Improving geography essay writing using innovative assessment

Rachel Pain\(^a\); Graham Mowl\(^a\)

\(^a\) Division of Geography and Environmental Management, University of Northumbria, Newcastle upon Tyne

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Improving Geography Essay Writing Using Innovative Assessment

RACHEL PAIN & GRAHAM MOWL, University of Northumbria, UK

ABSTRACT This article reports a project which aims to improve the essay writing of undergraduates on a first-year geography course. The intention was that through self- and peer assessment as well as tutor assessment of essays, students would learn about assessment criteria and ways of meeting these. As these techniques are unfamiliar to most students, and past experience shows that they sometimes view them negatively, it was important to stress the value of the project to their learning, to prepare them in a workshop, and to supervise and regulate the assessment process carefully. The project is evaluated from student feedback and suggestions are made for implementation of similar projects in the future.

KEYWORDS Essay writing skills, self-assessment, peer assessment.

Why Improve Students’ Essay-writing Performance?

The Essay-writing Mystique

Essays are one of the most commonly used methods of assessing undergraduate students on geography degree courses. Potentially, they are effective and appropriate for testing a range of the academic proficiencies which we as teachers consider valuable, including library research, clarity of thought and expression, synthesis of ideas and the exercise of critical judgement. However, essays have been criticised for the way in which they are sometimes used in higher education, particularly for the gap which can exist between teachers' and students' expectations as to what they should contain (Lukeman, 1992). For example, students may see a good essay as one which contains lots of information and examples, while teachers are often more concerned with logical structure, mature expression and well-supported argument. Where essays fall short of being fair and beneficial tools of assessment, the most common reason is that the criteria on which they are judged are not made explicit to the students who are expected to write them (Brown et al., 1994; Gibbs, 1992a). Undergraduates, particularly in their first year, may not know exactly what is required in an essay at university level, the importance of writing technique, or the best way to go about writing one (Prosser & Webb, 1994). Other
students are already expert essay writers, but differences in students' experiences can be expected to widen each year as more undergraduates come from non-traditional routes (e.g. mature students). Traditionally, the relevant study skills have not been taught but, rather, the assumption is that they will be acquired simply by practice in doing the task involved; a mystique has been preserved around exactly what assessors require. Students are judged on their ability to crack the code and deliver the goods in appropriate packaging.

Geography undergraduates' introduction to computing provides a complete contrast in many departments, where the necessary skills are taught routinely and rigorously—often, switching on the PC is the first thing the fresher learns. Of course, computing skills will be valuable throughout the next three years of the degree, and attractive to employers afterwards. But, for the same reasons, it seems illogical that writing skills are not usually given the same emphasis. The principle underpinning the project reported here is that most students need to learn the skills involved in writing essays.

Some lecturers would argue that students do get help with essay writing from the feedback they are given when their coursework is returned. The problem with this is that the feedback often tends to be descriptive rather than explanatory—for example, a lecturer may criticise the student's essay structure, but unless he/she goes into detail or provides examples as to how the structure may be improved, the student has often learned nothing other than what he/she is not doing correctly. Feedback to students from lecturers who are pushed for time often reproduces the very failings which lecturers deplore in the same essays! Of course, individual lecturers have always varied in the way they view and give student feedback, and many make reference at some point in their courses to what they are looking for in written work including essays and examinations. In recent years, a number of geography departments have begun to tackle the mystique around how to write essays, sometimes helped along by the prospect of quality assessment exercises. Increasing numbers of departments make their marking criteria explicit in the form of published marking schemes, and many publish their own study guides and run tutorials giving advice on essay writing. Moreover, there is a plethora of general study-skills literature which students can dip into to help them with their technique.

The trouble is that (a) not all students—especially first years—will be motivated enough to seek out this advice, and (b) the study-skills literature is difficult to engage with actively. Students may find the advice given hard to relate to in the context of the specific assignments they are set. This is the justification for building an active project on essay writing into the curriculum and assessment procedure on an existing geography course.

Students' Perceptions of the Problem

The course on which the project was run is 'Human Geography and Explanation', a first-year core unit on the BA/BSc (Hons) Geography route at the University of Northumbria. Fifty-three students took the course in 1994–95, of whom two were mature students and all except one came with A level qualifications. As this was the first time the course had run under a newly introduced modular system, the curriculum as well as assessment procedures were subject to general changes, and this presented the opportunity to test out forms of assessment which were both closely integrated with the curriculum and more efficient.

Before the current project was devised, the first-year students who were to be involved
were surveyed by questionnaire about their experiences of essay writing. At this stage most of the class had already had four or five essays assessed at university on various courses. This time-lag between starting the degree course and receiving essay-writing training can be viewed as having advantages (in that the students had some knowledge of the task in hand) or disadvantages (help might be most effective when given as early as possible). In general, most geography students have some experience of writing essays at upper school level, but the requirements of these generally differ from those demanded at university level. Moreover, essays are becoming less important as part of A level syllabi. Of the first-year students surveyed, the majority said that essays had made up half or less of the coursework completed for their A levels, and 11% said they had not written essays at all.

The results of the survey suggest that while there are differences in need among students (as experience of writing essays and perceptions about competency vary dramatically), the essay-writing mystique is pervasive. We do not think that the following findings are unique to this particular department, or for that matter to geography as a taught discipline:

- 78% said they did not have a clear idea of what essay markers were looking for at university;
- Only 5% felt they got enough feedback on essays from staff;
- 22% said the feedback they got was not always of sufficient quality to make clear where they had done well or gone wrong, while a further 69% said this varied from lecturer to lecturer;
- 47% of students specified particular difficulties with writing essays, and a further 39% were aware that they had problems but could not say exactly what these were.

As the following examples of students’ self-identified problems with essay writing show, concern is mostly about technique rather than content:

I usually know what points I want to make but have difficulty putting them in order and making a coherent argument.

Having the content for an essay but not being able to construct the information correctly to make the essay a good one.

Can write fairly fluently on a subject, but not always sure what the title of the essay wants me to do.

Researching for information is easily carried out, and planning the essay can be done, but I find it difficult to bring all points in the essay to a conclusion and to make each point relevant without repeating myself.

It seems that students often know where they are going wrong—they have been told in written feedback—but rectifying matters in the next essay is another matter.

From the students’ point of view then, there is ample justification for helping them improve the technique involved in writing good essays as well as the content. From the teachers’ perspective, too, there are a number of benefits of study-skills training for students:

- It makes explicit the criteria by which students will be assessed. This means greater fairness, more focused and effective work from students, and potential savings on the time of staff (Brown et al., 1994; Gibbs, 1992b). It can also help staff assessing a particular course or degree route to adopt common standards (Brown et al., 1994).
- It helps to adjust for differences in experience and competence among students.
It encourages deep rather than surface approaches to learning (Brown & Dove, 1991). Students' ability to focus, reflect on and make appropriate changes to the way they study as well as what they are studying is a key element in this transition.

Ways of Teaching Essay-writing Skills

Race and Brown (1993) outline various suggestions for helping learners develop essay-writing skills. The methods they describe fall into three main categories:

- explaining to learners the benefits of becoming good at writing essays;
- giving straight advice on technique in planning, structuring and writing; and
- helping learners understand assessment criteria.

Ideally, perhaps, all three elements should be present in guidance to students on writing essays. In building training into an existing taught course, it was decided that the third method was likely to be most effective. Experiential learning, or learning by doing, is one of the most effective ways of teaching skills for assessed work (Race, 1991). In this project, by giving students experience as self- and peer assessors, and by helping them to understand assessment criteria, it was hoped that their understanding of what is required in essays (and consequently their own abilities) would improve. This method was chosen as the most valuable and time-efficient option, but also the most interesting and involving for the students.

Why use Innovative Assessment?

The academic case for more innovative approaches to assessment in higher education has been made strongly elsewhere (Boud, 1990; Brown & Knight, 1994; Ramsden, 1992; Somervell, 1993) and it is not necessary to reiterate those arguments here. The diet of assessment which most geography students experience is now much more varied than it was even five or 10 years ago. This change is in part a consequence of the intrinsic educational arguments referred to in the texts cited above, but it is also a response to other extrinsic factors which have affected the nature of UK higher education in recent years, namely increasing student numbers, Enterprise initiatives, and modularisation and semesterisation.

Perhaps the most widely used methods of innovative assessment are self-assessment and peer-assessment (Boud, 1990; Boud & Falchikov, 1989; Brown & Dove, 1991; Falchikov & Boud, 1989). In theory, these forms of assessment should go a considerable way to achieving Heron's (1981) somewhat revolutionary ideal of 'the redistribution of education power'. In practice, however, the specific context of the assessment is often fundamental to the outcome—the type and level of the course, the nature of the assignment, the students' previous experiences of assessment, the degree of responsibility and control held by the learners and the extent to which they are prepared for their role as assessors, are all likely to affect the success of self- and peer assessment.

The value of particular methods of assessment may also be viewed in different ways. In the case of self- or peer-assessment, for example, it may be valuable as a summative exercise (in which case effectiveness will be measured by the 'reliability' of self- and peer marks compared with tutor marks) or in a formative sense (measured by the extent to which students derive a recognised learning outcome from the process of assessing). The educational value of self-assessment and peer assessment is less widely questioned than its summative value (Boud & Falchikov, 1989; Somervell, 1993), and it seems that
this will particularly be the case where assessment is to some degree subjective, as with essays. In this project, while care was taken to make the end mark as ‘fair’ as possible, the value of self- and peer assessment was primarily viewed as formative: they were used to help students learn about the processes of essay writing and assessing. In a foundation first-year course, where marks do not count towards the final degree, this was considered appropriate.

Self- and peer assessment were intended to enhance students’ essay-writing skills by engaging them in different ways at each stage of the assessment process (Figure 1).

Benefits and Hazards

The self- and peer assessment required students to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses contained in the essays they were assessing. Even if students are unwilling or unable to identify weaknesses in their own essays they may perhaps be less reticent about identifying weaknesses in another student’s essay, and this might shed light on their own work. In addition to this, the assessment process had the effect of focusing the students’ attention on specific aspects of their essays which they may not previously have considered, such as content, presentation, argument and structure. The other benefit of self- and peer assessment lies in the volume and variety of feedback they provide for the learner.

Despite the considerable benefits accruing from self- and peer assessment, there are some potential hazards which need to be addressed in project design. McDowell and Mowl (1994) suggest that the reactions of students to self- and peer assessment exercises are by no means always positive and they highlight a number of common student concerns. These inform our list of principles for good assessment practice (Figure 2); a conscious effort was made to incorporate these principles in the design and implementation of the self- and peer assessment exercise described here. These principles also formed the basis of discussion with students before the project in which the educational benefits were stressed.

The Preparatory Workshop: teaching students about assessment

The timing of the project, within the 15-week course, is shown in Figure 3. The first stage of the project was a one-hour workshop for all students taking the course. The aim
1. **Security of assessment system**—assessment system must be secure and treat all students equally and fairly to ensure their confidence in the system and co-operation. Where possible anonymity of peer assessors must be maintained.

2. **Staff motivation for innovation**—students must be convinced of the tutor’s reasons for introducing innovative forms of assessment. Saving staff time is not a good enough reason.

3. **Feedback**—the assessment process must generate meaningful formative feedback for the learner and not just a mark or grade.

4. **Importance of assessment**—assessment must be important enough to convince students it is worth bothering about (numeric outcome may be only secondary to a recognised learning outcome), but not so important, if being tried for the first time, as to provoke anxiety amongst the students.

5. **Timing**—students must be given enough time to develop their critical skills and to carry out the assessment process; they should not feel pressured by time.

6. **Clarity and ownership of criteria**—criteria for assessment should be explicit and clear. To facilitate this the students should be involved in generating the criteria for the assessment.

7. **Developing skills and confidence**—students should be given the opportunity to practise and develop confidence in their own ability to assess.

*Source:* Based on McDowell & Mowl (1994).

**Figure 2. Principles for ‘good’ innovative assessment practice.**

was to prepare them for their role in the self- and peer assessment processes and to give them advice on essay writing. This was achieved through the following:

- breaking down the ‘mystique’ of essay writing/assessing;
- developing students’ trust in their ability to assess work;
- generating criteria for essay writing and assessment;
- exploring good/bad essay techniques in relation to a question relevant to the course.

**Figure 3. Timing of assessment project within the course.**
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The workshop was designed so that students could take an active role and become involved in the teaching and learning in the session. The structure of the session was as follows:

(1) (5 minutes) Introduce workshop. Remind students of why essays are assessed and how they will be assessed. Stress what we perceive as the value of this. Take questions.

(2) (5 minutes) Small-group discussions: conferring on Marking Exercise.

(3) (10 minutes) Whole-class discussion on Marking Exercise. Begin to list some important qualities of essays on OHP, based on students’ suggestions.

(4) (15 minutes) Small-group exercise: the Grading Game.

(5) (15 minutes) Whole-group discussion about Grading Game. List on OHP more essay qualities which may arise.

(6) (5 minutes) Final points. Refer students to departmental study guide. Tell them about university drop-in centre for writing advice. Remind them about procedure for handing in the essay.

The two exercises used here are designed to teach students about assessing (and, indirectly, about writing) essays. The Marking Exercise is a short task from Gibbs (1981) which has been widely used to teach both staff and students about assessing work (see Brown et al., 1994). Before the class met, students were asked to assess two short pieces of work which represent different approaches to essay writing. In the small-group discussions and the whole-class discussion which followed, there was (as is reportedly usual) wide consensus on which essay was better and why. The good essay qualities which groups were asked to consider later fed into a criteria sheet which students were given to help them write and assess their own essays (see Figure 5). These are necessarily filtered by staff, but in this case did not require much tinkering! The benefit of student-generated criteria is that it gives them a sense of ownership, rather than their being asked to carry out assessments using imposed criteria (Race, 1991). This should make students more co-operative and confident in their ability to assess work, as well as making them think about what is required.

We designed the Grading Game ourselves (Figure 4). Its aim is to help students understand why particular essays are given particular marks, as well as to make points and encourage further discussion about good and bad essay writing. A human geography essay question which might have been relevant to the course was displayed on the overhead projector. Each group of students was given a set of statements from lecturers which described imaginary student answers to this question. The task was to arrange these statements into five groups (First, 2:1, 2:2, Third, Fail) according to the grade of essay which they felt each statement described. Students were given 15 minutes for this task, which was accompanied by a good deal of discussion and debate within groups. A class discussion followed in which groups were asked to justify how and why they had classified particular statements, and staff commented on where they would have placed them and why.

Organising Self-, Peer and Tutor Assessment of Essays

After the preparatory workshop, the students had three weeks to write their coursework essay. On completing it, they filled out a self-assessment form (based on Jenkins & Pepper, 1988) in which they were asked to indicate what they felt the strengths and
Essay question

Compare and contrast the different geographical processes which contribute to the creation of 'problem areas' in UK cities.

Examples of statements

First “Student describes the geographical processes which create problem areas in a critical way. Student shows the role of each process by comparing it and contrasting it with the others.”

2.1 “Student has read a number of the articles the lecturer has recommended, and references this material properly. However, student doesn’t indicate that there are controversies in the literature, and is uncritical of the authors.”

2.2 “Student appears to have a lecturer fixation. Includes all lecture material, but no attempt to select only material which is relevant, or to structure it to answer the question asked. This is another one of those ‘everything I was told about problem areas’ answers.”

Third “Student makes no attempt to construct a logical argument or relate one fact to another, but jumps from point to point in an unstructured kind of way. Lecturer finds this very tiresome and is left wondering exactly what the student is trying to say.”

Fail “Student demonstrates a total lack of understanding of the topic. Student implicates geographical processes such as land slip and fluvioglacial erosion. Student uses Jesmond* as a case study ‘problem area’.”

(*affluent local suburb)

FIGURE 4. The ‘Grading Game’.

Weaknesses of their work were, to give it a mark and to justify this mark. They were instructed to base their assessment around the criteria developed in the preparatory workshop for guidance (Figure 5). For some assignments it may be useful to make these criteria more specific, but in this case the aim was a broad understanding of what geography essays require.

The following list has been derived from the assessment criteria you generated as a group in the essay workshop. You should use this list as a guide to help you write, and assess your own and each other’s essays.

Structure

Does the essay have a clear, logical and well-defined structure? (e.g. is there an introduction, middle and a conclusion?) Does the introduction show a sound grasp of the question and provide a clear outline of what the essay is all about?

Is the main part subdivided into sections? Does the conclusion draw together the various important points made in the main body of the essay?

Answering the question

Does the essay clearly answer the question set?

Referencing and sources

Are the sources of supporting material properly acknowledged?

Is the essay clearly and properly referenced using a recognised system (e.g. Harvard)?

Does the essay draw upon a wide range of relevant literature?

Does the author present material in a critical manner?

Readability

Is it generally clear, readable and well presented? Does it make the reader want to read it? Correct use of spelling and grammar?

Originality and thought

Does the author demonstrate originality, thought and imagination?

Does the essay make you sit up and think, ‘Wow! I’ve never thought of that before, good point!’

Argument and content

Does the author sustain a well-reasoned and supported argument?

Are all the main issues explored, evaluated and the conclusions made justified?

Does the author use relevant and useful examples to illustrate the argument?

FIGURE 5. Essay criteria sheet.

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Using the standards and criteria discussed in class (see handout), allocate a grade to the essay you have been given and then write (below) a justification of the grade in terms of those general criteria. You should give fairly detailed reasons for why (and where) you think the essay has succeeded and failed.

YOUR NAME: ............................................................................................................................................
NUMBER: ..................................................................................................................................................
ESSAY TITLE: .............................................................................................................................................

What do you feel are the main STRENGTHS of this piece of work?

What do you feel are its main WEAKNESSES?

What mark (percentage) do you feel this piece of work deserves?

Justification for mark awarded:


The peer assessment took place in a one-hour workshop, where seating arrangements were carefully planned and no conversation was permitted once students were in the room. The essays, which had been coded to identify them to staff but keep them anonymous to peer markers, were given to pre-selected students. This made it possible to keep assessors physically separate from the essay author during the assessment, and to ensure that students assessed essays which tackled the title they had answered so that they felt more confident in their role as assessor. Moreover, the identity of student assessors had to be seen to be recorded in case there was any need for enquiry into the peer marks. Some students had voiced concern over the fairness of peer assessment prior to the workshop. The extra time required to organise these precautions on the part of staff paid off in reassuring students about anonymity.

At the start of the session, a member of staff reminded students how the peer assessment fitted in with the whole essay assessment process, and highlighted its value to their learning. Each student was provided with a peer-assessment form attached to a peer essay which they were asked to fill out, noting strengths, weaknesses and an overall mark, again with reference to the criteria developed at the beginning of the project (Figure 6). The students engaged with the task seriously, and the finished sheets showed that most put a lot of thought and effort into the assessment. A small number of students left the room after the mandatory first half hour was up, but the remainder stayed on, some for the full hour, until they had finished their assessment.

Regulating and Combining Marks

The six staff who were tutors on the course were asked to assess and mark the essays relating to the same criteria sheet. They did not see either the self-marks or the peer marks, but they were asked to address the student’s self-identified strengths and weaknesses in their feedback in the hope that this would make it more useful to students.

There was judged to be a need to regulate the marks in case of large discrepancies between self-, peer and tutor marks. Because the main value of the assessment is
formative, this was mainly to reassure students that their final mark was fair. Following
the example of Stefani (1994), it was decided that if a peer mark or self-mark was more
than 10% above or below the tutor mark it would be brought to within 10%. Students
had been told about this in advance, and one advantage may well have been to make
them more rigorous in their assessments. The regulation had a fairly minimal effect upon
the final mark for any essay owing to the relatively low weighting of the peer and
self-assessment (25% and 25%, alongside 50% for the tutor mark). No individual final
mark after moderation was affected by more than 2% when compared with the original
mark, and the average of all the final marks rose by only 0.2% as a result of
modification.

Evaluation

As the desired outcome of using self- and peer assessment was intended to be primarily
formative, we will not dwell here on the patterns of marking. There were discrepancies
between the original self-, peer and tutor marks for particular essays, though in line with
research elsewhere this tended to be mainly a problem of the lowest achievers
over-assessing themselves, and the highest achievers under-assessing themselves (Boud
& Falchikov, 1989). Generally, too, peer and self-markers are more conservative than
tutors, with their marks tending to cluster more strongly in the range of 55–65%. We
have discussed these trends, and the issues they raise, in more detail elsewhere (Mowl
& Pain, 1995).

One issue with potentially significant implications is that gender differences were
quite marked: female students awarded themselves self-marks which were 5.8% lower on
average than male self-marks, while the anonymous peer marks were only 1.2% lower
on average for females' essays than for males' essays. This would appear to suggest that
females are underestimating their own performance (or are less confident in giving
themselves the mark they feel they deserve), or perhaps that males are overestimating
theirs. However, the average tutor mark for female students was 4.6% below that given
to males, upholding the difference in male and female performance suggested by the
self-marks. Of course, tutors' marks cannot be assumed to be bias free (handwriting is
a good indicator of male and female scripts), but if gender has a significant effect it is
difficult to explain why there is little difference between peer marks of the same scripts.
It is therefore hard to come to a conclusion on the role of gender bias in self- and peer
assessment; the issue would certainly profit from more in-depth research.

Research has tended to gauge the effect of self- and peer assessment from the tutor’s
perspective of mark reliability; fewer studies have actually viewed the experience from
the students' perspective focusing on learning as an outcome. For our purposes on the
course, statistical analysis of marks was less informative than evaluation of the effect of
self- and peer assessment on students' essay writing. To paraphrase Race (1994), 'never
mind the marks, feel the learning'. Did the experience of acting as assessors increase
students' understanding of how essays are assessed and what is required, and did it help
them to learn how these requirements might be met?

These are ambitious questions to ask of a fairly brief and compact project, and
answering them with certainty is problematic. The main tool of evaluation for the project
was a questionnaire survey carried out with students in the final lecture of the course,
after the peer assessment but before they had received their marks and essays back. The
findings were as follows:
60% said they had found the self-assessment difficult, and 67% had found the peer assessment difficult;
57% agreed that self-assessing their essay made them put more thought into how they were writing it;
51% said that the self-assessment experience helped their understanding of assessment, while 45% said that the peer assessment had helped their understanding;
only 18% felt that including peer and self-assessment was less fair than if the assessment had been left to tutors;
64% felt that the assessment procedure would help them to write better essays in the future.

Further comments written on questionnaires were generally very positive about the experience, which students viewed as valuable, if demanding, as the following examples show:

- It made the student feel part of the system rather than a machine that chews out essays and is stressed for weeks waiting for results.
- A very good innovative approach—helped a great deal.
- Provided a valuable insight into the assessment/marking process.
- A bit time-consuming but on the whole beneficial.

Others said that they felt the process was taking account of their needs, comparing the course favourably with others they had taken so far, and thanks for the experience of self-assessment were even voiced by the first-year representative at a course committee meeting. On the negative side, however, a small number of students suggested that they needed even more guidance on assessment criteria before being asked to act as assessors, a point which is reflected in the variations between some of the tutor and self- and peer marks. The survey results also appear to show that about half of the students did not see the benefits of the self- and peer assessment elements, despite the efforts which had been made in the initial workshop to explain the value of the exercise. It may be that using self- and peer assessment to improve essay writing works better for some students than others; some students may feel that they did not learn anything new, others may simply not have engaged as seriously with the task as we would have hoped. For most students peer and self-assessment were totally new experiences (and essay writing itself was still relatively new to some), so perhaps the number of students who did not express a positive reaction to the exercise is to be expected. Again, further research into students’ reactions to projects of this nature would be valuable, and is probably best conducted by people unconnected with the course.

The students may have been split over whether or not they liked it, but to us as teachers a more important question is ‘did it do them good?’. If we consider the profile of marks given to the students’ essays by tutors, then it would seem that the project did work to produce better essay writing, as marks were considerably higher overall than we would expect for a class of students at this level. Of course, this may reflect a more able group of students taking the course this year, rather than signalling increased understanding of what is required. It did seem to us in assessing the essays, however, that many had made efforts to meet the criteria set. Student motivation is also an important consideration. Some students have mentioned, since the project finished, that having to fill out a self-assessment form, and the fact that essays were going to be up for criticism by peers, made them put more effort into writing than they would otherwise have done (the results of the survey would lend support to this). However, the value in terms of
improved essay-writing skills will only be apparent in the long term (and then it will be
difficult to be conclusive about its effects). What is clear is that the format of this
study-skills training, by involving the students actively and valuing their input and
opinions, was appreciated more than straight 'we tell you how to do it' advice.

Conclusions

This project shows that even with subjective methods of assessment such as essays,
students are generally capable and conscientious self- and peer assessors, as long as they
are adequately prepared and reassured about the value of the exercise. It was apparent
to us that this value is primarily formative: it is a useful way of helping students to
understand essay criteria and develop their essay writing skills. As a form of summative
assessment, self- and peer assessment of essays must be viewed with some caution, as
our research also identified the ‘over’ and ‘under’ marking trends highlighted by Boud
& Falchikov (1989). This problem was perhaps heightened by the fact that we were
asking students with little experience of degree-level essay writing, and no experience of
assessing, to make what is a complex evaluation. Although the students had been
involved in generating criteria for assessment, there was no detailed marking scheme for
the assignment giving weightings to different criteria. As the assessment of these
first-year essays did not count towards the final degree, and moreover it is at this stage
that help with essay writing is most valuable, we consider that the benefits of the project
in terms of learning outcomes far outweigh the risks. When the project is implemented
in the future a number of modifications will be made in response to the problems which
have been identified:

• using real examples of essays from the course by previous students in the preparatory
  workshop, will be a more effective rehearsal for the actual assessment;
• discussing the relative importance of different criteria and how this might be reflected
  in the final mark;
• building a formal opportunity into the project for students to engage actively with the
  final stage of the assessment process by reading the feedback generated by the three
  assessors (see Figure 1). We were concerned that the students might not bother doing
  this. The reading of feedback might profitably take place within focus groups where
  students discuss with each other the ways in which they might respond to the
  feedback. One way of getting students to do this could involve making it essential to
  attend such a session to receive their work back.

Correspondence: Rachel Pain and Graham Mowl, Division of Geography and Environ-
mental Management, University of Northumbria, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST, Tel:
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