A Geography module originally required the students to write two essays, one towards the beginning of the course and one near the end. The tutor became increasingly despondent that despite all the efforts spent marking and writing comments on the first essay invariably there was little improvement in the second and as student numbers were rapidly rising it was becoming increasingly difficult to find the time to maintain the quality of the feedback given.

Instead of two essays the course now requires only one, which is written in two stages. In the first stage, the students write a first draft of their essay by a given date. In a seminar session, they are then paired up and each pair reads and gives detailed feedback on the other’s piece of work. In the light of this feedback, the students then redraft their essays. When the essay is finally submitted it is accompanied by an account of how the feedback has been used, e.g. ‘I’ve included more sources because the first draft was criticised for using only two. I’ve kept the introduction the same even though it was criticised as unclear because I don’t agree…’ etc.

As a result of this change the tutor has halved his marking load. It is true that only one topic is now assessed rather than two as before but the tutor believes that educationally this is more than compensated for by the following benefits:

• it develops the students’ critical faculties

• significantly better work is produced

• it is more like the ‘real world’ - good writing involves redrafting in the light of criticism

Some potential problems with this approach…….and some possible solutions

Problem: If they are all doing the same essay then won’t students use peer assessment as an opportunity to copy ideas from one another?

Solution: Set two (or more) essay topics and pair students having different titles with one another; this has the advantage of exposing students to ideas from more than one topic, whilst avoiding possible copying issues.

Problem: A student who is willing & able to provide high quality feedback may get paired up with a student who is less able or willing to provide this kind of peer feedback. Isn’t this an unfair system because one student gains at the expense of another?

Solution: Ensure students are given comprehensive information & some training in how to provide feedback (Have they been given clear instructions on what to look for? Do they know what makes ‘good’ feedback?). Make it an assessment requirement that an element of self-reflection has to be included at the start of the final submitted essay; this should detail the nature of feedback that the student has provided to their colleague & also indicate what feedback they received and how it was acted upon. If a student fails to provide or receive adequate feedback, it will be evident in the final lecturer-assessed essay and can then be dealt with by the tutor.