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**FOCUS ON: ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK**

# **LEARNING THROUGH PEER & SELF-ASSESSMENT**



# PEER AND SELF-ASSESSMENT

Peer and self-assessment (PaSA) transform learning from a passive student learning experience to an active, participatory process, prompting students to engage deeply with assessment criteria and reflect on their own performance and that of their peers.

PaSA's true value lies in significantly impacting learning outcomes. It directly empowers students to develop skills in critical thinking and reflection, aligning with the competencies sought by employers, thereby bridging academic learning with practical, real-world applications.

## PROMOTING ASSESSMENT LITERACY & MORE

Through PaSA activities, students gain valuable insights into the complexities of setting and marking work, critical for [developing assessment literacy](#).

Actively involving students in their own assessment transforms the evaluation process into a learning tool, consistent with taking assessment for learning (AfL) approach. Moreover, peer and self-assessment activities not only enhance the development of subject knowledge, they also [promote skills essential for life beyond university](#), for example skills in reflection, communication and critical thinking

### What is peer assessment?

- A process where students evaluate and provide feedback on their peers' work using carefully defined criteria.
- Encourages students to take on the role of an **assessor**, fostering a deeper understanding of assessment standards, methods and criteria.
- Can be used for assessing individual peer work, though it is typically used in group work assessments, enhancing students' judgment skills, critiquing abilities, and self-awareness.
- Effective implementation requires good preparation, clear criteria, and understanding of its purpose by all participants.

"Peer feedback was practically 90% of Creative Writing so people took it very seriously. By the time it hits third-year ... people were reading each other's work constantly. Most of it was sitting in a group and working through the piece. Crucially – we were told **how** to give critical feedback." – University of Reading Third-year home student.

### What is self-assessment?

- Involves students reflecting on and evaluating their own work against set criteria.
- It is not about generating grades but understanding **what constitutes quality work**.
- Significantly develops students' self-efficacy and reflective skills, as well as the ability to engage and work with feedback, enabling students to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.
- Can be implemented through various methods, such as reflective logs, diaries, or feedback questionnaires, and can be used independently or alongside peer assessment.

## 10 QUICK IDEAS FOR PaSA ACTIVITIES

- ✓ **Reflective logs and diaries:** For students to reflect on their learning progress.
- ✓ **Audits and feedback sheets:** For students to self-evaluate their coursework.
- ✓ **Posters and presentations:** Use peer assessment for evaluating these, with carefully defined criteria.
- ✓ **Peer-reviewed essays:** Students critique and provide feedback on each other's drafts and essay plans.
- ✓ **Group project evaluations:** Students assess their own and their peers' contributions to group projects.
- ✓ **Case study analysis:** Students work in pairs or small groups to analyse and assess case studies.
- ✓ **Online discussion forums:** Use peer assessment in online forums, where students critique and build upon each other's ideas.
- ✓ **Problem-solving exercises:** Apply peer assessment to problem sheets or lab reports in quantitative subjects.
- ✓ In subjects like Drama or Language Studies, peer assessment can be used for **performances or role-plays**.

## DIGITAL TOOLS FOR ENABLING PaSA

There are a range of technologies available offering students and teaching staff alike a convenient way to facilitate PaSA:

Virtual learning environments (such as **Blackboard Ultra**) – support assignment submissions, collaborative tools and PaSA through various integrated features.

**Online interactive quizzes** (such as Socrative, Quizlet and **UoR Study Advice Self-Reflective Tool**) offer online quizzes for immediate feedback aiding PaSA. The Study Advice [self-reflection tool](#) provides tailored resources for skills development and goal-setting which can be shared with tutors.

**Collaborative and reflective learning tools** – e.g. **Padlet** allows teachers to create an interactive online bulletin board / wall for students to post their work so that they can receive structured, constructive feedback from their peers – anonymously if they wish. **Video discussion platforms** (e.g. Flipgrid) are ideal for peer assessment through video responses. **Learning portfolios** such as Seesaw facilitate self-reflection.

**Polling tools** such as **MS Forms** help teachers seamlessly blend their slide deck with polling questions to gauge feedback from their students. The power of this approach lies in the real-time reveal of the answers, causing students to reflect on how their response compares against the wider group.

**Generative AI tools** such as **ChatGPT** and Microsoft's **CoPilot** – [depending on your approach to GAIT](#), you might allow your students to type in prompts to garner feedback on specific aspects of their work as a self-reflective activity akin to having an 'AI peer' (Follmer, 2023). Students could also use such tools in other creative ways for example as a 'safe' testbed to practice giving feedback to their peers, preparing them for the real-life event:

 **ChatGPT**  
Absolutely, let's start with this exercise. Here are some feedback prompts for you to respond to, as if you're reviewing a less effective scientific poster:

1. **Layout of Poster**

- Prompt: "How effectively does the layout of the poster facilitate understanding of the research topic?"

 **You**  
The layout is generally well organised, guiding the viewer logically from the introduction to the conclusion. However, the thing that lets it down is the sheer amount of text squeezed into each section...

 **ChatGPT**  
Feedback on Your Response:

Your feedback on the layout is constructive and begins positively by acknowledging the logical organization, which is encouraging. However, your critique about the amount of text is somewhat vague. To make this feedback more actionable, you could suggest specific ways to reduce text, such as:

- Breaking down complex information into bullet points.
- Using more visuals or charts to represent data.
- Highlighting key findings or statements for emphasis.

**Word's track changes** – whilst not exactly a technology dedicated to PaSA, this feature means students can make / track changes and provide detailed comments on each other's work. Commonly used in industry, it is ideal for familiarising students with the practices of collaborative writing, essential for projects and planning activities.

## HOW TO IMPLEMENT PaSA INTO YOUR TEACHING

There are no hard and fast rules for how you go about implementing PaSA into your teaching practice. However there are some recommendations, for example, about where to start and what type of assessments to get started with...

1. Have a look at your learning outcomes – these may be programme or module ones. Which LOs might benefit or align with a PaSA approach? E.g. ones that focus on developing critical thinking skills.
2. Look at your current approach to assessment – are there any opportunities to integrate / replace with PaSA?

**① PaSA can be used for both summative and formative work. If you're new to this, design a PaSA for formative assessment to begin with, e.g. have your students review / feedback on aspects of each other's drafts.**

3. What kind of PaSA activities do you want your students to do? Take a look at the 10 quick ideas above or the case study overleaf for inspiration.
4. Ensure you build in time to conduct a PaSA induction session for your students, which should:
  - ✓ Explain why you are using PaSA (i.e. to enhance student learning).
  - ✓ Walkthrough the process with time for questions.
  - ✓ Provide a clear overview of the assessment criteria.

**① Assessment literacy can be deepened by allowing students to contribute to the design of assessment criteria!**

- ✓ Some tips on [how to provide good feedback](#) as well as [how to receive feedback](#) (see also 'feedback literacy' info box below).
- ✓ An activity to practice assessing work of others by reviewing exemplars of different standards, ranging from work that would fail, to work deemed outstanding.

① Feedback literacy is a growing concept in educational research. It describes the skills and capabilities needed for students to effectively engage with and benefit from feedback processes. The Feedback Literacy Framework (Molloy, Boud, & Henderson, 2020) outlines seven key groups of student feedback literacy capabilities:

- Commitment to viewing feedback as an integral part of learning and improvement.
- Appreciation of feedback as a process that requires active engagement.
- Ability to elicit, or prompt information to improve learning.
- Ability to process feedback received.
- Acknowledgment and management of the emotions associated with receiving/giving feedback.
- Acknowledgment that feedback is a reciprocal process.
- Enacting the outcomes of processing feedback information.

In the context of PaSA, feedback literacy is highly relevant as students will need to provide meaningful feedback to their peers and interpret and apply the feedback they receive.

Recent studies by Hoo et al. (2021) highlight the importance of the first feedback literacy capability i.e. the commitment to feedback as improvement. This commitment begins to take shape as learners develop the ability to make evaluative judgments, starting with self-assessment and then extending to assessing others. This process forms a cycle: as learners engage in peer assessment and feedback, they often draw comparisons to their own work, enhancing self-awareness.

Therefore, in preparing our students for PaSA activities, it makes sense to begin with a self-assessment. This should foster a mindset that sees feedback as a fundamental part of learning and sets the stage for developing other feedback literacies, equipping students to provide more effective feedback to their peers.

5. If you're implementing peer assessment activities, think about how you want to distribute the work to be peer-reviewed – randomly assigned and anonymous or have students pair up to allow a mutual peer-peer assessment arrangement?

① Top tip: form small groups of 3–4 for peer assessments – this will ensure a more comprehensive evaluation of each person's work and reduces the risk of two less proficient students being paired together, which might compromise the quality of the assessment.

6. Consider making use of digital tools to support your PaSA activities.
7. Just before the assessment, provide students with a copy of the marking criteria (you may want to include a follow-up brief to the initial induction session at step four above). Include examples of prompts for feedback that are both generic and assignment specific, and show how these justify the marks awarded, for example:

**Generic prompt:** *"How clear and coherent is the information presented in this poster?"*

**Assignment-specific prompt:** *"How well does the poster integrate current research and literature on [the chosen topic] to support development of the product being presented?"*

8. Ensure that you provide students with contact support point(s) during the PaSA process. This could take the form of an FAQ post on Blackboard or a scheduled drop-in session with yourself. Alternatively you could enlist the help of a few members of your programme team to offer 'floating' support for a highly interactive PaSA activity such as a poster presentation session (see case study next).



## PaSA CASE STUDY – PRESENTING SCIENTIFIC POSTERS AT A MINI CONFERENCE

The following summarises a case study on the use of PaSA for a scientific poster session for first year biology undergraduate students (Merry & Orsmond, 2004). The rationale for this approach included:

- ✓ Anonymous peer review is used by professional scientists to establish the credibility of scientific publications i.e. students would be engaging in authentic practice.
- ✓ PaSA is regarded as a means to develop skills in self-reflection and objective judgement required by professional biologists.

The authors staged their approach as follows:

**Stage 1.)** 4–8 weeks before poster presentation → students informed of the task to each create an individual poster, with date/time, topic and rationale (i.e. relevant to future professional activity) being clearly outlined. Students were told that they would later work in groups (of 5) to discuss marking criteria for their posters.

**Stage 2.)** 3–4 weeks before poster presentation → in groups, students were either a) told what the marking criteria were and given time to discuss and clarify these, or b) given extra time to generate, discuss, negotiate and refine *their own* poster marking criteria. Tutors would circulate to provide support and contribute to discussions.

Students informed that they would use this marking criteria to both peer-assess and self-assess the posters of their peers and themselves, respectively. Posters would be presented anonymously to reduce any bias in the assessment. Students told that the PaSA would contribute to their overall grade and that tutors were interested in the quality of comments in addition to the accuracy of their marking as compared with that of the tutors.

**Stage 3.)** 1–2 weeks before poster presentation → students given written information about the meaning of the marking criteria and the opportunity to address any misconceptions students may have following Stage 2. Students are also given a marking form for peer- and self-assessment and this was discussed, drawing attention to the types and usefulness of the feedback comments they might provide. Students could also look at exemplar posters and discuss these in their groups, with tutors circulating to support. Groups would agree what feedback they would give on the exemplars and the corresponding grade in relation to each marking criterion. If student-derived marking criteria being used, students were given the opportunity to refine these in light of evaluating the exemplars.

**Stage 4.)** *Poster presentation* → students would self-assess their own poster first (in line with an earlier point regarding **feedback literacy** - helping shape the initial learner commitment to understanding feedback as improvement). Following this, students assess posters of their peers that have been randomly allocated. This activity is entirely independent – students are not permitted to discuss the marks or comments with each other, although there were tutors circulating to provide support and guidance throughout.

Overall, Merry and Orsmond's approach showed there was an agreement between student and tutor grades, with the agreement being greater for peer-assessment than for self-assessment. Furthermore, formal questionnaires and informal feedback from students showed that the PaSA activities caused students to reflect more on the marking criteria and their learning.

## TROUBLESHOOTING

**Q. What if the students argue that it's your job to assess and not theirs?**

**A.** It is important to be upfront with your students on the benefits of what they will gain in terms of helping them understand the assessment criteria, improving their assessment and feedback literacies and, crucially, in developing skills necessary for life beyond university i.e. the ability to evaluate, assess and think critically. Some people think that PaSA offers a way to reduce marking burden for staff, and while this may be true in some instances, the reality is that the initial time and effort required are often substantially greater. However, the long-term benefits, particularly in terms of enhancing student learning, are significantly more valuable.

**Q. My students aren't comfortable about being judged / having to judge their peers. For example, what if they are assessing their friend's work and it is of poor quality? This will put them in an awkward position.**

**A.** This is a common issue and whilst it can be mitigated by using anonymous marking, you can take this one step further by managing confidentiality in the process. For

example, the use of codes to protect the anonymity of both the peer assessor and the assessee (Plymouth University, 2011).

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“Peer feedback could be a challenge but was often worthwhile. We were offered to do it anonymously and optionally and often you wouldn't get any. It's frustrating when students feel too shy to speak.” – UoR First-year home student.

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**Q. Won't my students overmark themselves if asked to self-assess?**

A. It is true that when it comes to self-assessments, students do tend to award themselves higher marks as compared with staff (Ross, 2006). Lew *et al.* (2010) found that self-assessment accuracy is linked to the student's ability, with higher-performing students displaying greater self-assessment skills. Research indicates that enhancing students' understanding of how to evaluate their own work, involving them in creating assessment criteria, and making them aware that their evaluations will be compared with those of teachers and/or peers can mitigate issues related to accuracy in self-assessment.

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“Taking feedback can feel personal. It's always to help you but it can be hard to receive. It's not about you as a person, it's about the process.” – UoR Master's home student.

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**Q. What if students all give one another top marks and fail to implement assessment criteria effectively?**

A. If this happens consistently, it indicates a need for further training in feedback literacy and understanding of assessment standards. During PaSA induction sessions, it is crucial to emphasise the importance of constructive, honest and specific feedback and guide students in using criteria to make their evaluations. Incorporating 'calibration' exercises, where students practice grading against an exemplar before assessing peers and comparing their evaluations with your own can also help address this issue.

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“Peer feedbacks can also be so frustrating sometimes as some students give the same general comment just for the sake of giving one, they don't actually take the time to read the work even if we were given the whole 2 hours of the workshop.” – UoR Second-year international student.

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**Q. What if students complain that they've got too much to do already?**

A. It is crucial to communicate that PaSA has been purposefully designed and integrated into their whole 'assessment diet.' Emphasise that PaSA is not an 'add-on', but a deliberate choice focused on enhancing your student's skill development.

**Q. What if my students think that they don't have the level of knowledge or skills to assess their own work?**

A. Start by educating them on the criteria and standards for assessment. Induction sessions on self-assessment techniques can be very helpful, and there are digital tools available that can provide useful prompts. Additionally, providing examples of good self-assessments and offering opportunities for practice with feedback can build their confidence. It's also useful to remind them that self-assessment is a skill that develops over time.

**Q. My students lack confidence in writing feedback, beyond induction sessions that offer group-practice on exemplars with generic and assignment-specific feedback prompts, is there anything else I can do?**

A. Show examples of both effective and ineffective feedback – analyse these examples to highlight best practices. You could also take the 'feedback on feedback' approach, providing students with comments on their feedback, guiding them towards improvement.

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“The golden rule is we never say how we would do it differently, just what you think could be different and letting them choose to take that on board (or not) in the way that feels right to them.” – UoR Third-year home student.

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## SUMMARY

Peer and self-assessment (PaSA) transforms learning into an active, participatory process, prompting students to engage deeply with assessment criteria and simultaneously encouraging critical thinking and reflection skills. Its real value lies in significantly impacting learning outcomes, aligning with competencies sought by employers and bridging academic learning with practical applications. In this guide we have explained how to practically implement PaSA into your teaching, emphasising the importance of fostering your students' *feedback literacy* so that they can effectively engage with and benefit from feedback processes, enhancing their ability to assess their own work and provide meaningful feedback to their peers

To contact us to discuss how PaSA can be implemented in your programmes or modules, and explore other guides in our Focus On: series, please visit <https://www.reading.ac.uk/cqsd/teaching-resources>



## References and further reading

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