

# ‘Just enough to make you take it seriously’: exploring students’ attitudes towards peer assessment

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**Abstract** The use of peer learning and peer assessment has gained considerable interest in higher education driven by both its educational value and by its ability to provide students with the opportunity to develop important transferrable skills. This paper reports on the use of peer learning and peer assessment with a cohort of four-year undergraduate physiotherapy students and an 18 month taught post-graduate teacher education programme. The study observed the students’ engagement in the process, surveyed their opinions on the activity at the end of the experience and conducted one focus group discussion with a subset of students from each cohort. The study found that the vast majority of respondents felt that the experience was valuable and enjoyable. However, when asked to indicate whether it was a fairer method of assessment there were more varied responses. Similarly when asked whether their peers should have a greater say in their overall grade the majority disagreed. Views on the educational value of the experience appeared to differ between the two cohorts of students. The study highlights the influence of a prevailing assessment cultures on students’ engagement in peer learning which requires consideration when including such pedagogical approaches.

**Keywords** Peer assessment · Peer learning

## Introduction

In the past assessment was rarely seen as a process of bringing out the potential that exists within students and creating an opportunity for them to demonstrate what they were able to do. Most of the time, assessments were only used to certify students’ learning. Many learning institutes have forgotten the ultimate purpose of the

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assessment actually is not only to prove but also to improve students' learning (Fook and Sidhu 2010, p. 154)

Assessment plays a critical role in the teaching and learning process of any university, however, as Liu and Carless (2006) note, the term assessment is often interpreted as referring to marking, grading, measuring and ranking rather than being seen as part of the learning process. The emphasis on such uses of assessment derives from societal expectations that see the role of education as ranking student performance as much as educating. This tradition remains evident today. Boud and Falchikov (2006) for example, note that the use of the label 'assessment' connotes the teacher's role whereas 'learning' connotes the student's role. Pope (2005) believes the current structure of university education creates a bias towards summative assessment as opposed to more formative assessment strategies. This bias can have a significant influence on the learning experience of the student, how they approach their learning and how they conceptualise their role as learners in this process. Research suggests that assessment shapes students' perceptions of learning—thus shaping the learning process (Bloxham and West 2010). This perception is deeply rooted in societal expectations;

Summative assessment has the clear purpose of certifying a level of attainment of a student at the point of completion of a course or program. This is a widespread public expectation of assessment, and while it could be argued that this is insufficiently future-oriented, it would be difficult to mount a case which involved shifting existing well-established perceptions of this purpose. The idea is too entrenched in public consciousness ... (Boud and Falchikov 2006, p. 401)

Coupled with the dominance of summative assessment at university level is the culture of assessment that students experience prior to entry into university (Callan 1997; Gleeson et al. 2001; Shachar and Fisher 2004). This emphasis can lead to a bias towards surface approaches to learning among students (Thomson and Falchikov 1998) and what Petty (2009) calls a 'maladaptive learning' strategy.

Assessment exerts a backwash effect on learning. ... Inappropriate forms of assessment appear to encourage students to take a surface approach to learning, that is they emphasise rote learning, conforming to the narrowest interpretations of assessment tasks and working to 'beat the system' rather than engage in meaningful learning. (Boud et al. 1999 p. 419)

There are multitudes of ways in which assessment can play a more integral part of the learning experience and peer assessment is one such strategy. Peer assessment provides opportunities for students to assess each others work and contribute to a community of practice where critically supportive dialogue leads to deeper student learning. Influenced by Vygotskian socio-cultural aspects of learning, this approach places a greater onus on the student to take responsibility for their own learning and the learning of others. However, implemented in the incorrect way it can become a case of 'poacher turned gamekeeper' and strengthen instrumental approaches to learning (Boud et al. 1999).

Within this context, this study reports on a peer learning and assessment initiative with a group of undergraduate physiotherapy students and a group of postgraduate teacher education students at a university on the west coast of the Republic of Ireland (RoI). The study was exploratory in nature and aimed to examine the issues that emerged within this context and the students' opinions of the initiative. Cognisant of the

prevailing examination culture, the research was particularly interested in exploring whether existing beliefs and values in relation to assessment influenced the students' engagement in the process. The research took place over an academic year and involved the observation of students, a survey of their opinions on completion of the peer learning/assessment and two focus group discussions (one with each group) conducted at the end of term.

### Benefits of peer assessment

Peer assessment has gained increased interest in teaching and learning, particularly in higher education, in recent years (Topping 2009; Magin 2001; Gatfield 1999). Falchikov and Goldfinch's (2000) meta-analysis highlights its use in all disciplines including Science, Engineering, Arts, Humanities, Business, Education and Social Science. Its use has been justified on several grounds (See Nulty 2011 for an extensive development of these benefits). Van Hattum-Janssen and Lourenco (2006) note that changes to higher education practices, which have seen greater use of teaching methods focusing on the construction rather than delivery of knowledge, requires different assessment methods that have the capacity to capture the extent of this learning rather than the reproduction of knowledge. Peer assessment and review strategies appear to provide one method of responding to this challenge. Langan et al. (2005) note that peer assessment can facilitate deeper learning and enhance students understanding. Topping (2009) notes that peer assessment utilising formative assessment techniques is likely to involve "*intelligent questioning, coupled with increased self-disclosure and, thereby, assessment of understanding*" (p. 23). In addition to facilitating deeper learning, Wen et al. (2006) note that the use of peer assessment may enhance the learner's metacognitive understanding. The development of this metacognitive understanding may come from the ability of peer assessment and peer feedback to enable students to take a more active role in the management of their own learning (Liu and Carless 2006). These higher levels of learner responsibility may increase the reflexive nature of the tasks. Davis et al. (2007) note that as well as developing a deeper conceptual understanding among pupils, teachers may also seek evidence of collaborative skills, problem solving skills, good planning and the ability to effectively articulate arguments. It can also assess interpersonal skills, important in many professional settings, which could not be assessed in other ways (Lurie et al. 2006).

Another reason for the growth in popularity of peer assessment and peer learning in higher education is the need to equip graduates with important transferrable skills that are required in the workplace (Topping 2009; Boud and Falchikov 2006). This vocational rationale for its use emphasises a number of skills including the ability to assess ones own work as well as the skills to assess the work of other professionals (Woolhouse 1999). Sluijsmans et al. (2004) note that '*being able to interpret the work of colleagues and peers is a necessary prerequisite for professional development and improving one's own functioning*' (p. 60). Therefore, creating learning environments that mirror aspects of professional practice can be enormously beneficial for the student (Langan et al. 2005).

The use of peer assessment and peer review techniques in education have also been utilised for their motivational potential. Vu and Dall'Alba (2007) claim that, if appropriately designed and implemented, assessment can motivate students to learn by directing their efforts in the peer assessment process. Van Hattum-Janssen and Lourenco (2006) argue that enhancing the student responsibility is another motivational aspect for the

student since they are an active participant in the assessment process rather than a passive recipient of it.

### Resistance to peer assessment

Despite the stated benefits of peer assessment processes, Liu and Carless (2006) note four main reasons for resistance to the use of peer assessment; they are: issues of reliability of the student grading, perceived expertise of the peer assessors, power relations and the time available to implement such processes (Van Den Berg et al. 2006). Vu and Dall’Alba (2007) also note that peer assessment raises ethical challenges such as ‘*making judgements on peers’ work and dealing with diversity in their backgrounds, learning modes and achievements*’ (p. 542).

The reliability of the peer assessor’s assessment is a common concern in relation to peer assessment (See Falchikov and Goldfinch 2000). Liu and Carless (2006) note that the existing literature on peer assessment is dominated by studies of peer tutor grade correlations and that this emphasis is still prominent despite that “*it is now well-recognized that students are reasonably reliable assessors*” (p. 282). Magin (2001) supports this view claiming that;

There is now a substantial body of case studies which have addressed the issue of reliability of peer assessments ... Many of these report quite satisfactory reliability in terms of agreement between peer and tutor marks (p. 54)

Langan et al. (2005) question the comparisons made between student and tutor grades as a way of assessing the validity and reliability of students’ assessments since it assumes that the tutor’s assessment is reliable and valid. While significant attention has been devoted to issues of validity and reliability of peer assessments, a similar level of attention has not been devoted to exploring the influence of power relations and the cultural norms of students and teachers and their influence on peer assessment. Thomson and Falchikov (1998) note that assessment can have a profound effect on the way students approach their learning. Their research into first, 2 and 3 year students in a Scottish university found that as a result of examination requirements many of the students adopted a surface approach to learning which, once established in the 1 year could persist into subsequent years despite the fact that such superficial approaches to study was not the way they would prefer to work.

When peer assessment is introduced into such contexts, where normative summative assessment has conditioned students to engage in the learning experience in a rather superficial manner, its potential value can be distorted. Students can simply assume the role of the teacher in the traditional teacher-student relationship—the poacher turned game-keeper. This role is not one that is difficult to undertake since it is one that is deeply embedded given the learner’s long ‘*apprenticeship of observation*’ of formal education (Lortie 1975). Therefore, if students have not experienced assessment as an integral part of the learning experience where formative feedback is used, as opposed to summative assessment, it is unlikely that, given the opportunity to take the role assessor, they will use the opportunity to engage in the experience in the same way.

A second aspect of traditional practice that influences the adoption of peer learning is the cultural expectations of students and teachers. The didactic contract, a term developed by Brousseau (1998), refers to the hidden relationship between teacher and student and the implicit rules governing this ‘contract’. As part of this contract the teacher has expectations of what the students must do but similarly the students too have expectations of the

teacher's role. This contact is shaped by historical and cultural norms. It determines how students and indeed teachers should behave in this relationship. In a similar tone Nuthall (2005) refers to the ritualised routines within education supported by widely held myths about learning that are acquired through formal schooling.

These ritualised routines cannot be separated from the power relations that they help to sustain. Despite attempts to make the learning experience of the student more democratic and participative, hidden power dynamics maintain a 'status quo' that determine the student behaviour. Gore (1995) refers to the '*continuity in the functioning of power relations in pedagogy*' (p.165) and the constraining effect of these defined roles and hierarchies on educational change.

Within this context of ritualised routines and defined power relations assessment is often not seen as a supportive developmental process but one of grading and certification;

The discourse of assessment draws strongly on the metaphors of acquisition and judgement. It sits less easily with the metaphor of participation that is being increasingly used to characterise workplace learning (Boud and Falchikov 2006, p. 406)

As students practices are strongly conditioned by assessment, changes to its pattern and provision can be met with resistance. Some students may reject the alteration of the teacher-student relationship, particularly if they achieve a high level of success in this traditional arrangement despite the educational benefits. Others may reject it because of the unease at assessing their peers or being assessed by their peers;

The act of being assessed is one that has considerable emotional resonance. Learners tend not to recollect positive experiences of assessment and commonly do not actively seek out opportunities to assess themselves or be assessed (Boud and Falchikov 2006, p. 406)

Research by Vu and Dall'Alba (2007), for example, found that while students involved in the peer learning process experienced some benefits they nonetheless '*expressed uncertainty and concern about the assessing ability of peers and the quality of feedback*' (p. 548). In a study using forced distribution grading with a group of 96 students in an American university by Ryan et al. (2007) most students thought the peer evaluation was unfair and disagreed with the grade received, others believed that they did not know their classmates well enough to evaluate their performance. Students may also dislike peer assessment as it heightens the possibility of receiving criticisms from peers. Arnold et al. (2005) also note that students;

... worry that something bad will happen to a peer because of a negative report. Additionally, students are reluctant to damage personal relationships by hurting their peer's feelings or incurring a peer's anger. Similarly, they do not wish to disrupt relationships among team-mates or members of work groups (p.820).

Therefore the integration of peer learning into the learning experience, while on the surface appearing effective, may be a task of conformity for the students. In light of the main issues highlighted, this study aimed to explore students' opinions of peer assessment. In this context, a number of key questions guided the study. How do students, conditioned within a traditional teacher-student culture react to peer assessment? How do existing power relations influence its use?

## Course development and methodological approach

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the University's ethics committee. All students that participated in either the questionnaire or the focus group component of the study provided written consent and were free to withdraw from the study at any stage without their data being used.

### Participant and module details

The study involved two different cohorts of students. The first group ( $n = 27$ ) were undergraduate BSc in Physiotherapy students, who were in the fourth and final year of the programme (mean age of 21 years). The majority of the students in this cohort ( $n = 25$ ) entered the BSc programme straight from second level education having scored in the top 5 % in the National State Exams, and thus were among the top performers in the country and had a very high level of academic ability. For a final year module this cohort was divided into six groups and each group was provided with a specific topic; the topics included Burns and Plastics, Sports, Rheumatology, Women's Health, Ergonomics and Developmental Disability. Each group was facilitated by the lecturer to research their topic and to prepare a 3 h short course which was presented to their peers at the end of the academic year. The assessment of this module comprised of three main components the lecturers grade for the short-course (60 %) the mean peer assessment grade for the short course (15 %) and the remaining (25 %) was allocate to a reflective piece submitted by the students on a positive and challenging critical incident encountered during the process of creating the short course.

The second cohort of students was a class of postgraduate teacher education students ( $n = 18$ ) studying an 18-month course to prepare them as post-primary teachers. As postgraduates the students ranged in age from their early twenties to their mid-forties. In this case the students were each allocated a topic relating to sustainable technology that they were required to teach to their peers in a 30 minute lesson. For each lesson three of the students were allocated the task of assessing the lesson and providing feedback to the student teacher. In this case the peers' assessment of the lesson did not directly contribute to the student's grade. Instead the students allocated to assess the lesson were assessed on their ability to apply the assessment criteria and on their ability to provide effective feedback to the student teacher. This initiative took place during the first academic semester of a three semester programme.

## Methods

In attempting to capture the students' reactions and opinions of this process several research tools were employed to both capture the process and the students' overall opinions of the process. Throughout both initiatives tutorials were observed to gauge the students' level of engagement and participation in the activities. On completion of the course modules students' opinion were obtained through a questionnaire ([Appendix](#)), which was composed of mainly closed questions (11 point Likert Scale) and a selection of open questions on the value and processes involved in peer assessment. Following this students were invited to participate in focus group discussions. The two focus group discussions conducted aimed to explore the students' opinions of the process in greater depth. All 27 physiotherapy undergraduate students completed the questionnaire and five of these

students agreed to the in depth focus group discussion, which was facilitated by a moderator. All 18 postgraduate teacher education students also completed the questionnaire and six agreed to participate in the focus group discussion.

## Analysis

Descriptive statistics were obtained using statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) IBM version 17 statistical software for the ordinal data obtained from the closed questions in the questionnaire. A content analysis was performed on the responses to the open questions from the questionnaire. The focus group discussion was audio taped, transcribed verbatim and member checking was performed on the transcript. A thematic and content analysis was performed on the focus group transcript by two people independently who meet and agreed on the main themes and subthemes emerging from the data.

## Findings

Students displayed a high level of interest in both peer assessment activities and during observations it was evident that the students put a considerable amount of effort into the assessment of their peers.

**Table 1** Undergraduate BSc in Physiotherapy students' questionnaire results (a score of 11 equates to strong disagreement and 0 equates to strong agreement with the statement)

Statement	Median (range)	Interquartile range	Descriptor
I was quite nervous about Peer assessment (PA)	8 (2–11)	3	Disagree
PA has limited educational value	8 (3–11)	1	Disagree
I enjoyed being peer assessed	6 (3–10)	2	Neutral
I was reluctant to be critical of my peers	6.50 (3–9)	4	Slight disagreement
PA is a fairer method of assessment	6 (3–11)	3	Neutral
I enjoyed assessing my peers	4.50 (3–11)	2	Agree
It was difficult to remove personal feelings	7 (2–11)	3	Disagree
I did not have the skills and knowledge to assess my peers	8 (6–11)	2	Disagree
I was reluctant to give my peers low marks	5.50 (4–11)	4	Slight disagreement
I did not like being assessed	6 (2–8)	2	Neutral
The inclusion of PA made the assessment more accurate	5.50 (1–11)	2	Slight agreement
I prefer the tutor grade only	6 (1–8)	2	Neutral
My peers did not assess the course accurately	6 (1–11)	4	Neutral
I found the task of PA difficult	6.50 (2–11)	4	Slight disagreement
PA is unfair	8 (5–11)	3	Disagree
PA is a valuable exercise	4 (1–7)	2	Agree
My peers should have a greater say in mark	8 (3–11)	3	Disagree

As part of the questionnaire students were asked to indicate their level of agreement and disagreement with a series of statements relating to peer learning/assessment. There was a very high correlation between both cohorts of students ( $r = .77$ ) in response to these statements. The vast majority of respondents felt that the experience was a valuable learning exercise and there was agreement that the experience was also enjoyable. The students indicated that they did not have problems removing personal feelings from the process and also felt that they had adequate levels of knowledge to conduct the peer assessment. However, when asked to indicate whether it was a fairer method of assessment there were less positive responses with the average score indicating a neutral stance. Similarly when asked whether their peers should have a greater say in their overall grade the majority disagreed (See Tables 1 and 2).

While both cohorts of students appeared very similar in their views of peer assessment from the list of statements, the two cohorts differed when asked to comment on the value of the peer assessment experience. Both groups felt that the benefits for the student being assessed by their peers was the opportunity to receive different opinions and views on their presentations/lessons; although 7 of the 24 responses to this question from the cohort of physiotherapy students describe little value for the student being assessed by his/her peers:

I don't think it contributes anything to the student. A mark is a mark regardless of who you get it from (Q2 P16)

**Table 2** Postgraduate teacher education students' questionnaire results (a score of 11 equates to strong disagreement and 0 equates to strong agreement with the statement)

Question	Median (range)	Interquartile range	Descriptor
I was quite nervous about PA	6 (4–11)	3	Neutral
PA has limited educational value	9 (5–11)	2	Strongly disagree
I enjoyed being P assessed	4 (1–8)	3	Agree
I was reluctant to be critical of my peers	8 (2–11)	2.25	Disagree
PA is a fairer method of assessment	6 (2–8)	2.25	Neutral
I enjoyed assessing my peers	4 (1–8)	1	Agree
It was difficult to remove personal feelings	8 (4–11)	2.25	Disagree
I did not have the skills and knowledge to assess my peers	8 (4–11)	2.25	Disagree
I was reluctant to give my peers low marks	5 (2–11)	4.25	Neutral
I did not like being assessed	8 (4–11)	2.5	Disagree
The inclusion of PA made the assessment more accurate	5 (1–7)	3	Neutral
I prefer the tutor grade only	6 (4–9)	3	Neutral
My peers did not assess the course accurately	8 (3–11)	2.5	Disagree
I found the task of PA difficult	6 (2–10)	4	Neutral
PA is unfair	9 (1–11)	2.5	Strongly disagree
PA is a valuable exercise	2 (1–11)	1.25	Strongly agree
My peers should have a greater say in mark	8 (5–11)	4	Disagree

Not particularly as I feel that the tutor (s) are already in possession of enough expertise and fairness to carry it out effectively. I feel students are not objective enough and mark in terms of how they would do it differently and can even be too harsh (Q2 P19)

Another open-ended question invited the students to comment on the benefits for the assessor. The main benefits given by the cohort of student teachers was that it prepared them for their future roles as teachers by heightening their awareness of effective teaching strategies and provided them with the opportunity to develop their skills of providing feedback;

As teachers we will have to assess students' work, so assessing will be a big part of teaching (Q1, P7)

Yes, because while you are assessing it gives you a chance to see different teaching strategies in action and you learn more from it when you are analysing it (Q1, P3)

Some physiotherapy students also identified the value for their own professional development

Yes, makes them better able to evaluate things a highly valuable skill which we will need when working as physiotherapists (Q2 P20)

However the most common response to this question, with over half of the responses (15 out of 27), mentioned the insight gained into the grading process which would benefit them in their own presentations, as the following examples highlight;

Yes it helps you in forming your own presentation as you know exactly how you will be marked (Q2 P14)

Yes it gives us the opportunity to gain an understanding of what a lecturer is looking at when grading students (Q2 P27)

Become more aware of what is expected/needed to get a good result (Q2 P2)

The data from the surveys, particularly from the open-ended questions, appeared to suggest that the undergraduate physiotherapy students placed more attention on their overall grade whereas the student teachers seemed to place most value on receiving the feedback on ways to improve their teaching. This issue also emerged from analysis of the focus group discussions where the undergraduate physiotherapy students appeared to place a high level of value on the end of term grade awarded and the group seems to be very assessment-focused in their actions. There appeared to be a certain level of reluctance for the students to engage in the assessment of their peers and there appeared to be two main reasons for this reluctance. Firstly, the students did not feel competent enough to assess their peers. They saw it as the lecturers' role to assess as the lecturer was the 'expert' and had knowledge that the students did not possess.

We're not as experienced as the lecturers. The lecturer is the one with the experience and the knowledge ... I don't really even understand why our mark counts ... we are not the ones qualified ... should our mark count should it not be the lecturers overall? (FG2 P4)

This lack of confidence is quite interesting given the fact that the students had indicated in the questionnaire that they felt they had an adequate level of skills and knowledge to assess their peers.

The second reason for their reluctance to engage in peer assessment was because of the high stakes nature of the assessment. The undergraduate students appeared to be very focused on performance and grade success and there was recognition amongst the students during the focus group discussion that there was a high level of competition amongst the group. The students seemed reluctant to grade presentations at a low standard when they had knowledge that their peers had put a significant amount of effort into its preparation. Indeed, there seems to be an expectation that hard work should be rewarded with high grades;

I don't think I'd be happy with a B2 after working so hard on it. (FG2 P2)

It's not fair on yourself either ... because you know how much work you've put into yours and then ... if they get the same grade as we did and we know we put ten times the amount of work that they put in then you're not really fair to yourself. (FG2 P1)

Even though the students described some benefits to being involved in the peer assessment process they also described how difficult it was assessing their peers. *I liked peer assessing because I liked having a say in it.... I think it is important that we got to have our say in it, but it was difficult assessing your peers (FG2, P3)*. One student described how she felt “guilty” (FG2P5) awarding a low grade to a group. Another said, “*I can't believe we have to do this to our classmates ...*”. (FG2P2)

Despite a level of reluctance to engage in peer assessment there was a strong sense of fairness among the group and the task was taken very seriously by both groups since it contributed to the students' overall grade. During observations students appeared to be very committed to agreeing a grade for their peers' presentations. This was evident through the long and detailed discussions amongst the groups when completing the assessment rubrics.

Amongst the undergraduate students the peer assessment seemed to be ‘accepted’ on the basis that it was not too heavily weighted that it would ‘interfere’ significantly with the student's overall grade;

It actually doesn't make that much of a difference, you are not going to change anyone's grade bracket through the peer marking For the percentage that it was worth, I think it was fair (FG2 P2)

It's not going to make a big difference to the overall mark ... It's just enough to make you take it seriously. (FG2 P3).

It was also mentioned that had the exercise been weighted heavier there would have been “*a lot more conflict*” (FG2 P3).

The cohort of postgraduate student teachers appeared to have less of a focus on ‘performance’. Similar to the undergraduate students, they did not want the peer assessment to be weighted any higher than it was as they believed it would be unfair to the students being assessed. However, they did not appear to have the same focus on the final course grade and instead saw the feedback as being worthwhile in their overall development, as the following focus group extract highlights;

... when you put the effort into doing the lesson you want the feedback. I suppose you have your own opinion of what you have done right or wrong and it's very hard to put yourself outside yourself and see. It might just be small things whatever. The whole idea of being here is learning to progress from where we started so if you don't

get feedback you haven't a hope of bettering yourself. So I welcome the feedback no matter how good or otherwise it might have been (FG1, P2)

In relation to the perceived benefits of the peer assessment process the physiotherapy undergraduate students also commented on how the process could impact positively on their development as a professional

... if you go out to give a presentation or an in-service like in the back of your mind your going to have all those criteria. (FG2, P1)

It could become very useful if we end up being clinical educators ourselves because that is a possibility ... we will have to mark other people's presentations or their assessment forms ... So at least now we've experience being markers. (FG2, P3)

Some teacher education students also made reference to the value of the experience for their future careers;

It is very important to be open to critique as a teacher, it is also very important to effectively critique (Q1, P17)

As a teacher we will need to be objective when grading, I felt it heightened your awareness of the good and bad aspects of teaching (Q1, P18)

## Discussion of findings

The noticeable differences between the two groups, particularly in terms of how they viewed peer assessment emerged from the questionnaire data, and were apparent in the focus group discussions. A number of contextual factors may have contributed to the differences observed between the two groups. Thus, it is crucial to consider the possible reasons for these disparities. The nature of the peer assessment task provided to both groups differed and this played a role in influencing the students' approach to the task. For the undergraduate cohort they saw the task mainly as a grading function and attempted to grade the students' presentations as 'accurately' as possible. In a sense the poachers assumed the role of gamekeepers in this process.

The cohort of postgraduate students on the other hand appeared to focus on the importance of the feedback to their peers partly because they were being assessed on this aspect of the process but also because they appeared to value the feedback from their peers. The value placed on the process by the student teachers may also reflect the course of study since the student teachers had explored the importance of feedback in the learning process as part of their teacher education programme. Possibly the greatest influence on the groups was their level of maturity as learners in large part influenced by their educational experience to date. The undergraduate group, for example, recognised the competitive nature within their cohort whereas the student teachers believed that they were quite a 'mature' group. There are a number of possible factors that contribute to these differences. The undergraduate group of physiotherapy students were quite a homogenous group. All had recently completed post-primary education and completed the state examinations that determine entry to third-level. To a large extent the undergraduate students observed in this research are strongly influenced by this assessment culture.

The postgraduate students on the other hand were not a homogenous group in terms of age and academic background. Many had several years experience in industry. Having completed a range of different undergraduate engineering and technology related degrees (which required different levels of performance in state examinations) they perhaps were not as assessment orientated as the other cohort of students. It could be argued that perhaps disengagement from formal education for a period of time by many of the postgraduate students that were returning to full-time education has played a role in seeing the peer learning task as a more educational as opposed to grading experience.

The differences in student background have significant implications for how they will approach activities such as the peer learning tasks outlined in this study. As has been highlighted, the undergraduate students assumed quite a rigid role of teacher when given the task of assessing their peers. They saw the task as simply a grading exercise and seemed to worry more about the ‘accuracy’ of the grading rather than the merits of the process as an educational experience or the value for their peers. In many ways this task was seen as a calibration exercise rather than a collaborative learning task and highlights the influence of assessment on student’s approaches to learning (Boud and Falchikov 2006). The undergraduate students appeared to have two key objectives: the first was to match one’s assessment to that of the teacher and the second was to gain a deeper understanding of the assessment criteria which would benefit their preparation for their own presentations. The student teachers, on the other hand, appeared to conceptualise the task differently and saw the task as a learning experience. In this context peer feedback seemed to be welcomed and appreciated.

These differences highlight the influence of the prevailing examination culture, outlined by Liu and Carless (2006), on peer assessment tasks. Can students develop a sense of ownership and engagement in such pedagogical strategies in an environment where grading of students dominates? To what extent do higher education institutions sustain this grading mindset?

Both groups of students used the experience to reflect on their learning although this ‘thinking’, which was referred to several times throughout the focus group discussions, varied. For the undergraduate students it was used primarily to reflect on the assessment criteria to ultimately improve their performance and potential grade in the module. Despite the large focus on accuracy and exam performance peer assessment did appear to also provide a learning experience in which they developed broader transferable skills (Langan et al. 2005; Petty 2009). Students commented on how the skills gained could be useful as a professional in terms of assessing future students as a clinical educator or providing quality in-service education to their peers. Thus, the process may assist in bridging the gap from student to practicing professional, as practicing physiotherapists commonly attend courses and are required to assess self, students and peers in the clinical setting. This was a common theme discussed by the postgraduate students who saw the peer assessment process as an opportunity to gain feedback on their teaching which would benefit them in their future careers as teachers.

At a broader level the study has captured a glimpse of the implicit understandings of the social rules of the ‘learning contract’ as understood by the undergraduate students (Brousseau 1998; Nuthall 2005). Despite the appearance of a change in this traditional relationship, behind the changes, underlying social and cultural expectations of the students continue to influence their engagement in the task (Boud and Falchikov 2006). This

‘choreography’ within the classroom is underpinned by shared beliefs as to what should take place in the learning setting and of the responsibilities and roles of both students and teacher. To what extent was the experience an exercise in conformity? The roles taken on by the students as teachers, students and assessors are products of teaching practices which they have experienced and internalized through their long engagement in the formal education system. Therefore, do they see the experience as an opportunity to develop understanding or is the key objective to meet the teachers’ expectations and achieve a satisfactory mark? These issues raise questions about the broader examination culture in higher education and the conformity to, and indeed amplification, of this culture by students. This study has shown that one cannot view the impact of innovations in teaching and learning without an understanding of the ‘micro-culture’ of grading and competition and how this culture is challenged by such innovations.

The current discourse of assessment is disabling to the purpose we are pursuing and any apparently desirable practices indicated here are likely to be appropriated in ways different from our intention. The individualistic, norm-referenced orientation of assessment is still largely dominant, despite some moves to challenge it. It operates not through policy, which increasingly advocates something different, but through the lived experience of students and teachers. (Boud and Falchikov 2006, p. 411)

Implementing pedagogical strategies that encourage collaborative learning and development through critical dialogue and assessment of peers work within an education system which aims ultimately to rank and grade the students is a contradiction all too clear to students. Therefore addressing broader cultural perceptions of the role of education needs to be challenged if students, and indeed faculty, are to truly take ownership of such pedagogical approaches. As Fook and Sidhu (2010) argue, ‘institutions of higher education have to revisit their purpose of assessment if they hope to equip their learners with skills and competencies needed to succeed in today’s workplace’ (p. 154).

Given the ‘contaminated’ nature of the term assessment and what the term conjures in the minds of students, perhaps an alternative discourse is required;

This leads us to question whether the term ‘assessment’ has been so contaminated and associated with actions that students wish to avoid, that the notion of becoming a lifelong assessor is anathema to them. Just as the discourse of learning can be treated with scepticism in workplaces, a discourse of assessment and becoming an assessor may provoke similar resistance in learners. Perhaps we should take care in trying to appropriate assessment discourse for activities that aim to promote learning (Boud and Falchikov 2006, p. 407)

However, regardless of how one frames the experience for the students one remains caught within the perennial dilemma of assessment versus learning. To remove the conditioning effect of assessment, and the negative actions by students as referred to by Boud and Falchikov (2006), the experience should not be linked to the assessment of the student. However, students, particularly those engaged in more surface learning approaches, rarely take seriously tasks that are unrelated to their eventual grade. This was best summed up by one of the focus group participants that said, ‘... *we wouldn’t take it seriously when we’re marking it ... if it wasn’t worth anything and I think everyone did take it very seriously*’ (FG2 P3). Similarly when speaking of the percentage of marks allocated to the peer

assessment element of the module another student noted that it was, ‘*just enough to make you take it seriously*’ (FG2 P3). These comments suggest that greater levels of student participation and ownership of their learning is as much a cultural shift for students as it is for teachers.

### Limitations of the study

It is important to note that the findings and interpretation of the focus group discussions are based on the discussions of 5–6 participants in each cohort of students. There may be an element of bias in the findings as the students that volunteered to participate in the focus group may have been those with strong views on peer assessment and may have not captured all views from all students involved in the process. However, the intention of the focus groups was to provide a greater insight into how the students viewed peer assessment and not to generalise to all students views on this process (Krueger and Casey 2009). In addition, it was the authors’ intention to interpret aspects of learning in higher education through the lens provided by this method of assessment.

### Future research

Further cohorts of students will be invited to participate in the study in order to obtain the opinions of different cohorts of individuals. This may provide different views on peers assessment and learning at third level or similar views in order to reach further exploration of the emerging themes.

## Conclusions

Educators and students can often exist in two parallel worlds. For the educator his/her task is to provide challenging learning experiences that bring the topic to life and simulate the types of experiences the student will meet in the future so that they can develop important transferable skills. For many students it is a game of tactical positioning and strategic manoeuvring to adapt and reduce these educational experiences to achievable goals to meet their ultimate goal—a good grade. This study has highlighted the influence of a prevailing assessment cultures on students’ engagement in peer learning which somewhat tempers the claims made by advocates of such pedagogical approaches. This study has highlighted the importance of contextual factors and the value of recognising the influence of the ritualised routines of the teacher and student roles and the cultural beliefs embedded in such practices.

**Conflict of interest** There are no conflicts of interest involved in this study.

## Appendix: Peer assessment questionnaire

This questionnaire aims to seek your opinion on the peer assessment element of the module. The questionnaire is anonymous. Please take the time to complete it and remember to return it to your tutor.

**Peer assessment questionnaire**

This questionnaire aims to seek your opinion on the peer assessment element of the module. The questionnaire is anonymous. Please take the time to complete it and remember to return it to your tutor.

1. Have you ever engaged in peer assessment before? Yes  No

↳ If yes, briefly describe what this involved.

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2. Please indicate your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements by circling the appropriate number.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I was quite nervous about the peer assessment element of this module at the beginning	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Peer assessment has limited educational value	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I enjoyed being assessed by my peers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I was reluctant to be critical of my peers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Peer assessment is a fairer assessment approach than traditional assessment approaches	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I enjoyed the task of assessing my peers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I found it difficult to remove personal feelings from the grading process	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I did not feel I had the skills and knowledge to assess my peers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I was reluctant to give low marks to my peers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I did not like being assessed by my peers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Including peer assessment in our course made the assessment more accurate	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I prefer my tutor to grade me rather than my peers	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I did not feel my peers assessed the course accurately	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I found the task of assessing my peers difficult	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Peer assessment is unfair	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Peer assessment is a valuable exercise for students to engage in	<input type="checkbox"/>				

My peers should have been given more say in my overall grade

Do you think there is any value for the assessor in peer assessment? Explain

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you think there is any value for the student being assessed by his/her peers? Explain

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Describe how the group reached consensus during the grading process?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Are there any changes you would suggest to the peer assessment element of this module?

Yes  No



If yes, outline these proposed changes and the reason for these changes.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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