

Voices from the Classroom

Using peer evaluation to promote independent learning in report writing

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ABSTRACT

Helping students to internalize the fundamentals of the report writing process and develop the critical skills necessary to produce convincing written reports is a challenging task for most communication skills teachers. Peer and teacher feedback given at the various stages of writing the report is key to its teaching on the Business Communication course at the School of Business. Based on our experience, we have discovered that while feedback from the teacher is crucial at the earlier stages of the report writing process to ensure that students are on the right track in terms of planning, research and analyzing and outlining of the report, leaving students to peer critique the reports at the draft stage, without any teacher input, can effectively create both spaces for independent learning for students and sound pedagogical strategizing for teachers. In this article, we share the benefits of this novel pedagogical approach to both students and teachers and some important considerations to ensure its smooth implementation.

Introduction

Report writing forms a key component of the Business Communication course which is offered as a core module to students in the School of Business, National University of Singapore. In teaching this key component, our aims are to help students internalize the fundamentals of the report writing process and develop the critical skills necessary to produce convincing written reports that are characterized by a sound and an interesting discussion of data, logical conclusions and feasible recommendations. Working in project groups, students are given guidance at the various stages of the report writing process from planning to designing of their research tool(s), and analyzing and organizing of data through peer and teacher feedback. The feedback from teachers at these earlier stages of report writing is crucial to ensure that students are given a clear sense of focus and direction before drafting the report.

In the past, both peer and teacher feedback was also given at the stage of reviewing and critiquing of the draft reports, where comments were offered orally in a tutorial session. With the help of a checklist of questions, students had to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their peers' draft report in terms of its

organization, content, language and presentation. While many students carried out the evaluation fairly satisfactorily, it was felt that most, if not all, looked to the teacher as an authority figure whose feedback, in their view, would be more 'correct' and would matter more, thus decreasing their motivation to put in more effort into the activity. As a result, teachers had to do more work and students ended up not learning as much as they could have. However, with several reports to review within a relatively short time period, the teachers' ability to provide a comprehensive critique on each report was necessarily limited.

The situation outlined above provided the impetus for us to implement the peer evaluation activity in which students were tasked with the responsibility of evaluating the draft reports of their peers, without any teacher input. We believe, given the right guidance, students are capable of doing a good evaluation. In addition, without any teacher involvement, the students are also more likely to take the activity more seriously. Furthermore, by asking students to carry out the evaluation of their peers' work, we also show respect for learners' opinions (Hammond & Collins, 1991, p. 189). Ultimately, allowing room for more learner responsibility and involvement will promote independent learning (Boud, 1981; Scharle & Szabo, 2000; Sinclair, McGrath, & Lamb, 2000).

Implementation of the peer evaluation

To facilitate the peer evaluation activity, project groups comprising four to five students per group were each assigned the task of evaluating another group's draft report. To guide them in their evaluation, a form containing questions on key aspects of the report—organization, content (introduction, findings, conclusion and recommendations), language, and presentation of the report—was made available to the students. The form comprised questions previously used in the checklist, with some revisions, and a few additional questions. The questions were very specific to provide students with a clear focus. They were also open-ended, not simply rating-type questions, to generate a more substantive response from the students. In their evaluations, students were asked to cite examples from specific sections of the report and also suggest improvements, where appropriate. In sum, the form was designed to ensure that the feedback received was meaningful and could be acted on.

In anticipation of any feelings of resentment and/or lack of motivation on the part of the students in completing the activity, the aims were clearly articulated at the top of the peer evaluation form, highlighting the benefits students stand to gain. In addition, twenty percent of the marks given on their final report was allocated to the quality of their evaluation of their peers' draft reports. This not only provided motivation for students to put in more effort into their evaluation but also ensured that it was of quality and would prove beneficial to their peers whose report was being evaluated. In the process, the student evaluators also benefited. More of the benefits of this peer evaluation will be discussed later.

Students were required to type their comments onto the soft copy of the Report Writing Peer Evaluation Form. The written nature of the evaluation was intended to give students more time to organize their thoughts and put their

ideas across more clearly and coherently for the benefit of their peers, in the process of doing so, the evaluators themselves were likely to achieve greater clarity in their own thinking.

Both the draft reports and peer evaluations were exchanged through the email. To administer the activity smoothly, definite deadlines were set for the completion and exchange of draft reports and peer evaluations. In addition to sending their draft reports and peer evaluations to their peers, students were also required to send both documents to their teacher by the deadlines set. For the teacher's ease of identification, students also had to fill in the title of the report being evaluated, the names of group members whose report was being evaluated, the names of evaluators and the tutorial group number on the evaluation form. Please see the Appendix for a copy of the Report Writing Peer Evaluation Form.

General observation regarding the quality of the evaluations

Generally, the quality of the evaluations was very good. Some of them were even exceptional in that the comments were insightful and pertinent and reflected a level of maturity and critical thinking that was not often found in the general student population.

"Surface" issues

Almost all the groups were able to comment on surface issues such as repetitions, inconsistencies between the data presented in the graphics and those in the text, inaccuracies in the labeling of the charts/tables and the numbering of sections and pages, imbalance between sections (too many subheadings in one section and too few in another), and the overall attractiveness of the layout and organization of the report.

While a few groups simply answered "yes" to the questions posed (e.g., "Does the organization reflect the purpose of the report?"), many of them gave reasons for their answers or added other comments.

Example

"Yes, the organization does reflect the purpose of the report and the relationships between the main sections and subheadings are generally logical. However, it is confusing having the aim incorporated within the overview and with a separate problem statement at the end of the section."

"Deeper" issues

What differentiates the better evaluations from the rest is the evaluators' ability to look beyond the surface errors.

In the introduction section, some of the evaluators were able to pick out the redundant details in the background information, the lack of clarity in the purpose statement or the lack of justification or rationale for the report. They made suggestions to remove the extraneous information to the appendix or reorganize the information.

Example

"Although the aim of the survey is noted in the overview, the existence of the purpose statement at the end of the point is a bit confusing, even though it ties in with the hypothesis. Suggest maybe reordering: Outline, scope, hypothesis, problem statement, and research methodology."

Many groups also questioned the research methods or asked how the respondents or organizations were selected.

In the findings, many commented that the findings were merely descriptions of data and that there was no highlighting of significant trends. A few groups were able to question the accuracy of the data or the lack of support for certain claims.

Example

"We find most of the data objectively described. However, we notice that their findings on the maximum amount of time customers are willing to wait have been omitted... We also wonder if the view of only 1 server is sufficient to conclude that the efficiency will decrease if the staff has too many tasks on hand."

In the conclusion and recommendation sections, almost all the groups were able to assess whether the report's conclusion has fulfilled the promise given in the purpose statement and whether there are sufficient evaluations of the findings.

Example

"The conclusion is actually very concise, dealing only with the concerned areas. When it comes to providing their own evaluations, we find that they only provided the respondents suggestions without including their own comments and views on the situation. Furthermore, no possible negative consequences were listed which may result in the reader not realizing the seriousness of the problem at hand. We believe it would be very beneficial for them to include these consequences to support their arguments. No specific possible explanation is given to account for the findings. Everything is pretty much just summarized."

Many groups commented on the soundness of the recommendations, such as whether they are convincing, practical and feasible. About half the groups felt that the recommendations were not persuasive enough.

Example

"Yes. The recommendations are specific and answer the problems directly. However, some recommendations are not feasible and some are already in place. Section 4.2.1: Conducting spot checks (pg 12) is already in place. MOH officials do check hygiene levels and issue ratings accordingly. Perhaps this recommendation could be replaced with the management conducting the spot checks instead."

Benefits to the students

The evaluation exercise gave the students an opportunity to assess another group's report, guided by a series of carefully-phrased questions. From their comments, we can see that students did take the effort to go through the peer

report in detail. Generally, they were very tactful in phrasing their comments, bringing up some positive comments before the negative ones.

Example

"The writers have definitely made an effort to include their own views on the findings by highlighting why value-added services are necessary and so on. Nonetheless, we felt the conclusion is too brief to offer any in-depth evaluation".

Evaluating another group's report also made the assessing group aware of their own report's shortcomings. From informal feedback, some students marveled at their peer's report (at the approach, the depth, or the overall organization and presentation) and commented that their own report was far below that standard. Groups made minor changes to their reports according to the evaluators' comments (especially the typographical errors or incorrect details). Some conscientious groups made the effort to improve their own report substantially by changing some parts of the report or reorganized certain sections.

Based on the feedback received, students also had to decide what comments and suggestions for improvements deserved consideration to improve the quality of their reports. This also constitutes independent learning.

Benefits to the teacher

The student feedback process described above also provides a fascinating perspective from which teachers can make valuable and critical decisions on student work. In a sense, ours is a case of student and teacher feedback together constituting the core of evaluative work in the course.

As mentioned earlier, student feedback enables the students to locate 'surface' problems in the drafts (grammatical and typographical errors, etc). Relieved of such nitty-gritty, time-consuming work, the teacher is later able to focus more on holistic and critical comments which enable students to re-work the structure or organization of their final reports and think more about their analyses and conclusions. As the students revise their drafts, the teacher is faced with less tedious work (although there is still some work to be done!) and, arguably, is better able to provide more adequate feedback to students.

The specific questions in the feedback form also become a pedagogical tool for the teacher to impress upon the students the need to consider particular issues and concerns related to effective report writing and, in general, business writing. The collective work of student feedback in the sense we described above is one novel and less intrusive way to follow up on relevant lectures and group activities which have earlier been conducted concerning report writing.

Yet another benefit of the feedback activity is that the teacher is able to gauge the amount of healthy dynamics and critical thinking in each project group. Usually, those who submit well-written feedback are those groups with good working rapport and who put in a fairly substantial amount of effort and energy into the writing project. It is premature at this time to say that every good feedback correlates automatically with good written work. However, there is plausible reason to believe that specific, well-argued, cohesive feedback is a product of thinking minds and healthy collaborative work.

Conclusion

The opportunity for students to be part of their own independent learning process can certainly be seen from the process of group/collective feedback described above. In this pedagogical strategy to improve student work, much care has been made to make sure that the students have been given sufficient information and guidance to be able to address relevant issues raised in the feedback form. At the same time, the specific questions addressed collectively by groups provide a space for students to independently identify and clarify problems in writing some of which, in fact, may have been glossed over by the teacher. On the part of the teacher, the feedback process enables him or her to engage in less work, but effective teaching. The sort of student feedback we instituted in our class creates both opportunities for independent learning for students and sound pedagogical strategizing for teachers.

References

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Appendix: Report writing peer evaluation form

Aims: *This report writing peer evaluation aims to:*

- *give you the opportunity to critically assess the effectiveness of a report written by another group, recognising its strengths as well as areas for improvements;*
- *obtain valuable feedback from others on how to improve the quality of your own group's report; and*
- *gain a more in-depth understanding of what makes a good report through engaging in the process of evaluation and receiving feedback to help you individually become a more effective writer.*

Use the following questions to guide your evaluation of the report draft assigned to you. You should support your answers with references to the report draft you are evaluating. Where possible, suggest alternatives.

Questions on various aspects of the report	Evaluation, comments, and suggestions for improvements (indicate references to specific sections of the report and/or page numbers, where relevant)
ORGANISATION <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Does the organisation reflect the purpose of the report? 	

Questions on various aspects of the report	Evaluation, comments, and suggestions for improvements (indicate references to specific sections of the report and/or page numbers, where relevant)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Are the relationships between main sections and within sub-divisions logical? ● What is the balance between sections? Do the most important items have the most space? ● Are the headings and subheadings informative and concise? Do they capture accurately the content of the commentary that follows? Is the numbering accurate? 	
<p>INTRODUCTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is the purpose of the report clearly stated? ● Is there adequate background information (including a brief explanation of the circumstances that have led to the writing of the report, methodology, scope and limitations) for the reader to fully understand the report? 	
<p>FINDINGS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have all relevant data been included? ● Does the commentary on data effectively highlight general findings and specific significant details? ● Are the data objectively and interesting described? Is there any repetition? ● Do charts and tables effectively complement the data description? Have specific references to charts and tables been made in the commentary? ● Are there any statements that read like conclusions and recommendations? 	
<p>CONCLUSIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do the concluding statements evaluate the data in terms of the purpose statement? ● Have all problematic areas been accurately identified? ● Does the 'Conclusions' go beyond a summary of the key findings? Have the report writers provided their own evaluation of the findings, e.g. remarking on the relevance/significance of the data; highlighting the seriousness of problems by articulating the possible negative consequences that could result if problems are not addressed; offering a possible explanation to account for the findings, etc.? ● How well have the report writers avoided unnecessary repetitions of data? ● Are the concluding statements convincing? Are the arguments sound? Are the conclusions soundly based on the data (evidence) in the findings section? 	

Questions on various aspects of the report	Evaluation, comments, and suggestions for improvements (indicate references to specific sections of the report and/or page numbers, where relevant)
<p>RECOMMENDATIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Do the recommendations follow logically from the findings and conclusions? Have they been written in line with the purpose of the report? ● Have all problematic areas been addressed? Is there any unexpected recommendation, i.e. one made for a problematic area that was not earlier highlighted in the Conclusions? ● Are the recommendations specific? Are they feasible? ● Are the recommendations persuasive? Have the report writers highlighted the positive outcome(s) that could result from the implementation of the recommendations proposed? 	
<p>LANGUAGE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is grammar correct, and spelling and punctuation accurate? ● Are transitional devices used appropriately to provide coherence to the whole report? ● Is the writing clear, direct and easy to read? ● Is the writing concise? Can unnecessary words/phrases be deleted? ● Is an appropriate level of formality used? 	
<p>PRESENTATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is the layout appealing? ● Are charts and tables neat, attractive and easy to understand? Are they labeled appropriately? ● Have mechanics been used effectively to differentiate headings of different levels? ● Have the pages of the report been numbered? ● Does the title page contain all the necessary information? Is the title of the report effective? 	

Instructions

1. Please provide the following information:

Title of report being evaluated _____

Names of group members whose report is being evaluated _____

Names of evaluators _____

Tutorial group number _____

2. Send the peer evaluation form via email to the group whose report you are evaluating and to your tutor by the deadline specified.