Examining the impact of formative assessment strategies (peer and self-assessment) embedded in the initial teacher education course on students’ learning and teaching skills.

Abstract

This report evaluates the outcomes of a small scale action research that investigated the impact of formative assessment strategies (peer and self-assessment) embedded in the initial teacher education course on pre-service trainee teachers’ learning and teaching skills. The research was conducted with a cohort of students studying on the postgraduate initial teacher education programme (ITE) for lifelong learning sector (PGDE/PDE) at the University of Bolton.

The study confirmed the considerable impact of learning cultures on the ways the trainees implemented formative assessment strategies in their practice. If peer and self-assessment were part of the trainees’ delivered curriculum (as in case of the BTEC Performing Arts), the motivation to develop one’s own formative assessment strategies was high. Likewise, if the institution used a particular formative assessment strategy, the trainees were more confident to embrace it. Conversely, if the trainees did not experience any practical application of peer and self-assessment in their teaching institution, they either refused it or considered it inappropriate for their particular subject, regardless of their own experiences with these on the ITE course. This was the case with trainees working with vulnerable and disengaged groups. Equally, it seems that trainees teaching high stakes subjects, such as GCSE English, experienced more controlled teaching and assessment regimes than trainees teaching vocational BTEC courses (Performing Arts). The GCSE English sessions were much more teacher centred with no evidence of peer or self-assessment, though there seems to be a change in the trainees’ attitudes and practice once the GCSE course entered a revision stage.

It can therefore be concluded that though the trainees value the positive impact of peer and self-assessment on their own learning, they seem to require much more focused training to apply these to their own classroom practice.

Introduction

John Hattie’s statement “Know thy impact” (cited in Petty, 2012/13, p. 10) has become a powerful inspiration to conduct small practitioner action research to establish the impact of peer and self-assessment strategies embedded in the teacher education programme that is run at the University of Bolton. The research was conducted with one cohort of pre-service teacher trainees who studied on the postgraduate initial teacher education programme (ITE) for lifelong learning sector (Postgraduate Diploma in Education for graduate trainees or Professional Diploma in Education for non-graduate trainees - PGDE/PDE) in 2013 - 14. The trainees were asked to complete a questionnaire; then an observation of the teaching practice of two trainees was conducted in their teaching placement; finally a short interview was executed with each of the observed trainees.

The need for the research arose from the fact that there have been only limited analysis and measurement of the impact of formative assessment strategies (peer and self-assessment) on students’ learning and teaching skills. To cite the article: Bacova, D. (2014) Examining the impact of formative assessment strategies (peer and self-assessment) embedded in the initial teacher education course on students’ learning and teaching skills. Research in practice. London: IFL, pp. 65 – 92.
trainee teachers, though these had been implemented in their ITE curriculum at the University of Bolton for some years. It has also been assumed that if the trainee teachers experience these strategies during their study, they would be more willing or confident to use them in their teaching practice.

The purpose of this study was therefore to elicit and then analyse the response of the trainee teachers to peer and self-assessment tasks implemented in the PGDE/PDE curriculum in order to evaluate the programme more critically while utilising the data collected in the research. The research focused on the attitudes of the trainees to the strategies that were designed in the programme to improve their learning and teaching skills. It investigated whether the trainees perceived the discussion on assessment criteria, peer assessment through peer feedback and action planning as a form of self-assessment to be beneficial for their further learning on the course and for their professional development as teachers. It also aimed to evidence the impact of the programme on the ability of the trainees to apply peer and self-assessment strategies in their teaching practice.

Literature review

Formative assessment as assessment for learning

In this study the term ‘formative assessment’ is understood within the context of ‘assessment for learning’ (AFL), as it explores peer and self-assessment as one of the key strategies that enhance learning. Both these terms are therefore used interchangeably, as suggested by Gardner (2006, p. 2) and other authors (e.g. Wiliam, 2011; Bennett, 2011). For example, Bennett (2011) argues it is not the name but the practice that is all the more important. He views formative assessment as being “still a work-in-progress” (p. 21) and urges practitioners to conduct “more work ... to push the field forward” (p. 20) to gather the evidence for its significant impact on learning. For Bennett, formative assessment is “neither a test nor a process, but some thoughtful integration of process and purposefully designed methodology or instrumentation” (2011, p. 7). Wiliam (2011) responding to Bennett’s arguments formulated tentatively his own definition of formative assessment that also informs my own stance towards assessment and shapes consequently the discussion on the findings of this research:

An assessment functions formatively to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have made in absence of that evidence. (Wiliam 2011, p. 43)

The researchers’ strong arguments about the positive impact of formative assessment on learning have popularised the concept widely amongst teachers, teacher educators, policy makers and OFSTED inspectors (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Gardner (ed.), 2006 and 2012; critically reviewed by Sadler, 1998; Daugherty and Ecclestone, 2006; Mitchell, 2006; Dunn and Mulvenon, 2009; Bennett, 2011). Even though the emphasis of the educational research has been on investigating formative assessment as assessment for learning mainly in the primary and secondary compulsory schooling, further and higher education establishments have also adopted various AFL strategies, mainly peer and self-assessment (Topping, 1998; Dochy et al (1999); Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000; Hanrahan and Isaacs, 2001; Weurlander et al., 2012). However, it must be noted here that the research into the formative assessment practices in the post-compulsory vocational sector which is the main
educational context where our trainee teachers are placed and eventually find employment has been neglected (Ecclestone et al., 2010).

The research by Torrance (2007) demonstrates that though the sector has successfully adopted some of the strategies of formative assessment, it has focused mainly “on criteria compliance and award achievement” (p. 282). He points out that assessment has “moved from ‘assessment of learning through ‘assessment for learning’ to ‘assessment as learning’” (p. 292) due to the prevailing practice of competence-based and criterion referenced assessment regimes. He notices a narrowing impact of formative assessment strategies on learning as these focus mostly on “what the learner can do, ..., in relation to the tasks required of them for competent practice” (2007, p. 292) instead of a more divergent forms of assessment that would allow the teacher to see “what else the learner can do” (p. 292). Davies and Ecclestone (2008), too, are critical of the practices developed in the sector. They demonstrate that different learning cultures in vocational training determine formative assessment practices and often emphasise instrumental learning at the expense of “cognitive progression within a subject domain” (2008, p. 84). They critically review the prevailing attitudes that strengthen “formative assessment as coaching for grade achievement and little more” (2008, p. 84), associating learning with achievement and argue for empowering teachers to be able to “challenge the current climate of mark domination” (2008, p. 85).

As far as the initial teacher education (ITE) is concerned there have been a number of different studies investigating trainee teachers’ assessment concepts, practices, values and experiences (Keogh et al., 2002; Moyles and Yates, 2003; Macellain, 2004; Graham, 2005; Mitchell, 2006; Winterbottom et al., 2008; Koutsoupidou, 2010; Black and Wiliam, 2012a and 2012b; Pedder and James, 2012; Lee and William, 2005). All these studies, though, stress the importance of introducing assessment as a complex concept into the ITE programme in order to challenge the trainees’ limited conceptual understanding and lack of personal and professional experience.

Peer and self-assessment are, according to Black and Wiliam (2012b), one of the four assessment strategies that underline formative assessment, in addition to (1) classroom dialogue (including discussion); (2) comment only marking; and (4) formative use of summative tests (2012b, p. 208).

Peer assessment

Topping (1998) defines peer assessment in quite a broad term “as an arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality, or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status” (p. 250). For Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000), peer and self-assessment are processes in which learners are “engaging with criteria and standards, and applying them to make judgements” (p. 287). Some authors recognise a difference between peer assessment and peer review. Peer assessment is considered a more formal process that can include rating or grading, while peer review is associated with less formal evaluation of one another’s work (University of Sussex, 2014; Pearce et al., 2009), however in the context of formative assessment researchers usually refer to peer assessment identifying a vast variety of practices in educational contexts (Topping, 1998). On the other hand, though, Wiliam (2011) firmly rejects the practice of using peer assessment for summative purposes including grading as it raises, as he believes “a number of ethical concerns” (p. 137). According to Wiliam, “peer assessment should ... help the individual being assessed improve his work” (2011, p. 137). For the purposes of the research, a
broader concept of peer assessment is utilised, mainly due to the highly varied context in which our trainees teach.

Self-assessment

Dochy et al. (1999, p. 334) define self-assessment as a process requiring learners to evaluate and judge “their own learning” and “their achievements”. The learners are expected to play an active role in the “reflection on one’s own learning processes and results” (1999, p. 334) (confirmed by Sadler, 1998; Pedder and James, 2012). Black and Wiliam (1998) believe that learners are in general “honest and reliable in assessing both themselves and one another” (p. 9) and consider self-assessment an “essential component of formative assessment” (p. 10). Self-assessment is closely linked with an ability of learners to understand goals and targets they are asked to achieve, this means they should be more directly involved in the discussion on learning objectives and assessment criteria. The presented research therefore included the attitudes of the trainees to the classroom practice of discussing assessment criteria in the sessions as this is deemed to enhance their self-assessment skills.

Methodology

The research focused on three questions:

1. What is the impact of the formative assessment strategies; self-assessment and peer assessment, embedded in the ITT course on trainee teachers?
2. How do the trainee teachers assess the impact their experience of formative assessment, (self-assessment and peer assessment) delivered as a part of the ITT programme, on their work placement?
3. To what extent do the trainee teachers implement these strategies (self-assessment and peer assessment) into their practice?

The context of the study

The full-time ITE programme at the University of Bolton runs for nine months (September – May) and leads either to the certification of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) or Professional Diploma in Education (PDE). The trainees are required to complete the first module Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS) and then they are placed into a variety of educational settings (from October onwards), mostly staying in the same institution for the rest of the programme.

The ITE programme embeds peer and self-assessment tasks that are designed to support trainees’ development of their own assessment skills. For example, the first and second modules require peer feedback on the trainee’s micro-teach and team teach, respectively. The trainees are also asked to complete a number of action plans, for example after receiving feedback on their assignments (through the tutor feedback on their summative assessment) and on their teaching in their work placement. The peer feedback is understood as part of the peer assessment strategy while action plans are viewed as self-assessment tools and both should encourage trainees to develop a better understanding of learning objectives, improve their learning and teaching skills, and increase self-awareness of own progression.
The Participants

The sample consisted of 19 trainee teachers, most of them were graduates (18 out of 19); their subject specialisms ranged from English, English Literature and Creative Writing (7), to Media (3), Performing Arts (8) and Psychology (1). They were placed in different educational institutions reflecting the sector, in further education colleges (11), private training providers (3), a community centre (1), and higher education institutions (4). The cohort was chosen because they were taught by the researcher who implemented specific teaching strategies to strengthen the impact of peer and self-assessment, namely group discussion on assessment criteria and devising various checklists to review their final assignment tasks.

As the purpose of the research was to investigate a specific ITE programme that took place in a particular socio-cultural setting, an action research using qualitative research methods was chosen. To ensure internal validity of the research the researcher used triangulation (Merriam, 1998, p. 204) through three different data collection methods: firstly, a semi-structured questionnaire was devised and distributed to the participants (Appendix A), then an observation of two volunteering trainees (Appendices B1 and B2) was arranged and finally, an interview with these trainees was conducted (Appendices C1 and C2) (Creswell, 2007; Cohen et al., 2001).

To strengthen the reliability of data, both the observed and interviewed trainees had a limited teaching experience in mainstream further education and they were informed that the observation and the interview would have no consequence on their summative assessment. Confidentiality and anonymity were achieved by appropriate data protection, they were identified as trainee teacher A (a female) and trainee teacher B (a male).

The questionnaire

A semi-structured questionnaire was piloted before it was emailed to the participants. Hard copies of the questionnaire were also provided as required. The completed hard and electronic copies were collected by a colleague of the researcher in such a way that prevented the researcher from recognising the participants’ identity to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity. To maintain the ethical requirements for the research, the participants were explained its purposes and asked to sign an informed agreement, following the University of Bolton ethical research procedures.

The questionnaire had two parts (Appendix A). The first part consisted of eight questions using a Likert scale response. This element of the questionnaire was aimed at, firstly, finding out about the trainees’ attitudes to the embedded strategies that contributed to peer and self-assessment, namely how these were experienced in the affective domain as regards motivation and enjoyment; and secondly, whether these strategies were viewed as supporting the trainees’ learning, i.e. being beneficial or problematic. Moreover, the questions 1, 4, 5, and 7 encouraged the respondents to explain the reasons for their answers.

The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 9 questions, 8 of which were open ended. This element of the questionnaire focused on the trainees’ ability to, firstly, reflect more deeply on their experiences and attitudes to formative assessment strategies used in their programme, and secondly how or whether they can apply them into their teaching practice.
16 questionnaires out of 19 were completed by 10 February 2014 which provided 84% overall response rate. For the analysis of the responses to the Likert scale questions only 13 questionnaires could be used and three had to be discarded due to the unreliable data (the Likert scale questions were not completed, incomplete or confused).

The responses were analysed using “conventional content analysis” (Newby, 2010, p. 485) and the same data analysis was utilised when discussing the findings gathered from observations and interviews.

The observations

Two volunteering trainees were chosen to represent both genders, the two main subject groups (English and Performing Arts) within the cohort, and with similar teaching experience in the sector. A semi-structured observation checklist with the space for field notes was devised. The checklist was divided into two parts, the first part concentrated on those teaching strategies embedded in the classroom practice that supported self-assessment skills; the second part focused on peer assessment. (Trainee A – appendix B1; trainee B – appendix B2)

The interviews

The observations were then followed by short interviews (up to 6 minutes) based on an “interview guide” approach (according to Patton 1980, quoted in Cohen et al., 2001, p. 271). These were conducted to gain an insight into the participants’ unique and personal views on peer and self-assessment as experienced during the programme as well as in their teaching practice. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using content as well as descriptive analysis. (Trainee A – appendix C1; trainee B – appendix C2)

The limitations of the research can be identified as:

1. Focusing only on one cohort of trainees.
2. Gathering the data during their study, namely in the middle of their course. To measure the overall impact of the programme on the trainees’ attitudes to and practice of formative assessment, the measurement should have been conducted at the beginning as well as at the end of their course.

Outcomes and Discussion

The questionnaire

The Likert scale questionnaire revealed an overall positive emotional and personal attitudes of the trainees to the activities that promote AfL (See the Table 1.). Most of the trainees perceived discussion of the assignment brief and assessment criteria as enjoyable. Five trainees appreciated their peers’ ability to simplify the tasks as well as provide emotional support to one another. One respondent however described the discussion as “confusing” because “no definitive, straightforward answers were provided”, while another respondent associated the negative attitudes with the personal state of anxiety triggered by the thought of assessment in general.
Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree or disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Discussion on the assignment brief and assessment criteria with my peers in the session was enjoyable.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I found giving peer feedback (for micro teach and team teach) useful and engaging.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I found receiving peer feedback (for micro teach and team teach) useful and engaging.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Action planning after every assignment has helped me identify areas for further learning.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Action planning after every observation has helped me focus on specific areas for development.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I found action planning a chore that needs to be done only to pass the course.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Self-assessment checklists provided by the tutor were helpful in meeting assessment criteria (for lesson planning; Scheme of Work writing; assessment tool description).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I have found self-assessment checklists inspiring to direct my learning in other modules as well.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from the Table 1., the process of giving and receiving peer feedback through peer assessment seems to be valued as an overall positive experience. Similar results are seen when it comes to action planning after receiving feedback on the assignments and observations. When asked to explain their views on action planning and its consequent support of learning, 10 trainees linked the process with the identification of areas that need to be learnt, 2 respondents believed that it supported their teaching skills, however 1 believed “assignments are one off” which might mean that the presumption that the action plans automatically contribute to a higher level of reflection on their own learning needs may ignore the variability of trainees’ previous study experiences, routines and learning styles.

When analysing the responses on action planning after the observations we can see again an overall positive response with 10 answers, however there were 3 negative ones, one complaining that “It’s taken until February for anybody to watch me teach”. The positive responses might indicate that action planning helps trainees heighten their awareness of the areas that need to be addressed as regards their teaching skills. However, the negative ones might have been more of a reaction to the problems with the organisation of the observation practice rather than with the actual action planning. To clarify, the ITE programme requires two mentor observations from the placement to be conducted ideally at the beginning of their teaching practice before University of Bolton qualified assessors come to assess every trainee teacher formally (up to 6 assessment visits per a trainee). However, in reality some placement mentors might be extremely busy, so the observations can
sometimes be conducted later in the programme than it is desirable for the trainees who might become frustrated by feeling isolated.

Despite an overall positive response to action planning after every assignment and observation, 6 out of 13 trainees consider the process of their actual writing negatively, 4 are undecided and only 3 do not consider it ‘a chore’. However, as this was the only negatively phrased question, it might have had an effect on the overall outcome. When commenting on checklists provided by the tutor, again there were a variety of responses. An overall positive response by 9 learners was challenged by 2 undecided and 2 who could not remember either receiving or using them. The self-assessment checklists seem to be a contested tool when it comes to their overall application in other modules. Even though 8 out of the 13 trainees consider them to be ‘inspiring’ to direct their learning, 3 could not decide and 2 disagreed. This overall response suggests that if trainees are asked to design their own planning documents and gather the evidence for their assignments, checklists could be uploaded on the virtual learning space of MOODLE, to be accessible to everyone who might want to use them.

The second part of the questionnaire was appropriately completed by all 16 trainees who acknowledged that the discussions on assignment brief with their peers took place in the sessions (Q1. Did discussion with your peers take place concerning the assignment brief and assessment criteria?), and therefore their answers on this practice can be considered as reliable and valid. To collect more detailed and richer data on the trainees’ attitudes to and understanding of peer and self-assessment open ended questions were used.

Q2. If yes, did peer discussion support your understanding of the assessment requirements?

15 respondents out of 16 confirmed that the peer discussion supported their understanding of assessment criteria, explaining that their peers “simplify/break down assessments”, they use “simpler terms”. The discussion “provides structure and meaning to things that are confusing”, while the same respondent with the negative attitude confirmed what was said in the Question 1 in the first part of the questionnaire that the peer discussion “was often very confusing” and the respondent “would prefer to discuss with a staff member who could give a definite answer than peers who have often been wrong”.

Q3. If yes, how has peer group discussion changed your attitude to assignment writing?

The majority of trainees answered positively. 13 of them identified areas such as helping with planning, getting ideas, broadening perspectives. In addition, there were answers that stressed an emotional aspect of assignment writing, in the sense of being able to “panic less” or “it feels calmer; less official; more humanistic”. Two respondents appreciated the social dimension of group discussions — “we can give each other ideas on work, who needs help and how we can help”; “most of my peers were in the same boat”. Only three negative answers were identified, one not completed as being negative in the previous question, one still unsure as being worried about the personal skills of assignment writing, one feeling strongly about their own academic skills, so not in need of any peer support as one simple explanation would suffice his or her needs.

Q4. In your view, what were the three most important strengths of giving and receiving peer assessment in a/ micro-teach and b/ team-teach?
The respondents appreciated again that through peer assessment they were getting a broader perspective on “what others are doing”. Most of the respondents believed this practice contributed to their own personal and professional development. They noticed the value of increased interaction and involvement in the session and appreciated again the social side of learning, one of them even stressing that “it in turn improves friendship”. Receiving feedback contributed to the increased confidence due to the positive evaluation of one’s teaching. However, one respondent did not answer this question, though identified a number of weaknesses which might suggest he or she could not propose any strengths. There were 3 answers that related the strengths of peer assessment to either being “critical of other people’s teaching”, or seeing the process as “essentially comparing teaching of another person/group to our own” and seeing this as a “competition...to ensure we are trying our hardest”.

**Q5. In your view, what were the three most important weaknesses of giving and receiving peer assessment in a/ micro teach and b/ team teach?**

When identifying weaknesses of peer assessment, the responses were as detailed and rich as the ones to the previous question on strengths. The majority of trainees identified the personal emotional response to the task as not wanting to be “too harsh”, “not entirely honest”, or “do not like to criticize”. On the cognitive level the respondents were questioning the reliability of peer assessment, rendering it too subjective through lacking enough specialised subject knowledge, to be “contradictory”, not constructive or “concise”. One response identified a possibility of peer pressure entering the process, “give bad comments if you don’t get on with a peer”. Some saw the problems with the management of implementing peer assessment into the session. They felt that it was not possible to be part of the session as well as to be asked to write their feedback on the session, one trainee therefore believed that the whole task is done only “for the sake of it” as there was not enough “time to reflect or think”. When discussing receiving feedback, the trainees felt vulnerable and being afraid of “taking it in a bad way”. The received feedback was sometimes refused as being “repetitive”, “not detailed”, “too many points to address”, or not used for further personal development.

**Q6. Do your students use peer assessment? If yes, how do they use peer assessment? If yes, did you introduce peer assessment as a result of your experiences on your PGDE/PDE course?**

Three quarters of trainees said that their students use peer assessment in their class, 12 out of 16, 4 said no. The respondents provided varied examples, some of a questionable merit for assessment for learning, for example learners marking each other’s work (5 responses). The other answers identified: taking part in formal and more focused peer assessment (6 responses) when their learners comment on each other’s work in class be it a piece of writing, group work or observing a practical skill. One trainee commented that his or her students use peer assessment “reluctantly”.

When asked if peer assessment was introduced as a result of the trainee teachers’ experience on their PGDE course, only 4 answered directly “yes”, in addition to these, 2 said that the course improved their skills in formative assessment, “it made me more consciously consider it”; “to be more effective”. 2 respondents claimed peer assessment was already part of the curriculum they delivered; one believed peer assessment was embedded automatically seeing it as part of group work, being part of “differentiation in the group”. One trainee said a particular strategy of peer
assessment was suggested to him or her by a colleague on the placement; one learnt the strategy on the previous teacher training course.

Q7. Can you provide at least 1 example of peer assessment and 1 example of self-assessment used by your students?

There were 13 answers to the question, two were not completed, one answer was “no”. The responses illustrate a wide range of views and sometimes unclear understanding of the concept of formative assessment. Two respondents mentioned that again peer assessment was conducted via more formal feedback through marking, while the majority of answers identified informal group feedback, group discussion and debate and group tasks. For self-assessment a number of different answers were provided reflecting the variety of teaching in the lifelong learning sector as represented in this group. The trainees mentioned: asking their students to mark their own performance; watch themselves in the mirror how they perform a specific skill; use reflection on own performance or skill; complete self-assessment forms; write a self-reflective essay and a log book or tutorials that ask students to reflect on their previous performance.

Q8. If you have identified two examples, why did you incorporate them in the course you teach?

There were 12 answers to this question. 6 respondents believe that peer and self assessment support their students’ learning about the subject, understand “specific criteria” and contributes to their personal development, “gives chance to look at performance critically”. 3 confirmed they use these strategies as they are part of the course curriculum they follow. Two responses appreciated development of interaction through peer assessment, one saying “I wanted the students to work together as they had become very distanced from each other”. One respondent uses assessment strategies because “they were a ‘fun’ and non-evasive way of using peer assessment “. One trainee teacher feels that “it is hard to incorporate anything other than task completion and Q&A into my teaching”, while another sees an opportunity to utilise peer assessment to support learning even when the teacher is too busy to support every individual learner, “Colleagues at my placement suggested the peer assessment and I thought the self-assessment was a good way to meet learners [sic] needs. The peer assessment is done because staff don’t have time to read essay drafts unless its [sic] incorporated into teaching time, and the self-assessment was done to help me plan”.

Q9. In your opinion, have there been any obstacles for incorporating peer and self-assessment into your teaching practice?

Out of all 16 replies, seven believe there are no obstacles in application of peer and self-assessment into their teaching practice. One trainee teacher noticed that the students can be quite “harsh” or they “mark their friends higher than they should do”, another noticed that students do not see too much relevance in these assessment strategies and consequently try to avoid them. It is therefore vital for the teacher “to help understand the point of a lot of the work that is taught”. Four trainees identified the problem with their particular group structure and group dynamics, the group is either too small “…I teach small group the students become quite close, this means they are reluctant to criticise each other “”, or too hostile to each other “unwillingness of learners to communicate with each other, let alone assess one another’s work”; seeing peer assessment and learning as a competition with one another “I teach a creative subject and therefore peer assessment can be taken badly by students who are in competition with one another”; or lacking any motivation to
learn the subject “they do not care enough to provide valid feedback to their peers – it doesn’t work”. Two trainees see the problem with the curriculum structure they deliver, as it is either due to the organisational constraints or curriculum constraints as he or she cannot see how peer or self-assessment could be introduced at all in the current module that is based mostly on group work unless it becomes more about “solo performance”.

Observations

The observations revealed some interesting insights into the practice of formative assessment as used by our trainees. For the observation a simple structured observation form with short field notes was used. The observation form had 13 areas to observe, 7 related to the promotion of self-assessment, 6 to peer assessment.

Trainee A’s observation of the GCSE English class (Appendix C1) evidenced some form of self-assessment implemented. This was most evident in the last task of the session when the learners were encouraged to reflect on their own learning that day and identify what they had learnt. They wrote a language feature they believed they understood and could explain on a post-it provided by the trainee. The trainee then read aloud their answers and praised them. However, there was neither an assessment strategy, for example questioning, that would confirm the learners’ statements nor any other evidence how these reflections could be taken further to become part of the following session’s planning. Though the learners were advised to use a glossary of terms, there was no direct instruction how this could be implemented into their own study. Individual learners were provided targeted feedback that could support their self-assessment when working on a language analysis task in the second part of the session, however when presenting new topic, the trainee mostly asked closed questions and provided a limited feedback, mostly on evaluating correct and incorrect answers.

Peer assessment, though was much less evident. The learners mostly worked on their own despite being encouraged to share their findings when conducting a textual analysis in the second half of the session.

Trainee B’s observation of BTEC Level 2 Performing Arts lesson (Appendix C2) illustrated a more inclusive approach for formative assessment strategies. Firstly, there was a much wider practice of questioning techniques; the learners were encouraged more to explain their answers, though positive reinforcement and a brief approval or disapproval of answers were evidenced here too. Secondly, the tasks implemented in the session themselves embedded the process of self-assessment to some degree, namely when the learners had to justify their preferences for a particular role in the production team. Here the learners talked about themselves, what they identified as their own particular strength to meet the demands of the role but how they also wanted to stretch themselves – many of them chose a particular role as it gave them an opportunity to learn something new. The feedback provided by the teacher enhanced their understanding of the role as well as aimed to stretch and deepen the experience of learning about the chosen role.

Similarly to the observation of trainee A, there was very little evidence of peer assessment in this session. The only example could possibly be when the learners had to choose a most suitable candidate for a particular role in the production team in case when two or more of them competed for the same role. The candidates had to persuade their classmates that their personal qualities and
attitudes were the best ones for the particular role and to explain how the team would benefit if they were chosen. The learners eventually chose to vote ‘secretly’ for their favourite candidate which can be viewed as a desire to avoid any peer pressure. However, the chosen candidates did not receive any peer feedback that would identify reasons for being chosen.

Interviews

Both interviewed trainees valued peer and self-assessment strategies implemented on the PGDE course. They both classified them as tools that can be used constructively to support their reflective practice and to be more aware of the areas that need to be improved, though trainee A did confirm her anxiety about providing a truly honest peer feedback during the micro-teach session at the beginning of the course. However, while being so anxious about peer assessment, she later recognised its positives in her teaching practice when she classified her mentor observations “as a shared practice”. She also claimed that the action planning “benefitted” her because “I’ve got a better overview of where I was going wrong and I’ve tightened up those problem areas.”

Trainee B also acknowledged action planning as a tool to review his own progress,

I know what I need to do, so I was gonna do but now I’ve got it down on paper, I can see where my development is and where I’ve improved and what I still need to improve on, it’s that continuous development thing.

While the practice of trainee A demonstrated a limited approach to peer and self-assessment, the interview conducted a month later showed a more open desire to implement these in the sessions. She particularly believed that these techniques can be utilised mainly in the period of revision before sitting for the final exam: “I’m getting peers to give feedback because I’ve really given them as much as I can now. “

Trainee B viewed peer and self-assessment as part of the classroom practice easily adapted by his own learners, “ ... with my second years they were doing audition monologues, ..., and they themselves took it as a ... so one as auditioning, one as an auditioner, so then ... they comment on it, everything they’ve done, ....” Moreover, as the performing arts curriculum officially embeds peer and self-assessment, the trainee B’s students might be more at ease when utilising them, especially if video recording is used for further feedback and self-analysis. Having an advantage of video-recording the learners, the feedback can be seen as almost coaching to a particular skill even though, it could be argued, due to the nature of the subject itself (performing arts), this cannot be entirely viewed as having a purely instrumental role in providing the right answers or as spoon feeding.

Both trainees were aware of the problems with implementing peer assessment in class. Trainee A viewed this strategy as something her students were “reluctant” to use as this seemed to be “a new tool we’re giving them and most of them don’t like that empowerment.” She linked the anxiety with peer assessment to her own experiences on the ITE course. Trainee B believed that his learners avoid peer assessment purely because of “laziness”.

Conclusion
The research outcomes suggest that the majority of the trainees found the opportunity to discuss the assignment brief and assessment criteria in class with their peers valuable. They believed that their peers used the language in a more appropriate and accessible way to explain each other what the task implied, how they would be assessed and how they could possibly succeed. Moreover, the discussion encouraged the trainees to become more motivated to learn through collaborative way and to support each other emotionally as well as cognitively. This particular classroom activity can be therefore considered as one of the 5 key strategies of formative assessment namely the one that William calls, “activating learners as instructional resources of one another” (William, 2011, p. 46). Understanding the criteria for success meant the trainees knew where they were going which is “crucial foundation for self-assessment” (Black and William 2012b, p. 202). In this sense it can be suggested that this is a fundamental strategy to support the spirit of assessment for learning and it should be implemented in the classroom teaching practice.

The strategy, however, was not without its problems which were probably caused by the way it was implemented. It did not address the behavioural responses to assessment the trainees bring with themselves when returning to formal education. Responses to the questionnaire uncovered some deeply engrained expectations about the role of the teacher and the learner in education. The negative attitude to this particular practice was based on the belief that it is the teacher who has a definite and correct answer and this can be executed more effectively than listening to the confusing and contradictory ideas of the peers. Furthermore, over the years spent in a highly competitive school environment some learners might have developed a state of anxiety as soon as discussing any assessment procedure. Unfortunately, peer discussions could not alleviate this and probably a more individual approach would be needed.

The questionnaire and the interviews confirmed the overall positive impact of peer assessment through peer feedback on trainees’ understanding of own needs and how to make further steps in their learning. Firstly, the value of giving and receiving feedback was identified as an opportunity to understand better not only their classmates’ subject background but the sector itself. Secondly, the feedback provided some good constructive advice to further the trainees’ professional development as teachers, to deepen their self-reflection on their own strengths and areas for development, and inspired them to become more motivated and confident about their own capabilities. Thirdly, it enabled the trainees understand better how they are being assessed, the process of assessment and how it can be utilised in their own teaching practice.

On the other hand, though, the research demonstrated that there are some fundamental problems with the current procedures of implemented peer assessment through peer feedback. Firstly, the above-mentioned misconceptions of assessment the trainees unconsciously apply when utilising and reflecting upon peer feedback. Some see this as ‘criticism’ of and ‘competition’ with one another. Others worry about emotional responses to their comments; they feel there are a peer pressure and social requirements of good classroom interaction that stops them from being honest.

Secondly, the strategy of being ‘constructive’ is not clearly defined, so peer feedback is seen as unreliable and subjective. It revealed the trainees’ insecurities about their own skills in assessment - what to look at, how to assess, how to construct a meaningful feedback that would move learning forward. Thirdly, the trainees criticised the procedures of implementing peer assessment in the classroom, leaving them frustrated to manage too many tasks at the same time. In this sense, it
could be suggested, this research confirmed the outcomes of an earlier research (cited in Black and William, 2012b, p. 224) that the learners involved in formative assessment have to balance “three goals... completion of work tasks, effective learning, and social-relationship goals. When these in conflict, they tend to prioritize the social-relationship goals at the expense of learning goals...”. This was clearly evidenced in the questionnaire responses as well as in the interview with one of the trainees. Evaluating the positive and negative responses to the current practice of peer assessment embedded in the ITE programme it can be therefore concluded that it follows more the letter than the spirit of assessment for learning and that some changes into its implementation would certainly enhance its positive learning impact.

When investigating the impact of self-assessment through the use of action planning in the course, the responses in the questionnaire were more varied; however the interviews with the two trainees evidence a gradual behavioural and cognitive change to this particular practice. The interviewed trainees confirmed that these had a positive impact on their further learning and teaching practice. The action planning allowed them see more holistically how they were doing, whether they needed improvement in any particular skill and how this improvement progressed. Action planning seemed to deepen their self-reflection on learning as well as on teaching and provided some kind of guidance about next steps in their professional development. However, the results have to be understood as interim because the data were collected in the middle of their training programme and could not reflect an overall response to all requirements of action planning after every assignment, observation and even tutorial. As some responses to the questionnaire suggest, action planning may become ‘a chore’, another box to tick to comply with the course requirements more than to actually contribute to the trainees’ own self-assessment that would enhance their learning.

It can be argued that a more careful implementation needs to be suggested to allow action planning to become a truly effective strategy for self-assessment that enhances learning. Nevertheless it being very much valued by both interviewed trainees, the requirement to write up to 20 action plans during nine months on the course may prove to be quite counter-productive for the trainees’ needs.

When commenting on the application of formative assessment strategies (peer and self-assessment) in the trainees’ practice, we can say this study’s results are similar to those found in the research conducted by Lee and William (2005), Graham (2005), Mitchell (2006), Pedder and James (2012), Ecclestone et al. (2010) and others. The questionnaires identified some good examples together with some confusing or negative attitudes to peer and self-assessment. The observations evidenced only limited usage while the interviews confirmed their possible wider implementation. The study confirmed the considerable impact of ‘learning cultures’ (Ecclestone et al., 2010) on the ways the trainees implemented formative assessment strategies in their practice.

If peer and self-assessment were part of the trainees’ delivered curriculum (as in case of the BTEC performing arts), the motivation to develop one’s own formative assessment strategies was high. Likewise, if the institution used a particular formative assessment strategy, the trainees were more confident to embrace it (as pointed out in Graham’s study, 2005).

Conversely, if the trainees did not experience any practical application of peer and self-assessment in their teaching institution, they either refused it or considered it inappropriate for their particular subject, regardless their own experiences with these on the ITE course. This was the case with trainees working with vulnerable and disengaged groups. Equally, it seems that trainees teaching
high stakes subjects, such as GCSE English, experienced a more controlled assessment regime than trainees teaching vocational BTEC courses in performing arts. The GCSE English sessions were much more teacher-centred, with no evidence of peer or self-assessment, though there seems to be a change in the trainee’s attitudes and practice once the course entered a revision stage. It can be therefore suggested the ITE course has currently a limited impact on the trainees’ ability to successfully apply peer and self-assessment strategies in their classroom practice.

To conclude, it can be suggested that the outcomes of this study confirmed that the overall impact of the embedded formative assessment strategies in the ITE on trainee teachers could be considered as positive only up to a certain point regarding their attitudes, learning and teaching skills. In order to follow the true spirit of assessment for learning, the following recommendations should be implemented:

Recommendations

1. To make the strategy of peer discussions on learning goals and assessment criteria more successful, it should be introduced carefully into the regular classroom practice. More time should be paid to the justification of the task. Understanding the educational discourse is part of trainee teachers’ professional skill, so the group discussion should be followed up by a reflective stage in which the trainees identify its positives and negatives. As the fundamental theoretical underpinning of formative assessment (Black and Wiliam, 2012a) stresses, it is the learner who is ultimately responsible for directing and planning their own learning process, a point that needs to be explicitly translated to every trainee.

2. To improve skills in peer assessment and in providing constructive and useful peer feedback a number of steps can be suggested. Firstly, to change the learners’ perception of assessment, previous understanding of and attitudes to assessment need to be elicited, challenged and reflected upon from day one on the course. Secondly, before being asked to assess their peers during their micro teach, the trainees should explore various model examples of peer feedback to help them understand what constitutes constructive feedback. The trainees who write the feedback should stay non-participating observers. Lastly, the trainees need to understand the observation feedback by their peers as something they will actively utilise in their professional lives and might learn to appreciate greatly.

3. The trainees should be trained in the self-assessment skills. The first step forward could be the classroom practice when the trainees are asked to elaborate on own process of understanding, confusion and decision making while working on a task (metacognition).

4. To enable the trainees to apply peer and self-assessment in their own practice, teacher educators should focus more on trainees’ assessment skills through challenging misconceptions about the purpose of measuring learning. This could be done via consistently targeted classroom dialogue based on wider reading together with focused classroom practice observations.

5. To address the variety of learning cultures where the trainees are placed and subjects they teach, a range of good practice examples could eventually be collected and made available via the virtual learning environment, MOODLE.
To conclude, to be able to truly follow the spirit rather than the letter of formative assessment as assessment for learning, we should be aware of the fact that if we do not support our trainees “in integrating new ideas into their ... practice, then any changes produced tend to be minor, and transient” (Lee and Wiliam, 2005, p. 279). However to do this successfully, we should pay “closer attention to the voices of learners – what is important to them that they learn and how they believe that learning might best take place” (Hayward, 2012, p. 136). This study has attempted not only to achieve this but hopefully its outcomes might be of contribution to the field of teacher education, especially now when we are at the stage when the whole teacher education programme is undergoing major structural changes to meet a new political and social agenda.

Bibliography


