

Undergraduate students in peer review: exploring assessment and feedback processes while judging academic work.

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Within teaching and learning in Higher Education the development of students' evaluative judgement has recently garnered noticeable attention. A chief concern for this study was exploring the evaluative capacity of 33 first year BA (Hons) social care students who peer reviewed assessment work and cultivated their experience to judge not only their peers' work, but ultimately their own. Exemplar analysis and peer review are among key pedagogical activities that have been identified as being important for developing both students' evaluative judgement and their feedback literacy. Students herein experienced both activities. Qualitative data collected included exit slip reflections, focus group discussions; and 13 semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis of the data generated 3 main themes of importance for the students' experiences: guidance, engagement, and judgement. Findings show that students not only developed their judgement but used it to amend their own work.

Full paper

Introduction

Evaluative judgement has recently been highlighted as a core capability for higher education students to cultivate (e.g., Cowan

2010; Ajjawi et al 2018). Carless and Boud (2018) suggest both exemplar analysis and peer review as useful approaches for supporting students in developing evaluative skills and judgement. Research on exemplar analysis has shown that students who judge exemplars and discuss them are better able to recognise quality in work (e.g., Hawe et al 2019). Moreover, studies have shown that students who peer review can learn to judge and amend the quality of their own work (e.g., Yucel et al 2014; Nicol and McCallum 2021). This research intended to provide undergraduate students with the opportunity to make evaluative judgements in a way that is akin to their tutor (e.g., Sadler 2010). However, rather than focus on results improvements among students, the study takes a non-positivist approach that focused on the student process rather than the outcome (e.g., Patton 2012).

Research objectives

Recently, the practice of peer review in higher education has received attention with a focus on students' and tutors' overall experiences of the process (e.g., Hanrahan & Isaacs 2001; Ballantyne et al 2002; Vickerman 2009; Llado et al 2014; Barnard et al 2015). However, Sadler (1989) notes that students should be able to discern quality within a piece of work. Peer review and exemplar analysis allows students judge the work of another. Therefore, this study explored:

1. What experiences supported students in making quality judgements
2. How students implemented those judgements of quality.

Acting on a judgement of quality particularly in the context of feedback is also important for students (e.g., Price et al 2011; Winstone and Carless 2020). The formative peer review meant that students could adjust their work before final submission.

Methods

To explore the experiences of 33 first year undergraduates' qualitative methods were employed. Table 1 provides an overview of the activities and associated data collection methods used. Exit slips are 'slips of paper on which students reflect upon what they know

and what they are coming to know’ (Leigh 2012 p.189). Each exit slip contained open ended questions relating to students’ experiences with each activity. All discussions were recorded, transcribed, and used in the analysis. Two focus groups including 6 and 8 students respectively were used to allow students to become actively involved in the research process and offer their views and experiences of the peer review process (Tonkiss 2012; Bryman 2012). Finally, 13 semi-structured interviews probed the students’ experiences of the feedback process more deeply. The methods used provided useful data relating to students’ judgement making.

Week in module	Curriculum Activity	Data Collection
Week 4	Introduction of Marking Rubric	Exit slip reflections
Week 5	Review and discussion of exemplars	Discussion recorded and exit slip reflections
Week 7	Example and discussion of providing feedback	Discussion recorded and exit slip reflections
Week 8	Students submit draft assignment	Exit slip reflections
Two-week holiday in which students wrote reviews of two peer drafts		
Week 9	Feedback is distributed	
Week 12	Final submission of assignment	Two focus groups and 13 interviews

Table 1. The activities and data collection methods employed.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to thematic analysis was employed and generated the themes illustrated in figure 1. The analysis spanned several months ensuring a familiarity with the data (Denzin and Lincoln 2013) but also a critical questioning of it (Braun and Clarke 2022). The analysis moved beyond looking at the descriptive nature of the data to analysing what was important for student’s judgement of quality.

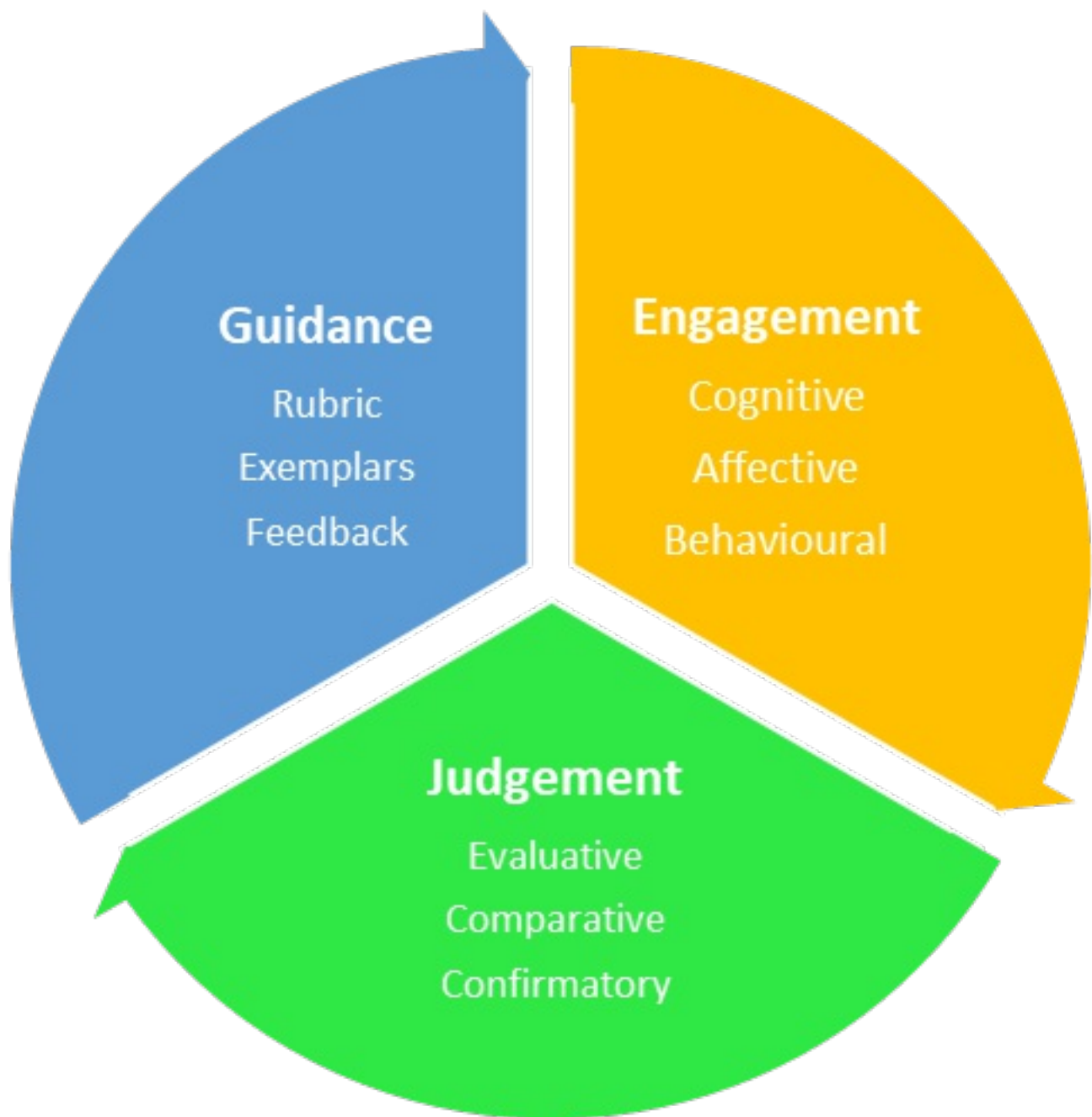


Figure 2. The themes and subthemes generated in the analysis

In general, the students were guided in making their judgements by their experiences of using the rubric, discussing the quality of the exemplars, and especially in their provision and receipt of feedback. The experience engaged the student's decision making and cognitive processes, but also occupied their emotions and involved them in checking behaviours. The judgements made by the students focused on the quality of the work. Students used comparisons with peer work, feedback, and their own work to confirm the quality of both their peer's work, but more significantly, their own work. They were better able to judge quality by combining the guidance,

engagement, and judgement processes they experienced while doing the peer review. While there are clear examples of each theme within the data corpus, they come together to tell a story of students judging quality within the peer review.

In conclusion, the findings confirm that peer review does facilitate students in judging academic work, as suggested by Carless and Boud (2018). Moreover, it appears that students compare their own work to the work of their peers' and against rubrics, by generating internal feedback, as suggested by Nicol (2021). While the whole experience was found to be generally positive it was also viewed as difficult by many students. Peer review is a valuable exercise for developing students' evaluative judgements especially when focused on qualitative, not quantitative feedback.

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