

Improving assessment for work-based learning and degree apprenticeships in business: case study of student-led peer review

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CASE STUDY

Improving assessment for work-based learning and degree apprenticeships in business through a co-designed peer review process

**Elizabeth Houldsworth, Henley Business School, Michael Kilmister, Centre for Quality Support and Development, University of Reading, and Rekha Brigue, Chelsea and Westminster Probation Delivery Unit, London Probation, United Kingdom*

Contact: liz.houldsworth@henley.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Involving students in peer review has substantial benefits for students' learning and development and, more pragmatically, for staff workload. This paper reports on a student-led effort to co-design a peer review formative assessment task. The assessment is part of a personal development module within a higher education degree apprenticeship programme delivered via blended mode by a business school in South-East England. This case study on student-staff partnership offers a description of the process and a reflection on the impacts from both the student and staff perspective. It suggests that student co-design and peer review activities complement work-based learning, effectively bringing the prior experiences and academic skills of mature/professional students into the classroom.

KEYWORDS

apprenticeships, peer review, co-design, business, management, work-based learning, staff-student partnership

There is growing interest in peer assessment approaches and other alternatives to traditional, instructor-led feedback methods in higher education (Concina, 2022). Peer feedback is a reciprocal practice that involves students offering comments and critiques on their classmates' submissions and receiving feedback on their own work (Nicolet al., 2014). It is likely that peer review initiatives—in this case study, we use the term peer review to describe peer feedback processes—have an impact on assessment outcomes by encouraging students to become more independent and effective at self-regulating their own learning (Jisc, 2015). Peer review also has the potential to promote academic co-regulation through ongoing dialogue between both the provider and receiver of the feedback (Zhu & To, 2022). Apart from the possible benefits of peer review for enhancing learning, its usage has the advantage of not adding to teaching staff workload (Nicol et al., 2014).

The context for this case study is a module called Personal Development (PD), a compulsory element of a master's level degree apprenticeship in business and management aimed at future leaders. Work-based learning higher degree apprenticeships are described as "one of the biggest changes in [UK] higher education for decades" (Rowe et al., 2016, p. 358), but the pedagogical literature in this space is still emerging. Regarding the co-creation of curricula, Chan and Chen (2024) report data from teaching award schemes in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and Hong Kong which suggests that the involvement of students as partners is a common dimension of student-centred learning and teaching excellence. However, despite the increased prevalence of students as partners in universities, a systematic review (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) found the discipline of business (clustered together with economics, law, and marketing) to be among the least represented in the academic literature, which is an oversight given the growth of apprenticeship programmes. Co-designed peer review is likely to be of special relevance to degree apprenticeships, as it effectively connects classroom-based learning and assessment with the students' professional contexts. As Lillis and Bravenboer (2020) argue, "successful WIL [work integrated learning] pedagogical practice in one professional area has features or characteristics which are adaptable or transferable to others" (p. 736).

The contribution of this case study is to provide an example to inspire others to co-design curricula and assessment in similar learning contexts in higher education. This paper makes the argument that co-designed peer-review assessments are a valuable addition to the work-based learning classroom. The paper begins by introducing apprenticeship programmes in the UK before outlining the co-design and implementation of the peer review process at the heart of the case study. It closes by offering preliminary observations on the impact the activity had on student learning and proposes recommendations for implementing peer review for apprentices and work-based learning students.

PEER REVIEW, CO-DESIGN, AND WORK-BASED LEARNING IN BUSINESS

Higher and degree apprenticeships were introduced by the UK government in April 2017, with programmes offered from level 4 to level 7 i.e., certificate of higher education to master's degree (Department of Education, 2023).¹ Apprenticeship programmes can be categorised as a form of work-based learning and operate as a three-way partnership between student, their organisation, and the education provider. Throughout their programme, apprentices collect a range of evidence for a synoptic portfolio that is assessed against the required apprenticeship standard (Pan & Reßin, 2022). Staff-student engagement in the co-design of tasks provides a means to ensure that learning, assessment, and feedback are made more authentic to the apprentices (and their employers). Authenticity means the classroom learning experience corresponds sufficiently with professional environments outside the university (Hagvall Svensson et al., 2022). In this case study, the use of peer review serves as an example of authentic assessment (i.e., a task of real-world or future career relevance), as it provides the apprentices with the opportunity to demonstrate they can evidence one requirement of the relevant apprenticeship standard, which is to be able to give and receive feedback.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTEXT

Our students are completing a part-time, master's degree level Senior Leadership Apprenticeship (SLA) programme, which develops leadership and management capabilities demanded at a senior level. In this case study, the target audience is emerging managers (i.e., those relatively new to management posts who have been earmarked by their organisations as talent for the future). Titled "Future Leader," the programme is delivered via blended mode by a well-known UK business school. Apart from periodic subject workshops and mentoring, the apprenticeship students are studying at a distance from the business school's leafy campus. The PD module is unique in two ways. Firstly, it is the only module that accompanies the students across their whole programme, and, secondly, it does not focus on a recognised business subject area, instead requiring reflection on the self. This self-reflective focus is facilitated through online materials and face-to-face workshops which encourage students to make the connection between personal life history, values and aspirations for ongoing development.

Depending on which iteration of the programme they are on, students complete two or three personal development assignments. The final assignment is marked by a tutor with feedback provided. As the assignments are reflections on personal development, it was decided not to provide a numerical grade. Instead, the final assignment is awarded either a P (proceed) or R (revise); the latter usually denotes that the individual has not fully understood or followed the assignment brief, most typically by not engaging in any genuine personal reflection. Any student gaining an R grade in their final summative task must resubmit until a P grade is achieved. By contrast, the earlier assignments are formative, with no feedback provided by the tutor. Instead, between the first and second workshop, apprentices engage collaboratively within their pre-arranged learning group to exchange formative assignments and provide (and receive) peer review feedback. Peer review is new to most of the students, and they are supported by written and visual guidance (which will be explained in the following section). The peer feedback experience is then discussed in a subsequent PD workshop, which also provides an opportunity for the tutor, with suitable permissions, to review a sample of the peer review feedback.

CO-DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

Engaging students in partnership has been defined "as a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7). Such initiatives provide a means of countering the critique that teaching and learning in universities is generally the domain of academic staff and that students often lack agency and voice (Mann, 2008). In terms of this initiative, the peer review process was established to meet two goals:

- To provide students with an authentic opportunity to practise their feedback skills as this behaviour is one requirement of the SLA apprenticeship standard (Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education, 2021). These are skills modern business leaders need to possess (Tulgan, 2015) and which these students who are "future" leaders are likely to still be developing.

- To decrease the likelihood of students receiving an R grade in their final PD assignment without increasing academic workload. Drafts are strengthened through peer review through two mechanisms: (a) the feedback itself and (b) the opportunity to review the work of another individual within their learning cohort. Plagiarism is not deemed to be a major risk as personal development reflections are unique to the individual.

In terms of our approach, a recent meta-analysis by Chan and Chen (2023) reports four key roles played by students in assessment partnership with university staff. In this case, students fulfilled the first two of these roles. The four roles are:

- Co-designer, which includes students devising performance criteria against which their work would be judged.
- Assessors, which includes students as peer reviewers who provide comments and feedback on other students' tasks, which might or might not involve assigning grades.
- Consultant, where students are allowed to shape and refine the assessment process. This did not happen in this instance in that the assessment process remained unchanged.
- Decision maker, where students make choices that help shape the assessment process, including deadlines and weightings. While students would have liked to control deadlines, these were fixed in the study schedule.

The process began with the module convenor providing an initial briefing and presenting some advice around peer review aligned with the module's learning outcomes. The module convenor first shared the briefing in a workshop with one of the early cohorts on the Future Leader programme prior to completion of their first assignment. Here, peer review was explained, and students were referred to good practice guidelines around giving and receiving feedback which were contained within the online learning materials.² At the next workshop, several months later and following the assignment, the peer review exercise was discussed, and all learning groups were invited to share their experiences. During a small-group discussion, the tutor visited each group to gain insights and to review samples of feedback. It became apparent that one group of six students appeared more confident than the other groups about the peer review. With prompting from the tutor, it emerged that this group had taken the initiative to create a peer review template (see Appendix 1) in the intervening period between the workshops. Their suggested approach was written in accessible, plain English and provided a more practical structure for feedback exchange, whether delivered through conversation or writing.

The peer review re-design was initially led by one student (co-author on this paper) within the confines of her own learning groups of six individuals. Her group reported how they had all contributed to the co-design to improve consistency within the peer review process, so as to clarify the process for themselves and to provide support to other students on the module who were also managing study schedules on top of demanding full-time roles. The template was subsequently reviewed and refined by the other members of the group's wider cohort, as well as learners on the subsequent intake. Broadening co-production in this way speaks to a growing theme in the staff-student partnership literature around co-creation initiatives needing to scale up to meet the needs of diverse student bodies (e.g., Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019). Learner

feedback suggested that having access to the template allowed all students to fulfil the role of assessor (Chan & Chen, 2023), albeit in an informal way whereby students felt able and legitimised to provide meaningful comment on the work of a peer.

Given the positive responses to the template the module convenor reviewed it to ensure alignment with programme and degree apprenticeship requirements. It was passed to the instructional designer for a “makeover” to ensure accessibility and improve readability according to universal design for learning guidelines (Wakefield, 2018). This included revising the instructions surrounding the assessment task in the virtual learning environment (VLE). Enhancements included a succinct, step-by-step briefing and a downloadable infographic with alt text³ to guide students through the peer review process (see Figure 1). The infographic, in the interests of providing students with multiple options for engaging with the guidance, visualised the peer review and feedback process.

Figure 1. The visual step-by-step guide for peer review on the VLE

These steps are also visualised in the visual guide below:



Source: the authors.

IMPACTS AND REFLECTIONS

We found several benefits as anticipated by Cook-Sather et al. (2014), including enhanced engagement and learning, along with improved peer and student–staff relationships. There was increased adoption of peer review, which is an optional part of the assessment. The student-initiated redesign of the peer review template makes peer review more accessible and authentic, with students appearing to welcome the idea that the template had been co-created with their peers. The clarification of the process in the materials on the VLE appeared to also increase user acceptance, making it more likely that students would engage with the task prior to attending the second workshop (where feedback would be shared and discussed with a wider group). The module convenor has recognised the continuing professional development inherent in the experience, wherein she reoriented away from being a disciplinary expert to being a facilitator who enabled shared inquiry, partnership, and students’ enthusiasm to develop classroom materials.

Verbal feedback from the second workshop with the group who designed the template confirmed that this was an innovation that was perceived to be worthwhile in terms of improving student understanding of peer review and its relationship to personal development for business managers and leaders. This supports the view espoused by Cook-Sather et al. (2014) that when learners are engaged in the co-design, they shift from merely completing learning tasks to developing a meta-cognitive awareness about what is being learned. Feedback from the group suggested that the template provided a useful structure to de-mystify the peer review process and promote healthy discussions and constructive criticism. The following quote from a student during the workshop illustrates the sentiment: “This [peer review template and process] facilitated a process of reflection and peer support which group members were able to cross reference to appropriate behaviours and capture in their reflective writing as part of evidence in their learning journey.” Following the positive feedback on the efficacy of the template to support peer review, it was decided to distribute the template to all other cohorts. This comprised the 136 students on the original programme and, at the time of writing, almost 200 apprentices on the programme that superseded it.

Although still in its infancy, there are tentative indications of wider impact in two areas. The first impact is enhanced student reflective practice. As discussed above, the inclusion of the peer review element necessitates the students share something about themselves and their reflections with a trusted peer. This has developmental benefits for the student that directly support the learning objectives of the PD module, as summed up in the following quote captured from a student:

I would shy [away] from discussing my own developmental journey and would rarely reference the discrimination that I have experienced within my career around age, race, and gender. The Personal Development module gave me confidence to disclose these issues in a safe space with my learning team to highlight the current issues that we face, and the challenges needed to create a diverse workforce and become more inclusive for individuals with protective characteristics.

Similarly, a recent case study produced by Henley Business School, in conjunction with a client, refers to the personal development which has been experienced: “The programme has given me so much more than an expansion to my toolkit. Nothing panics me now, I take stuff in my stride, able to constantly review and consider change and able to problem solve” (Henley Business School, 2024, para. 9). Findings from the Ofsted (2023) inspection reinforce this point, finding that apprentices use the knowledge they have learned to move on swiftly to senior promoted roles.⁴

The second impact is improved quality of the final PD summative assignments. Although further work is required to confirm this, a comparison of the reflective assignments suggests that the quality of the writing is higher where students have had the opportunity to engage in peer review, compared to programmes where feedback comes exclusively from the tutor. Without peer feedback, the number of assignments deemed to be below standard is typically in the 5–10% range. On the Future Leader programme where this initiative is implemented, less than 5% receive a “revise” grade on their final tutor assessed assignment. Consequently, it has been

decided that it is worthwhile to implement peer review on other apprenticeship programmes in the business school.

One of the key takeaways from this experience is that the peer review template emerged spontaneously, representing the openness, meaningfulness, and situatedness that lies at the core of students-as-partners practice (Peters & Mathias, 2018). We advise educators should be open to such student-initiated mid-module changes, especially in courses for part-time professional students, who might find it challenging to find the time to engage in structured co-designed activities. However, Findon and Sims (2021) study of engaging part-time working students in the co-design of academic skills curriculum demonstrates more intentional or planned co-design approaches are possible, and could be designed from the outset. We suggest co-design opportunities could be based on student partnership principles, such as Advance HE's framework for student engagement through partnership (Healey & Healey, 2019). Mini focus groups or evaluation questionnaires should be considered for refining co-creation approaches, and for providing an evidence base to overcome resistance to teaching and learning change or institutional inertia. It is also worth highlighting here the value of partnership not just with students but between academic and professional staff. In this example, by collaborating with an instructional designer, the module convenor ensured sustainability, scalability, consistency and accessibility, with these benefits reflecting previous studies around the advantages of academic-professional staff collaboration (e.g., Goff & Knorr, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This collaboratively written case study has been completed by the module convenor, instructional designer, and a student involved in a co-design project on a business module. It helps build the case that peer review is a valuable addition to the apprenticeship and work-based learning classroom, especially if it involves students in design and implementation. The peer review template emerged via a student-initiated act of co-creation. This template was formalised and embedded within the VLE, enabling it to be distributed to other cohorts and programmes in the business school.

Although a further stage of work is required to undertake a more systematic study of student views through surveys, initial evidence based on observations, verbal and written feedback from students, and trends in assessment outcomes suggests that this co-design activity has led to tangible benefits for the apprenticeship students. These advantages include increased student satisfaction, higher-quality reflective writing, and enhanced opportunities for interpersonal, self-regulation, and reflective skills development. Furthermore, the benefits gained here were achieved without significant increases to the workload of academic staff. This case study will hopefully inspire others to co-design curricula and assessment in similar learning contexts in higher education.

NOTES

1. In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland there are nine qualification levels (entry level to level 8). Higher and degree apprenticeships are offered at levels 4 to 7 e.g., higher apprenticeship to master's degree (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2024).

2. The online materials which students work through contain materials around some of the principles of giving and receiving feedback. These include the difference between positive vs. negative feedback and ensuring it is the behaviour that is commented on, not the individual.
3. Short for alternative text, alt text is concise descriptive text that describes a visual item in a digital medium.
4. Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills. They inspect a range of educational institutions in the UK.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Elizabeth Houldsworth is an associate professor of management learning and education at Henley Business School and is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Michael Kilmister is an academic developer at the University of Reading. He specialises in inclusive pedagogies in higher education and is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Rekha Brique studied a level 7 apprenticeship programme at Henley Business School and holds a Head of Service role with London Probation

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APPENDIX 1: TEMPLATE CREATED BY STUDENTS FOR PEER REVIEW

When contemplating your peer review remember:

In the Assignment Question document, the assessment criteria for personal development are summarised as:

1. Evidence of understanding and skills relating to the generic **process** of self-reflection as groundwork for development planning.
2. Evidence of understanding and skills relating to the **purpose** of reflection as groundwork for development of competences and perspectives needed for future leadership roles, as well as a balanced, fulfilled and healthy life.

To structure your peer review, you may find it helpful to use the template below [designed by one of the student cohorts]

Questions to consider	Reviewer notes
How well does the apprenticeship student reflect on their personal development as required by assignment question?	
How have they demonstrated that their personal development has interacted with their work and broader life experiences?	
To what extent have they utilised self-reflection – going beyond description?	
How have they used reflection to inform personal development planning in line with assignment question?	
How SMART are the personal goals outlined?	
Any other comments / feedback	