

Teaching with PeerAssessment.Com

This article suggests some ways to think through how to incorporate peer assessments in your teaching using the PeerAssessment.Com tool. Consider these ideas for effective practice:

1. **TIMING:** How many assessments should you use?
2. **PREPARATION:** How should you prepare students for giving effective peer feedback?
3. **REPORT DISTRIBUTION:** When should you release results to students?
4. **GRADING:** When should you grade assessments?

1. TIMING: How many assessments should you use?

WHY: I strongly recommend you provide students multiple opportunities to give and receive feedback with one another. First, a single assessment at the end of a team assignment is too late if the student needs to correct, or if you need to intervene to help. Also, the students will learn to communicate their feedback more effectively with successive assessments.

WHAT: For a longer team project, lasting most or all term, I recommend assessments every 2-3 weeks; however, if the teamwork is intensive and members interact frequently, weekly peer assessments may be justified. Another natural way to time assessments is when major deliverables or milestones are completed. Deliverable or milestone points tend to increase the tempo of effort to bring work to completion, so these likewise create natural points of reflection.

HOW: To set up iterative assessments--using the same questions and teams for each assessment to gauge progress--prepare the questions and teams for the 1st assessment before you create the next assessment. (When you add an assessment, the new one copies the set up from the prior one which saves most of the work.) See [Tips for Creating Iterative Peer Assessments in PA](#)

NOTE: If your student teams utilize Scrum or Agile Project Management, you are familiar with the Retrospective event that concludes each Sprint. Consider using PeerAssessment.Com to collect input for each Retrospective; have students fill out the assessment just prior to the meeting. Encourage teams to discuss the Team Assessment results to develop an action plan for the upcoming Sprint. (See open-ended question set "(T-03.a) Team Strengths, Weaknesses, Actions".) Using PeerAssessment.Com to collect the initial ideas allow each student to independently share their thoughts and minimize potential group think, as well as making the Retrospective meeting more efficient.

2. PREPARATION: How should you prepare students for giving effective peer feedback?

WHY: Giving effective feedback, one might argue, could be among the most challenging of the

soft teamwork and communication skills students need to master, while at the same time being critical to their successful careers. When delivered well, feedback motivates and improves subsequent actions of their receiver. When delivered poorly, it at least falls on deaf ears, but can easily cause resentment and division.

I strongly urge you to set aside some time to talk with your students why and how to give effective feedback to one another, even if your class's explicit focus is not on soft skills. This is both a critically important long-term skill for success in their career, as well as immediate success on their student team.

WHAT: We have included a brief article to teach your students, called [How to Give Feedback the Right Way](#). This provides a formula for giving feedback that will help them get their helpful feedback across, and be heard. It is called C.O.I.N. It is simple and can work with both positive as well as corrective feedback.

HOW: At a minimum, I recommend you prepare your students in three ways:

1. Inform your students you are asking them to give feedback to their peers that is honest, respectful, and constructive. You expect that the feedback they give to their peers will help them improve their teamworking skills for the long term, and improve their team's productivity in the immediate project. You will be looking at the feedback they give as well as get, to make sure this is reflected in what they share.
2. Ask students to read the brief article, [How to Give Feedback the Right Way](#), and apply its principles when giving feedback to one another.
3. Evaluate the open-ended feedback your students give to one another on their first assessment using the [Feedback Assessment Report](#). The report presents all the feedback a student gives their peers onto one page, so you can quickly review and comment upon (or grade) how well they have applied the practices.

3. REPORT DISTRIBUTION: When should you release results to students?

WHY: For many instructors, there is a concern about releasing student feedback to other students before we are assured that it will not contain inappropriate comments that could cause more harm than good. Thus, it is a good idea to balance the value of getting immediate feedback to students with the caution of reviewing the peer feedback closely before sharing it.

WHAT: PeerAssessment.Com, on the assessment page under "Report Distribution", provides three options to control how reports are distributed to students.

- "Automatically Distribute" includes the personalized report link in the end assessment email.
- "Hold and Review" withholds the report link until you can look over report; then it

sends the link out.

- “Do not distribute” is just that.

HOW: For the first assessment, I recommend that you set distribution to “Hold and Review”. This will allow you to review the feedback they gave to one another the first time around. If any issues arise, you can go in and edit/redact offensive comments that one student gave to another.

For subsequent assessments you will probably be comfortable using the “Automatically Distribute” setting once the students are assured that you are reading and considering feedback they give to one another.

There is one other point to add: After I review the first assessment, I briefly discuss my general impressions of the feedback students gave to one another. (*Was the open-ended feedback specific? Did it point out positive and negative behaviors? Were suggestions identified?*) My goal is two-fold: to raise expectations AND to make it clear that I read and take seriously their feedback. After this early discussion, I rarely have ever experienced inappropriate comments given to one another.

4. GRADING: When should you grade assessments?

WHY: If you choose to assign grades, it is important to distinguish between two types of assessment, formative and summative, which should influence the criteria applied.

- Formative Assessment takes place during the learning process with the goal of improving subsequent learning of the student or instruction by the teacher.
- Summative assessment occurs at the conclusion of an instructional period to evaluate the achievement of student learning

I love the clarity of this comparison, “When the cook tastes the soup, that’s formative; when the guests taste the soup, that’s summative.” (Source Robert Stake? Paul Black?)

The question of whether we assign grades, and how we assign grades, boils down to the type of assessment.

- The purpose of grading formative assessments, during the project, is to improve the quality of teamwork applied (and learned).
- The purpose of grading summative assessments, at the end of the project, is to more fairly and accurately distribute credit for accomplishing the team’s work.

WHAT: This has a few implications for assigning grades to peer assessments.

1. Formative peer assessment can focus on different behaviors and awareness, all of which may positively impact the quality of teamwork and the team environment immediately, as well as in the students’ careers. For example:
 - The ability to give effective feedback to others.

- Self-awareness and reflection on ones' own strengths and weaknesses as a team contributor.
- One's ability to adjust and improve their team contributions and participation.

Depending on the learning outcomes sought, the types of questions asked will vary as will the use of grading.

2. It has been argued that summative peer assessments alone can have a similar effect on the quality of teamwork. That is, telling students they will be evaluated by their peers at the end of the project is forewarning them that they will eventually be held accountable. Thus, formative assessments and grades may not be necessary to create the perception of accountability.

On the other hand, formative feedback from peers may provide a more effective means of empowering students to improve their contribution. One factor is that iterative feedback can address the specific recent behaviors—positive or problematic—a student took regarding the team. In contrast, the more time that has passed, the more abstract or generalized comments tend to be, which reduces their impact on the receiver. Another factor is simply that feedback can point out specific behaviors a student can employ to improve their teamwork.

3. I do not know of studies that have looked at whether formative assessments need to be graded to be effective. However, there are two things that must occur. I would argue that while grading is often used to incentivize these, there are other ways to make these actions take place.
 - a. First, most or all students must complete the peer assessments.
 - b. Second, students must give honest, constructive feedback to one another.

HOW: There are various approaches instructors take grading of peer assessments. Here are some recommendations from my own experience, and I invite you to send in yours.

- a. Complete the first peer assessment soon after the teams start working. Its emphasis is on giving honest, specific, constructive, helpful feedback. Grades are of the quality of open-ended feedback each student gives to their peers via the assessment. The goal is to initiate using an effective, learnable approach to give feedback to peers.
- b. Subsequent formative assessments involve low (or no) point grades for completion and/or feedback quality. Personally, I give small point values in lower-level courses. In higher-level courses I require giving quality feedback, but instead of grading each assessment, I provide individual feedback direct to students who do not meet expectations. They receive a warning that grading consequences will arise if they do not take it seriously.
- c. Higher point value summative peer assessments can be assigned at major milestones, or when the final work is submitted. The summative assessments

are based on the averaged peer-assigned ratings for a selected question set. There are various approaches that can be used to calculate individualized participation and/or contribution grades. Please see [Calculating Individualized Grades from Peer Assessment Scores](#).