

Peer Assessment as a Tool of Raising Students' Morale and Motivation: The Perceptions of the University of Fort Hare Social Work Students

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to validate the role of classroom based peer assessment as a tool of raising students' learning motivation through testing a null hypothesis that stated that. "Year 2012 Personal Growth and Development (SWP210) students' morale, motivation and throughputs cannot be improved by classroom peer assessments tasks". The paper employed a quantitative paradigm with a mini survey design. Twenty- four students out of a possible 240 students answered a questionnaire. Findings indicated that the majority of the students (75%) were adequately knowledgeable about the role of their peer assessments; majority (75%) recognized lecturer feedback as a source of learning motivation and 75% also indicated that classroom peer assessments increases morale, motivation and throughputs due to lecturers' feedback. The findings, therefore, validate the null hypothesis that peer assessment enhances students' morale, motivation and possible throughputs. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for the department of Social Work to enforce peer assessments in all its courses and the University of Fort hare Administration to ensure all the lecturers attain the Post Graduate Diploma in Higher Education and Training (PGDHET) courses to adequately equip them with assessment knowledge package.

INTRODUCTION

Whether viewed from a global, regional, or local perspective, learning prowess is driven by an array of factors such as environmental, genetical, hard work, and motivation (Bandura 1977). This agrees with many other occupational tasks and scenarios whose productivity is influenced by motivation, whether intrinsic, or extrinsic. These views are supported by theories and perspectives of motivation (Lawler 1994; Kang'ethe 2011). In the same vein, there are a myriad of problems that influence learning in the institutions of higher learning in South Africa. One such problem emanates, in the opinion of this researcher, from low motivation of the learners because of the nature of pedagogy applied with the end result of making learners' throughputs go down while others drop out (Martin et al. 1999; ACT 2003; Freire 1972). To this end, the University of Fort Hare is generally experiencing notable higher failure rates with some courses having to be repeated by a significant number of students. For example, a report in the Social Science Faculty Board Meeting held on 23rd February 2012 decried such failure rates (FSS Board Meeting 2012). Such failures make students either drop out completely, repeat many

times and therefore take a long time to complete their courses; or make them uncompetitive and therefore diminish their chances of taking higher degrees such as Master's or PhDs (Twigg 2003).

Informed by observation and situation at UFH, it is this researcher's subjective opinion that lack of students' motivation could be caused by immense application of teacher-centred learning pedagogy as opposed to learner-centred pedagogy (UFH 2008; Freire 1972). Teacher-centred pedagogy only makes students passive; are not considered important stakeholders in their learning; and assessment rubrics remain the tools of the lecturer instead of extending its ownership to the learners as important stakeholders in the continuum of learning (Lockett and Sutherland 2000; Freire 1972). This, in this researcher's perspective constitutes oppressiveness (Freire 1972; SAQA 2001). Such kind of approaches has led to students adopting rote learning, becoming stressed, anxious and sick when the examination time approaches, while some decide not to take examination and instead go to private doctors to feign sickness of various types so that they could be given official rest during the proposed date of the examination. This has led to the number that take special

examination burgeon every year. This state could also partly drive the phenomenon of learners getting involved in making endless grievances and strikes (SRC Notice 2012; UFH Staff Memo 2012). This teacher-centred pedagogy can also be responsible for students getting disillusioned and disenchanted in their studies, losing hope and vision, and sometimes adopting illicit methodologies such as plagiarism as a way of survival; and paying other established scholars to do their assignments on their behalf (Beute et al. 2008). Such scenarios are not uncommon in the corridors of UFH premises. It is therefore important that action based as well as non-action based researches are undertaken to find out how the students' motivation to raise their learning morale can be raised.

Problem Statement

It is this researcher's subjective contention informed by the fact that he is one of the lecturers in the Social Work Department that some of the University of For Hare's (UFH) social work students, even though majority of them proceed to the following year, only pass marginally making such students uncompetitive even when they would like to take their masters, either at UFH, or elsewhere. Though there could be many other problems underpinning this outcome, this researcher hypothesizes lack of adequate motivation to carry out learning as one such challenge. This researcher considered empirically validating whether peer assessments as part of action research has a positive contribution in motivating learners to improve their motivation and therefore increased learning and throughputs. He therefore captured his 2012 SWP 210 class's perceptions on their peer assessment as a strategy of raising learning motivation through action research. This was to put to rest and validate the hypothesis that peer assessment in the class is indeed an important tool in motivating UFH students. The results of such peer assessments can reinforce this researcher cum lecturer's application of peer assessment in all the courses with the hope of increasing students' learning outcomes as well as raise their learning competencies in general. This could also result in more emphasis being given to the approach in the UFH curriculum (UFH 2008).

Study Rationale

The study's broad objective was to investigate the role of assessments in motivating students to increase their learning and throughputs with particular emphasis on the use of peer assessment tasks (through action research) as a strategy to motivate the students to raise their learning morale, motivation, and possibly their throughputs. The hypotheses leading to the study were:

Positive Hypothesis

- ♦ The year 2012 SWP 210 Students' learning morale and motivation and possible throughput can be raised through classroom peer assessment tasks.

Null Hypothesis

- ♦ The year 2012 SWP 210 students' morale, motivation and throughputs cannot be improved by classroom peer assessment tasks.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

A paradigm is a "worldview" or a set of assumptions about how things work. This paper employed a quantitative research paradigm. A quantitative research paradigm involves hypothesis testing to obtain "objective" truth (Creswell 2008; Neuman 2007). The quantitative paradigm tested whether peer assessment has a positive impact towards learners' motivation and morale in their learning.

Research Design

The paper emanates from the action research that employed a mini survey design to investigate the perceptions of the 2012 SWP 210 students on the impact of peer assessment tasks as a strategy of increasing their motivation and possibly increasing their learning and throughputs. A survey research is often used to assess thoughts, opinions, and feelings of the research phenomena. A good sample selection is therefore central as it allows one to generalize the findings from the sample to the whole desirable population, which is the purpose of a survey

research. A survey consists of a predetermined set of questions in a questionnaire that is given to a research participant to respond to (Creswell 2007). This research applied a mini research survey in that the whole class represented all that was surveyed and only a percentage of the sample was chosen to answer the questionnaire and therefore generalize the findings to the whole class.

Methods of Data Collection

The researcher undertook several on-going classroom peer assessment tasks during the months of March and April 2012, and then conducted a mini survey at the end of April 2012. The goal was to investigate the perceptions of the 2012 SWP 210 students on the impact of peer assessment tasks on their motivation to learn and possibly increase their throughputs. The researcher considered it pertinent to engage students in doing small exercises taking only about 10 minutes of their lesson, two times in a week. After every lesson, the researcher would give some tasks that the whole class and the researcher would deliberate on before starting the following lesson. This meant that students had to continuously revise what they did in order to tackle the assignment tasks competently. The task usually involved the components of the lesson that had been taught and served the purpose of revision as a way of reinforcing learning. Tackling these tasks, the researcher believed entailed revision and immense student engagement with learning materials especially on the subject under discussion. These tasks were then peer-assessed by students themselves through exchanging their assignments with one another.

Instruments

A questionnaire with predetermined close ended questions was administered to a sample of 24 students in a class of around 240 students. This sample represented about 10% of the whole class. This justifies the quality and expectations of a mini survey. A questionnaire was chosen as the instrument because it was simple to administer and is best suited to capture the perceptions of students as regards the role and importance of peer assessment tasks as tools of increasing students' learning morale and motivation with the hope of increasing their learning

and possible throughput. It gives an outcome which is quantitatively based (Creswell 2007; Rubin and Babbie 2008). The questionnaire method of gathering data is considered simple and unambiguous compared to interviews that usually take long to complete. However, it poses a challenge in that it requires literate respondents who can read and understand the questions on their own (Creswell 2007; Rubin and Babbie 2008).

Sampling Selection Methodologies, Population under Study and Study Domain

Research Domain, Population under Study and Selection Criteria

The research domain was this researcher's 2012 second year class taking SWP 210 (Personal Growth and Development). The population under study that also formed the sampling frame consisted of the 240 students in the SWP 210 class. The selection method was probability, specifically systematic sampling technique. Because the class had 240 students and the researcher wanted 10% of them, this was divided by ten to give rise to 24 desired samples. Then from the list of 240 students that formed the sampling frame, every 10th student, or Kth student was picked to answer the questionnaire. This gave rise to 24 samples who all responded to the questionnaire. The gender phenomenon was ignored. The sample participants took only 10 minutes to answer the questions from the questionnaire.

Ethical and Legal Requirements

The researcher observed all the requisite legal and ethical requirements for a research undertaking. The researcher was given a letter by the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) indicating that the research undertaking was part of the course, *HET 501: The Higher Education Context and Evaluation as Action Research*. The researcher briefed all the 2012 SWP 210 students on the purpose and objective of the research. He also informed them that their inclusion and involvement in research was voluntary and there was no penalty if one decided not to continue with answering the questions. This researcher also explained that the respondents

were within their human rights to decide to participate or not (Rubin and Babbie 2008). He also read and showed the class the letter from the TLC manager asking for the potential research participants to kindly assist the researcher in answering any requisite questions for the purpose of finishing his Post Graduate Diploma in Higher Education and Training Context (PGDHET). The researcher also explained to the research participants that the acquisition of the PGDHET was of benefit to them and to the general UFH community. The 24 students who were systematically selected agreed to sign a consent form before answering the questionnaire. To the benefit of research validity, all the 24 research participants answered the questionnaire.

Data Analysis, Interpretations, Findings and Discussion of the Findings

Data analysis took the form of content analysis in which different categories of the respondents' perceptions were grouped to form themes. The themes were then pitted against the hypothesis to justify and validate their proposition, or refute them altogether (Creswell 2007; Rubin and Babbie 2008). Content analysis involves establishing categories and then counting the number of instances in which they are used in a text. This analysis is partially used for quantitative analytical methods, determining the frequencies of the occurrence of particular frequencies. This analysis allows the findings to be replicable (Creswell 2007; Rubin and Babbie 2008). Table 1 gives a summary of the data collected, followed by the presentation of the findings.

FINDINGS

The following themes were based on the magnitude of the responses made.

Table 1: Frequency of responses

No.	Responses	Greatly	%	A little	%	Not at all	%	Total	%
1	Those who adequately understand the role of classroom peer assessments Tasks	18	75	6	25	0	0	24	100
2.	Those who perceive that classroom assessment tasks increases learning morale and motivation	18	75	4	17	2	8	24	100
3	Those who perceive that peer assessment tasks can lead to increased throughputs due to lecturers' feedback	18	75	3	12.5	3	12.5	24	100

Students' Ownership of Classroom Peer Assessments is Strongly Grounded

Findings indicate that most students (75%) adequately understood the role and importance of classroom peer assessment tasks conducted in the class before the planned class starts. This indicates that most students are likely to have ownership of the tasks, making the implementation of the tasks easier and achievable. It is also likely that this ownership is likely to positively influence the fewer students (25%) who only understood the role and importance of these classroom assessment tasks a little. There is also a likelihood that some of the respondents who constituted the 25% category may not have been regular class attendees and therefore lowering their chances of understanding the role of these tasks. The fact that the exercise was also being implemented for the first time by this researcher (March and April of 2012), leaves chances that not all students may have had ample ownership of the tasks. All in all, the statistics gives light that implementation of the tasks is welcome and is likely to increase students' learning, morale, revision and possibly raise throughputs. This gives strength to this researcher's contention that peer assessment ownership is strongly likely to increase students' motivation to learning. This theme, therefore, supports and validates the positive hypothesis that students' learning morale and motivation and possible throughput improvement can be raised through classroom peer assessment tasks.

Classroom Peer Assessments Increases Throughputs Due to Lecturers' Feedback

Findings validate that peer assessments is a source of motivation as it enhances lecturer feedback. This is supported by the fact that 75% of the respondents acknowledged that the lectur-

er's feedback has an impact of increasing throughput. The 12.5% respondents who did not agree with the issue of lecturers' feedback as a possible avenue of increasing throughputs, and the 12.5% who perceived that the peer assessment contributed only a little in raising throughputs through lecturer's feedback, could possibly emanate from the students who may not have had ample ownership of the task because of the limited time frame that they were exposed to the task. It is also possible that some respondents may not have been coming to the class regularly. However, the researcher saw hope that with more exposure to the task, the 25% of the students will be motivated to own the tasks significantly. Nevertheless, the statistics validate and support the fact that peer assessment increased lecturer's feedback to the students.

Classroom Peer Assessment Increases Learning Morale and Motivation

Findings indicate that 75% of the respondents perceived peer assessments tasks as a source of learning morale and motivation to their learning. However, 17% believed the tasks only gave a little morale and motivation, while 8% failed to see the impact of the assessments tasks in raising morale or motivation to learning. The researcher believes that the task implementation had not achieved a 100% ownership because the tasks had only been carried out for a period of two months and also possibly due to the fact that some of the respondents may not have been coming to the class regularly. However, the 75% positive responses supports and validate that peer assessments had a positive impact on raising students' learning morale, motivation and possibly improving students throughputs.

DISCUSSION

Study findings validated students' understanding of the importance of classroom peer assessment. This succinctly positions the pivotal place of assessment as a tool of students' morale and motivation. Assessment, whether formative or summative, is critical towards realising educational goals and objectives (Luckett and Sutherland 2000; SAQA 2001; Jansen and Christie 1999). Assessment methods are critical to the quality of learning outcomes in any educational endeavour. It is central to developing student learning, motivating learning and en-

suring that education is outcome based (Jansen and Christie 1999). In general, assessment serves as an opportunity for the lecturer to give feedback to his/her students; measures the level of learning and progression of the students; gauges the level of understanding of the students; serves to check learning outcomes, or take stock of the desired outcomes (Wiggins 1997). It is also an opportunity for students to empirically demonstrate their acquired "hands on" experience; and also assess their level of motivation or lack of it towards learning. It is therefore critical that students are involved in assessing their work and not have the instructor do it all the time. This enhances students' intellectual growth and maturity as well as giving them ownership of their tasks (Boud 2003; Luckett and Sutherland 2000; SAQA 2001). It is unfortunate that many institutions of learning such as UFH have stuck to the traditional approaches of learning where very little or no assessment is carried out by the students themselves. This is why when this researcher introduced it in his Personal Growth and Development class (SWP 210), there were many questions and much confusion among the learners as no other lecturer had conducted a peer assessment exercise. This lecturer cum the researcher was also worried that being innovative and bold to test these tools which are long overdue may be viewed as a challenge to the departmental order.

In peer assessment, students are involved in assessing their peers with the lecturer/instructor acting as an external examiner. He/she does the role of facilitation, and guiding (Luckett and Sutherland 2000). The instructor should also check for reliability of the assessment marks, and professionally arbitrate in the allocation of marks. Perhaps one of the most important roles of the instructor in guiding the students' peer assessment process is taking the students through the crafting of the assessment rubrics so that they may arrive at the correct way of assessment. The rubric has to be succinctly understood by all the students to avoid bias in allocating marks. The assessment has to be fair and reflect the true facts on the ground. Conducted well, student-student assessment should bring in motivation in learning (Angelo and Cross 1993; Boud 2003; Boud et al. 1999).

While several traditional assessment practices such as giving assignments are easily known and implemented in virtually all the institutions of learning, classroom peer assessment remains one of the assessment practices which

are poorly executed in some institutions of higher learning such as UFH (UFH 2008). Classroom peer assessments are inadequately known, are poorly conceptualized; or are grossly ignored altogether. It is therefore critical that lecturers at UFH undergo a paradigm shift to start using, implementing and owning them (SAQA 2001). The role of classroom student-student peer assessment tasks, therefore, in universities such as UFH cannot be overemphasized in raising the learners' morale, motivation, with possible increased throughput. Student peer assessment implementation and administration, therefore, is topical and urgent in our classes at UFH because of poor performance among some of the students, increased repetition of classes, and perceived low morale and motivation to learning generally (FSS 2012; Act 2003).

A critical advantage of student peer assessment besides inculcating a sense of learning morale is that it also increases students' assessment culture and assessment ownership. This has an impact of enhancing students' esteem, assertiveness, learning autonomy and a sense of control of their learning. This can further lead to students' development of reflexive and reflective skills (Maguire 2002; Lockett and Sutherland 2000). These qualities no doubt impact positively on the process of their intellectual development (Gardiner 2006, 2008). Peer assessment is also likely to strengthen group solidarity, team work and team spirit; as well as confidence building among the learners. These are qualities that drive or result in learning motivation (SAQA 2001).

According to Kang'ethe (2011) as well other researchers such as Lawler (1994), motivation in any assignment or activity is central to increased productivity. From the research findings, it is apparent that increased student feedback from their lecturers is a source of student motivation and learning morale (Wiggins 1997). Feedback to the students, therefore, needs to be emphasized or reinforced by UFH administration in order to increase students learning and throughputs (UFH 2008). However, challenges that may lay in the way to impede such implementation or reinforcement need to be identified. For example, the phenomenon of large classes poses immense challenges to the lecturer-feedback process. It is an incontrovertible fact that in very large classes, the majority of the students can go through the whole semester without experiencing a single interactive episode with their instructors (Cuseo 2007). It is therefore critical

that the issue of class size is debated, discussed and brainstormed through platforms such as this provided by this paper. This is to give hope to coming up with workable class size that will ensure optimal output and outcome in teaching and learning (Cuseo 2007).

This researcher considers a large class as one with literally many students who the instructor finds difficult to control (Cuseo 2007; Weimer 1987). However, this could be subjective because there are cases where a big population of learners may be handled well depending on the medium and infrastructure of communication. Good examples are the seminars or conferences that are attended by a bigger population. However, the way information is transmitted during conferences may not be compared with the interactive demand of classroom teaching. Therefore, it is good to debate on the ideal class size (Cuseo 2007; Weimer 1987). To this researcher, an ideal class is perhaps one with the number of learners that the instructor can identify and interact with ease, a class which has ample resources for the number, and where the instructor can literally see what the students are doing without strain. For instance, an ideal class can have between 20 to 30 students, one with well-equipped sound relaying equipment such as microphones for students to communicate easily with the instructor and the whole class where students can easily stop the instructor for attention, it is well aerated, temperature controlled and with student friendly infrastructure such as good attractive seats, etc. In classes like the ones that this researcher teaches of about 250 students, giving feedback and adequate lecturer-student engagement presents an arduous task. This is an environment that needs to change if feedback process is to be effective.

CONCLUSION

This research paper leaves no stone unturned in asserting that the specific objective that sought to use peer assessment tasks as a strategy to motivate the students to raise their learning morale, motivation and possibly their throughputs is fully laid to rest. It therefore, gives the researcher an open slate to fully implement classroom peer assessment practices full throttle as a reliable assessment vehicle to achieve learning, raising learners' learning morale and motivation. The research results also fully satisfy and validate the positive hypothesis that: students' learning morale and motivation and pos-

sible throughout improvement can be raised through classroom peer assessment tasks. On the other hand, this justifies and validates the nullification of the null hypothesis that: The 2012 SWP 210 students' morale, motivation and throughputs cannot be improved by classroom peer assessments tasks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research prompts an array of recommendations. Since it is this researcher's contention that social work department has not adequately explored and implemented several workable assessment practices and this could be one of the gaps contributing to low learning morale and motivation by social work students; low pass rates; high levels of class absenteeism; and failure rate, it is critical that the results of this research are used by the lecturers and the department to work together with students and fill in the gaps that impede morale motivation among the students.

The researcher also takes this platform to urge and challenge the social work staff who have not been keen to conduct timely assessment tasks start to conduct them immediately. This research finding has validated that they are topical, urgent, timely, and long overdue.

However, since this researcher also considers a lack of assessment and evaluation skills among the lecturers as a possible gap that could impede their success in assessment endeavour, it is important that the UFH administration use its administrative machinery to enforce all the lecturers to take the PGDHET which is offered free of charge. This is the only way to raise UFH learning morale, motivation and throughputs.

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