

Using peer feedback to enhance employability

Using instant peer-feedback to engage students in reflecting on job applications

The aim

In Engineering, there was a need to encourage students to reflect on their job applications, and understand why their applications might be rejected, in order to improve the quality of their actual student placement applications.

Benefits

- Engaging students with assessment criteria
- Instant peer-feedback and self-reflection
- Develops student employability skills

The approach

Placement tutors used a peer-feedback activity encouraging students to self-reflect and make use of the feedback provided by their peers to improve the quality of their actual placement job applications, and to help them successfully compete for placement jobs. Students undertook a placement preparation task in which they peer-assessed and provided feedback on each others' job application forms and covering letters, based on a job description provided by the module leader. Students were instructed to refer to a set of assessment criteria while completing the task.

Students brought two copies of their applications to class - one of which was anonymised. All applications were collected by the tutors, and the anonymous applications were distributed among the students. The students worked in small groups and provided feedback and grades on the submission they had been given against the assessment criteria, and decided whether that particular applicant would be invited to an interview. This process was then repeated with another submission. Within an hour the small groups had an opportunity to provide written feedback on two or three applications.

At the end of class all the anonymous applications and written peer-feedback were collected in by the tutors for moderation. Further formative feedback was provided by the tutors and returned to students within a week of this activity. The module leader provided each tutor with an audio recording of her own session to ensure consistency in facilitation of the activity, and to support moderation of students' peer feedback and grades, as well the provision of any additional feedback by the tutor.

'The peer review helped to show me that I need to apply each form to each job.'

The outcome

As this task was undertaken at the same time that students were applying for actual placement jobs, it provided a valuable opportunity for self-reflection on the quality of their own application while they were reading and discussing others' submissions during class:

During moderation, the tutors found that the richness of the written feedback given by the students was of good enough quality to agree with. The grades sometimes had to be amended as the students tended to be a bit softer on their peers.

Future development

The tutors are considering asking students to use their own mobile phones or other audio recording devices to capture the conversations that they are having within their small groups, as she found that students often forget what has been said during the discussion unless they have taken notes. Recording this detailed discussion about their peers' applications ensures that students can use this formative feedback later while reflecting on and updating their individual CVs and applications. An alternative option to consider is the online Self and Peer Assessment tool in Blackboard to automate the distribution of submissions amongst the cohort. Students can provide written feedback and grades on a selection of their peers' applications as well as their own against a set of pre-defined criteria, and this captured feedback can be moderated online by the tutor.

Profile

Tutor name:

Anne Nortcliffe

Faculty:

Arts, Computing,
Engineering & Science

Size of cohort:

Very large (150+ students)

Technologies used:

Audio recorders

If you would like your e-learning practice captured and shared in a similar case study, please contact Brian Irwin within Quality Enhancement and Student Success.

Recommendations

- Before starting with the approach get team buy-in
- Set up a team meeting (or provide a media-based resource) to support consistency in facilitating the activity, moderating students' peer-feedback, and giving any additional feedback
- Encourage students to record group conversations, as well as any individual thoughts (self-reflection) about their own work, while reading others' submissions so that this feedback is not lost and can be used later to improve their own work

Further reading

A. Nortcliffe and A. Middleton (2011). 'Employability Feedback for Engineering Students', International Conference on Engineering Education, Ulster, UK, August 2011.