English-History 300-level tertiary unit, the principles can be adapted to other learning contexts at secondary level as well. The unit was a one semester class, with a small cohort of 23 students, comprising two tutorial groups over the two years of the study.

Design of the task

The confirmation panel task was embedded within the research essay of the unit, worth 10% of a total of 40% for the research essay, and allocated, not to the students making their submission to the confirmation panel, but rather to each student panel member who was, along with the tutors, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the presentation as a basis for a research essay. This was in response to a number of studies that show "students are driven by the extrinsic motivation of 'the mark'" (Davies, 2006, p. 70), and that students should be rewarded for the quality and effectiveness of their feedback.

The task required students to review peer presentations of a research proposal to a panel composed of two tutors and one peer, scheduled in regular class sessions. Each presentation took approximately 10 minutes, followed by a 3-5 minute discussion of the presenter's outline, content and literature review led by the panel members but also including other students in the class. No additional time was taken either before or after the class to review drafts. Feedback sheets with relevant criteria were distributed to all students in preparation for their role as panelist.

Proposal presenters shared their self-generated essay question, a thesis statement, a short literature review, and an outline of the proposed essay structure, delivered to their peers and panel members in an oral presentation accompanied by a literature review handout. The whole group was then invited to give feedback on the presentation, identifying perceived strengths and weaknesses, followed by questions and comments by the panel members. All questions needed to be addressed immediately by the presenter, if only to acknowledge that the issue needed to be considered. Discussion could then take a number of courses: students could suggest potential resolutions or ways forward, or the thread may be laid to rest. In addition, each presenter received individual written reports from the three panel members which made detailed comments leading to one of three recommendations: that the student proceed without changes; proceed with minor revisions; or proceed only with major revisions. The student panelist's oral and written responses formed the basis of the assessment of the quality of their feedback.

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Results

Student feedback on the efficacy of the panel was captured through semi-structured interviews after the assessment took place. The results that follow have been gathered into three domains that have been identified by Yang and Carless (2013) as forming a dialogic feedback process: the content of feedback;

social and interpersonal negotiation; and organisation and management (p. 287). Students were not coached on the aims of the assessment design. The questions were designed to invite metacognitive reflection on the value of confirmation panels as an assessment task. They are as follows:

- Did you find the confirmation panel process valuable? Please explain your response.
- What did you learn about the process as applied to different disciplines? (History and English)
- What were some of the strengths and weaknesses about being the presenter in this forum? What were some of the learning outcomes?
- What were some of the strengths and weaknesses about being the examiner? What were some of the learning outcomes of undertaking this role?
- What were some of the strengths and weaknesses of being the audience? What were some of the learning outcomes?
- What effect (if any) does the fact that many of you know each other have on how you deal with the personal/emotional effects of the process?
- What improvements might be made in the process?
- On a scale from 1-10 (1 being ineffective – 10 being highly effective), how would you rate the overall confirmation panel experience for positive learning outcomes?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about this experience?

> *As one student noted, the opportunity to comment on structure 'was a really helpful thing; you could see if things went off on different tangents even if you weren't an expert.'*

When asked to rate the exercise out of 10, the average rating for the first group was 9.25, with no score below 8 and two scores of 10. On the other hand, the second group gave it an average rating of 6.9, with a high score of 9 and a low of 5. The qualitative data is discussed below.

The cognitive dimension of feedback

Student responses to the cognitive dimension of the feedback identified a range of specific beneficial items, including revising the proposed essay question for clarity and purpose; adjusting the scope of questions to create a manageable response within the word limit; and pointing out the need to review and revise structure. Students identified that their peers from different disciplines fed into each other in both broad and specific ways, despite not having 'expertise' in the other discipline. As one student noted, the opportunity to comment on structure "was a really helpful thing; you could see if things went off on different tangents even if you weren't an expert."

Another benefit in this domain was the range of ideas to which students were exposed during the panels. While peer-assessment typically occurs between two or three students, the students in this trial were exposed to all of their peers' work. This gave the panel process a creative dimension that had not been anticipated. Students described getting ideas for their own paper from other students 'all the time', sourced from the criticisms of others' presentations, even when they were not a formal panelist. Comments on 'the scope of ideas' indicate that students recognised that they were observing how a community of practice works while actively participating in it. This was a socialisation process that developed a shared understanding between students and staff, shaping perceptions in order for learning to develop (Orsmond et al. 2013, p. 242).

But perhaps the strongest responses in this domain were reserved for the metacognitive advances made. The greatest perceived benefit of the panels included increased understanding of scholarly processes, research skills and a greater understanding of discipline-specific discourse. Comments typical of the student experience highlighted how listening to others "created an awareness of most productive ways of essay writing", creating an enjoyable "verbal draft", and while some found the process "kind of a bit of a struggle", it "has become heaps clearer".

This feedback suggests that confirmation panels are sites where learning communities can initiate novices into professional practice. They facilitate legitimate participation in processes, experiences and relationships (Bloxham and West, 2007) specific to a discipline, allowing students to "familiarise themselves with the specific canons of practice… moving towards the building of discipline specific knowledge" (Sampson & Comer, 2010, p. 278). If the aim of peer-assessment is "to induct students into sufficient explicit and tacit knowledge of the kind that would enable them to recognise or judge quality when they see it and also explain their judgements" (Sadler, 2010, p. 542), these confirmation panels were demonstrably successful.

The social and interpersonal negotiation of feedback

Yang and Carless (2013, p. 289) write of the social-affective dimension of feedback, identifying it as "a social practice in which the management of relationships represents a source of emotions influencing learners' ways of studying", recognizing the students' social role and emotional engagement in the learning environment. The literature on peer feedback and assessment highlights the risks inherent when mobilising power dynamics in relationships between peers, and that competition

needs to be balanced with collaboration. To this end, creating a "non-threatening, collaborative atmosphere enables students to learn better because it prompts them to think more critically" (Liu & Carless, 2006, p. 288). The nature of the class in this study has been described by the students themselves as "intimate" and "safe" because many of the students were already known to each other and had previously worked in groups within their own discipline. Obviously, different group dynamics call for different management strategies and types of preparation for interpersonal negotiation of feedback. Student responses in this area fell under three main themes: accountability, affective experience, and confidence.

Accountability

When negotiating peer-to-peer feedback, accountability was both an opportunity and a potentially sensitive space. Key concerns fell into two main groups: the responsibility of the presenter to the audience to convey their project with clarity and detail ("unclear presentations make it difficult to think of ways to improve it/presenter needs to step up"), and the responsibility of the audience to give the presenter constructive critical feedback. There appeared to be a consensus that everyone took their role as a critic seriously and 'played out' the panel process appropriately. Responses also indicated that the 'integrated multi-stage assignment' provided a helpful scaffold to improve student accountability. Students identified that the proposal process improved personal planning by forcing them to begin work on the project much earlier than usual, concluding that "it's good to think about it earlyish".

The accountability issue is important not only in producing quality work, but also because it signals that students perceive themselves to be part of a community of practice, and alert to the responsibilities and rewards that come with such a membership.

Affective experience

The dynamics between peers in the sessions clearly needs to be negotiated well; students who are familiar with each other will manage the feedback process differently than those who are less comfortable with each other. In this case, students widely reported the familiarity as being a benefit rather than a drawback. Some considered that "intimacy encourages balance between being nice and being useful", making it "a safe place for people to bat [ideas] down because it's all constructive," a "safer setting" where they were "not prejudged" as opposed to a class of strangers which would be "quite intimidating". Others felt "It goes both ways," as unfamiliarity could encourage you to "tear their essays to shreds," whereas "if you know them, you know their strengths; you can be more sensitive about how you word things." One student concluded that the process was "confronting but very productive," while another found it "comforting" that all students went "through the same process."

The recurrence of the term 'safe' is encouraging as it indicates that teacher-student and student-student power relationships were well managed. When asked directly about whether it was hard to critique their peers, no student identified this as a problem. Their concern was more, "you do want to give them something constructive back." Students perceived themselves to be working in a 'collaborative' rather than competitive or polarizing environment. Managing this affective experience was intentional on the part of the tutors to reduce the imbalanced power relationships "which can impede students from becoming active agents in the feedback process" (Yang & Carless, 2013, p. 289). Students reported feeling as though they had been "taught by the presenter" but this was balanced by the opportunity to feed back into the presenter's research process.

There were some negative aspects reported in this domain, however. Some students reported feeling overwhelmed or potentially disadvantaged in presenting, including "smart people [who] are hampered by articulation and self-confidence", and feeling "in over my head because I didn't know what I was supposed to be commenting on" with an English topic. Another "felt confused about listening/writing/speaking; felt like I wasn't as useful as I could have been," and "more stressed and confused than I was before." As a one-off learning experience, there was little opportunity for appropriate follow-up and no chance to further practice the skills to address these issues.

The structural dimension

Through participation in organising and managing feedback, a role usually reserved for teachers (Yang & Carless, 2013, p. 290), students recognised the efficacy of formative feedback, particularly in relation to the scope of their essay and revisions to their question. Reflecting on the timing of the task after the panels had been completed, one wrote, "I felt really scared about what would have happened if I hadn't been through this process," another adding, "We might have written a good essay answering the wrong question." Another student perceptively noted, "We couldn't have really been marked on the validity of the question if we hadn't been through this process."

While students always negotiate with lecturers when asked to generate their own research

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question, receiving peer feedback before receiving teacher feedback reinforces that students do have the ability to make complex judgements about their peers' work, predicting problematic areas and deriving concrete critiques from abstract ideas. In this way students are "constructed as much more active players in the assessment process than is implied by summative or formative assessment" (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 402).

Students also commented on the amount and usefulness of the feedback, saying it was "unusually great to have the feedback of the entire class and the two lecturers." Participating in the panel also "helped with self-criticism"; the listeners could "reflect on their own essay." Writing comments about other presentations led one into "comparing the feedback I was writing down to also thinking retrospectively about my presentation, and the kind of ideas that I stumble into when I'm doing my presentation." The favourite part for one student was actually "working outside my discipline; it's good to mark stuff outside your discipline." This is consistent with other research projects which found that peer assessment promotes self-reflexivity, and that being an assessor often produces the most useful learning outcomes (see Snowball & Mostert, 2013; Topping, 2010).

In this domain, students also identified areas that could be improved in future implementations of the confirmation panel. One observed that having the proposal the day before would have avoided the difficulty of reading and listening at the same time, while another wanted more detail on the feedback sheet about the criteria, "for example what is the difference between a major change and a minor change?" A number of students commented on the need for more time for the panel members to reflect before giving feedback, finding it "really hard to focus on two things at once, by looking at all the things I was supposed to do, but also listen to what they were saying." "You need more thinking time between," another offered, unable to write everything they wanted to in time. What is encouraging is that it reveals that the students were stimulated to think not just about evaluating the assessment task, but also evaluating the assessment procedures, a tacit knowledge again usually reserved for teachers.

The difference in responses between the first and second groups also highlights a need for careful briefing of the students for the process. When conducting the task with the first group, the tutors were implementing the process for the first time themselves and planned carefully, giving the students a much clearer understanding of what was involved. Being familiar with it the second time around, the tutors failed to offer the same level of preparation for the students, and it was reflected in a greater sense of uncertainty from them about their roles. It led to a question from a student about why the tutors used the confirmation panel approach rather than a personal interview with each student. The tutors were reminded of the need to contextualise the educational experience so that students understood its purpose and place in the learning outcomes of the unit and graduate outcomes of the course.

Conclusions

The researchers concluded that confirmation panels for students are highly effective in facilitating immediacy, accountability, reflexivity and increasing metacognitive skills. Importantly, the transfer of tacit knowledge specific to our community of practice was another highly effective outcome of this assessment event. Students were given access to not just a specialised induction process, but also to the range of vocabulary, revisionary and dialogic processes in which scholars participate on a regular basis. Such a 'meeting of the minds' positions peers as valuable intellectual resources, advisors and supporters, while 'sidelining' the teachers who have relatively minimal input in the confirmation process. As one student wrote, "[I]t was really interesting to see what everyone else was doing…we've all sat through the same lectures but gone in such different directions." The value of identifying oneself as a valuable and valued member of a community of practice demonstrably impacts accountability and motivation in a positive way. While students may not always have the capacity for autonomous research, the assessment feedback cycle can acknowledge and affirm the skills and knowledge students do have, building their sense of autonomy from teachers, and value to their peers.

The implications of this study for future research include adapting the principles of the study across a variety of teaching contexts where a major research project is undertaken, and also the need to repeat the exercise to allow for skill development. This will help identify which elements of the confirmation panel process might best be generalised across classes of varying disciplines and ages. The confirmation panel in the classroom, as piloted in this study, suggests that students have a greater chance of developing as autonomous learners in community. If one vision of educators as 'educational brokers' primarily values autonomy, this project has highlighted the importance of community in knowledge construction and intellectual endeavours. TEACH

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