The Influence of Cultural Heritage on Students' Willingness to Engage in Peer Assessment

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Introduction

Assessment is an essential element of any course where a student receives a mark on completion. The decision about which methods of assessment to use are critical because 'assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves *as* students (Brown et al, 1977 p7 my emphasis). From this perspective the experience of assessment is *productive,* not merely reflective of learning and intimately linked with students' sense of identity. The choice of assessment methods therefore determines not only what, but how the students learn. This paper explores the relevance of peer assessment for professional courses.

There is a growing literature about the use of peer assessment in higher education (see Sluijsmans et al 1998 for a comprehensive literature review). Proponents argue that it offers students the opportunity of engaging more deeply in their own learning and encourages the development of skills that will be applicable to many professional roles (Sluijsmans et al 1998).

Many argue that traditional approaches to management education are in trouble. For example, Mintzberg criticises MBA programmes for 'train[ing] the wrong people in the wrong ways with the wrong consequences' (Mintzberg, 2004 p6) and that Harvard MBA graduates 'were hindered by a lack of experience in making value-based decisions, a lack of comprehension regarding the consequences of their actions on society… and an inability to articulate their own values in a leadership role' (Mintzberg, 2004 p42, citing Piper, Gentile and Parks 1993).

Vaill similarly comments on the ' increasingly obvious fact that the prevailing forms of education for management leadership [do] not seem to be contributing very much to the improvement of management practice,' (Vaill, 1996 pxii). At the heart of these criticisms is the view that students are emerging with little idea about engaging in complexity and ambiguity and are overly reliant on authority that is derived, not, as described by Reed, (1988) as an intersection between person and

task, but from a de-contextualised collection of competences. When they arrive on the shop floor things look a bit different.

Engaging in peer assessment exposes shared and different assumptions about the nature of the task, the criteria for making judgements and about what constitutes quality work but within a context where the teacher can draw out the implications for learning. It also requires students to actively engage in negotiating boundaries between their professional and personal roles. It requires students to become more aware of the responsibilities they have. These are all highly useful management skills.

Not only is peer assessment relevant to management education generally, it is particularly suited to courses on diversity and cross cultural management which are concerned with issues of difference and of social, economic and political power. These courses should not only equip students to be able to move and work across cultures but also to understand and engage with underlying inequalities and relationships of dominance and oppression. Lange comments that 'critical transformative learning attempts to foster an individuals' consciousness of himself or herself as situated within larger political and economic forces' (Lange, 2004 p122) *and* explore the potential for change. Discovering that colleagues have different assumptions about the nature of competent work forces one to confront the reality of multiple realities and possibilities.

There are many different models for involving students in assessment including formative versus summative assessment, giving feedback versus giving marks, anonymous versus 'known' assessors and whether the criteria are set externally, determined by the group or determined by the assessor/assessee. Although there is strong support in the literature for peer formative assessment, for involving the students in defining the criteria and in for devoting considerable time to preparation, (recognising that few are likely to have the skills of giving and receiving critical feedback) there is less agreement about whether students should give marks. Sluijsmans et al (1998) argue against this while Wilson (2004) reports more positive results (although Wilson's 'students' are themselves professional teachers and so have some prior experience).

The main concerns around peer assessment (as with any model of assessment) are about the need to ensure validity, reliability and transparency, However, there is evidence (Brown et al, 1977, Race, 2001, Wilson, 2004) that these issues can be overcome. However, this paper is primarily concerned with planning the implementation of peer assessment with groups of students, both international and UK based, who come from a wide variety of cultural and national backgrounds.

**The relevance of cultural heritage on students' perceptions
of legitimacy and authority**

The field of cross cultural management has been strongly dominated by the work of Hofstede (1991, 2001) and, to a lesser extent, Trompennaars and Hampden-Turner

(1997) who suggest that national cultures can be defined, measured and 'located' on 'dimensions' representing various sets of values. This approach is definitely not without its critics who focus on issues such as methodology (McSweeney, 2002), on Hofstede's essentialist perceptions of cultures (Kwek, 2003) and his simplification of the complex dynamics between competing cultures particularly those of organisational culture, occupational culture and intra–organisational subcultures (McSweeney, 2002). Indeed, two articles in a recent edition of the *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* draw opposing conclusions about the relevance of national culture to organisational culture.

> *'The implications for leadership and cross cultural management theory, as well as for internationally active practitioners is that our results suggest that interpersonal leadership preferences related to national cultural values are **not** overridden by values acquired in an second (occupational) or third (organisational) level of socialization.'* (Zander and Romani, 2004 p309 - my emphasis)

While by contrast:-

> *'In a multi-cultural and diverse society culture can no longer be implicitly defined as a substitute for nation, and members of such societies can no longer be assumed to identify solely, or most strongly with their country of national origin or citizenship.'* (Sackman and Philips, 2004 p384)

However this work is extremely influential and, moreover, it is extremely attractive to students on LondonMet courses who, even if they think Hofstede's 'location' of their own country is simplistic, go on to apply his theories uncritically. Moreover, if we regard theory as not only reflective but also productive of reality then Hofstede's significance becomes even more important, as his dimensions have provided students (and not only students) with a heuristic for sensemaking.

The relevance to peer assessment is that one of Hofstede's dimensions is 'power distance', the way in which hierarchy and authority are viewed within a culture. Countries with 'low power distance' (the Scandinavian countries for example) are more egalitarian than high power distance such as India or China, where hierarchy is more respected (Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, given that these dimensions have *some* validity and are highly popular with the students (and are providing them with a conceptual tool for evaluating their own experiences of cross cultural journeying) to introduce peer assessment to a group of culturally diverse students without any consideration of the possibility that they might hold very different views about authority seemed insensitive and foolhardy.

I discussed peer assessment with two groups of postgraduate students. The first, studying cross cultural management, consisted of 17 international students from Italy, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, Eire, Norway, Finland, Poland, China and Taiwan. The

second group were studying managing diversity. All were from minority ethnic groups but two were UK residents.

Only two had had any previous experience of peer assessment and initially the majority were quite negative. I had a sense of increased anxiety. One student said that they 'didn't have the skills'. However, as I explained to the students why I thought the experience of being involved in peer assessment had direct relevance to management, and particularly to managing across diverse cultures and backgrounds, there was a significant shift in their attitudes. The second group even concluded by suggesting we vote on whether or not I should initiate peer assessment with the next cohort of students and the vote was unanimously in favour!

This was a very small sample but it would be possible to construct an interpretation of the students responses that would support Hofstede's thesis and demonstrate that his dimensions of power distance and uncertainty avoidance could be mapped against the students' national origins. For instance, the students who were least anxious were UK based (although from minority ethnic communities) and from Scandinavia while those who were most resistance were from China (high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance). When a Polish student said 'that the teachers know what to look for, that the students might be swayed by personal concerns' it was a Finnish student who said, *'but you can find that problem with the teachers too'*. This could be interpreted as representing different attitudes towards authority.

An Indian student (high power distance) didn't like the idea of the teacher handing over responsibility.

> *I have a negative feeling.* [the university] *would not be as good as others because you are delegating work to others. Are they qualified to assess work from an academic point of view? Not of equal knowledge.*

I asked students whether, when they were choosing a university whether they would have been swayed by hearing that we used peer assessment. Most reacted negatively including all the Chinese students who, unlike the others, were not swayed throughout the discussion.

> *It depends. Still not very open minded. Maybe parents don't accept this kind of assessment… They [colleagues at home] might not respect me as much, they would be worried about the experiences of my peer.*

Would they like to be assessed by a peer from a very different culture?

> *Not really because they might not understand what I am trying to explain.* (student from Nigeria)

This could be interpreted as representing fears and anxieties about cultural misunderstandings or simply about the difficulties of communicating where English is a second language.

> *I hope would be fair but written and spoken, especially for foreign students… if I can't express well I don't like.* (student from China)

But also… one person said that people at home (Ghana) would be more, not less likely to respect them for having been assessed by a peer.

> *We're all from different places – we write differently. The tutor can flow with what we're saying. But if you give it to someone from China – they say religion isn't very important – to us it's very important so she'd just fail me. They have no experience to judge from.'* (student from Nigeria)

The context for this comment is of an earlier discussion in the seminar about the importance of religion in different cultures. But this is a very interesting comment. Firstly, there seems to be an assumption that the culturally determined values the students bring, *including experience in areas which have little or no bearing on coursework* will influence their judgement – to the extent that 'she'd just fail me'. Secondly, the assumed absence of professional criteria for ethics from which to judge the work is significant. Interestingly, the same student, when asked if she had ever had a positive experience of assessment, immediately volunteered an example from work where she had been assessed by a *peer* colleague.

The importance of professional role

This leads me to suggest that a significant factor in interpreting these responses is the students' perceptions of their role as students and that this may be more significant than cultural differences. While some of their comments can be interpreted as representing differences in cultural heritage I think this ready, but rather heavy handed interpretation would be a mistake. They seem to me to be more ambiguous. reflecting anxiety, lack of confidence, the need for friends, the need to trust the integrity of the teacher. My interpretation of the Nigerian student's comment is that she is expressing anxiety combined with a lack of trust in a shared sense of professional standards.

While I was undertaking this (admittedly very small study) a colleague who tutors nurses in professional health settings was also exploring their attitudes towards peer assessment and he found some quite significant differences. His sample was even smaller than mine but the nurses, from equally diverse backgrounds, were much less apprehensive. The only significant difference between these two groups (other than size) is that the nurses see themselves as professionals already working in a professional job while the students, although undertaking courses with a professional emphasis, see themselves primarily as students.

Central to the activity of peer assessment is the giving of power by the teacher to the students and by the students to each other. Reed (1991) makes a crucial distinction between power and *authority* saying that authority is derived from the taking of a role, and that the way in which a person brings their personality to bear upon the professional requirements of the task is what invests them with authority

> *'Power is a quality or attribute of the person (or group). Authority is a quality or attribute of <u>role</u> ie of person-in-role.* (Reed, 1991 p20)

My students became much more enthusiastic about peer assessment when I was able to make it clear that it had parallels with the demands made on managers, especially in multi-national companies. When they could see the relevance of it for their professional careers they became notably less anxious.

However this isn't to say that cultural difference plays no role and here again the Nigerian student's comment is illuminating, suggesting that without the trust in a shared sense of professional standards that comes with the occupancy of a professional role (illusory though that may be) students may be overwhelmed by anxiety and fall back on more atavistic fears of the 'other'. How else can we interpret her comment that the Chinese 'have no religion' when assessing student work on a management topic seems unconnected, in any obvious way, with religious belief?

Reflections

Since I started this study I have had several experiences that have made me qualify my enthusiasm for peer assessment. The first was a difficult teaching session on the management implications of legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Four students gave a good presentation but another group found the topic extremely controversial as it offended their religious principles. The ensuing discussion was more than a little difficult and several of the students emerged rather bruised. This experience made me confront the profoundly different values amongst a group of students ostensibly all committed to managing diversity. I was very glad that I hadn't already brought in even a small element of peer assessment (although, of course, it is possible that having to make a proper assessment of the presentation might have made the dissenters engage more appropriately with the task).

The second experience was marking the exams of the cross cultural management students. A substantial number failed. This made me wonder about the advisability of involving students assessing each other if some of the work is of a very poor standard. The students who failed, mostly all from overseas, may well be in need of friendship and emotional support from their peers and if those very peers have been involved in assessing them, then it may make it harder to turn to them for support.

The third experience was being assessed by my peers on a group presentation for my own professional development. It was not a negative experience and much of the feedback was helpful and interesting – although very varied. But two thoughts run counter to some of the received wisdom about peer assessment, namely, that students should be involved in setting their own criteria, and that group presentations are a good focus for peer assessment (Race, 2001).

Personally, I did not enjoy or feel empowered by being involved in setting criteria – the exercise felt like fitting myself into a straightjacket. It was also clear that as there were preordained criteria as well, my 'power' was pretty relative. Secondly, the problem with group presentations is that the individual is never wholly in control and while I had great respect for my co-presenter, we brought very different skills and experience to the task. As peer assessment is more anxiety provoking than tutor assessment (for me, certainly, and from my discussions with the students, for them as well) I would rather I was being assessed on something that was more within my control.

Implications

Sluijsmans et al say that for self assessment (and surely even more so for peer assessment) to be successful there should be 'a shared value system between students and teachers' (Sluijsmans et al 1998 p28). My findings suggest that this cannot be taken for granted and my experience of teaching *Managing Diversity* absolutely confirms that. However, the nurses' more positive responses to peer assessment and the shift that happened in my discussion groups as I was able to draw out the relevance of peer assessment to management, suggest that the way forward is to create a new and shared value system within the class, that is specifically related to the management of diversity. I think this is more than just involving students in setting the criteria for assessment – it requires a deliberate engagement with the values that underpin them.

Without establishing a such a shared understanding of the purpose of the assessment exercise, its relation to the aims of the course, the applicability of the learning gained to future professional roles, I think there is a danger that cultural differences – or perhaps more accurately the *fear* of such differences, could increase students anxieties and make the experience unnecessarily difficult.

At the moment, for my postgraduates, I intend to initiate discussions about what makes good essays and presentations early on in the semester and use students' ideas to build in opportunities for formative feedback. I am still committed to peer assessment but I am more aware of the risks. I would like to build on this work next semester when I redesign the curriculum for my undergraduate module and explore ways of integrating peer assessment more thoroughly so that the experience is empowering rather than anxiety-provoking.

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