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## Studies in Educational Evaluation

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/stueduc](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/stueduc)

## Peer assessment use, its social nature challenges and perceived educational value: A teachers' survey study

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Teachers  
Peer assessment  
Interpersonal processes  
Anonymity  
Structural equation modeling

## ABSTRACT

The implementation of peer assessment (PA) in the classroom faces considerable interpersonal challenges. In this quantitative survey study ( $N = 225$ ) we focus on the current use and format of PA among secondary education teachers in Flanders and explore teachers' awareness of these interpersonal challenges. We validated an instrument for measuring teachers' awareness which was then used to investigate how this awareness level relates to their conceptions of the educational value of PA. SEM results show that teachers are slightly to moderately aware with regard to their students' concerns about the impact of interpersonal processes in PA as well as the importance students attribute to anonymity within PA. This study illustrates that teachers' perceived accuracy of PA is a major predictor of their belief in its educational value and opens up a new avenue for research on teachers' awareness of interpersonal processes in PA.

## 1. Introduction

Peer assessment (PA) has been shown to have positive effects on students' motivation and engagement in learning (Topping, 2003). In PA, peers use one another as a resource, both by sharing ideas and evaluating the ideas of others, and by providing feedback, which can be quantitative (e.g. grades or ratings across assessment criteria) and/or qualitative (e.g. written or oral comments) (Bolzer, Strijbos, & Fischer, 2015; Topping, 2010). PA offers many benefits, such as more enhanced learning (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999) and training of skills to assess high-quality work in relation to specified criteria (Reinholz, 2015; Topping, 1998), and can be conceived of as a learning tool due to the active involvement of the learner in the learning process (Harris & Brown, 2016; Panadero & Brown, 2017; Topping, 2010). Furthermore, PA is a strong vehicle of 'assessment for learning' because it actively involves students in evaluating their learning and allows them to participate in collaborative appraisal through the use of multiple perspectives when incorporating viewpoints from peers (Falchikov, 2003; Panadero, 2016).

Despite its benefits, students' interpersonal perceptions can influence their learning from PA (Cowie & Harrison, 2016). For example, students may experience pressure due to friendships with peers, resulting in unfair PA or refusal to participate (Raes, Vanderhoven, & Schellens, 2013). Until recently, the social nature (referring to the fact

that PA is per definition an interpersonal process) of this specific classroom assessment method and its impact on students' learning has only been explored in small-scale intervention studies, mainly within vocational and higher education contexts and with an emphasis on the students' perspectives (Panadero, 2016; van Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2009). As a consequence, there is a need not only to explore this phenomenon on a larger scale, but also to obtain an insight into teachers' levels of awareness regarding their students' understandings of the interpersonal process within PA. The teacher's perspective and actions are critical in developing a culture of classroom assessment that supports sharing ideas beyond individual differences (Cowie & Harrison, 2016; Harris & Brown, 2013). Studying teachers' conceptions of PA is important at a time when the innovation of assessment practices is on the educational agenda (Brown & Harris, 2016), as we know from previous research that conceptions predict their classroom practices (Panadero & Brown, 2017; Rubie-Davies, Flint, & McDonald, 2012).

## 1.1. Teachers' PA conceptions

Previous research about teachers' conceptions of PA use in the classroom shows that teachers value PA as a learning activity, but that it is only used occasionally (e.g. Noonan & Duncan, 2005). Panadero and Brown (2017), in a recent survey study of Spanish teachers, came to the conclusion that, although overall teachers like the instructional use of

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PA, they sometimes struggle with its inherent difficulties (e.g. students' possible lack of objectivity) and positive previous experience is one of the main predictors of PA implementation. Interestingly, primary and secondary school teachers reported higher levels of PA implementation and certainty about its educational value than higher education teachers (Panadero & Brown, 2017). Similar results were found in two previous studies investigating how higher education and secondary school teachers perceived PA (Lynch & Golen, 1992; Noonan & Duncan, 2005). The aforementioned studies build upon Ajzen's (2005) model of planned behavior which suggests that personal beliefs shape one's own behavior, and thus help us to better understand the effect of teachers' beliefs on the self-reported appreciation and use of this assessment practice. However, these studies did not focus on the human and social conditions that can stimulate and/or impede the enactment of valuable PA practices. Human conditions refer to "how individuals understand, respond to, and interpret assessment" (Harris & Brown, 2016, p. 2.). When studying the human condition, it is important to consider the beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and/or conceptions of assessment that teachers hold. Social conditions refer to "how assessment is experienced in group settings [and] the interplay between the experiences of the individual and collectives to which these individuals belong" (Harris & Brown, 2016, p. 3.). Due to PA's emotionally charged nature (for a review, see Panadero, 2016), teachers need to be aware of the range of feelings their students have during implementation (Harris & Brown, 2013) in order to be able to create a classroom climate of trust and respect, as this influences student participation in assessment practices (Brown, Andrade, & Chen, 2015). Affective threats are aggravated when teachers are not fully aware of students' emotional reactions to PA (Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2001). Positive teacher responses, such as showing empathy to students' emotions about peer assessment (Crossman, 2007) and insight into students' emotional concerns, are therefore needed. Currently, however, little is known about teachers' awareness of students' concerns about the interpersonal dynamics in PA, including the lack of instruments on how to measure this. A first step is to develop an adequate instrument and explore teachers' awareness regarding students' perceptions of interpersonal processes involved in PA. The next section describes the existing evidence on students' perceptions of PA interpersonal processes, which provides a starting point to make the transfer to the teachers' point of view.

### 1.2. Peer assessment: an interpersonal process

PA is fundamentally an interpersonal process as it generates thoughts, actions, motivational outcomes, and emotions for both assesses and assessors (Panadero, 2016). Attention to social and human conditions is thus needed because well-implemented PA should decrease affective threats, ensure accuracy, and lead to positive learning outcomes (Harris & Brown, 2016; Panadero & Brown, 2017; Topping, 2010). In a recent survey study by Rotsaert, Panadero, Estrada, and Schellens (2017), students' perceptions of the educational value of PA in relation to interpersonal variables, anonymity, and accuracy were investigated. As outlined in the introduction, these specific factors will be investigated from a teacher's perspective in the current study, as they can have a predictive value for teachers' classroom practices and will allow us to deepen our understanding of this so-far unexplored area in PA research. The following paragraphs briefly describe our current knowledge on six frequently referred to interpersonal variables and their relevance for the current study (Panadero, 2016): (1) *Friendship marking*; (2) *Fear of disapproval*; (3) *Psychological safety*; (4) *Value congruency*; (5) *Trust in oneself as an assessor*; and (6) *Trust in the other as an assessor*.

(1) *Friendship marking*. Friendship bonds have been identified as a source of potential scoring/feedback bias. However, only a small number of studies have directly addressed this topic (Panadero, Romero, & Strijbos, 2013). From a teachers' point of view it is important to study whether teachers have considered the effect of

friendship bonds on the outcomes of PA activity, so as to be able (in a second stage) to provide adequate social-affective support (Murdock, Stephens, & Grotewiel, 2016). (2) *Fear of disapproval* refers to the assessor's fear of negative comments from the assessee if they give them a low score or negative feedback (i.e. recrimination) (Cartney, 2010). The results of a recent survey study on students' perceptions indicated that students' awareness levels regarding the fact that such processes can be present and influence the outcome of PA activity exerted a positive effect on students' perceptions of the educational value of PA (Rotsaert et al., 2017a). In other words, the findings suggest that students' awareness levels about the fact that these processes – including their potential undesirable effects – are possibly present in PA lead to placing greater value on peer assessment as a valuable learning activity. Furthermore, girls rated significantly higher on this factor than boys (Rotsaert et al., 2017a). It is important for teachers to be aware of the possible effect these perceptions can exert and, in a second stage, how to create an adequate classroom atmosphere in which fear of disapproval is not present. (3) *Psychological safety* refers to a shared belief by group members that there is a safe learning environment that enables different opinions to be perceived as opportunities rather than conflicts (Tapia & Fernández Heredia, 2008; Nicol, 2010; Yu & Sung, 2015). As with the factor *Fear of disapproval*, teachers' awareness about the importance of a safe classroom environment will be important to enable a positive classroom climate. (4) *Value congruency* refers to the importance of unanimity among assessors and assessees on both the goals and criteria of PA activity (Cheng & Tsai, 2012). Teachers' capacity to guarantee congruency about the used criteria will start from their awareness of the fact that this can significantly affect the outcomes of PA activity. (5) *Trust in oneself as an assessor* refers to the assessor's beliefs about his/her skills when assessing a peer (van Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2010). (6) *Trust in the other as an assessor* refers to the confidence in the reliability and validity of the assessment and feedback received from a peer. Students will only act on the basis of trustworthy information; if they believe that comments are capricious, they will not act on them (Carless, 2013). Trust in evaluative capabilities has proved to be a significant predictor of students' perceptions of the educational value of PA (Rotsaert et al., 2017a). Again, teachers' capacity to build up trust in their own and others' evaluative capabilities will start from their level of awareness about this factor when implementing PA activities in their classroom.

Two factors are closely connected to the aforementioned interpersonal processes: the importance attributed to anonymity and perceived accuracy within PA. As regards anonymity, Topping (1998) indicates that privacy is an important structural feature of PA in that disclosing the identity of the assessor or assessee seems to matter to the students. The idea behind this is that, as a result of the assessee's anonymity, the assessor focuses on the content, not whom they are assessing. Assessors' anonymity can help assessees focus on the feedback they receive, rather than on the person who gave the feedback. Vanderhoven, Raes, Montrieux, Rotsaert, and Schellens (2015) found that students have more positive attitudes toward PA when assessor anonymity is ensured. In this study it was also found that when assessors' names are not hidden from the teacher (while the assessor's anonymity was ensured amongst peers), this worked as a means of controlling for undesirable interpersonal effects such as friendship marking. Yu and Sung (2015) stated that anonymity might offer greater psychological safety for students, but at the same time, when anonymity is provided to the assessor, it might lead to misbehavior, such as positive marking towards friends. In his review, Panadero (2016) proposed that anonymity needs to be considered carefully when implementing PA because it might hinder formative uses of PA. Ideally, anonymity is approached as a temporary catalyst to create dialogic classroom environments in which students feel safe to participate (Rotsaert, Panadero, & Schellens, 2017). Importantly, Panadero and Brown (2017) revealed that the majority of their participant teachers used anonymous PA. The level of importance students attributed to

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