Reflections on the use of Student Peer Assessment

To try and fail – and then (almost) get it right

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The following story is a little embarrassing. It is the story of how I plunged into using Student Peer Assessment (SPA) – and made just about every mistake possible. It is the story of how I insisted – and discovered that there were still lessons to be learned (the hard way). And it is the story of why I still plan to use SPA in the future. I share this story in the hope that it will allow the reader to take some short-cuts in his or her exploration of SPA.

I had heard about SPA from some colleagues who were already practising it and talking very enthusiastically about it – and I had realized that I needed some "help" in relieving my work in providing feedback to my students. I already have many "deliveries" on my courses to "encourage" students to study continuously throughout the course instead of just before the exam. These deliveries were obvious candidates for SPA – having students provide the feedback instead of me. How difficult could it be – even if I wanted to do it differently from how my colleagues did? So I didn't bother to look up more information – I just did it (for more details – also about the references I eventually did read and use – see [1]).

I wanted to start out slowly, so I tried it out in 2013 on a small course with 20 students on their 3rd/4th year taking a course on "Coaching of programming teams". For the first seven weeks students have to write an essay of 1.5-2 pages every week, discussing and relating their previous experience to the week's literature. At the following seminar I would give them back their essays with comments and we would spend 45 minutes in plenary, discussing selected comments from their essays – both for form and for contents.

My intention was that during the first four weeks the students would see different ways of commenting and giving feedback – and pick up on that so they could take over for the remaining three weeks. That didn't work. I sort of forgot to tell them what I was doing. I must have thought that they would have guessed that – they didn't. So I discovered that it is important that: 1) You are very explicit about SPA – so students are aware of what is going on and what they should have focus on. 2) There is a clear structure – so students know why you want them to use SPA, what they should do and when. 3) Students are given detailed instructions (aka assessment template) – so they know how they are supposed to carry out the SPA.

Things went better the following seven weeks when they were doing their in-depth projects and had to use SPA on the preliminary project report (only written feedback) and the final project report (both written and oral feedback). And a year later it went much better with the essays too.

Based on the previous lessons learned I was ready to take another round in another course in 2014. But before unleashing "extreme SPA" onto 55 students on my course on "Configuration Management" in Lund, I decided to test-run on the same course given at the IT University in Copenhagen. There were only 10 students and since it runs for the whole autumn term it had a slower pace and was "ahead" of the Lund variant. I made it explicit to the students that they had to carry out SPA on 2 of the three 3-4 page lab reports they had to produce in group and also on the individual 1.5-2 page review they had to write on a scientific paper. I had set up a clear structure with deadlines for both lab reports, reviews and assessments – and how much time I expected them to spend on each SPA (30-40 minutes). Finally, I had given them detailed instructions for assessment parameters and how much I expected from them (6-8 lines of text).

Unfortunately one of the students asked me if it was obligatory to do the SPA – and I couldn't tell a lie. So on the deadline only 3 out of 10 SPAs had been done for the review and 1 out of 3 for the first lab report (which caused me to skip the second one). However, I got this comment from one of the 3 students: "Forget about the feedback – I learned much more from assessing another person's work than from the feedback". I used that to start a discussion of what you – as a student – actually get out of SPA during the following class. That resulted in 5 more assessments coming in for the review and 1 more for the lab reports – and the following comment from another student: "After reading one of my peer's reviews I understand now what you meant about how constructive it can be. I see quite some differences between my style of review compared to […]'s and it brought a new light".

That made me realise that SPA is not so much about feedback as it is about learning and reflection – and once students realise that too, you don't have to "pay them" (with extra points for the exam) to do it. They should be grateful that I put all these example solutions online for them to study and learn from – in particular for assignments where there is more than one good solution. Well, you'd probably have to force (and enlighten) them the first time.

Fortunately none of my Swedish students asked if the SPAs were obligatory (the SPA:s should eventually make it into the official study plan). I was also able to motivate using SPA both referring to literature and to the student comments from Copenhagen – and to make the students focus on these assignments as extra possibilities of learning instead of as extra work I put on them. In the end SPA was used for the second (group) lab report and the individual paper review as for the Copenhagen course.

The results were significantly better. All 14 lab report SPAs were in on time. Lab reports had to be in on a Friday – same day as the lab – and the SPA on the following Wednesday, which allowed me to give some general feedback on both the lab reports and the SPAs at the Thursday lecture. One student had missed the deadline for the paper review (but handed it in the next day) and 53 out of 55 students had their SPA in on time (one had forgotten to Cc: me and the other had forgotten the deadline). Paper reviews were due on Monday at 2PM (so I could remind those whose reviews were missing at the lecture one hour later) and the SPAs were due on Thursday at noon (so everyone would do their SPA before I gave my general feedback on the reviews and the SPAs at the lecture one hour later). So even if – or maybe because? – I gave a very short time-frame for doing the SPA (expecting only 30-40 min of work, though) no student complained about that. Maybe they actually appreciated the fast "feedback loop". In my own course evaluation questionnaire I asked the students to rate the usefulness of SPA on a scale from excellent over average to unacceptable with this result: 14, 14, 18, 4, 3 – with an average of 3.60. So even if 7 students found it unacceptable or poor the majority of students found it useful to excellent – and since a 3.60 average is in the low end of what aspects of my course get rated, there is also room for improvement.

The original plan had been to subject all deliveries on the course to SPA – 6 weekly exercise hand-ins, 3 lab reports, 1 paper review, 1 project synopsis, and 1 project report. However, I was struck by SPA fatigue – in particular because I realised that in order for me to write detailed assessment instructions for the students, it should be explicitly clear to me what were the detailed learning objectives for each and every one of these deliveries. The course has improved from those deliveries I did that for and in the future I plan to use SPA to "improve" other deliveries. Furthermore, adding an SPA to all deliveries on a course with 12 deliveries in 7 weeks would probably cause fatigue even in Swedish students.

I had dreamt of SPA as a way of "working less" – and I probably will eventually. Much of the work I did was due to "getting to know SPA" (put it on the "personal education" account), making the detailed learning objectives explicit (put it on the "course improvement" account) and setting up the technical web framework (one-time cost). Next time I will be able to reuse what I have already done on those aspects. All I have to do is pass/fail the deliveries (much faster than commenting) since I don't want to put that responsibility on the students, and to glance through the SPAs for "sufficiency". Reading, commenting and mailing out to 55 students for their reviews was two full – and exhausting – days of work. Now it is down to one day or less. It still scales linearly, but not as steep as before.

Is there anything I regret about using Student Peer Assessment? Only that I hesitated for so long before I finally gave it a try – and failed at it – and then did it (almost) right!

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References:

[1] Lars Bendix: Extreme Use of Student Peer Assessment, in Proceedings of LTHs 8:e Pedagogiska Inspirationskonferens, Lund, Sweden, December 17, 2014.

Kanonisk ordning på distansundervisningsmaterial

Diskussion av för- och nackdelar

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Distanskurser har utvecklats under en lång tid på högskolan och under de senaste tio åren har lärplattformar gett distanskurser ett samlat digitalt stöd för platsoberoende undervisningsmoment. Trots möjligheterna som digitalt stöd medför så har distanskurser ofta strävat efter att efterlikna campuskurser. De senaste årens fokus på MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) har riktat intresset mot online utbildningar och digitalt lärande. Resurser satsas både på online-material och forskning kring digitalt lärande. De stora universiteten i USA har gett gratis kurser för 10 000-tals deltagare, öppet för alla. Europa är inte långt efter och i Sverige gavs förra året de första MOOC-kurserna av till exempel Lunds universitet [1].

Intresset för MOOCs och en eventuell satsning på egna MOOC-kurser finns även på Malmö högskola. Tankar som ligger till grund för MOOCs är öppenhet och en önskan att nå nya studentgrupper vilket går i linje med Malmö högskolas vision om mångfald och ett inkluderande förhållningssätt [2]. Men istället för att konkurrera med de stora MOOCs-aktörerna valde vi att utveckla en egen variant av MOOC-konceptet, en så kallad LOOC (Localized Open Online Course). För att understryka att kursen är en LOOC och inte en MOOC är allt egenproducerat material på svenska. Initiativet till projektet togs av studierektorn på datavetenskap, Olle Lindeberg, som såg behovet när han förgäves försökte hitta en MOOC i C++ riktat till erfarna utvecklare. Kursen skulle både vara öppen och på nätet, men inte rikta sig till en massiv publik utan till en regional – localized. Vi valde att utveckla materialet och samtidigt testa och utvärdera det genom att erbjuda kursen till två studentgrupper på Malmö högskola, som en del av två campusförlagda kurser.