

# FACULTY FOCUS

HIGHER ED TEACHING STRATEGIES FROM MAGNA PUBLICATIONS

## Peer Assessment that Improves Performance in Groups

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Peer assessment in groups has been shown to effectively address a number of group process issues, but only if the peer assessment has a formative component. Many studies have shown that if peer assessment is used at the end of a group project, group members will punish their dysfunctional members—those who didn't do work, didn't turn work in on time, didn't come to meetings, and didn't do quality work—but they won't confront those group members when they commit those dysfunctional behaviors. After-the-fact peer assessment gives the teacher input on who did and didn't contribute in the group, but it doesn't change what happened in that group or help students learn how to confront group member problems when they emerge.

Faculty members Anson and Goodman describe an online peer assessment system they developed that can be administered efficiently, provides quality feedback, and fosters effective team processes. Details for setting up and using the system are laid out in the article. Group members respond to four questions sets, including open and closed questions about the performance of each individual group member, and open and closed questions about how the group is functioning. Group members give each other feedback that is task focused—it's about how the group member is performing tasks, not feedback about personal characteristics. The group member questions include these, among others: attends team meetings, communicates and responds promptly to team members, meets deadlines and completes assigned work, and listens and respectfully considers teammates' ideas and opinions.

The activity has been designed so that groups must confront the feedback and make some decisions about how they will respond.

Group members get a printed report with their closed question data results and suggestions made by their team members (anonymously). They also get averaged ratings for the questions on overall team functioning. In some cases these materials were received electronically; other times they were distributed in class, and students were given a few minutes to read them silently. Then, and this may be the most interesting and valuable part of the process, teams convened and had a 10- to 15-minute improvement discussion. Based on the feedback they were provided, they talked about what they were doing well as a team, what they were doing poorly, and the top three things they should start doing differently. Team members took notes during this discussion and those were transformed into the team's process improvement plan.

The courses where this system was used involved “extended, multi-phased projects.” (p. 28) One involved a complex senior capstone course project. The teams in these courses engaged in three rounds of this team improvement process. The collected data show that three team processes stood out as strengths for most of the teams: “assigning tasks to all members, focusing criticisms on ideas instead of on people, and the team's ability to assess itself.” (p. 31) And there was one

weakness, a perennial for groups of all sorts: “completes work before last-minute deadlines.” (p. 32)

The article contains sample peer reports for individual group members and for the teams, along with the various question sets and many more details on how the authors implemented the system in their courses. It’s an interesting system that provides individuals and groups with good formative feedback. Even more noteworthy, the activity has been designed so that groups must confront the feedback and make some decisions about how they will respond. Students are being taught that problems within a group can be constructively resolved in ways that benefit the group and the work it’s completing.

Reference: Anson, R., and Goodman, J.A. (2014). A peer assessment system to improve student team experiences. *Journal of Education for Business*, 89 (1), 27-34.