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Solving Peer Evaluation Dilemmas in Group Work by Optimizing Its Application Through Practice and Learning

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Abstract

Interest in peer and self-assessment has increased as a result of the transition in higher education from teacher-led to student-centred learning. This paper utilises a case study to critically examine peer evaluation method in assessments, identifies its inherent challenges, and proposes solutions to enhance its efficacy and reliability using literature resources. Drawing on an applied case study from the undergraduate teaching case, this research integrates theoretical perspectives with practical insights to offer a comprehensive framework for effective peer evaluation in higher education. Main findings were as follows: Peer evaluation's effectiveness in group work is to an extent influenced by its weight in the overall grade. The 5% weight was insufficient, resulting in unequal engagement and free riding. Increasing weight may improve involvement, but it needs to be optimal to avoid over-burdening students. Challenges such as biased evaluations, inconsistencies in marking, and fear of retaliation can all weaken reliability. Clear performance-and-outcome-centred rubrics and consistent teacher engagement and moderation are essential for guaranteeing fairness. Addressing group dynamics, cultivating a development mindset, and promoting inclusivity and quality interactions can all help to improve the effectiveness of peer evaluations by aligning them with learning outcomes and encouraging constructive collaboration.

Keywords: peer evaluation; peer assessment; higher education; group work learning; group assessment

1. Introduction

1.1. Peer evaluation in higher education

Peer assessment has gained considerable attention in higher education as a result of the paradigm shift in education from teaching to learning and from teacher administration to student self-direction (Hanrahan and Isaacs, 2001; Li, Liu and Steckelberg, 2010). Students often favour peer evaluation because it fosters inclusion and engagement (Van der Kleij and Lipnevich, 2020). Among students, this kind of learning experience is fairly popular as it largely keeps them engaged and included (Van der Kleij and Lipnevich, 2020).

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Similarly, when it comes to assessments, students find self-directed assessment to be as enjoyable (Boud and Falchikov, 2006). As with the decision of what kind of peer evaluation technique would yield desired outcomes such as skills in validity and reliability (Van Gennip, Segers, and Tillema, 2009) and "learn about expectations, accountability, and the true purpose of giving and receiving developmental feedback" (VanSchenkhof et al., 2018), it is still a contentious topic. The previously described assessment technique will be referred to in this study as peer assessment, or alternatively, peer evaluation.

1.2. Peer Evaluation: The Theoretical Context

Peer evaluation is often recommended and widely used in educational contexts because of its potential to promote critical and reflective thinking and collaborative skills in students (Topping, 1998). Students who engage in peer assessment not only acquire an understanding of the standards and expectations of quality work, but they also develop a deeper understanding of the subject, resulting in a more thorough learning experience (Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000). Furthermore, peer evaluation allows students to critically analyse their classmates' work, which can help them evaluate their own work accurately. Furthermore, peer evaluation can greatly reduce instructors' assessment burden by sharing evaluative responsibilities, creating a more sustainable and efficient educational environment (Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans, 1999). Studies also found that peer evaluation methods in assessments can result in students developing skills in self-reflection (Nicol, Thomson and Breslin, 2014). As found by Hanrahan and Isaacs (2001), examining others' work enabled students to critically analyse their own work and progress towards learning. Furthermore, this collaborative approach can result in a more inclusive classroom environment in which students learn to value varied perspectives and contribute positively to each other's learning processes.

Despite its various benefits, peer evaluation encounters a number of challenges that may have an impact on its overall effectiveness and adoption in educational contexts. Issues concerning the reliability and validity of peer assessments persist, with many students often questioning the fairness and accuracy of peer evaluations (Liu and Carless, 2006). These concerns may lead to a loss of faith in the peer evaluation process, potentially reducing its perceived usefulness. Furthermore, personal biases, fear of retaliation and inconsistent rating criteria complicate the process and can considerably reduce peer evaluation effectiveness (Van Gennip, Segers and Tillema, 2009; Kaufman and Schunn, 2010; Gielen et al., 2010). For instance, personal biases can influence evaluations, resulting in distorted outcomes that do not fully reflect the quality of work (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Fear of retaliation might impede honest criticism, as students may be unwilling to severely criticise their peers' work. Furthermore, differing evaluation standards between pupils can lead to disparate assessments, resulting in a lack of uniformity and equity in the grading process. These problems demand careful analysis and

planned implementation to guarantee that peer evaluation remains an effective educational assessment tool.

1.3. Peer Evaluation: Implementation and Reflection

Assessments in educational settings have traditionally been teacher-centric, with the teacher functioning as the primary evaluator and students passively receiving evaluations (Adachi, Tai and Dawson, 2018). In such an arrangement, students typically have little to no input in the assessment process other than obtaining their final marks. Peer assessment, on the other hand, offers a transformative approach by giving students the authority to take charge of their own learning, promoting critical thinking, and cultivating self-reflection. Peer assessment helps students get a deeper understanding of the material by teaching them how to examine both their own and other peers' work. However, the initial implementation of peer evaluation in the teaching module revealed several significant challenges that need to be addressed for the assessment technique to yield intended results. These challenges included low student engagement, where students were not fully participating in the assessment process, as well as issues of free-riding, where some students relied on their peers to do most of the work. Additionally, concerns about the fairness and accuracy of peer assessments emerged, with students questioning whether their peers could evaluate their work objectively and consistently. These issues highlight the need for careful planning and support when incorporating peer evaluation into the curriculum.

1.4. Case study context

This study is based on a case of a taught undergraduate module which is available to a diverse cohort of students from various agriculture and life science disciplines. A significant portion of the assessment in the said module is group work involving working in a team setting. Just to add a bit of context; the cohort was taken to a real-life commercial farm where they were allowed to observe different enterprises, farm machinery, facilities, buildings, etc. They were then instructed to come up with a proposal to take over the farm. The proposal needed to have full farm plans, including, enterprise layout plans, financial projections, building up budgets, etc. The group activity was aimed at equipping students not only with knowledge of interdisciplinary perspective of farm businesses, practical application of management concepts, etc. but also the skills such as effective communication, working in a group environment, collaboration, efficient use of peers' expertise and capabilities, etc. (Nicol, Thomson and Breslin, 2014). It was also ensured that each team had an equal share of diversity in terms of background knowledge and expertise. For example, each group had members from livestock science, crop science, environmental science, etc. This was done so as not to leave any of the groups disadvantaged by lack of specific expertise.

Peer evaluation was allocated 5% in the final mark in order to promote fairness in the group assignment and prevent free-riding. The peer evaluation approach is commonly employed in situations where students must collaborate in a group environment and get feedback on both their collective and individual contributions to the group. The importance of peer evaluation in such circumstances is especially noteworthy. Firstly, since they are

not part of the groups, teachers are unable to evaluate each student's contribution to the group. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, in future employment environments when much of the work is done in a team environment, there won't be a university teacher to assess their performance (Sridharan, Tai and Boud, 2018). Which is why it is even more essential for students to go through self-reflection exercise through these assessment methods.

Despite having all of these measures taken and positive learning outcomes expected, problems such as bias, unfairness, insufficient communication among students in working groups, etc., could still impede the positive outcomes of these assessment approaches (Hanrahan and Isaacs, 2001). By the end of the session, it was evaluated that the intended benefits of the peer evaluation were not met. There were issues reported by some of the student groups regarding the fairness and ineffectiveness of the method used. Each complaint was unique in nature.

1.5. Aims

This study, firstly, aims to critically analyse the case and the use of student evaluation method, secondly, review some of the issues identified and, finally, attempt to suggest and discuss some potential solutions using the literature. This would add to the understanding of the use of peer evaluation methods in group activities and inform the pedagogical stakeholders of the current issues and their potential solutions.

2. Method

This study is based on the following question:

What are the issues faced when the peer evaluation tool was employed in a group assessment activity and how can we possibly address them using the literature resources?

An exploratory research design is considered appropriate to critically analyse and discuss the potential reasons behind the identified issues and find an optimal solution (Hanks, 2017). Such a method is particularly useful in situations where the goal is to gain insight and familiarity into the problem and address it through the available resources.

3. Results

3.1. Identified Problems and Proposed Solutions

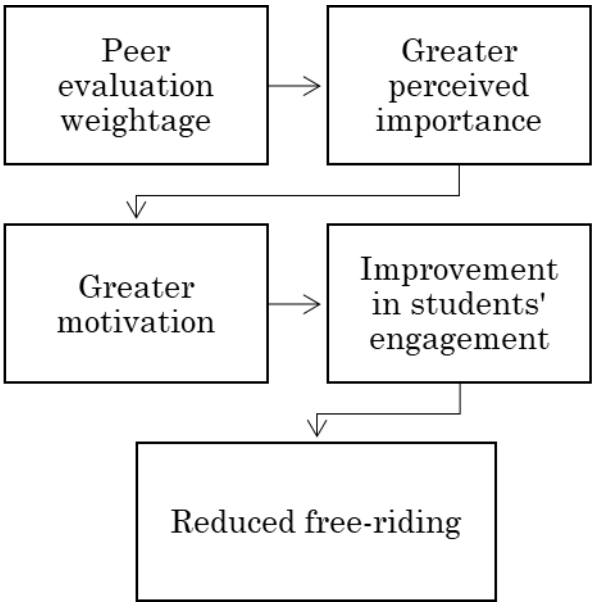
3.1.1. Weightage in overall grade

A 5% weightage for the peer evaluation was insufficient to motivate active participation amongst students, resulting in unequal participation. This can happen when students do not perceive one part of assessment as crucial as the others in their overall final grade (Frehner, 2019). Which is why, some students took part with greater enthusiasm and motivation in other parts of the assessment and not in the group activity. Chen and Lou (2004) explained this behaviour using expectancy theory as, the individual's decision regarding the amount of effort to exert is based on a systematic analysis of, (a) the value

of potential rewards, (b) the likelihood of obtaining these rewards, and (c) the chances of achieving the outcomes through their actions.

Figure 1: Impacts of increased weightage of peer evaluation

One of the ways to raise the stakes and rewards associated with peer evaluation component is to increase the weight of peer evaluation. Increasing the weight of peer review may improve student engagement while discouraging free riding (when some students put in less effort than others but still receive the group mark). However, it is critical to balance this increase so that students are not overburdened by peer evaluations. The increase in the weightage should only be optimal, which otherwise could result



counterproductive and cause issues such as anxiety, 'social comparison', 'fear of failure', etc. (Chamberlin et al., 2023). The underlying motive is to attribute greater importance to the peer-evaluation component which could then enhance student engagement and ultimately discourage free-riding as illustrated in figure 1 (Tang, Lau and Chau, 2022; Seifert, 2004; Brooks and Ammons, 2003). Furthermore, Paff, (2015) discussed the impact of grading on participation. Although, the nature of participation discussed is different, nevertheless, there is some evidence of a positive relationship between grading and students' engagement. Whilst group work is intended largely to improve students' collaborative skills, employing this technique would ultimately conforms to the concept of constructive alignment, in which assessment tasks coincide with learning outcomes (Biggs, 1996; Nicol, Thomson and Breslin, 2014).

3.1.2. 'Friendship-marking' and conflicts

Another issue identified was around favouritism or conflicts within groups leading to biased assessments and marking (Tomar et al., 2024). This goes directly in contrast with the expected outcome of 'cooperative learning and teamwork' stemming from peer-

evaluation (Carvalho, 2012). In a group setting, when individuals from different standpoints work together, the individualisation of group work can face problems. This could result from personal biases or behaviours described by Dochy et al., (1999) as 'friendship-marking' (students inflate the marks of their friends) and 'collusive-marking' (students plan to give one another similar marks). As well as due to the lack of set criteria in assessing each other's contribution, where students are unsure about what grade to assign to a particular amount or quality of work. Studies have found that students can make useful assessments and provide meaningful feedback if given proper and clear guidance and criteria (Carvalho, 2012; Vickerman, 2009).

3.1.3. Issues around understanding, 'retaliation fear' and reliability

There were clear inconsistencies and disparities in how marking criteria were understood by students, which resulted in differing evaluations. Some groups engaged less than others, while others set differing criteria for contribution. Each group had their own definitions for each component of the 'group work'. Therefore, providing clear and detailed evaluation criteria is essential to ensure that the students have a shared and common understanding of what grades should be assigned to an assessment (Orsmond, Merry and Reiling, 2000; Bloxham and West, 2004). This would then result in a consistent and fair marking among all the groups and individual students.

Another issue appeared as students feared backlash for providing honest feedback (VanSchenkhof et al., 2018). This stems from the social contact between groupmates, as mentioned by Vu and Dall'Alba (2007), "peer assessment may cause friction among peers, including feelings of hurt or betrayal resulting from comments or unexpected marks", resulting in a feedback which is not the truest representation of their performance. This could be dealt with using a predetermined criteria setup in a tick box or ordinal format. For example, 'active participation' (as shown in table 1), could well be recorded by the number of meetings attended by a certain peer. Similarly, meeting deadlines, could also be recorded easily. Knowing exactly on what and how an individual student is being marked by their peers in a group would result in much fairer and open assessment. Another addition to the marking criteria could be the requirement of providing a rationale for lower marks which would then promote honest feedback. However, not all components could be assessed with this methodology.

Reliability is another issue. Ballantyne et al. (2002) argued that students could be reluctant to have a fellow student who isn't an expert on the subject evaluate them. Moreover, students can believe that the teacher is the one who solely bears responsibility for evaluation.

Rubrics can address these challenges (Hafner & Hafner, 2003). A rubric, handed out or developed with students, can help to facilitate purposeful self-assessment. Andrade (2008) defined a rubric as a document that outlines criteria and quality standards for a given assignment. Rubrics are common tool used by teachers to assess student work, but they can also serve other purposes. A good rubric can not only help students understand quality

as defined by the instructor, aid in self- and peer-assessment, but also support revision and improvements. It can serve as both informative and evaluative tool.

Chan and Ho (2019) suggested providing a rubric and involving students in setting additional standards to ensure a shared interpretation of expectations. Jones and Alcock (2013) discussed 'comparative judgement' which could be useful in setting up a rubric where students could compare and mark against an example piece of work. However, certain components of the group work need to have a measurable criterion, such as showing up to a group meeting, commitment, cooperation and support, etc. whereas, some of the elements of group work could be left to the discretion of each teams' own set standards, such as, task delegation, standards, etc. This would allow for some degree of independence while maintaining uniformity within groups and individualism in all students enrolled in the module simultaneously (Panadero et al., 2023). Introducing a clear rubric with defined criteria would help in minimizing personal biases and improving consistency (Panadero, Romero and Strijbos, 2013).

While constructing a reliable rubric, indicators for validity and reliability must be considered (Panadero, Romero and Strijbos, 2013). The rubric's emphasis on participation, task completion, and communication skills is especially important because these components are essential for productive teamwork (Liu and Carless, 2006). In table 1, a general structure of a rudimentary rubric in presented. By allocating specific percentages to these categories, the rubric pushes students to fully engage in the group work, reducing the likelihood of free riding. Furthermore, the inclusion of criteria such as "Creativity and Initiative" and "Professional Conduct" ensures that students are recognised not only for their technical contributions, but also for their ability to collaborate and be responsible, both of which are essential skills in any professional setting (Van Gennip, Segers and Tillema, 2009). Requiring students to justify their grade promotes transparency and accountability, both of which are essential for cultivating a culture of fairness and trust within the group (Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000). Finally, random moderation of awarded marks guarantees that any large disparities in peer evaluations are addressed, adding to the validity of the assessment process (Topping, 1998).

3.1.4. Grade Inflation

Peer evaluation involves a great deal of autonomy and personal accountability, thus a lack of participation and oversight from the teaching staff can seriously impede the process while lowering the potential benefits that the assessment method may provide (Gurbanov, 2016). The role of the teacher in peer evaluation is unquestionable and reasonably significant and worthy of more consideration (Van den Berg, Admiraal and Pilot, 2006). If not monitored correctly and regulated continuously, peer assessments can lead to grade inflation due to leniency (Kilic, 2016).

It can be dealt with by implementing a continuous mechanism of marking rather than waiting until the end of the group work. Students can be advised to mark each other's performance periodically and communicate any important takeaways, if necessary, so that the improvements can be made and the co-operation could be enhanced (Cho, Schunn and

Wilson, 2006). Meanwhile, the instructor would need to moderate the performance and progress in order to keep track of work and grades.

3.1.5. Group Dynamics

Although peer evaluation has shown promise as a meaningful and reliable measure of individual achievements in a group setting, its usefulness may be impeded by student resistance, particularly in a diverse and multicultural environment, which gives rise to conflicts and differences (Chen and Lou, 2004; Evans, 2013). Such conflicts and differences among students, like with any group, are nearly unavoidable. In a peer assessment scenario, active engagement and interaction with various knowledge views are required, resulting in both knowledge exchanges and transactions. In such a knowledge-sharing environment, it is unrealistic to expect everyone to swiftly embrace others' ideas and viewpoints (Wang and Zong, 2019).

Wang and Zong (2019) discussed this from a different perspective and explained these group dynamics, where phenomenon such as, a) 'Knowledge self-efficacy' can lead to increased task conflicts in peer assessments, as participants may become defensive, competitive, and prone to misinterpreting others' feedback when provided feedback

Table 1: A sample rubric for peer evaluation in a group work

Category	Criteria	Description	Rating Scale
Contribution to Group Work (30%)	**Active Participation**	Level of participation in meetings, discussions, and decision-making processes.	Excellent (5) – Active engagement and initiative. Good (4) – Regular engagement and contribution. Satisfactory (3) – Occasional engagement with minimal contribution. Needs Improvement (2) – Low engagement, only when prompted. Unsatisfactory (1) – No or minimal participation and/or missing meetings without valid reasons.
	Task Completion	Reliability in performing tasks on time and to the expected standard.	Excellent (5) – Tasks completion well in time with high quality. Good (4) – Tasks completion on time and met expectations. Satisfactory (3) – Tasks completion with some required follow-up or were late. Needs Improvement (2) – Frequently late, tasks often incomplete. Unsatisfactory (1) – Failed to complete tasks.
Quality of Work (25%)	**Accuracy and Detail**	Quality and accuracy of work contributed.	Excellent (5) – Consistently high-quality work, accurate, and detailed. Good (4) – Mostly accurate work with minor errors or omissions. Satisfactory (3) – Adequate but required significant revisions. Needs Improvement (2) – Inaccuracies or lacked detail in work. Unsatisfactory (1) – Poor quality and required substantial rework by the teammates.
	Creativity and Initiative	Originality and initiative in contributing to the project.	Excellent (5) – Consistent participation of creative ideas and took initiative. Good (4) – Regular contribution of new ideas and showed initiative. Satisfactory (3) – Occasional contribution of creative ideas but mostly followed the group. Needs Improvement (2) – Rare contribution of original ideas or initiative. Unsatisfactory (1) – Did not contribute creatively or take initiative.
Collaboration and Teamwork (25%)	**Communication Skills**	Effective communication within the group.	Excellent (5) – Always communicated clearly and constructively. Good (4) – Usually communicated well, with minor issues. Satisfactory (3) – Communicated adequately, but with some misunderstandings. Needs Improvement (2) – Communication was often unclear or unhelpful. Unsatisfactory (1) – Poor communication and hindered the group's progress.
	Cooperation and Support	Willingness to work with and support team members.	Excellent (5) - Always supportive and cooperative, facilitated teamwork. Good (4) - Usually supportive and worked well with others. Satisfactory (3) - Occasionally helped others, with minor issues in cooperation. Needs Improvement (2) - Reluctant to help or cooperate, created friction. Unsatisfactory (1) - Was uncooperative and caused significant issues in the group.
Professionalism and Accountability (20%)	**Responsibility**	Level of responsibility.	Excellent (5) - Consistently responsible, took full ownership of tasks. Good (4) - Mostly responsible, with minor lapses. Satisfactory (3) - Adequate responsibility but required reminders.

		Needs Improvement (2) - Frequently lacked responsibility, required significant oversight. Unsatisfactory (1) - Was irresponsible, failed to meet basic expectations.
Professional Conduct	Professionalism, punctuality, and respect for deadlines.	Excellent (5) – Always professional, adhering to deadlines. Good (4) – Usually professional, with some lapses. Satisfactory (3) – Generally professional, although with some noticeable shortcomings. Needs Improvement (2) – Frequently unprofessional, late, or contemptuous of deadlines. Unsatisfactory (1) – Unprofessional behaviour, affecting groupwork negatively.

which they don't agree to, b) 'Cognitive diversity' or differences in general and specific knowledge perceptions among participants can lead to task conflicts, impacting teamwork and performance, c) 'Interactive experience' or the quality of interactions within a group significantly influences task conflict. Positive interactive experiences foster collaboration and reduce conflicts, while negative interactions increase the likelihood of conflicts during group tasks. Group dynamics can affect the fairness of peer evaluations through personal biases, cultural differences and other factors stemming from social contact between students (Hanrahan and Isaacs, 2001; Deardorff, 2006). Which is why, students need to resolve these behavioural conflicts agreeably to maintain teamwork. Effectively managing these conflicts is key to personal cognitive development (Wang and Zong, 2019).

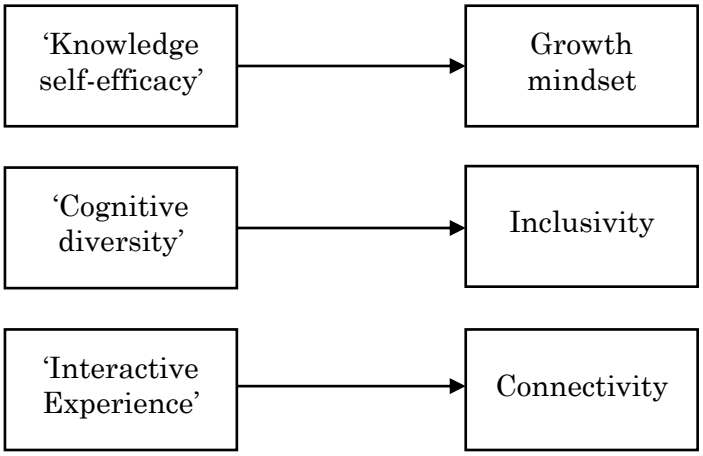


Figure 2: From conflicts to resolution (adapted from (Wang and Zong, 2019)

These issues can be mitigated through a reciprocative approach, as shown in figure 2. Firstly, 'Knowledge self-efficacy' could be replaced with growth mindset. That is, to discourage defensiveness and promote constructive criticism. Task disagreements can be minimised by educating students to see feedback as an opportunity for learning rather than a challenge to their abilities (Zhu and Carless, 2018).

Secondly, 'Cognitive diversity' could be returned with inclusivity. Foster an environment that values diverse perspectives by incorporating discussions on how different types of knowledge contribute to group success. This could be implemented by creating groups that consist of students with varied background and expertise and clearly explaining the rationale behind it (Chapman et al., 2006). Marking the diversity as a deliberate effort to enhance the overall quality of knowledge within the team would make it much easier for the teams to adjust. Furthermore, clear guidelines on how to integrate varying viewpoints from different fields, knowledge and experiences can minimize conflicts arising from cognitive diversity.

Finally, issues stemming from 'Interactive experience' could be tackled through connectivity. The quality of interaction and group meetings or discussions determines the

outcome. In order to enhance interaction quality, facilitation in terms of regular group check-ins and reflection on the practice could be carried out. This would then enable students to express problems and concerns timely and ultimately find early solutions. Creating structured opportunities for positive interactions can enhance collaboration and reduce conflicts.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, peer evaluation shows potential as a pedagogical method for promoting active learning, critical thinking and collaboration among students in higher education. However, effective implementation necessitates addressing multifaceted issues such as reliability, bias, engagement, feedback quality, and so on.

Peer evaluation in group work is most efficient when it is incorporated into the overall grading system in a balanced manner. A low weightage fails to encourage student engagement, resulting in unequal contributions from group members and free riding. Increasing the weight may improve student involvement and ensure equitable effort, but it must be done cautiously to avoid negative consequences such as anxiety, social comparison, and fear of failure.

Clear rubrics and well-defined criteria must be used to ensure that peer evaluations are fair and consistent. Rubrics not only help students grasp expectations, but they also give an organised structure for evaluating contributions, avoiding biases stemming from "friendship-marking". Continuous supervision and oversight are equally vital in avoiding concerns such as grade inflation and ensuring that peer assessments reflect true performance and participation.

Peer evaluations' success is heavily influenced by group dynamics. Conflicts caused by cognitive diversity or various levels of interaction may hinder collaboration and negatively affect the intended outcomes of peer evaluation method. Therefore, promoting a growth mindset and inclusivity among groups is critical. Encouraging open communication, setting clear expectations, and facilitating regular check-ins can help manage conflicts and enhance the quality of interactions.

The key takeaway is that when properly structured and supported, peer evaluation can be a powerful tool to promote accountability, improve student engagement, and align assessment practices with learning outcomes

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