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CREATING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS: PEER ASSESSMENT IN THE HOSPITALITY CLASSROOM

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Abstract

A goal of hospitality and tourism education is to graduate students ready to enter the workforce with intellectual and practical competencies which include inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, teamwork and problem solving. In response, educators are seeking engaging teaching methodologies to enable success in the classroom.

Participatory action research was conducted over two semesters to review the pedagogical objective of peer evaluations and to examine the relationship to classroom learning through presentations. Based on the results of the study, it is recommended to implement peer evaluation into the hospitality curriculum to meet the competencies required of today's hospitality industry. Peer evaluations increased classroom engagement and the ability of the learners to make independent judgments of their own and others' work.

1.0 Introduction

There is a demand from employers for graduates to possess a broad range of skills beyond their specialization, therefore, universities and colleges are expected to develop a repertoire of strategies to foster lifelong learning and transferable skills. As a result and to prepare students for the twenty-first-century challenges, classrooms are focused on essential learning outcomes and professional competencies, developing competency based curricula and constructing viable assessment tools (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012). Cheng & Warren (2000) in discussing teaching methodologies in undergraduate courses that encourage graduates to become lifelong learners, cited peer evaluation as one strategy which developed reflective practice, professional competency and critical self awareness.

Weber, et al (2009) argued that hospitality administrators and educators are being challenged with successfully employing structurally sound instructional systems that ensure effective quality assessment processes. While current assessments reliably test core knowledge and basic skills, methods for assessing other important domains of competence explicitly recognized as core to being a hospitality employee, such as interpersonal, communication and teamwork skills are less well developed. Professional competence requires consideration of both cognitive and interpersonal skills, thus, the development of assessment methods that measure these characteristics. If conducted appropriately, peer evaluation exercises can increase the ability of the learners to make independent judgments of their own and others' work encouraging a sense of involvement and responsibility (Paulson, 2001).

1.1 Peer evaluation

Peer evaluation is defined as a teaching and learning method in which students comment on and judge their colleagues' work, directing attention to skills and providing feedback. According to Gay & Airasian (2002), peer evaluation can be used to "provide constructive criticism and suggestions to improve weak areas and amplify strengths" (p.2). Technical knowledge traditionally remains under the teachers' control during the evaluation process as they are the ones to establish, decide and apply the evaluation criteria students will use during their professional life. A movement towards a peer evaluation model offers a way for students to acquire and implement standards to be used in their professional careers with other peers. Banta, Jones & Black (2009) argued that necessary components for this form of learning include a clear set of objectives that are accepted by all students, positive interdependence, positive social interaction behavior and attitude, and individual accountability.

While peer evaluations have been used in diverse disciplines such as medicine and biological sciences (Calhoun, Tenhaken & Woolliscroft, 1990), leisure studies (Sivan, 2000) and languages (Cheng & Warren, 2000), data are mainly limited to student perceptions (Walvoord, 2010) differentiating individual contributions to group projects (Bresciani, 2007) and group members and the teacher in negotiating peer and self-assessment checklists of group process behaviors (Bono & Colbert, 2005). The use of peer learning in educational assessment has sound pedagogical foundations as cooperation over competition is valued fostering certain lifelong skills to include the development of learning outcomes related to collaboration, teamwork, critical inquiry and reflection, communication and learning to learn (Banta, Jones & Black, 2009). Additional benefits identified include an increase in responsibility and autonomy of students and the development of collaborative attitudes (Suskie, 2009). Weber et al (2009) emphasized the outcome of peer evaluation as improved personal and interpersonal skills while Gay & Airasian (2002) saw peer evaluation as helping students to be reflective and cognizant of their own weaknesses in learning.

Walvoord (2010) provides a typology of peer evaluation in his review, classifying peer assessment through tests, marks or grades, oral presentation skills, writing, group projects, professional skills and computer assisted peer assessment. Authors Chen

& Hao (2004) refer to the building of lifelong learning habits and the encouragement of deeper learning rather than superficial learning while (Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman, 2004; Campbell, et al, 2001 and Omelicheva, 2005) believed learners developed abilities and skills denied to them in a learning environment in which the teacher alone assessed their work.

1.2 Peer learning and the hospitality classroom

Bresciani (2007) noted that teaching can be conceptualized as a continuum from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach where an outcome is the increased ability of the learner to make independent judgments of their own and others' work. Peer evaluation exercises are means by which this skill can be developed and practiced, encouraging a sense of involvement and responsibility. In the industry based discipline of hospitality and tourism education, accountability for performance should reflect and simulate sanctions or reward systems in the workplace. Peer evaluation as a reflective process encourages deeper learning (Leskes & Wright, 2005 and Weber et al, 2009) about the role of individuals in a team context and fosters important characteristics of professionalism, such as leadership qualities, communications skills, organizational capabilities, higher order reasoning and cognitive thought. Peer assessment praxis aims to make social and communication skills (Campbell, et.al, 2001), including those of giving and accepting criticism and praise, justifying one's position and rejecting suggestions transferable to workplace environments. Further, practice in student peer assessment skills could be applied to subsequent employee evaluation mechanisms.

How peer evaluation is presented to students and used in the classroom is an important consideration for educators. A consequence to the use of peer evaluations is the reluctance of students to assess their colleagues due to issues about the confidentiality of their assessments. Su (2006) referred to the reluctance of students to evaluate each other for fear of offending other group members, occasioned by a lack of confidentiality, difficulties in being objective, the social embarrassment and the cognitive challenge and strain of the exercise. Authors (Banta, Jones & Black, 2009 and Sivan, 2000) referred to the importance of providing training on the use of the peer assessment instrument prior to its implementation.

2.0 Background

After witnessing classroom presentations where students were often disengaged and whose responses included vague comments such as " good job" or "nice work", I decided to explore the concept of peer evaluation to refocus the students' attention, thereby engaging learning and permitting them to systematically think about the material being presented. Peer assessments in the hospitality classrooms have been relegated to a few paragraphs suggesting that it is still uncommon and successful learning has been mostly judged in terms of its effect on subject content learning reflected in examination results. While rare to see peers formally or informally evaluating each other, studies show that peer evaluations tap different performance dimensions than top-down evaluations (Omelicheva, 2005). This study was both theoretical and practical to review the pedagogical objective of peer evaluations, to examine the relationship to classroom learning through presentations in the undergraduate hospitality classroom and to describe the results (see figure 1).

3.0 Methodology

Sixty students (18 males and 42 females) enrolled in three hospitality management courses at a U.S. northeastern university participated in the study. Peer evaluations were conducted of student presentations in two 200- level and one 300 –level hospitality classes over two semesters (spring 2011 and fall 2011). There were two major sources of data; process observations and surveys. Observation of the key elements of the process which included evaluation system design, training of the students, completion of the evaluation forms (see figure 1.1), feedback and debriefing meetings provided a basis for judging accuracy. Students completed a survey (see figure 1.2) after the final student's presentation of each semester. Context, system design and implementation were constant. The surveys of participants were the main source of quantitative data on satisfaction and outcomes.

4.0 Results

See tables 1.1 and 1.2 for demographic characteristics. Analysis of the surveys provided significant understanding of the participants' perceptions regarding peer evaluation and led to the conclusion that, this process significantly enhanced the learning experiences which resulted in better presentations. Students increased their ability to make independent judgments of their own and others' work encouraging a sense of involvement and responsibility. Assessment practices need to be matched to learning outcomes and competencies in a course which has a dual function of judging for the purpose of providing credentials and for the purpose of improving learning. Themes consistent with the elements of constructivist theory emerged.

The survey instrument along with response percentages for each question is included in figure 1.2. Approximately 86.66% of the students stated they were fair while conducting the evaluation of the presentations and 75% agreed that completing evaluations made them pay more attention and is a direct measure of student engagement. This is supported by Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman (2007) who stated that students learned as they worked together for common intellectual welfare creating a cooperative classroom atmosphere and allowed critical examination of the learning in progress. Students were also asked to consider whether receiving multiple critiques of their presentations was useful. As a result, 91% responded that the evaluation process was useful and indicated they gained a different insight into the process, rather than just sitting through presentations without any objective or direction as an audience member.

Question three examined the extent to which evaluating the presentations of others helped students understand presentation expectations. Again, a majority of students responded affirmatively, with 68.4% agreeing that the evaluation process gave them a better understanding of expectations. Question five asked students to consider the peer evaluation learning experience. With 82% of the students indicating that the experience was worthwhile, peer evaluations appeared to be a useful exercise for increasing students' attention during presentations. As one student stated "it was interesting as several of the comments were the same"... "now I know what I should do better when I present". This may be a common thought for many as 87.6% of the students stated they would like to see peer assessment added to future classes. As one student commented, "peer feedback is more meaningful than that of the instructor; I am learning that we are all struggling together". Many of the students (73%) believed that peer evaluations improved their communication skills. According to one comment "the peer assessment was useful because it made me realize my strengths and weaknesses"... "we got to observe and comment one another. It showed my development".

Some students appeared to be cautious of the comments that they made on their assessment forms which could be stemmed from their own fear of receiving negative comments. In addition, while reviewing the presentations, they were also apologetic to their peers when clarifying their comments. A few students expressed concern with the fairness of peer evaluations, although they were aware that these evaluations would not be part of their presentation grade. This concern reinforced my reluctance to incorporate student evaluations into the formal grading process.

5.0 Discussion

Although faculty evaluation of student work is perhaps the most common, the use of peers in the evaluation process may be just as effective (Banta, Jones & Black, 2009). The peer learning exercises involved students working together as part of a learning community in which they had an investment and developed skills of collaboration. This increased the possibility for students to engage in reflection and exploration of ideas where the authority of the teacher is not an immediate presence. Students gained more practice in communicating in the subject area as they were able to articulate their understanding and have it critiqued by peers as well as learn from adopting the reciprocal role. Overall the students felt that peer evaluations were helpful, meaningful and effective, they learned the art of communication, the ability to judge each other's work while providing feedback and saw an improvement in their presentations. Peer assessment contributed to helping students develop learning agendas and reinforced the importance of professional attitudes and behaviors.

The results of this study showed that most students believed peer evaluations added value to the learning experience. Deeper learning occurred as students situated their learning experience in the realities of working in teams and developed an appreciation of group dynamics, management and leadership. Working with one's peers allowed interchange of ideas and methods resulting in a more refined product. Chen & Hao (2004) found that "on the whole, both field and laboratory studies indicate that peer assessment is a valid and reliable evaluation procedure" (p. 279). The data largely supported the use of peer evaluations of student presentations. Peer evaluation may be more effective than other pedagogical methodologies in terms of student learning in applied fields such as hospitality.

6.0 Limitations

This study although informed by field work and theory was exploratory. Another limiting factor was the sample size. Therefore, the overall scope of the study was not broad enough to allow strong generalizations about peer evaluation.

7.0 Conclusion

Students who are provided with clear models of work that meet the established standards and are involved in the monitoring which shifts some of the responsibility for documenting and justifying learning to them, may begin to make comparisons between their performances and the exemplars presented. In a methodological process where students are required to gain greater responsibility over their learning, it would be logical to expect from them greater involvement in education, particularly in those processes that affect their learning directly.

Assessments must be judged in terms of its consequences on student learning, both intended and unintended. Key elements of peer evaluation are reflection, feedback and integration of learning and reflect measures similar to those applied in hospitality work environments. Control and responsibility are delegated to students and as a teaching tool will allow hospitality educators to expose students to the realities of an industry based on performance measures in the relatively safe context of a study environment. There are also implications for curriculum development. As noted by Weber et al (2009), examinations have a massive steering effect on the curriculum despite the philosophical tendencies of using more innovative teaching methods. It is therefore unrealistic to discuss assessment in isolation from curriculum content and teaching strategies. Such an exploration will also raise questions in regard to the assumptions and traditions underpinning other forms of assessment currently in use. If peer learning is to play a part in the university experience, ways of assessing its value must be explored together with strategies for its effective implementation.

If hospitality classrooms want to transform and extend their pedagogical methods, incorporating a peer assessment model is important in the development of autonomous and reflective individuals. Such learner-centered assessments will develop a critical

self-consciousness by learners of their own role as active agents within the learning process (Bono & Colbert, 2005). The view that the assessment of students' achievements is something which happens at the end of a process of learning is no longer widespread. While future studies need to be conducted to confirm the findings, introducing peer evaluation into the hospitality curriculum is recommended. This is supported by Leskes & Wright (2005) who argued that peer evaluation can work effectively if the instructor is more concerned with the long-term, cumulative educational benefits rather than simply the immediate success or failure of students.

Table 1.1 Distribution of Participants by Majors

	N	Percent
Bachelor of Science in Hospitality Business	35	58
Bachelor of Applied Science in Hospitality Business	12	20
Bachelor of Science in Sports Management	8	13
Bachelor of Science in Business	5	9
Totals	60	100

Table 1.2 Distribution of Participants by Academic Year

	N	Percent
Sophomore	20	33
Junior	25	42
Senior	15	25
Totals	60	100

Figure 1: Determinants

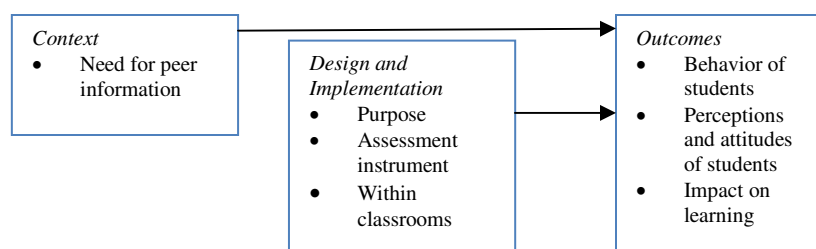


Figure 1.1: Assessment for Oral Presentation

- Comments and an overall score are required for each presentation evaluated
- Use the following scale:

E—Excellent (creative and memorable)	Value 5 points	VG—Very Good (not unique)	Value 4 points
G—Good (adequate)	Value 3 points	F—Fair (problems here and there)	Value 2 points
P—Poor (persistent problems)	Value 1 point		

Name of student/team members:

Overall Evaluation: E VG G F P

<p><u>Elocution</u> Circle one: E VG G F P</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Mumbles, incorrectly pronounces words, audience members have difficulty hearing presentation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Voice is clear, pronounces most words correctly, most audience members can hear presentation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Uses a clear voice and correct, precise pronunciation of terms so that all audience members can hear presentation</p> <p><i>Vocalized Pauses</i> (uh, well uh, um, like, etc.)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> none are noticed <input type="checkbox"/> 1 -5 are noticed</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> more than 5 are noticed</p>	<p><u>Organization</u> Circle one: E VG G F P</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No introduction, sequence of information or order to the presentation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Limited introduction, states the main topic but does not adequately preview the structure of the presentation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Presents information in logical, comprehensive and interesting sequence which audience can follow.</p>
<p><u>Subject Knowledge</u> Circle one: E VG G F P</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Does not have grasp of information: (a) majority of points glossed over; (b) cannot answer questions about subject</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Is uncomfortable with information and is able to answer only rudimentary questions</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Majority of points covered in depth, some points glossed over; Is at ease with expected answers to all questions, but fails to elaborate</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates full knowledge: (a) thoroughly explains topic; (b) answers all questions with explanations and elaboration</p>	<p><u>Mechanics</u> Circle one: E VG G F P</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Presentation has two or more spelling and/or grammatical errors</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Presentation has no misspellings and/or grammatical errors</p> <p><u>Graphics/Visual aid</u></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Uses superfluous graphics or no graphics</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally uses graphics that rarely support text and presentation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Graphics relate to text and presentation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Graphics explain and reinforce text and presentation</p>
<p><u>Eye contact</u> Circle one: E VG G F P</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Reads all of the report with no eye contact</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally uses eye contact, but still reads most of the report</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Maintains eye contact most of the time, but frequently returns to notes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Maintains eye contact with audience, seldom returning to note</p>	<p><u>Poise</u> Circle one: E VG G F P</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Excessive gestures - constant fidgeting, stuttering, foot-tapping, playing with hair</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Occasionally slumps and/or sits during presentation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Stands up straight with both feet on the ground</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Connects with the audience is engaging and invites participation</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Gives the impression that he/she is comfortable speaking to the group</p>
<p><u>Team Members' Contribution</u> Circle one: E VG G F P</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> One or two members dominate. Some members seemed ill-prepared or not informed</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Most members are actively involved and informed about the topic</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Each member is equally involved in the presentation and is well informed about the topic</p>	<p><u>Professional Dress</u></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes</p>

Figure 1.2: Survey Results for Peer Assessment

Statement	Strongly Agree or Agree	Strongly Disagree or Disagree
1. When evaluating my peers I am fair	86.66%	13.34%
2. As I was required to evaluate presentations, I probably paid more attention to student presentations than I would have otherwise	75%	25%
3. Grading other student presentations helped me better understand what's expected in presentations	68.4%	31.6%
4. Receiving multiple critiques of my presentation from other students is useful to me in improving my future presentations	91%	9%
5. The presentation critique was a useful learning experience	82%	18%
6. Peer assessment of students' work improves overall communication as everyone's opinions are heard	73%	27%
7. I would like to see peer assessment added to future classes	87.6%	12.4%
8. The experience of being assessed by my peers has improved my ability to work in interdisciplinary teams in the future	82%	18%

8.0 Citations

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