STANDARDS OF QUALITY IN
INFORMATION SERVICE AND PRODUCT DESIGN:
A CASE STUDY USING PEER ASSESSMENT

Merolyn Coombs and Hilary Yerbury

EXCELLENCE IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The quality of professional information practice is judged against the traditions of information work, user expectations and against requirements such as Australian and International Standards. However, in an area of practice where the professional might never see the consequences of their actions, (because the effects of information utilisation are rarely immediate (Larsen, 1980)) an understanding of the concept of quality is often elusive, even though an individual may competently provide information services on many separate occasions.

To enable students in their third year of the Bachelor of Applied Science in Information Studies to come to a conceptual understanding of quality, a segment of the compulsory subject Information Science 5 was designed with a focus on quality both as a concept and as a requirement of professional practice. The mechanism for achieving the integration of the concept and its implementation was peer assessment.

PEER ASSESSMENT AND QUALITY

Peer assessment gives students two ways of demonstrating that they have understood the concept of quality. The first is through the ability to produce a product or service with features which match those indicated in the standard of excellence. The second is through the ability to analyse the work of someone else, by matching it against the same standard and to identify the strength and weaknesses of that person's work.

To prepare students for an assignment in which their understanding would be based on their ability to apply the International Standard on Abstracting (ISO 214-1976(E)) and to provide feedback to a fellow student on the same exercise, a range of learning experiences were provided, including a package of printed materials (lecture notes, examples of how the standard could be used and a series of activitites to practice different ways of constructing an abstract), in-class practice exercises with follow up discussion and question and answer sessions. The question and answer sessions allowed students to clarify their
understanding of the concept, the requirements of the Standard, the procedures for the assignment and the demands of peer assessment.

The package also included a summary from the literature defining peer assessment, which identified the two elements of any assessment process, feedback and evaluation. The feedback element was emphasised both in the notes and in the assignment, although students were also asked to evaluate each part of the other student's work by assigning a point on a five-point scale between poor and outstanding. This was part of the exercise of demonstrating that they understood the concept of quality, and students were aware that academic staff would retain the responsibility for assigning the grade for each student's performance on the assessment task.

QUALITY, LEARNING AND PEER ASSESSMENT

The students worked conscientiously on the assessment task, and seemed genuinely interested in the process of peer assessment. In the evaluations they provided of the exercise, (the data collection instrument was based on the work of Falchikov, 1986), they indicated that they had found it a useful but difficult learning exercise. They liked 'seeing how other people understood the concepts in relation to myself'. But they disliked 'writing the comments' because 'it was hard to have to criticise someone else's work'.

From our point of view, the learning outcomes were disappointing. Many students did not seem to have 'learned' anything more about quality than they might have done from more traditional 'teaching'. The feedback they provided was pedestrian, showing an understanding of the mechanical aspects of analysis and the preparation of an abstract but with little evidence that these processes were related to excellence in providing information service.

Furthermore, the students' evaluations of the process did not reflect the developing acknowledgement of their own capacity to judge the worth of a professional activity. Instead, they showed a distrust of the understanding of the fellow student and in some cases of the integrity of the fellow student. They also expressed the view that only a member of academic staff would know what was 'right'. This view was typified in the comments 'I prefer academic staff [to provide feedback] because I feel it is more objective and they know the correct answers so give a better assessment' and 'peer assessment [will only give me] feedback
from the classmate who is at the same level as me'.

CONCLUSION

There is little indication that the use of peer assessment increased students' understanding of the concept of quality. The reasons for this are not readily apparent, although there are indications from their responses that they did not have a sound grasp of reasons why they might need to be concerned with demonstrating that they understand what constitutes excellence in professional practice. However, since the majority of students thought that the process of peer assessment was challenging and made them think, we will use peer assessment again next year as the mechanism for teaching an understanding of quality, albeit in a modified form.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

