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Peer assessment in higher education: a critical review of effectiveness and staff and learner perceptions.

Introduction

Throughout my teacher training and professional practice, I have developed a long-standing interest in formative assessment and Assessment for Learning (AfL). Within this area of my professional enquiry, peer assessment has shown pedagogical tensions from both learners and teaching staff. These outcomes have made it necessary to have a deep and critical reflection around how I implement this strategy into my own teaching. My earlier research, conducted across both the Foundation Phase and Key Stage 2 in Welsh primary education identified both the potential and the limitations of peer assessment. While learners and teachers frequently recognised its value in promoting critical thinking and supporting progression, its effectiveness was compromised by complex social dynamics, concerns regarding reliability, and varying levels of confidence in giving feedback.

As my professional career transitions away from compulsory education and towards post-16 education, this enquiry represents a natural continuation of my professional development. As such, it has become necessary to consider whether increased academic maturity and expectations of learner autonomy meaningfully shifts the nature of engagement with peer assessment. Tai *et al.* (2018) suggest that higher education settings are commonly associated with increasing learner autonomy, independent study and the development of evaluative judgement. Such characteristics suggest that peer assessment has the potential to align with broader expectations of student participation in feedback processes but does not consider potential complexities. This viewpoint has compelled me to investigate how peer assessment is understood and implemented in higher education settings.

This project adopts an action research approach to investigate how peer assessment is perceived and implemented by teaching staff and learners in higher education. To overcome potential logistical and ethical constraints around my PCET training, I decided to use secondary data to provide me with a theoretically robust benchmark to inform my inquiry and develop my future classroom practice.

Review of literature

Conceptualising Peer Assessment within Formative Assessment

Peer assessment has increasingly been repositioned within higher education as a pedagogical approach aligned with formative assessment and learning-centred teaching practices. Topping (2009) defines the process as learners evaluating the quality or value of work produced by peers of similar status. Crucially, this definition distinguishes structured peer assessment from informal peer feedback; it necessitates an engagement with explicit criteria, standards, and evaluative reasoning rather than relying on unstructured or spontaneous commentary. The educational value of peer assessment therefore lies not in the final marks produced but in the internal learning processes activated through participation.

Within the framework of formative assessment theory, peer assessment serves as a critical mechanism for enhancing learner autonomy and self-regulation. Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that formative assessment improves learning when learners understand success criteria and use evidence to track progress. Black et al. (2003) identify peer assessment as a core formative strategy alongside questioning and feedback as it enables learners to engage actively with standards rather than passively receiving feedback. Furthermore, Wiliam (2018) contends that the most significant learning gains often arise not from the feedback received but the cognitive effort required to generate it. The act of constructing feedback requires students to interpret criteria, compare performances, and articulate evaluative judgements, thereby strengthening metacognitive control over their own learning.

This developmental interpretation is reinforced by Nicol, Thomson and Breslin (2014), who agree that producing feedback has the potential to be more powerful for learning than receiving teacher feedback. Through processes of comparison and explanation, students generate what Nicol, Thomson and Breslin (2014) describe as internal feedback, refining their understanding of quality through engagement with multiple exemplars. Such activity supports the development of evaluative judgement, defined by Tai et al. (2018) as the capability to make informed decisions about the quality of work, both one's own and that of others. They conclude that peer assessment provides repeated opportunities to exercise this

capability in authentic contexts, positioning students not merely as recipients of assessment but as active participants in evaluative practice.

Recent studies extend this argument further through the concept of feedback literacy. Han and Xu (2020) suggest that effective engagement with feedback requires a cognitive understanding of criteria, an affective readiness to engage with critique, and the social capacity to participate in dialogue. Little et al. (2025) similarly emphasise that providing effective feedback demands clarity of purpose, sensitivity to socio-emotional dynamics, and the ability to construct actionable commentary. Collectively, these perspectives collectively suggest that peer assessment functions as a developmental practice that cultivates the capabilities required for independent learning, rather than as a replacement for teacher-led marking.

While these foundations are often linked with social constructivist perspectives, Reinholz (2016) offers a more structured explanation through the assessment cycle model. This model situates peer assessment within a structured process linking peer evaluation, self-assessment, and subsequent performance. Reinholz (2016) argues that repeated participation in this cycle enables learners to internalise standards and apply them autonomously, reinforcing the formative function of peer assessment in higher education.

Evidence of Effectiveness in Higher Education

Various research projects examining the effectiveness of peer assessment in higher education have produced broadly positive, though nuanced, findings. Early foundational work by Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) compared peer and teacher designated marks across multiple studies, identifying strong levels of agreement when clear criteria and structured guidance are provided. Their meta-analysis challenged assumptions that students are inherently unreliable assessors. Instead, it demonstrated that under appropriate conditions, peer judgements can be as valid as teacher assessments. However, the authors also emphasised that agreement was highest where tasks were well defined and marking criteria are transparent, indicating that the reliability of peer assessment is contingent rather than automatic.

Building upon the studies around reliability, more recent studies have shifted their focus towards broader learning impacts. Li et al. (2020), in synthesising findings across various higher education contexts, reported a moderate positive effect of peer assessment on academic achievement, particularly where students are given explicit training and opportunities for structured engagement. In a similar fashion, Huisman et al. (2019) conclude that peer feedback can produce learning gains that are comparable to teacher feedback, especially when integrated within revision cycles rather than delivered as an isolated one-off activity. These findings shift the focus from whether students can replicate teacher marks to whether participation in peer assessment enhances the subsequent learning outcomes.

An overview of meta-analysis by Pellegrini (2020) further reinforces this position, arguing that peer assessment demonstrates consistent but moderate effectiveness across multiple disciplines. Significantly, Pellegrini (2020) maintains that effect sizes vary considerably depending on contextual factors such as task complexity, feedback quality, scaffolding, and alignment with learning objectives. This documented variability suggests that peer assessment does not function as a universally effective intervention; rather, its impact depends on how it is structured and embedded within broader pedagogical principles.

Implementation Challenges and Institutional Tensions

Despite the documented developmental potential of peer assessment, its implementation within higher education remains notably inconsistent. Ashenafi (2017), when reviewing twenty-first-century research, suggests that widespread adoption has not occurred at the scale anticipated by early advocates of peer assessment. While theoretical and empirical literature emphasises the learning benefits, practical challenges relating to scalability, workload, and assessment culture continue to limit integration within higher education. This viewpoint suggests there is a persistent tension between pedagogical theory and institutional practice.

Concerns regarding reliability and student capacity frequently shape academic attitudes towards peer assessment. Adachi, Tai, and Dawson (2018), when exploring staff perceptions, report that staff often recognise the potential to enhance student engagement and metacognitive development. However, these perceived benefits are tempered by anxieties

around fairness, the potential for mark inflation, and the additional time required to design and monitor peer assessment activities to ensure they are meaningful. Adachi, Tai, and Dawson (2018) note that staff expressed concerns that learners may lack the evaluative skills necessary to provide meaningful feedback for their peers without substantial guidance. These findings suggest that potential resistance towards peer assessment is not about the pedagogical theory itself but often rooted in uncertainty around implementation quality and institutional accountability.

Wanner and Palmer (2018) emphasise that the role of the teacher is central to success and that peer assessment cannot be implemented as a fully autonomous student activity and instead state that it requires explicit modelling, structured criteria, and ongoing mediation from teachers. The authors further suggest that teacher participation enhances both the credibility and effectiveness of peer assessment by legitimising the process and clarifying expectations. Without this scaffolding, it could be argued that there is a risk that students may perceive peer assessment as peripheral or inauthentic, which has the potential to reduce engagement.

McGarr and Clifford (2013) argue that institutional cultures also shape how peer assessment is experienced. In a context where summative gradings dominate, both staff and learners may prioritise grade accuracy and fairness over developmental benefits. This tension can lead to superficial participation, especially in cases where peer assessment contributes to final marks. Their findings indicate that learners also questioned the fairness of peer-generated marks, especially when such assessment carried summative weighting. These concerns highlight how established assessment cultures, which prioritise teacher authority and grade accuracy, can make the implementation of peer assessment difficult even when its formative value is recognised.

Learner Perceptions and Relational Dynamics

As previously discussed, McGarr and Clifford (2013) concluded that learner perceptions can influence how peer assessment is experienced in practice. They report that students frequently express uncertainty about the reliability of peer assessment, stemming not only from doubts over peer competence, but also due to deep-seated discomfort with evaluating

classmates. This underscores the relational dimension of peer assessment, where social dynamics and confidence levels shape the extent to which students engage meaningfully with the process. Zhan (2024) examining the process from both assessor and recipient perspectives, identified cognitive, affective, and relational challenges that can limit meaningful participation. Students reported difficulty in interpreting criteria, hesitancy in delivering critical feedback and feelings of anxiety regarding peer judgement. These issues are not just technical issues but socio-emotional, reflecting discomfort with evaluative roles traditionally associated with teaching staff. Such findings align with Han and Xu's (2020) argument that feedback literacy requires not only an understanding of standards but also a readiness to engage with critique.

Panadero and Alqassab (2019) illustrate how relational dynamics further complicate participation. Their study suggests that familiarity and anonymity indicate that social proximity can both enhance and place constraints on assessment practices. They found that familiarity between peers may increase comfort and openness, yet it can also reduce feedback objectivity. When looking at it from a different perspective, they found introducing anonymity for students may reduce social risk; however, they felt that it limited accountability and depth. These tensions highlight that peer assessment operates within complex social structures, and that interpersonal relationships can shape the tone and substance of feedback. This view is supported by To and Panadero (2019), who observe that socio-emotional factors are also evident in learners' experiences of giving versus receiving feedback. They found that providing feedback can generate significant anxiety, particularly when critique is seen to be potentially damaging to peer relationships. Consequently, students may therefore soften criticisms or avoid in-depth feedback discussions to preserve harmony, which can limit the learning value of peer assessment. To and Panadero (2019) suggest that this pattern demonstrates that this discomfort may reflect transitional adjustment and lack of readiness for peer learning rather than opposition to peer assessment and feedback.

Design Moderators and Conditions for Effective Practice

Previous literature examined suggests that peer assessment is neither inherently effective nor necessarily problematic, with its success being a product of intentional design and clear pedagogical scaffolding. Adachi, Tai and Dawson (2018) propose a comprehensive framework

for designing peer assessment, highlighting the importance of having alignment between learning outcomes, assessment tasks, feedback processes, and evaluative criteria. Their work underscores that peer assessment should be intentionally constructed rather than treated as a superficial bolt on to assessment practice. Fleckney, Thompson and Vaz-Serra (2025) conclude that successful peer assessment incorporates transparency, modelling of feedback practices, opportunities for revision, and clear communication of purpose. In contrast, Li et al (2020) found that outcomes were weaker when there was limited scaffolding or unclear expectations.

The role of explicit training and guidance is further highlighted by Pellegrini (2020) maintains that training and explicit guidance significantly increase effect across meta-analysis findings, further suggesting that the competence of learners to deliver peer feedback develops through supported practice. Wanner and Palmer (2018) argue that this modelling is particularly significant when considering the development of feedback literacy; without explicit opportunities to interpret criteria, practise feedback commentary and reflect on feedback exchanges, students often struggle to construct actionable or constructive responses. Furthermore, they also conclude that teacher involvement enhances both the credibility and pedagogical impact of peer assessment by modelling evaluative reasoning and legitimising study participation. This reinforces the view that peer assessment functions most effectively with a guided formative environment rather than as a self-regulated student activity.

Design variables relating to anonymity and the level of interaction further illustrate the complexities of effective implementation. Panadero and Alqassab (2019) highlight that anonymity in peer assessment may reduce social risk in certain contexts yet can also limit accountability and relational dialogue. Their review suggests that decisions regarding anonymity should be responsive to contextual factors such as cohort familiarity and assessment stakes. These findings indicate that there is not a universally optimal configuration of peer assessment in higher education and instead imply that effective practice requires sensitivity to social dynamics and institutional culture.

Critical Synthesis and Research Gap

When considering the literature from a broader perspective, peer assessment is presented as a formative practice with robust theoretical foundations, but highly conditional effectiveness in practice. Foundational views from Black and Wiliam (2003) emphasise the importance of learner engagement with evaluative processes to secure meaningful learning gains. Furthermore, Nicol, Thomson and Breslin (2014) and Tai et al. (2018) highlight how peer assessment contributes to the development of evaluative judgement and feedback literacy. Empirical research broadly supports this developmental perspective; meta-analysis by Li et al. (2020), and Pellegrini (2020) identify consistent but variable outcomes. However, despite the positives discussed, the research did also highlight tensions between the theoretical promise of peer assessment and the realities of educational practice in higher education. Adachi, Tai and Dawson (2018) state that academic staff frequently recognise the potential learning benefits of peer assessment but also express concerns regarding fairness, reliability and the levels of scaffolding required to support meaningful assessment practices.

Similarly, studies looking at learner experiences of peer assessment also emphasise the relational and socio-emotional dimensions of peer assessment. McGarr and Clifford (2013) identify student uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of peer assessment, while Panadero and Alqassab (2019) and Zhan (2024) highlight the influence of trust, familiarity and feedback on learner engagement with peer assessment practices. When considering the balance of the literature explored, it could be suggested that peer assessment cannot be understood as a universally effective strategy in its simplest form but rather should be seen as a pedagogical process in which the success is determined by design, institutional context and learner readiness. Understanding how these interacting conditions influence the practical use of peer assessment therefore represents an important area of enquiry for educational practitioners seeking to bridge the divide between theoretical potential and classroom reality.

Methodology

What is Action Research?

According to Efron and Ravid (2020), action research is a cyclical, practitioner-led approach to systematic enquiry aimed at improving professional practice within a specific context.

Unlike externally driven research designs, action research situates investigation within the practitioner's own environment, integrating planning, action, observation and reflection in an iterative process. This definition makes it particularly suited to small-scale educational enquiry where responsiveness to classroom dynamics is essential.

Beyond procedural stages, action research is underpinned by the philosophical framework of reflective practice. Baumfield, Hall and Wall (2013) trace its foundations to the work of Dewey, arguing that professional learning takes place through critical engagement with experiences. This is supported by Nicodemus and Swabey (2015) who emphasise that action research redistributes ownership of knowledge production to practitioners, enabling the discovery of contextually valid insights. This practitioner-centred perspective aligns directly with the current investigation, which investigates peer assessment within my own teaching context.

However, there are tensions in the methodological approach of action research; Costello (2003) notes that close involvement of the teacher-researcher may introduce bias into an investigation, while the small scale and context-bound nature of action research limit the generalisability of the findings. Efron and Ravid (2020) further caution that novice researchers may struggle to maintain analytical rigour. To mitigate these concerns, this study will adopt Nowell et al.'s (2017) trustworthiness framework, embedding credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability with the thematic analysis process through systematic coding and transparent documentation.

Although research is typically iterative, practical time constraints restricted this project to a single cycle. Nevertheless, by progressing systematically through design, implementation and structured reflection, the study maintains a methodological contribution to evidence-informed pedagogical development.

What is secondary research?

For this action research project, a secondary research approach was adopted, analysing existing academic literature to peer assessment in higher education. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) describe secondary data as information that has previously been collected,

often for different research purposes, that can be reanalysed to explore new research projects or to reinterpret existing findings.

Smith (2008) highlights that while secondary analysis offers opportunities to engage with large bodies of existing data, concerns are frequently raised regarding the reliability of datasets and the extent to which data collected for one purpose can meaningfully address new research questions. In addition, Costa (2024) notes that existing datasets are shaped by the theoretical assumptions, methodological decisions and measurement approaches of the original researchers, meaning that the concepts may not always align perfectly with the aims of subsequent studies. Despite these limitations, I feel that secondary data can provide valuable opportunities to synthesise research findings and identify patterns in the data; however, it is important that sources are critically evaluated to ensure their relevance, credibility and alignment with the aims of this project. While time constraints limited the opportunities for primary data collection, this approach was selected as the most robust method for providing a high-level synthesis of current practice within the scope of my project.

What is thematic analysis?

The literature examined in this action research project was analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These phases include familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the final analytical account. In this project, the data consisted of selected academic literature relating to peer assessment in higher education. Repeated reading of the sources allowed for familiarisation with key arguments, recurring concepts and patterns. Initial codes were then generated to capture significant ideas, which were subsequently organised into broader themes reflecting patterns across the research.

Despite the flexibility this approach offers and its suitability for exploratory enquiry, thematic analysis has recognised limitations. Roberts, Dowell and Nie (2019) note that the nature of coding and theme development can make the process time-consuming and potentially susceptible to research bias. To address this concern, Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive approach to thematic analysis was adopted. This approach recognises that researchers are

not neutral observers but instead active interpreters of data. As a teacher-researcher with an active interest in formative assessment practices, reflexive awareness was therefore maintained throughout the analytical process to ensure transparency in the interpretation of themes emerging from the literature.

Results/discussion

Following a thematic analysis of the literature, several recurring patterns were identified; as a result, these were compiled into 4 key themes: the developmental and formative benefits of peer assessment, the conditional nature of its effectiveness, implementation and institutional tensions and the relational and socio-emotional dynamics affecting engagement.

Theme 1: Developmental and Formative Benefits

Across the literature, peer assessment is positioned as a tool for supporting deeper learning through active engagement with assessment criteria and feedback processes. Nicol, Thomson and Breslin (2014) argue that producing feedback encourages judgements on work quality, prompting reflection on both peer performance as well as their own. Similarly, Tai et al. (2018) describe evaluative judgement as a crucial attribute developed through the act of judging others work. Reinholz (2018) extends this via the assessment cycle model, suggesting that learning is maximised when students engage in a repeated process of feedback, reflection and revision.

Empirical research further indicates that peer assessment cultivates self-assessment and reflective thinking skills. To and Panadero (2019), found that these activities help students refine their own understanding of quality and broaden their capacity for self-evaluation. When considering these arguments, peer assessment is not solely a process of distributing feedback but also functions on a deeper level as a learning activity and the developmental value of peer assessment lies in its ability to shift students from being passive recipients of feedback towards being more active participants in the evaluation process.

Theme 2: Effectiveness as a conditional outcome

Whilst the literature suggests a general agreement regarding the potential benefits of peer assessment, evidence of its effectiveness is often presented as conditional rather than universal. Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) demonstrate that peer assessment can closely align

with teacher evaluation when students work within well-defined success criteria and clear expectations. Meta-analysis results from Li et al. (2020) report moderate improvements in learning outcomes associated with peer assessment. When looking at the context of academic writing, Huisman et al. (2019) found that peer assessment can produce measurable learning gains which are comparable to teacher feedback with appropriate instructions given.

However, these studies also emphasise the importance of structured implementation. Pellegrini (2020) concludes that peer assessment tends to be more effective when supported by explicit criteria, student training in evaluation and opportunities for students to revise their work in response to feedback. Without these supports, outcomes may become inconsistent, and students may struggle to provide meaningful feedback. This suggests that peer assessment is not ineffective but is a pedagogical approach whose success is mediated by the conditions in which it is implemented and used.

Theme 3: Implementation and Institutional Tensions

Whilst the literature suggests significant educational potential in peer assessment, its implementation in higher education is inconsistent. Ashenafi (2017), who observes that while peer assessment has been widely researched, it has not become fully embedded in mainstream educational practices in higher education and finds that institutional expectations regarding reliability and accountability contribute to a reluctance from staff to incorporate peer assessment in formal assessment processes.

Research exploring these tensions further highlights these conflicting tensions. Adachi, Tai, and Dawson (2018) found that while many academic staff recognise the formative value of peer assessment, they have significant concerns regarding workload, fairness and learner capability. McGarr and Clifford (2013) also examined the views of students and found that they often view peer assessment as valuable to their education but are also sceptical about its fairness when being used for grading purposes, suggesting that the success of peer assessment is dependent on institutional assessment cultures.

Theme 4: Relational and Socio-Emotional Dynamics

The literature also emphasises the importance of relational and socio-emotional factors in shaping learning engagement. As peer feedback involves assessing the work of classmates,

social dynamics can also directly influence the quality of feedback and the willingness of students to engage critically. Panadero and Alqassab (2019) note that anonymity can mitigate and influence the honesty and depth of peer assessment but also note that the benefits of anonymity vary depending on the context.

The literature also indicated that peer assessment can produce both cognitive and emotional challenges. This is explored by Zhan (2024), who identifies that students often report difficulties when giving feedback, especially when they lack confidence in their own ability to do so. To and Panadero (2019) also found that distrust, competition between students and communication issues can also reduce the effectiveness of peer assessment. Additionally, Little et al. (2025) further suggest that effective peer assessment practice requires not only the end evaluative judgement but also an ability to manage the socio-emotional challenges of feedback interactions, suggesting that peer assessment should be viewed as a socially complex process in which interpersonal relationships play a central role.

Conclusion and Recommendations

My study has explored the effectiveness of peer assessment in higher education, and the perception of the practice by both learners and educators. My findings suggest that peer assessment is broadly seen as a formative strategy capable of supporting the development of evaluative judgement for learners, feedback literacy and reflective learning. However, findings also suggest that its true effectiveness is highly conditional on a structured environment being provided as well as navigating highly complex social relationships.

These findings align with my previous investigations in primary education, which formed my rationale for this research. From a practitioner perspective, peer assessment has the potential to be an effective practice in the classroom; however, it faces many challenges which appear to be consistent across all phases of education in my experience and are often visible in the classroom. From my numerous investigations on peer assessment throughout my teaching career, I conclude that peer assessment should not be viewed as a simple assessment tool but more as a structured learning process that requires careful planning and support for learners from teaching staff.

Based on my findings during this review, I believe several recommendations can be made for practice.

- Peer assessment activities should include explicit guidance and training to support students in developing the skills required to construct effective feedback.
- Learners should be given clear assessment criteria and structured feedback processes to follow and be implemented to improve reliability and the perceptions of fairness in peer assessment
- Teaching staff should maintain an active role in facilitating peer assessment, modelling what effective peer feedback looks like and providing support for learners to navigate the social and emotional aspects of the practice

While I feel this study provides valuable insights into the way peer assessment is regarded in higher education, it is limited by its reliance on secondary data. This is an area I would be keen to explore again in future practice; however, I feel it would be better served through primary research in a specific Welsh educational context and would give a truer reflection. I feel that taking this approach in future research would provide a deeper insight into how learner and teacher perceptions of peer assessment affect its effectiveness in real learning environments.

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